

**C. A. Stephens, “That Mysterious ‘Daguerreotype Saloon,’” 10 May 1917**

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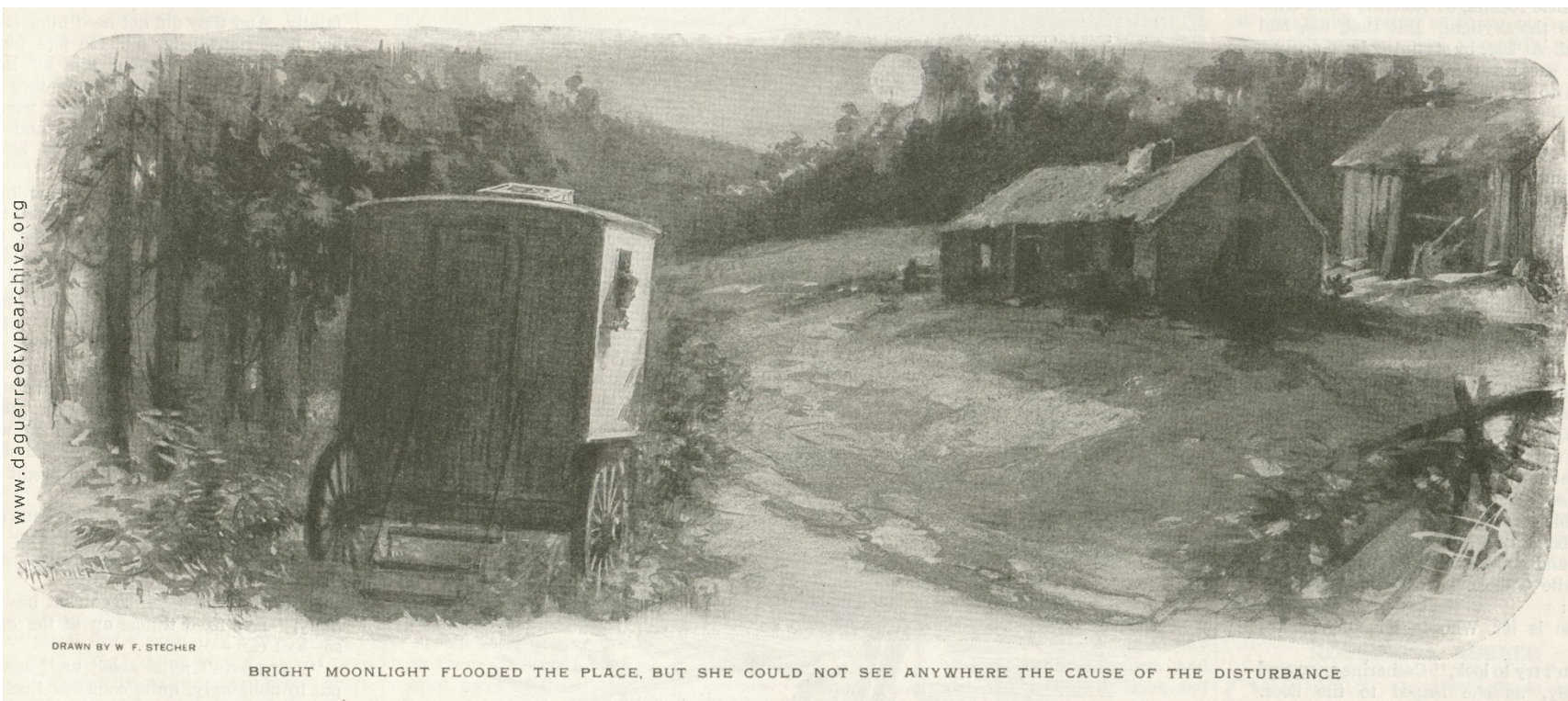
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[ SEE NEXT PAGE FOR GRAPHIC ]



[caption:] BRIGHT MOONLIGHT FLOODED THE PLACE BUT SHE COULD NOT SEE ANYWHERE THE CAUSE OF THE DISTURBANCE

## THAT MYSTERIOUS DAGUERREOTYPE SALOON

By C. A. Stephens



**A**MONG the quaint objects that were to be seen in New England fifty years ago, few were more interesting than the itinerant “daguerreotype saloon”—those peripatetic studios on wheels, in which “artists” used to journey about the country taking photographs. Of course, card photo-graphs had not come into vogue then; but there were the daguerreotypes, and later the tintypes, and finally the ambrotypes in little black-and-gilt cases.

Those “saloons” were picturesque little structures, not much more than five feet wide by fifteen feet long; they were mounted on wheels. On each side was a little window, and overhead was a larger skylight; a flight of three steps led up to a narrow door at the rear. The door opened into the “saloon” proper, where the camera and the visitor’s chair stood; forward of that was the cuddy under the skylight, in which the photographer did his developing.

The photographer was usually some ambitious young fellow who, after learning his trade, often made and painted his “saloon” himself. Frequently he slept in it, and sometimes cooked his meals in it. If he did not own a horse, he usually made a bargain with some farmer to haul him to his next stopping place in exchange for taking his picture. When business grew dull in one neighborhood, he moved to another. He was the true Bohemian of his trade—the gypsy of early photography.

Every summer a “saloon,” and some-times two, used to come to the “Corners,” near the old squire’s farm in Maine; but although we were all familiar with the itinerant vehicles, we were none the less puzzled by the mysterious “daguerreotype saloon” at Dresser’s Lonesome.

We came upon it in this manner: Catherine Edwards had for some time been carrying on a little industry that had proved fairly lucrative — namely, gathering and curing wild herbs and selling them to drug stores in Portland. Her grandmother had taught her how to cure and press the herbs. First, the girl dried the wild plants on the attic floor, then she pressed them in two-pound packages, bound them up tight in tough paper and put quaint labels on them. One season she sold more than seventy dollars’ worth of them.

Catherine took many long jaunts to gather her herbs,—thoroughwort, gold-thread, catnip, comfrey, skullcap, pennyroyal, lobelia, peppermint, old man’s root, snakehead and other herbs of greater or less medicinal value, -and she soon came to know where all those various wild plants grew for miles round. Nature in Maine is not lavish in the matter of wild herbs; and so Catherine, who naturally wished to keep her business for herself, was rather chary about telling others where the herbs that she collected grew.

She had heard that thoroughwort, catnip and pennyroyal were growing in considerable quantity in the old pastures at Dresser’s Lonesome. She did not like to go up there alone, however, for the place was ten or eleven miles away, and the road that led to it ran for most of the distance through deep woods; that road had once gone straight

through to Canada, but it had long since been abandoned. Years before, a young man named Abner Dresser had cleared a hundred acres of land up there and built a house and a large barn ; but his wife had been so lonely—there was no neighbor within ten miles—that he had finally abandoned the place.

At last Catherine asked my cousin Theodora to go up to Dresser's Lonesome with her and offered to share the profits of the trip. No one enjoyed such a jaunt better than Theodora, and one day early in August they persuaded me to harness one of the work horses to the double-seated buckboard and to take them up there for the day.

It was a long, hard drive, for the old road was badly overgrown; indeed we were more than two hours in reaching the place. What was our amazement when we drew near the deserted old farmhouse to see a "daguerreotype saloon" standing before it.

Its forward wheels were gone, and its front end was propped up level on a short piece of timber; but otherwise the "saloon" looked as if the "artist" might at that moment be developing a plate inside. On closer inspection, however, we saw that weeds had sprung up. beneath and about it, and I guessed that the wagon had been standing there for at least a month or two; and on peeping in at the little end door we saw that birds or squirrels had been in and out of the place. All that we could make of it was that the photographer, whoever he was, had come there, left his "saloon" and gone away-with the forward wheels.

We gathered a load of herbs and drove home again, much puzzled by our discovery. The story of the "daguerreotype saloon" at Dresser's Lonesome soon spread abroad, but no one was able to furnish a clue to its history. Of course all manner of rumors began to circulate; some people declared that the owner of the "saloon" must be a naturalist who had journeyed up there to take pictures of wild-animal life, others thought that the photographer had lost his way and perished in the woods.

When my cousin Halstead and Willis Murch passed along the old road in October that fall, the mysterious "saloon" was still standing there; and lumbermen spoke of seeing it there during the winter. The following August, a year after we had first discovered it, Catherine and Theodora again went up to Dresser's Lonesome to gather herbs; the "daguerreotype saloon" was still there, unchanged.

Halstead carried the girls up on that trip. The weather had been threatening when they started, and showers soon set in; rain fell pretty much all the afternoon, so that the girls were badly delayed in gathering their herbs. When Halstead declared that it was high time to start for home, Catherine proposed that they stay there overnight and finish their task the next day. The roof of the old farmhouse was now so leaky that they could find no shelter there from the rain; but Catherine declared that the deserted "daguerreotype saloon" would be a cosy place to camp in.

Theodora did not like the idea very well, for the region was wild and lonely, and since the old squire, who was away, might not get home that night as he expected, Halstead thought he ought to return to the farm.

"Why, this old saloon is just as good as a house!" she said. "We can fasten the door, and then nothing can get in. And we have plenty of lunch left for our supper."

At last Theodora reluctantly agreed to stay. After promising to return for them by noon the next day, Halstead started for home. After he had gone, the girls gathered a quart or more of raspberries, to eat with their supper. When they had finished the meal, they made, with the sacks of herbs, a couch on the floor of the "saloon." Then Catherine fastened the door securely by propping against it a long, narrow plank from the floor of the old barn.

For a while the girls lay and talked in low tones. Outside everything was very quiet, and scarcely a sound came to the girls' ears. All nature seemed to have gone to rest; not a whippoorwill chanted or an owl hooted about the old buildings. Before long Catherine fell peacefully asleep. Theodora, however, who was rather ill at ease in these wild and strange surroundings, had determined to stay awake, and she lay listening to the crickets in the grass under the "saloon." But crickets make drowsy music, and at last she, too, dropped asleep.

Not very much later something bumped lightly against the front end of the "saloon" outside; the noise was repeated several times. Oddly enough, it was not Theodora who waked, but Catherine. She sat up and, remembering instantly where she was, listened without stirring or speaking. Her first thought was that a deer had come round and was, rubbing itself against the "saloon."

"It will soon go away," she said to herself, and did not rouse her companion.

The queer, bumping, jarring sounds continued, however, and presently were followed by a heavy jolt. For some moments Catherine heard footsteps in the weeds outside; she told herself that there must be two or three deer. She was not alarmed, for she knew that the animals would not harm them; but she hoped that they would not waken Theodora, who might be needlessly frightened.

But presently she heard a sound that she could not explain; it was like the jingling of a small chain. Rising quietly, she peeped out of one of the little side windows, and then out of the other. The clouds had cleared away, and bright moonlight flooded the place, but she could not see anywhere the cause of the disturbance. Whatever had made the sounds must be out of sight in front; there was no window at that end of the "saloon."

Still not much alarmed, Catherine stepped up on the one old chair of the studio and cautiously raised the hinged skylight. At that very instant, however, the "saloon" started as if of its own accord and moved slowly across the yard and down the road!

The wagon started so suddenly that Catherine fell off the chair. Of course Theodora woke, but before she could speak or cry out Catherine was beside her.

"Hush ! Hush!" she whispered, and put her hand over her companion's mouth. "Don't be scared! Keep quiet. Some one is drawing the old saloon away!"

That was far from reassuring to Theodora. "Oh, what shall we do?" she whispered in terror.

Catherine was still begging her to be silent, when a terrific jolt nearly threw her off her feet. In great alarm the girls sprang to the little rear door to get out, and escape.

But as a result probably of the rocking and straining of the frail structure, the plank that Catherine had propped against the door had settled down and stuck fast. Again and again she tried to pull it away, but she could not move it. Theodora also tugged at it-in vain. They were imprisoned; they could not get out; and meanwhile the old "saloon" was bumping over the rough road.

"Oh, who do you suppose it is?" Theodora whispered, weak from fear. "Where do you suppose he is going with us?"

"We must find out. Hold the chair steady, Doad, if you can, while I get up and look out."

She set the chair under the skylight again, and then, while Theodora held it steady, climbed upon it—no easy matter with the vehicle rocking so violently—and tried to raise the skylight. But that, too, had jammed. At last, by straining hard against it, she succeeded in pushing it up far enough to let her peer out over the flat roof.

There, in the moonlight, she saw a strange-looking creature,—a man,—who rolled and ambled rather than walked; he was leading a white horse by the bit, and the horse was dragging the “saloon” down the road. The man was a truly terrifying spectacle. He seemed to be a giant; his head projected far forward between his shoulders, and on his back was what looked like a camel’s hump! His feet were not like human feet, but rather like huge hoofs; and the man, if he was one, wobbled forward on them in away that turned Catherine quite sick with apprehension. All she could think of was the picture of Giant Despair in her grandmother’s copy of Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress*.

Unable to imagine who or what he could be, Catherine stood for some moments and stared at him, fascinated. All the while Theodora was anxiously whispering:

“Who is it? Who is it? Oh, let me see!”

“Don’t try to look,” Catherine answered earnestly, as she leaped to the floor. “Doad, we must get out if we can.”

She threw herself at the door again and tried to pull it open; Theodora joined her, but even together they could not stir it.

Meanwhile the “saloon” swayed and jolted over the rough road; to keep from pitching headlong from side to side the girls had to sit down on the sacks. Their one consoling thought was that, if they could not get out, their captor, whoever he was, could not get in.

They were a little cheered, too, when they realized that the wagon, was apparently following the road that led toward home. But when they had gone about three or four miles and had come to the branch road that led to Lurvey’s Mills, they felt the old “saloon” turn off from the main road. Whither was their unknown captor towing them? With sinking hearts they struggled again to open the door, until, weak and exhausted, they gave up.

Theodora was limp with terror at their plight. Catherine was more resolute, and tried to encourage her companion; but as they jogged and jolted over the deserted road for what seemed hours, even her own courage began to weaken.

At last they came to a ford that led across a muddy brook. As the horse entered the water, the forward end of the rickety old “saloon” pitched sharply downward; the prop that had held the door fast loosened and the door flew open.

Needless to say, the girls lost little time in getting out of their prison. Before the “saloon” had topped the other bank, they had jumped out and had run into the alder bushes that bordered the stream.

Their captor was evidently not aware of their escape, for the “saloon” kept on its course. As soon as it was out of sight the girls waded across the brook and, hastening back to the fork of the road, took the home-ward trail.

About four o’clock in the morning the old squire heard them knocking at the door. They were still much excited, and told so wild and curious a story of their adventure that after breakfast the old squire and Addison drove over to Lurvey’s Mills to investigate.

Almost the first thing they saw when they reached the Mills was that old “daguerreotype saloon,” standing beside the road near the post office; pottering about it was a large, ungainly man—a hunchback with club feet.

A few minutes’ conversation with him cleared up the mystery. This was the first he had heard that two girls had ridden in his “saloon” the night before! His name, he told them, was Duchaine, and he said that he came from Lewiston.

“Maybe you’ve heard of me,” he said to Addison, with a somewhat painful smile. “The boys down there call me Big Pumplefoot.”

Unable to do ordinary work, he had learned to take ambrotypes and had set up as an itinerant photographer. But his mother, who was a French Canadian, had gone back to live at Megantic in the Province of Quebec; and in June the year before he had set off to visit her. Thinking that he might find customers at Megantic, he had taken his “saloon” along with him. He had followed the old’ road that formerly led through the great woods to Canada, but when he got to Dresser’s Lonesome he found the road so much obstructed that he had left the “saloon” behind, and had gone on with his horse and the forward wheels.

An accident had laid him up at Megantic during the winter and spring, but a few days before had started down into Maine again. On the way down the old road from Canada he had got belated, and had not reached Dresser’s Lonesome with his horse and wheels until late at night; but as there was no place where he could put up, and as the moon was shining, he had decided to continue on his way down to the Mills.

Thus the mystery was cleared up; but although the explanation was simple enough, Theodora and Catherine were nevertheless not inclined to laugh over their midnight ride in the mysterious “daguerreotype saloon.”

**[End of text.]**

The graphic is also available in JPG format:

[http://www.daguerreotypearchive.org/graphics/P9170002\\_STEPHENS\\_DAG-SALOON\\_1917-05-10.php](http://www.daguerreotypearchive.org/graphics/P9170002_STEPHENS_DAG-SALOON_1917-05-10.php)

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#### **EDITOR’S NOTES:**

Charles Asbury Stephens (1844–1931) was a prolific writer of short stories and articles. He began contributing to *Youth’s Companion* in 1871, and eventually became assistant editor. In 1887, Stephens earned a doctor of Medicine degree from Boston University with the view of writing fair and accurate medical articles for the periodical. A collection of Stephens papers are held at Bowdoin College.<sup>1</sup>

Further information regarding Stephens is found in Ronald G. Whitney, *The World of C.A. Stephens* (Springfield: Waynor Publishing Co., 1976). See also a list of tales and books authored by Stephen on the Norway Memorial Library’s web site, *Welcome to the World of C.A. Stephens: “When life was young. . .”*<sup>2</sup>

An abridged version of this tale—without illustration—is found in C. A. Stephens, *A Busy Year at the Old Squire’s* (Boston: Youth’s Companion, 1922): 171–78.

A contemporary description of American itinerant daguerreotype wagons is found in “American Photography,” *Liverpool Photographic Journal* 3 (12 January 1856): 1–2.<sup>1</sup>

A daguerreotype of Isaac Wallace Baker and his itinerant daguerreian saloon (in the collection of the Oakland Museum of California) is viewable on the web site of The Daguerreian Society.<sup>2</sup>

1. <http://library.bowdoin.edu/arch/mss/casg.shtml>

2. <http://www.norway.lib.me.us/cas.htm>

3. [http://www.daguerreotypearchive.org/texts/P8560001\\_AM\\_PHOTOG\\_LIVERPOOL\\_1856-12-01.pdf](http://www.daguerreotypearchive.org/texts/P8560001_AM_PHOTOG_LIVERPOOL_1856-12-01.pdf)

4. <http://daguerre.org/gallery/oakland/9ca.html>

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