

Hypothetical Encounter

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He strides with British arrogance, swinging his silver-tipped cane like a weapon among heathens. His stiff-necked swagger is not only a result of his impeccably folded silk cravat which envelops his chin but also a reflection of his attitude to the Parisian mob which raggedly opens at the approach of this singular-looking English dandy.

He is Thomas Wedgwood, the 28 year old son of the famous potter, a wealthy and highly educated young man, if pale and gaunt from ill-health. The gutter odors and reek of unwashed French bodies are not making him feel any better. God, such rabble deserves that cocky little upstart Napoleon. And Josephine. At least he had the decency to marry the hussy, what three years ago already? And now strutting the world like a barnyard cock, disrupting the spread of British values (and profits). 'Bout time we took a chopper to the blighter.

It is June of 1799 and Thomas Wedgwood, with mind aloof from the here and now, is about to collide, quite literally, with his destiny - but not recognize it.

Destiny was shambling, at that very moment, in the opposite direction, in the unlikely bulbous form of 58 year old Chaussier. No one used his first name. Even his wife screeched and scolded him with "Chaussier, clear up your mess", "Chaussier, your internal chemicals are stinking up the house", "Chaussier, you pig. . ." Chaussier, as you can see, had his own problems and they were closer to home than thoughts of his Emperor advancing into Syria.

Wedgwood and Chaussier, preoccupied with their separate imaginings, met. Forcibly. Friction and balance discombobulated, they landed in a heap of entangled limbs on the slick cobblestones of a Paris street. Such indignity.

Extricated from each others' embrace they made a striking study in the extremes allowable within the basic human model.

Wedgwood was the young greyhound to Chaussier's shaggy mutt, graying

around the muzzle. The Englishman was groomed and elegantly slim, dressed in a black frock coat over a fine linen shirt, with thin hair frizzed and powdered beneath a moleskin top hat. The Frenchman was the epitome of a seedy *Incroyable*, clothed in a floppy, ill-cut great coat with lapels as wide as wings over a soiled ruffled shirt and, most striking of all, striped stockings which banded his fat legs with colored rings. Hatless, his hounds-ears locks of hair would blow aside to reveal cameo earrings. His high boots were splattered with mud and garbage. Struggling to extricate themselves, they looked like a particularly dissolute and mangy mongoose in the clutches of a slick cobra.

But they had one thing in common, which the garrulous, querulous, beady-eyed Chaussier was quick to notice. "Silver nitrate", accused Chaussier, dispensing with both apologies and introductions. "Ah-ha!" he exclaimed, pointing at Wedgwood's fingers which were indeed stained black, "you are a chemist, like me!"

"It is correct to state," said Wedgwood, in as haughtily a manner as the act of flicking Parisian garbage from his pantaloons would permit, "that I study particular scientific phenomena as permitted among other gentlemanly pursuits. "

Chaussier, oblivious to the imperious tone, was too excited to dislodge a tomato which was beginning to slide down his *veste* and into his stockings. "Tell me about your experiments! You must!" (Chaussier always spoke with exclamation marks after his sentences). I too am a chemist. No greater joy than the mixing, the precipitations, the gases, the thrill, the joy of something, anything, happening. Of course, my wife loathes the blessed solutions, but me, I cannot wait. . . "

More in order to damn the torrent of unbridled, and therefore unhealthily foreign, enthusiasm of this smelly little man than a desire to impart knowledge, Wedgwood modestly intoned: "I have been conducting occasional experiments in the action of sunlight on silver nitrate, producing what I term silver pictures. Hence the stains you were so quick to point out. " Chaussier is oblivious to the rebuke at his lack of good, or at least English, manners. "Wonderful, exciting!" gushed Chaussier, his body jiggling with enthusiasm. "You must show them to me; I have to see for myself such miraculous pictures. "

"I cannot do that", said Wedgwood, "because I have been unable, as yet, to render the results in a permanent state. The silver pictures rapidly fade away under the further action of light. But I retain a modest hope, if not optimism, that a suitable fixing substance will present itself. "

"I know what you mean," said Chaussier, his jowls wobbling as he shook his head at the unfairness of life and at the tribulations of the truth-seekers. "We scientists labor long for such meager results. I, myself, spent years attempting to preserve animal substances from putrefaction. Failure. Then there is my present experiment, which poses the opposite problem to your own. You have an end in sight and lack merely the final step to its realization. I have the end result but have no idea what to do with it. *C'est la vie.*"

A glimmer of interest passed across Wedgwood's sickly face and, momentarily, scientific curiosity overrode his distaste for this fat Frenchman, still reeking with the odor of the abattoir. "What is it that you have discovered?," he asked.

Chaussier shrugged in exaggerated Gallic fashion. "I have been passing gas (beg your pardon!), sulfurous acid gas, to be precise, through sodium sulfide until sulfur ceases to precipitate. *Et voila.* A new substance - beautiful transparent crystals. In English you would call it hyposulphite of soda. My wife thinks I should call it Hippo 'after the gross creature who produced the stinking stuff,' she says. But then she is disdainful of all my manly efforts. . . ." and he digs Wedgwood in the ribs with a wink and a leer.

Recoiling yet again from contact, Wedgwood loses whatever grasp of the idea he might have had. Struggling to regain composure, he asks: "And what is the purpose of this. . . hypo?"

"Yes, that's the questions, is it not? What is the purpose of things? What are such things *for*? If only I knew. Like life, some things just *are*, are don't seem to have any useful role to play. Hypo *is*, and that's all I know. One day, perhaps. . . ."

At that moment a pretty serving wench sashayed into view, distracting Chaussier. Wedgwood took the opportunity to slip unnoticed into the moving throng, relieved at his sudden freedom from the carnal foreigner.

By the time he met Sam Coleridge for luncheon the strangely disturbing encounter with the hypo-man had dissolved even thoughts of silver pictures from his mind. I must get away from this rabble, he was thinking, perhaps to the West Indies. . .

Postscript:

This story is (probably) not true. But it could have happened. Thomas Wedgwood (1771-1805) did perform experiments in "silver pictures" throughout the 1790s. He might have traveled to Paris, although there is no record of such a trip, in order to meet his closest friend Samuel Taylor Coleridge who had been studying in Germany and began his homeward journey in June 1799.

A French chemist named Chaussier (1746-1828) did discover hyposulphite of soda, the ideal fixing agent for Wedgwood's "silver pictures," while working in Paris in 1799. Curiously, his first name (which was Francois) is never mentioned in any photographic context. I have probably defamed Chaussier's character. Although Wedgwood's appearance, character and dress is pretty accurate, Chaussier's are a complete unknown, although he did conduct experiments in preventing the putrefaction of meats.

Wedgwood was in ill-health and attempted to recuperate by taking a trip to the West Indies in the following year. He presented an account of his silver experiments to the Royal Institution in 1802.

It was not until 1819 that Sir William Herschel discovered that hypo dissolved silver salts. Both Talbot and Daguerre adopted hypo as a fixer on Herschel's recommendation in 1839. After 150 years it remains the standard fixing agent for photographic materials.

If the hypothetical (pun intended) encounter had occurred, and if Wedgwood had grasped the significance of Chaussier's discovery, photography would have had a different inventor and a 40-year longer history.

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