

THE PHOTOGRAPHIC NEWS.

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THE ETHICS AND ETIQUETTE OF SCIENTIFIC DISCUSSION.

We remember being amused some time ago by the order and classification into which a gentleman—himself a member of more than one learned society—arranged the peculiarities of temper which universally, as he stated, characterised the members of different scientific bodies. His theory assumed on the one hand, that the favourite pursuit influenced the temper of the man, or, on the other, that the mental conformation which gave a bias in favour of any particular science was generally accompanied by its given idiosyncrasy of temper, and that success in the science was generally accompanied by an augmentation of its accompanying peculiarity of temper. Without following out this whimsical theory, which was accompanied by a few illustrations which seemed to give it some show of truth, we took exception to one case in which we thought it assuredly broke down. The pursuit of one science was stated to be accompanied by a waspish acerbity of temper, and the attainment of eminence accompanied by a degree of quarrelsomeness and dogmatism utterly intolerable. To this we took entire exception, feeling assured that shallowness and ignorance of truth alone could produce dogmatism or quarrelsomeness on its behalf.

It might be an interesting study, however, to the psychologist to consider to what causes is due the fact—happily rare, but still sufficiently familiar to all interested in scientific debate—that an amount of acrimony and bitterness is at times imported into discussions, involving no personal considerations, which is utterly astounding and inexplicable. We think perhaps amongst many causes, there are two chief ones operating in conjunction with natural infirmity of temper. The first, which produces the milder form of acerbity, is simply inconsiderateness, a sheer oblivion of the possible construction cutting words may bear, or the possible pain they may inflict on others of sensitive temperament. The second cause, which leads to the grosser breaches of good manners, is simply ignorance combined with a naturally snarling temper. We believe it is nothing more. We are unwilling to believe in the existence of unprovoked malice, envy, and all uncharitableness. Ignorance is sufficient, we think, to account for much which bears the appearance of these vices. Ignorance of the laws of courtesy and kindness; ignorance of when they are violated. We are inclined to agree with Pope, that—

“Want of decency is want of sense.”

Whatever may be the causes, however, from which acerbities spring, it is a most important thing to eliminate them as far as possible from scientific discussion. Even in their mildest form, they must have a most repressive influence on the freedom of debate. That discussion should be entirely unfettered, there can be no need to affirm or enforce; but there is an immense difference between liberty and licence. That errors should be pointed out, and misleading statements confuted, there can be no doubt; but that offensive language should be employed is surely unnecessary, and the misfortune is, that it too frequently happens, that as argument grows weak, phraseology becomes strong, and when the position cannot be destroyed, the person is assailed.

That this is a state of things to be deprecated cannot be disputed. The habit of pouncing upon, and “putting down” every accidental *non sequitur* or doubtful statement, except where important interests are at stake, is a most dangerous one in any individual, and often serves to keep

silent others who, but for the indisposition to subject themselves to such treatment, might make important contributions to the common stock of knowledge. A case in point occurred only the other day at a photographic meeting. A gentleman whispered to his neighbour an important fact bearing on the subject of discussion.

“Why do you not get up and say so to the meeting?” was the reply.

“Oh, because I should probably have so and so down upon me immediately,” was the rejoinder.

Where this tendency arises from inconsiderateness, combined with, perhaps, an over anxiety at all times for literal exactness and accuracy, we are sure that a very brief hint will suffice to correct it, and suggest the importance of some regard for the personal feelings of opponents, as well as for the elucidation of truth. Where it proceeds from ignorance, it rests with Photographic Societies and Photographic Journals to teach and enforce courtesy, by suppressing rudeness and personality in the meetings of the one, and excluding it from the pages of the other.

We cannot enter into any enlarged consideration of all the bearings of such a subject here; but we have been led into these brief remarks by the fact, that we have recently been compelled to omit from our pages letters containing important remarks on interesting subjects, simply because those remarks were expressed, in and accompanied by, an apparent spirit of personality and captiousness, to which, for the sake of free discussion, we are compelled to object. We have said an *apparent* spirit of personality and captiousness, because we believe, in some instances, the phraseology has simply proceeded from the inconsiderateness to which we have referred, and not from any wish to offend. Unfortunately, where the motive is not apparent, the pain inflicted is not the less real.

Another motive which has induced us to make a few observations on this subject has arisen from the papers of Mr. Cramb, of Glasgow, on the silver meter controversy. Our readers have been made familiar with all the facts necessary for their guidance in this matter, and many of them have proved, practically, the value of the hydrometer for its purpose. Mr. Cramb has, in another angry article in a contemporary, returned to the question; but as a great part of his article consists of misstatements and abuse of ourselves, it were a bootless task, unpleasant to ourselves, and unprofitable to our readers, to follow him. Even had we been disposed to do so, we are somewhat disarmed at the outset by a statement that he is unable to find in his paper any just cause for the charges of rudeness which have been brought against him. Now, when a man can call the experiments performed before a scientific society to their entire satisfaction “complete befooling,” and not know that he has been rude, there is but little to be said beyond an expression of commiseration of the crass obtuseness which must exist. It is bad to be rude; but it is simply unfortunate to be so and not know it. Perhaps, even still, Mr. Cramb may be unwilling to take our word for it that he has been rude, and we must, therefore, refer him for confirmation to the courteous and sensible article of the editor of the journal in which his papers have appeared. As Mr. Cramb has referred to his national motto, apparently as a plea in mitigation of punishment, we may commend to his attention some lines from his national poet:—

“Oh, wad some power the giflie gie us
To see oursel as ithers see us!
It wad frae mony a blunder free us,
And foolish notion.”