

THE PHOTOGRAPHIC NEWS.

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PHOTOGRAPHY AND CONTEMPORARY LITERATURE.

If, by some singular combination of circumstances, it could occur that some centuries hence photography should have become one of the lost arts, and if, at the same time, it could happen that no vestige of a photograph remained in existence, future generations of the world would, we venture to affirm, still have a most perfect and vivid idea of the capabilities and productions of this wondrous art. This idea would be preserved to them with the utmost completeness in the thousand and one passing allusions in contemporary literature, in which the art has become a standing illustration of rapid delineation, and the term photograph a synonym for most perfect, minute, and literal accuracy. Is a description of life and manners striking for its minute and graphic truthfulness? It is at once regarded as "photographic in its unerring accuracy." Is a vivid, forcible, and detailed impression of any scene or narrative received? It is said to be "daguerreotyped on the mind." Is a painting remarkable for its delicate and perfect drawing, and absence of the characteristics of conventional art? It is pronounced "photographic in its rendering of minutiae." In a variety of forms, and an infinity of instances, the truth, the beauty, and the usefulness of the art receive constant and unpremeditated recognition.

This unconscious appreciation, this indirect and almost unintentional acknowledgment—which is by far the most valuable—is almost invariably honourable to photography: and the hearty, ungrudging recognition of some of the better writers on art subjects is not less so; but it unfortunately happens that every now and then, at intervals, a tendency or feeling creeps out and finds expression in some portions of the press, which displays an ignorance so dense, or a grudge so transparent and preposterous, that whilst we may understand its origin, we wonder how it found any chance of publication. Several such manifestations of feeling have found expression recently. It would almost appear as if the fifth-rate artists, whose occupation has long been well nigh gone, were, in anticipation of the challenge which photography will give at the forthcoming exhibition, gathering up their powers for a final effort to crush the art, and were beginning by a series of side-winds to throw contempt upon its productions. We feel it important to keep our readers informed of such attempts, and, at the same time, to rebut emphatically the false charges so often promulgated.

The first case to which we have to advert occurs in the *Athenæum*, a journal which has often rendered graceful tribute to photography and photographs, but which in a recent number offends in two instances; in one case casting a passing sneer on the art, and in the second shows a sad ignorance of the productions of English artists. In a review of a recent work by Mr. Thackeray, the writer thus commences:—

"There is a superstition amongst many people that photographs are likenesses, and that, however hideous the result may be, the photograph only brings to light the ugly possibilities that lie dormant in the individual. Again, there is a notion that caricaturists produce the strongest likenesses; it being essential to the success of caricatures that every one should 'recognise them at a glance.' In both cases candid friends mildly insinuate against the 'vanity' which protests against accepting the award. It is always easy to understand a dashing exaggeration; it saves trouble both to the artist and the public, and spares the skill and patience necessary to produce or to discern the delicate shades of the *poco meno e poco piu* needed

to make a genuine portrait. What is true of portrait-painting holds good of the art of delineating character. It is easy to produce a caricature which, by its exaggeration of some salient peculiarity, is certain to be recognised—and to raise a chuckle of recognition from its trick of resemblance to some people we have seen and observed; but that does not constitute a knowledge of human nature. Mr. Thackeray's present work—the sad failure of a man of genuine powers—seems to us to be in Literature what a photograph or a caricature is in Art."

Now we utterly deny the truth, justice, or good taste of this allusion to photography. We deny that photography necessarily or in itself possesses anything in common with caricature. "Dashing exaggeration of some salient peculiarity" is precisely the thing which photography is incapable of. Even in bad photography, where exaggeration may be detected, it has no power of discriminating between "salient peculiarities" and common-place features. Moreover, "the delicate shades," &c., needed to make a genuine portrait, are in reasonably good photography, the very points of its acknowledged excellence, rather than its glaring deficiency. In the same number which contains the review, we find the following:—

"The London Stereoscopic Company have issued among their later enterprises, a series of instantaneous views of Paris—of buildings, boulevards, street-views and the like—taken, we infer, by French artists. They are extremely sharp, vivid, brilliant, full of life and motion; the very image of the actual places and events transferred and fixed for ever. We have recently been looking over a good many French and Italian photographs; and we must warn our English friends, that in the coming contests at South Kensington, they must look for stern trials of strength. The French artists have the advantage over us in marine and street subjects; the Roman and Venetian artists in landscape and structure. Our figure photography is, perhaps, superior to the French or the Italian."

Most of our readers are aware that the stereographs referred to are by Mr. William England, an able English photographer; but in the spirit which depreciates home productions, the writer "infers" they are by French artists. Quite consistent with this inference is the statement that continental photographers excel in marine or landscape photography, and that English artists are superior in figures.

These slights and errors are mild, however, compared with those we find in a recent article, entitled "The New Picture Galleries," in the *London Review*, which is so amusing in its preposterous mis-statements, that we have transferred it in its entirety to our own columns, where it will be found in another page of this number. The *London Review* stands so high as a calm and truthful exponent of art and science, and has so often been distinguished by excellent articles connected with photography, that we were deeply grieved and disappointed to find what appears to be the spiteful lucubrations of a disappointed artist in its columns, which but a few weeks before had contained an article striking for its dispassionate and fair statement of the relation of photography to the fine arts.

The first characteristic of the article in question is its *malus animus*, its spiteful motive; the second, its false reasoning; and the third its gross ignorance. The first is shown in assertions and allusions, which both the writer and everybody else know to be untrue. In such phrases as "distorted by the painful process of photography," "sufferings in the inferno of some eminent photographer," "disfigured appearance of a friend," such as might be sought for "in a morgue," and other allusions equally choice.