

THE PHOTOGRAPHIC NEWS.

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RETOUCHING PHOTOGRAPHS.

WE have received several letters recently, in which the writers, referring to the alleged frequency of retouching, speak of such a practice as reprehensible, and ask upon what ground its legitimacy can be defended. One correspondent says:—

"Surely the old system of completely covering up the photograph in black and white, which was introduced in the infant days of paper portraiture, and could only be tolerated on the score that the photograph itself was very imperfect, cannot be justified in the days when photography has attained a very high degree of perfection, and can render detail with a degree of truth and delicacy which the cleverest painter may strive in vain to rival. When nine-tenths of the prints were well described as "soot and whitewash," and printed-in backgrounds were required to get rid of stains, working upon the print was almost necessary to get an approach to a good picture; and it was soon found that when the amount of retouching necessary to put detail into the bald patches of white had been effected, it became necessary to cover the whole image with pigment, to avoid an incongruous effect of half a picture in paint and half in photography. But since the introduction of bromo-iodized collodion, we can get detail, softness, and cleanliness, without the aid of the painter; and I am disposed to maintain that a perfectly untouched photograph has beauties of its own higher than any which can be conferred by the pencil of the retoucher.

"I believe the practice of retouching the negative to be more reprehensible than retouching the print, because it is misleading. The print being untouched, an unsuspecting observer believes that every detail is true to nature as photography has recorded it, and that the profane hand of man has not tampered with nature's own limning.

"As for M. Adam-Salomon's pictures I am utterly bewildered by the varied accounts of them which have been published. Your own account of them describes them as magnificent photography, with an unimportant and insignificant amount of retouching; another account describes their beauties as disappearing when a sponge was applied to the surface; another account states, in italics, that the 'faces are very cleverly retouched all over'; whilst a fourth says that they are not only retouched, but that the retouching is very badly done. To make the contradictions more perplexing still, I find one account describe his studio as having a ridge-roof with a north aspect; whilst another states the form to be altogether different, and the aspect south. Can you reconcile these discrepancies? Photographers residing in the country, anxious to do the best work, and anxious to profit by the instruction you so efficiently afford, are at times sadly perplexed by the contradictions in statement of

fact, and the varieties in expression of opinion, which they find in the journals."

In reply to our correspondent, whose letter is a type of others we have received, we may say at the outset that we cannot undertake to reconcile differences of opinion. These must always exist, and those concerned must just attach to each such an amount of weight as its intrinsic excellence and the trustworthiness of the authority may justify. Differences in statement of fact are more easily explained, or reconciled. Regarding the studio, the explanation is simple. M. Salomon's pictures which we have noticed were taken in the studio we described. He has recently been working in another, and, we understand, experimental studio, temporarily erected, the object being, we believe, to secure more rapid exposures. We have seen some of the portraits produced in the new erection, which strike us as scarcely so perfect in lighting as those produced in the old studio which we described. But we speak reservedly, as it is not right to judge from isolated examples. The apparent contradiction is, however, readily explained: the differing accounts refer to two distinct studios, and are not contradictory descriptions of one.

The question of the accounts of retouching is just as easily explained. It is again a case of the gold and silver shield. Some of M. Salomon's prints are retouched, and some are not. We have four examples of his work before us, which are capitally typical of the varied results. One is very much retouched in the face; another is very slightly retouched in the face; another is retouched in one or two minor details; and the fourth is not retouched at all. But it is important to note that it is the worst picture which is most retouched, and the best picture is not retouched at all. In no case is the excellence of the result due to retouching, which is only applied to remedy some manifest shortcoming, or, at times, to effect some fancied improvement.

A word or two will suffice to answer the question as to the legitimacy or justifiableness of retouching generally. We think retouching is legitimate wherever it is an improvement, and illegitimate where it interferes in any degree with either truth or beauty. Our correspondent—unconsciously, no doubt—endorses a very common fallacy when he speaks of the truth of nature as rendered by photography. Photography frequently fails to render the truth of nature. It renders red hair by producing black hair; it frequently renders freckles scarcely observable in nature by a coarse, speckled texture of black and white; it often ignores the delicate bloom and pearly greys which, in a beautiful fair girl's face, give such a charm of texture and modelling, and which the skilled painter takes such pains to render carefully in his picture. It often fails in these and in many other points, and if its shortcomings can be made up by the skilful use of the pencil we see no reason why the pencil should not be used. Where photography does render the