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Public Lectures—Lost Arts.

It has become a mighty fashion now to have public lectures in all our large and small cities—it is quite the rage—and a very commendable passion it is if rightly directed;—but this we believe is not always the case. Men of note as fancy speakers and authors are generally the selected lecturers; they tickle the ear and captivate the heart for the passing hour, but instead of making the hearers "wiser and better," those who believe all they say, are often made more ignorant than they were before. A great amount of trash is also uttered in some public lectures; there is little that is truly instructive or really true.—Now, as "the true is the beautiful," we must say that the universal taste or passion is for the glitter and gaud of the uncertain, in preference to the true. A respectably large audience could not, we believe, be obtained in all this city to hear a course of lectures on Natural Philosophy, while at the same time crowds go to hear mere opinions expressed about Dean Swift and the English Mind, and so on.—These things are all very well, but they do not exhibit a strong healthy public pulse, when the weighty matters of science and art, as was found in the case of Prof. Agassiz' lectures, are neglected. Some of these lecturers also do not exhibit that amount of correct knowledge which we expect of them. On Wednesday evening, the 1st inst., Wendell Phillips, of Boston, delivered one of the course that are called Popular Lectures, in the Tabernacle, this city, and although a very eloquent and humorous speaker, his information is not altogether to be relied on. The subject was "The Lost Arts," and we must take exception to much of what he said. He asserted that in all that relates to works of the imagination and the fine arts, we were far behind the people of antiquity. This we do not believe. Shakespeare, Milton, and Burns stand above all the ancient poets, and Raphael, Angelo, Canova, and Thorwaldsen, all moderns, were at least equal to the ancients in painting, sculpture, and architecture. He said very truly, that "we were apt to think our age the greatest, and that the ancients knew nothing." We are indeed too forgetful of the benefits we have derived from our ancestors, but at the same time there are some who reverence everything that is old—good and bad, and with an antiquarian taste, deride that which is new and better. There is much ignorance displayed by mere literary men, about the present state of the arts, and Mr. Phillips exhibited not a little. With respect to glass he said:—"This beautiful material that administers so much to our delight and comfort—did the ancients know of it? Even at the time when some skeptics were disputing upon this very question, the peasants broke into a house among the ruins of Pompeii which was filled with it. The lie and its refutation came thus together. It was like Dr. Lardner in 1839 writing a pamphlet to prove that a steamship could not cross the Atlantic, while in that same month the Sirius made her voyage to this country.

Instead of not knowing of glass, the ancients knew more than we do about it. In the first place, they understood the process of transfusing the color through the glass. Sir George Wilkinson brought from Egypt a small piece of glass, in which there was a figure of a duck, protected by another glass and then covered over again; and all this without destroying its beauty.

But I pass to the inquiry, whether they used glass for microscopes and telescopes? If you look at the History of Astronomy, you will find that the Hebrews and Egyptians were acquainted with the shape of the earth.—We also read that the Iliad was put into a nut shell by Alexander. Now this could not have been written in so small a compass without the aid of spectacles. We are also told that Nero had a ring of a peculiar shape and nature, that he looked down into the ring as he sat in the Coliseum, and could see the players distinctly. We are, therefore, led to believe that Nero had an opera-glass."

It is a common opinion (inexcusable in an educated man), that the moderns cannot make as good colored glass as the ancients. This is all nonsense; they can transfuse all colors into the glass, and the manner of covering the duck is quite a common trick among our glass makers. We have seen a miniature on ivory covered with glass and set in a glass frame in England—the glass fused all around it, and not a tinge of light or shade altered. Could the ancients do that? This miniature was formerly in the possession of Dr. Beck, of this State, who used to exhibit it in his chemical lectures. In glass making, the moderns far excel the ancients. The ancients may have been acquainted with spectacles, but it certainly requires a spectacle vision to discover any evidence of the same. As for telescopes being known by the ancients, Mr. Phillips draws largely upon his guessing powers. The remark about Dr. Lardner is incorrect; he never wrote any such pamphlet, and never made any such assertions. A man of education, who lectures to instruct the public, should draw his information from good authority instead of troubadour paragraphs which have appeared in some newspapers. Dr. Lardner has denied over his own signature, that he ever said "a steamship could not cross the Atlantic." The common belief that the ancients were acquainted with malleable glass, is founded on as great a historical error as that committed by Reese, who says, "a fossil glass is wrought by the Americans and used instead of iron." It is our opinion that there was not a single art known to the ancients which is not known to the moderns. Some arts, it is true, were lost during the dark ages, but they were all re-discovered, and nothing can be shown as works of ancients which cannot be done now. It is true we have learned much from the giants of old, but then we know all they ever knew, and can do all they could do, and a great deal more. The common opinion about "the lost arts,"—that the ancients were acquainted with arts about which we are ignorant, is a legend stamped with about as much truth as the story of "Jack the Giant Killer."

New York Harbor and Dirty Streets.

Charles H. Haswell, U. S. Navy, Engineer and Surveyor of the New York Board of Underwriters, has addressed a very sensible and interesting letter to the President, W. R. Jones, of said Board. He asserts that the reprehensible practice of covering newly paved cobble stone with sand some inches deep, and allowing it to remain to be carried down the sewers and into the docks by rains, is proving exceedingly injurious to the free navigation of the harbor. Were it not for the dredging machines continually in operation in our docks to remove the dirt carried down the sewers they would soon be filled up. The expense of dredging is enormous, while the manner in which it is conducted is more like the work of insane persons than men pretending to common sense. What do our readers think is done with the dirt excavated from our docks by the dredging machines? "Taken and wheeled up on dry land to fill up pools behind banks, &c., every one will say." No such thing, that would be too sensible a method for our lazy, unthinking gothamites. It is taken from our docks and dumped out into the bay—transferred from the slips to the channels of the rivers which bound our city." It is not carried out to the ocean; the tides roll it backwards and forwards, and some of it comes back to the very docks from which it was originally taken. Is not this a wise system for the sharp men of New York to be pursuing? With the increase of our city, if the same system continues for 30 years longer, the channels to our city will be shoaled up, and New York will become an exclusive resort for oyster boats and such like craft, instead of being as it is now, one of the finest and deepest harbors in the world. Mr. Haswell recommends that our streets should be kept clean, and that a new system of contracting for the removal of filth should be adopted. "The free navigation of our bay is involved in the cleanliness of our streets. This is what he asserts; we have no objection to the plan he recommends for keeping our streets clean, we like it, but we have something to say which he has overlooked. There is no necessity for covering newly paved streets with sand and

allowing it to remain for some time, under the pretence that it is necessary. The covering up of the newly laid stones with sand is to hide bad work, and put money into the pockets of the paving contractors. We have seen plenty of street paving in our lifetime, but never have we seen work done so wretchedly as in New York City. The stones should be laid down snug and rammed hard at first, and then all the loose sand swept off. We shall be glad when all our streets are laid with the Russ pavement, no loose sand is left after it. The cobble stone pavers will then discover that Othello's occupation is gone, and it was principally owing to their inefficient, unscrupulous, and miserable methods of working.

Give us Cheap Gas.

The city of New York contains the most patient, suffering population in the world.—Their rulers, every public chartered company, every city contractor, and every speculator favored by these rulers, enjoy the most delectable privilege of getting the greatest amount of money out of the "dear people." The taxes of New York City are much higher than those of any city in the world, and no city is so poorly served. The citizens of New York pay \$3 for every 1,000 cubic feet of gas they use, and the gas companies sell all the coke, (the refuse of the gas retorts,) for \$3.50 per ton. We do not know how much the gas companies pay now for their coal; we know that they charged \$7 per 1,000 feet of gas made from resin five years ago, and we presume the raw materials now used for making gas are much cheaper. The coal, we believe, comes from Liverpool, and may cost \$12 per ton—a most extravagant price. Well let us see what a ton of the best cannel coal will do and then we will have some idea of profit and loss—what gas can be made for, and what citizens should pay for it. A ton of the Scotch cannel coal produces 11,850 cubic feet of gas, and about 44 per cent. of coke, which at \$3 for 1,000 cubic feet of gas will make \$35.55, and allowing the coke to be 44 per cent., (sold at \$3.50 per ton) it will amount to \$1.54+35.55=\$37.09 for the product of one ton of coal at \$12, consequently, for the simple expenditures and profits connected with one ton of coal made into gas and supplied to our citizens, the gas companies of our city have the exceedingly favorable balance of \$25.9. It is our opinion that good cannel coal can be obtained from Virginia for as low a price as \$7 or \$6 per ton, and if cannel coal was taken from Glasgow instead of purchasing the inferior Liverpool coal, a great saving in that quarter would be effected. As we said before, we do not know exactly what our gas companies pay for their coal; we have put it at a high figure and have shown the results, and we can give chapter and verse for the alleged gas product of good coal, and none other should ever be used.

The price of gas, we think, might be safely reduced to \$2 per 1,000 cubic feet. If reduced in price, almost every private family would use it in place of oil, camphene, &c. We hope our gas companies will see to this; it would be the means of preventing many of the casualties which are constantly occurring from the use of volatile hydro-carbon fluids, and be a blessing to both rich and poor.

COKE FOR FUEL.—The gas companies in this city could sell twice the amount of coke which they make. Orders have to stand for a month before they can be filled; and we presume that if coke could always be furnished for the price mentioned, not a single family would use any other kind of fuel; anthracite would find but a poor market here, for the coke is much pleasanter, cleaner, more easily ignited, and has none of that offensive smell peculiar to bituminous and anthracite coals. Every person with whom we have conversed, who has used coke, likes it, and would burn nothing else, if it could be got as easily as coal. We look forward to the time when the volatile products of our bituminous coals, will, in the west, be distilled for many useful purposes, and the coke sent forward to the east and north at reasonable prices for family use.

Sea Island Cotton.

In a very able article on the cotton plant, by Isaac Croom, Esq., in the American Cotton planter, an able new magazine, edited by Dr.

Cloud, of Montgomery, Ala., it is stated that the first seed of the Sea Island long staple cotton was sent from the Bahamas to some gentlemen in Georgia in 1786, and the first experiments were made with it on the Sea Islands near the mouth of the Savannah river. The plants did not bear the first year, but the winter proving mild, the rattoons bore fruit the year following, and thus became acclimated. The original seed came from Persia. The successful growth of this world-wide famous kind of cotton is confined to a string of islands stretching from Georgetown, in South Carolina, to the St. Mary's river in Georgia, a distance of nearly 200 miles including a belt of coast not over 15 miles wide.

Safety for Ferry Boat Passengers.

A great many persons fall into, or jump into the river at our ferries, and not a few among the number of such get drowned. It is quite a common thing when a ferry boat is pushing out from its dock, to see persons rush forward to get on board before it departs, and some of them generally imperil their lives by leaping on the boat after it has started off. Among those who have resided in Brooklyn or Williamsburgh for a number of years, and whose business has led them to be regular passengers in the ferry-boats, there is scarcely one who has not at some time fallen into the water, or come very near doing so by jumping after a departed boat. The coolest of men in a hurry, when they see a boat just pushing off, as they arrive, are apt to play the impatient by springing after it. We have heard many plans suggested for preventing people from jumping on board of our ferry-boats, but it requires no ingenuity to devise an effectual one. All that has to be done is to board up all communication between the rooms where the passengers wait for the boat, except a small sliding gate under the control of the collector, and whenever he tolls the last bell, he should close it and not allow a soul to pass through until the next boat arrives. The boat should not leave for one minute after the bell is tolled, so that every one inside will be enabled to get on board, but not one outside. This plan would involve no extra expense; it is a simple and certain remedy for people getting into the river by jumping after a departed boat.

State Tariffs on Passengers.

In Africa and among Asiatic savage tribes, the chiefs have to be bribed by handsome presents before travellers will be allowed to journey through their territories. Some of our States seem to have learned intelligent lessons from these savage potentates. Thus New Jersey and Maryland charge the railroad companies 50 cents a head for every passenger—brother and sister republicans of other States—who travels on a railroad through them. It is reported that the present Tory Ministry of England intends to propose a tax on the railroad incomes of that country. Kindred governments have kindred feelings. This is protection by these States to their own citizens, with more than African or Asiatic refinement. "Brother republicans," say these States, "we are all of one family, and we are always glad to see you, but remember whenever you come past our doors you must have 50 cents each of you in your pockets; remember flunkies live by perquisites."

Planing and Sash Machinery.

The attention of our readers is called to an advertisement in another column of this paper for a mechanic to engage in the lumber business at the south. The advertiser is an energetic business man, in whom the utmost confidence may be placed, and his acquaintance at the south will render peculiar advantage to any party who may become engaged with him in the proposed business.

Award of Prizes.

In the next number of the Scientific American, we shall announce the names of the successful competitors for the prizes offered by us for the four largest lists of subscribers.

Communications sent to this office without the real name of the author attached, cannot, under any circumstances receive attention.—This is a rule common with all editors, and no writer should be ashamed to give his name, as it is always withheld from the public if a request is made to this effect.