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[p. 4]

‘The Croydon “Flirting Shop.”’

To the Editor of the Croydon Chronicle.

Sir,—Can you tell me if there is anything inflammable in the air or combustible in the water of Croydon? I think there must be, considering the exciting “scenes,” which occur when several of the inhabitants assemble together. The meetings of the Board of Guardians have for a long time past been unrivalled throughout the universe for “rowdiness” whilst to do the Board of Health but scant justice, it is only fair to say that it runs a good second; indeed, a few years ago I believe it might have put in a good claim and run a dead heat with the Guardians, nor was the School Board far behind, but the latter body, possibly in contemplation of the coming election, or of being worthy to occupy the Palace being got in readiness for it, has been on its good behavior latterly. But I hardly expected so much warmth—to use a very mild and neutral term—to be displayed at a discussion before a Scientific Society as I witnessed last evening at a meeting of the Microscopical and Natural History Club.

I had seen an announcement that a Mr. Pearce would read a paper on the “History and uses of British Medicinal Plants.” I thought I should like to hear that paper, as the subject was an interesting one to me, and not being a member of that learned body, I asked a friend if he could introduce me as a “Visitor.” He did so, such a circumstance being within the rules. I would not have missed that meeting for a good deal, for in a small way I was never more diverted in my life. I must also say that I was never more amazed. Before the paper was read there was a debate carried on with an acrimony and vehemence almost rivalling a family quarrel in the bitterness of its tone. The point in dispute was whether the reader of a paper could have the occasional privilege of having lady visitors introduced at the reading of his paper on announcing his wish at a previous meeting. The subject seemed to me to be a very mild one and it was introduced in a most temperate manner by Mr. A. R. Wallace and I expected it would have been carried without any opposition, at any rate without any formidable opposition, but I was undeceived when Dr. Carpenter, on seconding it, said that he expected to be in a minority, but they meant to persevere until they converted that minority into a majority, and that the carrying of the present mild resolution was only to be regarded as the “thin end of the wedge.” The Doctor made a long speech but a very temperate one, and when he sat down up jumped Mr. Henry Lee, who I plainly saw had armed himself for a very fierce encounter. I gathered from his speech that at some former meeting a new member on taking his seat for the first time was “accompanied by a lady,” and that that act was not one of inadvertence—as I should have surmised it might have been in a *new* member—but was a deliberate attempt to disturb the harmony of the Club and as Mr. Lee phrased it, to throw an apple of discord amongst the members. The name of the unhappy wight did not transpire nor could I ascertain who it was that had done such a monstrous act, but if instead of an “apple” he had thrown a bombshell amongst the members of the Club he could not possibly have caused a greater explosion of wrath. The poor lady herself does not appear to have made any disturbance or even to have uttered a word. Of what stern stuff must the members of this learned body be made, if the presence amongst them of one silent woman could cause such a commotion! Mr. Lee said that the society was originally established as a Club of men for men, and they intended to keep it select, and not permit the presence of women at any of its meetings, and therefore he should offer the strongest resistance to Mr. Wallace’s thin end of the wedge. So far, so good, and however much we may question the good taste or the policy of such a proceeding, or of such a rule there is not much to be said against it, but the next speaker, Dr. Strong in seconding Mr. Lee’s amendment made a very vehement speech and was as vehemently applauded by the majority of the meeting. I disclaim all intention of using any terms which can be called offensive, but I must say that some of the remarks

which fell from his lips seemed to me to be not merely puerile, but ludicrously contemptible and utterly unworthy any body of “scientists.” If the terms I have made use of seem too strong for the occasion I beg my readers will find more suitable ones and more fitting for the purpose. Dr. Strong, for example, said that if ladies were admitted to the meetings they should transpose the Club into a flirting shop” and that when flirting was going on there would be but little scientific discussion, in which, admitting his premises, I agree with him; but I cannot and do not believe that the presence of ladies at scientific meetings is conducive to flirting. But then it may be said that Dr. Strong *is* an authority on the art and mystery of “flirting” and that I am not, which I freely admit, as I never flirted. But Dr. Strong’s remarks brought to my recollection an incident of which I was a witness some twenty years ago in the House of Lords. During one of the debates—I forget now what the subject of debate was but I know that it was a perfectly harmless one—Lord Redesdale suddenly rose to order and said that he noticed there were a number of ladies present in the Ladies Gallery, and as their appearance there made that august assembly bear a strong resemblance to “a casino” he moved that they be requested to withdraw, and that the debate be suspended until they did so. This brought up Lord Granville who made one of those sparkling little sallies for which he is so famous. He said that he knew little or nothing of “casinos” himself but he did not for a moment doubt the authority of his noble friend on such a subject, but his objection of the presence of ladies reminded him of a French farce which he once witnessed at a Theatre in Paris. One of the characters in the farce was an “English milord” and that nobleman “objected to the presence of ladies.” Until to-night, said Lord Granville, I could never conjecture who was the *original* of that English “Milord.” This witty repartee, of course, “brought down the house” and Lord Redesdale looked unutterable things.

But Dr. Strong went on further to remark that they discussed matters at that Club which were unfit for ladies to hear. I could not for the life of me surmise what sort of Club it could be, for I could not suppose that it was even a small edition of the famous Club which history says was held at Medmenham Abbey, but the speaker set any anxiety at rest by remarking that the subject for discussion that evening, viz., the “History and uses of British Medical Plants” was such an one as would not be fit for a lady to listen to, as possibly some member might drop a remark upon the male, female and unisexual nature of plants. Does Dr. Strong suppose that well-informed ladies do not know, or if they do not, that there would be any indecency in informing them that there are sexes in plants as there are in animals and birds? Does he suppose there is any English woman living who does not know that there are cock pheasants as well as hens, or that there are nanny goats as well as billies? Would he exclude women from cattle shows because there are bullocks as well as heifers; from poultry shows because there are game cocks as well as bantam hens; or from cat shows because there are cats of both sexes as well as cats of no sex at all? I maintain that such squeamish arguments are utterly childish. I have now lying before me a little “Primer of Botany” written for beginners and children of both sexes by Dr. Hooker, C.B., F.R.S., Director of Kew Gardens and late President of the Royal Society, and in that little book I find that he makes mention of the sexes of plants and even gives wood cut illustrations of the different sexes, and although differing from so eminent an authority as Dr. Strong is on horticultural and floricultural matters, I submit that Dr. Hooker stands very high indeed and knows or ought to know what is fit or unfit to be brought under the notice of ladies or anyone else, however fastidious they may be. After the deliberate affront offered to the ladies I should not suppose there is a single woman with a grain of sense or of self-respect, who would wish to join the society, but would give it a very wide berth. I make use of the term “deliberate” advisedly for not only were Dr. Strong’s remarks loudly applauded, but Mr. Wallace’s motion was lost by a majority of at least three to one, and then a large proportion of the members made a stampede and left the room, proving pretty plainly that they had not gone there, as I had, for the purpose of listening to the reading of a paper on natural history, but of offering a sort of studied insult to the ladies. When the “Doctors” have another of their famous “balls” at the Public Hall, I hope the ladies with one accord will stay away altogether, and leave the lords of creation to dance and “flirt” with themselves and with each other. One of the speakers, I forget which, said that though they were resolved to exclude women

from their “*meetings*” they invited them to their *excursions*. What a precious concession! I was once present for a few minutes at one of these famous excursions for I came across the excursionists in taking one of my “walks abroad,” and I found they were bent upon visiting ditches and duck ponds, and “comprehending” such “vagrom” as sticklebacks, periwinkles, lobworms, and tadpoles. A little bit of such excursionising went a long way with me and I soon had had enough of it and left the excursionists alone in their glory!

The most flourishing of the learned scientific societies in London—I refer to the Zoological—not only does not repel but actually invites ladies to become members—and I am very much mistaken if at least half of the members or rather “Fellows” are not of the softer sex. The lounge in the gardens at the “Zoo” on a Sunday afternoon in the summer is one of the pleasantest outings of the London season. I have been there scores of times, and I must say that I have but very seldom seen anything like “flirting,” but then it may be said I am too great a bumpkin to know what “flirting” is. I plead guilty to the soft (or hard) impeachment.

A Mr. Klaassen seemed to have excited the wrath of the president by addressing letters to newspapers instead of to the club on the strikingly intricate, though as I should have thought, harmless question of whether “meteorology” was a subject of natural science worthy to be debated before the society or not. So I understood the question, but Mr. Klaassen spoke so distinctively that I could not clearly catch what he said. How such a question as “meteorology” could afford food for wrath I cannot conjecture. I once heard a former “captain” of your once famous, though now defunct, Volunteer Fire Brigade, declare and in the most vigorous manner, at a public meeting that he did not believe in “Hydraulics.” For the life of me I could not understand what the man meant, considering that he was a famous fireman, and after the meeting was over I asked him if he believed in mathematics, astronomy, or any other exact science. I then gathered that by hydraulics he really *meant* hydrants, not a scientific law but an engineering implement. Perhaps Mr. President and Mr. Klaassen may have mixed up in some such manner the science of meteorology.

It may be objected that having been admitted within that learned arena by a sort of act of grace (not being a member) it is a very ungracious act on my part to criticise or comment upon their proceedings. In reply I say that I transgressed no rule whilst there, for I did not disturb the meeting at all, but sat as silently as a spiked cannon and neither hissed or applauded, and it was clearly within the province of the member and also within the rules that on a proper introduction I was entitled to be admitted as a visitor. And I may furthermore say what cannot be gainsayed by any one, that I should have been clearly entitled to have written this letter after reading the newspaper’s reports of the meeting, and as I saw several reporters present I suppose we shall have either a full or a condensed report of the proceedings but I preferred that my comments should appear at the same time as the report.

In conclusion I would bring to the notice of your readers some thrilling lines extracted from a satirical poem, entitled the “Age of Land,” and written by the eldest son of my late partner Mr. Edward Wallace of Carshalton. He died in India at the age, I believe, of about 21, from the effects of sun stroke, but the poem, a long one of 90 pages, 8 vo., was written, I was told, when the author was only 19 years of age. The perusal of this satire proves to my mind that the author’s life was “too short for friendship not for fame.” After satirizing some of the mighty deeds of the lords of creation of that period, he thus apostrophises such as are outcasts from the Croydon Microscopical and Natural History Club:

Such are our men; but nay, what Women smile
Like pitying angels on our altered Isle,
And pour the healing virtues of their mind
O’er the dark sorrows of abased mankind?
What Women bless the relics of our power,

And prove their sway in misery's weary hour?
Ah! Beauty wanes not—Tho' all else may wane;
Destruction scowls on loveliness in vain!
Our honour fallen—our glories in the grave,
Virtue, and love may still our country save;
Still may our land abandoned by her men
'Neath woman's power bloom fresh and green again
To you I turn! sweet saints of Liberty.
Britannia's daughters, ever fair and free!
To you I turn! how loved—how lovely all,
Lift from your nation's brow its leaden pall!
With hands as snowy as the ocean's spray,
Dash the dank death drops from her cheek away!
With eyes, that shine like Venus' shining star
Drive the pale phantoms of the tomb afar!
And with your lips, as rosy as the morn,
Imprint a kiss upon her front forlorn!
With you it rests—and rests with you alone,
To place Britannia on her ancient throne;
Wipe the hot tear drops from her weeping eyes,
And raise her face in glory towards the skies!
Pause! ere you turn away—reflect! before
You close for ever mercy's hallowed door.
With you it rests a purer soul to speed
Through the dull twaddlers of this Age of Lead.

I am, sir, faithfully yours,

J. H. Shorthouse.

Croydon, Thursday, Feb. 19th, 1880.

The Alfred Russel Wallace Page, Charles H. Smith, 2021.