

THE FALSE PHOTOGRAPHER

When, as lately, events have happened that seem (to the fancy, at least) to test if not stagger the force of official government, it is amusing to ask oneself what is the real weakness of civilisation, ours especially, when it contends with the one lawless man. I was reminded of one weakness this morning in turning over an old drawerful of pictures.

This weakness in civilisation is best expressed by saying that it cares more for science than for truth. It prides itself on its "methods" more than its results; it is satisfied with precision, discipline, good communications, rather than with the sense of reality. But there are precise falsehoods as well as precise facts. Discipline may only mean a hundred men making the same mistake at the same minute. And good communications may in practice be very like those evil communications which are said to corrupt good manners. Broadly, we have reached a "scientific age," which wants to know whether the train is in the timetable, but not whether the train is in the station. I take one instance in our police inquiries that I happen to have come across: the case of photography.

Some years ago a poet of considerable genius tragically disappeared, and the authorities or the newspapers circulated a photograph of him, so that he might be identified. The photograph, as I remember it, depicted or suggested a handsome, haughty, and somewhat pallid man with his head thrown back, with long distinguished features, colourless thin hair and

slight moustache, and though conveyed merely by the head and shoulders, a definite impression of height. If I had gone by that photograph I should have gone about looking for a long soldierly but listless man, with a profile rather like the Duke of Connaught's.

Only, as it happened, I knew the poet personally; I had seen him a great many times, and he had an appearance that nobody could possibly forget, if seen only once. He had the mark of those dark and passionate Westland Scotch, who before Burns and after have given many such dark eyes and dark emotions to the world. But in him the unmistakable strain, Gaelic or whatever it is, was accentuated almost to oddity; and he looked like some swarthy elf. He was small, with a big head and a crescent of coal-black hair round the back of a vast dome of baldness. Immediately under his eyes his cheekbones had so high a colour that they might have been painted scarlet; three black tufts, two on the upper lip and one under the lower, seemed to touch up the face with the fierce moustaches of Mephistopheles. His eyes had that "dancing madness" in them which Stevenson saw in the Gaelic eyes of Alan Breck; but he sometimes distorted the expression by screwing a monstrous monocle into one of them. A man more unmistakable would have been hard to find. You could have picked him out in any crowd—so long as you had not seen his photograph.

But in this scientific picture of him twenty causes, accidental and conventional, had combined to obliterate him altogether. The limits of photography forbade the strong and almost melodramatic colouring

of cheek and eyebrow. The accident of the lighting took nearly all the darkness out of the hair and made him look almost like a fair man. The framing and limitation of the shoulders made him look like a big man; and the devastating bore of being photographed when you want to write poetry made him look like a lazy man. Holding his head back, as people do when they are being photographed (or shot), but as he certainly never held it normally, accidentally concealed the bald dome that dominated his slight figure. Here we have a clockwork picture, begun and finished by a button and a box of chemicals, from which every projecting feature has been more delicately and dexterously omitted than they could have been by the most namby-pamby flatterer, painting in the weakest water-colours, on the smoothest ivory.

I happen to possess a book of Mr. Max Beerbohm's caricatures, one of which depicts the unfortunate poet in question. To say it represents an utterly incredible hobgoblin is to express in faint and inadequate language the license of its sprawling lines. The authorities thought it strictly safe and scientific to circulate the poet's photograph. They would have clapped me in an asylum if I had asked them to circulate Max's caricature. But the caricature would have been far more likely to find the man.

This is a small but exact symbol of the failure of scientific civilisation. It is so satisfied in knowing it has a photograph of a man that it never asks whether it has a likeness of him. Thus declarations, seemingly most detailed, have flashed along the wires of the world ever

since I was a boy. We were told that in some row Boer policemen had shot an Englishman, a British subject, an English citizen. A long time afterwards we were quite casually informed that the English citizen was quite black. Well, it makes no difference to the moral question; black men should be shot on the same ethical principles as white men. But it makes one distrust scientific communications which permitted so startling an alteration of the photograph. I am sorry we got hold of a photographic negative in which a black man came out white. Later we were told that an Englishman had fought for the Boers against his own flag, which would have been a disgusting thing to do. Later, it was admitted that he was an Irishman; which is exactly as different as if he had been a Pole. Common sense, with all the facts before it, does see that black is not white, and that a nation that has never submitted has a right to moral independence. But why does it so seldom have all the facts before it? Why are the big aggressive features, such as blackness or the Celtic wrath, always left out in such official communications, as they were left out in the photograph? My friend the poet had hair as black as an African and eyes as fierce as an Irishman; why does our civilisation drop all four of the facts? Its error is to omit the arresting thing—which might really arrest the criminal. It strikes first the chilling note of science, demanding a man "above the middle height, chin shaven, with gray moustache," etc., which might mean Mr. Balfour or Sir Redvers Buller. It does not seize the first fact of impression, as that a man is obviously a sailor or a Jew or a drunkard or a gentleman or a nigger or an albino or a prize-fighter or an imbecile or an American. These are the realities by which the people really recognise each other.

They are almost always left out of the inquiry.