SCIENCE.

FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 20, 1885.

COMMENT AND CRITICISM.

THERE WAS A REPORT last summer in the foreign journals that the Portuguese government had bought twelve hundred slaves of the king of Dahomey. It was expected that this report would be met by a prompt denial. The Portuguese journals admit the purchase, but state that these slaves were prisoners of war taken by the sovereign of Dahomey, and were about to be put to death on the occasion of a grand *fête* prepared by the king; that, when the Portuguese heard of this projected hecatomb, they sent a ship with agents to Dahomey, as a philanthropic act, and for the benefit of the blacks; that by appealing to the cupidity of the king, they purchased them, not as slaves, but as free men, to work under a contract, for a period of three years, in the cultivation of the coffee plantations on the Island of St. Thomas, after which they will receive regular wages. The continental journals reply that this is only another name for slavery, and will be the most effectual means of perpetuating the traffic in Africa; that if there are no buyers, there will be no slaves; that the African regards the slave as much an article of commerce as ivory, india-rubber, or palm-oil, but prefers the slave as acquired with greater ease; that the king of Dahomey will at once send his warriors into the interior of Africa, to capture more slaves in the place of those that are sold, and if Portugal will buy these, a perpetual traffic in slaves will be established; that this will put an end to all hope of the civilization of Africa, as it must lead to a constant state of war, the trade in slaves paying better than any other.

THE COMING MEETING of the American public health association in Washington, Dec. 8–11, promises to be one of unusual interest. When it adjourned last year at St. Louis, it was expected that the principal subject for consideration this year would be cholera; but fortunately the anticipated epidemic has not appeared, and other topics will therefore be discussed. The leading feature will be the award of prizes for the best essays on the following subjects: Healthy homes and foods for the working classes, The sanitary conditions and necessities of school-houses and school-life, Disinfection and individual prophylaxis against infectious diseases, and The preventable causes of disease, injury, and death in American manufactories and workshops, and the best means and appliances for preventing and avoiding them. The prizes amount to $2,800; $500 for the first, and $200 for the second. The money is the gift of Mr. Henry Lomb of Rochester. For these prizes fifty-two essays have been presented.

TO ANY ONE NOT FAMILIAR with the history of the Smithsonian institution, and the manner in which its natural history collections were administered in the days before the national museum was adopted by congress, it seems almost incredible that there should not have grown up under its care an extensive collection of insects. Still more strange must it appear that an establishment so rich as is the national museum in other branches of zoölogy should have been up to this time without a regularly organized department of entomology. The reasons for this it seems unnecessary to discuss in this place, further than to remind our readers that until very recently all collections and plants received by the Smithsonian institution have been turned over to the department of agriculture for administration. When it is remembered that the national museum was never recognized by that name in any act of congress until 1877, and that its present organization dates back only four years, some deficiencies may well be overlooked. The lack of a department of insects, established upon a permanent basis, has from time to time been made the subject of remark in the columns of *Science*, and it gives us pleasure to announce that steps have been taken toward the stable organization of such a department. It has already assumed an importance not unworthy of the dignity of a national institution. The gift by Dr. Riley of his fine private collection affords a nucleus around which materials will rapidly accumulate, and the appointment of a paid custodian of the collection will cause entomologists to feel that their specialty is to be properly represented in Washington.

THE RECENTLY ANNOUNCED FAILURE of the natural gas-wells of Champaign, Ill., indicates that the supply in the vicinity of Pittsburgh and elsewhere may not be inexhaustible, and may have aroused anxiety in the minds of those who have invested in this new form of enterprise. There is a great deal to be learned in regard to petroleum and natural gas, but a few points as to their origin and mode of accumulation may be counted settled. They are derived from organic matter distributed through the rocks in which they occur: in other words, they are fossil fuel, as really as coal or lignite. They were accumulated in subterranean reservoirs, which are mainly porous sandstones or limestones, covered with impervious shales; and there is no reason to believe that these accumulations are of recent date. A gas-well or oil-well can no more be 'inexhaustible' than a coal-mine. While oil is mobile, and can be drawn through the rocks for some distance to the point of delivery, gas is still more mobile, and may travel farther; but the supply of either or both from a given area is limited and definite. Single gas-wells will fail like single mines, but the *field* may last for a long time. The first anthracite mined in Pennsylvania was opened in a pocket of large extent. The proprietors counted it 'inexhaustible,' and a panic seized them when they found the rock floor beneath it, at no great depth. But a good deal of anthracite has been discovered since. The failure of one set of gas-wells has but little bearing on the life of another set, with other sources of supply, with other sorts of reservoirs, and with other conditions as to depth and geological structure.

THE PRESIDENCY OF THE ROYAL SOCIETY OF LONDON.

THE announcement in *Nature* (Nov. 5) that Professor Huxley has definitely resigned his position as president of the Royal society of London, and therefore as *official* leader of British scientific workers, will cause much regret not only in Great Britain and Ireland, but on this side of the Atlantic. This regret is increased by the further statement that the resignation was due to ill health, which made complete freedom from official cares desirable. The president of the Royal society has manifold and anxious duties. It devolves on him to present the claims of British science to the government, and he is officially responsible for the proper expenditure of the annual grant made by the nation to the Royal society, for the furtherance of scientific research. He is, moreover, in a certain sense, the official adviser of the government in matters which involve scientific questions. Not technically a secretary of state, and fortunately without any political affiliations, upon him devolves, nevertheless, the duty of advising the cabinet on matters pertaining to science, and as to the selection of *regius* professors in scientific subjects in English, Scotch, and Irish universities. Of late years such official duties have been made more onerous by the anti-vivisection act, which names the president of the Royal society as one of the few persons who are entitled to certify that they believe the performance of experiments on the lower animals is justified by the aim of a particular research, and the character and training of the person who desires to make it.

In addition to the above official duties and anxieties, the president of the Royal society has exacting social claims. It devolves on him to see that distinguished foreign scientific men who may visit London are suitably entertained, and introduced to those whom they may desire to meet. The position, though, we believe, unpaid, is one of great responsibility, and involves much labor; and it is an open secret that Professor Huxley assumed it on the understanding that the secretaries should take the main bulk of the necessary work off his shoulders. His researches, his eloquence, his great 'common sense,' made him the natural head of British scientific men; and we trust that the day is far off when we shall cease to learn from him. We expect, now that he is set free from all routine duty, that we shall find him even more a protagonist than we have in the past. We hope that the newspaper rumor is true, and that he is coming to the United States to study the collections of fossil birds and reptiles gathered by Professor Marsh of Yale college, and give us, as no other is so competent to give, a statement of the bearing of these collections on the general doctrine of evolution. Should the master come to rest and work among us, he will surely meet a hearty greeting.

Professor Huxley was for several years the biological secretary of the Royal society. According to *Nature*, his successor is to be Professor Stokes of Cambridge, who has for many years been the mathematico-physical secretary. Who is to be the successor of Professor Stokes as secretary we do not know; but it is interesting to note that