man for horse-stealing under a statute for sheep-stealing, and would laugh at you if you quibbled about the distinction between a horse and a sheep." This certainly is most solemnly true, and is, among other things, the reason why people, as a rule, care so little for philosophy, the vital air of which is the persistent making of distinctions long after the saturation-point of the average human intellect has been reached. We all have our philosophies, to be sure, such as they are; but we all refuse to discuss them in the light of distinctions finer than our own. Such distinctions are 'cobwebs,' 'hair-splittings,' and the like; and we blankly ignore them with a perfectly good conscience. This is why no amount of criticism, however truly able, will shake the hold which certain popular philosophies have on 'the gallery;' for there is a gallery in philosophy, as in livelier spectacles. Mr. Shadworth Hodgson is certainly, of all English-writing philosophers, the one who makes the largest and most incessant demands on his reader's ability to take a distinction. He distinguishes after most of us long for rest, and he probably seems, in consequence, to the majority of those who open his pages, over-subtle and unreal, in spite of the extraordinary originality and vigor of every thing he writes. Many, to our knowledge, have wished that some disciple would come and issue his thoughts in the shape of small change, since they seem so little likely to become popular in the master's own massive statements. Miss Handley has essayed this useful task in the thin volume before us, which we recommend to all who would like a glimpse into some of the main features of Hodgson's system, but by no means to those to whom the title 'First lessons in philosophy' suggests a text-book for high-school use. The work is gracefully written in dialogue-form; but the contents are too technical to be touched upon in our space. We must confess, that, after one reading, we are still in some doubt as to whether Miss Handley's pages have brought Mr. Hodgson within range of those for whom his own are too abstruse.

NOTES AND NEWS.

A TELEGRAM from Dr. Swift, dated Dec. 27, announces the discovery of a comparatively bright telescopic comet, by Mr. W. R. Brooks, at Phelps, N.Y., an easterly motion being 'strongly suspected.' The discovery is confirmed by an observation at Harvard on Dec. 28. The comet is circular, about 3′ in diameter, equivalent in brightness to a star of the ninth magnitude, and it has a strong, eccentrically placed condensation, but no tail. The position given by Professor Pickering for Dec. 28.4684, Greenwich mean time, is, R. A. $19^h\ 59^m\ 27^s$; Dec. $+ 4°\ 31'\ 34''$; so that the comet would now set, in this latitude, about three hours after the sun.

— 'Short studies from nature' (New York, *Cassell*, 1885) is one of many books intended to interest general readers in the later scientific discoveries. Six of the ten chapters treat of zoölogical subjects, bats, dragon-flies, oak-apples, birds of passage, glow-worms, and Foraminifera. They are generally well written, and contain much that is interesting in a readable form. They treat mainly or entirely of English animals; but in most cases the notes and description would apply equally well, with a change of specific name, to our American representatives, and be equally interesting to our American readers. There are also chemical and astronomical chapters, and one on caves.

— Any book which will draw the attention of young or old to the habits of common animals deserves all encouragement. We have a few such already; but any one who has examined other books of this class will find, on comparison, that Holder's work ('Marvels of animal life,' *Scribner*, 1885), while compact, has a wider scope, and contains a large amount of fresh material. Very many of the animals described are not members of our fauna; but there are enough familiar forms described to encourage us to study the habits of more of our common animals, and to hint of the possibility of interesting discoveries awaiting patient observers. The fact that the writer has been an eye-witness of most which he describes, makes his work entirely different from the mere compilations of which most similar books are composed, and makes one almost forget while reading that he is not himself an eye-witness. The writer's style is fresh and attractive. It will surprise some readers to see man and the Pteranodon represented on plate xxxi. as contemporaneous. Possibly, however, the supposed human figure may not be that of a man: it might easily be almost any thing else. The plates, unfortunately, never accompany the description, but are the reward of patient search.

— The prize of 500 francs left by M. A. P. de Candolle is offered by the Société physique et d'histoire naturelle, of Geneva, for the best unpublished monograph on a class or family of plants; the essays written in any of the four great European languages or Latin, to be sent in on Oct. 1, 1889.

— A catalogue of the printed maps, plans, and charts in the British museum has been prepared by Professor Douglas, and will be issued in two large volumes.

— An Italian ship has been sheathed with glass plates, cast like iron plates, so as to fit the hull, to take the place of copper sheathings. The joints of the plates are made water-tight by the use of waterproof mastic. The advantages claimed for glass over copper are its insensibility to oxidation and its exemption from incrustation.

WASHINGTON LETTER.

AT the last meeting of the Philosophical society the evening was devoted entirely to the election of officers for the ensuing year, and the reception of the annual reports of the secretaries and treasurer. The report of the secretaries included some comparisons of the work of the society in 1885 with that of 1884, a *résumé* of which will doubtless be of interest to many readers of *Science* who are connected with scientific societies in other parts of the country.

The number of new members admitted in 1885 was 20, while in the previous year 35 were added to the roll. The total active membership has increased from 173 in 1884, to 183 at the close of 1885. Sixteen meetings were held in 1885, one more than in the previous year. The average attendance at these meetings has increased from 42 in 1884, to 48 in 1885, showing a considerably greater percentage of increase than that in the active membership. The number of papers presented was the same in both years, being 32; while the number of persons taking part in the discussions increased from 38 to 41. The 'general committee,' which transacts most of the business of the society, consists of 17 members. The average attendance at the meetings of this committee was 11.9 in 1884, and 12.1 in 1885.

To this exhibit ought to be added that of the mathematical section of the society, which held six meetings in 1885 with an average attendance of 15, these numbers being identical with those for the previous year. The section received 11 papers in 1884, and 14 in 1885.

Altogether the showing is indicative of steady progress. In round numbers, it may be said to enroll two hundred active members, and at any of its meetings one is tolerably certain to find as many as fifty people.

The report of the treasurer was also satisfactory, showing the financial condition of the society to be excellent. It must not be forgotten that within a few years three vigorous societies have 'swarmed' from this, including the anthropological, biological, and chemical societies of Washington, and that one or two of them are larger than the parent society. By careful attention to the character of the papers presented, the committee on communications has prevented specialization, and has thus succeeded in retaining the support and loyalty of those interested in all departments of science. The philosophical society is not yet fifteen years old, but it promises to be one of the three or four leading scientific societies in the country.

The joint committee of congress for the consideration of the scientific bureaus of the government continued its work up to the holiday recess. It is said that the geological survey was recently the subject of a searching investigation at its hands, the examination having to do principally with business methods and financial transactions. As stated in a previous letter, the recent addresses of the retiring presidents of some of the societies were devoted, in some degree, to the consideration of the absorbing question of the relation of the government to scientific work; and it is known that at least one member of the joint committee availed himself of the opportunity then afforded to learn something of the views of representative scientific men, expressed with that freedom from restraint which is characteristic of communications of that nature. The committee is expected to report in January.

The 'star-eyed goddess of reform,' as represented by the auditors of the treasury department, very properly shows herself to be blind to the existence of party lines or political affiliations. Commissioner Coleman of the agricultural bureau has recently had an account suspended against him, amounting to $1,800, arising out of the purchase of seeds for distribution by members of congress among their constituents. The purchase was made very soon after his appointment, and appears to be precisely similar in character to those which gave rise to the much larger discrepancy in the accounts of his predecessor, Commissioner Loring. It will not be regretted if the adjustment of these accounts leads to a revolution in the manner of conducting the seed-business in the department, which has for many years diverted a large part of the annual appropriation from channels in which it might have been made tributary to the real progress of agriculture.

The friends of Dr. Emil Bessels will regret to learn of the loss he has sustained in the burning of his residence in Prince George county, Md., not far from Washington. The fire occurred on Christmas morning, and it is stated that the doctor himself had a narrow escape. The principal and irreparable loss was his library, which is said to have been entirely destroyed. It included a large collection of rare and costly scientific books, valuable manuscripts, and arctic charts. Z.

Washington, D.C., Dec. 28.