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CONTENTS

<i>What is the Matter with Physics Teaching?:</i> W. S. FRANKLIN	
<i>Requirements of a Monograph on the Chemistry of Cellulose:</i> LOUIS E. WISE.....	479
<i>Eugenics—The American and Norwegian Programs:</i> DR. HENRY FAIRFIELD OSBORN.....	482
<i>Samuel Stockton Voorhees:</i> DR. W. F. HILLEBRAND	484
<i>Scientific Events:</i>	
<i>Synthetic Organic Chemical Manufacturers' Association of the United States; The Editorship of the "Journal of Industrial Chemistry;" Director of the Harvard College Observatory; A Southern Forest Experiment Station; Organization for Research at the Pennsylvania State College; Sigma Xi Lectures at Yale University.....</i>	485
<i>Scientific Notes and News.....</i>	488
<i>University and Educational News.....</i>	490
<i>Discussion and Correspondence:</i>	
<i>Latitude and Vertebrae:</i> DR. DAVID STARR JORDAN. <i>Abstracts and Titles of Scientific Articles from the Librarian's Standpoint:</i> THE LATE EUNICE R. OBERLY. <i>Longitudinal Electromagnetic Forces:</i> DR. CARL HERING. <i>The Scientific Bureaus of the Government:</i> DR. CHARLES D. WALCOTT.....	490
<i>Quotations:</i>	
<i>Meeting of the American Association in Canada</i>	493
<i>Scientific Books:</i>	
<i>Grabau's Text-book of Geology:</i> PROFESSOR H. L. FAIRCHILD.....	494
<i>Special Articles:</i>	
<i>A Precision Determination of the Dimensions of the Unit Crystal of Rock Salt:</i> DR. WHEELER P. DAVEY.....	497
<i>The American Electrochemical Society:</i> A. D. SPILLMAN	498
<i>The Optical Society of America:</i> DR. IRWIN G. PRIEST	501

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WHAT IS THE MATTER WITH PHYSICS TEACHING?¹

THE recent appointment by the National Research Council and by the American Physical Society of committees on the teaching of physics shows that our physicists who are primarily interested in research are beginning to see that something is the matter with the college teaching of physics. The question in everyone's mind is "Why the widespread dislike of physics by college students?" As a long-time member of this society I have had much intercourse with engineering teachers, and I have long had in mind an additional question: "Why the widespread contempt of physics teaching among engineering faculties?"

Before giving my answer to those questions I must point out that there is one kind of contempt of physics teaching among engineering teachers which is to the discredit of engineering teachers themselves, namely, the contempt which many of them have for straight and accurate thinking which does not conform to their own careless ways. When I meet with this contempt, which is much too often, I am sorry to say, I always think of a phrase P. G. Tait used in a discussion he gave many years ago of the perennial question of elementary mechanics. "In defense of accuracy," says Tait, "we must be zealous, even unto slaying." It must be conceded that P. G. Tait's ideas concerning elementary mechanics were and are absolutely correct as far as they go, and, after agreeing to use the word weight to designate the pull of the earth on a body, he never reverted to the usage of the grocer and the coal man. This is a thing many of our en-

¹ The opening of a discussion of physics teaching at the Orono meeting of the New England Section of the Society for the Promotion of Engineering Education; autumn, 1921.