

● A ROYAL PRACTICAL JOKE

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C. F. Schönbein (1799–1868), now best remembered as the discoverer of ozone and gun cotton,¹ made an extended visit to England in 1839. He set down his observations and impressions in *Mittheilungen aus dem Reisetagebuche eines deutschen Naturforschers*, which was published anonymously in 1842. The following paragraphs, translated from this entertaining and informative book, carry a lesson that can be taken to heart by many students and teachers.

“One of the oldest and most distinguished learned bodies of Europe is the Royal Society of London. It has been in existence for more than two centuries, and during this long period has always enjoyed the highest respect both at home and abroad. The foundations of this society were laid early in the 17th century at Wadham College, Oxford, where a company of distinguished men, such as Christopher Wren, Robert Boyle, etc., met regularly to discuss scientific matters. In 1658, most of the members of this private association left Oxford to take up residence in London. Their meetings were resumed here and continued regularly until the disturbances attendant on Cromwell’s death interrupted the peaceful occupations of the society. After Charles II ascended the throne (1660), the efforts of Theodor Haak, a German, brought the former members together again. They pledged themselves to contribute a certain yearly sum to defray the necessary expenditures for scientific experiments.

The restored monarch, anxious to win the favor of all various parties and classes, declared himself ready to take this scientific society under his special care. The royal offer was not unwelcome to the members and they accepted it. Hence, as early as 1662 a charter was issued granting to the group the right to use the name: “Royal Society of London for Improving Natural Knowledge.”

From then on the society received active cooperation from all quarters, even the courtiers strove to demonstrate their interest in this learned association. Charles II was an enthusiast concerning mechanical operations,

and was especially fond of witnessing physical experiments. Accordingly, he was a frequent attendant at the weekly meetings of the Royal Society. Sometimes, on such occasions, he, with covered head, took his place beside the president. As a rule, however, he sat among the members, conversing with them in the most intimate manner, and at times taking an active part in the discussions. He, however, noted that many of the members placed too much weight on the opinions which he expressed, and he determined to lay bare and chide in a good natured way the flatteries and servile bearing of these individuals.

One evening when the king came into the meeting, he seemingly was deeply immersed in thought. He sat with his hand covering the lower part of his face. Suddenly he cried out: “My Lords and Gentlemen. Why is it that if I place the same amount of water into each of two pails, and then put a four pound fish into one of them, this pail will not weigh more than the other?” A long silence followed this royal query. Finally, one member stated that the swimming power of the fish removes its weight. Another opined: “The vital momentum and the *vis inertiae* of the animal prevent any pressure on the sides of the container.” A third suggested that a characteristic atmosphere enveloped the fish, kept it suspended, and nullified its weight. Other equally sound explanations were offered, and listened to with the greatest sobriety by the king.

Finally, one of the older members arose, “I trust Your Majesty will pardon me, but I am making so bold as to doubt the correctness of the fact stated by you.” At this the king exclaimed: “By heaven, and so do I. My only intention was to discover to what lengths some of these gentlemen will go to agree with me, and I have played this practical joke on them in the hope that hereafter they will be more careful. I trust that they, in the future, will not let themselves be led by their imaginations, but that they will base their theories solely on assured and well proven facts. They certainly will be all the more apt to do so, if they keep in mind that our Society has accepted this policy as its prime rule and guide.”

¹ OESPER, R. E., THIS JOURNAL, 6, 432, 677 (1929).