

CHEMISTRY AND PRACTICAL JOKES.*

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Practical joking is jesting carried into action and is usually looked upon as a low and reprehensible form of humor. Sometimes, indeed quite frequently, and especially about the Fourth of July, when explosives are available, serious results are reported from such attempts to be funny, as placing a lighted cannon cracker under the chair of an unsuspecting person or shooting a blank cartridge toward a person.

Such forms of practical jokes as require no particular apparatus or material but occur spontaneously, are bad enough, but within the past few years there have been attempts, particularly by German manufacturers, to stimulate and develop the practical joking industry by supplying materials for carrying out such annoying practices as the production of a disagreeable odor or the setting of a large room full of people to sneezing.

The manufactured devices for producing a foul odor are in the form of capsules or containers of thin glass, easily crushed under the foot and containing a solution of hydrogen sulphide, which in these sealed glass containers, seems to keep indefinitely. Several sizes of these "stink bohnen" or "foul bombs," as they are labeled, are sold in small chip boxes filled with sawdust to prevent breakage of the bombs.

Practical joking must certainly be an international custom, for one package which I purchased for the purpose of investigation of the subject had a label printed in three different languages, French, German and English. These foul bombs, when broken, produce the characteristic rotten egg odor of hydrogen sulphide, which, however, soon disappears and doubtless no great amount of harm can result apart from the annoyance.

It is a different matter, however, in the case of the sneeze powders, as they are called, which are sold in tiny vials, labeled "Kachew Powder," each containing about 10 grains of a gray powder which I found to be one of the most acrid and irritating substances known to chemistry. Contrary to the usual supposition, red pepper, hellebore, bayberry, sanguinaria, tobacco or other common sternutatories, are not present in this material, which I have recently investigated and found to consist almost entirely of acridine, probably a crude form of the substance.

Acridine, $C_{13}H_9N$, is a basic substance obtained as a fraction of coal tar, associated with crude anthracene. Its name is indicative of its properties. It is a powerful sternutatory and skin irritant. The only legitimate use to which it has ever been put is as an insecticide and also in compositions for coating the bottoms of vessels to preserve them. It is said by some authorities that the preservative properties of some coal tar products are due to the presence of small amounts of acridine.

The use of such a powerful substance as this by malicious or unthinking persons should be suppressed. Indeed, I believe its sale could be restricted if not entirely prevented by a proper enforcement of the poison laws, as it is certainly a poison within the legal meaning of that term.

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