TOPICS OF THE WEEK

THE little shooting affair in the office of Mr Hugh Campbell, solicitor, Auckland, was hardly a nine days' wonder. At first there was a tendency on the part of some people to put a very sensational and blood-thirsty construction on the incident, but it would not bear such a construction when the evidence came out in court; and on the conclusion of the case even that portion of the public which hungers and thirsts after sensation turned round and expressed itself glad that Mr Northcroft had decided as he did. However much the abominable practice of carrying loaded fire-arms, and the still worse practice of showing them or firing them either to menace people or in joke is to be condemned, the magistrate was not called on to comment on that feature of the case. If he had, one does not doubt that he would have read Mr Swann a very severe lecture. Still less was he required to adjudicate on that aspect, or it might have been a serious thing for the accused. All that Mr Northcroft had to do was to decide whether Swann was guilty of attempted murder. He decided, on the evidence, that he was not, and everyone in Auckland believes his decision was correct.

As to what the exact nature of the transactions between Mr Campbell and Mr Swann may have been that led to the scuffle in the office the evidence in court did not disclose enough to enable one to express an opinion which is certain to be strictly just to both parties. If Mr Swann's desire was to let the public know what the transactions were, he has certainly succeeded to such an extent as to enlist a great deal of sympathy on his side; but we must be careful to remember that public sympathy is no test of the righteousness of a cause in any case, and that the natural suspicion the public have of lawyers generally always prejudices them in favour of the poor client.

IN the South the Hon. John McKenzie, and in the North Mr William Crowther, one of the members for Auckland, have been talking politics to the electors. I have no intention of following their example. We shall all have plenty of politics in a few months—in fact too much. Let us rather spend in social and other non-political matters what little time we have left to ourselves after the pre-sessional, sessional, and post-sessional periods are cut out of the round year. Looking at Mr Crowther and the Minister of Lands as men and not as politicians, it seems to me that no two members in the Legislature are more alike. To compare them as politicians would, of course, be unfair to Mr Crowther, for he is merely a newly broken colt in that tedious profession, while the Minister of Lands is a seasoned roadster; but divested of political trappings their personalities when laid bare are very similar. Neither is gifted with the smooth phrase of oratory, neither makes any claim to any literary qualifications. They both are somewhat antagonistic to literary finish, and are suspicious of it. Knowing that in themselves it would be an artificial effort, their first thought is always that it is the mark of insincerity and affectation in others. In the same way they are suspicious of a seeming excess of courtesy, and often assume a bluntness that belies their true character, which is sympathetic, though by no means broadly so. On the other hand, both men have a certain clear practical insight into things, acquired in that school of schools, the school of experience. One would not call it a long-sightedness in either, but perhaps Mr Crowther, when he comes to understand the details of politics better, will be able to single out the crucial point of a matter better than the Minister. In the House last session, in spite of many mental slips and much grotesqueness of expression, the Auckland member, when he got possession of a subject, generally saw its most important bearings. Undoubtedly he seemed to wobble in his opinions, but I believe his unsteadiness was the result of an almost nervous desire to walk straight along a difficult path he could hardly distinguish. A rough honesty of purpose characterises both men—at least this is the conclusion one comes to, looking at them with no party eye. Of course they may be led astray, but their natural tendency is to follow the path they believe best. All their lives they have made the roads for themselves to travel on, and they do not care now to journey on others.

WHAT is it coming to? Over in Victoria the treasurer has decided to reduce the rates of interest on deposits in the Government Post Office Savings Bank to 2½ per cent up to £100, and to 2 per cent up to £250, while he does not intend that anything over that amount shall have any interest at all. The reduction is said to be prompted by a desire to check the temporary deposits of large sums pending their investment. It may be that in Victoria a great deal of money is invested in that temporary manner, but we have always been given to understand that amid the crash of banks any number of people fled to the Government institutions as to a haven of refuge and deposited their scanty capital intending to keep it there. In that case these repeated reductions must come very hard on a careful and saving class of the population. Very likely the intention of the Government is to drive the capital which is shrinking and cowering under its wing into other channels of investment, but there is always a large proportion of timid, smallish depositors who cannot be driven away. For the sake of these one regrets very much the tendency to reduce interest manifested in the Post Office Savings Bank of more than one colony. As a financial writer recently said, it is a pity to decrease the inducements to economy which Government Savings Banks offer, or in any way to diminish the popularity of these institutions. Let us hope that New Zealand does not require to follow the example of Victoria yet awhile, and that the time is far off—much further off than some people prophesy—when those of us who have nothing will thank Heaven in all sincerity that we have not to worry ourselves over investments that yield nothing but trouble and vexation of spirit.

AN example of a Society which has done an incalculable amount of good is the Society for Preventing Cruelty lower animals—is the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. In a quiet, unostentatious way it does its work of mercy, and mitigates by its influence and active interference the lot of many dumb creatures who suffer from careless, ignorant, or cruel masters. Here in New Zealand, it is true, there are not such demands on its vigilance as in older countries. It is very rare that we hear of cases of diabolical cruelty such as come to light at Home, and which seem to indicate some strange mental aberration, as in the case of the French boy of twelve lately sent to a reformatory in Paris, who had a mania for torturing living creatures, and showed the greatest ingenuity in compassing the death of his victims by the most painful and lingering processes. New Zealanders do not pluck their poultry alive, or beat their horses till the poor animals lie down on the ground with something human in their supplicating glances. They have not descended to that stage as the peasantry in Italy or France have, but still they are not altogether guiltless in their treatment of their animals, as the officers of the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals can show. Doubtless thoughtlessness more than malevolence is the cause of their misdemeanours, but whatever the cause the misdemeanours must not be allowed to go unnoticed and unpunished.

THE announcement that Mr Walter Bentley was to leave the stage for the platform—it may be for years and it may be for ever—caused no little surprise over the colony. It was felt that though Mr Bentley can give a very amusing entertainment when he occupied the platform now and again as a raconteur, still his place was the tragic or the comic stage, and his most fitting costume, not the evening dress of the nineteenth century lecturer, but the more picturesque wardrobe of the Prince of Denmark or David Garrick. At least most competent critics felt this. I think that they were right. Mr Bentley's success as an occasional lecturer was in a very great measure due to his success as an experienced actor. In the lecture hall he shone with the reflected glory of the theatre, and what he said and how he said it derived a great degree of its interest from the associations the public had attached to him. There is something to the public mind mysterious in an actor. He lives and moves and has his being in a world which has a strange fascination for them, because they endow it with attributes it certainly does not possess. When, therefore, he comes before them without his stage mask and talks to them as a common mortal their sense of discrimination is dazzled by the novelty. Mr Bentley will doubtless profit for a time by this attitude of mind among his audience, but when the novelty of his new rôle has disappeared and he has to depend on his ability as a lecturer, pure and simple, he may find a difference.

IN Scotland a crusade has been started against the charging of rents for pews in churches. The Primus of the Episcopal Church there has headed the movement, and many other dignitaries of the church are enthusiastically in favour of abolishing pew rents, and the system of appropriation of seats in churches. Speaking at a meeting on the subject, Bishop Harrison, of Glasgow, characterised the practice as a serious hindrance to the missionary work of the church of God It appeared to him that there were still some lessons given to the world by our Lord and Master which we had not yet profited by, and one of these lessons was the true value that was to be set on material wealth. It was an un-christian idolatry to wealth which at the outset had led to the sanction of private pews in the house of God.

WHAT the Bishop says is very true, but the abuse of private pews now-a-days—if we are to regard it as an abuse—is nothing so flagrant as it used to be fifty years ago. Then the 'unchristian idolatry to wealth' manifested in some churches was as scandalous as the cool way in which wealth abused the license that was permitted it even in the house of God. In his 'Gleams of Memory' Mr James Payn tells us that when he was a child his family rented a place at Wantage from the squire of the parish. They also had a right to the family pew: but the great man used it when he came to church. It was curtained like a bar parlour, and had a huge fireplace. It was young James's duty, to keep up the fire and to do it so quietly that the squire's slumbers should not be disturbed, for that gentleman always settled to sleep through the service, and his snoring was phenomenal. Strange clergyman would make significant pauses, which always awoke him, when the snores were relieved by loud grunts and ejaculations. 'Put some more wood on, Jimmy!' he would shout, and then relapse into the snoring. Fancy such a thing in these democratic colonies!

AT the first blush there appeared to be something romantic about the story of Dr. Campbell, of Auckland and the £500 which has been lying to his credit in the bank, for over thirty years, without his knowing anything about it. Dr. Campbell, it appears, was treasurer of a fund raised in Auckland for the relief of the Taranaki settlers in 1860. A thousand pounds was subscribed, but only half that sum was expended, and the rest was lodged in the bank where it has been to this day forgotten by the treasurer and subscribers alike, till the manager of the bank refreshed their memories by sending a note to the doctor. There certainly appeared to be something romantic in the tale when it first was noised abroad in Auckland the other day, but now that the surviving subscribers have met and discussed what is to be done with the money so unexpectedly unearthed, the whole affair assumes quite a prosaic aspect.

WE all understand how the tale should have run. Instead of a body of comfortably circumstanced gentlemen to deal with the matter, it should have fallen into the undisputed possession of some young man of prepossessing looks and noble character whom Dame Fortune had treated most scurvily. He should have been in love with an equally prepossessing young lady whose parents had said that 'she will never marry a pauper.' Instead of a comfortable merchant's office the scene should have been a mean garret where the young man, pale, but determined, has just placed the Colt's revolver to his mouth—having written the note, etc., etc.—and is just about to draw the trigger when a knock at his door leads him to desist. He drags his weary frame across the apartment, opens the door, and receiving a letter opens it. Heavens! can it be true! He drags himself—or rather springs this time—to the window, rubs his eyes and cuffs his head to make sure that he is awake. There is no mistaking it. The banker has written to inform him that an account of a paltry £1,000 or so, which the hero opened long ago in his prosperous days for charitable objects, has not been drawn on for over twenty years—he, generous soul, had forgotten all about it—and has now accumulated, by a process of compound interest known only to novelists, to a fabulous sum. He flies with the news to his *fiancée*. The stern parents, of course, relent at the sight of such a note, and everything ends happily. This is how it should have been. Everyone would have felt supremely satisfied with such a conclusion. Not that they have any reason to be dissatisfied as the thing stands. But it does appear to have unsettled some people, for it is said that since the affair became known every man who ever contributed a sixpence to a charitable object in Auckland is feverishly enquiring at the banks whether there is an unclaimed balance on their books.