

TOPICS OF THE WEEK



AS everyone who reads the Home papers is aware, the three-volume novel has long been in a distinctly precarious condition. By the 'Prisco' mail last week news arrived of its absolute demise. It will surprise those who know anything about the matter to learn that the death struggle came through Miss Braddon, Mudie refusing to take a three-volume novel by this veteran and versatile fiction manufacturer. Miss Braddon's novels are not perhaps literature of the highest order, but they are in the main far superior to the books produced by the modern lady novelists, including those who have been so successfully boomed during the past eighteen months or so. They have, moreover, undoubtedly done much to build up the fortunes of the house of Meedie, so that the action of 'the library king' in this matter has a savour of ingratitude about it. With the three-volume novel itself we colonials have had little to do. It has been observed by a contemporary it was a ridiculous form of publication, but it served its purpose, chiefly because the English are not a book-buying people. They like to read, but they do not care to spend money in gratifying their taste, so they paid their penny or twopence a volume for the right of perusing their fiction in the most expensive form. It would be interesting to know, says another paragraph, what the effect has been upon authors and publishers. There has been no diminution in the flood of literature poured forth from the press, but whether the profits of authors have increased or diminished has not been stated. We in New Zealand are rapidly becoming a book-buying community, mainly because in the ever improving and increasing colonial libraries we can procure the best light literature of our time at prices which tempt the money from our pockets. It is my own conviction that the introduction of cheap editions at Home will kill many of the libraries, and that the English people will become a book-buying community.

THE firm of Oetzmann is known to most colonials only through its advertisements in the English journals. It has, however, recently furnished subject for some amusing paragraphs. It appears, according to *To-Day*, that 'Twelve years ago a letter was sent by the firm to an address in Bolivia, South America. The letter was not delivered, and it has just, this month, been returned to Messrs Oetzmann. The explanation which the firm offers is that the Spanish character is notorious for an ingrained love of procrastination. Ask a Spaniard to do something which positively must be done to-day, and he will look pensive, roll a cigarette, and reply, "To-morrow." This may be very true, and without doubt it would explain why, for twelve years, that letter was not returned. That, however, does not appear to me to be the chief difficulty—the thing which is hard to understand is why, after that lapse of twelve years, the letter was ever returned at all.

I HAVE known men (neither Spaniards nor in the Post Office) fully capable of postponing any ordinary business act for twelve years. But I have never heard of anyone who, after postponing anything for twelve years, thought it worth while to do it at the end of that time. I have heard of no earthquake or epidemic in Bolivia recently calculated to make a conscientious postal clerk, in view of the possible nearness of death, resolve to clear up the whole of his sins of omission. It does not even appear that Messrs Oetzmann wrote to complain—an act which might (though, I fear, it would not) have had a stimulating effect on the Spanish character. Procrastination

accounts for the twelve years' delay, but for the final return of the letter we must seek an explanation elsewhere. I think myself that the delay was part of the ordinary routine of the Post Office, and that the letter was at last sent back owing to negligence or disobedience of some clerk who was possibly new to the work.

THE letter, according to my theory, when twelve years ago it could not be delivered, was placed in a pigeon-hole. People who procrastinate, always put things in pigeon-holes. They feel somehow as if by so doing they were shifting the responsibility. There it remained for twelve years, until the new clerk arrived. He took the letter out of the pigeon-hole, intending to float off the stamps for his own private collection. Once on his table the letter got mixed up with some others intended for posting, and owing to some further act of inadvertence these letters actually were posted. The explanation is not, perhaps, wildly probable, but is more probable than the other. One should think twice before one accuses a South American post-office of having done its duty, even after a lapse of twelve years.

ACKNOWLEDGING the foregoing item to *To-Day* reminds me that that up-to-date journal has been commenting on Salvation Army Self-Denial Weeks in a manner which has my entire sympathy. As Mr Jerome remarks, one of the ways in which the warriors deny themselves is to pester pedestrians with collecting cards and collecting boxes. This is true also of the colony. Twice or thrice in one day during self-denial week I was bailed up by men and women with dirty and doubtful looking cards on which I was requested to set my name down for a trifling donation. And as our contemporary remarks, 'One of the ways in which these warriors deny themselves is to stand outside the railway stations with collecting boxes. This method of self-denial appears to me to be distinctly objectionable. I am not making any attack on the Salvation Army, but I do want to see some limit put to this nuisance of street-collecting. No street collection should be made without a special licence for the purpose. This licence should be very rarely granted; and people begging without a licence should be treated as beggars. When the Salvation Army is giving up orchids, tapestry and bacon for breakfast, it may be performing a salutary act of self-denial; but those of its members who stand cading outside railway stations are not punishing themselves, but the general public, and would be much better—though, perhaps less pleasantly employed if they did a day's hard work, instead of mooning about with money-boxes and making themselves a public pest.'

THE tremendous coup which the book-making fraternity must have made over the three cups will perhaps again turn the attention of women to an avenue to fortune, of which they have not yet availed themselves. Women have shouldered their way into so many professions previously looked upon as particularly masculine, that one is really surprised that that of book-making should have been so long left in undisputed possession of the male. But this is only so as far as English speaking communities are concerned. A well-known sporting writer tells that at a French race meeting he fell across a lady bookmaker, who, he declares, abound on the French race courses. 'She was a pretty little blonde, with a satchel across her shoulder, tickets in her hand, and with a pencil behind her ear. She stopped me as I was going to make some bet at the *Pari Mutuel*, and asked me to allow her to book the bet. As I was tolerably certain that I should lose under any circumstances, I allowed her to take the money. Curiously enough, the horse won.' As she was walking about at the time, and had no fixed stand, I concluded naturally that the money was gone for good. Therefore, I was a good deal surprised on being suddenly hailed by the fair bookmaker, who paid out the winnings to the centime with a business-like air that any member of the ring might have envied.'

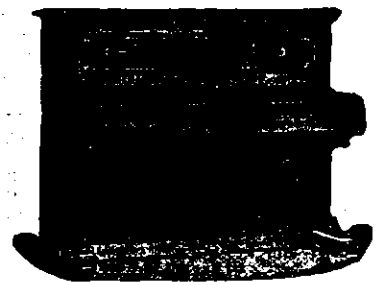
ENGLAND for the English wit, Labouchere declares, be the next popular cry. The engagement of the Duke of Marlborough to the daughter of the Vanderbilts has, he declares, attracted serious attention to the fact that the English men and women are being rapidly driven out by foreigners. He points out that there are German Royalties, American Peereesses, foreign financiers, Italian singers, French cooks, French maids,

and French dressmakers; Swiss waiters and Lascar sailors. Without dwelling further upon the details of the situation, it will be understood that English men and women are becoming anxious in consequence of the increasing success of their numerous competitors. It is, however, a curious circumstance connected with modern civilisation that every nation is now gradually but surely interchanging population. Thus New York is the second largest German city, possessing a population of over 450,000 Teutons. Almost every foreign country is crowded with English residents who have been unable to obtain remunerative employment at home. The matter has become so serious that the authorities of the Natural History Museum at South Kensington are said to have applied to the Home Secretary for permission to stuff suitable specimens of our race for insertion in the collection.

EVERY evil is popularly supposed to be attended by an antidote, and Professor Padmore Brown has just made a discovery which will remove at least one cause of complaint. After years spent in laborious and learned research, the professor claims to have discovered a serum, the hyperdermic injection of which will preserve young men of position against marrying Americans. If the serum really possesses the property which the professor declares that it has, this will undoubtedly be one of the most important discoveries of the century. No mother with eligible daughters, and no unmarried woman, would, in that event, ever be without one of the hyperdermic syringes filled to the nozzle with Anti-American Alliance fluid. It will, however, be curious to watch their manoeuvres to clandestinely inject young men of position or prospects.

The learned Professor declares that it is only a matter of time for different serums to be discovered to cure or prevent any species of human folly. Arguing that vanity, covetousness, malice, envy, and pride are all diseases in the blood, he maintains that it will soon be only necessary to inject the serum which is opposed to each to eliminate them from the system. If this is true, sermons will then become wholly unnecessary, and we may look forward hopefully to the time when perfection will be attained by hyperdermic injection! Moreover, missionaries will no longer require to proselytise, but, being fortified with Anti-Heathen serum, will convert unbelievers at the point of the syringe! This is the age of sensation, speculation, and—serum!

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