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Topics of the Week.

The Chinese Horror.

The interest of the campaign in South Africa still continues to wane before the increasing magnitude of the crisis in China. The Boer war has not yet had anything in it to equal the tragic elements that invest the situation in the East. Bloody battles in plenty have been on the veldt and terrible suffering, but these are an expected part of modern war. Let the Boer be as bad as his worst enemies have painted him he is still a foe who can be reckoned upon not to outrage altogether the laws of civilised humanity. Even his violations of the white flag may be as much the result of ignorance and want of concerted action as of deliberate treachery. The Chinaman belongs altogether to another category. He knows nothing of the Western notions of humanity, and looks on the trade of killing, with quite another eye from us. This is how one feels when you read of such a horrible massacre as that of the Europeans of Peking. Supposing the terrible news to be true—there is yet a chance it may be false—we cannot imagine such barbarism disgracing any Western nation, and we believe it would be impossible now-a-days. Let us not, however, be unduly proud of this civilisation of ours. It is only a little over three hundred years ago when the Catholics of France murdered 70,000 of their fellow countrymen for no other reason than that the latter were Protestants, and the Pope ordered a Te Deum to be performed on the occasion; and I am not at all confident that a modern mob let loose with all its passions afield would be distinguished for its temperateness. The little gleams of light cast into the darkness of China reveal the strangest of pictures to our eyes. They remind one of some horrible nightmare, in which the scene is lit by a lurid twilight, and ghastly forms bent on horrible murders flit by. What a picture, for instance, can one conjure up of that day or night, briefly referred to in our cables, when Prince Tuan, having administered opium to the Emperor and Dowager Empress, thereby reducing the one to death's door and the other to madness, sallied forth and called on the enraged populace to attack the foreigners. It is all so weird, mysterious, and terrible. I sometimes fancy our own dark ages might have presented some pictures as weird and horrible; but no, cruel, passionate, and ignorant as Europe may have been in these days, the very genius of the Caucasian mind which has so far enabled it to tread down the ape and tiger in itself must have even then saved us from descending so low as the loathsome Chinese standard. It is fearful to contemplate the position of the Europeans at the Legation during the time they were besieged there. Hemmed in by a multitude of hideous yellow-faced humanity breathing forth untold malice and hatred, they held their own hoping day by day for the succour which never came. And when at last, food and ammunition being exhausted, and they could no longer offer an effective resistance to the foe, they prepared to sell their lives as dearly as possible. Death was indeed the only refuge under the circumstances. Even could they as Europeans have been able to tolerate the indignity of surrender, such a course would probably have meant for them only torture ending in death. For there is no telling how the mob might have chosen to slake its hatred of foreigners had they been delivered alive into its hands.

Welcoming Our Returning Heroes.

To have cold water thrown on a project over which one is enthusiastic is one of the most vexatious "pin-pricks" of life, and is invariably warmly resented. The personage, therefore, who designs to perform this unpleasant operation on the public at large must expect to be anathematised in general, and in particular, for his trouble. Yet, if one has an inch of backbone, one feels it necessary sometimes to take the risk. In a few days a further batch of invalids from the

war will land in New Zealand and proceed to their various homes. It is already proposed to give these the sort of public welcome accorded to the others who have already arrived. It sounds ungracious, it seems ungrateful, it may be misunderstood, but I would urge, and with the utmost earnestness, let us do nothing of the sort. Granted, it seems hard that we should treat the men now returning so differently to those so warmly welcomed a week or so back, but it is a thousand times better to create a little disappointment now than a vast one presently, and whose after-effects might be deplorable later on. The point is simply this: Every steamer from the Cape for the next few months will bring one or two invalided heroes from the war. If on each of these occasions we get together and enthuse and make speeches, etc., we shall have no enthusiasm left for the great day when the lads who have done us so much honour return in their hundreds. Have you ever, I wonder, experimented with one of those small taps which one pushes through a champagne cork when it is necessary to use a very small quantity of the wine for an invalid? The first glassful comes out with a gush; so does the second; the third is more manageable; for the fourth portion one has to shake the bottle to generate enough gas to force the wine through, and the rest of the bottle trickles out flat, stale, and unprofitable. In theory, the last glass should sparkle out as briskly as the first. The dealer will swear to its doing so. In practice the result is invariably as I have stated. The parallel is obvious. Enthusiasm in affairs of this sort is very much like champagne. It must be freshly opened. Let us, then, wait till we can let the cork out with a bang, and have it fresh and sparkling. Our present mode is using the economical tap. We let out spurts, and think there will be plenty left for the others. So there may be, but it will be half flat. The thing to do is to welcome those now returning unostentatiously. Let us, through the Government, see that they lack for nothing, let the sick be tended with tenderest care, let billets be found for those who gave them up to go to fight for us all, let them know we esteem their services and sympathise with their suffering, let us, in short do them all honour privately. But, let us have no more public rejoicing and welcoming, no triumphal gatherings or meetings by Mayors and big wigs. Let all this be reserved for a day when, so far as we can tell, all who are coming back to us have arrived, or are to arrive, amongst us. Let that be a day of days. Let us save every atom of enthusiasm we can spare for it. The peace celebrations will come first, remember, and they will cause a tremendous expenditure of exultation and excitement, though nothing, I believe, to what will be seen when we welcome our boys, if only we work the matter in the right way and do not dissipate our energies in a number of small dress rehearsals. By the way, the methods in which certain of our country friends are preparing to celebrate the declaration of peace are decidedly original. One body of young men up in the northern districts swore recently not to shave or have their hair cut till peace was announced. They are already, I hear, sights for the gods, and the local young women are torn between their admiration of such patriotic fervour and their natural disgust at the scrubby faces and tangled locks of their brothers and lovers. Women of the humbler orders are, I think, less inclined to enthuse over such matters as Mufeking and the peace celebrations than men. I am led to this belief by the experience of some friends. It was decided that when the news of the relief of Mafeking arrived it would be necessary to provide the establishment with a Union Jack. When the flag came home, it was found to be too big for any stuff in the house. So a clothes prop was appropriated. But the maid-servant raised a protest. "Onnyway," said she, "Mufeking will hev to be relieved by Monday, because that's our washing day, and so'll want the prop for the cloas." As we know, Colonel Mahon and Colonel Plumer were obliging enough to settle the matter in good time for the family washing.

What Shall We Do for a Living?

A somewhat platitudinous paper on the above ever interesting subject appeared the other day in that highly respectable but usually rather dull periodical the Leisure Hour. The style of the writing would, in any other journal, be somewhat irritating. It is that of a consciously profound philosopher who, recognising our ignorance and ineptitude, deliberately writes down to meet us on what he conceives to be our own ground, and who, with a sort of elephantine playfulness, seeks to lighten the lesson he desires us to learn. This one could bear if Mr Garrett had anything very valuable or new to suggest, but it does not appear to me that he has. He tells us, for instance, that the trades which minister to the most direct necessities of mankind are the best, and most useful, and that it is wiser to avoid those occupations which depend on the fluctuations of fashion. Really, even in the nursery—so to say—we know this. Also, the author is kind enough to remind us that if our sons or daughters have short-sight or weak eyes they should not go in for the profession of engravers or anything requiring fine eyesight. But, leaving this kind of platitudes on one side, there is in the paper, after all, just one suggestion which would seem to have justified its acceptance by the editor. Supposing, says Mr Garrett, you wish to be a sculptor, but know that ready bread does not lie in that direction—"be a stonemason." If you hanker after an artist's career, but cannot afford the training or delay, "become a house decorator," or say you desire a sailor's life, but cannot leave home on protracted trips. Why, then, "become a fisherman." There is, it seems to me, a twofold wisdom in this advice. In the first place, such arguments are an invaluable weapon in the hands of parents who have young people with a sudden craze for art or for the sea or for art.

To bring forward the stock contra-arguments concerning the hard work and few prizes, etc., etc., is but to blow the fire of enthusiasm to still fiercer heat. Opposition does the same. But if the wise parent consents conditionally; that is to say, promises to help the artist provided he first devotes several years to house decorating, why the grit of the youngster is tested, his ability, if he has any, will assuredly show itself, and, in brief the chaff will be winnowed from the grain. In the second place, as is pointed out, the paths often meet. At all events, a man will be no worse a sailor for knowing how to handle a fishing smack. Stonemasonry is part of the sculptor's work, and no artist, if he has artistic taste, will be the worse for having devoted a short time to decorative work.

Free Railway Travelling.

In these days, and in this colony, it needs a very revolutionary and startling suggestion to successfully achieve the operation known as "taking one's breath away." But I think the proposal, seriously put forward in the press by an Auckland gentleman, that passenger traffic on our railroads should be made absolutely free, is completely successful in that respect, and is indeed almost sufficient to rival President Kruger in the gentle art of staggering humanity.

There is a Titanic breadth in the scheme, which fascinates the imagination, and, despite the first inevitable tendency to ridicule, inclines one to regard its proposer with some respect, remembering that many of the privileges we now enjoy were, when first advocated, pronounced just as absurd and chimerical as this seems to us today. The idea, if I grasp it aright, is briefly this: Every one, it is claimed directly or indirectly, benefits by the railways, whether they travel by them or not, and therefore all travelling should be free, and should be paid for by a tax, which would be levied on visitors as well as residents. The present method of brutally refusing to allow a man to travel unless he pays a fare is somewhat passionately denounced as a buccannery system, and our enthusiastic reformer is "astounded" that it should be tolerated in a civilised community. Well, well, old customs are, I suppose, hard to break through, and most of us have so inbred in us the conviction that the right and proper law of humanity is "nothing for nothing in this world, and precious little for sixpence," that we are really unable to see why there is any special grievance in buying a right to travel a certain number of

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