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Topics of the Week.

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Are We Becoming More Luxurious?

The general opinion of those who are not connected with journalism is that the writing of such notes as these is the easiest thing under the sun. "Pens and paper are provided for you," it is argued. "What have you got to do but to set to work?" That there should be any difficulty in the selection of a subject, and the method of its treatment, never occurs to the lay mind, while the very usual state of mind when it seems utterly impossible to write a line about anything in the wide world, is utterly incomprehensible to those outside the profession. Of course the thing has to be done, it is done, but with what effort and at what pains only those who have been through the scribbler's mill know. One of the obstacles which modern methods have placed in the path of the journalist of to-day is that the public are so infinitely suspicious of puff or advertisement in disguise, that many subjects which afford ample material for more or less interesting treatment have to be abandoned for fear they could be contorted into an advertisement for someone or other. For instance, a new experiment to be tried in one of our New Zealand cities opens up a couple of subjects which afford scope for certain reflections. A large restaurant is to be opened at which meals are to be served of a higher and more expensive class than has been the custom heretofore, and where special attention is to be given to the providing of dinner parties on a scale of luxury to which only certain clubs and great hotels of the largest colonial cities have up to now aspired. If the name of the city were mentioned this would infallibly be considered a bare-faced puff. Yet the fact that money is to be lavished on such an experiment at once raises three questions worth discussing—first, as to whether a taste for luxury in the matter of eating and drinking is growing amongst the present and the rising generation; second, whether it is more or less confined to one set or class; and third, whether the tendency (if it exists) is a subject for congratulation or the reverse. Query number one may, I think, be answered at once in the affirmative. The enormous increase in the number of restaurants, tea rooms, etc., during the past five or six years must have struck the least observant. Eleven years ago, when the writer first came to the colony, it was the almost universal practice for men—especially young men—to bring down their own lunch, and the eating houses, whose moderate charges were, and continue, a never ending marvel to one brought up to English prices—were chiefly used by the principals and senior clerks. The tea rooms, and what one might term the "restauranttes," which are now crowded at every luncheon hour, were then non-existent. That there should have been a revolt against the home-made luncheon was inevitable. Only a community which could not for financial reasons help itself would tolerate the home-cut, home-put-together luncheon. Even when done by a skilled and cunning housewife—one with a delicate hand and sympathetic mind—the home lunch was only a success on tolerance. But when, as was the case with the vast majority, it was done in haste, and at the last moment by the servant—I crave pardon, house assistant—at the boarding-house, the home-cut lunch was—well, you probably remember. Pahl! the very recollection raises one's gorge. But not only has the present and rising generation revolted against this—it has insisted on the rapid improvement of the places where the more agreeable substitute is provided. Look back over the last three or four years. Has not there been an enormous improvement in the daintiness with which food is served, and the manner with which it is cooked? Quantity has given place to quality in many cases, and competition and supply and demand have proved that there is willingness everywhere to sacrifice quantity for quality. "Little and good" is now the motto. "Rough but plenty of it" seems to be rapidly dying out. Hitherto no effort has been made to go above one shilling per meal at the majority of res-

taurants. Now we are to see whether colonials are willing to spend more, or whether "the best you can do up to a shilling" is the demand of the public. Personally, I am inclined to think it may be. On another point: It is often stated that the love of eating, or rather the thought of what shall be eaten and what shall be drunk, is purely or almost purely masculine. "Women do not care," we are told. Observation leads one to believe that in this as in other things New Zealand is the Antipodes of the Old World. The patronage of the new class of restaurant and tea room, and the amount expended on dainty feeding by women is amazing. Moreover, afternoon teas and at homes, where the fare provided was once cakes, toast, and bread and butter, have now developed into excuses for what schoolboys expressively term "a spread." Trifles, fruit salad, and even more solid viands, are now universal at such entertainments. And tea—well, it is said there are substitutes for tea too. That the taste for increased luxury and a greater expenditure on food is not confined to the moneyed class is, I think, admitted. Here, as in England, the artisan is decidedly fond of his dinner—more especially his Sunday dinner—and here as in England the amount of poultry consumed by the "working man" in comparison with that by the middle class mercantile man is astonishing. The Saturday night sales, both in quantity and price, at the fruit and poultry shops exceed those of the entire week, and the purchasers are almost wholly of the class who have arrogated to themselves the title of "working men." Finally, is the growing taste for greater luxury in living to be deplored? In strict moderation I think not. Plain living and high thinking is no doubt the ideal mode of existence. But while human nature is human nature it will remain more or less ideal. If taste for better things in a material is growing, so is taste in aesthetic and spiritual matters also, and so long as the former does not outrun the latter we shall do very fairly.

State Interference.

The extinction of the trading stamp will grieve no one but the individuals who made a very comfortable living therefrom. The system was altogether admirable from the point of view of the Trading Stamp Company, but from every other standpoint it was undesirable, helping neither purchaser nor retailer, but taxing both for the benefit of a middle party, who did nothing for his money. The only argument it was possible to urge in favour of trading stamps has been met by the new Bill, small discounts can be given, but they will be in cash or the equivalent of cash, and not an object which might or might not be worth the value claimed for it by a company, though never so benevolently inclined. The course taken up by the Government in this matter is another and rather good instance of the right claimed and exercised by modern government to interfere between the individual and the public, if they think the public are being in any way not perhaps altogether victimised, but over-charged, or made to suffer for the advancement of the unit. There are a considerable number of gentlemen now earning large, or at all events comfortable, livings, who will eventually, I believe and trust, find themselves and their means of earning what they delight to call "an honest penny," the objects of attention on the part of the Government. Money lenders, both big and small, will probably be the first. At all events it is to be hoped so, and amongst the laws and regulations under which these gentlemen conduct their lucrative negotiations should be this: All money lenders charging the limit interest should be registered and forced to trade in their own names. So-called loan and other banks, companies, agencies, etc., etc., under which individuals can now work without attracting any of the odium which rightly or wrongly attaches to the usury business, would thus be abolished and the borrower would know exactly whom he was dealing with. Under the present method poor Smith

is frequently forced to borrow money at six per cent. from B. to pay A., who regrets he cannot renew, and Smith has no means of knowing that he is dealing with the same man all the time. The exorbitant rates for renewals also need attention, and, of course, there will be a limitation of interest. Later on—but all in good time, brokers and agents will receive attention, and it will be probably decided that the rates now levied are exorbitant, and these will be reduced by law. No doubt this will mean fewer gentlemen of this business persuasion will make a living than at present, but the fittest will survive, and there are altogether too many just now. Exactly how far the State can legitimately go in this matter is an extremely nice question. In most trades the laws of supply and demand and the spirit of competition regulates such matters automatically, but where trusts are formed to interfere with such laws and to enrich individuals at the expense of the public it is now recognised that the State must and will interpose. In the matter of adulterated solids and certain liquors, the State, as a protector of the public, has long done its duty fairly well. It is a pity it cannot do the same in the matter of alcohol. The might of the brewer is great, but after all he ought not to have the State so completely under his thumb that it is frightened or incapable of insisting that a certain standard of purity shall be maintained, and that a fine of, say, £50 to £100 shall be imposed for obtaining money under false pretences by selling liquor which is not what it is stated to be. By placing, that is, an inferior article in a bottle bearing some brand or name demanded by the purchaser. When this is done we shall have a most momentous decrease in the drunkenness returns. Meanwhile, it is something to be rid of the trading stamp.

A Chance for Bachelors.

The movement in England to promote the emigration of women from the Mother Country to the Colonies has, I understand, received a certain stimulus lately from the growth of Imperial sentiment. With the exception of Victoria which has more women than men, all the other colonies of Australasia, with Canada and South Africa, have a preponderance of males; and it is considered that it would be of mutual benefit to the Old Country and the colonies that the former should send some of its women to these lands. London alone, it is calculated, has 500,000 marriageable girls who should go out to the Colonies; and that of course is only a portion of the marriageable spinsters the United Kingdom could furnish. Housewives in the colony who are weary wrestling with the servant girl difficulty would assuredly welcome such an influx. Even although the girls came to be married they would have to find something to do until someone actually asked them in matrimony, and so their presence here would for a time at least alleviate the burden of our housekeepers. But it seems that though we are most willing to receive them and the promoters of the movement in the Old Country are willing to bear the expense of their passage, the girls will not make the change. The inducement of high wages and the early prospect of a husband are apparently not sufficient to tempt them to these distant shores, though they know that to remain at Home means harder work, lower wages, and an infinitely smaller chance of getting married. No arguments seem strong enough to overcome this reluctance, and so the promoters of the movement for getting the surplus females of Great Britain transferred to the Colonies are said to be seriously thinking of subsidising the young colonials to come Home and marry the girls there. No doubt if sufficiently liberal terms were offered plenty of colonial youths would be prepared to take a trip to the Old Country. We have seen how willingly the contingents volunteered for South Africa and the war. Surely there would not be less alacrity shown were the quest matrimonial and not military, and the glory to be found in the court of Venus instead of in the field of Mars. I fancy there would be a rush of applicants if, as has been suggested, the Home authorities were to offer a free passage to England and back to every young colonial who when he left the Old Country on his return took an English girl with him. Of course there would be a feeling of resentment to such an arrangement among the colonial spinsters as long

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