

Topics of the Week.

Drifting Whither?

When the Financial Statement was delivered two months ago its most obvious feature was the prodigal spirit it revealed, both as regards the immediate past and the immediate future of our public expenditure. It showed that during the last financial year we had spent lavishly and that we had no intention of curtailing our expenses during the present year. Whatever might be the actual state of our finances there was no gain-saying the buoyancy of our financiers. Never was there a Budget more exuberant or less sicklied over with the pale cast of apprehension for the future. The other remarkable fact about it, which I commented on at the time was the indifference with which the public received the revelations of a financial policy that scattered the money broadcast, as in the old Vogelian days. Where was the loud chorus that in time gone by croaked of impending ruin as each successive million was added to our debt? Gone quite silent, and in vain I listened for the echoes of my own protests. It would be still more vain, I suppose, to listen for them now, when the advent of the Public Works Statement comes to remind us once again of the policy to which we are committing ourselves; for borrowing, as it is proposed in the Budget, is much more of an abstract proposition than it is in the Public Works Statement, where the definite allocation of the money appeals to individual interest. The bald idea of going on the market for another million and three-quarters may rouse the economical soul to loud protest against the unthinking extravagance of the Government, but when it comes to the parceling out of the gold, so much for your railway and so much for my road, and so on, the sense of our respective needs quite outweighs our misgivings for the financial stability of the colony, and the energy we devoted to the condemnation of reckless expenditure is consumed in urging the claims of our own particular island, province or district. It would be folly to expect a campaign of economy to start on the morrow of the appearance of the Public Works Statement. The motto of the moment is "Well, if the money is to be spent let us have our share of it," and of that motto is born even among the most thoughtful a spirit of indifference and laissez faire. We are becoming accustomed to the lavish scale on which the administration is conducting affairs, and heedless of the inevitable consequence of a small colony with a limited and slowly increasing population increasing an already stupendous load of debt at the rate of a couple of millions a year. So long as the money lasts all will be well, of course. The spend-thrift who squanders his patrimony flourishes while it lasts, but only while it lasts. And where is the difference with a colony like this? Our illimitable resources, of which we hear so much, are mainly in the shape of land, and the value of that is not to be reckoned by what it will bring in the inflated season of a boom, but by its actual productive value when compared with the broad acres in other parts of the world and nearer to the world's markets. And what is the value of the land without the people to cultivate it? And shall we add to the attractions of the colony by raising the taxes? But why start again the old Jeremiaid? Who will listen to it?

The Hand That Rocks the Cradle.

The common opinion throughout the colony with regard to female suffrage is that it has had very little effect on the general conduct of things

political; it has neither done the previous harm that was predicted, nor has it hastened the millennium by five minutes. To the ordinary observer elections are conducted very much as they were before, the same sort of candidates present themselves for election, and get sent down to Wellington, and the proceedings in the House of Representatives are unmarked by any special feature that would indicate the refining influence of women at work among our legislators. You ask nine hundred and ninety-nine men out of a thousand in the colony, aye, and nine hundred and ninety-nine women, too, and this is what they will tell you. But our absent Premier, when interviewed on this question by the advocates of the suffrage reform in England, told quite another tale. Posing as one who had been instrumental in effecting the extension of the voting privilege here—as a fact he was never a very whole-hearted supporter of the movement here until the eleventh hour—he painted a most idyllic picture that had dawned on this benighted land when woman got a vote. He told his interviewers that in New Zealand the election booths had been purified of all objectionable elements by the presence of women there; and so forth. But the statement which tickles this simple colony most was his assertion that the moral tone of the New Zealand Parliament had always been high, but now a man whose character was in any way tainted had better save his time and money; he stood no chance of getting into Parliament. How good the members in Wellington must feel to be talked about by their absent Premier in this way. I almost fancy I can hear the purr of self-satisfaction pervading the House. Lord, we thank thee that we are not as other legislators are! But is it true? Do the women of the colony institute such searching enquiry into the character of candidates? Do they separate the sheep from the goats by a hard and fast line? Are the present occupants of the House of Representatives spotless Bayards wearing the white flower of a blameless life? But these are indivisible queries better left alone. We shall, however, keep Mr. Seddon's words in mind when a few weeks hence the candidates begin to announce themselves thick and fast, and I trust that the ladies will not forget the high function of public censor with which he credits them and bestow their favours as their own high moral standard dictates.

The Extraction of Gold.

At the meeting last week of the Auckland committee of the Veterans' Home it was shown that the sum collected toward the proposed institution was not so large as had been expected, and it was suggested that a further effort to raise funds should be made through an entertainment of some kind. The entertainment is generally the first, and invariably the last resource when money has to be got for some object, and the fact that it is so popular is the best evidence of its efficiency. But easy as it may be to extract money from folks under cover of amusing them, or giving them something in return for their shillings, as compared with asking them to stand and deliver at the point of a subscription list, there comes a point when so many have resorted to the same means that it ceases to be profitable. This point would seem to have been reached in Auckland at present, for when it was suggested that a bazaar might be held to raise funds for the veterans a protest was raised on behalf of the Victoria School for Maori Girls, the friends of which have already annexed the bazaar idea. Next a floral fete was proposed for the veterans' benefit, but a representative of

the Ladies' Benevolent Society took exception to that scheme, it having been already appropriated by the society. Lastly, the veterans' friends fell back on the volunteers. They can generally be counted on to give a display for the benefit of any deserving object, but on this occasion they belied their reputation for generosity. It seems that the volunteers are also in a bad way for money, and have decided that any exhibition they give must be to replenish their own exchequer. All this should be a warning to the promoters of any new scheme, charitable, patriotic, or whatever it is. The entertainment device is for the present at least over-done. There is in active preparation three powerful assaults on the public purse which are likely to try it severely, were they the only assaults. But besides these, the pockets of the community are being assailed by lesser combinations, led in most cases by the Church. You can scarcely go into any household, city or suburban, just now without encountering evidences of the state of siege in which they are continually living. The Church in this respect is especially wily. She asks for no money of the members of the flock. Beyond his customary contributions on Sunday, pater may be conscious of no other clerical call on his purse, and mater may not even be troubled by that. But none the less, unknown to the one, and unappreciated by the other, the Church is getting her portion sure. In a good many households I know of one finds a counterpart of the "Song of the Shirt" drama in what you might call the song of the bazaar. Stitch, stitch, stitch, at pin cushion, d'oyley, or sachet; the eyes grow weary, and the fingers ache, to make expensive things which no one wants, but which will be sold to some unwilling buyer for twice their value. Fortunate it is that no one about to assist in a bazaar sits down, like the builder in the parable, and counts the cost, for then there would be no bazaars. It has been reckoned out, however—the price of materials, "which of course doesn't count," and of labour, "which of course doesn't count," and of time, "which also is not to be included," added to the price extracted from the paternal and fraternal pockets, when the results of the wasted time and money are put up for sale; and the conclusion is that as between the bazaar and the straightforward subscription, the latter is by far the most economical. But then it would not be half so successful.

The Shah's Millions.

The peoples of the West, great as they are at money-making, have seemingly never mastered the art of spending it. I suppose that the two faculties seldom go hand in hand, and that the man who accumulates millions is not equally able to spend them. For if they were more often associated fewer men would die millionaires. To know how to spend lavishly and profusely one must go to the Orient and take lessons, or learn of him when as in the case of the Shah he comes among us. A cablegram the other day announced that His Imperial Highness and suite had spent £200,000 during their stay in Paris, and an earlier message informed us of some equally large expenditure by the Persian Monarch in England. Now, Paris is no doubt the shopper's paradise, but the disbursement of nearly quarter of a million pounds sterling in the magasins of the gay city during a flying visit is an achievement that fairly staggers the ordinary Western mind. Not a lifelong training would qualify most people for such prodigality; it must be inherited, and not merely from one generation back but from a long series of generations. The multi-millionaire Chicago pork butcher's wife could never get through such a sum; his daughter or son could not do it without making fools of themselves. But the Shah in the most natural and decent way parts with his quarter of a million and never turns a hair. It has been suggested that he has saved up for this trip, and that the palace manager at Teheran suffered, and will suffer for the sake of all the present magnificence. Yet the Shah, you would say, spends too regally to have saved up for the occasion. It must be his habitual way, methinks, to disburse by the thousand where others spend by the ten. Still, even a despot with only six million subjects and a comparatively barren country, could never replenish a purse that poured forth such a stream of gold every week of the year. So one is reluctantly forced to the mean conclusion that His Majesty's scale of living when on tour is a trifle more magnificent than when he is at home. In the latter place there can be much fewer temptations, too. Teheran or Ispahan is not Paris, and we can imagine him living in a modest way for the Shah, and talking a trip to Europe by way of an occasional spree. His Majesty's father made four such trips before he was shot in 1896, and more than likely his son has inherited this way of taking his pleasure.

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