

Topics of the Week.

What Will They Do With It?

To provide innocent entertainment for others is one of the most pleasant and most gracious of those human functions of which our lives are, or should be, made up, so the good people of Auckland are to be congratulated on having furnished the colony at large, and more particularly the affectionate sister port of Wellington, with a continuous series of jokes each more execrating than the last, which have furnished food for frivolity, for, well, one hesitates to remember how many years back, in that "enfant terrible," the Auckland Harbour Board, the northern metropolis has for years possessed a "fat boy," whose extreme lethargy when asleep, as has usually been the case, and whose diverting blunders when awake, have far outstripped anything imaged in fiction, and have left the famous original of Charles Dickens simply nowhere. To be sure, the financial flesh of Auckland has been made to "creep" on occasion, but did not the original fat boy say to his mistress, old Mrs. Wardle, "I want to flesh creep." It is part of the role, and one of Auckland's advantages, in owning a fat boy. The latest prank of this farcure—as the French would say—is now well known. It is even somewhat more expensive than any which have gone before, but as it is infinitely more ludicrous and transcends mortal belief in the direction of blundering, no doubt the taxpayers will put their hands in their pockets with pleasure, feeling well repaid by the laughter which resounds from one end of the colony to the other. The Admiralty House joke is almost an old one. It is one of those not uncommon sort of jokes where you foresee the point almost as soon as the story is started, and begin to simmer with enjoyment, gradually working up to a violent crescendo of uncontrollable laughter. With the Auckland Harbour Board indeed all these stories are of the "grouse in the gun room" order, for everyone knows 'em by heart, and cannot but laugh consumedly. One may picture a member telling the yarn as follows: "Well, you see—snigger—I thought we ought to have an Admiralty House; not a common-sense little place suitable for the resident officer's wife, etc., but something to add to our collections. Ha, ha, ha! So I ups and bounces, and bluffs the Board—ho, ho, ho—and I gets a tenders called for a certain amount, and gets a site from the Government. Oh! that site—ha, ha, ha, he, he, he—that site—ho, ho, ho! Ought to have been split sight (see, site, sight)—ho, ho, ho!—and as the prize design cost too much we amended the amount—ho, he!—and we ups and builds what, you'll all agree, is the most 'strorinary building ever seen in the city. And, best joke in world, started it even when old Beau-mont refused to lay a foundation stone, because he never would live in it. And now—ho, ho, and fib. (cladding sides and gapping)—best joke in world—ho, ho, ho. 'Xeuse my painting. Another admiral refused to live in it, and we don't know what to do, and we've spent £8,510. See! £8,520 of other folks' money. See!" (Subsides into paroxysms of laughter), loudly echoed by Southern cities. Aucklanders smile wanly, and try and look as if they enjoyed it; while Mr. Napier makes ready for the next grand coup.

But, seriously, what will they do with it? Residentially, it is out of the question. A man who can afford about £300 or £400 a year rent is apt to turn up his nose at an atmosphere of railways and factory smuts and smokes. The Auckland Ministers' residence was put forward as a joke, but there was a tinkle of earnestness behind it. More unlikely things have happened. A junior club, a home for incurables, Veterans' Home and other propositions have been put forward, but why not make it the Harbour Board Office, and sell or lease the buildings they occupy at present? There would be something very appropriate in their occupying the strange structure. Failing this, Auckland might present the building to Mr. Napier as a perpetual monument to the combined sagacity and pertinacity which forced it upon an unwilling city.

A Dying Art.

Is conversation, one of the most delightful of the arts, already dead, or merely dying, and to be restored to its pristine vigour and beauty if prompt, wise and effective measures are taken? Several articles have appeared of late in the magazines commenting on the manners and customs of polite society, past and present, and contrasting the latter with the former, much to our prejudice. There is a good deal to be said on both sides, I imagine. We are probably less punctilious and courtly than our great-grandfathers, and age now is no cause for respect; but on the other hand, we have virtues which were denied our forbears. We are not drunk in the presence of ladies, nor do we swear before them nor at them, as was some time the fashion. But there can be no doubt that the art of conversation has declined. The battle of wit, the delicate duel of repartee, which were so pronounced a feature of the days when great ladies held "salons," are as extinct as the man and the dodo. And it is if anything worse in New Zealand than in the Old Country. Bright, brisk, intelligent talk on men and books, music, drama or events of interest in the world is rarely met with. The good talker is conspicuous by his or her absence, and the modern substitute—the continual chatter, with a perpetual flow of words, words, words—is a poor and a weary substitute. The craving for excitement, the taste for cards, the love of the most flashy entertainments in the direction of musical farce and farce comedy, are probably responsible for this deterioration. A few hours at ping pong is doubtless fascinating, at least so it seemed last winter, but is hardly the sort of evening which will result in any increase of mental culture or intellectual betterment. But yet ping pong and progressive card parties, football, and clubs for facilitating play therat abound exceedingly; whereas Shakespeare Clubs and similar efforts towards higher thinking have languished entirely. False culture and sham intellectuality are, of course, anæsthesia. Better far rank phillistinism and ping pong than affected æstheticism and cant. And it must be confessed we have not always been free of these two, but a happy medium may at last be struck, and it would be agreeable if some effort were made in educated circles to bring dinner table and supper table talk and general conversation in mixed company to a brighter and rather higher intellectual level than it at present occupies.

The Melba Management.

A very common topic of general conversation during the past week or so throughout the colony has been the tactics resorted to by the managers of the recent Melba tour to make that venture as remunerative as possible. A very large number of persons have caustically criticised the methods by which it was endeavoured to extract the last possible guinea from the music lovers of the colony, and a really rather extraordinary amount of bitterness appears to have been generated amongst folk usually good-natured enough in the disbursements they make on their personal pleasures. Having heard a good many adverse opinions, and scarcely come across one champion for Mr. Musgrove, it seems both fair and interesting to set forth these grievances, and then to see if after all there is not something to be said for the other side, and whether in point of fact there were any legitimate grievances at all. The charges against the management are simple. They are as thus: That a guinea and a half-guinea were quoted as the price of a seat, but that the opening of the half-guinea plan was held back till the very last possible moment to make certain that without "any possible, probable doubt whatever" the very uttermost guinea was extracted before anyone was

let in at ten and sixpence, and that the management endeavoured, in short, to bluff the public to take guinea seats. Further, it was objected that when guinea seats were found to be not all filled they were sold for half a guinea, and finally that at the last moment no inconsiderable number of fortunate economists heard the great diva for the modest sum of a crown. The charge is true, but if one considers it sanely, where is the grievance? The same principle is observed in commerce, and no one considers themselves ill-used. If a man can sell mutton at sixpence a piece he does so till his market is exhausted. Then he taps a second section of the public by selling them at fourpence, and finally, as we see so often, "Six Ene Auckland mutton for a shilling" are sold from a cart in the street within an hour of the time when the same price was asked for two only. Probably the reader has found himself walking home with a fish for which he has paid four times as much as he need have done had he had more patience or foresight, but does he feel any bitterness against the fish merchant with whom he did business? Assuredly not, if he is a reasonable man. Well, the Melba ticket business is on all fours with this. The man who purchased his seat for a guinea did so because he doubted if he would be able to get a seat at half that price. He paid for security, and got it. He has no possible cause for complaint because someone who was willing to take the risks managed to get a seat next to him, or as good as his, for any smaller sum. The management fulfilled their contract to him all right, where is his trouble? The old parable of the lord of the vineyard and the penny a day applies. The public are always somewhat prone to disparage theatrical managements for trying to exploit their pockets to the furthest possible extent, and to forget that theatrical ventures are arranged for the sole purpose of making as much money as possible. We do it, all of us, in our various businesses, and should feel justly indignant if anyone took exception to the same. Booming is perfectly legitimate—one takes all advertising with a little salt, and if one allows oneself to be lured into going to a concert or entertainment by lavish advertisement, and then considers that the puff was better than the fare provided, why, the blame is really on one's own head. The art is practised all the year round, and one must either learn to discriminate or be content to take one's luck.

An Age of Nil Admirandi.

Every man—and for the matter of that every woman—(one cannot always be using the "his or her") has, I imagine, experienced in a more or less acute degree the distressing chill which numbs a human being, when having exhibited his pet view or most notable local lion to a visitor whom it is desired either to please or impress, he finds that he has entirely failed to kindle any answering enthusiasm to his own (which already begins to appear somewhat ridiculous), and that his careful crescendo of effects has altogether failed in its purpose. Equally, everyone has, I suppose, felt the gradual growth of exasperation when an enthusiastic host or guide is for ever forcing our emotions, for ever tacitly demanding admiration (at the point of the bayonet, as it were) and for ever peering delightfully into our faces to see if we are sufficiently impressed. Which of these pin-pricks of everyday life is the most disagreeable, I do not care to pronounce. Unless we are careful we probably experience both with tolerable frequency, and at the time each appears to be more hateful than the other. But the cause at the bottom of both is eminently characteristic of the age. Broadly speaking, it is the age when we wonder at nothing, when we admire nothing. Spasms of enthusiasm may pass over us, the emotions may be temporarily galvanised into some acute form by an exceptional occurrence, but it is an evanescent effort, and to produce it the cause must be ever and enormously increased. We accept every wonder of electricity without comment. We talk to persons miles upon miles distant, we are whisked along by a force of which the majority of us

know absolutely nothing. We have our news flashed from every part of the world instantaneously; but the marvel of it all never appeals to us, and there is not a thinkable discovery which would cause us one gasp of astonishment. As a fellow-peasant observed in a somewhat similar article, we should only observe "Oh, well." These thoughts were engendered by the absolute frostiness of the audience in Auckland with regard to Melba. They applauded, it is true, but it was merely commercial applause, the premeditated claque of an audience which, having paid a more than usual price for seats, was determined to have money's worth and more if it could get it. There was not one spark of passion or true feeling in it, not one fraction of that subtle and indescribable but unmistakable current of emotion which will sweep through a perhaps silent gathering on occasion, and which brings a lump into the throat and sends a shiver down the spine. Yet, surely, the great diva should produce that effect. She does produce it we know at "Home," else she could never have risen to a position in Europe which monarchs might envy, and held her court to which even sovereigns sent representatives or greetings. Was it because admiration was forced on us—that well-known irritation of which I spoke in the first few lines—or was it that we are ceasing to be able to admire? Certainly I heard no one, save one, admit disappointment, yet few were, as far as I could judge, genuinely moved. Strange it is, my masters, passing strange. The exception I heard of is worth repeating, for, for colossal impudence, vulgarity and intellectual snobbery it must remain a record. A lady in Auckland informed a friend that she was "so disgusted after Melba's first item, that she went outside and sat in her 'bus till the concert was over." Was there ever anything more monumental than this? Is not "disgusted" delicious—a very gem of blatant ignorance and concentrated quintessence of conceit?



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