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Current Topics

AT HOME AND ABROAD.

A QUEER MISSION. It once happened, to our knowledge, that two charitable and pious ladies were discussing with much self-congratulation the good deed they had performed in rescuing a certain clown from the temptations that surrounded him, and setting him up comfortably in a less exciting line of life. A lady, however, who did not pass for being especially pious, stood by, and she caused some slight disturbance by quietly but suggestively inquiring—"And who is now clown in his place?" We have been reminded of this by an article in which the *Saturday Review* deals with the efforts of one Miss Barlee, who, it seems, has been occupied in the rescue of children employed in the acting of the pantomime on the London stage—one only out of ten of those who apply being engaged. But while the nine rejected are apparently left to their fate unheeded, the chosen one has been made the object of solicitude, and the aim of a work of conversion. Miss Barlee has written a book on the subject, and dedicated it appropriately to Lord Shaftesbury, and the *Saturday Review* cuts up the book, the work, and Miss Barlee all together, in a very amusing manner, suggesting that there is a doubtful kindness in taking away children from an occupation, that will always endure, whatever particular children may be taken away from it, in order that they may, at an infinitely reduced rate of wages, be set to make match boxes or roll up black lead in paper parcels. "Pantomime children, we hear," says the *Review*, "like their life and their profession. So few of us who have any profession like our lives, that it seems really cruel to diminish the number of the contented by means of illuminated texts" (one of the instruments of conversion). "Yet an imp's life is not always a happy one. These little artists delight in taking the parts of animals, especially when two children go to make up one beast. But even here the head has to be kept thrown back for a long time, and, of course, the heat must be intense. Much endurance has to be borne by children," says our honest voyager into pantomime land, admitting, by the way, that "no one in the present state of the labour market, denounces the occupation as wrong." Thus it appears that morality depends on the state of the labour market. An opposite and sterner view must be held by the owners of the "Christian influences" which converted the ministering Demon (one of the children mentioned). The real cruelty comes in when a poor child has become perfect as a wolf or a crab, but has outgrown his crab-shell or his wolf-skin, "To save the purchase of a new skin, the child is forced into an old one," than which no form of meanness can be more detestable. Sometimes, too, a Blue Fiend with bat wings and a forked tail has been found writhing beneath the cane of a cruel mistress. The Blue Fiend had outgrown its wings, and could not flutter naturally in the circumstances. No training is needed for a wave, who merely runs about on all-fours under a painted ocean, and earns three and sixpence for this delightful form of industry." Such are the occupations and the sufferings of the children to whose reclamation Miss Barlee has devoted herself. The nine rejected for the one chosen, meantime, as we said, being allowed to grow up uninterfered with, and abandoned to the guidance of the disposition that would have made them "pantomimeimps"—had they been fortunate enough to secure the opening they sought. But do we not find in this lady's devotion some indication of the motive that seems to inspire many self-appointed heralds of the Gospel—that is the desire of distinguishing themselves and coming before the public in connection with something that is unusual, remarkable, or interesting in some particular manner?—For that is undoubtedly a common incentive to missionary undertakings on the part of our friends the Evangelicals.

HOPE FOR THE PROTESTANT WORLD. "THE heart searches for its vanished kindred, and it will not believe that they cease to be, or that its interest in them or theirs in it is broken. It is a universal sentiment of humanity which has survived, and will survive, all the sophistries of speculation. . . . And it is the same instinct which prompted the custom of praying for the dead—a custom which prevailed and still prevails among the Jews, and which pervades the earliest literature

of Christianity. How natural the habit is comes out incidentally in one of the Princess Alice's letters. 'Ernie' [her eldest boy] 'always prays for Frittie, and talks to me of him when we walk together.' And with equal naturalness Tennyson, in his *Ode on the Duke of Wellington*, prays for the soul of the great Captain. The reader will remember, too, a beautiful passage in the *Morte d'Arthur*, where the duty of praying for the dead is argumentatively enjoined in the person of the poet's hero:—

Pray for my soul. More things are wrought by prayer
Than this world dreams of, wherefore let thy voice
Rise like a fountain for me night and day.
For what are men better than sheep or goats
That nourish a blind life within the brain,
If, knowing God, they lift not hands of prayer
Both for themselves and those who call them friend?
For so the whole world round is every way
Bound by gold chains about the feet of God.'

The fact is we all pray for the dead—at least all loving hearts do. When our beloved pass away from us we follow them with our longing thoughts; we speculate on their condition and their work in the world unseen; we wish them well. And what is a wish but an unexpressed prayer? 'Every good and holy desire,' says Hooker, 'though it lack the form, hath notwithstanding in itself the substance and with Him the force, of a prayer, Who regardeth the very moanings and sighs of the heart of man.' In truth, to forbid prayers for the dead is to undermine the doctrine of prayers for the living.—Our quotation is taken from an article on the Princess Alice written in the *Fortnightly Review* by the Rev. Malcolm M'Coll, and it may surprise many of our readers to find such an expression of opinion coming from a Protestant pen. What part of the Church's creed, in fact, has been more ridiculed or more condemned by the Protestant world generally than that connected with prayers for the dead? From the time of the Reformation, when countless endowments left by pious and charitable people in order that Masses for their own souls and those of others might be perpetually offered, were plundered by greedy apostates, down to the latest hour at which an anti-Catholic boanerges has thundered at Exeter Hall, the Catholic doctrine in question has been most violently, and even most brutally, assailed. Yet, now we are told by a Protestant divine that the instinct that prompts to such prayers is a universal sentiment of humanity, and that to refrain from prayers for the dead is to threaten the doctrine of prayers for the living.—The Church, then, according to this high Protestant testimony, has been right all these ages in which she has been so grossly condemned,—and Protestantism has been denouncing the truth and stands convicted of having robbed the dead of the prayers that were their due, as well as bound the human heart in cruel chains that curbed and stunted its most holy feelings.—But a belief in the prayers of the living for the dead almost involves a belief in the prayers of the dead for the living, and much more, and that section of the Protestant world that accepts the one belief bids fair to accept the others also.—Let us hope that the gratitude of the holy souls, no longer neglected, and the intercession of the saints no longer abhorred, may obtain for the world in question the grace of a full conversion.

A FAILURE THROUGH CENTRALISATION. UNDER the title of "Official Optimism," in the *Contemporary Review* for July, Mr. Francis Peck, chairman of the Howard Association, brings a heavy indictment against the prison system of England, and traces to the centralisation and secrecy which obtain in connection with it many evils and abuses.—If it be true, as he says it is, that crime is diminishing, the causes must be ascribed to something else, he maintains, than the discipline of the prisons—for that is sufficiently illustrated by the numerous and heavy offences committed by discharged prisoners—a complete proof of its inefficient nature being furnished especially by the report for 1882 of the Medical Inspector of Her Majesty's Prisons, in which it is stated that the 21,917 habitual criminals enumerated in the prison census had each incurred, on an average, four previous convictions.—As to the system of criminal treatment, the first fault is attributed by the writer to the law, which makes no provision for cumulative penalties for repeated offences.—A measure, nevertheless, which, if we may judge by the outcry somewhat artificially raised among ourselves at the additional sentences given by certain Visiting Justices, would hardly find favour in the eyes of a tender-hearted