

New Zealand Gazette

VOL. XVI.—No. 29.

DUNEDIN: FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 9, 1888.

PRICE 6D.

Current Topics

AT HOME AND ABROAD.

THE SWEATING SYSTEM.

THE revelations recently made concerning the prevalence of the sweating system in Dunedin, Christchurch, and Auckland, are such as must fill the mind of every honourable man with shame and alarm. Here is the colony, not nearly a century old, and yet evils prevail in it, that are the opprobrium of countries aged many centuries. But do we not blame the centuries often in the wrong, imputing to their mouldering decay the fungus growth that is the fruits of rottenness newly generated? We are too apt to console ourselves by blaming the past for evils that exist, but which, in truth, are the effect of present meanness, and selfishness, and hardness of heart. It is not necessary, for example, to look back to feudal times for the origin of that insatiable desire to have work cheaply done, which is one of the characteristics of the present day. We need look no farther for its fount and origin than to the baseness of the human nature that everyone of us bears in his own person, and which, unless it be curbed, and disciplined, and practised in the ways of honour and uprightness, must be prolific in all that is base and bad. On the contrary, if we look to the world's past, we shall find examples that might put the present sordid age to shame. To what was the development of the arts due in the middle ages, but to the generosity and bounty of the princes and great nobles who patronised and supported the artists? Had they looked for cheapness as the chief thing, and considered that their duty and highest virtue lay in sparing their purses, the world would have suffered severely, and its civilisation would have been retarded. But they considered the workman worthy of his hire, and honoured and rewarded him. We are told many tales of their cruelty; of the terrible doings that took place when the lord of the manor had the right and power of life and death over his vassals. But, comparing them with our modern society, whose wealthier classes have no such right, but without it, virtually, in many cases exercise such a power, perhaps the advantage lies with the lords of the feudal ages. That the sweating system, therefore, has obtained a footing, and even a firm hold, in this new country of ours, though it may be a subject for regret, is not one for astonishment. We do not, in fact, know of any place in the world where the soil is better prepared for such an ugly growth than in these colonies. We know of no place in which the worship of wealth is more barefaced or more abject. Some eminent visitor to these colonies—the late Mr. Trollope, if we remember aright—in writing of what he had seen, gave it as his opinion that what he called "hat-worship" was unknown here—his meaning being that the poor man did not take off his hat in the presence of the wealthy man. But if the poor man among us keeps his hat on his head in the presence of the wealthy man, his superior, it is because he lacks the good manners that distinguish his class elsewhere. The abjection of his mind in the presence of wealth is not less, but often much greater, than what it is elsewhere—and there is no part of the world where wealth, and wealth alone, without one single worthy or respectable quality to back it, obtains a greater degree of worship. But where the wealthy man is all-powerful and the poor man abject and dependent, systems like the sweating system must flourish and increase. As to the causes of the sweating system, apart from the desire that exists in the base and selfish mind to make as great a profit as possible of the neighbour—forgetful of the awful truth that one of the sins which cry to heaven for vengeance is that of defrauding the labourer of his hire—his just hire, the true worth of his work and not the pittance that a dire necessity may perhaps force him to accept, it would be no easy task to trace them closely and completely. Something is probably due to the effects produced by machinery; the theory being that labour is thus liberated from certain pursuits to find a ready occupation in others, but the fact being apparently that the labour thus liberated finds no ready occupation, but is obliged to accept starvation wages wherever they may offer. Machinery, for instance, often gives employment to children and sends men and women to look for it where it is not to be found. The problem of the machine against the man, in short, is one which still remains to be solved, and whose solution, moreover, cannot be much longer delayed. Something also,

perhaps, is due to the multiplied wants of modern households, which require an outlay that, in the majority of cases, it is not always easy to provide for. Many causes, no doubt, contribute to a result that is deplorable beyond description. But as we have said, the moral cause is the principal one. It exists in the meanness and selfishness—from which the working classes that themselves the sufferers are by no means free—that take nothing into consideration but their own gratification, and which too often, unfortunately, are looked upon as admirable qualities—prudence, thrift, and all the rest of it. The sweating system at our doors gives us good reason for humility, and, let us hope, a spur towards repentance and amendment.

A QUEER IMPROVEMENT.

A SIDE light has been thrown on the condition of things in Italy by recent events in America, which brings into strong relief the benefits of the improved régime. Among the details of cheap alien labour in New York brought out by the Committee appointed by Congress to inquire into the matter, about the worst have been those relating to the situation of the Italian immigrants. Here is an example:—"Marie Fadrizi, an Italian wife, who, although but 17 years of age, has had three children, was placed on the stand to show the wretched condition of and low wages earned by people of her class. She came from Sessa, Italy, seven years ago, and was married in this city three years ago. Her husband works on a farm somewhere out of the city. Hers is one of four families that live together in four rooms in a tenement house, No. 116, Mulberry street. There are fifteen people living in four rooms. They all use the one kitchen, which is the only room in which there is a window opening to the outer air. From the sleeping rooms windows open to the hallway. Five people sleep in the small room that she occupies. She works as a finisher on men's clothes, and is paid ten cents a dozen garments. By working hard from 5 o'clock in the morning until 10 o'clock at night she is enabled to earn 40 cents, and she is perfectly satisfied with this, and would rather live in Mulberry street as she does than return to Italy.—Catherine Fadrizi, the sister-in-law of the last witness, testified that she also lives in the house 116 Mulberry street. She is employed at sewing collars on men's coats. She does not have steady work, she said, but when she has work she toils from 3 o'clock in the morning until 11 o'clock at night to earn from 40 to 50 cents a day. On some days when her children are sick or troublesome she rises at 2 o'clock in the morning."—But, notwithstanding all this, the testimony of the women was that they preferred their present condition to that in which they had lived at home. They did not desire to go back to Italy, they said, the country having no attractions for them:—"If I can get three dozen coats to do a day I am satisfied and can support my two children," said Catherine Fadrizi. But what must be the state of things in Italy when that thus brought to light in so far preferable to it, Italians America is preferring to submit to these hardships in addition to exile from their native land? The immigration, meantime, goes on, and this year over 50,000 more unfortunates have been expelled from their country to crowd these dens of the New York sweaters. What, then, we ask once more, must be the state of Italy under the reign of union and freedom and the improved conditions of the period?

THE COMING CHAMPION.

OUR only hope, meantime, for the annihilation of the sweating system lies in the working-men themselves. Not the working men of the Australasian Colonies, however, who seem unfortunately very unfitted for any task of the kind, and who, so far as they show any disposition to act in union at all, are apparently disposed to yield themselves up as blind and indiscriminating followers to leaders as blind and indiscriminating as themselves, and often to become the tools and dupes of men with the proverbial bee in their bonnets. Our hope is in the working-men of America. The old story tells us that, if the horse knew his own strength, man could never make a servant of him, and the working-man is something like the horse. Were he aware of his true standing-place and capable of making proper use of his powers, no abuse could affect his position. It is the signs that, in the United States, he is rapidly attaining to all he needs, that we hail as a token of progress and a hopeful earnest for the immediate future. The celebration which took place, for example, in all the great cities of the States on September 3, Labour Day, as they call