

Current Topics

Catholics and Crime

'Anonymous writing,' says Cardinal Manning, 'is a dangerous trade. Few men can resist the temptation to write under a mask things which they would not say with open face.' This is especially true of the anonymous accuser. He takes an 'alias' and dons the mask for a purpose—just as his confreres the burglar and the assassin do. And, like them, he prefers to rob and stab in the dark. The New Zealand Parliament expressed the general verdict of civilised society when, on October 5 of the past year, men of all political parties joined in applauding the Premier's statement that the human 'reptiles' who endeavor to shield themselves in writing anonymous charges against their fellow-men, are 'worse than assassins'. The notorious untrustworthiness and general mendacity of masked accusers are even recognised by the law of every civilised country; and the testimony of such witnesses would not be accepted by any court of justice in Christendom or pagandom, from Nome to the Bluff or from Tokyo both ways around to Timbuctoo.

From time to time during the past few years a little knot of men in saffron masks have been inflicting upon the Otago public sundry controversies on the allegedly high criminality, immorality, and general chuckle-headedness of 'Papists', and especially of Irish 'Papists'. These dull and vacuous discussions are (as we twice pointed out, in the columns of the secular press) plainly 'put-up jobs'. We have over and over again the same old style; the same old fallacies and 'faked' figures; the same droll claim to 'deep' and 'practical' expert knowledge of statistical science. We have, too, the same old clumsy and transparent tactics. If there is any risk of the controversy lapsing prematurely for lack of genuine opposition, 'Roman Catholic' or 'Colonial' sets up an opportune 'defence'—usually talking arrant nonsense that is palpably intended—after the fashion of the boy-talk in 'Sanford and Merton'—to afford one of his 'pals' an opportunity of emptying on the heads of a long-suffering public the festering contents of a controversial slop-barrel. In the general absence of a bona fide defence, the mock controversy normally terminates, with the wholesale charges already referred to, topped off with a whoop about Catholic women and the Liverpool prison statistics of the early eighties. Then the 'Colonial' or the bogus 'Roman Catholic' thanks the 'experts' for their enlightening information, acknowledges a change of heart, the 'opponents' shake hands all round, and—the curtain drops.

A controversy on this subject in our local morning contemporary is not, however, fated to end with the limelight blazing upon this happy tableau of 'doubters' converted and 'enemies' reconciled. One part of it reminds us that some time ago, in the course of a similar discussion, a masked man (presumably a member of the controversial syndicate) set forth to prove that the state of morality among Catholic women in Ireland is 'simply appalling.' For this purpose, he made a statement that we do not care to reproduce textually in these columns. In veiled substance, it amounted to this: that for many years the statistics (which he professed to quote) of certain institutions in Dublin and Cork disclosed the existence of an altogether 'appalling' amount of a nameless disease in the Catholic parts of Ireland. By copious official statistics, taken at first-hand, we were able to prove in the secular press and in our own columns that the story spun by that anonymous accuser was, through and through, a fabrication; that his figures were sheer inventions; that no such institution as stated exists in

Cork; and that (so far as actual comparative returns extending over a long period, showed) the record of Catholic Ireland is in this respect relatively immaculate. It is difficult to use eight-ounce gloves and soft phrases to the coarse-grained criminal who concocted this abominable calumny against that purity which (as even James Anthony Froude admitted) is one of the proudest glories of Irish Catholic womanhood. In one of his lectures (reported in the 'Times' of November 16, 1872) this bitter enemy of Irish Catholics felt compelled to say: 'in the last hundred years, at least, impurity had been almost unknown in Ireland. This absence of vulgar crime, and this exceptional delicacy and modesty of character, were due, to their everlasting honor, to the influence of the Catholic clergy.'

A lie of the whole cloth is, in all reason, had enough. But Tennyson has written

That a lie which is half a truth is ever the blackest of lies;

That a lie which is all a lie may be met and fought with outright,

But a lie which is part of a truth is a harder matter to fight'.

That is just what is the matter with the Liverpool and other 'statistics' which the 'experts' in figure manipulation have thrice inflicted upon the public for the purpose of 'establishing' the low morality of the 'Romish' Church. On a thin and rickety foundation of statistical fact they have piled up a cairn of false statement and illogical inference. The 'Catholic Times' has been quoted (at least in a former sham discussion) to 'prove' the assertion that the number of Catholics (alleged to be 13,876) who passed through the Liverpool prison some twenty-three years ago was altogether out of proportion to the population of that city. We would lay Lombard Street to a China orange that not one of the masked men—really quoted from the 'Catholic Times' either in this or in any other connection. In our last issue we quoted an editorial paragraph from the 'Catholic Times' of November 16, 1906, which credits the story as given above to a fanatical organisation which called itself the Protestant Press Bureau. Some time ago that association carried on in England a No-Popery campaign of extraordinary virulence. Such, in fact, was the deplorable indecency of the methods to which it resorted, that Mr. Edwin Charles (a non-Catholic writer, we think) declared in an Ilford paper that never, in the course of twenty-five years' experience as a journalist, had he seen the like of it for wilful misrepresentation and unblushing mendacity. The Bureau supplied ample justification for this grave indictment by (among other matters galore) its scandalous suppression of the following vital facts, which will bear republication in this connection: (1) Only a part of the alleged 'Roman Catholic' prisoners referred to were from Liverpool. Prisoners were sent to Liverpool from St. Helens, Widnes, Southport, Waterloo, Seaforth, Crosby, Ormskirk, Birkenhead, Liscard, and from Flint Borough and Flint County in Wales. (2) Over fifty per cent. of the alleged 'Roman Catholic' prisoners were petty offenders who were committed for less than a fortnight, mainly through inability to pay fines; thirty eight per cent. of them were imprisoned for a week or less; and only four per cent. of them had to serve sentences of three months or longer. These facts have been for some time before the New Zealand public. They amount to this: that there was hardly any serious crime among the alleged 'Roman Catholic' prisoners who went through the Liverpool gaol some three and twenty years ago. Jury-packing is supposed to be now restricted to one part of the Empire. But a still more violent and unconstitutional outrage against justice is the gagging of witnesses for the defence, or the suppression of their testimony. Why were the pertinent facts given above suppressed? Why was the evidence for the defence shut out? Why was the jury (the newspaper-reading public, to wit) invited to