

Current Topics

Colonel Lady Plunket

Her Excellency Lady Plunket has given a new and much-needed impetus to the volunteer movement in New Zealand. She holds the position of honorary colonel of the North Canterbury Mounted Rifles, and on last Saturday reviewed her men at Culverden—decked out in the graceful feminine version of the regimental uniform. War (as has been said or sung) taxes both sexes—it takes the blood of men and the tears of women. In the days of chivalry, the fair hands of gentle dames girded on the swords of the knights that went forth to do battle for faith or country. And in our day, when war means so much, a woman in the position of her Excellency does good and patriotic service in aiding, where and how she properly may, to have the manhood of the nation prepared to develop its utmost power of defence when the drums beat to battle and there's something heavier than atmosphere in the air. Happily, apart from what may be called the accidents of war, the blood of women has not often mingled with that of men where the front of battle lowered. Yet the fighting instinct is not wholly undeveloped in the sex that is called gentle. And more than once—as in the siege of Limerick—it has flared out to some purpose in conflicts in which religious freedom or national existence have been threatened, or in which (as during the Paris Commune in 1871) party passion rose to a high fever.

Scottish history presents at least one case in which a lady was made the colonel of fighting troops. We refer to the winsome Jennie Cameron, whom Bonnie Prince Charlie made colonel of the 250 sturdy claymore-fighters that she marched into the Stuart camp one fine day in the 'forty-five. Long before Jennie Cameron's day, Dame Nichola de Camville figured valiantly as a leader of men on 'the field of fame, fresh and gory'. She took the royal side in the war with the Barons and fought Lincoln Castle with skill and daring against Gilbert de Gaunt, first for King John, afterwards for Henry III. And more than once she verified the truth of the lines in 'Hudibras':—

'Women, you know, do seldom fail
To make the stoutest men turn tail':

Another Lady Valiant was the beautiful Countess of Salisbury. A hundred years later, and we come across the humble village maiden, Joan of Arc, the peerless queen of all women who drew the sword in defence of fatherland. She stands on a pedestal of honor, serene, unique, and all alone—this sainted Maiden of Orleans, the liberator of France. Even the glowing East has not been without a blue-blood heroine of war, despite the soft ease and the guarded retirement in which its upper-class womanhood is nurtured. We are now nearing the golden jubilee of the passing of the Ranee (Princess) of Jhansi, who led a brief but strenuous military life as a cavalry officer in the Indian Mutiny. For several months after the fall of Delhi she handled squadrons of dashing cavalry in the field against the British, wielded in hand-to-hand conflicts the carved blade of a razor-edged sword, and led charge after charge in right gallant fashion in the hard-fought battle of Gwalior. There she fell, at the head of her men, 'with enough wounds in front', says Justin McCarthy, 'to have done credit to any hero'. She had met a foeman worthy of her steel. Her generous victor was Sir Hugh Rose, and he said in his General Order to the troops after the battle that 'the best man upon the side of the enemy was the woman found dead, the Ranee of Jhansi'. We hope the day is far distant indeed when even the manhood of New Zealand may have to stand embattled against a foreign foe for the defence of their country. But we think it a happy circumstance that, at a moment when

the ever-present need of preparedness for such an emergency is too much lost sight of in the eager rush of 'getting on', a lady should be found capable of reading to the country one of the warning lessons of the Sybil-line Books.

A Little Centenary

Of the holding of centenaries there is no end. The latest announced is the approaching fourth centenary of the modern dinner-fork, which (we learn) is to be quietly celebrated towards the close of the present year by disciples of Brillat-Savarin here and there and by 'all others that (as Mrs. Gamp remarks) are 'so dispooped'. The second volume of Chambers' 'Book of Days' gives (p. 573) some curious particulars of the origin of this useful substitute for the fingers at what Meredith calls 'the blessed hour of dinner'. The fork has long since figured so largely as a household necessary that we can hardly realise that it was a rarity in England just introduced by a few 'spruce gallants', when Heylin wrote his 'Cosmography' in 1652. About the close of the same century, the English traveller, Coryate, found them in Italy. 'The Italian', said he, 'cannot by any means endure to have his dish touched with fingers, seeing all men's fingers are not alike clean'. Hence they used 'little forks' made of iron, steel, or silver—a practice which Coryate brought back with him to England and recommended to his countrymen. The use of the fork did not, however, become general in England till about the close of the seventeenth century. Nowadays the 'little fork' is one of the outward signs that distinguish white civilisation from the outer barbarism of chop-sticks and of the literal 'finger in the pie' or on the roast. Many years ago (so runneth a story in point) an island missionary conveyed this idea after a fashion of his own. He wrote in the course of a report of his work among the untutored Polynesian savage: 'I much regret that my flock is still addicted to cannibalism, but, thanks to my example and precept, they are become so far civilised that the use of knives and forks is becoming quite common'.

'Honor, Loyalty,' etc.

Mr. Clemenceau, the Premier of France (so runs a cable-message in last week's papers) has been delivering a patriotic speech at Amiens 'against the parri-cidal anti-militarists and anti-nationalists', and appealing to 'all true Frenchmen' for 'a sounding faith in the ideals of honor, loyalty, and national strength'.

At a time when blood flowed like water in the Coliseum, and thousands were 'butchered to make a Roman holiday', the old pagan Senate of the Empire enacted that mattresses should be provided for the rope-dancers, in order to save their bones from the risk of fracture and their epidermis from abrasion. Mr. Clemenceau is acting with even greater inconsistency. After an act of national repudiation of a great national obligation, he dares to appeal to the honor of 'true Frenchmen'; in the midst of a campaign of unconstitutional plunder and proscription, he has the courage to invoke the 'loyalty' of the people to constituted authority; and he talks of 'national strength' after having thrown down the apple of bitter social discord, and set himself, with his other aggressively atheistic ministerial confederates, to extinguish the light of heaven in France and to wipe out of the heart of the nation the knowledge and love and fear of God that are not alone the highest wisdom, but the best safeguard of a nation. But

'Evil on itself shall back recoil'.

And the fierce extreme Socialist anti-militarism and anti-nationalism that now menace France, are—like the reinforced wave of hoodiganism and juvenile and adult crime—merely a symptom of the fell disease with which the long campaign of official atheism has infected