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Current Topics

AT HOME AND ABROAD.

'CIVIS'
AND THE
CATHOLICS OF
NEW ZEALAND.

BOSWELL reports Dr. Johnson as saying: 'I have no more pleasure in hearing a man attempting wit, and failing, than in seeing a man trying to leap over a ditch, and falling in.' 'Civis,' who writes—or is supposed to write—the 'Passing Notes' in each Saturday's issue of the *Otago Daily Times*, 'falls in' every time with the monotonous regularity of the unsteady knight in Alice's tour through Looking-glass Land. He furnishes a melancholy example to disabuse the minds of budding journalists who fancy that native wit need not grow like the finger-tips, but may be acquired, like a knowledge of history, by study, or, like a Highland fling, by practice. Like some scores of our Catholic and non-Catholic acquaintances, we have long since given up as a weariness of spirit the perusal of 'Civis's' melancholy attempts to manufacture watery wit, and his acres of words, words, words, that cover up a puerile fancy like the endless wrappings of old newspaper which envelop an empty match-box or a bent hair-pin in the 'fish-pond' of a charity bazaar—but with this difference: that you are sometimes in luck at the 'fish pond' and haul up a wax doll or a pocket-slate or a three-penny cigar. We do not dip in 'Civis's' 'fish-pond' now. Like so many others we have long since found his 'prizes' to consist, week after week, of a monotonous and almost unbroken series of empty verbal wrappings. We peruse some of his paragraphs only when, at long intervals, our attention is specially directed to them by some leisured friend who is not particular about his reading matter. And we are on such occasions chiefly struck by the growing fatuity of 'Passing Notes.' There is a demand for the light and airy treatment of current subjects in Saturday papers. If well served up, such themes as the 'Passing Notes' might be as whipped cream or freshly-opened champagne to a newspaper feast of solid matter. James Payn, 'Oriol' of the Melbourne *Argus*, the 'Linkman' in *Truth*, and the 'Flaneur' of the Sydney *Freeman* are (or were) all readable and interesting in a bright and chirrupy way. 'Civis' is, in more senses than one, a distant imitator of them. But by comparison with them he is what a clothes-horse is to 'Carbine' or a wash-tub to a warship. We like fooling—when it is clever fooling. There was a time when 'Civis' could get off, once a quarter and in fine weather, what Artemus Ward would call a 'goak' of a more or less cheerful or more or less melancholy kind. The aching intervals between were filled in with an occasional 'chestnut,' an occasional verbal transcript taken (without acknowledgment) from 'Oriol' of the Melbourne *Argus*, occasional paragraphs supplied by obliging wits or would-be wits from outside Dunedin, and, for the rest—general vacuity. It probably suits some people—the guardians of the city and suburban perambulators, for instance. But 'for people that like that sort of thing, it is just the sort of thing they like.'

'Civis' is perfectly welcome to the utmost degree of dulness that he can compress into his weekly nonsense-talk. He would receive no notice in this quarter did he not, for 'divarshun' or with malice prepense, throw stones occasionally through our window. His latest fling is about the election campaign, which is now in full blast. The *Otago Daily Times* 'Civis's' employer—is, for reasons which do not concern us, strongly anti-Seddonite. We hold no brief for Mr. Seddon, but we may express our conviction that, even as newspapers go, the *Times* is not an over-scrupulous fighter. Yet there are some things that the *Times* or any reputable paper in the Colony, would hesitate to do, even in the full fury of an electoral campaign. One of these is, to directly and editorially raise sectarian passion and utilise it for the benefit of a political party. Such an expedient is to a political campaign what the poisoning of wells and the use of explosive bullets would be in military operations. Such methods of electioneering are left

by reputable journals to the oath-bound fanatics of the Orange lodges. But there are three well-known ways of driving a coach-and-four through this elementary law of journalistic honour. They are as follow, and are used separately or jointly as the editorial judgment or the circumstances of the campaign may dictate: (1) The repeated publication of reprint matter—extracts, cuttings, etc.—calculated to arouse sectarian passion and direct it along the desired course. (2) Another method is to open the columns of the paper to correspondence along the proper channel. Such correspondence frequently, if not usually, originates with, and is kept up by, persons connected with the newspaper office itself. It is for the most part anonymous, and uniformly abusive and exaggerated. Replies may or may not come to hand. Effective replies, unless coming from persons of some note or position, are frequently either thrown into the waste-paper basket or published in a form so mutilated that their value is destroyed. In order to give an excuse for the prolongation of the correspondence, weak, wishy-washy 'replies' are, in case of need, concocted, frequently at the newspaper office, and published anonymously or over bogus names; or semi-illiterate effusions, coming nominally or really from some indignant but well-meaning 'domestic help,' are selected for their sublime worthlessness and inserted as the best and only reply the 'other side' can make. (3) The third method of raising the sectarian demon non-editorially is to utilise the services of what we may call the 'free-lance' department, where it exists. 'Civis' is the 'free-lance' of the *Otago Daily Times*. Cheap writers of this class have definite and well-recognised functions in the secular Press of our day. Ideally, their office would be that of wits at a brilliant literary gathering. But the ideal condition is very seldom attained on provincial papers; for wits come only a few in a century. Like true poets, they are born, not made, and they usually gravitate to the capitals. The actual function of the cheap free-lance writers referred to above is the same in principle as that of the court-fools of medieval days: (a) to tickle the crowd with quips and jokes and verbal antics (if they can); and (b) to yell out the political innuendoes and personalities which the canons of journalistic honour and dignity and prudence forbid a reputable paper giving expression to editorially. Briefly, they do their newspapers' swearing and cursing and 'language' in election campaigns, and spend the rest of their time earning an honest livelihood by tickling the jawbones of yokels with an oaten straw.

Now, the *Otago Daily Times* has, within the limitations mentioned, raised the sectarian cry as part of its electoral plan of campaign. (1) It has not published reprint matter of the kind indicated, for the simple reason that none was available. (2) It has, however, given full scope to anonymous and other correspondence denouncing the Catholics in exaggerated terms for their alleged relative numerical superiority in certain branches of the Public Service of the Colony. A perusal of those productions will serve to throw grave suspicion upon the *bona fides* of a great part of the correspondence. (3) And now 'Civis' has taken up the task and with his cap awry and his bells a-jingle gets off some remarks anent Catholics and the general elections which the editorial columns would not carry. Stripped of their wrappings of redundant phrase, the following are 'Civis's' remarks:—

There is another matter of practical and pressing interest upon which, were it possible, I should very much like to confess the *TABLET* editor. Is it understood that throughout New Zealand Roman Catholics will vote for the Government candidates? . . . Does an understanding exist between certain high contracting parties that Roman Catholics, as far as their ecclesiastical authorities can influence them, shall be influenced to vote for Government candidates? . . . If such an understanding exists, the rest of us would like to know it. And that's where, I am afraid, we shall come short! But, failing authoritative information, we shall be able, putting two and two together, to form for ourselves a pretty accurate judgment. There is just one other question: Supposing that Roman Catholics generally are going to vote for the Government, what is the inducement? What is the Government going to do for them in return? These are questions upon which electors of all parties may with advantage chew the cud of reflection.

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