

Current Topics

The Holidays

It took a heavy toll in human life 'to make a Roman holiday' in the old pagan days of the gladiatorial show. Even in our time, the Fourth of July celebrations in the United States cause a mortality that easily outrivals that of one of the 'great' battles of the South African war. We in New Zealand do not take our holidays so sanguinarily. And yet (according to the press reports) the boat that is loaded, and the gun that is not, continue to be about as deadly as ever they were.

'Birreligion'

The new 'unsectarian' school religion manufactured by Mr. Birrell has been squeezed to death by the House of Lords. When it was first broached, it was greeted with the following skit in an English contemporary :-

'Let Irreligion hide its head
And Birreligion reign instead!
'Twas thus the Commons raised the cry;
Religion heard, and heaved a sigh.'

The strong opposition aroused in England by Mr. Birrell's Education Bill was a protest against the principle of forcing upon people a manufactured creed which was not acceptable to their religious convictions. It seems strange that the Imperial Parliament should try to deprive Christians in England of the denominational rights in education which it confers as a matter of course upon Hindus in India and upon Mahomedans in the Soudan. It looks as if the American 'pious editor' is not the only one who believes in freedom's cause—provided it be 'ez far away ez Payris' is.

Carnegie Libraries

Mr. Carnegie has been dropping free public libraries with generous promiscuity throughout the English-speaking world, from Thurso to Dunedin. A note of warning raised by us some years ago in regard to these benefactions has found an echo in a recent letter by Cardinal Logue. Such libraries (he says) might be made most useful institutions; but they may also become 'a very great danger if not kept under the strictest supervision'. They may easily (he adds) be made the medium for the distribution of anti-Christian, immoral, or doubtfully moral literature. And if such productions 'fall into the hands of ignorant or half-educated people, we should soon have conditions as to faith and morality which now exist in France, or perhaps nearer home.' In those libraries 'the great run', says the Cardinal, 'is on works of fiction which are neither educational nor improving, if not positively injurious and corrupting.'

This is also the general experience of towns in Australasia that possess circulating libraries. In February of the past year, the scholarly and cultivated vice-president of the Dunedin Athenaeum (Mr. Whitson) showed by actual returns that the habitues of that library (who are no exception to the general rule) indulge almost exclusively in fiction, and for the greater part in fiction that is mere mental hasheesh—the sort of thing that Samuel Smiles describes as 'intellectual dram-drinking, imparting a grateful excitement for the moment, without the slightest effect in improving or enriching the mind or building up character'. 'During four months', said Mr. Whitson, 'out of a total circulation of 22,716 books, 20,261 were novels'. 'And I am sorry to say', added he, 'that the quality of some books which are in very great demand is of the poorest.' The best writers of fiction are left in comparative neglect. So are works on science and 'belles lettres'. And, speaking generally, 'compared with fic-

tion, the circulation of books in other departments of literature is productive of sorrowful reflections.' The need of our time is not so much more readers as better readers. As matters stand, it seems that our public circulating libraries are more of a calamity than a blessing to the community. And, judging by the general experience, Carnegie's benefactions are very likely to be in part expended in packing library shelves with namby-pamby and sensational fifth-rate or tenth-rate fiction—with yellow-backed agonies brimful of intrigue, mystery, and blood.

Of the two kinds of romance that seem to be most in demand, Dr. Pryde says: 'If they are namby-pamby, reading them is like sipping jelly-water; if they are sensational, they are like Mrs. Squeers' posset of brimstone and treacle. In both cases they destroy the mental appetite and make it loathe all solid food'. The great mass of the novel-reading public are finical about their tea and beer and beef and tobacco. But they seem to have no standard by which to judge of the quality of the printed stuff on which they gorge. For many of them, novel-reading is not so much a recreation as a passion—something akin to the taste of toppers for fiery waters, and of Anglo-Indians for red-hot condiments. Mr. Carnegie would have enormously enhanced the value of his gifts, and gone far towards preventing their commonest and most obvious abuse, had he made some effective provision against converting the new libraries into distributing centres for rubbishy fiction—and little more. We have said full many a time that one of the pressing needs of our day is the cultivation of a conscience in regard to printed matter; and, after that, a 'professor of books', to guide our reading along paths that shall be safe and pleasant and profitable. Had Mr. Carnegie only thought of supplying the professorship of books—that is, skilled and judicious supervision in their choice—he would have done much towards supplying the other and primary need, that of gradually establishing an improved conscience in the matter of reading.

'Unblushing Mendacity'

Disraeli once said in the House of Commons, in the course of a speech on the Sugar Duties: 'Figures are not party men. You may cross the House, but you cannot convert 15,000 tons into 20,000.' All this is very true of honest figures honestly treated. But figure-facts are no more proof than are other facts against the ways and wiles of the fact-manipulator. And his treatment of them from time to time gives a point to the sarcastic degrees of comparison: lies, thumping lies, statistics. In our issue of September 20 of the past year we gave a detailed exposure of a series of 'doctored' statistics that were published by anonymous writers—acting apparently in concert—in several newspapers throughout New Zealand. The figures purported to have been taken from the Liverpool 'Catholic Times,' and their ostensible object was to 'demonstrate' the high criminality and general chuckle-headedness of adherents of the 'Romish' Church. The 'proof' was an assertion professing to show that, according to the Catholic organ mentioned above, the number of 'Papists' who passed through the Liverpool prison in 1884 was 'out of all proportion to the Roman Catholic population of that city'. And the 'argument' was clinched with the smug observation: 'By their fruits ye shall know them.'

Referring to our exposure of the 'faked' figures regarding the Liverpool prison, the 'Catholic Times' of November 16, 1906, says: 'Our New Zealand contemporary points out—what had not been stated—that Catholic prisoners are sent to Liverpool from St. Helens, Widnes, Southport, Waterloo, Seaforth, Crosby, Ormskirk, Birkenhead, and Liscard, and Flint borough and County in Wales; that over fifty per cent. of the