

## Current Topics

### A History of the 'Chain-prayer'

Some time ago we more than hinted our suspicion that the author, as well as the distributors, of the 'chain-prayer' infiction, belongs to the class to which Irish politeness applies the gentle term 'innocent,' and which an Arabic euphemism designates by the phrase: 'Allah is with him!' In ruder phrase, we opined that the author of that piece of folly belonged to the ancient order of the rantipole or mooncalf. Our Presbyterian contemporary, the *Outlook*, has recently had occasion to warn its readers against the 'chain' folly. And in its issue of January 9 our esteemed contemporary prints, on the authority of a Wellington correspondent, a story of the origin of the nuisance which, if true, amply bears out the judgment that was reached by us on the internal evidence of the prayer and its accompaniment of superstitious and preposterous directions. 'In a certain English family of good social position,' says the *Outlook* correspondent, 'one of the daughters was afflicted with insanity, and was tenderly cared for at home. Her mania developed a religious form, and she was continually writing incoherent letters to friends and others, concerning their spiritual condition, which letters were, of course, destroyed without her knowledge. One day she was observed to be unusually busy, writing some twenty or thirty, and her family discovered later, to their dismay, that she had succeeded in getting them into the post. The matter caused them much anxiety, and inquiry afterwards proved that these letters were the first of the celebrated "chain," the later links of which have become so familiar; and when the subject became a matter of public discussion, they thought it right to make the facts known. In its original form, this dictatorial document shows, one would think, sufficient evidence of mental aberration on the part of the writer, but instead of rejecting it on that account, many people obey its injunction, merely toning it down. I have had copies sent to me at various times, both complete and "sub-edited." People, presumably sane, who unquestionably accept the guidance of an anonymous lunatic should be ashamed of themselves.'

### Catholic Missionaries

In a recent issue we quoted the high encomiums which an Ulster Protestant, Sir Robert Hart, the veteran director of the Chinese customs, paid to the zeal and devotion and success of Catholic missionaries in the Hwa Kwo or Flowery Kingdom. The *S.H. Review*, in a recent issue, cites an almost equally laudatory notice of the Jesuit missionaries in China, from a Protestant clergyman lately returned from the Distant East. After having described the famous Jesuit observatory of Sicaivei, near Shanghai (which issues the keenly watched daily weather-bulletins for the stormy eastern seas and regulates the time of the Chinese Empire), the clergyman referred to says: 'Catholic priests and the Jesuits, especially, whom I have had an opportunity of studying at close range, are doing magnificent work among the natives. The technical schools, where the boys are taught printing, carpentry, and other useful trades, are conducted on practical lines, and are a tribute to the self-sacrifice and earnest zeal of the Jesuits.'

### Bolivia Again

In our last issue we dealt with 'a fairy-tale of a far-off land'—to wit, Bolivia. This time the fairy-tale belonged to the sub-variety known to smiling travellers in East and West as the 'missionary tale.' It was told by a good missionary who was touring New Zealand to 'scare up' funds for the purpose of enabling him to overlay with doctrinal vagueness their doctrinal clearness, and to substitute for their religious unity and peace the beginnings of the jarring dissensions and strife which have made Christianity a laughing-stock to the heathen. The particular tale dealt with by us in our last issue was this: that Popery had never so much as lifted its finger for the education of the Indian native race in Bolivia. The Franciscans of the South were, in this connection, selected for specially dishonorable mention. They had not (we were told) opened a solitary school for Indians, and their sole work among the tribesfolk was to turn the Noble Red Man of Bolivia into a first-class horse and cattle thief! Only that and nothing more! We quoted at the time from several statistical and other publications, from the testimony of Protestant ranchers, and even from a statement in *Missionary Pioneering in Bolivia* (written by two confrères of Mr. Allan, the missionary referred to in this paragraph) that the Indian school is a long established

method of the Franciscan Indian missions in Argentina and Bolivia. We quoted the *Prensa*, of Buenos Aires, which testified that the Franciscan friar, and not the soldier, is the true civiliser of the wild and dangerous tribes of the Gran Chaco. Further information, showing the constant use made of schools by those zealous and successful Catholic missionaries may be found in Father José Cardus's work, *Las Misiones Franciscanas en Bolivia*. We might mention the Franciscan colleges at Tarija, Potosi, and Tarata—all in the southern missionary region. And, finally, we might quote the following extract from an article on 'Los Guayaros de Bolivia' in vol. iii., numbers 5-6, 1908, of the international anthropological journal *Anthropos* (published in Vienna): The Guayaros were civilised and christianised by the Franciscans, and the school was one of the means used by the Fathers for this purpose. Here is a purely incidental mention (p. 887), of the Indian school from the article in question, which, by the way, was written by one of the Franciscans on the Indian mission among the Guayaros: '*Hace pocos meses, me divertia en enseñar á los niños de la escuela el melancólico canto que se titula "la paraguaya"* . . . And so on. Which, being interpreted, meaneth: 'Some months ago I was amusing myself by teaching the children of the school the doleful song entitled "La Paraguaya"' ('the Paraguayan'). The writer then proceeds: 'The neophytes, attracted by the novelty of the rhythm and of the melody, asked me the name of the song. "La Paraguaya," said I. "Yes," they replied, "the Paraguayans are our ancestors."'

### More About 'Spirit Photography'

Spiritism offers a small amount of bread to an intolerable deal of sack—a minute quantum of real phenomena to a mountain of conscious deception, unconscious illusion, and errors of inference or of observation. In our articles on the subject (in 1907, and in our issues of December 10, December 17, and January 7) we have, however, confined ourselves to two phases of this queer superstition—namely, to professional mediums as a class, and to a few of the classes of physical phenomena produced by them. We ask our readers to bear this well in mind, and not to draw unwarranted conclusions from our occasional omission of the word 'professional' in the course of articles which were intended to deal with that class alone. In like manner, we trust that our references to the physical phenomena will be read as applying to these alone. We have not yet touched upon the non-professional mediumism, nor upon the non-mediumistic phenomena of spiritism. We may have something to say about these at a later stage—pointing out the very few and rare phases of their manifestations that, in our opinion, do not admit of natural explanation. We touch a different phase of the subject from that of the professional charlatan and his clumsy or clever 'manifestations,' when we come to (say) the 'magnetic' somnambule, the medium with whom the greed of gold is not a motive of fraud, and the so-called clairvoyant who drops off spontaneously, on slight provocation, into a state of trance. Some of these offer curious problems for the psychologist as well as for the physician and for the investigator of spiritism. But this is a question into which it is not our purpose to enter here. Let it suffice to remark here that (as Podmore shows in his *Modern Spiritualism*, 1902, vol. ii., pp. 290-2) a number of these mediums were of a distinctly neurotic, degenerate, or other pathological type—some of them victims of physical abnormality, sexual aberration, or hystero-epilepsy; that there is a 'notorious prevalence of the drink habit amongst mediums'; that, 'as the [spiritistic] movement progressed, there was a very large admixture of deliberate and apparently healthy knavery' among private mediums; that 'again and again we find persons, removed by education and social position from the ordinary temptations to fraud, who are engaged in the production of physical manifestations involving elaborate and systematic fraud.' This phase of the subject makes a curious study for the moralist, as do some few of its phenomena for the student of the spiritistic cult. But here, for the present, we make our bow to it with an 'au revoir'—perhaps.

We now return à nos moutons—to the physical phenomena of so-called 'spirit photography.' In our last issue we gave the reader a general idea of the wiles and artifices of this tricky and (to many) impressive manifestation of spiritist phenomena. But our three pages of condensed exposition necessarily left untouched the manner in which the too eager and credulous vision of the sitter is led at times to play unconsciously into the hands of the photographic medium. We pointed out in our last issue that the 'spooks' or 'spirit forms' that are made (by double exposure, the use of fluorescent substances, and other mediumistic stratagems) to 'materialise' beside or

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