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Current Topics

AT HOME AND ABROAD.

A CATHOLIC INVENTION.

THE writers of popular history, like writers of what is called 'popular science,' often need either to mend their education or amend their moral code. A writer in the latest issue of *Cassell's Magazine* helps to give a further lease of life to the good old fiction that the first successful application of coal-gas was the work of William Murdock, who lighted his house with the new illuminant in 1792. Murdock was not, however, as *Cassell's* says, 'the father of gas-lighting.' A record in the great Catholic University of Louvain (Belgium) shows that one of its professors, Jean Pierre Minkelers, had made use of coal-gas to light up his lecture-room in 1784, eight years before the clever Ayrshireman had made his successful experiment. Dr. Zahm says: 'To this same professor is also due the first application of coal-gas to balloons—the invention of two Frenchmen, Stephen and Joseph Montgolfier—although the credit of it is usually given to the English aeronaut Green.' Nearly two years ago the *Stonyhurst Magazine* published the following literal translation of a paragraph that had appeared in a German newspaper, the *Neue Augsburger Zeitung*: 'Who invented lighting by gas? The answer is—pray don't be alarmed!—the Jesuits. How did it come about? During the last century the Jesuits were expelled from England. They met with hospitable reception in France; but when the Revolution had broken out there, they were forced in 1794 to leave. Now they once more found an asylum in England, and since the English were great opponents of the Revolution, the Jesuits were allowed to settle down again. They very soon erected a large educational establishment, and before very long they had a number of pupils about them. At their place, Stonyhurst, a royal castle, had become very extensive, and required a great deal to light it up, they made attempts to extract gas from coal, in order to burn it instead of oil and candles, and thus practise more economy. The experiment succeeded. Lighting by gas was now introduced, and it rendered excellent service. This discovery excited great astonishment on all sides. In the year 1815 the Jesuit Father Dunn founded the first gas company in Preston, a considerable commercial and manufacturing town. The portrait of this Jesuit was hung up in the Town Hall as a memorial.'

CATHOLICS SAVE THE TAXES.

HERE in New Zealand the Catholic body, by supporting their own schools, lighten the burden of the sometimes not over-grateful tax-payers by some £60,000 a year. In New York our fellow-Catholics save the public pocket by even a vastly greater sum. In the five boroughs that constitute Greater New York there are 175 Catholic schools, with an average attendance of 70,187. Now it appears from the Education Board's official returns that every budding American citizen that attends the public schools costs the city treasury 32 dollars. New York is thus saved about 2,263,064 dollars (over £453,600) through Catholics supporting their own schools. 'To this,' says an American contemporary, 'may also be added the cost of the school buildings, some of which are model educational institutions, and cost for construction from 10,000 dollars [about £2000] to 100,000 dollars, without the price paid for the ground on which they are built. An average of about 30,000 dollars would place the value of the buildings at about 4,000,000 dollars. This, added to the cost of education as fixed by the local Board, would amount to over 6,000,000 dollars [about £1,200,000]—money that comes out of the pockets of about one-third of the population and is saved by the city treasury.'

IS SHE DECAYING?

SOMEBODY has said that the man who cannot do the *pons asinorum* or spell *phthisis* never undertakes to reform Euclid or Noah Webster. But there are three things that a good many men can do, without the burden of acquiring previous knowledge or experience: they

can tell an editor exactly how to conduct a paper, a general how to conduct a campaign, and the Pope how to rule the Church. Every country has its few scattered individual Catholics who are hard critics, who know more of ecclesiastical polity and discipline than the Pope, who are more infallible than he, who find the Church—on its administrative side chiefly—a bit awry and lopsided, and whose advice alone is needed to set things plumb and perpendicular again. Indeed, almost every parish has one or two of those inerrant growlers. And be it noted that the man who year in year out cultivates the habit of finding fault with the priest in his pulpit or the bishop in his chair or the Pope on his throne is not far off from a disposition to find a sense of irritation in their doctrine and authority also. England, like other countries, has produced a few of those hypercritical Catholics. We do not refer here to the notorious varlet who, not being a Catholic, yet assumes the title 'Catholicus,' and from behind the breastwork of his anonymity fires his rusty old blunderbuss at the Pope and the College of Cardinals. A century ago, according to Mr. Ward, in the *Spectator*, 'there were a number of those free lances in the Catholic Committee and the Cisalpine Club, declared enemies of their ecclesiastical superiors, fierce denouncers of the Roman Curia and of the tyranny of the Papal system. But Pius VI. and Pius VII., Bishop Milne and Bishop Douglas, have not been considered to be spiritually inferior to their accusers.' Some 30 years ago a Catholic—according to the same authority—wrote in the *Home and Foreign Review* contrasting 'Catholic' with 'Christian' morality. And recently Doctor Mivart allowed his strong prejudices in the Dreyfus case to so warp his judgment and his view of straightforward fact as to lead him to attack the Church of France and the Holy See, and to find in the verdict of Rennes, in which no member of his creed was concerned, an evidence of the decadence of the Catholic Church!

A correspondent of ours is much exercised over this. But he may possess his soul in peace. These are but the passing anger and disappointments of a disaffected few. People make haste to forget them as they have forgotten the tirades of the extremists of the Catholic Committee and the Cisalpine Club, and of the writer in the *Home and Foreign Review* of the sixties. Mr. Wilfrid Ward was, we believe, a strong Dreyfusard, but he knew his facts too well and was too cool and level-headed to make the Rennes verdict an excuse for attacking the Catholic Church. In the course of a letter to the *Spectator* he says:—

Such sweeping statements must be rejected, even by the most indignant Dreyfusards, if they care to see facts as they are. We may detest the language of *La Croix*, we may deeply regret the attitude of many French clericals, but none the less we must see in that attitude the sign, not of a decaying Church, but of a deep and blinding party prejudice. When Englishmen believed in the Titus Oates plot—for which so many innocent men suffered death—when the fire of London was, in a public inscription, ascribed to the English 'Papists,' England was not a decadent nation. But men, in other matters upright and honourable, were victims of a culpable, though apparently almost irresistible, party prejudice. They deserved reprobation for their flagrant injustice in these specified instances. But they are not simply bad or unjust men. Nor was the nation in 'peril' from its general corruption and degradation. And the case is similar now, in the eyes of impartial observers, with regard to those French churchmen who have approved the Rennes verdict.

The man who goes in search of the decadence of the Catholic Church must seek it with a compound microscope. The Church is not a national institution. It is universal. There may be a decline of fervour in this country or that. Nations may even fall away, and have fallen away, from the centre of the Church's unity, as happened to England, Scotland, Scandinavia, and a part of Germany and Switzerland in the sixteenth century. But the Church is indestructible as well as universal, and despite these temporary checks she still went marching grandly on. The numerical losses which she sustained in Europe in the days of the Reformation were fully compensated by the wondrous successes of the missionary enterprises in Ceylon, India, Japan, and those new countries

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