

Passing Notes.

BY JACQUES.

Laugh where we must, be candid where we can.—Pope.

Beecham has come a cropper over his operatic venture. A Beecham spill, as it were.

A woman dropped dead in a northern shop a few days ago. Possibly she had just been told some of the latest prices.

More newspaper arithmetic. According to the "News" the expenditure in connection with Prince Charming's recent visit to Invercargill was £10,962 4s 8d; various receipts, £1631 1s 5d; Dr. balance, £365.

Another instance from the same. An aeroplane, carrying a pilot and five passengers nose-dived to the ground. "Four were killed," and the only survivor terribly injured. Perhaps the pilot didn't count.

The "Otago Daily Times"—possibly as an indication of its opinion of things Irish—always spells the famous hunger-striker's name "McSwiney." On his present dietary (water, carbonate of soda, etc.), however, he cannot be considered as much of a hog.

A sewing machine man was recently picked up at Auckland in a badly battered and insensible condition. The case is most mysterious. If it had been an insurance agent, tax collector, or book fiend we could have understood it.

Bill, my next-door neighbour, has not much in the way of looks to thank Providence for. About five feet high and the same around, with a bald head, red face, and promiscuous sort of whiskers, but a good fellow withal. He has many troubles, which he unfailingly brings to me—when I am not successful in dodging him. Last Sunday he captured me in my garden. I noted his gloomy face with apprehension, but there was no escape, so I set my teeth and prepared to endure. For a few minutes he smoked in moody silence, and then suddenly opened out: "Look 'ere, Jax, I'm about fed up with them blanky picture shows. Tell yeh 'ow it is. At one time me an' the old woman used to get on well together. I useter think a lot of 'er—an' so I do still—an' I know she looked on me as pretty passable as an 'usband an' a father. In those days things was rather tight, so we didn't bother the picture shows much. But since I got me rise an' bonus, and things 'ave been a bit easier like, the old woman's taken to goin' to the pictures about twice a week or so. I don't mind that in itself—I like to see 'er enjoyin' 'erself, an' I can afford the expense now. But what riles me is the 'igh-fainged notions she's gettin' through seein', too much of those blanky picture stars, with their nice clean looks an' smart clothes. She looks dissatisfied with me now, an' though she don't say very much, I know she's always wonderin' why I'm not a cross between Francis Bushman an' Douglas Fairbanks, with a dash of Tom Mix or Bill Hart thrown in. Dammit, I tell 'er I can't 'elp being short an' fat (I've no delusions about myself), but it's no uster try an' reason with a woman. She seems some'ow to think I'm to blame for bein' me, an' not one of those long-legged, curly-headed, clean-shaved tykes on the screen. An' the way she sniffs at my dangerees—the good honest dungarees that I earn 'er and the kiddies' bread an' butter in is enough to break a fellow's 'eart. Thinks I ought to 'ave a swallow-tailed coat and a white shirt front the size of a Union Jack. An' she's always grumblin' because we 'aven't got a motor car, an' lots of other things. Oh, hell, Jax, those pictures 'ave got me wet." I understood, and tried to cheer him up, but he moved off, dejected and disconsolate.

It would seem that on the butter question, as on so many others, Labour does not know exactly what it wants, but is determined to get it. In a recent report of the proceedings of the Butter Prices Committee, among those invited to give evidence and suggestions, the New Zealand Alliance of Labour stated darkly that they did not consider the time yet ripe for action. Nor did they give any hint as to when that same unripe time would be ready for plucking. The Wel-

lington Trades and Labour Council was in favour of the farmers having free right to export and to raise local prices as high as may be, provided (oh, glorious merry-go-round!) the wages of the workers were raised commensurately. To this view the Canterbury Trades and Labour Council is stubbornly opposed. Whatever prices ruled in other world markets, on no account should they be allowed to levitate here. It did not show that it had any clear idea as to how that undesirable probability was to be prevented, though it seemed to think that something might be done by "dealing it out" as solidly as possible to land agents. Truly, they have some clear thinkers in the Labour Parties—only somehow they persist in thinking clearly along widely different and divergent lines. And "who shall decide when doctors disagree."

I see that the editor of this paper has issued his fiat—in future no letter to him (as editor) must exceed three hundred words. I doubt the wisdom of his decision, and hope that he will reconsider it. One of the most useful and attractive features of the modern newspaper is its correspondence column; as a vehicle for the ventilation of wrongs, the spread of information, and the interchange of ideas it is without peer. And there is no question that many of the contributions appearing therein often reach a high level of literary excellence. To compel the compression of every letter to within the compass of three hundred words will be to largely destroy its possible literary quality and argumentative force. One cannot get much of either into such a brief screed. Of course our editor's object is to curb prolixity. But (provided that the subject under discussion is of sufficient general interest and unnecessary repetition is avoided) is prolixity, after all, always undesirable? It is a quality that enters largely into some of our finest literature; Dickens, Scott, Thackeray, Goldsmith, Sterne, and many other of our foremost writers were very prolix, judged by present-day tabloid standards. Yet, strip the works of, say, Dickens of their unnecessary verbiage and you lose most of their charm. The plot, the incidents—all of the essentials of the story are there, but, shorn of their beautiful wordy raiment, their stark nakedness has little of attraction for us. So with our newspaper correspondence. The very way in which a letter is worded will often command more interest than even the theme itself. Moreover a little latitude in the matter of space gives a controversialist a better chance to avoid that seeming of offence that the necessarily abrupt tone of a briefer epistle might convey. It is much pleasanter for all concerned when the editor gives one sufficient space to dub one's opponent's statements "terminological inexactitudes" instead of "d—d lies."

It must not be assumed from the foregoing that I deny brevity its full share of merit. Brevity is something more than the soul of wit; there are times and circumstances when it rises to an exalted place among the virtues, and others in which it represents the highest form of wisdom. "Git!" said the Yankee householder, as he rammed his revolver in the face of the burglar. "You bet!" replied the burglar—and "got." Now this conversation was quite complete; to have enlarged it would have been "wasteful and ridiculous excess." In business and official circles brevity is esteemed a virtue; the rule is to decide what you want to say and then say it in as few words as will cover the ground. Even in domestic, or family, correspondence that rule may be employed with advantage, as witness the epistolary interchange between John Steel and his mother: "Dear Mother,—I'm in quod.—Yours, John Steel." Now that note, brief as it was, fully subserved its purpose. It conveyed the fact of recent misfortune, his then present detention and whereabouts, and a delicate intimation that some form of assistance—probably pecuniary—was expected and would be appreciated. Had he filled quires he could have said no more. The virtue of John's brevity had its reward—as virtue always does, according to the picture show and the penny novelette

Promptly came the equally brief answer: "Dear Son,—So am I.—Yours, Mary Steel." Like John's own, her few pregnant words told all that she wished to tell or that he desired to know. She had received his letter; she evidently deplored his plight, but, being also unfortunate, it was not in her power to assist him in any way, etc. etc. It is such instances as this which compel one to acknowledge the value at times of verbal frugality.

KINGS AND PRINCES I HAVE MET. PRINCE PASCO.

In this Prince we have one of the most bewildering and baffling cases of dual personality yet recorded in the annals of science. Like Dr Jekyll and Mr Hide, he not only undergoes frequent changes in physical appearance, but his name also varies in correspondence. Sometimes he is very dark, and has three days stubble on his face, and looks at you as though he didn't think much of you, and would like to go to sleep again, anyway. On these occasions you must mind your p's and q's, and address him as "Ange." At others he is distinctly taller and fairer, with a clean shave and a friendly, if somewhat supercilious smile, and a habit of overloading the cash register with shelds. Then, if you would avoid offence, you must call him "Joe"—with just the proper dash of respect in your tone and manner. Sometimes his changes are so swift that if you offer him a glass of beer as "Ange," you are startled to find that it is as "Joe" that he drinks it.

Early in life His Highness developed an interest in commercial affairs, and to-day he may be regarded as our foremost collector of and dealer in curios. He has his own fleet of ships, which day and night scour the briny deep in search of treasure for him. Not diamonds or rubies, bric-a-brac, works of Art, or other things of that kind; these are trash to him. He flies at higher game; such rare and priceless things as groper, flounders, blue cod, oysters, etc. Also mutton birds—which, for rarity and price, rank today with the bird-of-paradise. Incredible as it may appear to the present generation, there was a time when these things were so plentiful and cheap that people—even the working classes—used to eat them. In fact, at the risk of being branded as an untrustworthy exaggerator, I will go so far as to say that they formed quite a common article of diet in God's Own Country.

I can bring proof of this if desired. To-day, as you all know, that man is considered fortunate indeed, who can afford a stuffed mullet for the show case on his mantelpiece, while, if he has a life-sized groper there he is held guilty of vulgar ostentation. As for eating them—well, we would as soon think of eating angels. Sic transit gloria mundi et Friday. Impelled by my usual insatiable thirst for knowledge I recently waited on His Highness to learn from him, if possible, the why and wherefore of the present disagreeable thushness of things in his particular domain. Receiving no response to my repeated knocks, I at length boldly opened the door and entered—to find myself at once in the Prince's beautiful marble lined museum and art-treasury, in which were lavishly displayed soles, trevally, trumpeter, and many other evidences of the Prince's vast wealth. The Prince himself stood gazing at the latest addition to his wonderful collection—a lovely, fat, three foot groper—with the same expression of rapturous exultation as we may imagine on the face of a Ruskin discovering a rare gem from the brush of a Raphael or a Carpaccio. I then understood why my knocking had been unnoticed. I waited awhile, out of respect for his evident artistic temperament, and then gently coughed, to attract his attention. He turned quickly at the sound and, apologetic for his seeming discourtesy, demanded to know what the devil I wanted. I replied, with becoming respect, that, in the interests of the general public and my own attenuated stomach, I desired to learn why it was that fish prices persisted in smashing the altitude records of even our most daring airmen. He explained that it was chiefly due to the increased price of worms. I could not accept this explanation as sufficient, and pointed out that the weekly market reports had not yet shown, so far as I knew, any phenomenal inflation in worm values. He then admitted that there were other factors in operation—such as the price of fish-hooks, etc. I was still far from satisfied, which he, no doubt, perceived, for he added hastily, as a sort of afterthought, "Rockefeller." I was mystified, until he explained that it was through that arch-soundrel that petrol was so expensive. This seemed more satisfactory, though I must confess that I had hitherto been ignorant of the value of benzine or distillate as part of the dietary of fishes.

Seeing that the Prince was wearying of questions I prepared to withdraw. I was loth to depart, however, without some memento of my visit, so taking out my bloated wallet I asked to be supplied with one of his piscine curios. He looked with contempt on the temerity I laid before him, and asked me if I would have an oyster or a whitebait. I said I would prefer a whitebait, provided the Prince would condescend to open and clean it and otherwise prepare it for mounting. This he kindly did, and to-day that whitebait, framed and glazed, is cherished by my wife as the rarest and most precious of her drawing-room treasures.

SCIENCE NOTES.

Before the war the knowledge of the average man with regard to poison gases was not an extensive one. Poisons were associated in his mind with the chemist's shop, the extermination of rats, a post-mortem, or with a murder case. Prussic acid was the best known. The young man blighted in love raised the phial of this accursed drug to his lips, and so deadly was its vapour that he passed over, as the Spiritualists say, ere his lips came in contact with the liquid.

The only poison gas commonly known was the domestic sort, which certainly had a detrimental effect on the system when (in absence of a lighted taper) it was turned full on in a badly ventilated room.

But the war has changed all this. The Germans made use of poison gases as a weapon of war, the Allies retaliated, and a new art of warfare, the science of gassing, came into being. To Dr Haber, whose work on gases gained for him the Nobel Prize in Chemistry of last year, much of the development of this art is to be ascribed.

The first use of poison-gas in warfare was made in April 1915. The gas used was chlorine. This gas was liquefied behind the line in large heavy cylinders. These were carried into position by perspiring Teutons, and disposed at regular intervals along the line. At a given signal, on a day of favourable wind, the gas was released among our men. The result we knew. There was great indignation at home, because this act was clearly and blatantly at variance with the terms of the Hague Convention, but in France among our men there was even greater anger. Emergency respirators of a kind were rapidly improvised, but many thousands of our men were killed by the gas, and many of the survivors suffered most terrible agonies. These first respirators were merely pads of material tied round the mouth, not unlike what a Dickensian character might wear if he were suffering from a sore throat or a badly stopped tooth on a cold day. They were more effective when moistened, but they were not a striking success.

We ourselves began to use gas in September 1915. It was a great secret, and it was so well kept that the first intimation many of us had of our intention to use gas came from those at home who were serving their country by making it. About this time many artillery units found themselves digging numerous small dug-outs in the front line, just sufficiently large to accommodate "a general and one staff officer." Most units set to work without putting any but a literal interpretation on this somewhat extraordinary order. These dug-outs were for the accommodation of our cylinders of chlorine.

At the same time there appeared a new brand of brothers in the Corps of Royal Coloured Corporals, partly because of the Engineers. They were nicknamed the armlet of many colours which they wore, and partly because the lowest rank in the company was that of corporal. These men were for the most part excellent chemists in private life, but in war their duty was to handle the heavy cylinders of chlorine (familiarily termed Rodger), and to release the gas at the required moment. Many an infantryman or gunner watching these men, felt glad that at school chemistry had not been in the curriculum.

But the use of cylinders of poison gas was open to many objections. The cylinders were not only very cumbersome, but they were extremely vulnerable. (They went off when struck by an enemy shell, even though they weren't manufactured for that purpose). In addition the opportune discharge of gas depended on the slope of the country in front of the front line, and on the shape of the trenches and on the direction and velocity of the wind. Even then, after much palaver over the 'phone, and the alteration of the zero hour because of "conditions" the discharged gas not infrequently did some harm to our own troops as they went over to the attack.

In consequence shell and trench-mortar bombs, and even hand-grenades were filled with poison, and then fired into the

enemy's midst. These had no back effect, and so long as they fell approximately at the chosen spot they were effective.

For success in attacking by gas, one of the most important things was to maintain a high concentration of the poison in the air around. One part of a gas in a thousand of air when maintained was considered a high concentration, and indeed one part in ten thousand with most poison gases was quite effective. One would imagine that the denser the gas being equal, because it would lie in trenches and in shell-holes where soldiers were; but it must be remembered that all poison gases soon became very diluted by the air around, and the density of the mixture, therefore, after a time, could not be very different from that of air itself.

What did the scientific organiser of warfare consider to be the most important features of a gas? First of all, the ease with which the necessary large quantities of the gas could be made, and the convenience with which it could be transported; secondly, the effect of the gas when inhaled by the soldier, and the difficulty the other side might have in providing adequate protection against it.

The best known of the gases used were chlorine, phosgene, mustard gas, and chloropicrin, but many more, described by long chemical formulae and even longer chemical names, were used by both sides. The element of surprise was an important tactical point, and it was considered clever to send over a new gas of which the other side was ignorant, and against which they had provided their soldiers with no protection.

Chlorine, as everyone knows who has inhaled it, even in small doses, has a most irritating effect on the throat and lungs. It is, however, a simple and honest poison. You may see it coming, and avoid it. Further, either you get it or you don't get it. With phosgene, on the other hand, you are never quite sure where you are. Although its effect is less irritating than chlorine, it has a delayed physiological action. It may be breathed apparently with impunity, but the trouble comes later.

Chloropicrin was one of the chief lachrymators or weeping gases, and was used effectively, even at a concentration of one part in a million, against troops doing any work in which weeping rather interfered with things. Mustard gas was an irritant which even in very small amounts had a very inflammatory effect on the skin, the more insidious because it was not immediate. It produced serious sores at the parts affected, notably on the eyes, leading to many cases of permanent blindness, and to an enormous number of cases of temporary blindness.

These are the best known, but more irritating and more deadly gases were being experimented with towards the end of hostilities. It is rather curious that prussic acid, which is associated in most minds with sudden death, was used so little. The reason for this is that, except in large concentration, its effect is very mild. Also it is a very simple gas to secure protection from with a respirator.

The first respirator issued to our troops after the original mouth-pad had been superseded, consisted of a flannel helmet with mica eyepieces, which was pulled over the head and tucked in under the collar. Impregnated in the flannel was a solution of "hypo" and other materials for absorbing the chlorine. Later patterns of this type were provided with glass windows for the eyes, and a rubber valve for exhaling the breathed air. After a time a box respirator was introduced, and this completely superseded the helmet type. This respirator consisted of a small box filled with granules of specially prepared charcoal, which was guaranteed to absorb nearly every kind of poison gas known. It was connected with the piece that covered the face by a flexible rubber tube. A clip gripped the nose in a most convincing manner. The breathing in and out was done through the mouth by means of suitable valves.

It was a simple device, comfortable enough, and everyone who was in France had the pleasure of drilling in it. It gave complete protection against most of the poison gases used, and when the charcoal deteriorated it could be easily replaced.

It is the opinion of a speaker at the last meeting of the British Association that poison-gas warfare is not so inhuman as it is commonly supposed to be. The argument was, that granted that human beings must die or suffer so that military objects may be gained, then such objects may be attained by the use of poison gas with less loss of life and permanent injury than by the employment of high explosives.

We agree, but we hope that this type of warfare is ended for ever.

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