READINGS FROM CURRENT LITERATURE.

THE LARGEST GUN FOR RUSSIA.

The Krupp Company has just despatched the largest gun which has ever been manufactured from Essen to Hamburg for shipment to Cronstadt, it being the property of the Russian Government. This gun, which is made of cast steel, weighs 235 tons, and has a calibre of 13½ inches, and a barrel 40 feet in length. It fires two shots per minute, and each charge costs £300. It was tested at Essen before a number of Russian officers, and after penetrating 19 inches of armour the projectile went 1,400 yards beyond the target.—*Truth.*

MR. STANLEY AND THE POET BURNS.

Mr. H. M. Stanley spent his last evening before leaving London for the relief of Emin Pasha with Sir John Pender, and on parting the latter gave Mr. Stanley a miniature edition of Burns' poems, published by Messrs. Bryce, of Glasgow. This the great explorer said he would carry wherever he went. Sir John Pender, in recently writing to Mr. Bryce, says :—"When I met Stanley in Egypt in the Spring I had not been in conversation with him many minutes before he reminded me of the little copy of Burn's poems, and he said it had been a great source of comfort to him ; he had read it many times over, and he believed there was no better thumbed book in existence than that little volume. He said that Burns was such a child of nature and that he was so much in sympathy with him, that many times he was not only deeply touched, but greatly encouraged by the perusal of the poems."—*Athenæum.*

THE MUD-FISH.

Africa is the home of many extraordinary animals, but there is no more remarkable creature than the mud-fish, which inhabits certain of the rivers of Western Africa, and, as its name implies, it lurks at the muddy bottoms of these rivers. At present, however, it is not necessary to go to Africa to see this fish, as it can be seen by anyone who has the time in the reptile-house at the Zoological Gardens. At first sight there is perhaps nothing especially striking about this animal; it looks very much like an ordinary fish except for its curious long slender fins. A visitor who knew nothing about the creature would probably go away with the impression that he had seen nothing out of the common. When the fishes arrived each one was encased in a ball of dried mud, lined with mucus from its body, and perforated by a small aperture to admit of breathing. This "cocoon," as it is sometimes called, on account of its analogy to the earthern case fabricated by many caterpillars in which to undergo their metamorphoses, on being placed in warmish water was dissolved and the fish liberated. The habit which the mud-fish has of making an earthern chamber of the mud at the bottom of the river is a most wonderful provision of Nature for the exigencies of the climate. The rivers which the fish inhabits are liable to periodical droughts. When such a drought is imminent the fish retires to deep water and excavates a pit, in which it lies, covering itself over with a thick layer of mud. It can suffer with impunity the complete drying-up of the river. But the most interesting fact about the creature is that during the time of its voluntary imprisonment it breathes air directly through an aperture left in the cocoon, by means of lungs, just like a land animal. When the returning rains dissolve the mud and liberate the fish it breathes by means of gills, just like any other fish.—*Leisure Hour.*

THE MARCH OF CHOLERA.

When some months ago the Turkish authorities asserted the extinction or non-existence of cholera in Syria, while Russian consular agents maintained that it was still hovering about on the borders of the Persian and Ottoman empires, we expressed our conviction that the subsidence of the epidemic was merely what might be expected at that season, and that it would reappear with the return of spring. And so it is ; cholera is reported now as having broken out on the Imperial domains of Djedil and in the village of Bellek, near Bagdad, where six persons have died out of thirteen attacked. Bagdad was the headquarters of the epidemic last year, whence it was carried by the river boats far up the Tigris. We believe that the Foreign Office received information of its occurrence as far north as Diabekr and Erzeroum, though in the latter case it was more probably conveyed by road from Tabruz. But, though it may thus appear to have receded, such a phenomenon would be without precedent. When, in 1847, it seemed to invade India from Turkestan, or, in 1865, it appeared in Armenia after it had ravaged Constantinople and Saloniki, it was not retreating but performing a flank movement, and doubling on its own advance, as we have seen in the spread of influenza to India and Australia after it had overrun all Europe. Cholera requires human intercourse for its conveyance, certain meteorological and local conditions for its development, and the ingestion of specifically infected water, etc., for its communication. Thus, while it will cross the Atlantic in a fortnight, it marches by slow stages through lands where railways are still unknown, retiring into winter quarters when traffic and travel are suspended, to reopen the campaign with the return of warm weather, which is naturally earlier in the south and the plains than in northern or mountainous regions. In the winter of 1846-47 it had reached precisely the same points as it did last autumn, and in like manner withdrew for a time to the lower valley of the Euphrates and Tigris, recrossing the mountains and plateau of Armenia in the spring, reaching Astrakhan and Jaganony in July, and Moscow and St. Petersburg in September, when, with the approach of winter, it disappeared only to break out with renewed intensity, and, as it had travelled with tenfold greater rapidity along the good military roads between the Caucasus and the capitals than it had previously done through Persia, so when once it touched the margin of the restless life and commercial activity of Europe it was drawn into the vortex, and there was not a country or large town but had been invaded before the summer was over. If we may venture to prophesy, we would say that it will not proceed further up the Tigris Valley, but, travelling by the Euphrates, will be next heard of at Aleppo, and perhaps Beyrout, and it will enter Egypt *via* Yeddah and Suez, and then leave Alexandria for the Levantine and Mediterranean ports. From Tabruz it will take the route *via* Erzeroum and Trebizond to Constantinople, Odessa, and by Baku, Tiflis, Derbent, and Astrakhan over Russia.—*British Medical Journal.*

WHO ARE THE GREATEST READERS ?

Which class of our population is the most addicted to reading ? Some interesting light is thrown on this question by the latest report of the Birmingham Free Libraries Committee. Amongst other tables therein given is one showing the occupation of borrowers admitted during 1889. Here are some of the figures :—Scholars and students, 1,392 ; clerks and book-keepers, 1,138 ; errand and office boys, 301; teachers, 293 ; shop assistants, 290 ; jewellers, 216 ; compositors and printers, 192 ; milliners and dressmakers, 109. Almost at the bottom of the list come journalists, 6 ; news agents, 2; and reporters, 2. Is this because they have libraries of their own ? or because the people who write in newspapers lose their taste for reading books ?—*Pall Mall Gazette.*

ENGLAND'S ARMY.

The official list of establishments of the regular and auxiliary forces for the current year, just issued from the War Office, shows that the number of officers and men permitted to be enrolled is 215,884 regulars (exclusive of the Indian native army), 141,130 militia, 14,080 yeomanry cavalry, and 260,337 volunteers. In the regular troops the household cavalry are put down at 1,299, the line cavalry at 17,790, artillery 35,740, engineers 7,366, foot guards 5,888, line infantry and depôts 135,603, army service corps 3,368, West India 2,222, Malta artillery 387, various local native corps 2,721, ordnance store corps 747, corps of armourers 277, ordnance artificers 80, and medical staff corps 2,396. The militia consists of 19,221 artillery, 1,204 fortress engineers, 1,326 submarine miners, and 113,887 infantry at home ; 3,993 in the Channel Islands, 1,190 in Malta, and 309 at St. Helena. The establishments of the volunteers are calculated for 1,027 in the Honourable Artillery company, 364 light horse, 47,621 artillery, 14,252 engineers (including submarine miners), 61 mounted rifles, 196,697 infantry, and 1,315 medical staff.

MR. WALTER BESANT AND A CURIOUS COINCIDENCE.

One would suppose (says the *Daily News*) that a novelist would find it quite safe to use the word "Dives." Mr. Walter Besant, however, has realized that that word, as a proper name, has a representative, who appropriately resides in a gold region. In "The Doubts of Dives" there also occurs a still more singular coincidence. One of the characters is "Mr. Pindar," an old dramatic critic ; and Mr. Dives, of Johannesburg, who bought the book because of its title, had with him a friend named Pindar, who had been a dramatic critic, and, he says, "in many other points exactly resembled the character in the story." Mr. Dives thought it worth while to bring these curious facts to the knowledge of Mr. Besant, who replied as follows :—"12 Gayton Crescent, Hampstead, March 15, 1890. Dear Sir,—I am very much amused by your letter of February 14. In using the name of Dives I used the Latin word which has always been applied to the rich man in the parable. You own name is, I have no doubt, as you say, a form of the old name D'Ives. You are quite right in supposing that my late partner came from Northampton. I have never been to that town, and I am quite unaware of your name being found there. The coincidence of your finding the name of your friend, as well as your own name, in that little story, and that he was formerly a dramatic critic, is most extraordinary. I note it down as one of the curious coincidences that are always happening. I hope that you, and Mr. Pindar too, will very soon feel some of the burden of the wealth which so much oppressed Dives in the story, and—I remain, Sir, yours, etc., Walter Besant."

THE RESTRAINTS OF INVENTION.

The profounder and more original the thinker, the greater is the barrier between himself and the learned and unlearned multitude, whom he would approach. Every advanced thinker must meet his obstacles. One might suppose that simple mechanical inventions would escape the hostility of fools ; but they don't. So simple an invention as the percussion lock, which has superseded the old flint lock, was invented in 1807, but it was thirty years before it could be introduced into the English army. How difficult was it to introduce coal or even to introduce gas ; the candle still survives in England. When the first oil-well was sunk in Pennsylvania by Colonel Drake, it was considered so crazy an affair that he had great difficulty in getting men to do the work. When anthracite was discovered in Pennsylvania, by Nicholas Allen, near Pottstown, he tried to sell a load but got discouraged, dumped it in the river, and emigrated westward. When Robert Morris and others secured a large tract of coal lands expecting to make a fortune, they failed to introduce it and gave up their scheme. When coal was first introduced in London (early, I believe, in the fourteenth century), it produced a great outcry, and a law was passed against it making the burning of coal a capital offence. It is said that one man was executed, but this is hard to believe. Some persons were so hostile to coal that they refused to eat any food cooked by a coal fire. The opposition was not quite as great to the introduction of gas. The first cargo of ice sent to New Orleans was driven away by the mob. It was imported something like seventy years ago, by Judah Touro, and being put into an ice-house in Congo Square, before it was completed, a mob rushed in, drove off the workmen, demolished the building and ordered the captain to leave the port. The ice was sent to the West Indies, and the newspapers next day were fierce against the importation of ice.—*The Arena for June.*

NINE THOUSAND MANUSCRIPTS.

From a "Topic of the Time," in *The Century* for June, we quote as follows : "During the past two years from eight thousand five hundred to nine thousand manuscripts were annually submitted to *The Century Magazine* for publication. This is an increase over previous years, and does not include the hundreds, perhaps thousands, of propositions submitted with regard to articles. As there has been an increase in the number of periodicals published in America of late years, and as the newspapers are publishing more contributions than ever by writers not on the regular staff, it is evident that there has been an increase in literary activity at least in proportion to the increase in population. Now out of nine thousand manuscripts a year *The Century* can only possibly print four hundred or less It follows that editing a magazine is not unlike walking into a garden of flowers and gathering a single bouquet. In other words, not to accept an article, a story, a poem, is not necessarily to 'reject' it. There may be weeds in the garden—there must be weeds in the garden—but the fact that a particular blossom is not gathered into the monthly bouquet does not prove that the editor regarded the blossom as a weed, and therefore passed it by. It would be impossible to sweep all the flowers into a single handful. The 'rejected' or 'declined' are naturally prone to gibe at sympathetic or apologetic words from editorial sources, so we present the above simile with considerable diffidence. There is truth in it, nevertheless ! And it would probably be much easier for editors to make up a number of bouquets from the flowers at their disposal, than to gather the single one for which alone they have room."

OUR ENGLISH COUSINS.

England is the banking-house and financial agency of the world. She is a great factory and ship-yard, but in the next century will have to give up her pre-eminence in these particulars. She does the ocean carrying trade of the world, but in this, too, she can not always stand first. Some of her scientific and economical investigators give her only one hundred years in which to exhaust her supply of coal situate for inexpensive mining. With her cheap coal, her superiority in factures will depart. Till Babylon itself shall fall, England seems likely to be and remain the banking-house of the world. A recent estimate gives her revenue from investments outside of the United Kingdom at $5,000,000 a day or $1,825,000,000 a year. The taxed income alone of Great Britain in 1888 was $3,180,000,000, on which the tax, at 6 pence the pound, was $63,500,000. Of the income and profits of the people of Great Britain only that which is above a certain amount is taxed. Hence the income taxed does not notify the total income of our English cousins. That is estimated carefully at somewhat more than $7,000,000,000 a year. It costs England a round sum to support her royal family. Queen Victoria is paid $300,000 a year into her privy purse. She is paid $1,156,000 a year, for salaries of the royal household. She is paid $220,000 a year for retiring allowances and pensions to servants. She is paid $66,000 a year to give away in royal bounties, alms, etc. She has $181,000 a year for incidentals. As Duchess of Lancaster she gets $250,000 a year from that duchy. This makes a total of about $2,175,000 a year. Her son Alfred, the Duke of Edinburgh, is paid $125,000 a year. So is her son Arthur, Duke of Connaught. Her daughter, Victoria, ex-Empress of Germany, is paid by Great Britain $40,000 a year, and each of the other girls $30,000 a year. Her cousins, too, are paid all the way from $15,000 a year to $60,000 a year, her cousin George, Duke of Cambridge, getting the latter sum. Her eldest son and heir apparent, Albert Edward, Prince of Wales, is paid $200,000 a year for himself and $185,000 a year for support and maintenance of his children. Besides this from his duchy of Cornwall he gets about $310,000 a year.—*Public Opinion.*

In India a specific for cholera is stated to have been discovered. The name of the drug is salol, and out of eighteen patients treated with it not one died, although some of them were in a state of collapse when the drug was administered.