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Life on an Emigrant Ship

John Creaghe

November 1890

Comrades — Having just come from Buenos Aires among the human merchandise in the steerage of one of the Royal Mail steamers, it may interest some of the readers of the *Commonweal* to read what my experiences were under the circumstances.

We sailed on the 19th of September, and after leaving the Rio de la Plata we called first at Santos in Brazil. This is a beautiful place and splendid harbour, and is beside the port of disembarkation for the human material which is being imported in rather large quantities at present for the colonies in the province of San Paulo. As we anchored, a French steamer arrived, crowded with Italian immigrants, and in the evening, being ashore, I witnessed the transhipment of them to a lighter, which later on was towed up the river with barely standing room on board of her. From some of the passengers who came ashore in Santos I learned that there were 800 in all and that they were all going to San Paulo.

From our own experience on board of the “Trent” I judged that the passengers of the “Bearne” must have had a pleasant voyage of it in such a full ship. Worse awaits the poor creatures, however; for an Italian who joined us at Santos, and who had

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come down from San Paulo, told me that a few weeks before more than two thousand immigrants had arrived there and that they were wandering about half starved.

Brazil is at present going ahead on the same road of progress which I have seen have such a pleasant turning in the Argentine Republic. Free passages are given to all who wish to come, purely with the object of giving a value to the lands on which they may settle, and, where the climate permits them to do so, this will give such a value to the land as will completely exclude any but capitalists from possessing it. Then the earnings of the labourers become less and less or as the "practical" people put it, "labour becoming cheaper and cheaper;" everyone will soon be astonished at the great "progress" of the country, as shown by the rise in the value of land. Speculation will then drive this up far beyond its real value, the future prices of land will seem to have no limit, and then one fine day will come the inevitable smash, which will paralyse everything, and drive the labourer back to starve or fight in the country he came from.

It will take but a short time for this to be brought about in Brazil, for the greater part of the country is quite unfit for European races to live in. Men told me who came from Santos that there was no want of work there, as public works were in progress, but they said it was so horribly unhealthy that it was worse than other places where they were half starved. Everyone knows what a fever-den Santos is.

In spite of this I found that the hard work of loading and unloading ships and the coaling of steamers was done entirely by white men (Portuguese and Italian "free" labourers). Formerly, as I have seen, this hard work was all done by black slaves, but now the free whites have the privilege of killing themselves at it. The black man, as I have been told, is taking it pretty considerably easy in Brazil at present. He is not yet ambitious of making a fortune, the lazy fellow!

We loaded about ten thousand bags of coffee in Santos, and I don't know when I saw men working so hard as those who carried it aboard. Every man with a bag of coffee on his shoulders, and some with two and even three, came running up the gangway, flinging their load into the hold and rushing back again for another. It was quite a lively scene, and some of the poor fellows laughed and shouted as they became excited, and I heard some of our respectables remark how very happy the fellows were and what a lot of money they must earn! Some of them, I know, looked very much distressed, as the weather was very sultry, though we were very far indeed from the really hot season.

We took in a good many passengers here, and sailed for Bahia. Up to this the space provided for steerage passengers had not been quite full, and yet there was a horrible stench in the steerage, which I at first attributed to my fellow passengers, but which I found disappear here, though the number increased. The fact was that a quantity of jerked meat was discharged here, which had been stowed under our noses! When it left I had a better opinion of the passengers and felt a truly Christian spirit toward the company!

We called at Babia, Rio Janeiro, and Pernambuco, and by the time we left the latter place our space was well filled. It was almost impossible to sleep below, the atmosphere was so stifling, and we were not allowed to bring the company's mattresses on deck for fear they might be soiled, but a blanket and pillow on the hard deck was preferable to smothering below. And the food and the feeding! There was a group of Spaniards on board coming from Buenos Aires — fine sturdy, strong fellows they were, as the Spanish workers in general are, thanks to the fact that Spain has not progressed like some of her neighbours, and ground body and soul of the workers into riches for a few capitalists. Well, these men complained loudly one day of their treatment, and as I agreed with them, they requested me to go with them to the captain and protest.

We were fed almost exclusively on black beans and rice. Black water called coffee was served, with a piece of bread badly baked, at 6 a.m. Then at 8 we had beans and rice boiled in a mash, and ladled out to us from a bucket; which each one had to receive at the end of his bunk. As there are two rows of bunks, the feet of the man on top either brushed the hair of the man below or hung on each side of his nose! Fortunately I was on top.

Then you received your ladleful of the mash, scalding hot, on a tin platter which the ladle nearly filled, and then you must decide while your fingers burn whether you will be able to endure it on your thighs, or with a wrench round of your body place it hastily in the middle of your bed!

We generally got a chunk of nauseous-looking tough uneatable meat as second course, on the same platter, and a cup of wine; and the same at dinner at 1 o'clock. Tea and bread and butter at 5 p.m., and this closed the festivities. We occasionally got some variety in the way of macaroni and potatoes, but the diet was substantially as I mentioned from day to day. The wine supplied was by nature good common wine, but we were defrauded of it by the stewards, who went in for doing a little business on their own account. They contracted with a number of passengers to give them good diet on payment of two sovereigns a-head, and the way they did it was by keeping the best part of the food apart for them and getting it cooked specially, and by taking part of the wine for them and filling up with water for the other passengers.

Of course the protest to the captain had little or no result, except in bringing the wrath of the chief steward down on my devoted head because I acted as spokesman. The watering of the wine was, however, put a stop to, and the food was not quite so abominable as before.

Ah, how far the workers are yet from understanding their rights in such matters! While they who ought to have everything are treated invariably as animals, or as merchandise to

delightfully monopolised there to that extent and in so short a space of time, that even the poor Italians, who suffer such misery in their own country, are returning in thousands, and this has been going on for the last six or eight months. Brazil will never amount to anything, as may be seen from what I said before.

At last the emigration fad is thoroughly played out. The wanderers are returning, and with a vengeance, for from men of all nations I have heard the opinion invariably expressed that poor men had better remain in future in their own country, and do what they can to change social conditions so as to make it possible to live there. When we remember that we have means of producing twice as much food and three times as much of other articles of consumption as we require, it is easy to see what has to be done. Down with the exploiters, the rich robbers! Down with the vile system which compels the producers of wealth to starve in the midst of plenty. Yours in the Social Revolution,

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be made money of, their masters in the cabin have plenty of space and ventilation and every convenience that can possibly be provided. The workers produce everything and are grudging the merest necessities; their masters produce nothing and have everything at their disposal.

There was a partial strike one day by the fireman on board the "Trent", which forcibly called my attention to the way these workers are treated. One morning I found the chief officer of the ship and the chief engineer, log-book in hand, surrounded by a group of the firemen, who were called upon each in turn to say if they would turn to and go down below or not. The dispute seemed very serious, and there was evidently a savage determination on the part of the chief engineer not to grant whatever the men demanded. After considerable hesitation, and some words between this chief machinist and one of the men — in which the said chief adopted the principle of saying what he liked in as angry a tone as he chose, and ordering the other to shut up when he answered him quietly — the men had to give in for fear of being logged and afterwards heavily fined.

The chief engineer or machinist triumphed over them, calling them the usual "damned ---", in a remark which he made to the chief officer as he went away, a remark which was heard by the men and repeated from mouth to mouth. And what was it all about? The men demanded to get a cup of coffee before turning to at their hard exhausting labour. Ah! if they only chose, they could have their coffee and everything else they asked for, or stop the whole machinery, as I hope to see the coal miners do some day with the whole machinery of Capitalism.

I could not help thinking of this, and all that I saw and have seen in former years of the life of the poor sailor, when I read today an indignant article in the *Times* and other papers about

the “absurd” demands of the sailors and dock labourers, and how the indignant shipowners had federated to bring down their pretensions, and were going to lay up all their ships. I devoutly wish they may, and then perhaps they may stir the workers to go and take a part of what belongs to them.

Why the life of a sailor is worse than that of a prisoner in jail, with the addition of running the chance almost every day of being drowned, as Doctor Johnson is reported to have said about a century ago. And what it is in steamers is nothing to what it is in sailing ships! Beastly food, filthy styes to lie in, wet, cold, slobber, hard work, little sleep, hard words, contempt, more kicks than halfpence — such is the paradise which the shipowners are so astonished to find sailors getting tired of. May they never cease, and they never will until they dine and sleep in the palaces which up to now they have provided for these ship “owners”, and others who call themselves owners of the wealth of the workers.

The evening before reaching Lisbon the steerage passengers had another specimen of the utter contempt and indifference for their comfort with which they are treated, and will be treated like all the workers *as long as they put up with it*. We had little enough room on deck in all conscience, but this evening what space we had was in a fair way to be filled up with empty barrels, and which were to be put ashore in Lisbon, Cargo of all importance, steerage rubbish none. Along came the barrels, rolled and flung end over end by the underlings, with a savage “Look out, there!” putting to flight women and children as well as men, who were settling down to converse and amuse themselves in one way or another.

Again the passengers became indignant, and as we had no faith in protests to the authorities any longer it was proposed that we should go and occupy the space kept apart for the second-class passengers, which a group of us, chiefly Spaniards, accordingly did, and we remained there in spite of efforts to dislodge us until we were tired of it. But that we

were so near port the barrels would all have gone overboard; but at Lisbon the bulk of the passengers were to leave, and then we would have plenty of room.

I tried to improve the occasion by pointing out to the men how the life of the worker and producer was everywhere the same as on board that ship. Plenty of space and ventilation and comfort in their dwellings for the proud idlers, and the life of pigs (far worse in one way for the unhealthier) for those who feed these idlers and provide them with healthy, commodious, and luxurious dwellings. In the conversation I heard some dreadful accounts of the misery endured by working people out of employment in Buenos Aires and Montevideo. I did not really know all of it until told by some of these eyewitnesses. I was told of strong young men going round in the morning and collecting scraps of refuse food from the *vasura*, or refuse boxes, which are left at the doors to be emptied into carts which call round for the purpose. One man said he saw poor women, brought out as immigrants, going about near the Immigrant’s Home in the most frightful state of filth and crawling with vermin, offering themselves for sale for any trifle they could get to buy themselves some decent food.

There is one comfort in all this for us Revolutionists, and it is that the so-called new countries are no longer what they were; they do not any longer offer the immigrant the slightest hope of getting out of his class and living as an exploiter. Nor do they any longer offer him a field for labour where competition is less than elsewhere and wages higher. I, for one, rejoice at it, for if there was one selfish class more than another that filled me with disgust it was that of the men who, finding their own bellies filled, no matter where, turned a deaf ear or laughed contemptuously at whoever tried to call their attention to the sufferings of their class.

Buenos Aires and Montevideo, that is to say, the two Republics of which they are the capitals, I can assure my comrades are entirely “played” out as immigration fields. Everything is