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LIFE ON BOARD A FEMALE CONVICT SHIP

WESTERN AUSTRALIA is now, I believe, the only colony to which convicts can be transported from Great Britain.* The people of Van Diemen's Land, and of the Eastern coast of Australia, having a large and continually increasing supply of free labour at their command, have naturally, and no doubt wisely, declined to receive upon their shores any longer the pariahs of the mother country, and it is only reasonable to expect that before long the free population of Western Australia will follow the example of their brethren of the older colonies. Thus, unless some new *terra incognita* be discovered suitable for a convict settlement, the probability is that before many years have elapsed Great Britain will be compelled to provide safe keeping for the whole of her convict population upon her own shores. Under these circumstances, therefore, a brief description of the routine and discipline on board a female convict ship, at a period when vessels of this class sailed from England at regular intervals several times in the course of a year, may be interesting to the reader.

In the year 1841 I sailed from Woolwich on board the barque Gilbert Henderson, of Liverpool, chartered as a convict ship by Government, and bound to Hobart Town, Van Diemen's Land, with a living freight of three hundred and fifty female convicts.

The Gilbert Henderson was a fine new vessel of about six hundred tons' burden. Her crew consisted of the captain, three mates, a carpenter, a sail maker, a steward, a cook, sixteen seamen, and three apprentices, or midshipmen as they were termed by courtesy.

It is customary on-board male convict ships for the Government to send out a guard of soldiers or marines, with their officers, in addition to the naval surgeon, to whom the chief command over, as well as the medical charge of, the convicts is intrusted. On board male convict ships also a strict military guard is constantly maintained, and, though the convicts are left unmanacled, so long as they conduct themselves well, only a limited number are permitted to be on deck at a time - each gang taking its turn for exercise - and the slightest mistrust, the faintest appearance of insubordination, leads to the heavy ironing and the close confinement of the suspected men, and an increase of vigilance on the part of the officers of the ship and the guard.

On board a female convict ship, however, the military or marine guard is dispensed with, the ordinary number of the crew is not increased, and although a sufficient supply of handcuffs and irons are sent on board, they, as well as the firearms of the ship, are kept out of sight. There is, in fact, little more appearance of force or extra discipline than may be found on board an ordinary emigrant ship, while there is much superior cleanliness, and the health, comfort, and convenience of the convicts are most sedulously cared for during the voyage.

On board a male convict ship no passengers excepting military officers on Government service are permitted to embark, but - although I believe the rule equally applies to female convict ships - it was not so strictly enforced on board the Gilbert Henderson.

Besides the naval surgeon (in our case one Sir J__H__) the passengers on board the Gilbert Henderson comprised a retired "naval physician of the fleet," who was going out to settle in Van Diemen's Land, on a grant of land he had received from Government; his nephew, a young Irishman about twenty years of age, of no profession, who was going out to seek his fortune, under his uncle's patronage; his son, a lad of fifteen years; a retired army captain, greatly addicted to microscopic studies, who was also going out to take possession of a Government grant; and a midshipman of the Royal Navy (myself) going out to re-join my ship, after having been on sick furlough.

Sir J__H__ was a surgeon of higher naval rank than it *was* or *is* usual to appoint to do duty on board a convict ship. He had been knighted for his services (in Prussia) on behalf of the English Government, during the period of the epidemic of 1831-2. But he had accepted the

appointment because it afforded him an opportunity to reach Diemen's Land free of expense, in order to settle upon a grant of land in the interior of the island, which had been accorded to him for his medical services in addition to the of knighthood.

I may, however, here state that the worthy knight, who somewhat of an eccentric, and was the most enthusiastic the party respecting the anticipated delights of a colonial life, very soon found his way back to England.

He had provided himself with all the requisites of a settler the "bush", such as tents, axes, spades, garden seeds, utensils, etc, and to these had added all the comforts elegancies of civilisation that he could stow on board, such as articles of furniture, cases of books, pipes, and barrels wine and beer, etc, and, according to his own account, was going to found a Utopia in the wilderness; yet on landing at Portsmouth two years afterwards, the first person I met on quay was Sir J__H__ !

"I heard that the B____ had just arrived", he said, as he shook hands with me, "and I came down expecting to find that you had returned to England with the vessel. I thought I'd like to shake hands with my old shipmate again. We had pleasant days on board the Gilbert Henderson."

"Yes, Sir John," I replied, "but you of all persons are the last I should have expected to meet. I thought you were long ago comfortably settled in the 'bush'. "Wouldn't do my dear sir," replied the knight. "Not at all the thing for a man of my years. I was sadly disappointed. Not a living soul within twenty miles of my grant. Went to look for it – couldn't find it for a long time. Found it. A wretched place. Nobody to speak to but the convict servants I took with me. Should have been dead and buried in less than six months if I'd stayed. Remained a week. Came back to Hobart Town and sailed for England on board the first vessel that was ready for sea. Sad take in. Grants of land indeed! Cost me hundreds of pounds, all thrown away. Ruinous! Come and dine with me today, but don't speak of Van Diemen's Land. It makes me miserable to think of it."

I accepted the invitation to dinner, and found Sir John very comfortably situated in a modest establishment near Portsmouth, with his wife and daughter, enjoying a much nearer approach to the Utopia of his sanguine imagination than ever he would have succeeded in founding in Tasmania.

But to return to my subject.

The Gilbert Henderson sailed in due course from Woolwich, and as we had tolerably fine weather, the horrors of seasickness were all got over before we had well got clear of the British Channel, and a regular routine of duty, combining the utmost order and regularity, was established on board. A *douceur* proportioned according to their relative ranks, was to be awarded to the captain and the three mates if at the end of the voyage they produced a certificate, signed by the naval surgeon, setting forth that they had exerted themselves to the utmost to assist him, and to prevent any irregularities during the passage to Van Diemen's Land; and there was, I truly believe, much less irregularity, and far more comfort and even enjoyment, on board the vessel than there would or could have been had the three hundred and fifty convicts been free emigrants.

Their position on board enabled the officers to exercise a much greater amount of moral and physical control over them than could have been exercised over free emigrants, and though many of the convicts were of the vilest class, as was manifest both from their appearance and their conduct during the early part of the passage, such was not the case, at least to all appearance, with the great majority. At the period of which, I write, females were still much needed in Australia and Van Diemen's Land, and perhaps for this reason, perhaps also because the penal laws of late years have been much more mildly administered, the greater number of females on board were sent abroad for terms varying from seven to fourteen years for offences that would now-a-days be condoned by a few months' or weeks' confinement in the penitentiary. Most of the convicts were young women, many mere girls, and I believe that shoplifting, and that for the first time, according to their own account, and indeed, according to the prison sheet, was the offence of which the greater number had been convicted. The demeanour and appearance of the convicts was, however, no criterion wherefrom to judge of the nature of the crime which had led to their banishment from their native land.

On the contrary, in some instances the most repulsive in appearance (setting at nought the theories alike of Spurzheim and Gall, and of Lavater) and the most violent in conduct had been

convicted of the lesser offences against society; while in other instances there were females of prepossessing appearance, and of intelligent cast of countenance, and gentle feminine manners, who had been convicted of the most atrocious crimes. However, these were exceptions. As a general rule, it would not have been difficult to select the more hardened and desperate offenders by means of their personal appearance.

After the first week or two, however, offences against the rules and regulations of the ship were of comparatively rare occurrence.

All the convicts were required to be on deck, weather permitting, at six o'clock in the morning. At half past seven o'clock they went below to the comfortable roomy "between decks" to breakfast - this meal consisting of a pint of cocoa for each person, with biscuit *ad libitum* - which had been set out on the tables by a certain number of the convicts, chosen weekly by the doctor to perform this duty, to stow away the beds, to sweep, and twice a week to scrub the "between decks", to receive the daily provisions from the third mate (who acted as a sort of purser or steward, under the doctor) and to perform all the duties requisite to keep the portion of the ship occupied by the convicts in a clean and neat condition.

After breakfast (in fine weather) all but the sick and those whose duties detained them below were again ordered on deck, where they remained until dinner time (twelve A.M.) when, in obedience to the third mate's whistle, they went below to their dinner, consisting of boiled salt beef, and pork on alternate days, with the addition, according to the day of the week of barley broth, or rice and molasses, or pea soup. On Sundays and Thursdays, flour, and raisins, and suet were supplied in place of pease, barley, or rice, and each female had an allowance of three quarters of a pound of plum pudding. The supper, at six P.M. consisted of tea in place of cocoa, with biscuit *ad libitum* and the cold salt meat that had been left at dinner time.

A regular allowance of provisions is supplied by the Government, but whatever may be the case on board a male convict ship, the full allowance of the females was rarely consumed.

There was a comfortable "sick bay" for such of the convicts as were ill or seriously indisposed, where they met with every attention. But, strange to say, among so many females of a generally degraded class, illness or even serious indisposition, was very rare. Few, in fact, were indisposed in the slightest degree after the malady of sea sickness had disappeared from amongst them. This may perhaps be accounted for in a great measure from the fact that the majority of the convicts had been detained (in some cases for months together) in the different English, Irish, and Scotch prisons in the neighbourhood of the places where they had been convicted before they were sent on board, and all, when sent away from these prisons were supposed to be in good health. But no doubt a great cause of the general good health among so many females, necessarily crowded together on board ship, was the particular attention that was paid to cleanliness; to a sufficiency of wholesome, if not luxurious, food, to regularity of living, and to the care that was taken to keep a free draught of air in the "tween decks", where the convicts slept, and to keep the convicts themselves on deck during the daytime as much as possible. Even when the weather was rainy or boisterous, all were on deck for at least an hour or two in the course of the day, being sent up at such times in squads or parties of forty or fifty at a time. There was, in fact, but one case of serious illness during the voyage, and that resulted in death just when the ship had reached the Equator. A poor girl of eighteen years of age, who ought never to have been sent on board at all, died of consumption. Sir J. H. was justly proud of the excellent health of the females under his charge, and I doubt whether an emigrant ship with three hundred and fifty emigrants, male or female on board ever made a passage of four months' duration without more than one death occurring during the passage and with so little sickness.

It is, in fact, utterly out of the question for the officers or surgeons of emigrant vessels to maintain the regularity, order, and cleanliness, and consequently the comfort to the passengers that was maintained on board the *Gilbert Henderson*; and I suspect that few emigrant ships are so abundantly supplied with good wholesome provisions for so long a voyage. I doubt, indeed, whether such is the case on board Government emigrant ships. The comparison between the comforts supplied to prisoners and convicts on shore, and those supplied to the poor, which has so lately agitated the newspaper press,

holds equally good at sea. A quantity of potatoes, and other vegetables, sufficient to last for several days, was put on board the vessel immediately before she sailed from Woolwich, and this stock was renewed at the Cape de Verd Islands - the captain putting into Fayal for this express purpose - and again at the Cape of Good Hope. Neither was the necessity for recreation overlooked by the authorities. A quantity of coarse stuff, suitable for rough needlework was supplied by Government, as well as a great number of tracts and religious as well as instructive and amusing books, and though none of the convicts were compelled to do any work beyond that of taking their regular turn to sweep and clean the “ ‘tween decks”, make up the beds, wash the tin cups and dishes, etc, there were few who, before the ship had been long at sea, did not apply for work, or for books to read, to pass away the time, and needlework or books were only accorded to such as conducted themselves properly. It was, of course, necessary among so many females to establish a system of minor government. To this end monitors over classes of twelve or fifteen in number were chosen from among the most energetic and best conducted females, while governesses were appointed from among the more intelligent and the best educated (and there were many among these unfortunate creatures who had received a good, and, in a few cases a superior, education) to instruct the utterly ignorant.

This plan was productive of most beneficial effects. There were not a few poor neglected girls who came on board the vessel unable to tell one letter of the alphabet from another, who, when they landed at Hobart Town, were able to read the Bibles that were supplied by the Government, with tolerable facility, and in some instances with fluency.

The duty of the monitors was to see that all under their especial charge fulfilled the regulations of the ship in every respect, and to report for reproof or punishment such as were indolent or stubborn, or who refused to obey; and well these monitors did their duty, so that in a very short time there were few causes for complaint, the convicts discovering that obedience in this respect conduced to their own comfort.

The punishments were few and far from severe, and, as a general rule, after the first month at sea were seldom called for. Stopping the allowance of tea at supper-time, or the allowance of plum pudding on Sundays and Thursdays, were the mildest and the most frequent punishments. Next to these was the sending of the culprit below in fine weather, and compelling her to work while her companions were enjoying themselves on deck. For the more refractory, a wooden box, something like a sentry box, was provided. The culprit was placed in this box, where she was compelled either to stand upright, or to stoop in an uneasy posture, for an hour, or two or three, according to the nature of the offence; and when the door of this prison was closed, the only light and air came from a hole in the top. So far as I can recollect, however, this punishment was not awarded to more than half-a-dozen during the voyage; and those who were once subjected to it, never I believe (with one solitary exception) again committed an offence that called for a repetition of this temporary incarceration. The exception of which I speak was in the person of an old woman - the oldest woman on board in appearance - and she was the only female whom it was found necessary to handcuff during the passage. This wretched creature was almost as strong as a man, and was absolutely incorrigible, though even she improved her conduct as the voyage drew near its close. The severest punishment of all - or that which was regarded as the most severe - was the cropping of the head. I believe there was not a female on board, old or young, who would not almost as soon have lost her life as have had her hair cut close. It not only deprived them of their most cherished natural ornament, but it branded them as infamous on their arrival in the colony, and rendered them objects of ridicule and derision. On one occasion only was it enforced, and then the culprit was a young, good looking, and generally well-behaved girl, with a head of luxuriant black hair. She pleaded, as if for her life, that the punishment might be spared and her companions pleaded for her; but the offence of which she had been guilty was one that could not be overlooked, or that, if overlooked would have struck a fatal blow to the discipline of the ship. The doctor, however, permitted the offence to be condoned by merely going through the form of the punishment, and one of the women simply clipped off a quarter of an inch from the culprit's back hair. The girl was afterwards, as she had been before, one of the best behaved of all on board. It is hard to say what she *might* have become if the really kind-hearted doctor had proved stern and submitted her to the dreaded degradation.

As a general rule, these women, after they had got over their sea sickness, and had become familiar with the routine of the ship, appeared to be quite contented and happy. In a few instances in which the convicts had fallen from a respectable position in life, and had received a good education, and had perhaps been used, in early girlhood to mingle with troops of friends, and to mix in good society (and there were some such on board) they seemed deeply to feel their degradation, and held themselves as much as possible aloof from their companions in shame. But even such as these were not always unhappy, at least, in seeming. "Hope springs eternal in the human breast", and perhaps they hoped yet to outlive their past disgrace, and to become respectable, and even respected, members of society in the land of their enforced exile.

A great deal of freedom was permitted to all, so long as they conducted themselves properly. They were permitted to choose their own companions, with whom they could sit and chat, and work or read, and were allowed to roam about the decks as they pleased, so long as they kept off the quarter-deck, and refrained from encroaching beyond the limit of the foremast, where the sailors had their quarters; and the sailors were forbidden to come amongst them on that part of the deck appropriated for their use, unless to attend to the necessary duties of the ship. Conversation with the sailors, was also strictly forbidden; but it was found impossible to prevent this, and so long as the conversation was carried on in quiet tones, and without any attempt at improper familiarities, it was winked at by the doctor and the officers of the ship. Indeed, the officers and passengers occasionally conversed familiarly with the best conducted and best looking of the females, and passed harmless jokes with them, for a long sea voyage often proves a great leveller of social distinctions. On one occasion only was there any attempt made to break the bonds of discipline, and this was looked over - for that occasion only - and regarded as a sort of harmless feminine saturnalia. There is, I believe, a sort of carnival kept up at a certain season of the year in the northern counties of England, and one of the practices at this carnival is for the men (of course of the lower order) to lift or toss the women in their arms on one day, while the women on the following day return the compliment, those who have been "lifted" paying some slight fine, or else paying some slight fine to escape being "lifted". I am not sure which is the case.

At all events there were several north-countrywomen on board the Gilbert Henderson, and I suppose these women had spoken to their companions of the custom of their native county; a plot had been arranged in consequence, and it had been resolved, if the plot could be carried out, to keep "lifting day" on board the ship.

I have heretofore said that among the passengers on board there was a retired "physician of the fleet", a somewhat staid, pompous, precise, little old gentleman, who had with him his son and nephew. It happened that on the morning of "lifting day" this old gentleman was the first among the inmates of the cabin to mount the poop decks to enjoy his accustomed "constitutional" before breakfast.

The women were already on deck, and as soon as the little doctor made his appearance, trimly dressed, as he always was, whether in fair or foul weather, two strong-limbed stout girls left a party of their companions with whom they had been conversing, and, watching their opportunity, when the old gentleman's back was turned towards them, darted under the rope which ran across the quarter deck from the starboard to the port bulwark, mounted the ladder to the poop-deck, and seizing the unsuspecting doctor, lifted him in their arms and bore him, wriggling and shouting, and spluttering with rage and terror, down the ladder and among their laughing companions, making the circuit of the middle dock on both sides of the long boat.

"Hough! Hoo! Hey! Hey! Hough! Hough!" shouted the doctor, making the most hideous and incomprehensible cries, which could be distinctly heard in the cabin.

I verily believe that he thought a mutiny had broken out among the convicts, and that he was going to be tossed overboard as the first victim. There was a general rush from the cabin to see what was the matter, and the first sight that met the eyes of the captain and passengers was the doctor mounted on high above the shoulders of the women crowded together on the lower deck in the arms of a couple of stout viragoes, kicking his feet, and struggling, and calling loudly for help, while the women were shouting with laughter, and the sailors, and even the officers of the watch, were giggling and enjoying the fun.

“What on earth is the matter, doctor?” cried the captain who could not at first conceive the meaning of the strange spectacle.

“Hough! Phoo! Hoo! Hoo! Hoo!”, spluttered the doctor, still struggling in the arms of his captors, who, by the way, were two of the best-looking and best-conducted, as well as two of the stoutest, of the younger females on board.

“Oh, please your honour, it's no harm; it's lifting day,” cried several voices.

The captain and the chief mate of the vessel were both Northumbrians, and familiar with the custom. Indeed, I presume that the women were aware of this fact, and thus fancied that the joke would be taken in good part.

The captain, however, frowned and made a pretence of anger; but the women seemed so happy and good tempered, and were so respectful withal, amid their laughter and merriment, and the little prim retired physician of the fleet looked so exquisitely ridiculous in his mingled terror and amazement at this strange handling, that the stern captain was unable to repress a smile -Immediately the smile was seen on his face, four stout females, who had been watching their opportunity, yet had been half doubtful whether it would do to carry the joke any further, sprang forward, ascended the poop ladder, and before either was aware of their purpose, seized the captain and Sir J__H__ (who had just made his appearance on deck, and appeared to be struck with amazement at the scene presented to him), and hoisting them aloft, bore them in triumph round the lower deck. The little doctor had by this time been released, and had regained the poop, still flustered and red in the face with passion. When, however, the matter was explained to him by the chief mate, and he saw his fellow passengers and comrades of the cabin treated in the same way that he had been, and discovered that there was no cause for alarm, his anger and indignation quickly subsided, and he enjoyed the fun as well as the rest. His nephew, the young Irishman, who was a great favourite on board, now came on deck, and was immediately seized by half-a-dozen or more, each couple struggling with the other to gain possession of him. The young fellow, however, whether he understood the meaning of it or not, entered at once into the spirit of the fun, and even aided his captors in carrying out their project.

“Aisy now Judith,” he cried, adopting his native brogue, as he always did when in unusual good humour. “Let Mary and Jane, be afther tassin’ me first, an’ sure you shall have your turn. Troth, I wouldn’t t balk ye av ye like it. Ye may carry me round the deck all day av jo ll do it quiet and easy, bedad.”

He was actually passed from one laughing couple to another until he had made the circuit of the decks half-a-dozen times, himself cheering in Irish fashion the while, and being responded to amidst roars of laughter by his own countrywomen, who were numerous represented on board. The army captain, the doctor's son, myself, the mates, steward, cook, all on board, in fact - were “lifted” in turn, and then as the bearers, or lifters, began to grow weary the saturnalia ceased. The captain and Sir John thought they had permitted the matter to go as far as was consistent with the discipline of the ship, and perhaps a little further. The women were good-humouredly called to order, and soon afterwards piped down to breakfast, and the captain, doctor, and passengers went to their breakfast in the cabin, where the retired naval physician was unmercifully joked upon the astonishment and terror he had exhibited. He acknowledged that he was frightened at first; but he, as well as his nephew, was an Irishman, and possessed of a natural feeling of gallantry towards the female sex, even though the females were convicts and outcasts.

“Sure they’ve behaved themselves very well during the voyage,” he said, “and a little outbreak like this once upon occasion is pardonable. Don’t ye think - couldn’t ye now”, addressing Sir J__H__ and the captain, “just give them a bit of a treat for once in a way? Sure, if it would cost anything beyond the Government allowance, I’d bear my part of the expense, and my son's and my nevy's into the bargain.”

“Why doctor, you seem rather to have enjoyed the joke,” replied the captain laughingly.

“And why not?” answered the doctor. “Tis but right the poor creatures should have a bit of fun to themselves, if they *have* been in trouble. Sure, they were very decent and respectful with it all”.

A general laugh arose at the little doctor's expense, but his nephew now took up the plea, and averred that it was only fair that for once in a way the women should have a treat.

Sir John and the captain were not unwilling but the difficulty was how it was possible to afford them a treat. As things were, they had their liberty so long as they behaved themselves, and had every comfort that they could reasonably expect, even though they had been free steerage passengers. At length it was decided that, at the joint expense of the passengers, plum pudding of a better quality than ordinary should be supplied *ad libitum* to the women for dinner that day, in lieu of the rice and molasses that were the regular provision of the day, and that after dinner, instead of the measure of lime-juice that was served out daily to each female, each one should be treated to a pannikin of moderately strong punch, concocted by mixing rum and water with the lime-juice and sweetening it well with sugar.

I have observed that one of the convicts a young Scotch girl eighteen years of age died of consumption when the ship was on the Equator. Great sympathy was felt for this poor girl by all her companions in guilt and misfortune during the latter days of her illness when her dangerous condition became known.

Outcasts though these poor creatures were, they were not dead to all womanly feeling. Many among them, perchance, were the victims of circumstance, and under happier auspices might have been respectable members of society. Who can say how sorely the guilty may have been tempted -how long and how bravely they resisted temptation before they fell? Who among us can say, "I would have resisted to the end?" The very judge who passes sentence upon the wretched criminal in the dock might have changed places with him had their positions in society, their early education, and their early companionship been reversed. The pure minded, gentle-nurtured, kind-hearted lady who looks with a feeling of mingled pity and scorn upon her fallen sister passing by in the flaunting garb of vice and shame, or in the rags of poverty, and perchance of crime, might have been such as that fallen sister but for circumstances over which she had no control. Let us not pride ourselves upon our station or our virtues, but let us rather be thankful that we have not been tempted as others have been; or if we *have* withstood temptation, let us still be thankful that strength was given us to resist, and look with compassion upon the fallen, who are our brothers and sisters still.

Everything that the doctor's skill could devise was done for this poor girl of whom I have spoken, but she was beyond human aid even when she was sent on board the ship. The **fell** disease for which science has no remedy had fixed itself upon her lungs, and she slowly pined away and died, far from the relatives and friends she had known and loved in happier days, ere she had yielded to the temptation which brought her and perhaps those near and dear to her to grief and shame. [She had been a respectable servant girl in Edinburgh, and, out of a situation and suffering from illness, she had stolen and sold to purchase food and medicine, a muslin dress that was exposed at the door of a draper's shop.]

All on board felt for her, all on board pitied her fate. She was buried at midnight, on a calm moonlit night, when the surface of the ocean was smooth and glittering as that of a mirror. Sewn up in a white sheet, and strapped to a board loaded with shot at one end, the lifeless form was laid across the bulwarks near the gangway. The sailors of the watch below and all the convicts were summoned to the deck by the slow tolling of the ship's bell. The passengers came forth from the cabin. Sir J__ H__ read aloud the prayers appointed by the Church to be read at the funeral of those buried at sea, and when he spoke the solemn words - "We therefore commit the body of our beloved sister to the deep" etc etc, the board was loosened, it slid swiftly over the side, a splash was heard and the corpse sank deep beneath the parting waters, there to abide until the Great Day when the sea shall give up her dead.

The splash was heard amidst solemn silence, but immediately there arose from the assembled females a wild "keene" of lament, which rang in the ears of the listeners for long afterwards and - many among them sobbing hysterically - the females retired to the deck below. And in a few days, she who had been one of their unfortunate companions was by them forgotten as though she had never existed.

I have said that the doctor read prayers over the corpse of the convict girl. He also read prayers every Sunday morning to the assembled females, passengers, and crew, according to the strict orders of the Government. It was also the practice of the monitors to say grace over every meal, and on Sundays, when the weather was fine, groups of females might be seen listening attentively to the governesses

reading aloud from the Bible, or from some religious book or tract, all other reading being interdicted on the Sabbath day.

I have stated that the women were sent below at six o'clock P.M. Occasionally, however, some of them were permitted to remain upon deck until eight or nine o'clock, as a mark of especial favour for good behaviour.

Still, although the rule was that all the females were to be below at six o'clock, they were not obliged to go to bed until nine or ten o'clock. Until that hour the "between decks" were well lighted with swinging lanterns, and they might amuse themselves as they pleased. Singing was a favourite pastime with them, and, as many of them possessed good voices, the singing heard on a still, fine night at sea was very pleasing, and sometimes extremely beautiful and touching. Improper or vulgar songs were, however, strictly interdicted, and it is but just to say that they were seldom attempted, and in all cases were immediately silenced by the proper feeling of the great majority of the convicts, without the necessity of any interference on the part of the officers of the ship. Swearing or using foul language was strictly forbidden. The women were warned that if they made use of such language they would be punished, and after the first few weeks at sea, even those who had been accustomed to swearing and lewd conversation were generally silenced immediately - if by chance they forgot themselves - by the reproofs of their better-disposed companions. The very few who still continued to indulge in profanity were shunned as pariahs by the rest, until at length even they were shamed into propriety.

Shortly after ten o'clock at night the doctor, accompanied by the third mate, who carried a lantern, went below, and made a thorough inspection of the "between decks", saw that all the women had retired to their bunks, that the decks were thoroughly cleared up for the night, and all the lights, with the exception of a lantern at each end of the long deck, were put out, and listened to any complaints that anyone had to make. The women were then left to themselves until daybreak.

Thus passed day after day during the long four months' voyage, and I venture to repeat that, after the first month, six weeks at furthest, the Gilbert Henderson had on board more orderly, a more healthy, a more contented, - I almost written a happier, and I may certainly write, in appearance a happier - lot of passengers than ever had emigrant vessel that passed over her track, a more healthy, and contented, and better-conducted lot of passengers than she have had had the convicts been free emigrants; over whom the same salutary control could not have been exercised and who could not have been kept from quarrelling and with one another.

As we drew near the end of the voyage, many were the heartfelt aspirations among the convicts that they remain on board - that they could pass their whole term penal service sailing to and fro on board the Gilbert Henderson. I verily believe that there were few among them would not, had they had the choice, have rather preferred remain on board the ship than to land. They had made friendships with one another, they had learned to place confidence in those in authority over them, and perhaps many among them had led a happier and more peaceful life on board the ship than they had ever led on shore, and had felt and acknowledged its benefits. They knew not what fate awaited them when they should be landed at Hobart Town and separated one from another, perhaps never to meet again, and they preferred their present peace and quietude and regularity of life to a doubtful future.

Two of the convicts, whose crimes would really at the present day he considered almost venial, had been permitted, as an act of grace on the part of the Government, to bring their children with them, and these children - boys of three and two years old - had thriven wonderfully during the voyage, and had been petted by all on board to such a degree, that had they been a few years older they would have been utterly spoiled.

At length the lofty, sombre mountains of Tasmania hove in sight, and the next day the Gilbert Henderson came to an anchor in the harbour of Hobart Town, and was immediately boarded by the Custom House officers and others of the colonial authorities. The superintendent of convicts came on board, and, one after another each female was summoned before him and requested to state her name and age and the place of her birth if she knew it, and also the occupation she had followed in England, Ireland, or Scotland. She was likewise requested to say whether she could read or write, or neither, or both, and whether she had any marks on her arms or other part of her person, and if on her arms to show

them, otherwise to describe them. She was then told that she must in future, while under the especial control of the Government authorities, answer to a number attached to her Christian name, and informed that her future treatment would depend entirely upon her own conduct in the colony – the past was forgotten. None were asked to state what they had committed. A list of the names of the convicts, with the crimes of which they had been convicted, and an account of their conduct in prison between conviction and embarkation, had already been sent out, was in the possession of the officers, who sometimes astonished some one whom they were questioning by telling her that they hoped she would behave better than she had at such and such a gaol, where she had been guilty of certain misconduct.

The whole of the convicts were then assembled on deck, the captain and doctor were requested to state what had their general conduct during the voyage; and if any among them had been remarkable for insubordination to point such persons out.

Sir John and the captain, however, reported favourably. Even the old woman whose frequent insubordination has been mentioned was passed over, inasmuch as her conduct had wonderfully improved.

Then the women were told to state boldly, once and for all whether they had any complaint to make of the conduct of doctor, captain, officers or crew.

To this there was a general cry of “None! None! None!” amid a general clapping of hands, until the officer had to call for and insist upon silence.

It was customary at the period of which I write, and it still be the case in Western Australia, immediately to place out the female convicts under masters and mistresses might require their services. Thus, if a lady wanted a nurse, a housemaid, a dairy maid, a sempstress, or even a lady’s-maid, and saw a young female among the newly-arrived convicts whose appearance she liked, and who possessed the qualification necessary for the service, she could immediately take the convict into her household, on giving evidence of her respectability and responsibility; only in that case she called upon to report her assigned servant once a month to the proper authorities, and in case of any misconduct on the part of the servant she could be sent by her master or mistress to gaol for punishment. At least one-fourth of the smartest and best-looking girls on board the Gilbert Henderson were at once assigned in this way, and carried off by their new masters and mistresses. The remainder were sent to the different penitentiaries, there to remain in Government employ until they should be needed elsewhere. At this period, also - and perhaps it may still be the case in Western Australia - I cannot say - any free male emigrant could marry (of course with the girl's consent) any convict girl to whom he took a fancy, after she had been four months in the colony, and had behaved herself during that term with propriety. It was, however, necessary, in case of such a marriage to obtain the sanction of the governor, and of the girl's master and mistress. If the sanction of these persons were obtained, and the marriage took place, the husband made himself answerable for his wife's safe keeping in the colony, and was obliged to report her to the proper authorities once a month; and in case of his wife's misconduct the husband had it in his power to send her to prison for punishment. Such marriages were frequent, though, of course, the free husband was nearly always a man of the poorest class, yet many of the marriages are said to have proved very happy to both parties concerned.

On a convict's being assigned, the crime of which she had been convicted was made known to the master or mistress alone, and they were expected to keep it secret, under penalty of a heavy fine, from all other persons, unless the convicts (who were no longer termed convicts, but Government people) gave them permission to disclose it.

Male convicts were at all times, I believe, more harshly treated than females. Certainly, at the period of which I write, female convicts who conducted themselves with propriety had little to complain of, except, perhaps, the superciliousness of the free emigrants of the lower class, and sometimes the harsh, scornful language or the abuse of their masters and mistresses, which scorn and abuse they dared not resent. Most of the higher class of masters and mistresses, however, treated their convict servants quite as well, and in some instances much better, than, as a general rule, domestic servants of the humbler classes are treated in England.

A few hours after the Gilbert Henderson had come to anchor, and soon after the convict officials had quitted the ship, the state barge of his Excellency the Lieutenant Governor of Van Diemen's Land was seen approaching. It contained Sir John Franklin (then Lieutenant Governor of Diemen's Land) and Lady Franklin, who were attended by a guard of honor in the colonial uniform of blue and silver. Sir John Franklin wore the uniform of a post-captain of the Royal Navy, and he and his lady had reached the ship before we had time to fire a salute or make any preparations to receive them.

I was informed that Sir John Franklin made it a point to visit every convict ship that arrived at Hobart Town, and Lady Franklin always accompanied her gallant husband on board female convict ships. It was the first time I had met Sir John Franklin, who was one of the handsomest men I ever saw - standing I should think, over six feet in height, and stout in proportion, with handsome features, a fresh florid complexion, and an exceedingly benevolent expression of countenance. His Excellency and Lady Franklin lunched on board, and Sir John inquired into the particulars of the voyage, and before he went away invited the doctor, Sir J__H__, the captain, and the passengers to dine with him at Government House on the following day. Lady Franklin, meanwhile, with a gentle sympathy and a natural kindness, which at once attracted them towards her, sought out the younger convicts and assembled them round her, and addressed them briefly yet earnestly, telling them that if now they behaved well, and were honest, virtuous and diligent, their past follies and crimes would be forgotten, and they might yet become happy wives and mothers, and respectable and respected members of society.

Sir John and Lady Franklin left the ship under a salute of nineteen guns and the next day, according to appointment, captain, doctor and passengers, dined at Government House. The conversation during the evening turned upon Arctic travel and discovery, in which Sir John had already greatly distinguished himself, and after we left the house the remark was passed between us that our gallant host would be happier in command of a new Arctic expedition than he was Governor of Tasmania

He was, in fact, a man of too much kindly and generous for the post he occupied. He could not bring himself to deal so harshly with the convict population, nor to hold reins of government so tightly over them, as the free settlers required at his hands; and Lady Franklin, I fancied, also - so mild and gentle

Soon afterwards Sir John Franklin resigned the lieutenant-governorship and returned to England and sailed thence on the last fatal voyage from which he never returned

In the course of a day or two the convicts were all removed the ship which had so long been their home - perhaps, as I have said before, the happiest home many among them had ever known - some to go to the masters and mistresses to whom they had been assigned, others to go to penitentiaries at Hobart Town, Launceston, and different parts of the island. It was rather a painful leave-taking. Many of the females had been secretly working little souvenirs in the shape of book marks, etc, which they now respectfully and timidly offered to the doctor, captain, and passengers who still remained on board. Sadly and sorrowfully enough they stepped over the side of the ship into the steamer that to convey them to their several destinations, and at length, when the rope was cast loose, and the steamer went off with her living freight - some among them tried to get up feminine cheer, as they waved their bonnets and handkerchiefs at the ship and the doctor and captain, who were standing at the gangway watching their departure. But they could not manage it; the feeble cheer broke down, and many of them sat down sobbing, or threw their arms round the necks of their companions and wept on their shoulders, so long as the steamboat remained in sight of the vessel.

More than twenty years have passed away since the Gilbert Henderson landed her living freight on the shores of Tasmania. Many changes have occurred since then. I have never seen the good ship since, she may be still ploughing salt sea waves, or, for aught I know, she may have foundered in the deep. No doubt many of the females she landed at Hobart Town are dead, for though most were young, some were then old. Nearly all have long ago served their term of penal service, and no doubt many of them are now wives and mothers, and are, perhaps, in the possession of independence and wealth, in the land of their adoption - for very rarely indeed do female convicts return to England.

Van Diemen's Land, or Tasmania as I have said, is no longer a penal colony, and as the departure of a female convict ship from the shores of Great Britain is now of rare occurrence, and may soon cease, I trust that the literal and truthful description I have given of life on board a female convict ship may prove to possess interest to the reader. M

*Convicts are sent to the Falkland Isles to Gibraltar and perhaps to other dependencies but I believe these re exceptional cases Mid-Western Australia Is the only colony open to female Convicts.

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