

No. 18.

The AGENT-GENERAL to the Hon. the COLONIAL SECRETARY.

(No. 714.)

7, Westminster Chambers, Victoria Street, Westminster, S.W.,

29th October, 1873.

SIR,—

I have the honor to acknowledge the Hon. Mr. O'Rorke's Memorandum of 28th July (No. 153, 1873), calling my attention to the fact that no notice has been taken of the questions raised in the Immigration Commissioners' report on the ship "Bebington," and the report of a Commission appointed by His Excellency the Governor, to inquire into the circumstances attending the death of sixteen children on the passage, but acknowledging receipt, under cover of my letter of 12th April (No. 238), of Captain Forster's report on that vessel. I did not think it necessary to make any special comment on that report, because nothing that I could have said on the subject would have added to the value of the testimony of such an authority. I did, however, remark in my letter forwarding the report that you would perceive therefrom that all the arrangements on board that vessel, as regarded internal fittings, ventilation, hospitals, water-closets, inspection of emigrants, &c., had been approved by the Inspecting Officers of Her Majesty's Emigration Commissioners, and were in accordance with all the requirements of the Passengers Act.

As I have already pointed out, the report of the Immigration Commissioners in New Zealand, so far as the emigrants themselves were concerned, was very satisfactory. They reported, "We have much pleasure in announcing that no serious cases of sickness among the adults occurred during the voyage. The immigrants appeared in good health and spirits; the provisions were generally of good quality, and had been served out with regularity; the distilling apparatus was in excellent order, and no complaints were made of the quantity of water supplied being insufficient."

The Commissioners further state that "The surgeon-superintendent records the death of sixteen infants from diarrhoea and exhaustion. He attributes this mortality to the fact that these children were all weakly and ill-nourished when they came on board. To confirm this he points out the fact that the children born during the voyage (eight) are all living and in good health. The medical comforts were exhausted three weeks before the arrival of the vessel in port, from which it would appear that the scale provided for in the contract is not sufficient where there are so many women and children; and we would suggest that a more liberal allowance of such articles as preserved milk, sago, corn-flour, and rice should be supplied for the use of the young children." And the Commissioners conclude by "recommending the payment of all gratuities, and expressing their admiration of the tact and patience displayed by the captain and surgeon in the discharge of their duties."

It will, therefore, be seen that, so far as the Commissioners' report is concerned, there is scarcely anything calling for explanation on my part. The medical comforts have proved quite sufficient in other ships, and I have no doubt would have been equally so in the case of the "Bebington" had they been properly served out to the emigrants, and not tampered with during the voyage.

With regard to the evidence taken before the Commission, I may state that, after a careful reperusal of it, I cannot see that it calls for any explanation or comment from me. It must be at once apparent to the Government that I cannot exercise any control over the officers after the ship has quitted the port of embarkation. All that I can do is to exercise the utmost care in my power in the selection of surgeon and matron; and in the present case, as appears from the local Immigration Commissioners' report, the selection was a fortunate one in every respect. The issue of medical comforts must of necessity be left to the discretion of the surgeon-superintendent, and must be in a great measure regulated by circumstances. It is, I think, sufficiently evident, from the report of the Special Commission, that the medical comforts on board the "Bebington" were reduced by peculation on the part of some one on board, although the evidence failed to bring the offence home to those on whom suspicion rested.

Charles Howe, who acted as purser during the greater part of the voyage, states in his evidence that he could only account for the shortness of milk by saying that it was stolen by the people who were helping him. He proceeds "These men were passengers. I knew that a man named Brennan sold some. I have heard the passengers say that any of them could buy milk from Brennan. I have heard Hunt say so. I told the Captain, at the time, that these people who came down to help me were not trustworthy."

Another witness, Henry Hardy, deposes "To the best of my belief the medical comforts in many cases issued for the use of the children, were eaten by the parents themselves, who, I have heard say, did not want children in the country they were going to."

Another witness, James Dickens, gives similar evidence, and states, "I think in several cases the parents showed great indifference to their children's comfort and health, and also were apparently but little affected by the loss of their children."

With reference to the suggestion contained in the Commissioner's report, that an emigrant steward should be specially appointed, I beg to point out that I could not do this without transferring to myself a responsibility which at present very properly belongs to the owners. If I took into my own hands the appointment of petty officers, the owners would in a measure cease to be accountable to the Government for the proper performance of their contract.