

of employer and worker, does not apply to the transactions between gum-digger and gum-buyer, as each is supposed to be a free agent, not bound by any contract. We have found that in some cases the digger is under considerable disadvantages through not being paid in cash; but there are several sides to the question, and the circumstances alter in certain fields. On a leased field or freehold land the owner or occupier can, of course, make what terms he pleases with the digger who expresses his wish to work on such property. In some cases the occupier requires either a rental per annum or a royalty on the quantity of gum extracted, but in many other cases he allows the digger to take what gum he pleases from the ground, on condition that the gum is sold to the occupier, and all provisions bought at his store. If these conditions be acceded to, the digger must trust entirely to the honesty of the storekeeper not to pay him too little for his gum, and not to charge him too highly for his stores. As a matter of custom, the amount owing for stores is deducted from the value of gum received before the balance is handed over; and it would not only be detrimental to the industry to interfere with this method of payment for advances of food-supply, but it would be specially and directly harmful to the digger himself, as his credit would immediately cease. If the digger considers that too much is being exacted from him in the way of unlimited tribute on his gum and provisions his only remedy is to move further on, either on to the lands of the Crown or those of some other proprietor.

There have been brought under your Commissioners' notice instances where the balance between the price of gum sold and the store account has not been handed over, but simply carried on as a credit in the books, and the digger has found it almost impossible to obtain any cash whatever, without taking legal proceedings, that in remote country districts would entail great trouble and expense. Moreover, pressure is applied in some cases to men who are not digging on the lands leased by the storekeeper, but on adjoining Crown lands, and they are ordered to sell their gum to the storekeeper at a low price on pain of being refused supplies of provisions, even for cash. In a lonely place, where sometimes for many miles there is only one store, the cost of sending the gum away to some distant place of sale compels the digger to accept harsh terms of purchase. It was urged by some witnesses that it was impossible to escape this levy by sending their gum direct to Auckland, as, if it became known to the local storekeeper that gum was being sent away, not only would every difficulty of transit be put in his path, but a telegram would at once be forwarded to Auckland warning merchants there that if such gum was purchased business relations with the storekeeper must cease. No corroboration of the statement was received from Auckland merchants, but they stated that they did not care about receiving small parcels direct from diggers, as these involved too much trouble and expense in handling, &c.

The greatest hardship is felt by the diggers should the storekeeper be also the holder of a publican's license. In such a case many of the diggers—men who under a hot sun spend long hours of toil—find themselves betrayed by persuasion and their own moral weakness into wasting their paper credit on intoxicants, and they go on from year to year little better than slaves, without homes and without money, unable even to get the passage-money to leave the district. They are, in fact, as they have been named to us, the publican's "working bullocks." Such a state of things needs remedying; and if the provisions of the Truck Act be not made applicable to buyers and sellers of gum, lest the honest storekeeper be unable to recover the value of goods supplied, at least there should be insured to the digger the certainty that after winning the gum he could, on demand, obtain in cash its value, less the price of stores already supplied to him.

24. Complaints were received from diggers to the effect that they were often unjustly dealt with in the matter of weight. Instances were given of many pounds in the hundred-weight being pilfered from the seller of gum by means of unproved balances and scales. It appeared from the investigations of your Commissioners that the system of inspection of weights and measures was exceedingly defective, and that some of the weighing appliances were of a very primitive or antique character. At present the visits of Inspectors are few and far between, in some cases years having elapsed without any visit having been made to certain establishments. The Inspector is handicapped by the weight and bulk of the testing apparatus that he has to carry, and his progress in remote and unsettled districts is at once slow and well known, so that concealment of false weights and unfair balances is comparatively easy. Even in the more complex weighing-machines the unscrewing of a nut on the regulator affects the weight recorded, and it is difficult to see how a check could be applied, unless the regulating apparatus could, by an alteration of the present machine, be locked and sealed by the Inspector. Nevertheless, attention should be given to it by practical men, not only