

OUR ANTIPODES:
OR,
RESIDENCE AND RAMBLES
IN
THE AUSTRALASIAN COLONIES.
WITH
A GLIMPSE OF THE GOLD FIELDS.

BY LT. COLONEL
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CHAPTER XXI.

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 PHICAL JUMBLE.

Jan. 1, 1851.—THERE was, it must be admitted, nothing remarkably festive, for the first day of the new year, in visiting a female penitentiary and lying-in establishment! Such was, nevertheless, my morning's employment. The Cascades factory is seated at the foot of Mount Wellington, wedged in a gully between high hills—a bad situation, except as regards the supply of water, which is plentiful. The buildings are enclosed within a high wall, with barred gates and vigilant turnkeys; it is, in short, a gaol in every respect according to the respective deserts of the inmates. We were received at the entrance by the matron, a dignified lady who looked quite capable of maintaining strict discipline whether in a public or in a merely domestic establishment. From her hands we received, in due military form, "the morning state" of her garrison—which, as it appeared, amounted to 730 women and 130 infants. In turn we visited the several courts, solitary cells, the hospital, refectories, dormitories, and lavatories. In one yard was formed up for our inspection, in hollow square, seventy or eighty women—open to be hired as servants. "These," as we were informed, "were the better conducted, and the pregnant women." In another court were a strong division of more troublesome and notorious characters, who were under restraint and not permitted to go into service. The uniform, a very unbecoming one to the person, however becoming to the station of the wearer, is a

white mob cap and a dress of grey duffle. As we passed down the ranks the poor creatures saluted us with a running fire of curtseys, and a dead silence was everywhere observed. In a large exercise yard, with an open shed in the centre affording shelter from the sun, we found some sixty women, with as many babies from two years to two days old—women and children all silent! One would have thought them all deaf and dumb;—never was I before in so numerous a nursery;—I hope I never may again! The children were mostly healthy and pretty. As for their mothers—there must, I suppose, be a good deal in dress as an element of beauty—for I scarcely saw a tolerably pretty woman in seven hundred. Some of the females, I found, were the hired nurses of the establishment—not the mothers of the children. Of these latter many, it appears, merely enter the factory to deposit their “kid forlorn,” and, when sufficiently recovered, return to service in the town or country within the district to which their ticket or pass extends, and not a few re-enter its walls as soon as it is possible for them to require again obstetric assistance. It is nothing to say that many of these poor brats will never know their own fathers;—their mothers, perhaps, know them no better: and many of the wretched little ones, in the hands of the nurses, will never know either parent. The public consoles itself with the dry fact, that they will all come into the labour market. A large ward was allotted to the mid-day sleep of the poor little babes. It was rather a pretty sight for a father (of none of them) to contemplate. There were a score or so of wooden cribs, in each of which lay two, three, or four innocents, stowed away head and tail, like *sardines à l’huile*; while others were curling about like a litter of kittens in a basket of straw. All were wonderfully good—chiefly, I suspect, because there was no anxious mamma nor fussy nurse constantly soliciting them to be so.

The visiting-surgeon of the establishment, whom I accompanied, had found it necessary to prescribe half-rations and gentle medical treatment (a grain or so of ipecacuanha, I suppose,) to a certain turbulent few of the prisoners; and as it was whispered to him that his fair but fierce patients meditated a remonstrance when it came to their turn to be visited; and as there was little doubt this appeal would have taken a

Billingsgate form, the prudent Medico postponed hearing it, which, I confess, was to me a great relief. This was on his part a merciful as well as a discreet step, because the half-rations of the insurgents would assuredly have been further reduced to bread-and-water discussed in silence and solitude—things that no woman loveth. Forty-eight hours of this kind of single-blessedness, with the above meagre diet, and a prescription slightly productive of nausea, occasions, it is said, a prodigiously soothing effect upon ladies afflicted with gross health and fiery temperaments. Going along the avenues of solitary cells, there was a great unlocking of massive doors, and a questioning of "Have you any complaints?" I only looked into two or three. One woman was carding, another combing wool. A third cell, on being opened, I found to be completely darkened;—it seemed empty, so I passed within the door to examine its construction. It looked like the den of a wolf, and I almost started back when from the extreme end of the floor I found a pair of bright, flashing eyes fixed on mine. Their owner arose and took a step or two forward; it was a small, slight, and quite young girl—very beautiful in feature and complexion,—but it was the fierce beauty of the wild cat! I am a steady married man, of a certain age,—but at no period of my life would I, for a trifle, have shared for half-an-hour the cell of that sleek little savage; for when she purred loudest I should have been most afraid of her claws! As the heavy door slammed in her face, and the strong bolts shot into the grooves, the turnkey informed me that this was one of the most refractory and unmanageable characters in the prison. That said beauty is a sad distorter of man's perceptions! Justice ought to be doubly blindfolded when dealing with her. I fear me that the pang of pity that shot across my heart when that pretty prisoner was shut again from the light of day, might have found no place there had she been as ugly as the sins that had brought her into trouble. I had no more stomach for solitary cells this day.

One of the great yards of the Factory was devoted to laundress-work. Squads of women were up to their elbows in suds,—carrying on the cruel process of wringing,—or displaying their thick ankles as they spread the linen over the drying lines. The townfolk may have their washing done here at 1s. 6d. per dozen, the money going towards the

expenses of the institution. I was pained to see so many very youthful creatures in this yard—delinquents in their earliest teens; debauched ere the pith had hardened in their little bones. We had next a glimpse of a room full of sempstresses, most of them employed on fine work. It was not impossible, the matron stated, that some of the elaborate shirt-fronts we should see at the Government-house ball this evening had been worked in this, and washed and “got up” in the last ward. A rougher fabric done by the less-skilled prisoners is a coarse kind of woollen tweed, only used for prison-dresses.

However painful to a devoted servant of “the sex” must necessarily be the details of an establishment such as this, there was some consolation at least in carrying away the conviction that everything that the care and ingenuity of man could contrive for the perfecting of the system has here been exhausted. The cleanliness of the prison was almost dazzling, and the order and discipline appeared faultless; and I had much pleasure in recording the same in the Matron’s Visitors’ Book. “See Naples and die,” is the Italian motto. “See a Female Factory once, and don’t do so again,” is mine!*

The grand New-year’s ball at Government-house afforded a refreshing counterpoise to my morning’s employment. The vice-regal residence itself has little to recommend it as an edifice, and its site would be much better occupied by buildings connected with the harbour and wharfs, which are close at hand. A weather-boarded ball-room of singularly fine proportions has lately been erected by the present Lieut.-Governor, Sir William Denison; in which the six or seven hundred guests present this night were by no means crowded. The entrance to the ball-room from the body of the house is through an arched lobby and down a few steps which form a kind of daïs overlooking the saloon. On the top of this stood the Christmas tree, whose main body was formed of a single fern-tree, its wide and graceful fronds spreading above a whole cornucopia of midsummer flowers, looking strange, doubtless, in the eyes of such of the company as were not

* Newspaper notice, January, 1851:—

10 January.—“FEMALE PASSHOLDERS.—Number of Female Passholders awaiting hire: Hobart Town Brickfields Dépôt, 276; Cascades Factory, 176; New Town Farm, 71; Launceston Factory, 38; Ross Hiring Dépôt, 49.—Total 610.”