

No. 58.

The AGENT-GENERAL to the Hon. the MINISTER for IMMIGRATION.

(No. 1692.)

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

20th October, 1874.

SIR,—

With reference to Mr. Vogel's letter of the 29th June, No. 181, enclosing me a copy of the report of the Royal Commission appointed to inquire into the origin of the outbreak of infectious disease on board the ship "Scimitar," I have the honor to inform you that I have received a letter, of which I subjoin a copy from the Assistant Secretary of the Marine Department of the Board of Trade, informing me that the Board have called upon their Medical Inspector at Plymouth to report on that part of the evidence which imputes blame to him for having allowed infected persons to embark contrary to the opinion of the surgeon of the ship.

2. Since the receipt of Mr. Vogel's letter, I have made the circumstances attending the despatch of the "Scimitar" the subject of very careful inquiry; and I have read, not without surprise, the evidence upon which the very sweeping statements of the report, which are again expanded and intensified in the Hon. the Premier's letter, are based. Mr. Vogel states that "great carelessness, to say the least of it, is the rule rather than the exception in the despatch of ships" under this department, and that "the medical inspection of the emigrants is of such a character as to be practically useless;" that "the results" of this system in the case of the "Scimitar" "have been of a very distressing character;" that the ship was sent to sea "with the seeds of infection notoriously on board;" that fever having broken out a few days after leaving port, "she became a floating pest-house;" that "more than half the emigrants were down with one form of disease or another," and that "twenty-six died."

3. I have searched the evidence in vain for any adequate foundation for these allegations, except the last. It is a fact that twenty-six children, seven of whom were infants under a year old, and eight of whom were under two years of age, died on board the "Scimitar." But as the Commissioners remark, some of these must have succumbed to the hardships of the voyage in any circumstances, and, as they add, it is a satisfactory result that with so many adults on board there was not one death among them. Such a death rate is strangely low for a ship which earned the character of a floating pest-house. The "Scimitar" carried 430 emigrants. They were embarked in midwinter, in wet weather, and a peculiarly unwholesome season, during which maladies of the kind which broke out on board were widely epidemic in England. I find in the Registrar-General's report on the three last months of 1873, that the deaths by measles nearly trebled, and the deaths by scarlet fever more than doubled, those of the preceding quarter. There were 3,223 deaths in England by measles as against 1,180; 5,576 deaths by scarlatina as against 2,088 in the preceding three months. The weather of the month of December had been peculiarly unhealthy. There had been in the middle of the month a week of bitterly cold weather, in the course of which the deficiency of mean temperature amounted at one time to 16½°. It is natural to expect that among 430 people, collected at such a period of the year, some germs of the diseases prevalent in this country should exist; that, in addition to the ordinary zymotic maladies, the same average of catarrh, influenza, and diarrhoea should be found afloat as ashore. But I am happy to learn that, of the many adults who suffered from coughs and bowel complaints, not one died—that those who were, as Mr. Vogel says, down, all got up again. That among such a number of people the seeds of infection were latent in one or two families is no doubt demonstrated by the result: that they were notoriously so, I maintain there is no reliable evidence. There is very distinct evidence to the contrary effect. I take the Surgeon-Superintendent, Dr. Hosking's own evidence, on one sentence in which the censure of the Commission is chiefly based. In regard to the very first case of infectious fever which broke out on board, that of the child William Brown, he swears that "no examination prior to our sailing could have detected disease in this case." He deposes that "on the whole the state of health of the emigrants was good at the time of embarkation;" that "there were no cases of measles in the dépôt at the time"; that "the 'Scimitar' passengers were inspected by him before going on board;" that "he passed them all;" that there were several cases among the children he "was suspicious of sickening for measles, but the symptoms were not sufficiently developed to justify him in rejecting them;" and he adds, "previous to embarkation there were a number of cases of catarrh, but nothing serious." It would not be easy to find in England, at Christmas-time, 430 men, women, and children without a good number of cases of catarrh among them. All this distinct and circumstantial evidence is, it seems to me, inconsistent with the allegation that the existence of infectious disease on board at the time the ship was sent to sea was, as Mr. Vogel alleges, notorious. It was Dr. Hosking's especial duty to prevent persons notoriously infected from being sent to sea; and his powers in this respect were unlimited. Nor, although he admits that his inspection before embarkation was of a "cursory kind," does he deny that the medical inspection, which immediately followed on board, was careful and thorough. What does he, in fact, depose upon this point? He says, "the medical inspector (Dr. Eccles) came on board about mid-day, and was occupied several hours in examining the passengers. The whole of the 430 emigrants were collected on the poop and passed one by one. The examination by the medical inspector was very careful. I stood by him. In every case he looked at the tongue, and whenever he saw a case of the slightest suspicion, he examined the throat and the skin of the chest. All the emigrants were found apparently in good condition with the exception of a family named Smith; the whole were sent ashore as showing symptoms of scarlet fever, and I understand the suspicions of Dr. Eccles were afterwards confirmed. We left that family behind." This careful, final, and general inspection, it must be remembered, followed on a regular daily examination of the emigrants by Dr. Eccles. Dr. Hosking deposes that when he arrived at Plymouth, "Dr. Eccles, the Imperial Government Inspector, was in charge of the dépôt. He attended daily about nine o'clock a.m., and inspected the emigrants." The family of Smith was not the only one regarding which stringent precautions were taken. Some of the Tanner family were at once removed from the dépôt on showing signs of disease. The Wolfrey family were landed a few minutes before the ship sailed for the same reason. Dr. Hosking had full powers, and he knew it. When