

# COLONIA COSME.

## THE NEW AUSTRALIA EXPERIMENT.

WITH SOME PERSONAL RECOLLECTIONS OF LIFE AS A COLONIST.

(BY MARY JANE GILMORE.)

### I.

Colonia Cosme is the outcome of New Australia. It may be remembered that the Paraguayan Government granted the New Australians a large tract of land for settlement purposes. But there was never any real unity in New Australia. After William Lane left, first one person was chairman, then another; one arrangement followed another; troubles and dissensions grew, parties formed ready to cut one another's throats, each one petitioning the Government against the other, till at last that most long-suffering of bodies, the Paraguayan Government, interfered, and sent out an official to fix up things and report.

The result was that the colony ceased, in the original sense of the word, to be a colony, the Government giving each settler so many acres of land for his individual use. The Paraguayan and the New Australian live side by side, equal under the law, and equal socially. The Paraguayan gives a dance and the white man attends it. The white man gives one and the Paraguayan comes. A wedding is the signal for an all-round drunk, Paraguayan and Australian drinking out of the same bottle. It is easy to get drunk in Paraguay. Everyone grows his own sugar-cane and makes his own rum. So far, though there are half-caste children, there have been no marriages with the Paraguayans.

### FORMING THE NEW COLONY.

When the Cosme people, about 58, left New Australia, William Lane, though he could have made any subdivision of the land and cattle, gave up, with the consent of those with him, and with a Quixotism that we cannot but admire, all claim to everything. The new colonists set out with a small supply of food, the general personal baggage, a few implements and tools, and a few head of cattle. None had the least idea where the ultimate settlement would be, but there was plenty of enthusiasm and great faith, and nobody minded things much, even when, later on, as Nurse Grace said, they "had to go to bed early because they got so hungry sitting up."

After leaving New Australia a camp was formed on the bank of a river, while an agent went to interview the Government about a new grant. The Government was rather taken aback by the request, and wanted to know why the grant already given would not do for both parties. Ultimately, after negotiation, a grant was offered near the yerbales—forests where the Paraguayan tea grows. An exploring party set out to locate the grant, which was only about 18 miles distant from the camp. An idea of the country can be gathered from the fact that it took the party 10 days to get there. The inspection showed that the grant was utterly unsuitable, being in wild, rugged country, with a sandy soil, and practically no communication with the markets. Another disadvantage was that it was Indian country. In the nearer distance lay part of the mountains of Central Paraguay, seamed, scarred, and riven by great gorges, and inhabited only by wild animals, the jaguar, the puma, the morabi, and the carpincho, to say nothing of the smaller fry, ocelots, tiger cats, and others. Later on we forgot to fear them, though the foxes, ocelots, and tiger cats made fowl-raising a difficult business.

### AN UNACCEPTABLE GRANT.

As soon as the grant was inspected all haste was made again to Asuncion, in the hope of getting the concession declared off. The grant was on the point of being completed, and the Minister concerned was very angry; so angry, indeed, that the colonists thought it wise to try and buy a little piece of land if they could raise the money. They had begun to learn that in a fertile country like Paraguay, with a warm climate and a regular rainfall, a large area of land was a dead-weight rather than an advantage. Thanks to

friends in Scotland, money was forthcoming, and five and a half leagues of land were bought 13 miles from a railway station, in the fork of two inexhaustible rivers, the Pirapo and the Tibicuari. This was the new home, and here they came in July, 1894.

As they entered into possession the thick rain was pouring down, the loose Paraguayan soil was soft and soaking, and the long wet grass was up to their knees as they tramped through it. "But," said a woman to me long afterwards, "it seemed like heaven. It was our own, and there was peace." Utterances such as this show the condition that had prevailed in New Australia, and the anxious uncertainty of the pioneers of Cosme after they had left that colony and lay camped at Codas.

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## NOTHING BUT PEACE.

Peace was about all there was in the new home. There were no houses, no fences, no knowledge of the locality, while the Australian experience was not such as met the requirements of the changed conditions of climate and production. All-round bush knowledge was of the greatest value, though to what extent was not recognised till English people began to come out. The Australian could turn his hand to most things. The lack of tools never daunted him. When he had no plane he used an adze, when the adze gave out, an axe. If he wanted soft wood, and it was not handy, he used hard, and made the best of it. Englishmen were quite helpless when they first joined. The way Australians worked appalled them. They were bewildered by raw material, never having seen it before, and helpless for the want of tools. We reckoned an Englishman had to be a year in the colony before he was worth anything to it.

## PECULIAR NATURAL FEATURES.

The first site chosen for a location was vacated, and a second one in a better position taken up, also on the edge of the camp. "Camp," I must explain, is treeless land. "Monte" is forest. They are interwoven one with the other in a manner difficult to explain to those who have never seen it. The camp is like a great river, widening and narrowing between widening and narrowing forest land, being in some places only a few hundred yards wide, and in others miles, diverging and converging continually. Sometimes tongues of camp are bent into the monte, forming gulfs. These are called rincones. Sometimes a small area of camp will be found wholly or almost wholly enclosed by the monte. These are fine hiding places for cattle-stealers, as the monte is as good as a fence and much more impenetrable. The soil in the camp is quite different from that of the monte, and the line between the two is almost distinct. No seed from the monte blown on to the camp ever takes root. The long rank grass covers it, growing up to the shade of the trees. There it stops, going no farther. Camp is quite unsuitable for cultivation, but the colonists had to put the plough into it to meet the necessities of the food question. The neighboring natives who now and then passed by said cultivation on the camp must fail. Asked why, they could give no reason, but only said it was so.

## CLEARING THE BIG SCRUB.

In addition to the camp put in with maize, all hands, after pitching a few tents and making a few rough shelters, went to work clearing a patch of monte. Monte clearing is terrible work, laborious and disheartening. Huge trees, the branches of one overlapping the others, dense undergrowth matted beneath them, thorn and creeper everywhere, are what has to be faced. As fast as any sort of clearing was made it was turned over and seed planted, maize, mandioca, sweet potatoes, and beans being put in. During this first terrible six months the eight-hour question slept. Men worked 16 hours a day, every man as hard as the other. Blistered hands, aching backs, hunger cravings, and over all a never-failing cheeriness and kindness. This was the early story, and the story of men and women alike.

## A TIME OF PRIVATION.

No one who had not been in the colony could imagine how things were, either as regards the material, or, to use the word not quite in its ordinary sense, the spiritual aspect. There seemed to be absolutely no such things as complaint, ill-nature, or ill-feeling. In the store, supplies ran down day by day till women washed without soap, cooked without fat, and patched the outer garments with the inner. Flour was almost non-existent. A few pounds remained for the sick, but the sick almost invariably refused to take it, saying others needed it more than they. In those days there was little to choose between the sick and the well. Want of good food was talking on all alike. Every article of

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## II.

Of course, no money passes current in the Cosme colony in Paraguay, either between members or between the colony and members. All share alike in whatever the public labor produces. As some things are not as plentiful as others, and as many things have to be bought, a general system of fixed allowance is adopted.

At certain hours the store is open. In order to keep an exact account of everything, things in the store are given out on their outside or trade sale price, so many pounds of maize, mandioca, sugar, etc., to the dollar. A dollar is a laborer's day wage in Paraguay. As prices fluctuate, a fixed average price is charged to colonists. In this way, a colonist can always see what credit he has at the store, and the storekeeper can make his financial statement at the year's end without any bother of mixed or complicated values. Maize-meal, mandioca, sweet potatoes, and beans were, when we left, unlimited in quantity, everyone getting just as much as he liked. Previously, people had been allowed only so many pounds of each of these; the allowance, small at the beginning, increasing as the production increased.

## NO ABUSE OF CREDIT.

As far as the abuse of credit is concerned, one may say that it practically never occurs. If by chance a woman does ask in excess of her card one month, she invariably repays in the next. At first, the monthly card covered the whole allowance, except sick allowance, made to people. Sick allowance means medical advice, medicine, food, nursing, and absence from work. When the card stood so, we could give an order for articles of clothing, saving the money, or rather the credit to pay for them off the card. It should be explained, in relation to credit cards, that the figures on one side (a) dealt with goods produced in the colony, and those on the other side (b), to things bought outside, which were necessarily limited in quantity, the colony never having much money to expend anywhere.

## THE SYSTEM OF EXCHANGE.

Thus, instead of spending the whole of side (b) in salt, soda, meat, etc., things not produced in the colony, a family could go without some of these, and spend the amount saved in anything else they chose to order. Under this system, it was found that while living was, owing to the poverty of the colony, poorer than was good, people made it still poorer, in order to buy clothes. Clothes had become simply tatters patched. To remedy this, a clothing allowance was agreed upon, each person to receive the same, children proportionately. This worked for a while, but newer people, not having more changes perhaps, through having shared their things, had more durable clothing, and did not need to spend their allowance. Some returned it monthly, having it cancelled. Others let it stand to their credit, so that after a few months they had a pile of dollars to their credit, as well as being decently clad, while others had only the clothing and no dollars.

## A COMMUNISTIC DIFFICULTY.

This condition of things was alien to the real meaning of the colony. The dollar credit was cancelled, and the clothing allowance abolished. In its place was fixed an arrangement, by which we applied for clothing as we wanted it. This did not work altogether well, as people had different ideas with regard to need, and also different degrees of pride, some people going without clothes who should have applied, and others applying when they should have patched. To mend this, lists were sent round to the members, asking them to notify the committee of the least possible amount of clothing they could do with for six months, so many yards of stuff being allowed to each child of a certain age, and so on to the adult. The failure of this system was that some of the children were larger the size of others, and what made six suits in one family, only made four in another. Also people in their desire not to ask too much, asked too little, and had to request supplementary allowances, while the careful and the careless family made further differences. Communism is a thing of the spirit, not of law, and it was here that in later times the colony fell short. In the big things, it was easy to make rules and keep them. One general standard did for all. But in the little things it was different. There was quite a lot of ill-feeling aroused by the supplementary clothing allowances, and I have heard since leaving the colony that members had reverted to the system of the clothing allowance on the card, saving it, or spending it as they chose.

This arrangement, while not communistic, is easy to work, and pleasanter to live under, and is, after all, exactly that of the food allowance where one has a credit and liberty to choose in what way he will take it out, except that no one is allowed to save on the food allowance, and one may on the clothing credit.

## SUPPLIES ULTIMATELY TO BE UNLIMITED.

Here, I would say that the system of allowance or limit was regarded by William Lane as a temporary thing, necessary on account of the want of plenty in the colony, and to be abolished as soon as practicable. The idea has so far been carried out by his successor, as chairman, John Lane, that allowances of maize, mandioca, etc., are now unlimited.

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Education is compulsory, English and non-sectarian. Marriage is illegal, so far as the colony is concerned, for men under 20, and for women under 18. These ages are fixed upon the grounds that the children of the immature lack normality, being either delicate physically or hyper-sensitive, nervously and mentally, and that youthful parents lack the judgment and general experience of those older. Marriage of cousins is illegal. The civil ceremony is necessarily that of Paraguay, a simple form of registration. It is supplemented by a public colony ceremonial. The property is held by the colony. The land can neither be mortgaged nor sold, while there is one dissentient voice. Possession by members is by usehold, and usehold only comes with membership, and membership only after a year's probation, both by and of the colony.

Housing is a single room for an unmarried person, two for a family with two children, an additional room for two more, and after that a second children's room, to allow for separation of boys and girls. Up till lately, the single men messed together, having a cook. Lately, as they are few, and labor is scarce, there is talk of their boarding out with the families.

#### THE COLONY'S ENTERPRISES.

To-day, among the big items of colony property are a sugar-boiling plant, and centrifugal, with a good sawmill and flour mill, all worked by steam, and a brickmaking plant. Sugar and timber are the chief means of obtaining money. The cane grows well, and needs really less work and care than any other crop that can be produced and sold for the same money.

The cheapest things produced in large quantities other than oranges, are bananas and plantains. They are fed to the pigs, as there is no local market for them, and they are too perishable to allow of export. If the colony only had a good marmalade and jam factory, they could work up tons of oranges and bananas. The streets are lined with orange trees, and there are 10,000 full-bearing trees in the orangery, and every house has either its orange trees or its orange hedge. Apart from the banana and plantain fields, the plants are put in by householders for temporary shade, as required. They grow very rapidly, and are cut out when the shade is no longer required.

#### THE WANT OF LABOR.

The whole colony industry is hampered, not so much by a want of machinery, as by a want of labor. Men simply cannot live year after year in a climate like that of Paraguay, and we are like Australian bushmen. The temperature is regular, but very depressing physically, owing to the great degree of moisture in the atmosphere. We used to feel the slightest change of temperature, owing to the extreme paucity of blood, consequent on the want of nourishment, food as much as upon climatic influence, resulting in the winter, and collapsing in the summer. But a well-nourished people, suitably housed, should not suffer so much, provided they did not get chuchu, local malarial fever.

Among the most stringent rules of the colony, and one can understand why, is that of

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### III.

Among the minor disadvantages of the Cosme colony, in Paraguay, are the sameness of the food and the want of meat. Three times a day the colonists eat corn meal, sweet potatoes, and mandioca in some form or other, making variety by leaving one of them out. These three things are more "same" than one who does not know them can possibly imagine. They are all starchy. Mandioca is nearly pure starch. From it are made tapioca, farina, alfrecho, sago, and almidin (starch). Sweet potatoes are the same, sago and a starch. Corn starch is too well-known to require notice. Being so starchy, the amount of actual nourishment is small, while the varieties of indigestion they produce are severe and many. There is practically no fat. A housewife in my time thought herself lucky if she had a teaspoonful of fat in a month with which to merely grease the pan. And any man who got his food cooked with a taste of fat declared he felt stronger all day for it.

#### MILK AND MEAT SCARCE.

Milk is scarce. The cattle are of a poor quality. They give little milk, and the calves have no stamina. They also require handling every day when small, on account of the flies and other insects. Insect life is varied and plentiful. Throughout all gardening operations they have to be fought, hand-picking being the only means at the colonists' disposal. The locusts come once in a while. Cosme has escaped well so far, their one visitation causing little damage. Most English vegetables can be grown, tomatoes very well, indeed, but fruits and vegetables seem to flourish irregularly, both wild and cultivated. One year things will be splendid, prolific beyond all expectation. The next year they will hardly come to anything.

#### INSECT PESTS.

The insect pests are unimaginable. There are many varieties of mosquitoes, from a little brute that stands on his head, and so gets through all but the best and finest net, to a large kind that you can kill every time he comes near you. But, by the irony of fate, the little fellow stings badly, and the big fellow hardly at all.

Flies are innumerable. One small and very frail variety has a mania for walking on the ball of the eye. Then, there are the ordinary house flies, green flies, purple, amber, red-eyed, and blue-eyed, March flies, warble flies, blow flies, that make it imperative to keep the sleeping baby's mouth either covered or closed, and to put carbolic on sores on the children's heads if the skin happens to be broken, and I know not how many more.

#### A FLESH-BURROWING GRUB.

A source of great discomfort and disgust is a hairy grub that hatches in the flesh. It is probably the offspring of the warble fly. It makes life a misery to both man and beast. I have seen a small boy of four with a dozen in his head during the season. They raise a lump like a boil, but a boil is nothing to the pain they inflict when they wriggle in their attempts to get out. To effect their escape they are provided with strong hairs, which, being erected, irritate an animal until he rubs the place against a tree or post, so breaking the skin, when the grub emerges, sometimes half an inch in length.

Another flesh trouble is the chigoe, usually called the jigger. It is a small flea about the size of a pin point, which burrows into the flesh, round the nails for preference, but also anywhere else it can get at you. The male is not of much consequence, but the female is, as she begins laying eggs as soon as she is into the flesh until she has a sack of eggs as large as a pea, which causes a rather pleasant burning itching. At this stage the things need removing. If left, the eggs hatch and give one a lively time. People with many jiggers have had to go to bed till the holes left by taking out the sacks have healed.

#### ANTS, CRICKETS, FROGS, AND SNAKES.

Ants were another pest. They were perhaps rather more numerous than the flies. A tiny little red ant used to get into the boxes and eat the clothes. The crickets ate great holes in the clothes until they were carefully stowed out of their reach at night, and then they did not disdain a sleeper's hair or the flesh round his nails. The bichos (anything noxious from a gnat to a jaguar) are like the fruits and flowers. Some years they flourish, some years they don't. Perhaps there is some connection. In addition to these there are centipedes, tarantulas of enormous size, great hairy striped things, with big red mouths, and wasps and hornets. The virulence of the poison of the hornet sting is intense. Of course we had fleas and cockroaches, but they were not bad. Among the less troublesome bichos were the lizards, climbing frogs, and toads. The climbing frogs attracted snakes. The snakes were dangerous, and they often invaded the houses. "Don't move," said a husband to his wife one day. Of course she did. There was

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## SOME STRANGE COMPLAINTS.

None of the sickness to which we were subject ended fatally. A malarial fever, with or without ague, was the most prevalent. When neglected it turned to intermittent fever. The poor living gave rise to a kind of boil or abscess, probably a carbuncle, which broke out near the elbows, wrists, knees, and spine. Sometimes these left holes you could put your thumb in. Psamidora was another amiable affliction, but there were few cases of it. It was a raw open sore, without pus or scab, eating out skin and flesh. Without seeming to enlarge it travelled all round the patient's thumb, healing behind as it went forward. The treatment was cotton wool cut to the exact size and soaked in carbolic and fitted into the cavity.

## AN OBLIGING MEDICO.

In cases of severe sickness or those necessitating surgical aid there was a Spanish doctor, who may or may not have had a diploma, in the nearest town, about 12 miles away. As a rule patients preferred going to Villa Rica to be attended by the English doctor there. He always treated patients without charge. The druggist's shop in Villa Rica was, thanks to him, equal to any I have seen anywhere. In the matter of sickness the colony is very good, the last shilling being allowed if anyone wishes to see a doctor.

## DEATHS CAUSED BY ACCIDENT.

All the deaths that have occurred in the colony in eight years have been caused by accident, with the exception of two which were due to croup and cancer. The general tone of the colony's health is low. This may be due to the poor food. One cannot tell, not even by the native, for he, too, lives poorly. On the other hand, the food may be the best for the climate, and the climate may be the sole cause of the debility. In early times we held ourselves superior to native ways, but as time went on the question was often put, weren't they, after all, the best for the climate? And, bearing this out, of late years the summer working day has been shortened, and the midday break lengthened, and the siesta become almost a universal thing for men. Owing to the necessity of taking care of their clothes, some of the men took to working without their shirts. The effect of the sun was to make the skin as dark as a native's.

## A CONCLUDING WORD.

In conclusion, I would say, we have lived in the colony for years, my husband having been one of the pioneers from New Australia. We have disagreed with its action in several things, we have not been satisfied with its trend in some. Yet Australia has shown us nothing so good as the colony in its kindness, its hospitality, its sympathy in times of trouble, its freedom from anxiety, for the woman particularly, and its pure generosity. And if in Australia, where the natives were the white man and the white man the black, and there is no question of colour,