

September 8 1877

REVELATIONS OF LIFE ON A CANAL BOAT The special commissioner of a London contemporary, writing from Braunston, on Tuesday, says:-

Braunston is a straggling village, with a church and parsonage, on the borders of Northamptonshire. I am particular in mentioning this, for with the exception of the church, which has some pretensions to architectural merit, and the parsonage, which is as pretty in its surroundings as can well be imagined, there is nothing to commend itself to the visitor in the village of Braunston. The Oxford Canal lies in the valley at the foot of the hill leading from Dunchurch and Rugby (from which town it is distant eight miles), and crossing a bridge, and walking a hundred or so yards up the main road, you reach the terminal station on the Grand Junction Canal. A few red brick buildings, a blacksmith's forge, the curate's cosy dwelling among the trees, a half dozen or so dilapidated cottages, and a basin or dock for the repair of broken down barges, constitute the principal features of the station. I was anxious to reach Braunston, because I had been given to understand that it was a rallying ground for the boatmen, and besides was the place where dwelt a gentleman who knew about as much of barges, bargemen, bargewomen and their children as any man in England. When, therefore, Braunston Basin hove in sight from the rickety plank thrown across the barge's tarpaulin, doing duty as the boat's ridge, I was glad. I may say indeed that I rejoiced for more reasons than one. I had had enough of barge life for the present, and would fain have changed my resting place among the sugar bags for the more comfortable repose of the village inn.

This morning Captain Jonah took the opportunity of having a few words of friendly conversation with me on the canal bank. He wished me clearly to understand the position of affairs as far as himself and family were concerned. "Look you", said the skipper, "things could not be wuss with me and mine than they is at present. We're bound to be done some good by if they carries out this education of the children. Trade's awfu' bad. Prices is down to nothing on account of the comp'tition with the railroad. It's as much as us can do to make both ends meet now. If they takes the child'n they takes in course their mothers, and if they takes the mother, that means rising the wages. D'yer see?" I gave Captain Jonah to understand I quite saw that; but I said that I should like to have a few figures from him, if he would not mind giving them, in reference to this subject of wages. I ascertained from him that at present the boatmen calculate to make from five to seven pounds for the round "voyage" from London to Birmingham and back, which, including stoppages, occupies about fourteen days. Out of this sum they have to find the cost of a horse, provender, stabling and so forth, and the money for ropes, lines and straps used in drawing the boat. Pressing the skipper closely, I found that he considered £2 5s a week was but a fair wage for the labour of himself, the wife and Joe. At the very least £2 clear ought to be earned, and if they took the children away, this sum would have to be raised to meet the additional expenses of rent for a cottage for the wife, and schooling for the children. Such, in brief, were Captain Jonah's views with regard to the Canal Boats Act. A "mate" of his being in charge of a barge in our wake, I took occasion to have a few words of conversation with him also. He had heard considerable talk of the "lamin" question. He thought it was a good job. Many, however, didn't – many of the boatmen were so ignorant that nothing you could do for them, however good, would make them satisfied. The women, this boatman thought, ought to be taken out of the boat. It was no place for a woman. Parenthetically I may here remark that I have an impression that the cap'en had a personal and purely selfish reason for advancing this opinion. His wife and he were constantly at high words, and doubtless if the authorities were by chance to take his wife out of the boat he would be only too glad. And I, moreover, surmise that, the wife once on shore, the husband would do everything in his power to remove from his own shoulders the responsibility of supporting her. The wife's keep would fall upon the parish. I am satisfied that the local authorities interested in carrying out the provisions of the Act will have to exercise extreme caution in dealing with any clause affecting the women. When I say "women" I am alluding more particularly to the mothers of the children who next year will come under the cognisance of various local school boards. I was talking yesterday to the clergyman of a parish abutting on a certain section of the Grand Junction Canal. He gave me instances of the great difficulty that had been experienced by the guardians of the poor in his district in reaching cases of wife desertion by the canal boatmen. He mentioned the case of a boatman's wife with six children, and all she received from her husband's wages was ten shillings a week. "He stays away up in London," said the clergyman, "and we can't get hold of him." The rev gentleman, whose words I am quoting, had had some experience of the canal boatmen, their habits and mode of life. "I think you may say as a rule," he remarked in the course of conversation, "that their whole idea of life is eating, drinking and smoking. They are utterly selfish. They spend all they earn upon themselves. We got up a special Sunday afternoon service in the parish for a time; but they wouldn't attend it. They had no coats, they pleaded, and didn't like coming to the church in their sleeves – the boatmen generally wear a sort of fustian jacket, with brown cotton-stuff sleeves – and the service was perforce dropped". The clergyman considered the average wage they earned ample to keep the men, their wives and children in fair comfort, if the boatmen would only keep out of the beershop.

But to return to my companion of this canal voyage. The captain of the barge that had kept us company from Paddington Basin was distinctly of opinion that the women should be kept out of the boats. "Why shouldn't they be kept out. We could do without 'em. The Bridgewater Trustees had 'em out," said the man, "but they sneaked in again. Not that it was the women's fault. Some of the cap'ens asked leave to take their wife from sich a place to sich a place, and then they was aboard ag'in. And once aboard they stuck there". I have already said that I am disposed to take this man's statement for what it is worth. I mention it because it happens to lead up to one of the main difficulties to be contended with in carrying the Act into operation. This difficulty, however, is not one affecting the political bearings of the measure, but is purely of a social character. "If," continued the boatman, "they takes away the children, why the mother must live ashore to look after 'em. And don't yer see", - here Captain Jonah's friend followed the reasoning of Captain Jonah himself - "when the mother goes off with the child'n they's got to rise our wages." I said to the man, "Now what do you consider is the actual amount in hard money you put into your pocket weekly – I mean for the labour of yourself, your wife, and the two lads?" I was particularly desirous that my question should not be misunderstood, and I repeated it, because I had become more and more convinced during my journey down the canal that there was no difficulty whatever in carrying the Act into operation as far as the authorities were concerned; the matter resolved itself purely into a question of labour and wages. The boatman replied, and I was careful to take down his words, "We reckon to get two pound ten". "Those are excellent wages," I replied, "hundreds of clerks in London make less, and a few artisans more. You ought to be able to educate the children yourself, even now, on those wages". Captain Jonah's mate opined that they might be considered good wages "by anyone as didn't know all the expenses the boatmen were at". Continued the skipper, "I've lost two 'orses only lately, and I gave eleven pounds for that there 'orse. Where's I to get another eleven pounds from if I loses that 'un?" I felt compelled to agree with bargee that eleven pounds sterling were not to be scraped together nowadays without some forethought and thrift. As this wages question will by and by, when the Act comes into operation, become – unless I am greatly mistaken – a point of debate between the barge owners and the men, I have been especially particular in collecting information on this point; and I may add, from a variety of sources, from the canal superintendents, barge owners, bargemen and their wives, and the lads tending the horses.

A gentleman who is a partner in a large firm of lime and cement merchants was good enough to give me the following particulars. His firm owned about twelve or thirteen boats working as "lime" boats, and six or seven as "coal" boats, on one of our principal canals. There was not a boat of these, so far as he could call to mind, that was not worked by a man, his wife and a lad. "I believe", said this gentleman, "that the boatmen in our employ have made, and are making, on the average £2 5s a week, and this with no rent and taxes to pay". I understood him to mean that this sum was earned by the joint labour of the three. I have yet to ascertain, however, whether this rate of earnings is common throughout the trade and steady throughout the year. If it be so, it seems to me that the boatmen have nothing to complain of now, and will have little to complain of by and by when out of this forty five shillings per week they have to set aside a few shillings for the rent of a cottage and for school pence for the children. With one exception all the bargemen I have talked with on my journey down the Grand Junction Canal look at the Act as simply a master's question. One man and his wife, who had reared thirteen children, and only one out of the boat, were against the Act; but this formed the solitary exception. I am inclined to agree with the clergyman whose opinion of the bargemen I have already quoted, that the men as a rule eat well, drink well and smoke well. The first night I was on board the barge I threw an eye across the captain's supper table. I noticed a tempting boiled knuckle of ham, a shapely piece of corned beef, fat and lean admirably blended, a crusty loaf of fresh baked bread, a dish of pickled onions and cucumber, and a goodly can of ale. In the morning there was an unlimited supply of milk, fresh from the cow, for the children, tea and bread for the skipper, his wife and guest. I may say that my own supper, from lack of forethought, was considerably in rear of the skipper's, and I was trusting that I might receive an invitation to the cabin. I may be permitted, perhaps, to express the hope that I shall never partake of a worse meal than that which graced the little cabin table of my friend the bargee, who thinks that things could not be worse than they are with him at present. Probably many who read this may consider their own lot at times a degree less desirable than that of Captain Jonah, of the good barge Mary Jane. I reserve the consideration of barge accommodation and the question of how the Act is to be carried out for another letter, which I will write after visiting the Potteries, where, I am told, the condition of the barge people is less favourable than that which I have been describing.

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THE CANAL BOATS ACT AND THE BARGEMEN The special commissioner of a London contemporary, who is inquiring into the condition of the canal population, writes as follows from Runcorn on Thursday, the 6th inst:-
Yesterday I took leave of Captain Jonah and the crew of his barge, Mary Jane. Joe was fast asleep on the gangway of one of the lock gates. The sick relative had taken possession of my nest among the sugar bags, and was likewise asleep. Ellen, with baby tucked under her left arm like a bag of old linen, was leading the horse, on whose back Sam was astride. Jack, the lurcher, was scampering about in the fields, a picker-up of unconsidered trifles. The skipper was alone with me clearing up matters. "You talks about that 'ere 'orse. I tell yer 'er won't lay down. Once let un git used to a stable and 'er'll lay down fast enough. But not all us can do will get in to lay down, leastwise 'cept in Birmingham". This was in reply to an observation from me that Captain Jonah's horse seemed a trifle tired, and needed rest. "When us get to Birmingham 'er makes up for it. You see, 'er's used to the stable there, and the other 'orses, and 'er lays down like a lamb. But you might jist as well try to 'oist that boat across your shoulders as try to git that 'ere 'orse to lay down 'cept in Birmingham. Keep her belly full, says I to Joe, keep her belly allays full, Joe, and then 'er goes 'long like a steam ingen". I may say that I am able to speak with some authority myself concerning this same animal's idiosyncrasies. I was walking on the towing-path with Joe in the early morning of Saturday, about the hour that the working man of Rickmansworth were astir, and going their various ways to their labour, when Joe turned upon me unawares. "Jist walk arter the oss a bit while I runs on to the lock". I took Joe's whip and walked after the horse. For two long hours I walked after the horse (Joe, taking every available opportunity to rest, was found dead asleep on his ordinary bed, the gangway of a lock gate far on ahead) until fairly exhausted by curses loud and deep from boatmen passing in the opposite direction to ourselves, whose drawing ropes I fell foul of. The skipper, his wife and the sick relative enjoyed my discomfiture. "Er's a darned sight too cunnin' for yer, guvnor," said Captain Jonah, alluding to the horse, and coming to my rescue when a bridge stood straight in the way, and I had brought half a dozen barges to a standstill. "Er's drea'ful cunnin' if 'er once catches sight that it aint Joe as is walkin' arter her. Yer see it was 'cause 'er caught sight of yer. Yer should never let that 'ere 'orse see yer. Keep behind 'er, I all'ays says to Ellen, and then there's no stoppin' the boat". Captain Jonah and I took a friendly farewell of each other at a village ale house in the company of a few brother bargees invited for the occasion, the skipper's parting words to me being, "It's all a owner's question. Don't forget that, guvnor".
While at Braunston I had the advantage of having an hour's conversation with the gentleman to whom I alluded in my last letter. He is an owner of barges and a builder of barges; moreover, he has had many years' experience of the people working the boats on different canals. His pocket, in common with the pockets of most owners, will in all probability be touched by the "accommodation" clause of the Act. "I think there has been a great deal of fuss made about this matter of cabin accommodation," said he to me, "when really there is no necessity for it. Though the space is small, how long are they (meaning the boatman and his family) in the cabin? I could take you to places in London that are fifty thousand times worse in regard to space and cleanliness than the boat cabins are. Look down Limehouse, and about there. I quite agree that we want something done for the barge people. The children are terribly ignorant; we want something done, and something must be done for them. The education of the younger children is what is peremptorily needed. The boatmen and women must, as far as their condition is concerned, go as they are – let us look after the rising generation, and that as soon as can be". With this we went to a covered dock where a recently built barge was being painted, and stepped into the cabin. I took the dimensions down as follows:- 8ft 6in long, 6ft 6in in the widest part and 5ft high. I am bound to say and without hesitation that here the sleeping accommodation for two was ample in point of space as that which was reserved for married couples in the after-cabin of a 1680 ton ship in which I once sailed to New York. There was no obstacle to efficient ventilation, and there was a good side bed for children. Altogether I should have felt no difficulty whatever in passing this boat cabin as sufficient accommodation for a man, his wife, and two children. Absence of furniture, mess traps, curtains, bedding, and the like, no doubt made a slight difference in the appearance of available space; but even with these additions I should still have been quite content to occupy the cabin myself with the number mentioned. Fresh air is after all what is most needed for children, and with all proper precautions such as is made on board ship to prevent people falling overboard, I should consider a child's life on board a barge infinitely preferable to a child's life in a London alley. A sort of painted rope netting rigged around the cabin deck would no doubt answer all the purposes of a proper protection for the children. It must be borne in mind that I am referring more particularly now to barge life on the Grand Junction Canal. I shall presently have something to say of barge life elsewhere.
Returning to the subject of the Act, the gentleman whose conversation I have been reporting considered that there was such prejudice against the canals now (I take it that he meant in point of competition with the railroads), and the depression in trade was at present

so great that, really, unless matters mended, it would become a very serious question with the owners what was to be done when the Act came into operation. "It all resolves itself into a question of wages", said he. "There will be no difficulty at all in getting hold of the children if the men are paid sufficiently to keep a home for the mothers. That is, I think, what will have to be done. The women will, of course, belong to some parish, and the parish authorities will have to see that the children are properly educated". I asked him how he would guard against the possible evil of boatmen shirking the responsibility of contributing to their wives' support. "They are constantly travelling from place to place," said I, "and what is to prevent a man residing at Braunston, for instance, spending all his wages in London, and vice versa?" "You will, I am afraid, have that difficulty occasionally to contend against," was the reply, "but with a rise in the rate of wages, we shall get a better class of boatmen, and the thing will right itself. It is impossible to take the wife's labour out of the boat without offering compensation to the husband in some kind. We are all agreed upon this; the men see it, and the owners see it. We look forward to having a better class of boatmen and a better state of things on the canal generally. Understand this clearly," said the gentleman, in bringing our conversation to a close, "we owners are distinctly in favour of the Act, and consider it an excellent measure, though it must affect our pockets considerably".

I altered my plans, and instead of writing this from Burslem, as I promised, took the train to Runcorn, in order to make note of the condition of things on the Bridgewater Canal, which at this point joins with the River Mersey. I walked on to the canal bank, and jumped on to the first barge alongside the wharf. Its cabin accommodation was very bad indeed. There was a woman on board, and I asked her how many children she had. "One of her own, and one giv to her." "Given to you?" said I; "What do you mean?" "Well, this 'ere lad," said the woman, pointing to a boy of about twelve years of age, "he was giv to me". Later in the day I happened to mention this incident to a gentleman, whose knowledge of the barge people is as extensive as that of any person whom I have yet met with on my journey – he had laboured as a missionary among them, preached every Sunday at a mission chapel near the canal bank to the boatmen, and was in every way qualified to give me trustworthy information – "It's a very common thing for them to be lending their children from one boat to another," said he to me, "boys and girls both. For instance we had a little girl who used to attend our Sunday school here. She was about seven years of age. She had been attending school for eight consecutive Sundays, and had gained eight good conduct tickets. The child was looking forward with great hope and pleasure to gaining a ninth ticket, which she would have secured by her attendance at the school on the ninth Sunday. During the week she was lent by her parents to another boat. The poor child fell off into the cut and was drowned. We never saw anything of her after she left the school". "Good Heaven!" said I, "do you mean to say such things have been permitted amongst these people?" "How was it to be prevented?" he replied. "Up to the present time no one has taken the slightest interest in the condition of the boatmen but here and there. George Smith, of Coalville, has been the man who has been mainly instrumental in drawing public attention to the matter, and, thank God, we have got the Act. Now we shall see what's to be done?" The state of the barges on the Grand Junction Canal struck me as being Paradise compared with the state of many of the barges that came under my observation on the canal side in the neighbourhood of Runcorn. They were filthy to a degree, and in many cases utterly unfit for human habitation. I ascertained casually that of all the boats plying on the Bridgewater canal the Wigan "flats" are out and out the very worst, and the Wigan boat-people the most depraved. As was said to me, "They are more immoral, more dirty – and that would be quite mild to say of some of their boats – and the most difficult to labour amongst. Other barge-people are bad; but the Wiganers are more depraved in every way, shape and form". I am merely reporting word for word what I was told me by a gentleman of great experience among the boat people on the Bridgewater Canal, and I had this statement confirmed by several.

I made some inquiries during my stay at Runcorn concerning the rate of wages paid to the boatmen, and ascertained that two men working on one of the "broad" boats earned between them 50s a week. No women are allowed to live on board this description of barge, which is worked by skipper and mate. The skipper earns on an average 27s, the mate 23s a week. The accommodation provided seems to be ample, and the ventilation, with a little improvement, might be made all that is to be desired. I took occasion to ask a man who had served first as a boatman on the canal, then as an able seaman in the merchant service, and afterwards in the same capacity in the Royal Navy – a man therefore of wide practical acquaintance with shipboard accommodation – I asked him what hands, in his opinion, the barges might reasonably be allowed to carry. He thought on board the "broad" boats two, and on the "flats" three; the narrow boats might likewise be permitted to carry three persons. The space in the cabin of the "broad" boats I found to be as follows:- About 5ft 6in high, 9ft long and from side to side 9ft. The sleeping berth was about 9ft by 3ft.

While walking on the canal bank at Runcorn a man came up to me, and said he would like me to come over to his barge. Accordingly over I went. Presently I stood on the barge dock, the centre of a circle of brawny armed women, shaggy haired children and very frouzy clothed men. An Amazon with tanned face and goodly beard put her arms akimbo, and stood forth the champion of the party, and what she had to say was received with bargee cheers, thus:- "Ers right" "Sal knows on't" "Leave her alone for knowin' about us" "It's right what she's a-saying, master" "Listen to her, master", and so on. The Amazon was very clear and decided in her manner. She looked around now and again upon the circle about her much as a great speaker looks upon an audience around and before him, and gave an appropriate shrug of her shoulders here, and a nudge of the head there, and a lusty bang with her fist at that portion of her speech which was very telling in point of oratorical action. "Master", she began, "they's got to recompense us. They's got to gi us more money. They'll 'ave to do som'at for us when they takes the children out of the boats, or us can never live. The masters w'll have to find the 'orses to pull the boats, and they'll have to pay the boatmen regular weekly wages. That's what they's got to do. We w'd like to be ashore and 'ave the childr'n to school; but us can't live shore without more wages". I asked the woman what she considered fair wages for the husband to earn, and she replied, "Thirty two shillin' a week, and to find nothin'". Then she went off on another tack. "Look you, master, I wants to know what's to come o' the poor women as works the boats?" The Amazon gave a nod of the head sideways, and an inquiring look round, as much s to say, "Now, friends, I have him", and continued, "You go to'ards Wigan and what do you see? You'll see lots of poor women, captains, and they works the boats to maintain their children. What's to 'come o' them?" "Why work us to be sure," exclaimed a sinewy sister of the barge, "What else?" "Four out o' six boats as comes from Wigan is worked by the women who've lost their 'usbands. What'll become to them poor craters?" asked the spokesman of the assembly. "Who's to support the childr'n as the mothers 's took away out of their boats?" "It is not intended," I said, "to prevent the woman working in the boats if the accommodation is sufficient; and things would be better for them all, they would find this time next year." "We 'opes so, I'm sure, master," was the chorus in reply, and with that I took my departure, distributing largess by way of compensation for the time during which I had occupied their attention.