

They Must Work, But Not Rebel

By Frank R. Lopez

*Impressions While at Ellis Island Awaiting
Deportation*

IF I were a writer, historian or novelist, I would have enough material for a large work, in my notes taken during my residence at Ellis Island. But, as I am not, I write only a few lines for the workers, who may be future guests of "our dear" Uncle Samuel—at the "Hell's Island Hotel"—a few things they should know before they "accept" the "invitation" to the lodging house at the Island, a house built to receive and welcome the oppressed workers of other nations who sought refuge in this "land of the free."

The progress of America is due to the "greaser" and the "dago," to those "foreigners" who were received here to produce the wealth of the country, and who built America, the America of to-day.

The stains of the blood and sweat of the "foreigners" on the buildings, the stone, wood and marble, are a fantastic vision which mocks the ugly faces of the corrupt bourgeoisie in their sumptuous palaces.

The "foreigners" who built your railroads, your subways and your automobiles; and operate your mines, mills and factories; the "foreigners" who dug out of the bowels of the earth the diamonds you wear, the money you spend,—these are the "foreigners" you so viciously persecuted today. To those "foreigners" you owe a great debt, you owe not only the clothing and shoes you wear, but the bread you eat. We produce your wealth, your luxury and all the necessities of life, and die by the thousands daily from cold and hunger.

Who are the undesirable citizens of the community? The worker, the producer, the lover of art, science and literature, or the parasites who live on the product of others' toil? The bourgeois, whose crimes are innumerable and indispensable in acquiring gold and supremacy, the legislator, the priest and the judge, the one who dictates, the other who lies, and the other who condemns—these are the real undesirable citizens.

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Gathered from every industrial center of the country comes the rebel worker, the dreamer of a new and peaceful society, the lover of freedom and the emancipation of his class. Separated from his family, his friends and comrades by the hirelings of Capitalism, they are brought together as a herd of cattle to the sea port, to be shipped back to their former country, branded as a "damaged merchandise, unfit for the market."

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The social movement of the United States is nearly a century behind other countries (not so civilized, of course) where almost every worker knows his friend and his adversary. In Europe, when militant proletarians fall into the hands of their enemies, a special place is provided for them, and very often an amnesty is obtained and they return to the struggle, to liberty and their families; but here there is no distinction made between a political prisoner and a common criminal. In Boston, for instance, I was taken from the jail to the court several times, handcuffed to two professional safe-blowers. The public didn't know the difference between us three "criminals," but the two half-covered their faces with caps as if to hide their crimes and their identity; but I was different, looking onward, head erect, with my hat thrown backwards. I had no crime to conceal.

At the Detention Department, in Ellis Island, the prisoners are treated all alike, (except the aristocratic Germans). If you are there for an Ideal, for Freedom, or for killing half a dozen human beings, makes no difference: for robbery, forgery, white slavery, stowaways and all kinds of criminals of this capitalist society were there during the past months, many of them sick, very sick, mentally and physically. Some cases of pulmonary tuberculosis and syphilis were discovered among the prisoners, and more than one case of degeneracy was discovered but not isolated. Doctors? Yes, of course, we have doctors come to the room once or twice a day; but it seems that they are afraid to contract some sickness and run out very quickly without asking any body about his condition.

Some of the prisoners, especially stowaways, are without clothes except for a few rags to cover their skin, and the windows must be kept closed on account of that, which imperils the health and life of many. In such a room, where almost every one, sick or in good health, spits on the cement floor, the lack of air and light is terrible, either for human or animal.

The majority of the guards are brutes, beasts in human form, every one considers himself in the Island as having more authority than any petty King.

At first glance the observer will notice their brutality and their stupidity. Such are the men whose orders we must obey.

Their savage instincts were shown in the case of Frank De Rubbis, a young Italian comrade, who does not speak the English language. For the "crime" of not answering quickly enough, when his name was

called in a way that he had not understood, De Rubbis was thrown down to the floor by five of the guards, handcuffed and dragged out of the room, leaving behind his hat, coat and baggage. (these things were sent to him afterwards).

Another case of brutality was when a young man (we knew him as "the Turk of Palestine") tried unsuccessfully to gain his freedom. He was beaten over the head and body, and kicked all over; and for trying again and again to escape, was sent to the insane house and kept there for about two months, until he with others was transferred to Boston.

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The food is of the worst quality, the dogs of the rich would refuse it. It would seem almost impossible for a man to live on such a small quantity of nutritious food, but we still live, although causing many cases of illness. All of us are physically weak, and very often the food is left untouched because of its bad quality.

Some nights we can't sleep because of our empty stomachs. During the day some fellows lie down on benches after eating, to prevent the quick digestion of the food, and the pain of an empty stomach.

The sleeping quarters consist of large rooms with "bunks," ship style, piled up in three upwards and two side-ways, one over the other without enough space to get in, and after you lie down, be careful, don't raise your head or you will kiss the top bed spring. The bedding consists of three rags, small and rotten, (some people call them blankets, but they are not), one to cover the bottom of the bed, spring or canvas; the second to be rolled up and used as a pillow, and the third to cover you. Steam heat dies out during the night and the quarters very often feel like a meat refrigerator. After being locked all day in the Detention Quarters, filled with corrupt atmosphere and steam, you begin to feel the effect very soon, no matter how physically strong you may be. If you try to open a window to breathe the pure air of the night, you surely will get into trouble with some one. The same thing happens in the Detention Quarters. Bugs and other insects very often "call" on you during the night. One comrade suggested collecting some of these creatures, not for the purpose of sending them to the zoo, but to send them to Mr. Baker, or Mr. McKee, the Emperors of the Island, the Rulers of the "Hotel."

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Six weeks are almost long enough to study the conditions of such a place as a military hospital. If "Jean de la Hire" happens to be there he can add a second volume to his work, *The Hell of the Soldier*. At the beginning of December, I was taken to the hospital in company with another prisoner, Fernando Masso, (a stowaway) and put to bed in ward 31, among "our heroes" just returned from Europe. I felt happy at first, being among men able to speak about the war—but, what atrocious things! . . . Almost every one shows me a souvenir, to obtain which you must kill their owner. A young man from Chicago showed me a nickel watch (worth less than two dollars) and he said with a proud air, that the former owner was a prisoner; he asked him to give up his watch, and upon refusal, killed the damn German with a blow on the head. Another man, from New York, showed me a ring with two German helmets engraved on it, to obtain which he ran a bayonet through a wounded prisoner's stomach, an officer. . . . Another from Kentucky, showed me some German coins, one mark in silver, one brass beer check, and a few copper coins. After a man falls, he says, run through his pockets in search of souvenirs.

Of a blind sergeant with three years' service. I asked: "Well, young man, what are you going to do now, without your sight?" "Well," he answered, "I expect to get a pension." "Yes, but the pension, if you get any, is never worth as much as your eyes. Do you see any thing?" "No, but don't you worry, friend, I see enough to tell every man what military life is, and what war is." Another man, from Chicago, said: "If Uncle Sam called me again for the army, I would first jump from the highest bridge in Chicago, head down." Another from Virginia, said: "After I get my discharge I will never tell the people that I was a soldier, I shall be ashamed. I have read some books about military life, but I never believed them until now. You will see, after a few months, a sign on gentlemen's piazza or door, reading, 'Soldiers are not allowed here.'" Another, from Louisiana, said: "Before I join the army again I will see the foreign armies landed in New York." All of the patients have similar histories, but many of them, as they explain it, are afraid of court-martial,

and keep their mouths shut. That's why I name no names. My heart thrilled with joy and my pains stopped while these brave boys talked about their hatred of such life, but my pains were double and my sufferings were more acute when their brutality and ignorance were exhibited.

Some of the patients were able to get out of bed and jump around, while others were very sick, as in the case of F. Masso, who was delirious for twenty five days before his death. The treatment he received was terrible. He was a malatto from South America, and the nurses in charge of the ward absolutely refused to help him in any way, but I must say that the officers were not aware of that.

A Lieutenant one day asked the nurse "How does Masso take nourishment?" "Very well, sir, very well," was the answer; and I counted four consecutive days that he has been without any nourishment at all, because it took too much time to feed him, and the women nurses (some of them) were very "busy" sitting on patients' beds talking for hours, while others who needed care and help, but not very nice looking, died without any help.

The conditions of military hospitals are nearly all alike, but here, too, I found three women nurses, in all, with a human heart, helping the patients. The men nurses, or "Ward Sergeants," were better fit for a stable than for a hospital. The Doctors one day ordered a watch to keep Masso in good shape, one soldier during the day and two at night, half night each. The patient, in his delirious state, trying to get out of bed, cried that those people were starving him. After the Doctors went out the supposed attendant, instead of watching Masso, tied him to the bed with a sheet, to keep him in place; while he played cards with others during the day, and the night watch does the same thing and goes to sleep.

The Doctor ordered a window opened near his bed to give him fresh air after the pneumonia was over, but as soon as the Doctor walked out of the Ward, one said: "Hey, shut that window, let that yellow beast die there." And they did. . . . And he died.

After two weeks in bed battling with "Flu," I was ordered to get up. I refused at first, because my condition was not good enough to get out of bed, but thinking that probably they knew my condition better than myself, I accepted; with the aid of two men I was seated on a chair for a while, until I called for their help to put me back to bed.

The same day I began to feel an acute pain in my chest and back, and head. At that moment, I had lost all hope of winning the battle, at the same time the Doctor told the nurses that I was gone. "Flu and pneumonia, he is gone." One day at dinner time the nurse came in and asked: "How many of you have had no dinner?" She began to count. "One, two, three," turned to the other row of beds and begun, "One, two," . . . "All right, three whites and two immigrants," she said. The immigrants were as white as the others.

In my fifth week, I was transferred to Ward 12 on a wheel chair, without enough cover to protect me from the cold, across the long and narrow path, and sick again for a few days. At this Ward there were no bed patients except one invalid young Greek, about seventeen years of age, in bed for nearly two years. The Ward Sergeants here were more cruel and abusive than the others. When the Greek asked for any thing, the first answer he received was, "I wish you die, George . . . you will save a lot of work for us." This Greek in the morning of January 17, was beaten with clenched fists by one of the attendants, and Joaquin Flores, another patient, was also beaten during the last week of January, for refusing to wash the floors, and one of his eyes very badly discolored.

At the pneumonia Ward one day at eight o'clock in the morning, the Ward Sergeant called to the telephone the officer in charge and said: "Captain — we have a new patient—Broncho-pneumonia, it seems to me that he is dying. Will you please come down and see him?" At 9 o'clock that night, he called up again and said: "Captain — did you forget what I told you this morning about the new patient? He is dying. Will you please come down?"

The answer could not be heard, but the Sergeant entered the Ward excitedly and said: "What do you think of Captain — I called him this morning about a new patient, and he said 'all right!' and now I call him again and he says, 'just a minute. . . !' and closed the connection."

My persecutors have been active for a long while stealing my letters, in order to find material upon which to build up their case. Now, they can use some of these notes if they want to. But they must remember that the Voice of Freedom cannot be strangled. The spectre of the dead and the mutilated victims of erotism of the rich, in war and in industry, is arousing fear and action.