**NLI 13081/2?**

**Casement to Sir Edward Grey on debt bondage**

**15 May 1911**

The Right Honourable

Sir Edward Grey, Bart, MP

etc etc etc

Foreign Office

Belfast

15 May 1911

Sir,

With reference to Mr. Jerome's confidential dispatch No. 32 of the 15th March, which with its enclosures I now return, I have the honour to state that I had not previously heard of the “Inca Chronicle” which is apparently an English magazine published at Cerro de Pasco the mining settlement at the summit of the Andes.

The writer of the article “Slavery on the Amazon”, Mr. Wood B. Savage is quite unknown to me. Very much of his comment upon the methods adopted by rubber merchants in their dealings with the forest Indians is undoubtedly true, although he is clearly not writing from first hand knowledge.

It is incorrect, for instance, to speak of Indian “villages” being “blown off the map” by Peruvian gunboats. There are no Indian villages on the Putumayo; the native Indians have not formed villages in those forests and there is no record of Indian settlements (generally comprising only one loft house) having been destroyed by the government river steamers. This charge is, doubtless, based on an imperfect relation to Mr. Wood of the attacks upon the Columbian caucheros and their settlements on the Caraparana in 1908, made by the Peruvian river craft headed by the Arana Company's steamship “Liberal”.

While much of the article is true in the main so many of Mr. Wood's references are inaccurate or so loosely made it would not be hard for Senor Arana, or possibly those others indicted by name, to show that this writer knew little of the subject he undertakes to deal with.

The Luis F. Morey, referred to on page 13 comes of a family which has dealt for some time in Tarapoto on the overland route to Lima. Tarapoto is a small agricultural township near Urimaguas, lying not far from the lower course of the river Huallaga and the Moreys have been associated with that town for a long period. Lt. Herndon of the United States Navy who passed through Tarapoto in 1851, mentions in his book “an intelligent young Spaniard named Morey” whom he found dwelling there and who gave him much information about the country.

The Moreys are probably the wealthiest of all the Iquitos rubber traders and owe a part of their wealth to the accepted methods of filibustering and slaving which rule on the upper Amazon.

The Aranas came from a region nearer the Andes than Tarapoto. They originate in a small township called Riojano in the hills, and have, undoubtedly, some Indian blood in them. That is no guarantee of good faith towards fellow Indians in any part of South America I have visited.

The system of education, if system it can be called, under which such men are brought up, the absence of moral instruction, public or private, and the entire denial of the primary rights of civilized existence to Indians, by which these are robbed of lands first and then of their labour and lives, induces all men who wear a coat and trousers and who learn Spanish (or Portuguese as the case may be) to cast their lot with the spoilers and to claim that they belong to the conquering race, by adopting its methods and maxims, whereas their countenances betray them as often of pure Indian blood or more frequently of that mixed ancestry which constitutes so large a part of the Peruvian population.

The “Asociacion Pro-Indigena” whose statues Mr. Jerome thoughtfully transmits is, I gather, already beginning to do something in congress in the hope of improving the condition of the native Indians and the all of the poorer workers, the “peons”.

These latter, although nominally wearers of coats and trousers which with the Spanish language, stand for the tests of “civilization” under existing conditions of Peruvian development, are also ill treated and robbed by the employers of labour, and under the system of “cuentas” that prevails – i.e. debt bondage – are virtually held as salves over a large part of the forest regions. I have little doubt Julio C. Arana began his career in some humble capacity. He reached the Putumayo as a pedlar or huckster, having emerged from the earlier forms of quasi–peonage to become, himself, an owner of peons. Jose Inocente Fonseca, one of the worst murderers on the Putumayo, did, I believe, actually begin as a working peon. A peon has few rights – the native Indian has none. The peon's principal protection is his knowledge of Spanish and an ability to himself exploit and cheat those weaker than himself. He is invariably in his employer's debt and not often gets out of it. The object of the employer is to keep him in debt and so retain a hold upon him, and upon his wife and family – for such peonage descends by indebtedness. This condition of things prevails over a wide area and, doubtless, even in Iquitos itself is more active than would be readily admitted.

Mr. Cazes related the following story to me, which later, in my presence, he told to the Prefect.

As head of his firm, the Iquitos Trading Company, Limited, he had to take over an “Estate” in lieu of a debt the owner had contracted. This is a pretty common proceeding on the upper Amazon, where everyone goes into debt or tries to get others into debt. In this case, a number of “labourers” went with the Estate. Mr. Cazes gave me the actual figures. These men were represented by the debtor as “owing” him some £400 to £500 and their cuentas (or debit accounts) to that sum were produced and passed over to Mr. Cazes as assets along with the property. Thereupon Mr. Cazes became the owner of these men. These were not wild, forest Indians, but ordinary type of trouser clad upper Amazon peon.

Many local men approached Mr. Cazes offering to buy these cuentas from him – i.e. to buy the “debts” of these men and so to acquire them. They offered the face value of the cuentas again and again and Mr. Cazes refused to sell for a reason that did him honour. He said that in the ordinary course he should have sold the cuentas of these men quite willingly, along with the Estate he was seeking to realise as his firm only wished to recover its moneys advanced to the debtor, but in the case of these peons he was aware that they would be purchasers were caucheros who wished to take the men down to the rubber forests of Brazil, to the Acre territory, whence they were unlikely to return to Iquitos, and in any case, where they would be separated from their wives and children.

He refused to be a party to this separation and so refused all offers for the cuentas and ultimately, so he said, lost some hundreds of pounds, as he had no use for the men and never recovered what he had had to allow the debtor for their “accounts”.

If a transaction of this kind is possible with the head of a British Company, who is also a British Consul in the locality where it occurs, it is obvious that the state of things revealed is little, if at all, removed from slavery. A similar condition rules in neighbouring countries, in many parts, and prevails, it would seem, in Mexico to a deplorable extent. This is a form of internal slavery that is sanctioned by long usage and custom in the Iberian states of South and Central America – those less correctly termed Latin States of America.

There is little of Latin civilisation in the Iberian compost that dominates so large an area of the New World.

It is unjust to the gentler civilization and artistic mind of Italy – the true inheritor of the Latin estate – to dub the compound of ferocious ignorance and greedy dullness which stand

for Iberianism in the two Americas the product of the Latin genius or Latin civilization.

Where men – miscalled civilized – adopt such methods towards each other under the forms of their civilized life it is not strange that when they come into contact with weak and primitive peoples, whom they are bent on exploiting, and where there is nstrong law to restrain them, their dealings should degenerate into those savage and terrible excesses that were found so

prevalent on the Putumayo.

Bondage for debt is doubtless illegal already in Peru, and in agitating against its continuance the Peruvian Anti Slavery Society is but asking that the laws of Peru should be enforced. The bondage is quite distinct from the atrocious procedures adopted against the wild Indians.

The former is a matter of internal Peruvian concern – or of Iberian American concern – that external society is not specifically called to denounce, but the dealings of Peruvian, Columbian and I believe many Bolivian rubber “traders” with the primitive tribes of savage Indians, still dwelling in appreciable numbers on the headwaters of the Amazonian system of riverways is an outrage upon universal humanity that does call for universal reprobation and, where this may be possible, for humane external intervention.

If, by the action of His Majesty's Government on the Putumayo this system can be brought to an end in that particular region, a beginning is thereby laid for the best efforts of Peruvians themselves to deal with the evil in other parts of their great forest region where it, undoubtedly, still prevails.

The Peruvian “Asociacion pro-Indigena” should be induced to concentrate its action upon securing a proper civil service establishment for administrating native affairs, so as to replace such “officials” as the Comisario Burga (a paid agent of a trading company) or the Juiz de Paz Colonna (equally the agent of a rubber firm) with salaried and independent officers. That is the first essential reform, The second, and one dependent upon this would be to insist that the future legislation should take account of Indian land rights, and while securing to the State all that may be needed for economic development to see that some of the development rests upon the part ownership of the soil secured to small holders, and that Indian tribes and tribesmen should be guaranteed against the lawless squatting and forcible expropriation by individuals that today constitute the best title to an Amazonian “Estate”.

I have the honour to be,

Sir,

With the highest respect,

Your most obedient,

humble servant,

Roger Casement.