

WRECK OF THE PORT DOUGLAS.

THE PASSENGERS INTERVIEWED.

The s. s. Kaikoura which arrived here from London on Saturday last, brought the passengers for Australia by the ill-fated steamer of

the Anglo-Australian, or Milburn line, Port Douglas, which struck on a reef off Cape de Verde, Senegambia. The Port Douglas was making for Dakar, a French fortified coaling station to replenish her bunkers. Mr F B Johnson, a passenger was on the deck with his wife at the time of the disaster, and he willingly gave some particulars of it, which will be found embodied in this account. The Port Douglas left the Tilbury Docks for Melbourne and other Australian ports on May 14. On May 17 she called at Plymouth. After taking two steam launches on board for the New South Wales Government she sailed for Dakar. All went well until the vessel was abreast of the red light on Cape Almadie and the white on Cape de Verde. This was on the evening of May 24. Some slight merrymaking had been going on, it is stated, in honour of Her Majesty's natal day. At 8.45 the speed of the Port Douglas seemed to have a sudden and surprising, impetus, and while wondering at this many of the passengers were thrown to their feet by a violent

concussion. A cry of agony went up, for

who could tell what would come next? The ship rolled from side to side, then grated, rolled again, bumping with awful violence. Captain A. C. Payne, her commander, was on the bridge at the time, and at once gave orders to man the boats. There could be no mistaking what had happened. The Port Douglas had struck on a rock. The carpenter sounded the bells. Too true; the noble ship was fast filling. The terrific force with which she struck must have caused an enormous rent in her hull. For a few minutes there was a panic among the passengers. "Where's my boy" a mother would cry out. "Wife, wife here we are" said a husband and then they would get together ready to take their places in the

boats. Still the vessel was filling up. They could not tell how long she would hold out, but a few minutes panic, and then all became quite quiet. The women and children were first seated in the boats, and then the men, the officers remaining on the vessel. There was little confusion. Blue lights, flare-ups and rockets were sent up but received no response from the shore. God only knows how a ship would get on which fared worse than the Port Douglas, for the night was fine and clear and there was no sea on, or it would not have been hard to predict where the majority of the passengers would have gone to. Certainly not at the Hobart Coffee Palace, where they are at present comfortably quartered pending their

departure for Australian ports. "To return to our muttons." When the vessel struck the chief engineer promptly went below, and all steam was allowed to escape and the furnaces were drawn, otherwise when the water reached the stokehold, a terrific explosion would have hurled the sufferers at once into eternity. While the excitement was at its height the escaping steam made a deafening noise, and rendered the orders of the officers difficult to hear. However, all the passengers were got into the boats and the crew in their places. The loaded boats were then swung out on the davits where they hung till daylight, for the place abounds with hidden and raised reefs and there is a perpetual surf breaking on the strand. The Port Douglas is a broad bottomed vessel, and the rock on which she struck was apparently a flat one, so the steamer maintained a tolerably even keel, but the poor frightened passengers in the boats were thinking every minute that some weakness in the hull of the steamer might give way and she would go to pieces dragging them down in the vortex. While the blue lights were going up, a chubby youngster asked if the fireworks were in honour of the Queen's Birthday, little reckoning the danger she was in. The children were very good: worn out with excitement many sank peacefully to sleep in the boats. Below them the dark water infested with voracious sharks, above them the starry sky. To their little minds the whole

calamity seemed like a huge joke; there they slept peacefully in the swaying boats dreaming of dolls and toys and fireworks, while their parents were pallid with fear, little knowing when the last brief struggle for life would come. Daylight came at last. The faint grey streaks were seen ascending from the eastern coast line, and by-and-by there was sufficient light for the boats to be lowered. One was let down, but a heavy ground swell took her dangerously near the rocks, and it was deemed prudent to return and lie under the lee of the ship. The vessel was boarded and the occupants were enabled to get something to eat, for many were thoroughly exhausted. As the day wore on

some negroes came off and piloted the boats to

shallow water. More Negroes met the boats and waded in carrying the women and children to the shore. It was stated that some French soldiers were told off to do this, but they preferred looking on. Mr. Johnson says :- "Before quitting the Port Douglas for the last time, we saw from the deck that monster sharks were prowling around us, evidently alive to the chance of a banquet, so that had we once got into the water there would have been but small hope for anyone. We have all to thank God for a marvelous escape from a terrible death,

for the more I think of that dreadful night the more convinced am I that our puny effort did but little towards our deliverance.

When the passengers landed they were con-

ducted to a courtyard attached to the Cape Verde lighthouse. The torrid rays of a vertical sun, and the weariness of the past night, began to tell upon some of the unfortunate

people and many were showing signs of buckling down. However, some mules arrived and these carried some of the weaker folk to the barracks four miles distant. The region is a very dreary one, and the heat oppressive. On arriving at the barracks they were met by the Commandant, who set before his unexpected guest ample vin ordinaire and the sour bread - food pleasant enough to Jean Bonhomme,

but very unpalatable to John Bull or his colonial children;

never they were very acceptable at the time, and the passengers thought so too. A stay of a few hours and conveyances arrived to take the party on to Dakar, 10 miles off. The carts were without springs, the roads were execrable, and from the description of one or two passengers the ride was a most exhausting one. Dakar, however, began to be perceptible, and then the passengers were driven to quarters at one of the hotels. Now an Englishman coming to Australia has the conceit wiped out of him when he sees what constitutes some

buildings in Australia called "hotels." But in Dakar the Englishman felt wiped out himself when he entered the portals of a Dakar hostelry. The French people came round the unfortunates chattering like chimpanzees, and the Dakar negro impudently handled the passengers' clothes, and what baggage they saved, and so appeased his own curiosity. It was difficult to provide for so many at this hotel, but somehow or other the visitors were stowed away, and were afterwards served with a meal a la Francaise. It was midnight ere they retired, and then the sleep was often broken by the heavy roll of the surf at hand and that afar off, which sounded like a distant railway train on a still night. The population of Dakar, like many other towns in Africa under the French or Portuguese is of a mixed character. There may not be found the variety here as at Port Said or Suez - pestholes of European scum -but the majority of the troops are men of questionable character. They consist of infantry of the line, Marine Artillery and Spatis, a light native cavalry. Opposite to Dakar is the Isle de Goree, where the Government officials and better class live. The British Consul resides here, but he was absent in France at the time. The town of Dakar is in a very insanitary condition. Mr. Johnson says "I would not live in the place for £5,000 a year, and that is a great deal for a poor man."

While at Dakar, awaiting relief, the same gentleman says, "There were among us some of the noisier sons

of Britain who under the influence of cheap cognac foolishly allowed their 'Rule Britannia' instincts to encourage them in a wild desire to 'Rule Dakar' also."

The end of it was the passengers were bundled out unceremoniously to find "fresh diggings."

They landed at a neighbouring restaurant, but although there was ample food the place was most filthy, and the "diners" had to share the some room as the poultry. Flies, mosquitoes, and vermin so troubled the visitors that they were forced to placate their Gallic, erstwhile inferiors at the hotel, and beg them to take them in, and they did take them in. But worse was to follow. While anxiously awaiting the arrival of the Kaikoura the poor people were looking forward to an end of their trouble, but it was not to be. For a French schooner, which had been chartered to salve the passengers' luggage from the steamer had almost completed her cargo and was only waiting for a few packages ere she brought in the changes of clothes which many were badly needing. Alas ! by some means not ascertained she dragged her anchor and drifted on to the rocks and everything was lost. A negro mate, who was in the vessel at the time, was drowned, and his mutilated remains were found next day. In this unfortunate accident one poor man says he lost among all his clothes and other articles 10 £5 notes--his little all which he hoped to make use of in the "new and better land." Others lost jewellery, watches, books, drawings, articles of vertu, relics, heirlooms and countless treasures which are valued for the memory they bring of some loved one. Mothers were distracted with the thought that their children had no more clothes than those they had on and a long cold voyage into high southern latitudes was before them. Scarcely a passenger had more than a change of clothes with him, and most were left utterly destitute. Messrs William Milburn and Co.,

the owners of the vessel, sent some money for tho assistance of the poor people, and so miti-gated their losses to a slight extent. Next morning boxes, wearing apparel, books, pictures and other floatable articles were picked up along the shore, but the major part of the emigrants' belongings were gone down in the schooner. On June 6 the Kaikoura hove in sight, and once more the party were among their own countrymen. The passengers, numbering 44 in all, were taken on board, but the captain officers and crew returned to England. Mr. Johnson speaks very caustically of the French authori-ties at Dakar. He says: "The French made a demand that the Port Douglas should be handed over to them, whch demand was properly ignored, as will be seen at once from the fact that the principal marine officer on seeing her saloon piano exclaimed 'Ah ! this will just suit my daughter,' What could we hope from men of such loose principle if anything

of value got into their possession. There was no irritating obstacle which they did not place in our captain's way to harass and annoy him. The unfortunate man, oppressed with the burden of his very serious position, striving to do his best for the comfort and relief of those committed to his charge, was questioned incessantly by some of them and threatened and reviled by others, had more than enough to contend with without extraneous persecution. Yet I never saw him flinch or give way to temper for a moment, though cruelly provoked. On behalf of my wife and myself, and the majority of our follow passengers, I declare that Captain Payne under exceptionally trying conditions, did all that lay in him, as a man to meet the grave responsibility, which must have lain like an incubus upon him." Captain Crutchley of the Kaikoura also criticises severely the action of the French at Dakar. The passengers generally complain of the bad treatment they received at the hands of the French, and speak highly of the blacks who were more considerate. The former, it is said, took every advantage of the defenceless people to rob them right and left. How true this may be remains to be proved, but if only a portion of the stories told are facts, the lot of the passengers was not a happy one, and they will ever look back upon the inhospitable colonists of Senegambia.

Tho Port Douglas was a new vessel, built in 1891 on the Wear. She was 4285 tons register and was considered tho commodore ship of the Port line. It is estimated that the loss of steamer and cargo will not be covered by £100,000. Advice by cable states that a large quantity of the cargo has been saved but the remainder, with the vessel is said to be irretrievably lost. The reef on which she struck is supposed to be uncharted.