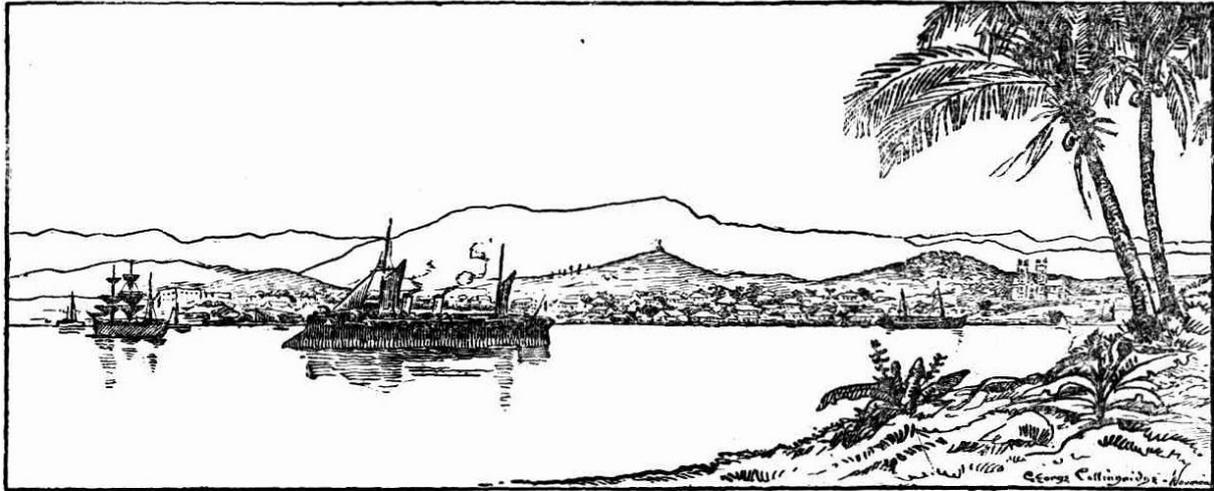


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Noumea: The Capital of New Caledonia.

A TRIP TO NEW CALEDONIA IN A FRENCH STEAMER.

(BY GEORGE COLLINGRIDGE.)

FIRST IMPRESSIONS

As the Messageries boat was to leave Circular Quay at 6 in the morning, I got on board the night before. Smoking a cigar and lounging on deck, I watched the arrival of some of the passengers, who, like myself, had also preferred to pass the night on board. They arrived in threes and fours, and a group of French army and navy officers formed close by me, vivaciously discussing their impressions of Australia (on their way from Marseilles to Noumea they had passed a few days in Sydney and environs) in general, and Sydney folk in particular. 'Les premieres impressions sont toujours les meilleures,' said one. That does not always mean the first impressions are good ones, I thought to myself, and it appeared so a few seconds later when a new arrival on deck being asked his opinion about the country he was going to leave, replied, 'C'est un pays de cochons, et un cochon de pays.' Anglice, 'It's a country of pigs, and a pig of a country.' Very few foreigners journey to New Caledonia on board the French steamers, and one finds oneself in French territory as soon as the gang board is lowered. We left punctually at 6 a.m., stayed a considerable time opposite Watson's Bay, taking on board two or three hundred cases of French explosives for the warship Protet, now anchored in the harbour of Noumea, where the new naval base connecting

FRANCE'S FLYING SQUADRONS

is being established. We cleared the Heads by 9 a.m., and after the 'second breakfast,' which is at 11, we had lost sight of land, of the bold entrance to Broken Bay, and of the Cardinal's Palace at Manly, which forms such a conspicuous landmark, and were bowling along at such a good speed that we nearly cut a whale in two that had not been forewarned of our approach and was probably fast asleep. At the breakfast table I had occasion to make the acquaintance of my army and navy companions, in the midst of whom I had been placed. Speak but the language of the Gaul, and charming companions you will find them; thus I found mine. During the dessert, 'entre la poir et le fromage,' as the French say, the conversation became animated, and when the coffee and cognac was served, it became general. New Caledonia,

Tahiti, the New Hebrides were discussed in turns. Somehow, it had transpired, that I knew something about the New Hebrides, and a young officer asked me some particulars concerning that interesting, but little known, group. Among other items, he wanted to know what the main produce of the large Island of Espiritu Santo was, and by his earnestness of speech had attracted the attention of the whole table. Now was my opportunity: 'Ma foi!' I answered, carelessly, 'C'est un pays de cochons--'" "Et un cochon de pays," he exclaimed, bubbling over with mirth as he finished my sentence, and the merry laugh spread all round, turning to a general uproar, and somebody looked very small for a while. It wasn't myself. The senior officers especially were splitting their sides with laughter, and one of them apologised to me, and made a few pertinent remarks to the gallery concerning the heedlessness of youth and the allround blessings to be derived from vernacular prudence in foreign lands. On the morning of the fourth day after leaving Sydney we sighted the lofty hills of

NEW CALEDONIA.

Mount Mou resembles Ben Cruachan, and the general outline of the distant hills recalls Scotland, so that, for once in a way, that ideal nomenclaturist, Captain Cook, made a happy hit by naming this land New Caledonia. A black speck in the distance marked the narrow entrance thorough the coral reef, and the opalescent tints of the shallows bordered by the dazzling white of the surf as it thundered over the outward barrier assumed deeper tones of cerulean blue and emerald green as we moved further in. Anon, the black speck grew larger, and turned out to be the pilot boat, manned by sturdy Kanakas. passing the 'Tabou,' a little lighthouse standing in the water on the left, and the larger one on Amedee Islet on the right, we were soon in the placid waters of Noumea Harbour, and steaming towards our anchorage, four miles ahead of us. As soon as the anchor was dropped, and the little canon fired, we were surrounded by a flotilla of small boats and steam launches, filled with friends eager to get on board to welcome the new arrivals. A minute later they swarmed on deck; ladies gorgeously attired in the latest fashions, French, officers of the army and navy in the full glory of their dazzling uniforms, a sprinkling of civilians in spotless white, and the rest made up of brown and black natives in flowing gowns and various attires of brilliant hues. Then followed an indescribable scene, in which gallant military salutes and wild embraces commingled, after which every one went on shore. The view of the township and scenery around, backed up by lofty hills, is very picturesque, but you must go ashore to get the best points of view. I found the Custom House officers not at all troublesome, and made my way at once to the Place des Cocotiers, where the leading hotels are situated, at the foot of the hills that rise behind the town. These face the large squares that occupy the centre of the metropolis. There are

FOUR SQUARES

in juxtaposition. The first, right in front of the hotels, shading them with its magnificent plantations of 'flamboyants' — the flamingo tree of the West Indies — and cocoanut palms, is named La Place des Cocotiers. Here at any hour of the day, you can rest under the delightfully cool shade of these trees, and watch, the motley crowd of every clime that characterises Noumea, or, after the heat of the day, listen to the excellent music of the military band, when, the crowds grow denser, and promenade to and fro until the music ceases, and everyone retires to bed, and the sea breeze prolongs the harmony as it sighs thorough the palms. At this season of the year the officers and citizens of Noumea dress in spotless white; the ladies in mauve and delicate shades of purple, and these colours contrast well with the dark skin of the Kanakas and their garments of gorgeous primary colours. The other squares of Noumea are the Market Square, where the suburbans bring their little crops of fruit and vegetables,

consisting at this time of the year of strawberries, tomatoes, butter beans, green peas, asparagus, etc. Here also you may buy fish, meat, poultry, venison, etc. The market is all over and the square cleared by breakfast time, which is between 6 and 7. The beautiful little 'Square Olry,' with its fine bronze statue of the Governor of that name, lies nearest to the wharves, and between it and the 'Place des Cocotiers' is a new square, now undergoing a process of formation and filling in. The streets of Noumea are well watered and planted with various umbrageous trees, amongst which the flamboyants will make themselves very conspicuous in a month or so, when they will be out in full scarlet bloom. I climbed the heights that overlook the town, and was much struck by the beauty of the scenery. The spacious harbour lay in front of me, protected by Nou Island to the right, and Rabbit Island to the left; the French warships lay at anchor in midstream, and other craft alongside the splendid stone quay now being constructed, and which when completed will present a magnificent sea wall extending the full length of the bay. Away to the north and south the suburban villas peer here and there through the greenery of cocoanut plantations, which under the glorious sunshine give such a tropical character to the scenery of this beautiful isle of the Pacific.

THE ARCHITECTURE

of Noumea, 'laisse un peu a desirer' the French say. and it certainly is not what one might expect from a nation endowed with such good taste as the French. Someone has said that the town has been built with absinthe and gin cases. This is a libel, but the general appearance of the town conveys the impression that the colonists have not come to stay, such is the lack of solidity and permanence about most of the houses. Why don't they make use of the splendid tiles from Marseilles that are now so much used about Sydney. The finest buildings in Noumea are the cathedral and the Town Hall. The cathedral stands on elevated land, and offers a good land mark for ships at sea. On one side of the square in front of it is a fine bronze statue of Joan of Arc. A fine museum is in course of construction, as the present one is totally inadequate for the large and exceedingly interesting collections of all sorts that are accumulating within its narrow precincts. I noticed some recently obtained and rare specimens of ancient aboriginal rock carvings, an art that the Kanakas of New Caledonia were not known to have practised.

THE MINERAL WEALTH

of New Caledonia is said. to be great, but comparatively little is known of it yet, as the country has not been thoroughly prospected. On the east coast the famous nickel mines in the Kanala district, extending along the coast for nearly seventy miles, are being systematically worked; and the Germans, in their practical way, have begun to tap some of this wealth. Many Japs and Austrians are employed on these mines, and some of them, by-the-bye. are rather disappointed and are leaving for West Australia. The first sod of the

RAILWAY FROM NOUMEA TO BOURAIL

was turned in August, 1901, and four months later the line was officially opened from 'La Montagne Coupee' to 'Koutio-Koueta'. Since then, however, the construction has not been progressing favourably, and. now the undertaking is pronounced a failure. In fact, there has been something like a little revolution in New Caledonia caused by Governmental doings. Governor Feillet; who began his career in grand style, and gave general satisfaction, has started on his return to France. Mr. Picanon is coming out to reorganise things, and take Mr. Feillet's place, and Mr. Telle holds the reins of government until he arrives. The sending out

of convicts will continue, as the party in favour of deportation has won the day. Meanwhile, the projected works, and those that had been started in connection with the formation of a

NAVAL BASE

at Noumea, such as the formation of docks, magazines, and storehouses, are at a standstill. This policy of inactivity will certainly not be continued, and it will be interesting to know what Mr. Picanon is going to do, and what his instructions are. With reference to religious matters, the New Caledonians appear to take their clue from what is done in France, and there is, therefore, just now, among a certain class, a strong feeling of hatred against the clergy. This was forcibly brought to my notice in the following amusing way:— I had business at the Bishop's house, and was searching for that dignitary's residence without much success, when I spied a rather important-looking personage coming towards me. He had a white helmet on, and wore a scowl under it. I asked him where the Bishop resided, at which he shrugged his shoulders ominously, made an awful grimace, and put out his arms, exclaiming in an unnecessarily vehement way, 'Mais je ne sais pas, monsieur!' ('I don't know, sir!'). A few steps further on I met a Kanaka, and repeated my query, and was shown the place at once. As it happened to be at the very spot where I had made my first inquiry, I came to the conclusion that the man in the white helmet was a stranger like myself, and made some remarks to that effect to my Kanaka friend, at which the latter exclaimed, with volubility, in that canine French known as "Biche la mar," "Oh, no, sir! That fellow no good, sir. He know well he go eat missionary!" Cannibalism is apparently changing hands — or mouths.

THE SUBURBS OF NOUMEA

are delightful. Here are to be found the well built barracks of the soldiers and gendarmes, and the snug and umbrageously hidden residences and villas of the wealthy. A drive to Anse-Vata, the Brighton of New Caledonia, must never be omitted, and I availed myself of an invitation to visit that delightful watering place by reef and palm.