

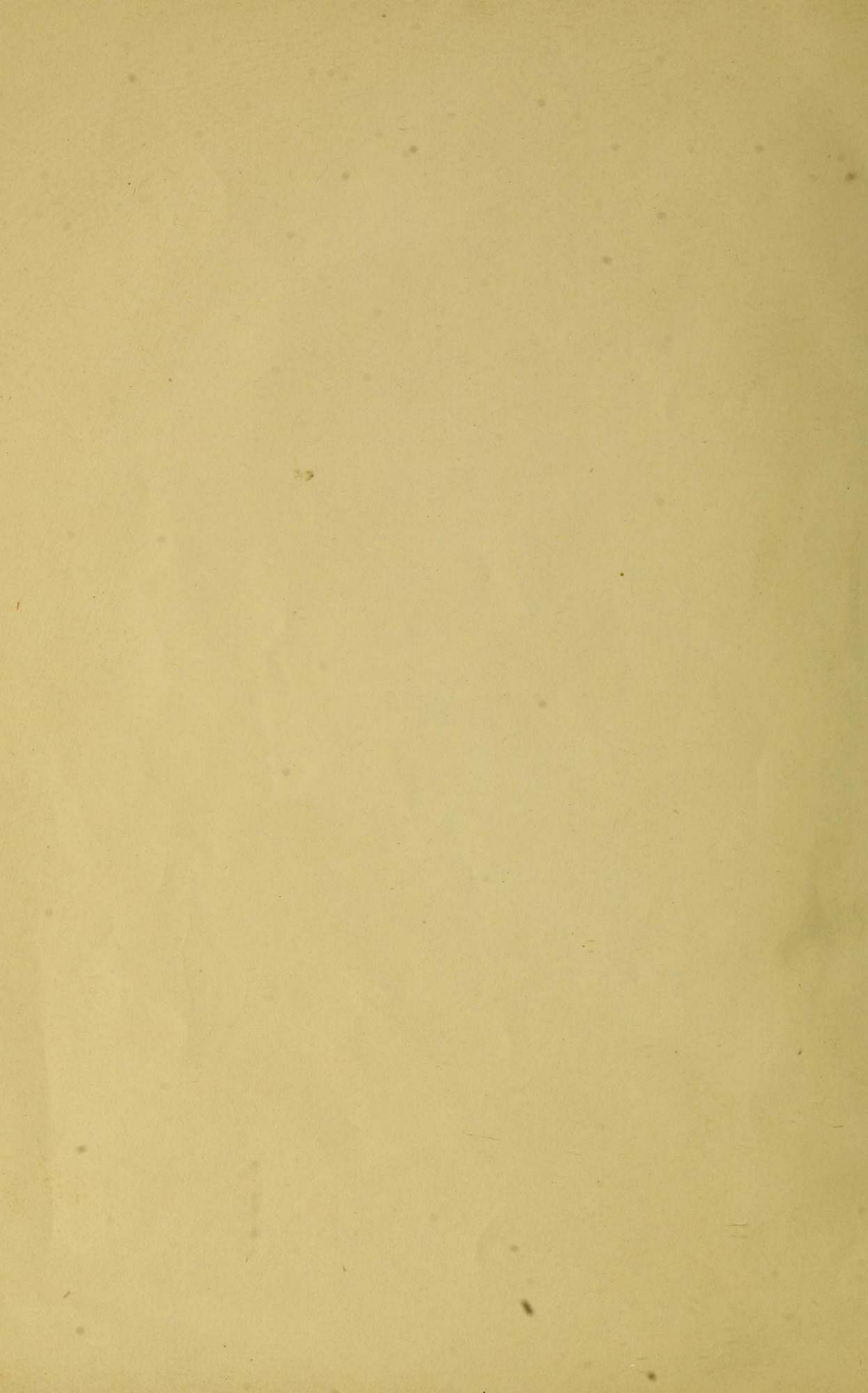


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# NEW CALEDONIA,

BY

CAPT. AUGUSTE E. BRUNO,

*Of the Royal Hussars, Honorary Equerry to His Majesty  
the King of Italy.*



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# NEW CALEDONIA.

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The distance from Sydney to New Caledonia is about 360 leagues. The voyage for sailing vessels occupies from ten to twenty days, and is fraught with as much interest as elsewhere, on the mighty deep. Schools of small whales are occasionally to be seen capering, spouting and leaping out of the water, the sunlight reflecting from their yellow bellies; bands of flying fish, skimming over the surface of the sea, at a height of a dozen feet, and making a thousand feet a minute, before dipping, in their efforts to escape from the Albacore (a large species of the mackerel family), or from some other of its innumerable briny persecutors.

The pursuit by the Albacore becomes exceedingly interesting—being a swift and powerful swimmer, it keeps, with wonderful precision, directly beneath its volatile prey, until the aerial leap ends in submersion, when its open jaws receive the little victims.

The Albacore attains to nearly the length of a man, and is not rivaled in elegance and beauty by any of the finny family. Its color along the back is gold, tinted blue, and the sides and belly of a silvery saffron hue. It has been observed, after capture, and just before dying, to change constantly and rapidly its color, and to reflect, like the pearl shell, the varied tints of the rainbow.

The Sword-fish, also encountered on the voyage, in turn makes prey of the Albacore, and the presumption is that when the latter congregate in large numbers about a ship, their finny foe is hard by; the theory being that the vicinity of so large a body as a vessel is sufficient to deter the sword-fish from making his impetuous



thrusts amongst the shoal, lest his bony weapon, impelled into the solid timbers by the violence of the assault, could not be withdrawn.

An occasional shark shows his fin. This sluggish, stupid monster, the legendary of the mariner, will follow the ship for days, and the idea prevalent among sailors is, that when seen in mid ocean, the shark is lost and famished. Corroboration of this idea is found in the fact that when captured—save the refuse of the ship—no food is found in its stomach. Sharks abound near the island coasts, and subsist upon the floating debris, gelatinous sea nettles and mollusks, with which inter-tropical seas abound. When lured away in the wake of a field of medusæ, they never return, but become hungry wanderers in the expanse of the ocean.

Endless varieties of squid and cuttle-fish are seen, many of which make long leaps out of the water.

Among other *compagnons de voyage* were the scarlet-tailed Tropic bird (Phaëton), called by sailors the Boatswain, from its shrill note, the Albatross of enduring flight, that dexterous fisher, the proverbial Booby, and the circling Sea Gull.

On the 9th of April, the jagged peaks of New Caledonia's mountains came in sight, and grew upon the horizon in the shortening distance. The white coral belt, which encircles the shore in parallel continuity beyond the reach of vision, next riveted the attention.

This limestone barrier of fossil coral, were it not for occasional passes through it, would interpose an insurmountable obstacle from the outer sea to the mainland, and the interjacent lagoon formed by it. Such breaks in its continuity, opening a way for the "White-Winged" messengers of commerce, are made by the currents of rivers, whose fresh waters are fatal to the life and labors of these marvellous myriads of zoöphytes, which, through countless centuries, have been raising and extending their ramparts against the ocean monarch in his very domains.

These opening, or breaks, in the coral belt are discernable at a distance at sea, both from a diminution in the tremendous surf, and a little islet on each side of the entrance, formed by



the sediment deposited by the current on their coral margins, and are tufted with vegetation and clumps of cocoa trees.

The current from the lagoon to the outer sea, through the opening, is constant, and less rapid in the middle, where greater resistance is encountered from the opposing ocean waves, and is increased by the surf overleaping the coralline barrier and falling into the lagoon.

On my first voyage I passed through what is known as the Dumbea passage, which is three-quarters of a mile wide, and lies abreast of the port of Noumea. Soundings at the seaward entrance indicate a depth of fifty fathoms, shallowing to fourteen at the inner outlet. A westerly current runs through it, at the rate of nearly one mile per hour, and no great hazard attends its navigation; yet a strong southerly breeze increasing the momentum of the current, with no anchorage, would make disastrous wrecks on the northwest shore of the pass inevitable, or, if overtaken by a calm in mid passage, a vessel would surely drift upon the lateral reefs.

Navigators speak occasionally of encountering a singularly turbulent sea at the entrance, rolling over and breaking with sufficient violence to swamp a ship.

On this voyage the "*Sadie T. Caller*" entered the bay through one of the Bulari passes, of which there are several, separated by coral patches. The one through which we entered was recognizable by small islets, as above mentioned, one on the outer, and the other (Amadée isle) within the reef.

Upon Amadée islet has been reared one of the most magnificent light-houses in the world; a spherical iron tower, painted in red and white bands, with a revolving light, 175 feet in elevation from the base to the lightning rod.

On one of the wooded islets at the entrance of Dumbea passage, there is likewise a fine beacon.

Between the Dumbea and Bulari passes, a distance of thirteen miles, the madreporic reef is straight and unbroken. The trend in the reef here changes from W.N.W. to N.N.W.

After gliding among the labyrinth of islands, the "*Sadie T. Caller*" passed through the inlet to the east of Isle Nu, and cast anchor in the roadstead in front of Noumea.



Noumea is the chief French port of New Caledonia, founded as late as 1853, by Montravel, and at that time fortified against interior attack by the small military colony then planted there.

The harbor of Noumea is one of the finest known to navigators, regarded from any point of view; the first great drawback, want of fresh water, having been removed by a splendid aqueduct, built by convict labor. It may be said, however, that during the months of January and February, the cyclonic period, there are occasions when anchors will not hold a ship; men-of-war are obliged to keep up steam, and sailing vessels to take refuge in sheltered coves. So terrific is the wind, that houses are unroofed, sometimes blown over, and many disasters result.

Perhaps the most serious scourge of New Caledonia is the cyclone, which, with more or less intensity, visits the Island and adjacent seas annually.

The initial point of this formidable whirlwind, in the Southern Hemisphere, is near the Equatorial line. Sweeping around upon a progressive axis, its centrifugal flight never ceases, until a circle is described, which marks a diameter of nearly 1,000 miles, moving ever in a direction like that of the hands of a clock.

The movement of translation of the axis of the cyclone is invariably westerly, with a steady southerly inflection, describing a parabola, and continuing to a distance of two and a half leagues.

By reference to the map, it will be seen that the cyclone passes between Australia and New Caledonia, then diverging to the southeast, it doubles the northern promontory of New Zealand, from whence this devastating phenomenon, in its headlong flight, becomes lost, and its warm breath congealed over the icy wastes of the South Pacific.

In its track, every unsheltered object upon the Island is prostrated. The rain, meanwhile, falls in torrents, and the rill speedily becomes a river; but in the deep valleys vegetation escapes its pernicious breath.

The advent of these formidable tempests is heralded by unmistakable signs. For days previously the heat becomes oppressive, copper-hued clouds float in mid-air, rain, in huge drops, descends, and finally, when too late for precautions, the



sudden fall of the mercury in the barometer announces that the unwelcome visitor has reached the shore.

At the acme of the tempest, the wind rushes from every point of the compass. Should it happen, as once it did in Noumea, in 1865, that one finds himself in the magic centre of this mad whirl, he beholds the sky serenely bright, the sun undimmed, the atmosphere pure and undisturbed, a gentle breeze sighs through the rustling foliage, and the soul of man and of nature seems to blend in harmonious lethargy, when, like a thunderbolt, the howling tempest bursts upon this fictitious calm, and terror and dismay overwhelm the earth.

The track of the hurricane is marked by general desolation. The perennial verdure of this tropic land, its paradisaical fields and forests, then look as though they had been scathed by the fiery fiend. The mighty wings of the tornado, drenched with the ocean's spray, shower their briny burden upon the teeming earth, the bruised vegetation yields its life-sap to the desiccating sun, and the eternal evergreen fades into a sickly yellow.

New Caledonia, discovered by Captain Cook over one hundred years ago, is, next to New Zealand, the largest island in the great South Sea, being upwards of 220 miles in length and 40 in width. Its valleys and transverse plateaux contain large areas of transcendent fertility, teeming with spontaneous vegetation; yet, no product of this prolific island figures in the world's commerce, except its sandal wood, gold, copper and nickel ore—the latter presenting itself in the form of a magnesium hydro-silicate, which has received the name of Garnierite.

Situated as far south as the Hawaiian Islands are north of the equatorial line, the climate, while similar, is superior thereto. From April to December, a glorious succession of resplendent days and starlit nights, of equal length, marks the longer of the two seasons in this latitude—the wind prevailing from the E.S.E. point of the compass, with occasional variations to the W.S.W. in July, August and September, bringing rain. The west coast, to a degree, seems to come within the Australian monsoons. The shorter season is dreaded by navigators on the north coast, as a ship in the toils of the cyclone, which then prevails, rarely ever



escapes wreck upon the coralline reefs, which form the most striking characteristic of the South Sea Archipelago.

The entire west coast of New Caledonia is an interminable labyrinth, or network of promontories, peninsulas, bays and islets, with circumjacent reefs of coral, while its eastern shore line is, figuratively speaking, edged with a submarine fringe of coral rocks, extending for many leagues oceanward, with sand islets at intervals.

Notwithstanding the broken character of the coast, there are numerous ports or havens which afford shelter.

Two longitudinal cordilleras, running in nearly parallel lines, diversify the surface of the Island, the craggy peaks of which, being visible at sea for many leagues, are Nature's beacons to the wary mariner amid these treacherous seas.

New Caledonia, like the sister groups, affords to the geologist unmistakable proofs of mighty volcanic upheavals in long past ages—in fact, at this time volcanoes exist in the interior.

The mangrove in many places lines the shores in dense groves to the water's edge, while the cocoa and betelnut trees, both varieties of the palm, luxuriantly abound. It is the nut of the latter, with the leaves of a species of pepper tree, and coral lime, that is chewed so universally by the East Indians.

The pine, in clumps, grows to a great height, especially near the sea and on the smaller out-lying islands. Many fine tropic timber trees are found, the most important being the sandal and rosewood. The sandal-wood of commerce is the heart of the larger trunks, and is of a very deep saffron hue and most grateful perfume.

The coffee and tobacco plants flourish to a greater degree in New Caledonia than in countries where they are indigenous, the former producing a berry of unrivalled flavor in about fourteen months after planting, whilst in other countries, famed for their coffee product, double that time is necessary.

These crops are, unfortunately, subject to periodical destruction by invasions of grasshoppers, which grow to an enormous size, and have become so grave an infliction upon the country as to have induced the Colonial Government to offer great prizes for contrivances to exterminate them.



The cotton plant finds, likewise, a genial soil in New Caledonia, but the rainy season is inimical, as the crop is liable to damage from excess of moisture, a peculiarity of the Torrid Zone.

Many oil-yielding plants, of great variety, figure in the botany of this island, while the sugar-cane grows luxuriantly.

The mulberry tree (*Morus Mucculis*) and silkworm are attracting great attention.

Cattle raising is becoming an almost universal business, and with immense success.

The native population has, as yet, not been ascertained, and is estimated at upwards of 35,000. The European or foreign population does not exceed half that number.

The murderous proclivities of the aborigines of New Caledonia, and many of the South Sea Islands, have been corrected by the French Catholic missionaries, and those of the Church of England, and the colonists, a great number of whom, in the past, in their humanitarian efforts, have laid down their lives and sunk to their eternal rest, "unwept, unhonored and unsung."

On the Island of New Caledonia, "Commerce, the great civilizer," and French penal colonization, at first supplemented the work of the missionaries, but now have superseded it.

The French occupation of New Caledonia must result in the eventual extermination of the native islanders, such is the natural and implacable antipathy felt by the latter against the former, an almost incessant struggle of progressive intensity is made by them. In the French newspaper, published at Noumea, it is usual to read of "Soulèvement Canaque," "Nouvelle révolte des Canaques," "Cannibalisme Canaque," *ad infinitum*.

Under the title, "Un peu d'Histoire—Coup d'œil retrospectif," a Noumean publication, furnishes a long and frightful list of the atrocities of the islanders upon Europeans, mostly the French, since M. Tardy de Montravel, on September 24th, 1853, debarked "au Havre de Salade" and solemnly took possession of New Caledonia, "au nom de la France." The victims comprised in this fearful list of killed and eaten, are soldiers, colonists, their wives and children, missionaries, crews of vessels,



shipwrecked passengers, fugitive transports and Polynesian laborers.

Convict labor has been utilized by the French Governmental authorities in New Caledonia, in a manner and to a degree that excites the admiration of all.

Under the guidance of their engineers and superintendents, this labor has been so directed that immense excavations have been made, and hills leveled, and the sea filled in over a great space, upon which the *Port de France* (Noumea) has been built. Commodious Government warehouses, dry-docks, arsenals, military barracks, Government Palace, Hall of Justice, hospital, telegraphs, aqueducts, quays, roads and military highways, public squares, baths, and other great works, have been commenced and completed with convict labor. Extensive tracks in the interior of the Island are being opened, made accessible and cultivated by this labor.

The Isle Nu (Dubouzet Island) lies opposite the Port Noumea, which latter place is located on the north side of a small bay, on the west shore of Ducas Peninsula. Isle Nu is quite three miles long, and runs parallel with the Noumean shore, from which it is separated by a channel of the same length, a mile or more in mean breadth.

This channel affords an anchorage protected from the winds at all times, with deep water and bold shores. In this roadstead are moored the men-of-war and gunboats, that inspire with wholesome dread from five to eight thousand wretched criminals, and crush in their hearts the forlorn hope of ever again seeing their beloved *patrie*.

The surface of the Isle Nu is diversified by a series of small hills and plateaux, rising one above another, receding from the shore. To the east and west there is an outlet to the sea. Upon the summit of the central ridge a military observatory has been erected, dominating the island and its surroundings.

On the first plateau, and diagonally opposite Noumea, is a long line of low, one-story, sharp-roofed stone prisons, compactly built, each containing eighty bunks, forty on a side, strongly constructed, and provided with iron rings, to which the fettered prisoner is fastened at night. In this initial row the



least criminal of the convicts are lodged at night. On the terrace, or plateau, partly artificial, next above and behind, is a similar row of prisons, for an inferior grade of transports; and in this wise four plateaux have been used as prison sites, the last and highest row of prisons being reserved for the most infamous. A species of boulevard, shadowed by evergreens, occupies the space in front of the prisons, and here "the sentry walks his midnight round."

That speedy justice may be meted out to these outcasts, when a fit occasion presents itself, that useful, expeditious and humane invention of a great philanthropist, so suggestive of dissevered heads and bodies, the guillotine, has been imported from the mother country and installed upon the island, where it grimly invites the attention, and provokes retrospective reflection upon the gigantic crimes of the Reign of Terror—crimes committed in the sacred name of Liberty, when there turned upon man a fiercer demon-man!

The thumb-screw, rack and other ingenious devices of the Holy Inquisition, are at times resorted to, when the wretch is put to the "Question."

A finger, or other mutilated member, in this sultry climate, not infrequently mortifies, rendering amputation necessary.

The martial discipline of a French camp prevails, and as has been suggested by an observant English officer, it is this military system, that pervades everything they do, that makes the French such bad colonists and so hated by the natives.

Among the depraved of these unfortunates, serving out their penal terms on the Isle Nu, and for whom no ray of hope glimmers on the darkening vista of life, there exists, despite the espionage of their military guards and keepers, a singular freemasonry of language and action. Their oral communications with each other are in a convict dialect, known alone to themselves; and what is surprising, money, which they are interdicted from having in their possession, nevertheless circulates surreptitiously among them, betrayal, or any attempt of the kind made by any of their number, portends the death of the false one sooner or later.

Money is furtively obtained by them in many ingenious ways,



and as ingeniously circulated. One illustration, of many that might be given, will suffice. Out of beef bones are deftly wrought *chef d'oeuvres* of art, in the form of shirt studs, snuff-boxes, match-cases, and many curious little articles. In the manufacture of these, tools of some sort must be used. As possession by them even of a penknife is prohibited, these must be obtained, as well as the time for their use, by the connivance of the surveillants, who have charge of them in squads, and are held responsible for any breach of prison discipline. While engaged on the public works, and strangers, captains of vessels, visitors, and others, come about them, an opportunity is watched for by them, and the little artistic fabric, revealed in the half-opened hand, is offered for sale, *soto voce*, and invariably finds a purchaser in various persons from various motives, whether as a souvenir, a curiosity, or a tribute of pity for the wretched vendor.

The guillotiner, or headsman, who is a convict, and lives apart from them, borrows, frequently, money from his brother convicts, at usurious rates, and pledges, as security, his fee of twenty-five francs, to become due from the Government for the next human head that is severed from its body.

The worst type of criminals is to be found here—creatures originally without a single instinct of nobility to distinguish them from the brute creation. Crime and disease are far from being exceptional among them, while insanity and consumption—resulting from self-abuse—despair, and suicide, decimate them.

In front of the prisons, along the shore, are commodious slips and wharves. Boats in use for officers and prisoners are always secured by chains and bolts to the landings, and vigilant sentries ever on duty.

Obliquely to the right of the prisons are the offices and residence of the Commandant, surrounded by gardens of perennial verdure and rare beauty. On the left the telegraph station is located.

There are many other prominent buildings on this side of the Isle Nu, among which may be mentioned a spacious structure dedicated to the use of the surveillants and their families, a



church (services in which prisoners are made to attend), a grand boulangerie and an extensive saw-mill. A depot or warehouse, of large proportion, and a splendid building, used by the Commissioners, doctors and schoolmasters, attract the attention; also the Academy, the barracks and officers' mess-rooms.

A fine road leads from the embarcadero over the hills to the southeast slope of the Isle Nu, confronting the ocean. There is to be found the Hospital, an elaborate and most charming structure, in the construction of which French skill and taste, always so superior, have been well displayed. Some distance away is to be seen, embowered amid the foliage, the convent of *Les Soeurs de Charité*. Encompassing these for a long distance is what is termed the *Jardin Anglais*, the most enchanting spot to be met with anywhere. What rapture fills the breast of the stranger invited to visit this Elysian field while wandering through bowers of floral beauty, over green and russet walks, reposing for a moment in the welcome shade of the bending banyan, glancing at the feathery plumes of the graceful palm, rustled in mid air by soft wooings of the south wind, amorous vines and mosses clinging to their forest trees, love-birds of dazzling plumage fitting through the foliage, insects with diamond-lustred coats wantoning in the sunlight, and the air languid with its burden of a thousand perfumes. And when the music of the Island band, with its voluptuous swell, comes gently stealing upon the ear, every sense seems ravished.



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