

(No. 4343.)

"KAKANUI" (S.S.)

Marine Department,
Wellington, N.Z., 22nd May 1891.

REPORT of the Court of Inquiry into the loss of the S.S. "KAKANUI" of Dunedin, official number 75,223, 57 tons register, William Best, master, holding a Board of Trade certificate of competency, No. 50,448. The vessel left Macquarie Island for New Zealand on the 3rd January last, and has not since been heard of.

"1. That the official number of the said ship called the 'Kakanui' is 75,223, of which William Best was master, who held a certificate of competency, and which ship belonged to Keith Ramsey, Charles Frederick Sundstrom, Archibald Brown Campbell, and John Mill, of Dunedin and Port Chalmers, New Zealand.

"2. That the vessel was insured for 1,500*l.* in Home Offices, and for 300*l.* in the National Insurance Company of New Zealand.

"That the 'Kakanui' was fore and aft schooner-rigged; her port of registry is Dunedin; her registered tonnage, 83 gross and 57 net; she was built of iron, with three watertight compartments. And

"I, the said Justice of the Peace and Resident Magistrate, further state my opinion on the matter aforesaid to be as follows:—

"That the 'Kakanui' left Invercargill on the 24th December 1890, under charter to the New Zealand Government, to proceed to the Macquarie Islands and bring back to New Zealand all persons on shore there who wished to return.

"The 'Kakanui' was sent on this mission in consequence of strong representations made to the Government that there was a sealing party of nine men at the islands, in the employ of Mr. Joseph Hatch, of Invercargill (also the wife of one of the men), who were landed there in April 1890, with only six months' provisions, which provisions must then (December 1890) have been long since consumed. These representations, supported as they were by corroborative evidence, made out a strong case that the party, if alive, would in all probability be in a desperate state of destitution.

"The following is a list of persons who left Invercargill in the 'Kakanui':—William Best, master mariner; Jacob Eckhoff, chief mate, holding a master's certificate; Charles Norden, second mate, holding a coastal certificate; Robert Stewart, engineer, holding a second-class certificate; William Morgan and Hugh McMillan, firemen; John Silvester, George Ludman, and Peter Sands, able seamen; William Ressler, cook. The only other person on board was Mr. James Stewart, who proceeded in the vessel as Government agent.

"The 'Kakanui' reached the Macquarie Islands and anchored in Lusitania Bay about 5 o'clock on the morning of the 3rd January 1891. Mr. Stewart, the Government agent, at once proceeded on shore and met the whole of Mr. Hatch's party of men, and informed them that he was commissioned by the New Zealand Government to offer free passages to all persons who wished to return to New Zealand in the 'Kakanui.'

"The following persons, which included all upon the island excepting Mellish and his wife, accepted the offer conveyed to them through Mr. Stewart, and accompanied him in a whale-boat to the 'Kakanui':—C. Gamble, H. Couzens, A. Watson, G. Godfrey, W. Dow, H. Lewis, W. Cowan, and W. Ralph. Mellish also went on board, but not with the intention of leaving the island, and was shortly afterwards put on shore.

"About half-past 6 o'clock of the same morning, after a stay of about an hour and a half, the 'Kakanui' raised her anchor and steamed off towards the north end of the island. Mellish explained in his evidence that the men had only their swags with them at Lusitania Bay, and that the rest of their things, including some clothes, skins, curios, and other articles, were at a depot at the north end of the island; that they asked his permission to remove them, which he con-

sented to; and that when he next visited the depot he found that, with the exception of two broken fowling-pieces and a pillow, everything belonging to the men had been removed from the island. It is not probable that the vessel was delayed at the north end more than a short time, because, according to Mellish's evidence, at his suggestion, Captain Best hurried away from Lusitania Bay, as a north-east wind was blowing and increasing in strength, and the sea was making, and therefore he wanted to get clear of the land. The same considerations would operate at the north end of the island, and the articles left behind there, although of small value, afford some indications of haste in the men's movements on shore.

"The 'Kakanui' was last seen by both Mr. and Mrs. Mellish as she was steaming from Lusitania Bay, and they lost sight of her as she rounded the point of Big Bay. There is no evidence or grounds for belief that the 'Kakanui' was ever seen again except by those on board of her, but there can be no doubt that she reached the north end of the island, and in all probability steamed away from there on her course towards New Zealand.

"In consequence of the 'Kakanui' not having returned to New Zealand, the Government steamer 'Hinemoa' left the Bluff for the Macquarie Islands in search of the 'Kakanui' on the 22nd January 1891, and returned to the Bluff unsuccessful on the 4 February. She left again on the 6 February to search the Auckland and Campbell Islands, and returned to the Bluff on the 14th February. On the 27th February she left Wellington to search Antipodes, Bounty, and Chatham Islands, and returned from that expedition, reaching Napier on the 11th March. Captain Fairchild, the commander of the 'Hinemoa,' has reported, as the result of those voyages, that he had discovered no trace of the 'Kakanui.'

"Mellish gave important evidence as to the probable fate of the vessel. He said, referring to the time when he last saw the 'Kakanui,' 'The wind was north-east; this was a head wind for her, and she was steaming against it.' It was pretty rough, and the wind increased as the day went on. 'It continued to increase till 12 or 1 o'clock on the following morning, when it fell light. The wind then shifted to the westward and blew a living gale for about sixteen hours. It blew down the biscuit-house which had been erected some months before. It had often been exposed to gales before, but that gale blow it right clean away. It lifted stones bigger than marbles, and took them up into the air in circles. I have known gales like that before, but not so heavy. It was the worst gale I have ever experienced at the island.' As Mellish had been on the islands about sixteen years, excepting an occasional absence of six or eight weeks at a time, when he made a voyage to New Zealand, he could not have expressed his opinion of the great force of the gale in stronger language. It should also be noted that Mellish lived on the east side of the island, protected to some extent from a westerly wind, while the 'Kakanui' would be out in the open sea, subject to the full force of the gale. Mellish also said that at the time of the gale, he had fears for the safety of the 'Kakanui'; but if she had been a sailing-vessel he would have had no fear of her, because those vessels are more buoyant in the water, and they can be hove-to.* Mellish said further, 'There was nothing wrong with the 'Kakanui' that I could see, only she seemed a little too deep. She had a little more than her Plimsoll mark out of the water.' There seems to me no probability that the vessel could have been deeply laden when she reached the Macquarie Islands. Mr. Ramsey's evidence shows that her carrying capacity was 77 tons dead weight; that she left Invercargill without cargo, but carried 63½ tons of coal. She occupied nine days on her passage down, and her consumption of coal when steaming full speed would be from 3½ to 4½ tons a day. If she consumed only 10 or 15 tons—a low estimate—then I am advised by the nautical assessor that she would have been in fair trim.

"I now come to the questions of the seaworthiness and fitness of the 'Kakanui' for the voyage upon which she was sent from New Zealand.

* The nautical assessor disagrees with this opinion.

"In the first place, I find that the 'Kakanui' held only a coastal certificate, which was issued upon the declaration of Mr. Engineer-Surveyor Blackwood, in June 1890, for six months, and which expired on the 31st December 1890. Mr. Blackwood, being now in the North Island, has not been available as a witness upon this inquiry; but the evidence of Mr. Engineer-Surveyor Crawford goes to show that Mr. Blackwood informed him that he surveyed the 'Kakanui' at the end of June 1890, for twelve months, but that, acting upon his advice, Mr. Ramsay, the managing owner, applied for a six months' certificate only, so that he might have the advantage of a Government inspection at the end of that time. There was nothing in the near expiration of her certificate to prevent the 'Kakanui' being sent to sea, but the certificate she held was for coastal voyages only. She was permitted to proceed to sea by instruction from the Marine Department to the Collector of Customs at Invercargill in this way:—

"On the 23rd December Mr. Ramsay applied to Engineer-Surveyor Crawford to know whether there was any objection to the 'Kakanui,' on account of her holding only a home-trade certificate, proceeding to the Macquaries; and thereupon Mr. Crawford telegraphed to the Marine Department, Wellington, that he had no objection to the 'Kakanui' proceeding there. It then appears that the collector was directed by the Marine Department to let her go. Mr. Crawford has explained the grounds for the recommendation he made to be the statement made to him by Mr. Blackwood in connection with the last survey of the vessel; the fact also that he had himself known the vessel ever since she was built, had inspected her many times, and knew that her general condition was all good; that to his own knowledge she was a good little vessel, and had a good name as a seaworthy boat.

"The permission given for the vessel to proceed on her voyage was doubtless irregular in the manner and form in which it was sought and given.

"The 'Kakanui' was docked at Port Chalmers in December 1890, and seems to have then received a complete overhaul and all necessary repairs, and to have left the dock on the 17th of that month in thorough order. Intimation that she was to be docked was addressed to the engineer-surveyor at the time, but it seems the letter did not reach his hands until after the vessel had left Port Chalmers again. But for this unfortunate mischance the vessel would have been surveyed, and I think there is every reason to believe that a proper formal certificate would have been obtained for the voyage she was shortly afterwards required to undertake. The explanation sufficiently shows why the 'Kakanui' was permitted to proceed on a foreign voyage with only a home-trade certificate; and that the fact that she held a certificate of that class only is not any evidence that she was not fit to go upon a foreign voyage.

"Several witnesses have testified to the 'Kakanui' being well built, a good sea-boat, properly found with everything required for a sea-going voyage, including a large whale-boat in addition to the ordinary ship's boat. Mr. William Thomson, a master mariner, and Lloyd's surveyor at Dunedin, stated in his evidence that, in his opinion, she was fit to face any weather when in proper trim; and generally, as to the vessel, the witnesses spoke favourably. In addition to this, Captain Best, her master, had been a considerable time in command of the vessel. He is reputed to have been a competent and careful master. Captain Eckhoff, the first mate, had been more than once at the islands; the seamen were the ordinary crew of the vessel, and none of these appear to have made any objection to the voyage. The second mate, Norden, is the only person who appears to have spoken against the safety of the vessel for the voyage, but the arrangement that Captain Eckhoff was to supersede him as mate, while engaged upon it,

would naturally not tend to make it popular with him; but it is difficult to understand that he could really have intended Mrs. Stewart to believe, on the eve of her husband's departure, that the voyage was one that the vessel was not fit to be put to.

"The strongest opinion against the fitness of the 'Kakanui' for the voyage is in the evidence given by Mr. William Belcher, a seaman, who made several voyages to the islands, and lived there on one occasion for 13 months. He had never sailed in the 'Kakanui,' but gained a knowledge of the vessel by seeing her occasionally at the wharves. He said that if he had been a member of her crew he would most decidedly have not gone to the Macquaries in her. He did not make any particular objection to the vessel as distinguished from others of the same class, but he expressed a decided opinion that steamers of her size and class are not fit to cope with weather and seas that prevail between New Zealand and the Macquaries, which he characterises as equal in severity to any that home ships meet with. He also stated that a steamer will not heave-to so readily or make as good weather of it as a sailing-vessel.* This witness is a highly intelligent, practical man, and I give his opinion as to the probable fate of the 'Kakanui' with full confidence. He said that, with a gale of wind such as that described by Mellish, the weakest point of the 'Kakanui' would be the engine-room skylight; that a sea might come on board of her, carry away the skylight, get below into the engine-room, and put out the fires, and the vessel would then be disabled, and probably founder.

"There seems to be no doubt that the 'Kakanui' was caught in the terrible gale of the 4th January, described by Mr. Mellish, and which seems to have partaken of the nature of a cyclone; and, as she has been neither seen or heard of since then, in all probability she foundered during that gale—a fate that might have happened to a vessel of any size.

"I may add, although it is not a matter pertinent to this inquiry, that the evidence shows clearly that the men and women at the Macquaries, on the arrival of the 'Kakanui,' were not in a destitute condition or suffering from want of food, and never had been. Mr. Mellish's evidence on the point, which there is no reason to doubt, is, that when the 'Kakanui' arrived there were about 8 cwt. of biscuits, which he says, although 'not particularly good,' were 'not so bad;' about 2 cwt. of good flour, a sugar-bag full of rice, and some split peas; sea-birds' eggs, rabbits, Maori hens, wild ducks, mutton birds, sea-elephants' tongues, and other things fit for food were obtainable upon the island, most of them in large quantities. There was no tea, coffee, or sugar, the stock having been exhausted for over four months, and no salt meat or tobacco, and the men were running short of boots and clothes; and that, from want of casks to put oil into, and fuel to make it with, the men were forced to give up work in August, and, as their pay depended upon the quantity of oil obtained, they ceased to earn wages. These are the hardships the men suffered, but they were never in want of food, the danger that doubtless prompted the benevolent act of sending the 'Kakanui' to give them relief.

"Given under my hand this twenty-first day of April 1891, at Dunedin, in the Colony of New Zealand.

(Signed) "E. H. CAREW,
Justice of the Peace
and Resident Magistrate.

"I concur in the above report.

(Signed) "JOHN ORKNEY,
"Nautical Assessor."

* The nautical assessor disagrees with this opinion.

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Pursuant to Government, No. 289, dated 1889, C. P. Cooper, Esq., Captain E. Crewe, M.A., "Rosetta," and B.I.S.N. Company, investigation into the stranding of the S. near Karhaj, in November last, the 13th and 14th days of

2. From the evidence of the British steamer Inverkeithing, in 260 ft. long, 130 tons, owned by the Taffrail Log Company, M^r. Adam, who had been master, granted a certificate issued at Bristol Bay on the 27th touching at ports

3. Her crew, all two navigating officers and two engineers.

Breber, who had been ordinary master, of Bombay and died on the ship on the 2nd came from the Macquaries was his first voyage as officer, Manekjee, competency as second mate, Government of Bombay joined the ship and acted as second mate, no certificate. The lascars and well crew

4. There was a Persian Gulf, by Stiffe, of 1860, with 1865, and small chart in use; and Gulf, Western Sea, corrected up to Part 1., of 1874.

5. There were three spirit compasses, a spirit compass, and compasses. The passes were not in pass had no spirit was used. There compass error bore bridge compass. Taffrail Log in g

6. Captain M^r. A. was surveyed in B. ficate, under Act- 1890.

7. The vessel left October last, and tested the starboard after leaving by in the afternoon a with the compass

8. After calling sorah at 5.30 p.m. discharged and to 13th of November river, and left the at 7.10 a.m. with and had a large The bar buoy at 1.40 p.m. that day four miles. The