

The Spectator

FOR THE

WEEK ENDING SATURDAY, APRIL 20, 1912.

NEWS OF THE WEEK.

A TERRIBLE disaster, involving a greater loss of life than has ever been known in the history of the mercantile marine, happened to the White Star liner 'Titanic' last Sunday night. The 'Titanic,' which was the largest ship in the world, was on her maiden voyage across the Atlantic. When in latitude 41°16' North, longitude 50°14' West, the nearest land being Cape Race, she struck an iceberg about 11.40 p.m. According to a statement drawn up by some of the survivors, there was a smooth sea and the stars were visible, though there was no moon. The iceberg was reported by the look-outs to the officers on the bridge, but not in time to avoid the collision. The boats were lowered and took off the women and children and a proportion of the men. But the boats, which numbered twenty in all, including the collapsible boats, were not nearly enough, and out of the 2,208 persons on board apparently only 705 were saved. The number of drowned is therefore said to have reached the appalling total of 1,503. The 'Titanic,' carrying down with her the great majority of men passengers and crew, sank about 2 a.m.

The usual wireless messages were sent in all directions from the sinking ship, and distress rockets were fired. At midnight the wireless messages were picked up by the Cunard liner 'Carpathia.' She reached the scene of the wreck at 4 a.m. on Monday, and took on board all the passengers from the twenty boats. When the survivors in the 'Carpathia' were landed on Thursday night at New York utterly contradictory stories of the disaster were told. The weight of evidence, however, seems to prove that the 'Titanic' did not strike the berg with any great violence. We think it likely that she lifted on the submerged ice, which probably extended a very long way from the visible peak, and the glancing impact tore a long hole in her side. If these were the circumstances many of those on board may actually have been in doubt as to whether the vessel would founder at all. Men's misgivings generally adapt themselves to the violence of the shock. Among the wilder stories of the survivors was one that the captain and chief engineer of the 'Titanic' had shot themselves. We do not believe this for a moment, though revolvers may have been used by the officers if there was any panic in filling the boats. Nor do we believe that the boilers of the 'Titanic' exploded and broke the ship in half. That kind of story is always told when a steamship founders. Those in the small boats no doubt watched the end of the 'Titanic' from a considerable distance, and have only a vague notion of what happened.

No details of the wreck were sent by the 'Carpathia' as she steamed towards New York, and the most extraordinary and fantastic rumours became current. From the moment that the news of the wreck was known the air was filled with the messages of amateur wireless operators, and it has even been suggested in America by a highly responsible authority that some of the false rumours were due to attempts to gain favourable terms for owners of cargo in the insurance market. We deprecate most strongly all such attempts to impute unworthy motives, for which there is no evidence. At the same time the experiments of the amateur telegraphists did unquestionably cause much pain by raising false hopes, and probably also made the wireless operations of the ships extremely difficult. So strict was the silence of the 'Carpathia' during the voyage from the scene of the wreck to New York that she refused to answer messages from Mr. Taft. She sent lists of the survivors to the shore, and no other word. We suspect, however, that the reticence of the captain was due to a most commendable desire not to prejudice the inquiry into facts about which he had heard only the confusing evidence of contradictory witnesses. The question of the inadequate supply of boats will assuredly engage the earnest attention of the British and American nations for some time to come. The American Senate has promptly appointed a committee of inquiry. We have written of this matter fully elsewhere. The sorrow and emotion of the country at this awful and most dramatic catastrophe may be measured by the extremely generous response to the Lord Mayor's Fund opened for the relief of the sufferers.