"RIFLEMAN."

The Merchant Shipping Acts, 1854 to 1876.

In the matter of the formal investigation held at Westminster, on the 27th and 28th instant, before H. C. Rothery, Esquire, Wreck Commissioner, assisted by Captain G. S. Simpson, US, Captain A. A. Bigelow, as Assessors, into the circumstances attending the loss by fire of the sailing ship "RIFLEMAN," of London, on or about the 27th April last, while on a voyage from Demerara to London.

Judgment.

The Commissioner. This case appears to us to be a very clear and simple one. The "Riflemans," which was a barque of 346 tons register, belonging to the Port of London, was the property of Mr. G. S. Simpson, of No. 9, Clements Lane, in the city of London, and three other gentlemen, by whom the vessel was owned. She was built in the year 1860, and appears to have been a good vessel, having been originally classed A 1 for 14 years. The shipowners, as if brought to the port of London, but no record of this period has been kept for nine years.

On the 13th day of January 1877 she left London, with a general cargo, and was ordered to call at St. Thomas's, and to proceed, and the men, owners, and crew of 12 hands all told. She had two boats which, in view of the same, was considered as a good and efficient vessel. The evidence of the managing owner was for a sum of 7,000l., of which the owners took 500l. as their own share.

She reached Demerara on the 5th of March, and there discharged her cargo, &c. took in another, consisting of sugar, rum, cocoa-nuts, and cocoa-nut beans. The sugar was stowed in the after part of the ship, the rum forward. She appears to have had the same crew on her return voyage, with the exception of the cook and steward, who was changed at Demerara, and she left that place on the 11th April last.

Nothing material occurred until the afternoon of the 20th. At noon of that day she was in latitude 26° 6' north and longitude 68° west. It was the second mate's watch on deck, and the three men who belonged to the chief officer's watch, Harrison, Larsen, and Erickson, were in the forecastle. At 1.30 p.m., whilst the officers were at mess in the cabin and the cook and steward was waiting on them, there was a cry of "fire" raised. The cry came from the three men who had been in the forecastle. Harrison, one of them, rushed aft, and the carpenter, who was at the time at work on the galley, stopped the two others, horse and Erickson, and told them to come and assist in getting water to put the fire out. By the time the carpenter had got to the forecastle he found it to be so full of smoke that it was impossible to go in. He was followed very soon afterwards by the master and two officers, and after the smoke had cleared off a little they all went in and found that it was coming up through the half holes of the hatch which led down from the forecastle to the fo'c'sle. The hatch was taken off and water was poured down, but the smoke increased so much that they were unable to remain in the forecastle. The master accordingly ordered the fore hatch to be taken off and smoke and heat were then observed to be coming from the forecast of the hold on the starboard side. Water was accordingly poured down the fore hatch and then a hose was thrown to the master to have a slight explosion at 3.30, followed by a more serious explosion, followed by a still greater volume of smoke, and thereupon it was determined to cover up all the hatches of the ship.

Previous to this the pumps had been at work to pump out the water which had been poured down through the forecastle and the smoke and heat had been almost entirely expelled. The ship was now due to arrive at Liverpool, and the master had told us that between 2 and 3 o'clock he discovered there was both rum and sugar in the water, from which it was clear that some of the punchrooms of rum must have burst. At 6 o'clock, it being then dark, all the holes were covered up and securely fastened down.

During the night the fire does not appear to have increased, although some smoke still came up, and accordingly at daylight of the 28th the covering was taken off, and they began again to pour water upon the cargo. At about 6.30 another serious explosion took place, sending up a volume of smoke which obliged them to retire, after covering up all the holes again. Not knowing what else to do they appear to have taken refuge in the after part of the vessel, but at 9 o'clock another very violent explosion took place, and the men could no longer be induced to remain by the ship, and accordingly the two boats were got out, and provisions and water having been put into them, the master, the second officer, and three men got into the gig, and the first mate and six others into the cutter.

Subsequently the carpenter, who was in the cutter, was transferred to the gig, and giving six men to each boat. They stayed by the ship, which was now in flames, during the remainder of that day, and at 1 a.m. of the following morning she disappeared, having burnt down to the water's edge. They were at that time something like 718 miles from St. Thomas's, and a course was accordingly steered for that island. The ship owners, as we have seen, kept the records of the ship's class for nine years.

On the 28th, the second officer was killed in a vessel named the "Northward," which was called the "West," and they were taken on board of her, and carried to Demerara, where they arrived on the 9th of May. The cutter, however, continued her course towards the West Indies, and arrived at the island of St. Kitts on the 7th of May. Happily there was no injury to the life in this case. The question, however, which we have to consider, was how and where the fire originated.

With regard to the place where the fire originated there can be no doubt. It seems that under the forecastle, which was on the main deck forward, was the forecastle, access to which was obtained through a hatch in the forecastle deck. The deck of the forecastle rested on the hold beams, which were some 6 or 7 feet below the main deck, and separating the forecastle from the hold was a bulkhead composed of inch boards. That it was composed of inch boards there can be no doubt, for we have had the evidence of the carpenter, who has told us that he replaced six of the boards with inch planks, and that he put inch planks because the rest of the bulkhead was of inch planks. In the forecastle were two water tanks close against the bulkhead, and there were also about two tons of coal in a tank immediately under the hatch. The deck of the forecastle was made of old pieces of rope, and other things of that kind. The access from the forecastle to the forecastle was very easy, the hatch was never fastened down, and anyone might raise it, and go down whenever he chose.

I have stated that the sugar was stowed in the after part of the vessel, the rum forward, and the punchrooms of rum and sugar upon them. All this was perfectly correct. The master said that the crew who had seen the way in which the cargo was stowed.

In the afternoon of the 26th, between 4 and 5 o'clock, when the fire had been somewhat subdued and the smoke which had come from the forecastle and forecastle had partially abated, the second mate having first tied a handkerchief over his mouth and nose went down into the forecastle, partly for the purpose of seeing where the fire was, and partly for the purpose of removing two half casks of resin that were there. When he got into the forecastle he felt the bulkhead, and the cask was three feet thick, and he found that a portion of it on the starboard side had been burnt away so that there was a hole quite through. The other two boats were knocked down, and made for, and the master, as we have said, were uninjured, not charred as the part to which I have referred was. He was unable to do more than remain a short time there owing to the smoke that was pouring on the cargo, but he succeeded in taking up one half of the casks of resin and rafted it on deck. All the smoke was cleared away, and when they went into the forecastle. The master also has told us that on the morning of the 26th, after they had removed some of the casks of sugar which were already open, there came a small portion of rum, he observed that a portion of the bulkhead on the starboard side was burnt through, and that some of the punchrooms of rum was opened. The master has also given evidence to the same effect. He cut a hole


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immediately over the bulkhead on the starboard side, and put his hand down and found a hole through the bulkhead with the wood on each side charred. He also told us that he put cut holes on the port side, and far aft on the starboard side as the galley, nowhere did he find any appearance of heat except at the place where he had put the cut holes on the port side of the forward bulkhead, and that which was burnt through. We can therefore have no doubt whatever but that here was the seat of the fire.

The next question which we have to consider is, how did the fire originate? Any suggestion that it was the result of spontaneous combustion must, I think, be at once rejected. Sugar is not liable to spontaneous combustion, nor rum either; and as regards the coal, the quantity was so small; moreover, if there had been any spontaneous combustion there the second officer could certainly never have got into the forecastle as they were immediately under the hatchway. The only possible way in which it would have caught fire, looking at the nature of the coal, and the place where it originated, was by flame having in some way or other been brought into contact with the spirits where it was stowed close to the forward bulkhead. Now, it seems that the carpenter on the morning on which the fire was discovered had gone down into the forecastle to take off the lid of one of the water tanks, the water which they had on deck having run out. On that morning also the second mate, and I believe two of the third mates also, but the evidence is that they took with them a globe lamp, and there is no suggestion that the fire could have originated at that time. It does not seem to me that if the fire originated by the application of flame to the spirits, it would not have smouldered for some time, and not have burst out at once, as seems to have been the case on the present occasion. The fire must have been applied only a short time before it showed itself.

Now, every person who was on board the ship, with the exception of the three men who were in the forecastle, namely, Harrison, Lassen, and Ericksen, have been examined before the Court, and have told us where they were. The master and officers and crew were in the cabin, one man was at the wheel, another man was mending a sail on the poop, the carpenter was repairing the galley, and Bussing was passing along the galley. At any rate, every man has accounted for his presence on board the ship, except those three men, who, before they could be served with notice to attend here, have been examined, and have thought proper to embark on board some other vessel, and to leave the country. All the witnesses, with the exception of those three, have shown to our satisfaction that they had nothing to do with causing the fire. And as we must reject the theory of spontaneous combustion, we can come to no other conclusion than that it must have been caused by one or other of those three men who have not been examined, namely, Harrison, Lassen, or Ericksen. Let us see what their opportunity and means indicated they had to commit such an act.

It seems that these men were in the forecastle from 12 o'clock till half-past 1; they knew the rum was close against the thin bulkhead which separated the hold from the forecastle, and they had seen it stowed, they knew that the bulkhead was composed only of inch planking, for it had been repaired in Demerara; and if they had any desire to get at the rum, the time which they would naturally select would be when the master and officers were at mess, and when, therefore, there was less likelihood of their being interfered with. The conclusion then to which we have come is, that those men took the opportunity of the master and officers being at dinner, either to remove one of the planks, or to bore through into one of the oaks. In doing so we can quite understand how the spirits would saturate the planks near where the hole was made. A light would of course be necessary, and what more natural than that in drawing off the rum it would catch fire. Finding it impossible to extinguish it (as it would certainly be), they would rush on deck and give the alarm of fire. The part which the fire would first seize would be that part of the bulkhead which had been saturated with the spirit. The water poured down through the forecastle, and the heath carried on the deck would do no more to extinguish the fire in this place, but not before it had burnt a hole through the bulkhead and charred the parts around, nor in any way extinguish the flames of the other portions of the cargo. We can come then to no other conclusion on the evidence before us than that the cause of this fire was the attempt made by these three men, Harrison, Lassen, and Ericksen, or one or more of them, to get at the rum, and that in doing so they set fire to the spirits.

We very naturally, in every case without observing that to stow a cargo of rum close up to a bulkhead composed of planks only 1 inch in thickness which separated a place from which the crew had ready access, was not such a mode of stowage as ought to have been adopted. We are told that it is a usual, or perhaps I ought to say not an unusual, mode of stowage; but whether it is so or not, it is a most improper mode. Captain Kennedy, one of the owners of the vessel, and the ship's husband, has told us that he had been assured that the bulkhead was composed of planks of only 1 inch thick; he should certainly have doubted it by calling other planks to it as witnesses. He told us also that he should certainly not have brought the puncheons of rum up to the bulkhead, but should by dammaged wood, or in some other way, have prevented their coming close up to the bulkhead. Whether it would not have been better that there should have been less difficulty in the forecastle and the rum is a matter well worthy of consideration. In the opinion of the naval gentlemen by whom I am assisted it would not have materially affected the trim of the vessel, and certainly it would have required no extraordinary attempt to get at the rum much more difficult than it was. It was said by Mr. Simpson, the owner, that there's a will there's a way. That may be so, but it is the duty of the owners and of those persons who stow vessels not to make it too easy for the crew to get at the cargo, particularly when it consists of rum. In every ship there must have a particular officer. And we think a bulkhead of 1 inch planking between it and the cargo, and the seamen ready access was not such an obstruction as would be likely to discourage the attempt to get at it.

We do not think that the captain, we think that no blame whatever attaches to him. He seems to have done his duty from first to last. The stowage of the cargo did not rest with him, but with the owners, and he was not responsible for the thickness of the bulkhead. The evidence shows that he had no reason to suppose it necessary to exercise any special vigilance on this point for they had behaved well on the voyage out, and except whilst they were on shore at Demerara they seem to have behaved well. But unfortunately they were exposed, in our opinion, somewhat unnecessarily to a temptation which they have been unable to resist, and that appears to have been the cause of the loss of the ship.

Under these circumstances we shall return to the mate of the vessel, and in our opinion the evidence is conclusive that it was one of the three men, Harrison, Lassen, or Ericksen, who caused the fire.

(Signed) H. C. Rothberry, Wreck Commissioner.

Finding.

The Court, having carefully inquired into the circumstances of the above-mentioned shipping casualty, finds, for the reasons stated in the annexed judgment,—

(1.) That the fire which destroyed the vessel "Rifleman" was probably due to one or more of the seamen having, while endeavouring to break the puncheons of rums of which part of the vessel's cargo consisted, set fire to the spirits.

(2.) That the mode of stowing the rum puncheons, with only an inch of bulkhead between them and the forecastle, to which the crew had ready access, was not proper.

(3.) That the master of the vessel did not use due care for the casualty, and that his certificate ought therefore to be returned to him.

The opinion that there shall be no costs of this investigation.

Dated this 23rd day of June 1877.

(Signed) H. C. Rothberry, Wreck Commissioner.

We concur in the above report.

(Signed) J. C. Oost, L.N.

J. Scales, Assessor.