

(No. 7241.)

"SARDINIA" (S.S.).

REPORT of a Court of Inquiry held at Malta on the 1st, 2nd, 3rd, 4th, and 7th days of December, 1908, to investigate the circumstances attending the stranding and destruction by fire of the s.s. "SARDINIA," of Liverpool, Official number 93204, outside Valetta Harbour, on the 28th November, 1908.

Courts of the Magistrates,
Valetta, 7th December, 1908.

Procès Verbal drawn up in terms of Articles 89 and 94 of Ord. I of 1874 as amended by Ord. No. VI of 1891.

1. On the receipt of the report made by the Collector of Customs on the afternoon of the 28th November, 1908, reporting the stranding and the destruction by fire of the British steamship "Sardinia" outside the harbour of Valetta, this Court of Judicial Police commenced an inquiry as prescribed by Art. 89 of Ord. I of 1874, on the 1st December, 1908, and continued it on the 2nd, 3rd, 4th and 7th days of the same month, examining the witnesses whose depositions are annexed to the present procès verbal.

2. The Court was assisted by Commander Judge D'Arcy, R.N.

3. The evidence collected bore out the following facts, viz:—

(a) The British s.s. "Sardinia" of the Port of Liverpool, O.N. 93204, 1514 registered tonnage, 300 H.P., with a crew of 39 and 12 European passengers, 3 Indian passengers, and 150 Moorish passengers, under the command of Charles Littler, master, left Malta for Alexandria on the 25th of November, 1908, at about 9.30 a.m.

(b) The names of the persons composing the crew, the names of the European passengers, the names of the Indian passengers are those contained in Doc. A.*

The names of the Moorish passengers cannot be obtained, as nothing but their total number was, by the master of the ship, given to the Custom House on the ship's arrival at Malta on the 24th November, 1908, at 9.30 p.m. It is, however, a fact that the same Moors the steamer had on board on her arrival at Malta proceeded with her on her departure for Alexandria

(c) The cargo she had on board was that of a general nature. No explosive or inflammable goods were declared to be on board by the master of the ship. In fact the evidence collected in the inquiry proved that, with the exception of a barrel of turpentine taken on board at Liverpool for Tangiers, and thence over-carried and kept lashed on the well deck, nothing in the manifest of the cargo denoted that any dangerous goods were being carried on board. The cargo, on arrival at Malta, was the same as that as when the ship left Liverpool, saving that some merchandise had been landed at Tangiers, and that several bales of slippers and haicks, and one case of provisions were taken in at Tangiers. The hatches were not opened at all at Malta, as no cargo operations were carried out in this harbour.

(d) The s.s. "Sardinia" had just left the harbour of Malta when those on board, as well as the signalman from the Valetta Signal Tower, noticed at 9.40 a.m., smoke coming out of No. 2 port ventilator. Rapidly that smoke increased in density, and scarcely had a water hose been thrust into that ventilator by an order of the master to the chief officer, who was yet taking in aboard the anchor, than the smoke blew out of the starboard ventilator. Fire had caught in No. 2 hold just in front of the bridge on which the master and the 3rd Officer were. By these, on the bridge in the wheel house, was quarter-master Marooth. The master, at the first notice of the fire, had ordered the ship's helm to be put hard-a-starboard with a view of re-entering the harbour for assistance.

(e) In less than two minutes, however, No. 2 hold was ablaze, and the flames, accompanied by a stifling dense smoke, rose high up with an exploding noise. No more

was after that seen of the master who, at that same moment, had told the man at the helm "For God's sake save your lives."

(f) The ship was then a raging fire from No. 2 hold forward, and as the ship with her hard-a-starboard helm caused the choking smoke and the flames to drift to the bows, which had then become untenable, those on the bows (amongst whom was the 1st officer) flung themselves into the water, while the quarter-master at the helm left the steering gear, and the 3rd officer, burnt all over, crawled down the bridge and reached powerless the sternside of the ship.

(g) The second officer had been at the stern streaming the log, but on the alarm of fire he had gone to the bridge to receive the orders of the master. It was to him that the master gave the order to connect the water hose. He had helped to put the hose on to the port ventilator, but the rapidly increasing smoke drove him aft, and there he kept, as the smoke and flames amidships had intercepted the passage from one end of the ship to the other.

(h) The flames from No. 2 hold surging high had, within five minutes from the first notice of the fire on board, set fire to the four boats, the only boats the ship was carrying.

(i) All were now helpless, crew and passengers alike. Belts and some lifebuoys as could be reached were dealt out by the stewards, who fetched them from the saloon, as all other belts and life saving appliances were out of reach. Those were given to the saloon passengers, and others were used by a few of the crew. The Moorish passengers, frantic with fear, flocked to the stern of the ship, the only place where breathing was possible. Some had procured a belt, but the great majority had none, and they jumped over the side of the ship mixed with some European passengers and some of the crew.

(j) As the force of the wind was 3 and the sea was choppy, and as the propeller of the ship was all along going at full speed, the loss of life among those who were thus desperately throwing themselves overboard, though unable to swim, can be more easily imagined than accounted for. In fact, though the ship on her hard-a-starboard helm described five circles with a gradually decreasing speed of from 9 to 4 knots an hour, going over the same area before she struck the rocks, fewer of those who had jumped overboard later in the day lost their lives.

(k) The ship being not under control and rapidly speeding ahead in circles, all the time throwing out particles of burning cargo, made it impossible to approach her safely so as to tranship the imperilled crew and passengers. All that could be done, until the ship stranded, was to pick up from the sea those who threw themselves over.

(l) The steamer stranded about 1 mile E. outside the Valetta Breakwater at about 11 a.m., and there she still lies a constructive loss.

(m) Having already made out the impossibility of any practical aid being procured on board the steamer through the locality, the suddenness, and the intensity of the fire on board, it will be sufficient to attest to the nature and timely assistance given from the outside to the swimmers from the ship with a two-fold consideration.

First the general opinion of the survivors with the exception of John Bunyan; second the fact that as soon as the fire on board was discovered from the signal tower, and from the tug "Cracker" that was outside the harbour with the admiral on board, telephone and semaphore messages were passed to the Custom House and the men-of-war in harbour to give all assistance available. By reason of such quick proceedings, boats from the ships, two miles away, were on the scene before the ship stranded, and before the ship had concluded its second circle, and swimmers were picked up to be sent to the shore to be medically attended to.

(n) Yet the fire, and the rash dashing overboard from the steamer, steaming in circles without control, was the cause of an appalling loss of life. Ninety-seven persons found their death either in the sea or in the flames. A list is hereto annexed of the names of the persons which, from the Coroner's Inquest, held in Malta simultaneously with this inquiry, appear to have thus lost their lives. As above said,† the number of the Moorish

* Not printed.

† Cf. par. (b).

passengers who perished in this disaster has been obtained by calling up the roll of the survivors.

(o) The questions, however, which are to be put in regard to this casualty are :—

I. What was the origin of the sudden and violent fire? and the answer is, that nothing has transpired as to the cause of the fire. Hypotheses were thrown out but mere possibilities, as for example, that the fire from the braziers of the Moorish passengers might have worked its way through the tarpaulins of No. 2 hold, are not sufficient evidence in a Court of Law.

So must it be said as to the ship carrying inflammable cargo, though the flames that rapidly burst incoercible from No. 2 hold would denote that some goods of inflammable nature had been there stored.

II. Was the ship well provided with life-saving appliances in proportion to the crew and passengers, European and Indian and Moorish alike? and the answer must be in the negative. Four boats were insufficient for all, no other fire appliances were on board to combat a fire than the ordinary water hose to wash the decks, life belts could not be dealt to all, nor were they all in good condition. No boat or fire drill seems to have been practised at all. Of this deficiency the owners and the master may be held responsible.

III. Was the ship authorised to carry all the passengers she had on board at the time the fire broke out? And the answer depends on the authority the passengers' certificate conveyed to the owners. That certificate was not produced at this inquiry, and as to the carriage of deck passengers without any passengers' certificate, it has been advanced that within the Mediterranean no limitation is made by the law as to the embarkation of such passengers. The Board of Trade can define this question better.

IV. Who is the person responsible for any improper cargo being on board? And the answer is, that it does not appear that any dangerous cargo was knowingly anywhere shipped on board. If that could be made out, then the owners and the master would be the responsible parties. Under all circumstances, the master being dead, and the owners being out of the jurisdiction of this Court, no action can be taken in Malta; and this remark holds good as to Question No. II.

V. Are the officers of the steamer responsible for the loss of life after the fire had become unmanageable? And the answer is, that it was impossible for anybody practically to give any help. The boats had been devoured by the fire from within five to ten minutes after the first notice of the fire, and it was impossible for anybody to stay on board on account of the choking smoke, the large flames, and the showers of burning matter falling. Yet the third officer stood by the ship till nearly the last and helped ladies to pin on their life belts.

VI. Should not the officers have attempted to bring the ship back under control and manage to bring it into harbour? The answer is in the affirmative, provided it were not a fact that the nature and locality of the fire had not made it impossible to the surviving officers to turn the helm from the steam gear on to the hand-steering gear, or even to get to the implements required for that job. The second officer, however, who all along remained unhurt, could with more nerve have at the beginning, viz., as soon as the fate of the officers on the bridge was evident, ordered by word of mouth to the engine-room to stop the engines.

VII. Whether any responsibility attaches for the loss of lives that ensued? The answer is, that there is no person living within the territorial jurisdiction of this island that can be made amenable to law on that account. The master of the ship is dead and the owners of the ship, if any responsibility can be brought home to them, are without the jurisdiction of this Court.

The Court orders that a copy of this report and proceedings verbal be forwarded to the Collector of Customs together with the depositions of witnesses and documents.*

(Signed) GIOV. B. MIFSUD,
Magistrate.

The foregoing is a true and faithful copy of records of the inquiry held at Malta on the 1st, 2nd, 3rd, 4th, and 7th day of December, 1908.

P. VELLA,
Registrar.

* Not printed.

Remarks by Nautical Assessor.

I am of opinion that the ship was badly found in appliances for saving life and guarding against fire.

With regard to precautions against fire, there appears to have been little or none; there does not appear to have been any fire buckets, hoses, or other means of extinguishing fire other than the ordinary hose for washing decks; and taking into consideration the large number of deck passengers carried, and who were allowed to have charcoal fires constantly burning on the deck and on top of the hatches, every precaution against fire should have been taken by having pumps and hoses rigged and the crew exercised at fire stations, none of which things were done.

It seems probable that even had every precaution been taken, it would have been of no avail as the fire was so rapid that nothing could have stemmed it. To cause this conflagration, it would appear that there must have been material of a highly inflammable nature where the fire originated, though what it was, there is no evidence to show. With regard to the life-saving appliances of the ship, they were absolutely inadequate for the number of passengers and crew carried, there being only four boats for about 180 persons or more. Life belts were also insufficient, and what there were seem to have been in a bad condition and jammed to their places of stowage.

I do not consider that the officers realised the danger when the fire first broke out or suspected that it would assume such magnitude so rapidly, and to trust to a solitary hose putting out a fire seems to have been only courting disaster.

The captain appears to have been killed at his post by the first rush of flame on the bridge, and the first officer to have been driven overboard from the forecabin, which was untenable, to seek safety by swimming as he was seen swimming ashore. I consider that the second officer, who was uninjured, displayed great want of presence of mind in not passing to the engine room by word of mouth orders to stop the engines on his way aft, or, when the ship in her circling got stern to wind, at which time all the smoke must have been blowing forward, as from his experience of what he saw on the bridge he must have known that the captain was incapacitated, and also that it was impossible to stop the engines by the telegraph.

I also consider that he showed great lack of nerve and officer-like qualities in leaving the ship before all the passengers had been got off her, his presence, had he remained, would at least have tended to instil some sort of confidence amongst those remaining on board. Everything that was possible seems to have been done to render assistance by the boats and tugs in the harbour and it is to be regretted that, owing to the engines of the ship not having been stopped, tugs and boats were unable to get closer to her than they did, and it was due to this that so many lives were lost, also the boats and tugs were kept employed in picking up the people as they jumped overboard whilst the ship was circling round.

What was the immediate cause of the fire it is from the evidence impossible to say, but it may be conjectured that it was caused either by a burning lump of charcoal from a brazier used by the Arabs having burnt through the tarpaulins on Number 2 hatch and fallen through a chink into the hold, or through some one carelessly throwing a lighted cigar or cigarette end down the ventilator of Number 2 hold.

The stranding of the ship was due to her being out of control caused by the fury of the fire driving everyone from the bridge, and it is to be regretted that she did not take the ground sooner.

I would like to express my high opinion of the conduct of Mr. Hugh Owen Jones, the third officer, who, although very badly burnt all over, especially the hands, remained by the ship almost to the last, even assisting a lady passenger to tie her lifebelt on when he must have been suffering great agony from his burns and shock. Also of the stewardess, Miss Kate Gilmour, who assisted the passengers in every way and remained by the ship to the last and showed great presence of mind throughout.

The lady passengers showed great presence of mind and pluck under these most trying circumstances, and were a noble example of fortitude which I regret to say appears to have been lost on most of the men, who jumped overboard or otherwise sought their own safety, leaving the ladies to their fate.

The statement made by Mr. Bunyan, one of the passengers, that the naval boats were slack in coming to the rescue is refuted by the evidence of the other passengers, and I would add that they had to pull a distance of about two miles against a very choppy sea before getting near the steamer. In summing up,

although the fire was so terrific that it would appear nothing could have been of any avail to stem it, it appears the ship was badly found as previously stated, and the surviving officers and crew who succeeded in getting to the after part of the ship, with the exception of the third officer (badly injured) and the stewardess, neglected their all important duty of seeing to the safety of the lives of the passengers before seeking their own. I consider that deck passengers ought not to be allowed to be carried unless there is sufficient boat accommodation for them in case of necessity and the life-saving appliances in proportion to them.

(Signed) JUDGE D'ARCY,
Commander, Royal Navy.

(Signed) GIOV. B. MIFSUD,
Magistrate.

List of Persons who lost their lives in the fire which broke out on board the British S.S. "Sardinia," on the 25th November, 1908.

CREW.

Name.	Rank.	Remarks.
Charles Littler ...	Master ...	Body recovered.
R. Frew ...	Chief Mate ...	Body not recovered.
Fred Parkes ...	Qr.-Master ...	Do.
J. A. Priscoe ...	Do. ...	Do.
Edw. Farrell ...	Do. ...	Do.
M. Murphy ...	A.B. ...	Do.
W. Seagreave ...	Chief Engineer ...	Do.
D. Hislop ...	2nd Engineer ...	Body recovered.
J. Neil ...	3rd Engineer ...	Body not recovered.
H. Stanton ...	Fireman ...	Do.
W. Hynes ...	Do. ...	Do.
D. Watson ...	Do. ...	Do.
P. Riley ...	Do. ...	Do.
C. Mooney ...	Do. ...	Body recovered.
H. Dolan ...	Do. ...	Body not recovered.
F. Hughes ...	2nd Steward ...	Do.

EUROPEAN PASSENGERS.

Name.	Remarks.
Donald Grant (boy) ...	Body recovered.
Arturo Obrelli ...	Do.

MOORISH PASSENGERS.

N.B.—Only the names of twenty-six (26) of the Moorish passengers have been obtained, viz., of those whose bodies were recovered and could be identified.

The ship had on board 150 Moors, 69 of whom were rescued alive.

The names of the twenty-six (26) bodies recognised as said above—

Names.	Remarks.
Hadja Marian ...	Body recovered.
Fatma bint Mohamed is Serif ...	Do.
Hadja Gheixa ...	Do.
Hadja Fdila ...	Do.
Fatma bint Ulid Mahdi ...	Do.
Mosé (Jew) ...	Do.
Hadj iz-zummari ...	Do.
Hadja irkuia ...	Do.
Hadja Fatma ...	Do.
Mohamed is-Susi ...	Do.
Hadji Idgani ...	Do.
Idzani El Ghafix ...	Do.
Hadja Zaghra ...	Do.
Mohamed da Algeri ...	Do.
Hadja Barca ...	Do.
Sidi Hfeid ...	Do.
Hadj Ahmed ben Ali ...	Do.
Mulei Ahmed ben Ahmed ...	Do.
Ali ben Hmed ...	Do.
Mohamed Frez ...	Do.
Hmed Kurix tat-tumi ...	Died in hospital.
Hadj Mohamed Lukil ...	Do.
Hadj al Gharbi ...	Body recovered.
Hassan ben Mohamed it-tazi ...	Do.
Hadj Meshud Bin Gelluli ...	Do.
Ahmed bin Nani it-tuti ...	Do.
Six (6) found burnt on board.	
Twelve not identified.	

9th December, 1908.

(Issued in London by the Board of Trade on the 12th day of March, 1909.)

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