

"ITALIAN PRINCE" LOSS

Master's Evidence on Abandonment

THE WIRELESS OPERATOR'S POSITION

The Board of Trade Inquiry into the loss by fire of the British steamer *Italian Prince* was continued at The Niblett Hall, Temple, E.C., yesterday. The vessel's master, who had not completed his evidence the previous day, re-entered the box and continued his story. In the course of his evidence he stated that he had ordered the chief officer to see that everyone was present at the muster before the vessel was abandoned. The latter had visited the wireless room and the operator's quarters. The operator at the time, it transpired later, was attending to his batteries on deck. (Counsel for the Board of Trade in his opening statement had said that there was a report that the operator was left at his post when the ship was abandoned.) The master paid a tribute to his officers and crew, whose conduct he described as "very good indeed." A statutory declaration by the wireless operator was read and evidence was given by a number of officers and the chief engineer, who was still in the box when the Inquiry was adjourned.

The inquiry is being held before Mr. K. S. Carpmael, K.C., sitting as Wreck Commissioner, with whom are Captain W. E. Whittingham, Commander J. R. Williams, Engineer Lieut.-Commander T. A. Pearson and Mr. A. M. Robb, Assessors.

Mr. O. L. Bateson (instructed by the Solicitor to the Board of Trade) appeared for the Board of Trade. Mr. G. St. C. Pilcher and Mr. W. W. Porres (instructed by Messrs. Middleton, Lewis & Clarke) represented the owners, the Prince Line, Ltd. Mr. E. E. Addis (instructed by Messrs. Rehder & Higgs and the Mercantile Marine Service Association) represented the master of the vessel. Captain James Halloway, Mr. R. A. Clyde (instructed by Messrs. Clyde & Co.) appeared for the cargo underwriters. Mr. C. R. Havers (instructed by Messrs. Charles G. Bradshaw & Waterson, acting for the Marine Engineers' Association) appeared for the chief engineer, Mr. R. J. J. Smith, and the second engineer, Mr. A. M. McNeil. Messrs. Nordon & Co. watched the inquiry on behalf of Mrs. M. M. Brown, a passenger. Messrs. Winter & Co. on behalf of Mr. and Mrs. Bovill, passengers, and Mr. J. B. Hewson on behalf of the British Mexican Petroleum Company, Ltd.

The previous proceedings were reported in LLOYD'S LIST of Feb. 7 and 8.

Continuing his evidence, Captain Halloway said: "After the passengers had left flames were shooting between the funnel casings to an enormous height. When I came from the port side of the boat deck I crossed the hose and found that the hose was practically flat—there was no pressure of water in it. Just then

there was another slight explosion, followed by a third, and I decided then to see about the safety of my men. I thought about closing the engine-room skylights, but I was afraid of the men being smothered. I had considered previously withdrawing the men from the engine-room in order to try to do something about the fire on the starboard side of the deck.

"As I went back to the bridge, I was the only one in charge, I sent the third mate off on some message—exactly what I do not know. There were at least a dozen ships around us. The electric light was practically gone and I was going to have the two red lights put out, indicating that the vessel was not under command. I met the chief officer, who had come back from the engine-room, and he told me that things were very bad indeed down there, and I went to go along to the engine-room myself but I found the men coming away; they could not stand the fumes.

CHIEF ENGINEER LAST OUT

"I took steps to see that all the men came out. The last one out, I understand, was the chief engineer. The chief officer reported that everyone was out. Then I ordered the port forward boat to be swung outboard as I assumed that it was too late to use any smothering efforts. The boat was swung out and lowered to the rails. Part of the crew got in and I decided then to abandon the ship.

"I gave the order to the chief officer to see that everybody was there. He made the report that he had been through all the crew's quarters aft and he had gone to the wireless room and the operator's room adjoining. I gave the order for everybody to get into the boat, which they did. The chief engineer was on one side of me and the chief officer on the other. I asked the chief engineer about steam, and I realised myself that there was practically no steam. He said there was very little. The boat was lowered into the water and we cast off. It was quite dark but clear. The wind was about four to five from the north-east on the port quarter and the sea was more or less broadside. There was a swell and the lifeboat was rising 20 ft. up the ship's side. The ship would be heading SE. to SSE."

Mr. BATESON: Having cast off did you then discover there was someone still on board?—We called the roll to make sure everybody was there, but we could not remain near the ship owing to the swell. I had the other men to consider in the boat and we had to get some little distance away from the ship to clear the swell.

"Just after we got clear," Captain Halloway proceeded, "it was found that the wireless operator was not there, and immediately all the men in the boat sang out for him, and he came along. I understand he came down the side ladder and swam off to the boat. He was a good swimmer, and, apart from being wet and a little perturbed, he was none the worse for his experience."

Mr. BATESON: Did you make any inquiries of the wireless operator how

it was that he had not got into the boat before?—Yes, he personally told me he was round the corner—which means on the starboard side—attending to his batteries on deck.

Was any signal made of any kind when you were going to abandon ship?—No.

What is the signal?—I don't know.

Mr. CARPMAEL: Does it mean you have not got any recognised signal to abandon ship?—Yes.

Is it not usual to have some such signal?—Not in the merchant service.

You mean you have never come across it yourself?—Never. I told the chief officer to go and see that everybody was out, and I saw him go.

Did you give the signal to the passengers—a series of short blasts on the siren?—No; I did not think the fire would have reached such proportions as it did.

But when you did decide to abandon ship, was not that a proper signal?—I felt much more relieved after I had put the passengers in the boats afloat for safety.

Mr. BATESON: Would it have been possible to sound a series of blasts on the ship's siren when you came to abandon ship?—It would have been very weak.

Did you know what apparatus there was in the engine-room for the purpose of dealing with fire?—Yes. I knew there were some new extinguishers provided, according to new regulations, when the ship was refitted at Hartlepool. I also knew that the ship was fitted with a steam smothering gear in the engine-room.

Do you know whether anyone ever tried it?—Not to my knowledge.

Did you know whether or not it could be operated from the deck?—Yes, it was mostly from that point that I knew about it. The wheel was right abaft the funnel.

Who was responsible for the maintenance of the gear on deck?—It came under the engineering department.

Was it kept locked in any way?—There was no means of locking it.

Did you at any time during the fire consider using the smothering gear?—I did at the last, after I had been on the boat deck. I still hoped by fighting the fire at its base that it would be possible to overcome it.

UNABLE TO GET BELOW

But you did not know what was going on down below?—No. I could not get down.

And even at the last you did not try smothering?—No, there was practically no steam and no pressure and I considered it was too late to use it.

"Had I known, in the light of what I know now, that the fire was going to assume such serious proportions," added the master, "I should have attempted smothering at once."

Captain Halloway said he was picked up by the French steamer *Capitaine Augustin*, whose master

offered to stand by the burning *Italian Prince* until daylight. She was not a ship that could give any assistance. Had she been a salvage tug or anything like that he would certainly have accepted the offer of assistance. By arrangement with the captain of the French steamer a message was sent out warning shipping to keep away from the *Italian Prince* as she contained explosives. The wireless operator of the *Italian Prince* co-operated with the French operator in transmitting the message. Captain Holloway's last view of the *Italian Prince* was about 4 o'clock the next morning, when flames were shooting high between the inner and outer funnel casing and the funnel and star-board plates were practically red hot.

Mr. HAVERS: Had you at any time any criticism to make of the conduct of the chief engineer or any of his staff?

—None whatever.

And looking back now, with all the information you have, have you any reason to change your opinion?—None whatever: not in regard to any single one of them.

Mr. PILCHER: During the time you have been master of this vessel have you ever had any difficulty from the owners in getting repairs done or equipment supplied?—Never at any time.

In answer to Mr. Addis, Captain HALLOWAY said a rocket was fired before the ship was abandoned. He praised his officers and said the conduct of all the men had been "very good indeed."

Mr. ADDIS: Why did you abandon ship?—I could do nothing more.

Looking back now, is there anything you think you might have been able to do?—No.

A suggestion has been made that you ought to have made more effort to go down below: what could you have done?—I could have done nothing. No one could have done anything in those fumes without coming out for fresh air. Having regard to the efficiency of my engineers and officers I did not think in the circumstances there was anything I could do. I was very well satisfied with the way they were carrying out their duties.

WIRELESS OPERATOR'S STORY

Mr. BATESON read a statutory declaration from the wireless operator, Mr. Ian H. Hardwick, who, he said, was now in the service of a shipping line at Alexandria. The wireless operator explained how, after sending out the master's S O S, he received replies from several ships. He instructed their wireless operators to stand by, and reported to the master, who told him, "Tell them all to come quickly." At this time, Hardwick's statement explained, his dynamo supply began to fluctuate, so he transferred to the emergency batteries.

When he went to the bridge he found it deserted. The funnel was ablaze

and volumes of fumes and smoke were pouring from it.

"I ran back to the boat deck," the statement went on, "and on reaching the radio room saw a light waved from a boat. I heard shouting and waved and shouted back. I went down the rope ladder and jumped into the water. The boat, which I found to be the master's, was pulling back to the ship, and I was picked up by it."

Mr. FRANCIS A. GROVES, chief officer of the *Italian Prince*, said it was the master who first noticed that the wireless operator was missing. They noticed his absence by the light of the flames' reflection.

Mr. THOMAS A. BOWMAN, a former chief engineer of the *Italian Prince*, told the Court that the ship had a steam smothering apparatus during the time he served in her. The apparatus, he said, was overhauled periodically.

Mr. MELVILLE STORRIER, the second officer, who was in charge of the taking off of the passengers, said the boat was lowered and the passengers got on board without a hitch of any sort, and without any confusion or panic.

OVERCOME BY FUMES

Mr. ROBERT J. J. SMITH, the chief engineer, said that one of his staff was overcome by fumes while fighting the fire, and had to be carried on deck to recover. Five explosions, he said, occurred within about two minutes. The smoke was so dense that as he came up the engine-room ladder he could not see the steps in front of him.

Mr. BATESON: Did it occur to you that it might be a good thing to try the steam smothering apparatus?—In the first instance, no. I considered the fire very small to attempt batten-ing down. I had every confidence in being able to deal with it. Later the fire to my mind was more on the boiler tops than down below. I considered the fire to be under control apart from the explosions.

The inquiry was adjourned until to-day.



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