

Miscellaneous.

BURNING OF THE STEAMSHIP POLAND.

To the Editor of the Boston Courier.

Boston, May 29, 1840.

DEAR SIR,—As the loss of the unfortunate ship Poland excites considerable interest in this community, I take an early opportunity to give as complete a detail of the occurrences connected with it as my memory will allow. We sailed from New York, or rather we were taken in tow by the steamboat Wave, from pier No. 3, in the harbour, about 11 a. m., on Monday, the 11th inst., the wind being quite light, and were towed down to Sandy Hook, where the pilot and the steamer left us. Our crew consisted of twenty good substantial working men, and it was a subject of remark before we left the wharf that every man was sober—an event by no means common with a crew bound to sea. We also had two cooks, two stewards, and the wife of the principal steward as an assistant in the ladies' cabin. The captain and two mates made up our complement of men to 25. There were 24 cabin and 11 steerage passengers.

Counting all hands, men, women and children, we had on board 63 persons. We had good weather and favourable breezes passing about 25 miles to the South of Nantucket Shoals, and going on prosperously and fast enough to satisfy the most impatient for a short passage, until Saturday the 16th. At 12 o'clock noon, of that day, we were in lat. 41 35, and long. 58 30, nearly one third of the passage, and with every hope of not being on board more than 18 days.

At 2 p. m., or within a few minutes of that time, it began to rain, and so continued, in showers and squalls, until about three o'clock, when a severe shower commenced with large drops, like some of our summer showers after a hot and sultry day. As most of the male passengers were in the house on deck, looking out at the rain and sea, Captain Anthony standing at the door, a large ball of fire, apparently about twice the size of a man's hat, suddenly descended in a horizontal line from the clouds, which appeared to be meeting from two different points of the compass ahead of us, and struck the end of the foremast yard on the left hand side; it descended the ties or some chains, to the end of the fore yard, and ran on the yard to the cap of the foremast, where it exploded with a report similar to that of a cannon, and giving the appearance of the explosion of a bomb or similar, although on a much larger scale, to the explosions of some of the fire-work circles which we have exhibited on the common on public galas throwing out rays in every direction, like the rays of the sun. The whole was instantaneous, and was seen by two or three of us; it came and passed off in a flash, and was followed almost at the same instant by a peal of thunder, sharp and loud, but not long or rumbling. It was the only flash of lightning or peal of thunder that we ever saw or heard.

Almost immediately, Captain Anthony went forward with one or two of the passengers, being aware that we had been struck with lightning, to ascertain if the ship was damaged. It was ascertained that when the ball exploded the electric fluid ran down the foremast to the lower deck where the chain cable was stowed, and one of the steerage passengers pointing to a small piece of cotton on the deck, said there was no fire, as that cotton was set on fire, and he put it out by putting his foot on it. We ascertained that the fluid did run round the chain, but could not see where it escaped. On going into the fore-castle, we discovered some signs of the lightning, and were led to suppose on a very close examination, that after entering the steerage it passed through into the fore-castle, and out up the companion way. A piece of the fid, about 8 inches long, and 2 or 3 thick, was knocked off the fore-top, and two or three of the halyards were found to be cut off, which the captain immediately set his men to repairing.

Our dinner was a short and silent one; and when we went on deck, the Captain said that he had but little doubt that the ship was on fire, and that we must endeavour to get at it. On a suggestion that we might be obliged to take to the boats, it was immediately remarked by one of our French passengers and responded to by others—"Let us take care of the women and children first." I mention this as honorable to those who made it, and as showing that there was, even at that first moment of danger, a praiseworthy abandonment of self to the protection of those who are naturally more helpless. Not a moment was lost in clearing the main hatch, the captain himself leading the way and commencing by throwing over the empty water casks and useless lumber which was stored round the long boat. The mate, with another gang of hands, was at the fore hatch, and in a few minutes all hands, including many of the cabin and steerage passengers, were at work hoisting out and throwing overboard flour and cotton.

The work of discharging the cargo between decks went on cheerfully, amid a severe rain, until about eight o'clock, the fire not appearing to increase, and at times appearing to be altogether extinguished, even if there had ever been any except in the imagination; but at that time, and when the forward lower hatch was reached, that the cotton in the lower hold was on fire. The hatch was immediately closed as tight as possible, the upper hatches were also closed and partially caulked, and preparations were made to get out the boats.

In answer to many inquiries why we had not in the mean time got our baggage on deck, I will remark that until now there was a hope that we were still safe, or that, if there were fire on board, we should be able to get at and extinguish it. So great was our confidence, that the children were undressed and put to bed for the night—not, however, without many anxious forebodings on the part of their parents. When the dreadful certainty was forced upon us, our first object was to get the women and children on deck, and in fact this was rendered the more necessary for the circumstance that the hatches being closed, the gas must escape somewhere, and it immediately got vent through the run and the steward's

pantry, into the cabin, rendering impossible for any one to remain below long at a time.

Captain Anthony, coolly, calmly and quietly gave his orders, and they were obeyed in the same spirit by his men. He remarked that it was useless to bring up any thing but such light articles as we could easily find, as the boats would not be able to carry any baggage. One caught a carpet bag, and another a cloak; some opened their trunks and took out their money, leaving every thing else behind; and the steward got up a barrel of bread, and others assisted him in putting whatever of eatables there was in his pantry into bags, &c. A barrel and two or three jugs of water were put into the long boat, with such coats, cloaks, &c., as could be got at in a few minutes, and then she was launched overboard.

The women and children were first handed over the side of the ship, and then the cabin passengers, all except three; a few of the steerage passengers, the second mate, Mr. Keeler, and four sailors. The other boats were also got out and two men placed in each. All this was done with order and regularity, without pushing or crowding, in a very short time. It was 10 o'clock before the long boat was pushed off, and a line attached to her and the ship—having on board thirty five persons. Nothing was said at the time about the other two boats, and those of us who remained on board the Poland were waiting for the first break of morning to learn the fate to which they were doomed—knowing that it would be madness to put more into the long boat, and that not more than half of us who remained could get into the other two.

The ship, at the time when we first supposed ourselves in danger, was put upon a southerly course, in the hope of falling in with or cutting off a ship which we had passed in the morning, and signal lanterns were hoisted in the rigging, but when we commenced getting out the boats she was hoisted too, and she rode very easy all night, the sea not being very boisterous, and there being very little wind. It rained at intervals all night, and although it was daylight and clear about 4 o'clock in the morning, the time seemed almost an eternity. After the long boat was hoisted out an attempt was made to save some articles from the cabin, and the steward succeeded in saving the captain's watch and chronometer, and trunk, with a small box containing about \$300 in specie, but the gas and the smoke soon obliged us to abandon all farther attempts, and to close all the doors to the cabin and to the house over them.

We walked the deck all that night, and said but little. Captain Anthony was watchful, going silently about in every part of the deck, stopping up a crack here and adjusting a rope there, or giving some order for the safety of those who at that moment he must have felt were dependent almost entirely upon his discretion for their lives. Morning broke, and the sun rose, but no sail was in sight. There we lay on the broad ocean, a fine ship smoking at every crack, with three frail boats attached to her by a single rope, and no hope of rescue except through the goodness of the Almighty. Whatever may have been the religious feeling or want thereof, among those 63 persons so awfully situated, there was no cowardice exhibited, no sudden outbreak of prayer and repentance, no murmuring. But there did appear to be a confidence in the breast of every one, that the God who had thus suddenly afflicted us would not leave us to perish in that desert sea.

We remained in this state of suspense all day Sunday, making ourselves as comfortable as possible. Every crack where we could find the smoke coming out, was stuffed with cotton, or plastered over with pipe clay.—The ice house on deck contained fresh meat, such as beef, ducks, chickens, &c., and the cooks were employed all the day in cooking. We sent some warm coffee and fresh milk, and some boiled fowls to our friends in the long-boat, and made every exertion to lighten their misfortunes. But still no ship came in sight, and evening at last found us in the same perilous situation that we were in the night before.

During all this day the deck was quite warm, on the right hand side forward of the mainmast, indicating as we supposed, that the fire was under that part of the vessel, the thick glass dead lights set into the deck at intervals of about two feet from stem to stern, were also quite hot. But toward night the deck and glasses began to cool off, and there was less smoke apparent; and forward hatches, too, were not quite so hot, and we began to have more hope. We had got a man over the stern in the forenoon, on a spar, to fasten down the shutters to the cabin windows and nail them down, but this did not prevent the smoke from coming through. The wooden shutters of the skylights on deck were put on to prevent the glass being broken by accident, and toward night we thought that the glass under those shutters had cooled off.

About ten o'clock on Sunday night, most of the unfortunate people on board the ship sunk to sleep on the deck from mere exhaustion, leaving only three people awake to watch for help, or to warn us of what we most dreaded, a bursting out of the flames. No language can tell of the sufferings of that night, which was more dreadful than the last. We were like people confined on the top of a burning mine, with no power to escape—death almost certain to be our portion within a few short hours, and our minds tortured with suspense.

During the night, Capt. Anthony lay down and caught a short sleep. The weather was tolerably fair, but silence reigned throughout, except so far as it was broken by the occasional rumbling and dashing of the sea. Just before two o'clock, I lay down beside him to wait my fate, leaving only one man walking the deck, and in doing so, I disturbed him. He waked, and turning over, he took my hand and remarked, "I feel that we shall be saved. I have had a pleasant dream." This circumstance, slight as it was, had its effect, and did impart some little consolation to both of us.—So true it is that drowning men will catch at straws.

About this time the weather was changing, and the sea had risen, and the people in the

long-boat had become alarmed. Mr. Wainwright hailed the ship, to know if it would not be best to take the boat in. Capt. A. answered that they had better wait patiently until daylight, and then walked forward to examine the state of the ship. We now found that the fire had evidently increased, the deck and hatches were still quite warm, and the pitch was beginning to boil or melt in the seams between the planks. A short conference convinced us that but little time could elapse before the fire would burst through the deck, and then there would be no farther hope. What we said and what we felt between that time and daylight, is not to be told here—it is sufficient that we thought we knew the worst; the two small boats could not hold more than fifteen persons, and there were nearly thirty on board the ship; under the best circumstances some of us must be lost, and it is needless to say that Capt. Anthony determined that he should stick to his vessel and run the risk rather than crowd the boats with too many people, or exclude any one else.

At daylight, Mr. Wainwright came on board in one of the small boats, and we explained our situation to him. There was but a chance for any of us. If he and his party remained in the boat, they might be saved, but if they were taken on board the ship, and the fire should break out, it would be then impossible to put the people into the boats again, and launch them over the side, and death by fire or drowning would be the certain fate of all. The case was too strong, and the horrid conviction was too apparent to be disputed, and, as was his duty, he prepared to return to his family and meet his fate.—It is not for me to say what were then our feelings. Three of us, in the fullness of our strength and the ripeness of years, were then parting, as we all supposed, forever; and nearly every one else was asleep. Words were useless, and we could not utter what we wanted to express. We commended our families to each other, in case either should be saved; and with a silent shake of the hand he returned to the boat, to make such preparations as prudence suggested, to protect his almost helpless companion in case he should find it necessary to cut his boat adrift.

From this time the sea became more boisterous, and at last, after some hours of anxious watching, we sent for Mr. Wainwright to come on board again, and he was told that there were fears that his boat would swamp. Capt. Anthony was afraid to make sail on the ship, as the working of the masts might create a current of air below, which would either increase the fire, or operating upon the gas in the hold, blow off the hatches and thus seal our fate at once. After some consideration, it was concluded to run the risk, and take in the boats, and put the ship before the wind, in the hope of falling in with some other vessel before we were entirely consumed, and no time was lost in putting the plan into operation.

When the poor sufferers in the boat came on board, their situation was found to be much worse than ours had been. We at least had the power of locomotion, and could shift our position at will, but they, particularly the females, had suffered for two long nights and a day, the tortures of a cramped up situation, unable to sit except in one position, with their feet continually in the water, and their bodies every few minutes covered with the dashing spray of the sea. Mrs. Wainwright had held one of her children in her arms the whole time, and not being by any means a robust woman, it is astonishing that she held out so long. Nothing but a mother's love, and a firm trust in an over-ruling Providence preserved her in those hours of trial. Mrs. Arfwidson was almost exhausted, and her infant having suffered from the want of the natural nourishment its mother could not afford, seemed almost ready to die. Some of the passengers in the boat were sea-sick the whole time, and taken altogether, their situation had been more trying than ours.

Once more together, and stowed in the most comfortable way possible on the quarter-deck, some little cheerfulness was shown, although all felt that our situation was not in the least alleviated, and many feared that we had but joined together to struggle and to die. Sail was made on the ship, and we stood off to the north-east, and at noon we found by observation that we were in latitude 40 08, and long. 56, having drifted to the south-east with the sea. We were now in the track of vessels bound to and from Europe and the United States, and the hope that we might yet be saved, inspired some confidence. The men were now put to work at the pumps, and the ship was found to have leaked a great deal, a part of which was undoubtedly owing to the pitch, where she was caulked, having boiled out of the seams. The water which was pumped up, was quite hot at first, and as long as the men pumped, it continued to be warmer than the temperature of the sea, or of common bilge-water.

About 2 p. m. this day, (Monday,) a sail was discovered from the mast-head, and soon after it was seen from the deck.

The joy which this discovery gave can be imagined, but cannot be described, it seemed as if some would almost, if not quite, go crazy. The stranger saw our signals of distress, and hove to for us to come up. It proved to be a Boston built ship called the Clifton, Captain J. B. Ingersoll, bound from Liverpool to New York, with 250 steerage passengers, mostly Irish. To Capt. Anthony's statement that his ship was on fire in the hold, and that we wanted to be taken off, the prompt answer was, "Come all on board of me, and bring all the provisions you can." Before our own boat could be got out and manned, the boat of the Clifton, with the chief mate and 4 or 5 men, was alongside of us, and the process of transferring all hands from ship to ship commenced. The sea was very high and the gale was increasing, which made our task a long and dangerous one; from three until nine o'clock the two boats were passing and repassing, with people and such articles as could be saved from the deck.

The gale was now blowing from the north-west, and both captains remarked that they did not recollect ever to have seen a worse sea for many years. We were all safely on board by 9 o'clock, and Capt. Ingersoll, not thinking it safe to risk his own ship any longer, in the vain hope of saving property, made sail on his ship,

and we left the unfortunate Poland to burn up and sink, a fate which she undoubtedly met within two or three hours.

At the time the last boat's load left the Poland, the decks had become too hot to stand upon and her sides were so warm, that as she rolled in the sea, the water would run off as from hot iron, and she would instantly become dry, and too hot to bear the hand upon. An effort was made to get out some articles from the house over the cabin stairs, but on opening the doors, the smoke, heat and deleterious gas drove the people away instantly, and a second attempt proved like fruitless. A like attempt near the main hatch met with the like success, and the ship was abandoned with tears and regret, for sailors imbibe an affection for the craft in which they have sailed, and they feel the loss more keenly than many people feel the loss of their friends and relatives.

On board the Clifton we met with a most cordial reception from Captain Ingersoll and his whole crew. We had been saved in life, but we had all lost our clothing, and the chests of the sailors and the trunks of their commander were freely opened, and their contents were as freely offered for our use. What inconveniences were suffered from the crowded state of the Clifton, and our own destitute condition, were of no moment. We were safe, and all things elsewhere forgotten in a feeling of gratitude and thankfulness to Almighty God for saving us from the death we had so long seen almost certain to us.

There were many incidents connected with this eventful period, the recollection of which is interesting to those concerned, but I have already taken up more room than I at first intended. I cannot conclude, however, without remarking that to Capt. Anthony belongs all the credit that belongs to any one for preserving us so long; the card published by the passengers under their signatures, awards him no more than justice, and might with equal justice have been made much stronger. He has acquired a hold upon our hearts that cannot be loosened but with life itself, and if ever man could retire with a confidence that he had done his duty faithfully in the hour of danger, unflinching at the last moment, that satisfactory consolation must be his.

It has been remarked by some that the ship might have been scuttled, and that water might have been poured into her, but those who make such observations little know the danger to which such attempts would have exposed us, and to those who cavil at the fact that she was abandoned without farther attempt to save the vessel and cargo, we can only reply that we hope they may never personally know how much more difficult it is to act in the hour of danger at sea, than it is to talk and find fault in safety on shore.

As for the passengers and crew, they deserve all praise. It appears now almost impossible that so much could have been done, so much could have been suffered, without confusion and without a murmur.—From the first moment to the last, there was order and regularity observed, and each one appeared to strive to make the burthens of the others as easy to bear as possible; the calm confidence of our female companions, and their firm reliance upon the goodness of the power which was afflicting them, served in a great measure to encourage their friends in the hard task of sustaining them until assistance came to hand.

J. H. B.

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To Clergymen, Teachers of Sabbath

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