

THE LOSS OF THE RODGERS

A THRILLING STORY OF DISASTER FROM THE ARCTIC SEA.

FUTILE EFFORTS TO SUBDUCE THE FLAMES —HOW THE MEN WERE SAVED—HOSPITALITY OF THE NATIVES.

WASHINGTON, June 21.—The Acting Secretary of the Navy has received a dispatch from Lieut. R. M. Berry, commanding the Rodgers, which was destroyed by fire in St. Lawrence Bay, dated at Camp Hunt, Eteelan Island, North-east Siberia, Jan. 7, 1882, as follows:

I have the honor to report that at 8:45 A. M., Nov. 30, 1881, a fire was discovered in the fore hold of the Rodgers, underneath the donkey boiler room. The crew went quietly and quickly to their stations; the hatches were closed, and two streams were soon playing, one from the steam-pump worked by the donkey boiler and the other from the deck force-pump, but owing to the fullness of the hold and large quantity of smoke it was impossible to reach the fire. In a few minutes after the fore hatch was partially opened to admit the two streams of water. So much smoke was escaping that the men at the nozzles had continually to be relieved, and the fireman at the donkey boiler could not remain at his post. The door to the donkey boiler room was closed and the deck opened above, by which means the fires were kept up. The connection to the main boilers, which had been broken to prevent the pipes freezing, were made, the boilers pumped up, and fires started. The Babcock fire-extinguisher was discharged through an auger-hole over the fire; the Mead light oil was removed from the sail-room, and the powder from the magazine placed over the taffrail, to be thrown overboard or put in the boats, as necessary. Measures were taken to prevent the fire from spreading aft, but to no avail, and it soon became evident that to save the ship was impossible, and all efforts were directed to saving the people. This was difficult, as the young ice was of such consistency as to make it impossible to force a boat through it even sufficiently far to clear the burning ship. An attempt was made to beach the vessel, but the wind fell light and we moved hardly at all. The ship would not mind her helm and was carried by the ice and tide between Lutke Island and the low spit, taking the ground about 500 feet from the latter. Ineffectual attempts were made to flood the ship and to run a line ashore with a boat, but she could not be forced her own length from the ship. The next attempt was made with a skin boat, which succeeded in conveying a deep sea line on shore, by which a larger line was hauled on shore and made fast to a piece of driftwood. The boats were warped ashore, but the process was attended with so much difficulty that we were compelled to desert the two rear boats. Before the last two boats left the ship at 11:45 P. M., the fire had broken through the fore hatch, and before the boats reached the shore at 2 A. M., Dec. 1, the fire had extended the entire length of the ship. Soon after the line bent to the stream anchor was burned in two, and the ship, much to my surprise and chagrin, was swept out of the harbor by the ice, destroying all hope of saving anything more from the wreck. She was last seen in the morning of Dec. 2 still burning and well up in the harbor. The crew lost nearly all of their clothing, and the officers lost a large portion of theirs. The official records were saved.

After getting on shore the men were too much fatigued to attempt constructing a shelter, but slept out in the open air, wearing blankets. Open water made its appearance along the beach at daylight, and the boats were launched and headed for the native village of Nuniagmo, but were driven back by the ice, and they were compelled to remain another night in a violent snow-storm. The following morning two natives, who happened to be on the ship at the time of the fire, returned with other natives and all the sleds of the village and invited us to take up our quarters at their houses, which invitation was accepted, leaving a party in charge of our boats and stores, and these were subsequently taken to the village. The party was subsequently divided up among the four villages in the vicinity of St. Lawrence Bay. The villagers were kind and their houses comparatively comfortable. The catch of walrus is good, and we are in no danger from hunger or disease. We also hope by trading to have all the party properly clad by the last of the month.

I have been unable to determine the origin of the fire, but think that it was most probably caused by the heat of the donkey boiler, charring and firing the deck underneath, as it was there that the fire broke out. The following articles were stored in that part of the hold, viz.: Lime juice, pemmican, beef, pork, rice, beans, sugar, molasses, pickles, vinegar, running gear, and a large hemp hawser, which was evidently burning when the fire was first discovered, as there was a strong odor of smoke from tarred hemp. None of these articles are, I believe, subject to spontaneous combustion. The steam-pipes for heating the ship all ran between decks with the exception of the escape-pipe, which ran down in the hold, but as the steam had made the round of the ship before entering that, it could not have caused the fire. Separated from the fire-hold by a bulkhead was the main hold, containing only screened anthracite coal. The hold had not been entered by any one for more than two weeks.

The officers and men could not have deported themselves better, and quiet and order prevailed throughout. I propose engaging one of the whaling fleet, as soon as they shall arrive next Summer, to take the party to St. Michael's, and then engage passage on the Alaska Commercial Company's steamer to San Francisco. The intention of searching the coast for information concerning the Jeannette and missing whalers will not be abandoned, and I have already learned from the natives that there is an ample supply of food along the entire coast; so, should any of the missing parties reach the coast, they will be in no danger of want of food. Owing to the continuous gales and rough water, it was impossible to execute my intention of building a house on shore and landing a large portion of stores. One month's provisions, a portion of the trade articles, nearly all the guns, all the ammunition, except the shot, of which we saved two bags, and a small amount of clothing, were saved; nor could we have taken much more in boats had we been able to reach them.

I regret that I could not send this report sooner, but all efforts to get a guide to Nishue Kolymsk, or even a messenger to communicate with this station without using my own dogs, which at that time I could not spare, were unavailing. I send this report by Mr. W. H. Gilder, pay clerk, who will report in person to the department with all dispatch and mail at the nearest Post Office a copy of this report.

R. M. BERRY,
Lieutenant United States Navy,
Commanding Jeannette Relief Expedition.

In another dispatch bearing the same date Lieut. Berry informs the department of gallant conduct on the part of W. F. Morgan, Master-at-Arms, during the fire, by his daring efforts for its suppression. He received injuries which made necessary his being placed under medical aid, and of which he did not recover for two weeks. He rendered himself conspicuous, where all did their duty remarkably well.

SAN FRANCISCO, June 21.—The following dispatch has been received from Port Townsend, Washington Territory: "The steamer Idaho has arrived from Sitka. She brings full reports of the burning of the United States exploring steamer Rodgers in St. Lawrence Bay and the rescue of her crew. The revenue steamer Thomas Corwin arrived at Sitka on June 3 with the officers and crew of the Rodgers. The officers landed at Sitka are: Master D. S. Warring, executive officer; Ensign G. M. Story, Passed Assistant Surgeon M. D. Jones, Passed Assistant Engineer A. V. Zane, and Assistant Surgeon J. D. Costello, and 26 men, all in good health. The latter comprising the same crew that sailed from San Francisco, all told. Lieut. A. M. Berry, commander of the Rodgers, accompanied by Ensign H. J. Hunt, left St. Lawrence Bay Dec. 23 to sleigh the Siberian coast in search of the Jeannette. On May 13, 1882, Master Warring received a letter, through the natives, from Lieut. Berry, dated at Keoyma River, April 4, stating that he had heard of the loss of the Jeannette and the landing of her boats; that he should continue his search for the survivors, and should not return by way of the East. He directed Mr. Warring to take his party and make the best of his way to San Francisco and communicate with the Navy Department. The point where the letter was dated was about halfway between the St. Lawrence and the Lena Rivers.

At the time the Rodgers was burned she was lying off shore about a mile and a half. The fire was reported at about 8:45 A. M. Everything was done to save the ship. The fire was in the lower hold, forward, and it is probable that the cause was spontaneous combustion, and the place where it originated was so situated that it was next to impossible to get a stream of water on it. The officers and crew fought the flames to no purpose. The fire gained so rapidly that it became evident to her commander that all attempts to save the ship would prove fruitless, so about 4 P. M. the ship was headed for the beach in hopes that by scuttling her sufficient provisions might be saved to maintain the party until rescued. Although from six to eight feet of water rushed into her fire-room, owing to coal and timbers choking up the passage, the water did not flow forward to the seat of the fire. The ship at this time lay about 250 yards from shore, surrounded by soft slush 20 inches thick, too soft to land upon, and yet too thick to force boats through under ordinary circumstances. Fortunately, the ship was provided with a skin boat, by means of which the men were enabled to carry a line ashore. At 10 P. M. the flames proceeded so far aft that it was determined to abandon the ship. Up to this moment the whole company was engaged in fighting fire, throwing overboard the combustible part of the cargo, taking out provisions for the boats, &c. But little success was had, however, in securing the provisions. The condition of the ice was such that it took until 2 A. M. of the following day to land what could be saved. The boats were hauled up and the whole party encamped on the beach for two days, before any attempt was made to communicate with the natives, who came down with a few dredges to assist the party to their village, which was distant about seven miles. Three barrels of flour and one of beans and sugar; 1 tin of coffee and about 300 pounds of pemmican and 75 of tobacco; 8 Remington rifles, with 5,000 cartridges, and some trade articles, and all five boats, with a complete outfit were loaded. The trip from the boats to the village was very laborious in the exhausted condition of the ship's company, it being over hills, with snow four feet deep. The village consists of 11 huts, and the tribe are the Tehanketohis, which inhabit all that portion of North-eastern Siberia. The officers and crew were distributed among different habitations, where they settled down for a long winter's sojourn, adapting themselves to the customs of say-are life. It soon became evident that the supply of walrus meat of the natives was insufficient for such a large party, and a redistribution of the men

became necessary among the different villages along the coast, which was done within a range of about 35 miles. On the 4th of February, Master C. F. Putnam, commanding the supply depot at Cape Serdige Karmen, arrived at the village with four sledges loaded with pemmican and other provisions for the shipwrecked party, he having heard of the loss of the ship through natives. He started on his return trip to the depot in bad weather, and was overtaken by a terrible gale of wind, with drifting snow, when two days out, and was obliged to turn back, and in his endeavor to reach the village on the southern side of St. Lawrence Bay, about 12 miles from North Head, he became separated from his native escort, and not being able to see 10 feet ahead of him, was carried out to sea on an ice-floe. Later in the day he was seen about seven miles off shore, abreast of the village. A vigorous attempt was made to rescue him by four of the Rodgers's crew and two natives in a canoe, but owing to the intervening ice they were unable to reach him, and were obliged to put back after getting three miles from shore. This was the last ever seen of Putnam. Master Warring, leaving the ship's party in charge of Ensign Story, procured a sledge, guide, and dogs and searched the entire coast to Indian Point, and thence to Plover Bay, and found not a trace of the unfortunate officer. On the way down the coast four dogs were identified as belonging to Putnam's sledge. One of them had a wound through his neck as if made by a pistol bullet, under circumstances which are unaccountable. The conduct of the natives was reported to be excellent and their humble hospitality profuse. Their provisions of walrus and seal were at times very scarce, and they often went without food themselves to afford relief to the whites. The Rodgers party subsisted entirely upon native food, pemmican being the principal thing reserved, it being found necessary to take it to the boats for preservation. Only one notable instance of ill-behavior upon the part of the natives is recorded. During the absence of Mr. Warring on the Putnam search a turbulent chief, with a band of followers from a neighboring village, demanded the white men's provisions. The situation was a critical one, but owing to the skill and decision with which Ensign Story handled the case all danger of a collision was avoided, and the marauding party were sent off hungry. No indications of scurvy made their appearance until late in February, when several officers and men were the subject of light attacks. When at Plover and Marcus Bays Warring left with the natives a letter to be delivered to any whaling vessel which might visit these places informing it of the condition of the shipwrecked crew. Capt. Owens, of the steam whaler North Star, of New-Bedford, got one of these letters and forced his ship through the ice opposite St. Lawrence Bay, reaching there on May 8, and jamming his ship on the outer edge of the ice so as not to be carried to the northward by the large floes of ice floating by. On the afternoon of the 14th, when the party had safely boarded the North Star, before leaving, Mr. Warring issued to the natives all the unexpended trade goods, provisions, rifles, ammunition, and boats, as a recompense for their kind treatment. This was eminently satisfactory to these harmless creatures, so that should a party of wrecked mariners ever again be cast away in that vicinity, they can rest assured of a friendly reception.

The officers and men all unite in speaking highly of the generous efforts of Capt. Owens in effecting their rescue. Previous to their being transferred to the Corwin he offered to land them at Fort St. Michael's, Alaska, or San Francisco. On the night of the 14th, being clear of ice, at midnight, the Corwin appeared and all hands were transferred to her.