

*Wages and Effects of Deceased Seamen.*—The estates of fifteen deceased seamen, amounting to £130 18s. 8d., were dealt with during the year. Of these, six were new estates. The sum of £93 9s. 6d. was paid to relatives and other claimants, and the sum of £11 11s. 2d., being the amount of unclaimed estates which had been in the hands of the department for over six years, was paid into the public account.

*Engagement and Discharge of Seamen.*—It has been found necessary to exercise the greatest caution in accepting statutory declarations from men that they are entitled to ship. The law allows such declarations to be accepted in the case of seamen who have lost their discharges, and who in consequence are unable to produce documentary evidence of their qualification for the rating of able seamen or firemen as the case may be. The department has good reason to believe that men without the proper qualifications have made declarations that they were entitled to ship, and instructions have therefore been issued to Superintendents of Mercantile Marine that in all doubtful cases they are to question the men as to their knowledge of the duties of a seaman before granting a permit. The question of appointing master mariners to be Shipping Masters at the four principal ports is now under the consideration of the Government. The Collector of Customs at Wellington having found, on examining the articles of agreement of the s.s. "Mahinapua," that the master had not obtained ratification of some engagements and discharges which had taken place on board, proceedings were taken against him, and he was fined £2 and costs, the fine being small as the case was the first of the kind which had come before the Court.

In July last eight of the crew of the s.s. "Rimutaka" went ashore without leave while the vessel was at Hobart on her way from London to this colony, and, as they did not return before the vessel left, the master, on arrival at Wellington, reported them as deserters, and obtained the sanction of the Superintendent to writing them off the articles as such. Subsequently, owing to representations made by the Tasmanian authorities, the owners brought them over to join the vessel at Lyttelton, but on their arrival the master claimed that the writing-off as deserters held good, and that they must ship afresh. The matter was then brought before this department, which sought the opinion of the Crown Law Officers, who advised that the men were wrongfully entered as deserters, and that the officer should not have sanctioned their being written off as such. This opinion was based on section 188 of "The Imperial Merchant Shipping Act, 1894," which provides that a master shall not discharge a seaman or apprentice, or leave him behind, unless he previously obtains the sanction of the Superintendent or Chief Officer of Customs at or near the place, which in this case was Hobart. After this opinion was obtained the department insisted upon the writing-off being treated as null and void.

One case of the carriage of explosives by a passenger-steamer contrary to law came under the notice of the department. In this case the s.s. "Te Kapu" carried ten packages of powder from Napier to Wairoa. Proceedings were taken against the master, who was fined £10 and costs.

The only case in which it was considered necessary to take proceedings for overloading was that of the "Royal Tar," which arrived at Auckland from Newcastle, New South Wales. Before the vessel left Newcastle the master was notified by the authorities that he must lighten her before proceeding to sea. He did not, however, do so, and the local Marine Board then reported the matter to this colony, and the master was prosecuted on his arrival at Auckland, and fined £25 and costs.

At the request of the Port Nicholson Yacht Club an application was made to the Imperial Government for permission to fly the blue ensign of Her Majesty's fleet, and, the club having complied with certain necessary formalities, the Admiralty has acceded to the request, and the requisite warrants have been received and forwarded to the club.

*Alterations in the Law.*—During the session of Parliament held in 1896 an Act to further amend "The Shipping and Seamen's Act, 1877," was passed. Considerable alteration was made in the law regarding engineers of sea-going vessels. Up to the coming into operation of the Act there were only two grades of certificated sea-going engineers, and no steamship could be compelled to carry more than two engineers; but the new Act provides for three grades of certificates, and that the number of engineers to be carried in intercolonial and coasting vessels is to be regulated by the indicated horse-power and the distance between terminal ports. It also provides that engineers are to be rated as officers, and that when the conduct of any person in the engine department is likely to be called into question on an investigation into a steamship casualty one of the Assessors must be an engineer holding a first-class certificate. Intercolonial and coasting steamships registered not sooner than six months after the coming into operation of the Act are to have adequate ventilation of the engineers' room, engine-room, and stokehold; and for each engineer up to at least three a separate room is to be provided, having a separate entrance to the deck otherwise than through the engine-room. Provision is also made that the current rate of wages ruling in the colony is to be paid to seamen engaged in the colony, or who, though engaged abroad, are employed in the colony; that in the case of seamen engaged in the colony the engagement may be determined by twenty-four hours' notice on either side at any time after the ship's arrival at her final port of discharge in the colony, consequent on the completion of a round voyage; and that when any member of the crew of a foreign-going ship has been sent to prison for a term not exceeding one month, and the ship is about to leave the colony before the expiration of such term, the delinquent is to be put on board by the police, and kept in custody by the master until the ship has sailed.

With the exception of fifteen weeks during which it was necessary to employ a temporary clerk, the whole of the very large amount of clerical work done in the head office during the past year has been overtaken by the Chief Clerk, one assistant, and a cadet, notwithstanding the addition to the work of former years.

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W. T. GLASGOW, Secretary.