

(No. 573.)

S.S. "TRAVANCORE,"

The Merchant Shipping Acts, 1854 to 1876.

In the matter of the formal investigation held at Westminster, on the 12th of April 1880, before H. C. ROTHERY, Esquire, Wreck Commissioner, assisted by Rear-Admiral PICKARD, R.N., Captain BEASLEY, and Captain FORSTER, as assessors, into the circumstances attending the stranding and loss of the British steamship "TRAVANCORE," of Leith, on the 8th March last, near Cape Otranto, whilst on her passage from Alexandria to Brindisi.

The Court, having carefully inquired into the circumstances of the above-mentioned shipping casualty, finds, for the reasons annexed,

1. That the stranding of the said vessel was due to her having been kept by the master on a course too far to the west, in the belief that the bearing given to him by the second officer of the Santa Maria Light was the compass bearing, instead of its being, as it was, the true bearing.
2. That the course steered, before the Santa Maria Light was sighted, was a proper course; but that the course steered, after it was sighted, was not a proper course.
3. That the master was not justified in remaining below, and ordering the course he did to be steered, after the Santa Maria Light was sighted.
4. That the master was not justified in continuing to go at full speed, and in not using the lead after he had come on deck and had found that a fog had set in, and when he was ignorant of his true position.
5. That the vessel was not navigated with proper and seamanlike care.
6. That Robert Scott, the master, and Melbourne Denny Blott, the second officer, of the "Travancore" are to blame for the casualty.

For these wrongful acts and defaults the Court orders the certificates of the said Robert Scott, and of the said Melbourne Denny Blott, to be suspended for three months.

Dated this 12th day of April 1880.
(Signed) H. C. ROTHERY,
Wreck Commissioner.

We concur in the above report.
(Signed) GEORGE H. FORSTER, }
B. S. PICKARD, } Assessors.
THOS. BEASLEY, }

Annex to the Report.

This case was heard at Westminster on the 12th of April instant, when Mr. McConnell appeared for the Board of Trade, Mr. Clarkson for the owners, and Mr. Pollard for the master of the "Travancore." Four witnesses having been produced by the Board of Trade and examined, Mr. McConnell asked the opinion of the Court upon the following questions:—

- "1. What was the cause of the stranding of this vessel?"
- "2. Whether a proper course was set and steered before and after Santa Maria Light was sighted.
- "3. Whether the master was justified in remaining below, and ordering the course he did to be steered, after the Santa Maria Light was sighted?"
- "4. Whether the master was justified in neglecting to slacken speed and use the lead?"
- "5. Whether the vessel was navigated with proper and seamanlike care?"
- "6. Whether the master or officers, or either of them, is in default?"

Mr. McConnell also stated that in the opinion of the Board of Trade "the certificates of the master, and of the second officer, should be dealt with."

All parties, as well as the second officer, who was not represented by counsel or solicitor, stated that they had no further evidence to produce. Mr. Clarkson then said that he had no observations to make, there being no charge against his parties. Mr. Pollard addressed the

Court on behalf of the master, the second officer was heard on his own behalf, and Mr. McConnell having replied for the Board of Trade, the Court proceeded to give judgment on the questions on which its opinion had been asked. The circumstances of the case are as follows:—

The "Travancore," which was an iron screw steamship of 1,903 tons gross, and 1,172 net register, and was fitted with engines of 350 horse-power, and which was one of the regular mail packets in the service of the Peninsula and Oriental Steam Navigation Company, left Alexandria on the 5th of March last for Brindisi, having a crew of 108 hands all told, 57 passengers, and about 1,000 tons of cargo, consisting principally of cotton. She was, we are told, in first rate condition, being amply provided with boats, pumps, and every requisite for the voyage, and her compasses, of which she had four, being in good order. At 6.30 a.m. of the 7th, when abreast of Stamphani Island, the master laid her on a North 15° West course by standard compass, which was equivalent to about North 33° West true, there being an error of about 18°, namely 10° West for variation, and about 8° West for deviation of the compass on that course. The object of the master was to go about a mile outside of Cape Otranto, the practice being to signal to the shore at that point, so that a telegram might be sent to Brindisi to have the train ready for the mails and passengers on the steamer's arrival. The same course was continued throughout the day, namely, N. 15° W. by standard compass, or N. 33° W. true; and at 11 p.m. the captain went below, the weather at the time being fine and clear, the sea perfectly smooth, and with little or no wind. At midnight the second officer came on deck and took charge, and about 40 minutes afterwards, and whilst the vessel was still on the same course, Santa Maria Light was observed, bearing according to the second officer about a point and a half on the port bow, upon which he went below and reported to the captain that the light bore N. 50° W., but without saying whether that was the true or the compass bearing. As a fact he reported the true bearing; but the master supposing it to be the compass bearing ordered the vessel to be kept on the same course as before, until they should make Cape Otranto Light. At 1.50 a.m. Santa Maria Light, we are told, bore four points on the port bow, but at 2.30 a.m. it disappeared, upon which the second mate went below and reported the fact to the master, telling him at the same time that the weather was becoming thick. Shortly afterwards the captain came on deck, and in reply to his inquiry was told by the second officer that the light, when last seen, bore S. 72° W. Finding that the weather had become foggy, and that no lights could be seen, the master ordered the helm to be ported a point, and soon afterwards he ordered it to be ported another point to take her further off the shore, but the vessel was still kept at full speed, making 11 knots an hour. The master then went below to consult his charts, and on returning on deck at about a minute or two after 3 o'clock, he ordered the helm to be again ported a point; but seeing land almost immediately afterwards on the port beam, he at once directed the helm to be put hard aport, and whilst she was answering her helm the vessel struck. It was soon afterwards discovered that she had grounded on a flat rock in the Bight of Castro, inside Point Maccarone, and about nine miles to the south of Cape Otranto, and that her bows were only about 50 yards, and her stern only about 100 yards from the shore. Orders were at once given to get out the boats; and at about 4 a.m., seeing that the vessel was then making water fast, and that she had a strong list to starboard, it was deemed expedient to land the passengers and mails, which was done; the master and crew, however, remained on board to try to get her off. All their efforts, however, proved unavailing, the only result being to cause her to make water more rapidly; and at 5 p.m. the same day, finding that she had then 17 feet of water in the hold, it was determined to abandon her, and by 7 p.m. they had all left her and gone ashore. They returned to her the following day, and although they ultimately succeeded in saving a portion of the cargo, they were unable to get the vessel off, and she became a total wreck, but fortunately without any loss of life.

These being the facts of the case, the first question on which our opinion has been asked is "What was the

"cause of the stranding of the vessel"; and to this we shall have no difficulty in returning an answer. It has been already stated that, when the second officer reported the Santa Maria Light to the captain, he told him that it bore N. 50° W., but without telling him whether it was the true or the compass bearing. It was in fact the true bearing; but the master supposed that it was the compass bearing, and accordingly ordered the vessel to be kept on her course N. 50° W. by standard compass, which as we have seen was equivalent to about N. 33° W. true. If, however, we place the vessel on a chart with Santa Maria Light bearing N. 50° W. true, distant 27 miles, which is the distance at which the second officer tells us the light was when he first reported it, and then steer N. 33° W. true, we shall find that it will take us ashore a little to the south of Castro; and allowing for the alteration of the helm two points to port, after the master came on deck at 2.35 a.m., it would fully account for the vessel having run ashore inside of Maccarone Point.

The next question which we are asked is, "Whether a proper course was set and steered before and after the Santa Maria Light was sighted?" We have seen that the course steered from Stamphani Island, and until they sighted the Santa Maria Light, was N. 15° W. by standard compass, equivalent to N. 33° W. true, which would be a proper course, for, if made good, it would take her near to but clear of Cape Otranto, and as the weather was clear and fine, the sea smooth, and no wind, there is no reason why that course should not have been steered. Again, if the vessel had been where the master supposed her to be, when Santa Maria Light was first reported to him, namely, with the light bearing N. 50° W. by standard compass, which would be equivalent to N. 68° W. true, allowing 18° W. for variation and deviation, the course might safely have been continued, for the Otranto Light would have been picked up long before they reached the land, and the course could then have been altered if they found that they were too close in; but with the Santa Maria Light bearing N. 50° W. true, and only about a point and a half on the port bow, it was obviously an improper course, and must if continued inevitably take the vessel ashore near Castro.

The third question on which our opinion is asked is, "Whether the master was justified in remaining below and ordering the course he did to be steered, after Santa Maria Light was reported." It seems that the second officer, who holds only a second mate's certificate, was totally unacquainted with the navigation of these waters, having made the voyage from Alexandria to Brindisi only once before. The master, too, had very little personal knowledge of him, as he had only joined the vessel at Bombay; and judging from the way in which he gave his evidence, he is not a person calculated to inspire any very great confidence in his skill or ability. It would therefore have been better if, instead of relying on the report of this young man, the master had, when the light was first reported, gone on deck and satisfied himself of its position and bearing; and at all events he should have ascertained without a doubt whether the second officer was reporting the true or the compass bearing of the light.

The next question upon which our opinion is asked, is "Whether the master was justified in neglecting to slacken speed or use the lead?" So long, indeed, as the weather continued clear, there would be no necessity to slacken speed or take a cast of the lead, for the lights would show him his true position; but when he came on deck after half-past 2, and found that the fog had set in, and that no lights were visible, it was his duty to have slackened speed and taken a cast of the lead, in order to ascertain his true position. That the fog was very thick at the time is clear from the evidence of the look out

man, who told us that they could not see more than half the ship's length off; and even the captain stated, that when the vessel took the ground they could not see the land, although it was only about 50 yards from the bows, and about 100 yards from the vessel's stern. In our opinion the master had no right to be driving the vessel at the rate of 11 knots an hour through a fog so dense that they could not see more than 50 yards off, he being at the same time totally ignorant of the vessel's position, except by what he had been told by a young officer, of whom he had very little personal knowledge, and who seems to have taken so little interest in the duties of the ship as not to know whether it was the practice on board to report the true or the compass bearing. In our opinion the master is very greatly to blame for not having slackened his speed and taken a cast of the lead, which would at once have shown him his true position.

The fifth question upon which our opinion is asked, is "Whether the vessel was navigated with proper and seamanlike care?" and in our opinion she was not.

The sixth question upon which our opinion is asked, is "Whether the master or officers, or either of them, is in default?" We think that the master is to blame for not coming on deck when the Santa Maria Light was first reported to him, in order to satisfy himself as to its true position and bearing, and for having relied entirely on an inexperienced young man, of whom he had little personal knowledge, and for not even taking the trouble to ascertain whether the bearings which he gave were the true or the compass bearings. He is also in our opinion to blame for not having slackened the vessel's speed, and taken a cast of the lead, when he came on deck after half-past 2 o'clock, and found that a thick fog had set in, he being at the same time totally ignorant of the vessel's true position. As regards the second mate, we think he also is to blame for having reported to the master the bearing of the light without telling him that he was giving him the true bearing, when I am told by the assessors that it is the invariable practice to give the compass bearing, leaving it to the master to reduce it to the true bearing by making the proper allowance for variation and deviation. If he had taken the least interest in his duties he would have learnt, between the time of joining her at Bombay and the casualty, whether it was the practice on board that vessel to report the compass or the true bearing, or rather, I ought to say, whether it was the custom to deviate from the established practice by reporting the true bearing. It is to this mistake that the casualty is mainly to be attributed.

Now no charge has been made against the master, or against any of the officers, for anything that occurred after the stranding, they all seem to have done their best to save the vessel and cargo. At the same time we should not be justified in allowing these two officers, through whose neglect this casualty has been brought about, to go wholly unpunished. Here is a splendid mail steamer, with a number of passengers and a very valuable cargo, which has been thrown away and entirely lost by their negligence; and it is probably owing to the fact that the sea was perfectly smooth, and that there was no wind at the time, that the casualty was not attended with a very serious loss of life. As, however, counsel for the Board of Trade stated they did not press for any very severe punishment against either of them, their certificates were suspended for only three months.

No application, and therefore no order, was made as to costs.

(Signed) H. C. ROTHERY,
Wreck Commissioner.

We concur.
(Signed)

GEORGE H. FORSTER,
B. S. PICKARD,
THOS. BEASLEY, } Assessors.

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