

(No. 914.)

“RUPERRA.” (S.S.)

The Merchant Shipping Acts, 1854 to 1876.

In the matter of a formal Investigation held at Cardiff on the 17th and 18th days of February 1881, before ROBERT OLIVER JONES, Esquire, Stipendiary Magistrate for the Borough of Cardiff, assisted by Captain CASTLE and Captain HARLAND, into the circumstances attending the stranding of the British steamship “RUPERRA,” of Cardiff, near Bolt Head, Devon, on the 27th day of January 1881.

Report of Court.

The Court, having carefully inquired into the circumstances attending the above-mentioned shipping casualty, finds, for the reasons stated in the annex hereto, that the said ship, owing to careless navigation on the part of the master and officers, was lost by running ashore at Bolt Head, on the coast of Devon, on the 27th January last. The Court suspends the certificate of the master for six months; that of the first mate for three months from this day, and reprimand the second mate.

Dated this 18th day of February 1881.

(Signed) R. O. JONES, Judge.

We concur in the above report.

(Signed) JOHN S. CASTLE, }
ROBERT HARLAND, } Assessors.

Annex to the Report.

The “Ruperra” was an iron steamship, built at Jarrow in the year 1877. Her registered tonnage was 835 tons, and she was propelled by two direct acting inverted compound surface condensing engines of 120 horse power combined. She was registered at the Port of Cardiff, owned by Mr. John Cory and others of that place, Mr. Cory being the managing owner, her official number being 77,203.

The “Ruperra” left Alexandria on the 7th January last, with a cargo of 1,520 tons of cotton seed, with a crew of 22 hands all told, under the command of Mr. John Angel Lee, who held a certificate of competency as master, No. 07,593. She was in good order and condition in all parts. She called at Gibraltar for orders, and received orders to proceed to Hull. She resumed her voyage on the 21st January at 4 p.m. At noon on the 26th January, while it was supposed that they were off Ushant, some uncertainty existed in the master's mind as to his actual position, and he therefore took three casts of the lead, finding 63 and 64 fathoms, with a bottom of sand and shell. The master estimated his position to be 8 or 10 miles west of Ushant. The vessel was stopped for the purpose of these soundings for about an hour, and at 1.15 p.m. again went on at full speed, a course being shaped N.E. $\frac{1}{2}$ E., which was altered to E. by N. $\frac{1}{2}$ N. at 1.30 p.m., the object being to take the ship well clear of Portland Bill. Shortly after 5 o'clock a.m. on the 27th January, the ship struck stem on the rocks to the east of the Ham Stone, near Bolt Head, on the coast of Devon. Some five minutes before she struck, the look-out man had reported to the chief officer, who was in charge, something black ahead, to which the mate replied, “All right,” but he did not alter the speed of the vessel, thinking, he said, that it was a fog bank coming down from the eastward. A minute or two later the look-out man reported, “It's looking very black ahead.” The chief mate then saw, “Something very black,” stopped the engines, and ordered the helm “hard-a-port,” but he did not call the captain, who was below. In three to five minutes later the ship was ashore. The engines were put full speed astern, but without effect. With the pressure of the ebb tide the vessel swung broadside on to the rocks, and in a few hours was broken to pieces. The crew took to the boats, and, after remaining till daylight within a short distance

of the vessel, landed in safety at Hope Cove, a few miles to the westward. Upon this state of facts the Court were asked, on behalf of the Board of Trade, the following questions:—

1. What was the cause of the stranding of the vessel?
2. Whether the vessel's position was correctly estimated at noon on the 26th January last, and whether the master was justified in assuming that she had run 176 miles from noon on the previous day?
3. Whether prompt and proper measures were then taken to ascertain and verify the position of the vessel?
4. Whether a proper course was set and steered at noon on the 26th January, and whether due and proper allowance was made for tide and currents?
5. Whether the master was justified in keeping the vessel so long on that course?
6. Whether the course set was steered?
7. Whether the master was on deck at a time when the safety of his vessel required his personal supervision?
8. Whether the second officer was justified in neglecting to call the master when the weather became hazy, and in getting out the life-boat without orders after the vessel had struck?
9. Whether the lead was used with sufficient frequency, and, if not, its neglect was justifiable?
10. Whether the chief officer was justified in neglecting to call the master at 5.20 a.m. immediately on the look-out reporting that it was looking black ahead, and whether he was justified in assuming this to be a fog bank?
11. Whether prompt and proper measures were then taken, and whether, when “breakers” were reported ahead, prompt and proper measures were taken to avoid them?
12. Whether the vessel was navigated with proper and seamanlike care? and, finally,
Whether the master and officers are, or either of them, is in default?

We had no hesitation in finding that the stranding of the vessel was due to careless navigation. The master has stated that, in his opinion, the casualty was caused by the compasses being affected by the haze, and the chief officer is of opinion that the compasses were affected by the snow on the land. The vessel had two compasses, the steering compass and the pole compass, the course being given by the latter, on which we have been told there was no deviation on the north-easterly courses. The master joined the vessel in 1878, and the vessel had not been swung since. It is true the master says that he corrected the compasses by bearings of the Pole star, but that could only be a very rough approximation in these latitudes. Amplitudes and azimuths appear to have been entirely neglected.

At noon on the 25th of January, the master states that he took an observation, and found the ship was in 45° 47' north latitude, and 7° 15' west longitude, and he considered that he was therefore 5 miles to the eastward of his proper track. In taking this observation, he does not seem to have employed the mate to confirm his calculations. It is possible that there might have been an error in the longitude, the sights having been worked out by the master alone, and not having been checked by the chief officer. The distance run appears by the log to have been 186 miles. We think the master justified in taking that to be correct.

We think that he took prompt and proper measures at noon on the 26th to ascertain and verify the position of his vessel, and that if the position stated was correct, then, in our opinion, a proper course was set and steered, but we are bound to infer from actual facts that the master's estimate of his position, both at the time of taking the observation and at the time of sounding, must have been a wrong one. We do not think that it was necessary to make any allowance for tide and currents.

As to the fifth question, we think the master was justified in keeping his vessel on that course, but considering that he had not seen the land when he supposed himself off Ushant, and had taken no observation on that day, it would have been a proper and prudent course for him to have taken another sounding before he left the deck at 11 o'clock p.m. This course he neglected to take, and his conduct in this respect was not justifiable.

If we are to believe the witnesses, and we see no reason to doubt their testimony on this point, the course set was actually steered.

The master went below on the night of the 26th, at 11 p.m., telling the mate before he did so to keep a good look-out, reminding him that "at 12 o'clock you may see the Start," and directing him to report to him at 12 o'clock. It seems that there were written orders to the officers posted in the chart room, amongst which was one requiring that the master should be called "if anything happened." So far as they went, these precautions were proper and prudent, but in our opinion the master should have gone further. The mate, in accordance with his instructions, reported to the master in his cabin at 12, that the weather was clear and that he could see nothing. With this report he appears to have been satisfied, and, in point of fact, he did not go on deck until roused by the telegraph on the ship's approaching the land. He ought to have left orders to be called during the middle watch; this was the more necessary, inasmuch as the ship was entering the English Channel, and the officer of the watch was the second mate, upon whom so much responsibility should not have been thrown.

The conduct of the chief officer and of the second

mate was not satisfactory. The weather at the time the ship was approaching the Devonshire coast was hazy; upon the evidence of all the witnesses we come to no other conclusion. On the contrary, so clear that the Eddystone Light, within range of the ship must have passed, must have been visible to the second mate ought to have taken notice of and reported it to the master. The chief officer also ought to have kept a vigilant look out, or he would have seen the same light when he came on deck at 4 a.m. Further, we think he was not justified in neglecting to call the master at 5.30 a.m., or in so hastily concluding that the object which appeared ahead, and which was the land, was a fog bank. He also neglected to call upon the first report made to him by the mate to look-out.

More wakefulness and promptitude upon the appearance of danger might have saved the ship. In these matters were, it was too late when the second mate was made to take any effective measures for the purpose.

(Signed) R. O. Jones
JOHN S. C. ...
ROBERT H. ...

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