(No. 3742.)

"BLUE CROSS" (S.S.)

The Merchant Shipping Acts, 1854 to 1876.

In the matter of a formal Investigation held at the Sheriff Court House, Dundee, on the 27th and 28th days of February 1889, before John Campbell Smith, Esq., Advocate, Sheriff Substitute of Forfarshire, assisted by Captains Castle and Anderson, into the circumstances attending the stranding and loss of the Steamship "Blue Cross," of Dundee, on or near Salvoneen Spit, north of Faro Island, Gottland, Baltic, on or about the 14th January 1889.

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 stranding and loss which occurred on 14th January 1889, was caused by the vessel being considerably to the westward of her position by dead reckoning, and to the master having neglected to take steps to verify his position when he could have done so, by taking an observation of the sun for longitude, and failing that, by the non-use of the lead. The Court find the master to have been in default, but taking all the circumstances of the case, many of them extenuating, into consideration, they refrain from dealing with his certificate, but admonish him to be more careful in the future.

Dated this first day of March 1889.

(Signed) J. C. Smith, Judge.

We concur in the above report.

(Signed) John S. Castle, Absm. Anderson, } Assessors.

Annex to the Report.

This investigation was held at the Sheriff Court, Dundee, on the 27th and 28th February, when Mr. J. J. Johnstone represented the Board of Trade, and Mr. Andrew Hendry appeared for the owner and officers.

The "Blue Cross," official number, 62,312, was a British screw steamer built of iron at North Shields in 1869, of the following dimensions:—Length, 219 ft. 5 ins., breadth, 30 ft. 4 ins., and depth of hold, 18 ft. 2⅕ ins. Her gross tonnage was 1,074·47 tons, and her net register was 693·80 tons. She was rigged as a schooner and fitted with two engines of 100 horse-power combined, and at the time of her loss, which forms the subject of this investigation, she was the property of Mr. Robert Taylor, of Dundee, he being the managing and sole owner. This vessel having taken in a cargo of about 1,000 tons of oats in bulk at Reval, left that port at 8 a.m. of the 13th January 1889, bound for London, her draught of water being 16 ft. 10 ins. forward, and 19 ft. 6 ins. aft, the centre of the disc being two inches above the water, which was fresh. At the time of leaving she appears to have been in good order for the intended voyage. She had three compasses and four boats, two of which were fitted as lifeboats, and a crew of 18 hands, including the master, Mr. James R. Nicholson, who holds a certificate of competency, number 01,890.

The weather at the time of leaving was fine and clear, with a moderate breeze from the south-east. All went well, and at 10 p.m. Dagerort Light bore S.E. by E., distant 14 miles, this distance having been ascertained by a four-point bearing, whereupon a course S.W. by S. was set by the pole compass, upon which course the master stated there was a quarter of a point easterly deviation, making a S.W. ¼ S. magnetic course. The patent log was now re-set, and the wind increasing from the southward and eastward, the fore-trysail being set. The S.W. ¼ S. course was continued till 2 a.m. of the 14th, when on account of increasing wind and sea the course was altered to S.W. by S. ¼ S. magnetic. At this time the master describes the weather as bitterly cold, and the vessel shipping large quantities of water which speedily became frozen and the vessel covered with ice, which was in some places from 2 to 3 ft. in thickness. At 9 a.m. the wheel chains became blocked on account of the ice which had accumulated on her deck, and they found it impossible to give the vessel sufficient port helm to enable her to keep her course, and the result was that from 9 a.m. to 11 a.m. she was making a S. by W. course. At the last-mentioned hour they succeeded in getting the wheel chains clear, and they thereupon put the vessel upon the S.W. by S. ½ S. course again.

During the morning the weather had been fine and clear, the sun and horizon visible, with occasional snow showers, and at noon it appears that they were unable to get a meridian altitude. Her position, however, was made up by dead reckoning, which placed the vessel in latitude 58° 4′ north, and longtitude 20° 20′ east, she having run 72 miles since taking their departure from Dagerort Light.

At noon the chief officer came on watch, and the snow showers appear to have been more frequent, but between the showers they could see from 3 to 4 miles. At 2.30 the weather was fine and clear, and the master then went below, leaving the chief officer in charge of the deck, instructing him to keep a good look out. The weather continued the same, with passing snow squalls, and at 3.15 p.m., a snow squall having just passed over, the mate suddenly saw breakers about half a point on the port bow. He immediately gave orders for the engines to be stopped, and the helm to be put hard-a-port. At the same time the master, who heard the engines stopping, immediately went on deck, and seeing the breakers, he at once gave orders for the engines to be reversed full speed, but the vessel took the ground before her way could be stopped. They kept the engines going astern for about twenty minutes, when the chief engineer reported that she was rapidly filling with water in the engine-room and stoke-hole, and the master then seeing that there was no possibility of getting the vessel off, the engines were stopped, and one of the lifeboats was got in readiness for lowering. Signals of distress were made, and about 8 p.m. the lifeboat from the station came alongside, but the crew remained by the vessel until 11 a.m. the following day, at which time there was 14 ft. of water in her. The master then made a contract with salvors, who had come to their assistance, agreeing to pay the sum of 3,000*l.* if the ship was got off the reef, but the weather continued to be unfavourable, and ultimately the vessel became a total wreck.

The following are the questions put to the Court, and their answers thereto:—

1. What number of compasses had the vessel on board, where were they placed, and were they in good order and sufficient for the safe navigation of the ship?

Ans.—There were three compasses, a pole compass, one in the wheel-house, and one aft. There is nothing in the evidence to show that they were not in good order, and the Court are of opinion that they were sufficient in number for the safe navigation of the ship. The Court are further of opinion that one of them should have been fitted as an azimuth compass.

2. When and by whom were they made, and when and by whom were they last adjusted?

Ans.—There was no evidence as to when and by whom they were made; but it was stated that a new pole compass was supplied at Copenhagen on the previous voyage, at which time the vessel was said to have been swung, and a deviation card supplied for that compass alone, which, however, was not produced.

3. Did the master ascertain the deviation of his compasses by observation from time to time? Were the errors of the compasses correctly ascertained, and the proper correction to the courses applied?

Ans.—The master stated that he had no opportunity of ascertaining the deviation of his compasses by observation during the voyage, and it was his first voyage in this ship. He stated, however, that the sun was visible on the 14th January, but for some reason or other he did not take advantage of the opportunity that then presented itself. Even if he had done so, the Court are unable to see how he could have taken a correct bearing, as the compasses were not properly fitted for that purpose.

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4. Whether the vessel was properly and sufficiently manned?

Ans.—The vessel appears to have been manned with the usual number of hands for vessels of her class. At the date of the casualty two of the men were suffering from frostbite, and were unfit for duty.

5. Whether proper measures were taken to ascertain and verify the position of the vessel at or about 10 p.m. of the 13th January last, and afterwards in the course of the voyage?

Ans.—Ordinary measures, but somewhat imperfect, appear to have been taken, in order to ascertain and verify the position of the vessel at or about 10 p.m. of the 13th January last, when she passed the Dagerort Light, but not afterwards.

6. Whether at or about 10 p.m. of 13th January, and 2 a.m., 9 a.m., and 11 a.m., and noon of 14th January respectively, safe and proper courses were set and thereafter steered, and whether due and proper allowance was made for distance run, and for tide, currents and beam wind, and sea?

Ans.—If the courses said to have been set and steered after 10 p.m. were made good, then such courses were proper ones, and sufficient allowance was made for current, beam wind, and sea. If these courses were actually steered, the Court is unable to understand how the ship struck where it did.

7. Whether at or about 9 a.m. of the 14th January, when the wheel chains became blocked with ice, and the vessel could not be kept on her course, prompt and proper measures were taken to clear the chains?

Ans.—So far as appears, all possible measures were taken to clear the wheel chains when they became blocked with ice.

8. Whether a good and proper look-out was kept?

Ans.—On account of the ice which had accumulated forward, it was impossible to place a look-out man there; but considering the state of the weather, we are of opinion that it would have been more prudent to have placed a man on the bridge along with the officer of the watch.

9. Whether the lead was used, and if not, whether such neglect was justifiable?

Ans.—The lead was not used, and the non-use of such cannot be held to have been justifiable. We are of opinion that had it been used at noon of the 14th January, it would have shewn the master that he was to the westward of his assumed position, as the depth of water would not have corresponded with the depth shewn on the chart at his estimated position.

10. What was the cause of the casualty?

Ans.—The casualty was caused, or at least materially contributed to, by the master neglecting to take proper precautions for the safe navigation of the vessel, and in particular by neglecting to take observations for longitude, and by totally neglecting to use the lead.

11. Whether the vessel was navigated with proper and seamanlike care?

Ans.—Considering the disastrous result and the previous answers, the Court are unable to hold that the vessel was navigated with proper and seamanlike care.

12. Whether the master and mate, or either of them, are in default?

Ans.—Taking the whole circumstances as proved into consideration, the Court do not find the mate in default, and they do not consider it necessary to deal with the master's certificate, but earnestly admonish him to be more careful in future.

Sheriff Campbell Smith, before announcing the decision of the Court, said:—

In supplement to these technical answers to technical questions, I desire to say a word or two upon the manner in which this casualty occurs to my non-nautical mind. That the loss of this ship was a preventable calamity I have next to no doubt. I further think that it was brought about by a concurrence of accidents; in the first place, by an unexpected force of current driving to the west; in the second by a snow shower obscuring the land during the critical half hour before the ship struck; and in the third, by the ship arriving at a part of Salvoreen Reef, where the water was pretty deep, where the breakers were slight, and where there were no visible beacons. The absence of any one of the causes would probably have averted the loss of the ship, but I think it might have been averted had the captain or the mate used such precautions as ordinary skill and reasonable prudence (I am afraid I cannot say ordinary prudence) ought to have suggested. The ship was lost because those who guided her did not know where she was; she was 18 miles further west than she was calculated, or rather guessed, to be. And she had gone all this distance off her intended course by steering, so to speak, blind-fold, or in darkness, for 94 miles, the time occupied in this chance-directed voyage being from 10 p.m., on the 13th January to 3.15 p.m., on the 14th, and at least the last 7 hours of it being daylight. During the daylight there were snow showers, but the sun was visible sometimes, and if an observation had been taken, it would have shewn that the ship was further west than her estimated position. Moreover, at the beginning of this 94 miles, the ship's position was not ascertained except in a very careless way by a so-called "4-point "bearing," which was said to show that she was 14 miles off Dagerort Point inner lighthouse. Next, the strength of the current, necessarily produced by the wind, was only guessed at, and guessed to be *very* far under its actual strength. Had the weather of the 14th kept clear, the land would have been seen in time to give warning of danger. But no man in charge of a ship in any sea, especially a land-locked sea, has a right to count on clear weather. He is bound before losing sight of land, and about to steer out into darkness, to make sure both of the position he starts from and the point he is to make for, and the forces that are likely to affect the steering of the vessel. I cannot say that the officers of this vessel attended sufficiently to any of these things; they trusted too much to the chapter of accidents. But neither can I say that their carelessness was gross or uncommon. Of the very few ships regarding the fate of which it has been my duty to enquire into, other two have perished from similar want of skill and attention, in failure to ascertain the true position before parting with sight of land, in sticking too mechanically to the compass and the chart, in failure to keep all the senses vigilant, and especially common sense.

(Signed) J. C. Smith.
John S. Castle.
Absm. Anderson.