

(No. 6063.)

"BOVERIC" (S.S.) AND "HELLAS."

South Australia Marine Board.

Collision between S.S. "Boveric" and barque "Hellas".

An inquiry was held at the Custom House, Port Pirie, on 29th and 30th May, 1900, before Thos. N. Stephens, Esq., J.P., President of the Marine Board, and W. R. Cave, Esq., J.P., Captain J. H. Gibbon, and A. Campbell, Esq., J.P., Wardens, into the circumstances connected with the collision, in the Port Pirie River, between the s.s. "Boveric" and the barque "Hellas," which occurred on the night of the 2nd May, 1900.

The British steamer "Boveric," 2,578 tons register, 345 ft. long, and 50 ft. beam, was inward bound to Port Pirie with a cargo of coal; draught, 13 ft. 3 in. forward, and 16 ft. 6 in. aft. She went aground on Cockle Spit in the morning, remained there until 6.30 p.m., and then, after dark, proceeded up the Port Pirie Creek, entering it at 7.10 p.m., attended, it was said to help round the bends, by the launch "Florrie," 22 tons register, and 11 horse power, which vessel, the master of the "Boveric" stated; was the only one he could obtain. According, however, to the master of the "Nelcebee," the services of that tug were offered during the day and declined. The master of the "Boveric" has held a certificate of exemption from pilotage for two years, but had never before entered the Port Pirie Creek at night. The master was on the bridge, third mate (J. C. Keay) at the telegraph; C. Sundqvist, A.B., at the wheel; T. A. Frost, first mate, on the fore-castle head; and R. H. Smith, second mate, on the poop aft.

The Russian barque "Hellas," 1,568 tons register, 261 ft. long, and about 40 ft. beam, was outward bound, in the charge of Pilot Whitmore, with a cargo of 2,000 tons of wheat; draught, 19 ft. 6 in. on an even keel, and towed by the tug "Nelcebee," 98 tons register, 60 horse power. The loading, however, was incomplete, about 240 tons having still to be taken in at the Germein anchorage. Going down the river, the pilot was in the port mizzen rigging about five ratlines up; the master on the poop; second mate, E. Blomquist, standing by; two men at the wheel (Efrainson and Grunquist); and first mate, O. Unonius, on the fore-castle head.

From the evidence given by the witnesses of the "Boveric" and the attendant launch, it appears that when she entered the river at 7.10 p.m., the engines were slowed to two knots. When at No. 3 beacon, saw the "Hellas" at about No. 2. Passed No. 3 very close, and after straightening up, the red buoy was in line with No. 2 beacon.

The "Boveric," it was said, was so far on the west side of the channel that the red buoy and No. 2 beacon were reported in line, her bilge several times touched the edge of the channel and gave her a list, and after the accident she passed inside the red buoy, which scraped along her port side. The master's written report the day following the collision was, in effect, as follows:—After passing No. 3, noticed the lights of a steamer with a ship in tow, ported helm, stopped engines, which were going dead slow, answered tug's whistle, and could see red lights of both vessels; steadied helm, put engines easy ahead, red buoy reported right ahead in line with No. 2. When near the red buoy, the "Hellas" shut in her red light and showed her green; immediately stopped engines, but collision unavoidable, starboard bilge dragging against the bank. Collision occurred near red buoy. Immediately barque clear, put helm hard-a-starboard, engines full speed ahead (then inside red buoy which passed on port side), and straightened vessel up in channel.

The engineer's log-book showed the following entries:—Entered river, 7.10 p.m.; slow ahead, 7.18 p.m.; stop, 8.15 p.m.; and full ahead, 8.17 p.m., the collision occurring between the two latter. The log-book shows also that, after the collision, the engines were put "full astern" and "slow astern," an operation which the master said was impracticable before the collision. This log-book further shows that the engines

were "slow ahead" from 7.18 p.m. until 8.15 p.m., when they were stopped a minute before the accident. This practically agrees with the master's report the day after the accident, but contradicts his evidence before the Board, that the engines were stopped after he passed No. 3 and were never moved until after the collision.

The pilot's report to the harbourmaster, the day after the accident, stated that he slowed down at No. 2 beacon, passed black buoy about 5 ft. on starboard side, "Boveric" then bearing into barque's waters. Seeing collision imminent, ordered tug broad on starboard bow full speed to clear "Boveric." Tug on flats inside black buoy. Attributed collision to "Boveric" forcing barque too much to east side of river, giving "Hellas" no room to pass. If "Boveric" had followed usual course adopted by large steamers, no accident would have happened.

According to the evidence of the pilot and crews of the "Hellas" and tug "Nelcebee," No. 2 beacon was passed at a nice distance, and No. 4 black buoy made for and picked up within about 6 ft. When passing this buoy the "Boveric" was seen coming in such a manner that a collision was imminent. The helm, which had been steady, was put hard-a-port, and the tug went at right angles on the starboard bow to take the vessel close into the eastern bank. Before, however, this could be accomplished, the collision occurred by the striking of the vessels on their respective port bows. Two men on board the "Nelcebee," however (one in the bows and the other on the bridge) did not take this view, and stated that when off the black buoy the "Hellas" took a sudden and rapid sheer across the river. This the master of the tug, who was at the wheel himself, denied, and suggested that the change in the position of the barque relatively to the tug was caused by the alteration in the position of the tug, not of the barque. The witnesses of the "Boveric" considered that the sudden sheer of the "Hellas" was caused by the influence of starboard helm, but the witnesses of the "Hellas" declared that no starboard helm was used. Some of the witnesses stated that the tug on going on the starboard bow of the "Hellas" got so far over on the bank that she was touching on the eastern side. The master of the tug is certain that he was in that position, and that the length of the tow line was not more than 14 fathoms. The two seamen, however, stated that the tow line was 20 and 30 fathoms respectively, and one said that the tug was not nearly as far over on the eastern bank as stated. The master of the "Hellas" said in his evidence that after the collision the tug had to go over on the west side to pull the barque off the bank. The witnesses of the "Boveric" and the "Florrie" said that they are certain that it was the red buoy on the starboard hand going in that they sighted and scraped along, and not the black buoy on the port hand.

The "Florrie," it is said, cut her tow line before the collision, fearing that the barque would run between the launch and the "Boveric." The "Boveric" did not stop, as required by section 422 of the Merchant Shipping Act, 1894, to ascertain whether any assistance was required, because, the master stated, the vessels were in narrow waters and the barque had a tug in attendance.

The accident occurred in the neighbourhood of the red and black buoys, midway between Nos. 2 and 3 light beacons, at 8.16 p.m., on the 2nd May, the night being fine and clear, no moon and no wind; high water by the automatic tide-gauge at 8.30 p.m., 21 ft. 8 in. The collision therefore occurred practically at slack water. The "Boveric" witnesses said that there was a strong flood. The master of the "Boveric" stated that the "Hellas" and her attendant tug were not seen until he reached No. 3 beacon, which accounted for the meeting in what he and others said was one of the worst places in the river for vessels to pass. The width, however, at that place is about 200 ft., and the combined beam of the "Boveric" and "Hellas" 90 ft. Allowing 20 ft. for each vessel to be off the beacons and 90 ft. for beam would total 130 ft., leaving 70 ft. clear, which ought to have been sufficient. A much better meeting place, however, could, and in the opinion of the Board should, have been found. Some evidence was given that pilots taking a steamer inwards usually stop between Nos. 6 and 8 beacons, or, failing this, between 3 and 4, to allow an outward bound towing ship to pass, but one pilot said he was not aware of this.

There was a good deal of discrepancy as regards the whistles and their meaning. On the one hand it was stated that the "Nelcebee" on leaving the harbour gave long blasts at frequent intervals between the harbour and No. 2 beacon as a warning to anything else in the river, and that these signals could be heard a long way off; also that after passing No. 2 one short blast was given. Some witnesses heard only one signal. The master of the "Boveric" said he heard one, and answered when at No. 3 beacon, interpreting the signal as that required in certain circumstances by the regulations—"one short blast—I am directing my course to starboard." An officer of the "Boveric" heard one whistle, and considered it a signal—"I am directing my course to port." It is evident to the Board that great care should be exercised in the use of sound signals, and that persons concerned should be thoroughly acquainted with the regulations on the subject.

As regards lights, the evidence agrees that the "Hellas" had the usual side-lights burning brightly, and the tug "Nelcebee," in addition to side-lights, had the required two bright masthead lights (see Art. 3, Regulations for the Prevention of Collisions at Sea), besides a steering-light abaft the funnel. The lights of the "Boveric" were also exhibited in good order, but some doubt was expressed whether the launch "Florrie" carried two bright masthead lights. Pilot Whitmore stated that the absence of two such lights made him doubtful whether the "Florrie" was acting as a tug or pilot.

The damage to the "Boveric" was estimated at £600. The damage to the "Hellas" was said to be £760, as per contract for repairs, excluding about a month's detention. The "Hellas" was, the master thought, half insured. No evidence was obtainable whether the "Boveric" was insured, or whether the cargo and freight on either or both vessels were so covered.

The distance between Nos. 1 and 10 beacons is about five miles. Between Nos. 1 and 2, say, 4,600 ft.; between Nos. 2 and 3, 4,800 ft.; and between Nos. 3 and 4, 6,000 ft. or one mile. The distance from No. 2 to the red buoy is 2,400 ft., and from No. 3 to the same buoy, 2,500 ft.

The Board have already pointed out the important fact that the master of the "Boveric" had never before been up the river at night, and, under these circumstances, and considering the size of his steamer, he acted unwisely, if not in going up, certainly in engaging the services of a launch of the size and power of the "Florrie" to assist the steamer, instead of employing a tug fully equal to the work required. Large steamers in Port Adelaide have frequently secured the help of a tug and a pilot at night, although the master may be exempt. The master of the "Boveric" also should have so handled his vessel as not to meet, in one of the worst places in the river, a sailing ship towing out. As an exempt master, practically a pilot, he knew or ought to have known, the river and the suitable places for meeting and passing, and, having under his command a steamship, could have so regulated her speed and movements as to accomplish this without any very great difficulty, especially by a seamanlike handling of his vessel, engaging a suitable tug, and keeping a good lookout. As regards this latter, it was stated that neither vessel before starting knew that the other was to be in the river at the same time, but the "Boveric" at about No. 4 beacon was seen from the "Hellas" at No. 2, that is, one and three-quarter miles away, whilst the barque was not seen from the steamer, until the "Boveric" was at No. 3 and the "Hellas" at No. 2, or about three-quarters of a mile off, although the night was fine, clear, and calm.

Some evidence was given that the town lights under certain circumstances make it difficult to pick up a ship's light, but, it must be pointed out, that in one case the lights are fixed and in the other moving, and in this instance six lights in all were exhibited from the "Hellas" and her tug, none of which was stationary.

The accident might also possibly have been avoided if the "Boveric," when the master saw that a collision was likely, had gone astern, even if she did slew with her head to starboard and go ashore. The explanation that this was impracticable is not borne out by the evidence to the effect that the same operation was executed after the collision, for it appears that the steamer went inside the buoy, got into about mid-channel, stopped, went astern, straightened up, and then proceeded on her course, and yet it is suggested that the same manœuvre could not be carried out, or even attempted, to avoid the collision.

The Board, having heard the witnesses and considered their evidence, are further of opinion that the "Hellas" was carefully navigated, and, although some of the witnesses affirm that just before the accident she took a sudden and rapid sheer right across the river, this is not only denied by other witnesses, but is quite unaccountable. No reasonable explanation, other than direct starboard helm on the "Hellas," is offered. The Board believe the evidence of the pilot, master, second mate, and two men, all near the wheel, that the vessel steered remarkably well, and that no starboard helm was given.

It is said that after the collision the "Boveric" passed inside the red buoy, which scraped along the port side. How this was accomplished is not very clear, seeing that the steamer neither got the mooring chain foul of her propeller nor went aground in the operation, even if the buoy was then 20 ft. further off the bank than usual, as was found to be the case a fortnight afterwards. The "Boveric" witnesses said the colour of the buoy could be distinguished, and this, if its stated proximity to the steamer was correct, might have been the case, but the partial colour of all buoys, whether red or black, within a very short time after painting, is well known to everyone who makes use of them.

It should also be remembered that the vessels met in an extremely awkward place for four of them to pass in safety. It was the duty both of the pilot of the "Hellas" and the master of the "Boveric" to, as far as possible, avoid such a meeting place, and although this would be comparatively easy in the day time it was much more difficult at night. The advantage, however, manifestly lay with the steamship rather than the barque in tow, and, in the opinion of the Board, the collision might have been avoided if the "Boveric" had been so handled as to have passed the "Hellas" in a wider part of the river.

From the foregoing it will be seen that, in the opinion of the Board, the "Boveric" did not do all that could have been done to prevent the collision, and the master, as the holder of a certificate of exemption from pilotage, is cautioned to be more careful in future, otherwise the Board will be compelled to deal with his certificate.

JOHN DARBY,
Secretary Marine Board

Marine Board Offices, Port Adelaide,
June 12th, 1900.

(Issued in London by the Board of Trade on the
24th day of August, 1900.)

Report

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