

(No. 7705.)

“SOCOTRA” (S.S.).

THE MERCHANT SHIPPING ACT, 1894.

In the matter of a Formal Investigation held at the Caxton Hall, Westminster, on the 14th, 15th, and 17th days of February, 1916, before J. G. HAY HALKETT, Esquire, assisted by Commander G. K. WRIGHT, R.D., R.N.R., and Captain J. H. WALKER, into the circumstances attending the loss of the British steamship “SOCOTRA” through stranding at or near Le Touquet, France, on or about the 26th day of November, 1915.

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 stranding and subsequent loss of the vessel were caused by the master neglecting to take adequate steps to ascertain and verify the position of his ship at and after noon of the 25th November, 1915, and mistaking Le Touquet light for the light at Beachy Head.

The Court finds the master, Mr. Robert Pollock Stevenson, alone in default, and suspends his certificate, No. 019,405, for six calendar months from this date.

On the application of the master's counsel, the Court recommends the Board of Trade to grant him a chief officer's certificate during the period of such suspension.

Dated this 17th day of February, 1916.

J. G. HAY HALKETT, Judge.

We concur in the above Report :

G. K. WRIGHT } Assessors.
J. H. WALKER }

ANNEX TO REPORT.

This inquiry was held at the Caxton Hall, Westminster, on the 14th, 15th, and 17th days of February, 1916, when Mr. H. Stuart Moore (instructed by Sir R. Ellis Cunliffe, Solicitor to the Board of Trade) appeared for the Board of Trade; Mr. C. Robertson Dunlop (instructed by Messrs. Freshfields, Solicitors) appeared for the master, Mr. Robert Pollock Stevenson; and for the third officer, Mr. Norman Vincent Grimsditch; and Messrs. Butler Aspinall, K.C., R. H. Balloch and Innes Harold Stranger (also instructed by Messrs. Freshfields) represented the owners, the Peninsular and Oriental Steam Navigation Company. Mr. Dunlop also watched the case on behalf of the chief and second officers, who were not parties to the inquiry. At the outset the owners were not parties, but, on the application of Mr. Aspinall, and with the leave of the Court, they were made parties to the inquiry.

The “Socotra,” official number 106,612, was a British twin-screw steamship, built of steel at Jarrow-on-Tyne in 1897, by Palmer's Shipbuilding and Iron Company, Limited, of Newcastle-on-Tyne, and was registered at the port of Newcastle in March, 1897. Her dimensions were:—Length, 450 feet; breadth, 52·2 feet; depth of hold, 30·5 feet; gross tonnage, 6,008·93 tons, and registered tonnage, 3,896·25 tons. A clincher-built, schooner-rigged vessel, with seven bulkheads and seven water ballast tanks of a total capacity of 1,200 tons, she had two decks, two masts, a poop, an upper and lower bridge, deckhouses and a fore-castle. She was fitted by the

builders with two triple-expansion, vertical, surface-condensing, inverted, direct-acting engines of 700 nominal and 4,500 indicated horse power, with three cylinders for each engine, of a diameter respectively of 22½ inches, 36½ inches and 60 inches, and length of stroke 48 inches. The engines were constructed in 1897, and were designed to give a speed of 14 knots. There were two steel boilers, working at a pressure, when loaded, of 170 lbs. On her boat deck she carried four lifeboats; two on either side, each capable of accommodating 48 persons; and aft on her poop were stowed two cutters, each capable of taking 20 persons. Hooked on to the rails, ready for use, were six lifebuoys, of which two were on the bridge; and 100 life jackets were lying, ready for use and accessible to all hands, in a box on the hurricane deck. She had three compasses in position, a Lord Kelvin's compass on the upper bridge by which the courses were set and steered, a similar compass in the chart room below the bridge, and a Lilley spirit compass on the poop, right aft. The two former compasses were adjusted in June, 1911, by Messrs. Kelvin, White and Hutton, of London, and subsequently corrected, from time to time, by the master, who kept the deviation book up to date. A Walker's patent Cherub log was fitted on a boom under the bridge, with the recorder showing on the bridge; and the vessel was also furnished with Lord Kelvin's patent sounding apparatus. The latest Admiralty charts and sailing directions, tide charts and tide tables, were also supplied; and in every other respect the vessel was well fitted and found for the trade in which she was engaged.

The “Socotra” left London on the 1st July, 1915, carrying a full cargo of general merchandise, with a crew of 97 hands all told, under the command of her master, Mr. Robert Pollock Stevenson, who held an ordinary master's certificate of competency, number 019,405. She was bound on a round trip, calling at Cape Town, Adelaide, Melbourne, Sydney and Brisbane; from which latter port she started on the return voyage on the 18th September, 1915, calling at the same ports in the reverse order, with a full cargo mainly of frozen meat and wool.

At 6.53 p.m. on the 24th November, 1915, she was off Ushant, which bore S. 36 E., distant about 1½ miles. The bearing above mentioned and all other bearings and courses given in this annex, are true bearings and courses. From this point a course of N. 54 E. was set which was continued for seven minutes. At 7 p.m. the course was altered to N. 44 E. in order to run up the English Channel; which course, if continued, should have taken her to about 10 miles to the southward of Portland Bill. At 8 p.m. Le Four light was eight miles distant, bearing S. 39 E. Proceeding on the course N. 44 E., Isle de Vierge was abeam at 9.1 p.m., bearing S. 47 E., and distant 9½ miles. At that time the patent log, which was set and streamed at 8 p.m., recorded 10 miles. At 10 p.m. Isle de Bas light was visible, bearing S. 47 E., while Isle de Vierge light bore S. 4 E. The position, as then ascertained by cross bearing, was just outside, and to the N. and W. of the line of course, a circumstance which the master attributed to the ebb tide being against him. At 11.3 p.m. Isle de Bas light was abeam, bearing S. 46 E., distant 20 miles, though by a clerical error the distance was entered in the log book as 10 miles. The patent log then recorded 31½ miles. Isle de Bas light dipped at midnight, then bearing S. 20 E. distant about 24 miles. The patent log, at this time, recorded 41 miles, which very nearly corresponded with the actual distance run. Thus far, the record of the patent log, which was approximately accurate, showed an average speed of 10½ to 10½ miles; but the master, in his dead reckoning, had been allowing the vessel 11½ miles. Continuing the course N. 44 E., the patent log at 4 a.m. of the 25th November showed 81 miles, and at 8 a.m. recorded 121 miles. At 9 a.m. the course was altered to N. 57 E., to correct the difference between the compass error allowed since the morning of the 24th November and the compass error as ascertained on the morning of the 25th. This course was continued till 11 a.m., when it was altered to N. 85 E. At noon, the weather being fine, though with passing clouds and slightly hazy, and the patent log showing 161 miles, the master reckoned his position by

account to be latitude $50^{\circ} 38' N.$, longitude $1^{\circ} 30' W.$ Working, however, from the observation for longitude by the second officer at 9 a.m. that day, and the latitude as found at noon, the master concluded that he was wrong in his dead reckoning, and that the position at noon ought to have been latitude $50^{\circ} 21' N.$, longitude $2^{\circ} 28' W.$ Unfortunately, these observations were taken under unfavourable weather conditions, and the second officer's calculations were not checked, nor his observations verified, by the master, or by any other officer. Subsequent events prove that the longitude obtained at 9 a.m. was inaccurate, and that the vessel was, in fact, a considerable distance to the eastward of her assumed position. A sounding taken at noon gave 22 fathoms, with bottom "sand and shell, very fine." No such sounding is obtainable at either of the positions mentioned; but this fact does not appear to have suggested any doubt in the mind of the master. He intended to make land about Portland Bill; the position obtained by observation placed him $9\frac{1}{2}$ miles south of that headland; and the position obtained by account being obviously impossible, since it placed him almost ashore at the Isle of Wight, he immediately assumed he was where the position obtained by observation placed him. Then he "thought" he saw the two lighthouses on Portland Bill, and the assumption was confirmed. Had he taken into consideration the record of his patent log, instead of reckoning by his engine speed alone, he would have found his noon position on that day to be, approximately, latitude $50^{\circ} 24' N.$, longitude $1^{\circ} 55' W.$, with soundings, at the then time of tide, of about 22 fathoms; and in all probability he might have been less ready to accept without examination the results of the second officer's unverified observations. Even with the data available it is difficult to understand why the master failed to close with the land, so as to dispose of any uncertainty as to his exact position. On the other hand, it must be admitted that the third officer, whose watch was from 8 to 12, also mistook the land then sighted for Portland Bill; though the second officer thought it was too faint to be recognized. It is now certain that this must have been either Anvil Point or the high land of the Isle of Wight in the neighbourhood of St. Catherine's Point. At the distance the vessel was from land, either might possibly be mistaken for Portland Bill by a careless observer, whose mind was obsessed with the idea that Portland Bill ought to be near at hand.

The initial mistake having thus been made, the master, from his then position, which he estimated erroneously, set a course N. 80 E., and having reset the patent log, proceeded on this course till 8.20 p.m. After 4 p.m. the weather, though fine, was somewhat hazy over the land; so hazy, in fact, that the land could not be seen. No soundings were taken on this course until 7 p.m., when "22 fathoms, sand and shells," was obtained; but after 7 p.m. soundings were taken hourly till 10 p.m. The result of the cast at 7 p.m. was not such as to suggest a serious doubt as to the position of the vessel; but the result at 8 p.m., "18 fathoms, shells," was not reassuring. At 8.22 p.m., as the weather was becoming more hazy, the telegraph was rung to "stand by below," and the course was altered to N. 70 E. This course was steered till 9.30. The sounding at 9 p.m. gave "26 fathoms, gravel." No such soundings appear on the chart anywhere in the neighbourhood of the master's assumed position; and he admitted that the discrepancy made him more doubtful than ever as to where he was. Accordingly, he altered the course at 9.30 p.m. to N. 60 E., to haul in towards the English coast, presumably with the intention of picking up some light which he could identify. A cast of the lead at 10 p.m. gave him "24 fathoms, sand," in an assumed position, which must have been somewhere between Beachy Head and the Royal Sovereign light vessel, where no such sounding was possible. The vessel was then going at full speed, the flood tide being with her. Apparently, further disturbed by the result of the last-mentioned sounding, the master reduced her to half speed at 10.19 p.m., and stopped her at 10.21 p.m. He stated that he stopped her because a green light had been sighted about half to three-quarters of a point on the starboard bow and about three miles distant. There is no record in the

log book as to when this light was first seen, but there is an entry that the buoy to which it was attached was passed about a cable's length on the starboard side, at 10.30 p.m. Though the master had never seen a green light on a buoy on the British coast, and though both he and the third officer failed to find any such light on the chart, the master, without any apparent reason, seems to have concluded, at once, that the light sighted was the light on a wreck-marking buoy. Those on board were unable, at any time, to distinguish, with certainty, the shape or colour of the buoy; but there can be no doubt that it was the red buoy, with green light, moored on the western side of the Vergoyer Bank, off the French coast, near Le Touquet. The patent log was hauled in at 10.20 p.m., and the third officer stated that it then recorded 119 miles from the noon position; but by a strange omission, no entry of its reading then, or at any time after 8 p.m., was made in the log book. After 10.20 p.m. the patent log was not used. At 10.30 p.m., when the engines were stopped and the vessel was drifting up on the flood, past the Vergoyer buoy, another sounding was obtained, giving "11 fathoms, fine sand." More uncertain than ever as to his position, the master then let the vessel drift, heading about N. 10 W., till 10.43 p.m., when the engines were set "slow ahead" on the course N. 60 E., till 11 p.m., the weather being very hazy. Another sounding, "18 fathoms, sand," was taken at 11 p.m. Up to this time no other light had been seen; but about this time the lights of two or three small craft, apparently fishing vessels, were observed, and men were visible moving about their decks. The "Socotra" passed close by one of these vessels; but the master, although uncertain of his position, did not think it necessary to hail her and make inquiries.

At 11.20 p.m. a light was seen, bearing S. 63 E., at an estimated distance of about eight miles, which the master took to be that at Beachy Head. He described this light as a flashing light, giving two flashes every 10 seconds at regular intervals, with very slight eclipse; a description which does not at all tally with that of the light at Beachy Head, but which ought to have suggested the possibility that it might have been Le Touquet light, as in fact it was. Why the master should have thought it was the Beachy Head light is incomprehensible. Had he laid off its bearing on the chart, he must have realised that, if the vessel was eight miles distant from that light with the light bearing S. 63 E., he must have been well on shore in Sussex, in a position from which the Beachy Head light could not have been visible. The third officer pointed out to him that it was a different flash from that of the light at Beachy Head. The master remarked that it might have altered, and persisted in his opinion. He did not lay off the position on the chart, but assuming he was close to the land off Beachy Head, he altered his course to S. 40 E. about 11.25 p.m., to haul off from the shore. Shortly after this, at 11.30 p.m., another sounding gave "16 fathoms, stones." Though this was not consistent with his assumed position, the speed was altered at 11.45 p.m. from "slow" to "full ahead" with both engines, by order of the master; and the course and speed mentioned were continued till the vessel went aground, about 12.8 a.m. of the 26th November. By midnight the weather had cleared, and was then fine, with haze on the horizon; and the light being visible on the port side, the master ordered the third officer to get a four point bearing of it. Before this order could be executed, the vessel struck, taking ground fore and aft without any violent impact, apparently sliding on to the bank, with only a slight tremor to indicate what had happened. The weather being fine though hazy, steps were taken to get her off, but without success. The helm was put hard apart without effect, though the master stated her head swung about 10° to starboard. The engines continued full speed ahead till 12.15 a.m., when they were stopped, and then ordered "full astern" at 12.17 for five minutes. At 12.20 it was noticed that she was bumping. After that time the engines were used as required, in the attempt to get the vessel off, until 3.28 a.m., when they were stopped. The following day five tugs assisted in the attempt to haul her off, but again without success. On the

30th November the crew went ashore; and later the vessel parted amidships and became a total wreck.

The "Socotra" went ashore on the top of high water, at a point about 2½ miles S. 52° W. of the lighthouse on Touquet Point, and about 1½ miles from the shore. Her draught, at the time of the casualty, was estimated to have been 20 feet forward and 20 feet 3 inches aft.

The third officer, though a party to the inquiry, appears to have been in no way responsible for any of the errors or omissions which resulted in the casualty. He took the 8 to 12 watch on the morning of the 25th November, and the first watch on the evening of that day; but he must be assumed to have been acting directly under the orders of the master, since the latter was on or near the bridge, and in charge of the vessel, practically the whole of the time. It is true that, when convinced that the light seen at 11.20 p.m. was not the Beachy Head light, he allowed his own better judgment to be overborne by the superior authority and experience of the master, and he failed to call up the other officers, as he ought to have done, to obtain their opinions, and if these agreed with his own, their assistance in pressing their joint views upon the master. But his position was a difficult one. He was a very young officer, while the master had had many years of service; and in these circumstances a junior officer may well hesitate to take a strong line, unless he possesses considerable courage and independence of character.

From the facts set out above, it is obvious that the primary cause of the casualty was the mistake made in fixing the noon position on the 25th November; and it is equally clear that this mistake was mainly due either to faulty observation or to erroneous calculation, or to both, when the morning sights were taken by the second officer at 9 a.m. Had the master, as he ought to have done, himself verified these, or caused them to be verified by another officer, the mistake must have been discovered and rectified, the correct position ascertained, and a proper course set from a sure point of departure. Other opportunities occurred of saving the situation; but the master did not avail himself of them. He ought, as above suggested, to have closed with the English coast, until he identified some landmark which could not have been mistaken. He might also have taken a line of soundings, and thus secured more trustworthy information than could be obtained from the single casts, at hourly intervals, the results of which were ignored. About 10.30 p.m. an intelligent use of his chart and directions ought to have shown him the precise position of his vessel. Shortly afterwards, this information was directly available, had he hailed the small craft which he passed close by, near the Vergoyer Bank. Nor was it too late, at 11.20 p.m., to haul his vessel out of danger, had he taken the trouble to see, what other officers had seen at once, that the light then sighted could not have been the Beachy Head light. With the aid of his chart and his light book, a little thought should have enabled him to identify it, unmistakably, as the light on Touquet Point. Even at his moments of greatest uncertainty, he failed to consult with his chief officer, whose opinion as to the supposed Beachy Head light was very emphatic. Every opportunity of correcting the original mistake was missed, and it is not easy to understand the reason why. It was tentatively suggested that the state of the master's health may have been responsible for this neglect; and in his evidence, which he gave very frankly and straightforwardly, he stated that he was suffering from some gastric affection, for which, in the absence of a doctor, he was being treated by the chief officer. The evidence also showed that he had requisitioned from the owner 72 bottles of Irish whisky, all of which had been consumed between the 1st July and the 26th November. In addition, about 48 bottles of Scotch whisky and about six bottles of gin were supplied to him by the storekeeper on board, of which the Scotch whisky was mainly used for entertaining in hot-weather ports. The witnesses, however, were unanimous in stating that, though nervous, anxious, and apparently very much worried by the menace of submarines, he was perfectly sober, and

that there was nothing in the state of his health to suggest that he was, in any way, unfit to discharge his duties as master.

At the conclusion of the evidence Mr. Moore, on behalf of the Board of Trade, submitted the following questions for the opinion of the Court:—

1. What number of compasses had the vessel, were they in good order and sufficient for the safe navigation of the vessel, and when and by whom were they last adjusted?

2. Did the master ascertain the deviation of his compasses by observation from time to time, were the errors correctly ascertained, and were the proper corrections to the courses applied?

3. Was the vessel supplied with proper and sufficient charts and sailing directions?

4. Were proper measures taken to ascertain and verify the position of the vessel at or about noon on the 25th November last, were safe and proper courses thereafter set and steered, and was due and proper allowance made for tides and currents?

5. What was the buoy sighted at or about 10.30 p.m. on the 25th November last? What did the master take the buoy to be, and were proper measures then taken to ascertain and verify the position of the vessel?

6. What was the light sighted at or about 11.20 p.m. on the 25th November last; what did the master take the light to be, and were proper measures then and thereafter taken to ascertain and verify the position of the vessel?

7. Was the lead used with sufficient care and frequency, and was the character of the bottom as shown by the armature of the lead observed and noted throughout?

8. During the evening and night of the 25th November last and before or at the time the ship struck on the 26th November last, was the condition of health of the master such as in any way to incapacitate him in the conduct of his duties as regards the navigation of the ship?

9. What was the cause of the stranding and loss of the vessel?

10. Was the vessel navigated with proper and seamanlike care?

11. Was the loss of the S.S. "Socotra" caused by the wrongful act or default of the master, Robert Pollock Stevenson, and the third officer, Norman Vincent Grimsditch, or either of them?

Mr. Aspinall then addressed the Court on behalf of the owners, and Mr. Dunlop on behalf of the master and third officer. Mr. Moore replied, on behalf of the Board of Trade, and the Court gave judgment and returned the following answers to the questions of the Board of Trade:—

1. The vessel had three compasses in position; a Lord Kelvin's compass on the upper bridge, by which the courses were set and steered, a similar compass on the lower bridge, and a Lilley spirit compass on the poop, aft. These compasses were in good order, and sufficient for the safe navigation of the vessel; and the two former were last adjusted by Messrs. Kelvin, White and Hutton, London, in June, 1911.

2. The master ascertained the deviation of the compasses, by observation from time to time, the errors were correctly ascertained, and the proper corrections were applied to the courses.

3. The vessel was supplied with proper and sufficient charts and sailing directions.

4. The measures taken to ascertain the position of the vessel at or about noon on the 25th November last were inadequate, and no attempt was made to verify that position, with the result that the master erroneously assumed he was off Portland Bill, whereas, in fact, he probably was, and according to the patent log should have been nearly off the Isle of Wight. Had the vessel then been off Portland Bill, and at the distance from it estimated by the master, the courses then and thereafter steered would have been safe and proper. In the circumstances existing, the courses set and steered at noon, and thereafter till 10.30 p.m., on the 25th November last, were doubtless safe, in the sense that there was no immediate danger; but they cannot be said to have been proper courses. At and after 10.30 p.m. the courses set and steered

were not safe or proper courses. No allowance was made for tide or currents. Such allowance ought to have been made, but the omission to make it does not seem to have been of serious moment.

5. The buoy sighted at or about 10.30 p.m. on the 25th November last was the red buoy, with green light, moored on the west side of the Vergoyer Bank, off the French coast near Le Touquet. The master assumed, without serious consideration and for no apparent reason, that it was a wreck-marking buoy off the English coast; and thus no measures were taken at this time to ascertain and verify the position of the vessel.

6. The light sighted at or about 11.20 p.m. on the 25th November last was the light on Touquet Point, Le Touquet, France. The master mistook this light for that at Beachy Head, although these two lights differ considerably, both as to duration of flashes and eclipses, and although the third officer expressed to the master his opinion that it was not the Beachy Head light. If, when the light was first seen, the master had laid the bearing down on the chart, he would have found that, from his then relative position, Beachy Head light could not have been visible, and that his ship, in point of fact, would have been well on shore.

7. The lead was not used with sufficient care or frequency. The character of the bottom, as shown by the armature of the lead, was observed and noted throughout. No intelligent use was made of the results of such casts as were taken.

8. The master, who had enjoyed indifferent health during the round voyage which commenced in July, 1915, showed, after his arrival in the English Channel, considerable nervousness with reference to anticipated attacks by enemy submarines; but the Court is not

prepared to say that his condition of health, during the evening and night of the 25th November last, and before or at the time the ship struck on the 26th November last, although not quite normal, was such as, in any way, to incapacitate him in the conduct of his duties as regards the navigation of the ship.

9. The cause of the stranding and loss of the vessel was the neglect of the master, in failing to take adequate steps to ascertain and verify the position of his ship, at and after noon of the 25th November last, and in mistaking Le Touquet light for the light at Beachy Head.

10. The vessel was not navigated with proper and seamanlike care.

11. The loss of the S.S. "Socotra" was caused by the default of the master, Mr. Robert Pollock Stevenson, alone. Having regard to his record, and to the straightforward manner in which he gave his evidence, the Court suspends his certificate, number 019,405, for six calendar months only from the date hereof. The Court is of opinion that the third officer when he came to the conclusion that another light was being mistaken for Beachy Head committed an error of judgment in not calling up the other officers. No blame attaches to him for anything else.

J. G. HAY HALKETT, *Judge*.

We concur:

GEORGE K. WRIGHT *Assessors.*
J. H. WALKER

(*Issued in London by the Board of Trade on the 24th day of March, 1916.*)