(No. 6482.)

"FIRTH OF FORTH" (S.S.).

The Merchant Shipping Act, 1894.

IN the matter of a formal investigation held at the Moot Hall, Newcastle-on-Tyne, on the 20th, 21st, and 22nd days of January, 1903, before WILLIAM ANGUS and WILLIAM JOHN SANDERSON, Esquires, two of His Majesty's Justices of the Peace acting in and for the City and County of Newcastle-on-Tyne, assisted by Captains E. M. HUGHES and W. COWIE (Nautical Assessors), into the circumstances attending the stranding of the British s.s. "FIRTH OF FORTH," of Blyth, on the Coast of Florida, Gulf of Mexico, on the 3rd day of November, 1902.

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 of the vessel, whereby she sustained serious and material damage, was due to the negligent and improper navigation of the chief officer in not correctly ascertaining and verifying the position of the vessel and setting improper courses. The Court finds the chief officer, William Tate, alone in default, and hereby suspends his certificate, No. 001039, for the period of six months from the date hereof, and at the same time censures the master, James Russell Brady, for failure to correctly ascertain the deviation of the compass, and setting an unsafe course on the day prior to the stranding.

Dated this 22nd day of January, 1903.

WM. ANGUS,
W. J. SANDERSON, } Judges.

We concur in the above Report.

E. M. HUGHES,
W. COWIE, } Assessors.

Annex to Report.

This was an inquiry into the circumstances attending the stranding of the British s.s. "Firth of Forth," and was held at the Moot Hall, Newcastle-on-Tyne, on the 20th, 21st, and 22nd days of January, 1903, before William Angus and William John Sanderson, Esquires, assisted by Captains E. M. Hughes and W. Cowie (Nautical Assessors). Mr. Burton appeared for the Board of Trade, Mr. Middleton represented the owners, Mr. Wallace, the master, Mr. Temperley, the first officer, and Mr. Robert Jacks, the second officer.

The "Firth of Forth" of Blyth, Official No. 101841, was a steel screw steamship, built at Sunderland in the year 1893, by Messrs. Doxford & Sons, Limited, and was of the following dimensions:—Length 311 ft., breadth 38·2 ft., and depth in hold 21·65 ft.

She was schooner rigged, fitted with triple expansion engines of 303 horse power, constructed by Messrs. Doxford & Sons, at Sunderland, in the year 1893. She was of 2231·97 gross, and 1383·19 net registered, tonnage, and owned by the Forth Steamship Company, Limited. Mr. Arthur Tate, of Newcastle-on-Tyne, being the managing owner.

She was on the voyage in question in good condition and well-found, fitted with life-boats and life-saving appliances in accordance with the Act.

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The vessel had four compasses, particulars of which are hereinafter given, the courses being set by the wheelhouse, and the vessel steered by the standard.

The master was supplied with recent American charts of the Gulf of Mexico, with the accompanying book of lights and fog signals, but does not seem to have been provided with any sailing directions.

The "Firth of Forth," which was a turret deck ship, left Mobile, U.S.A., on October 30th last, bound for Amsterdam and Sunderland, with a crew of 21 hands all told, and no passengers, under the command of Mr. James Russell Brady, who held a certificate of competency as master, No. 04811. She carried a cargo of 775 standards of pitch pine logs, of which 650 standards were below and the remaining 125 on deck. The deck cargo, consisting of 760 logs, was chiefly on the harbour or main deck, about an equal quantity being carried on each side, there being a few logs on the forward lower turret deck.

The logs on deck, which were of various sizes, about 7 ins. to 15 ins. square, and averaging 35 ft. in length, were secured by winch chains, wire runners, and the usual deck-cargo appliances.

All the deck cargo was consigned to Amsterdam, and the remainder to Sunderland. The vessel's draught of water on leaving Mobile was 16 ft. 3 ins. forward, and 21 ft. 1 in. aft, and, according to the master, she was, when loaded, about 3 or 4 ins. clear of her marks.

The master had been in the vessel off and on for about three years, the first officer, Mr. William Tate (who was a brother of the managing owner), for about twelve months, and the second officer, Mr. Stobbs, since the 2nd September last. The "Firth of Forth" crossed the bar at 7.30 a.m. of the 31st October, having at the time a list of 10 degrees to port. From Mobile a course was set by standard compass S.E. by S. $\frac{1}{4}$ S., the error being 8° W. giving S. 45° E. less 3° for leeway making S. 42° E. (true). The master intended to pass through the Rebecca Channel, to the east of the Tortugas, stating that this had been his usual course on previous voyages.

This course was steered till noon of the 1st November, when observations were taken placing the vessel in latitude 28° 21′ N. and longitude 86° 3′ W. On leaving the bar there was a strong E.S.E. breeze gradually increasing, which on the morning of 1st November had become a strong gale with a force of 8 or 9. The wind was on the port bow, and the existing list increased considerably until, indeed, at 7.30 a.m. of the 1st, the ship was said to have been almost on her beam ends. Soon after leaving port the master was seized with an attack of fever which subsequently, on the 2nd November, incapacitated him from retaining command of the vessel. After consultation with the chief officer, the master decided to cut the lashings and sacrifice the deck cargo. This was done, and the engines were stopped for about seven hours to prevent injury to the propeller. Immediately the port cargo went overboard, the ship took a heavy list to starboard, but as soon as the deck cargo on that side cleared away, she resumed to some extent her former list to port. About 2 p.m. of the 1st the course was altered to S.E. by E. (by standard compass), the master stating that at this time the error was 7° E., and based his calculation accordingly, whereas on the previous day it was 8° W.

The master attributed this change to heeling error, but as the list continued to port, he must be wrong on this point. The courses subsequently made by the ship prove that the error remained westerly, while the second officer on two occasions on the 3rd November found that such was the case.

This course was continued till noon of the 2nd November, when observations taken by the chief officer placed the vessel in latitude 26° 47′ N., longitude 85° 30′ W. At this time the master was, through illness, unable to take the observations himself, though he stated he checked them at 5 p.m., immediately before he was compelled to hand over the command of the vessel to the chief officer. In view of subsequent events, and of the incapacity of the master at the time, the Court is of opinion that these observations are not to be relied upon. Before finally going below at 5 p.m. the master formally handed over the command to the chief officer, with written instructions to continue the course and look out for lights on either bow.

In the opinion of the Court it was not a prudent course for the master, even when himself in charge, to take his vessel by night through the narrow Rebecca Channel when he could have made a safe passage to the west of the Tortugas. *A fortiori*, when the command devolved upon the chief officer, who held a first mate's certificate only, the master should have instructed him not to have attempted the channel. Nothing eventful occurred till noon of the 3rd, when observations were taken by the first and second officers, the former placing the vessel in latitude 25° 9′ N., longitude 83° 20′ W., the latter in latitude 25° 9′ N., longitude 82° 29′ W.; at the same time, finding the error of the standard compass to be westerly. The second officer was not satisfied with the result obtained by the chief officer, who nevertheless adhered to his own finding and altered the course to S.E. (by standard) notwithstanding the protest by his brother officer. That the second officer was correct after events show, as also that the error of the standard compass was westerly all through. The chief officer frankly admitted at the inquiry that he had made a mistake, and took the sole responsibility upon his own shoulders. At 4 p.m. the course was altered to E.S.E. (by compass) again, despite the protest of the second officer, and continued till 5 o'clock, when it was altered to S., land being sighted about six points on the starboard bow. At 5.30 the course was again altered to S.W. (by compass), the chief officer stating that he then observed a fixed white light six points on the port bow, which at the time he took for the Tortugas Light, but subsequently the Sand Cay Light. In the opinion of the Court both these conclusions were wrong, and the light he really saw at 5.30 could have been no other than the North-West Channel Light, as the Sand Cay Light was not then within range. At 5.30 the second officer went below for tea, leaving the chief officer in charge. He returned at 5.50 and observed a fixed white light about four points on the port bow, which probably was the North-West Channel Light. He observed a second light at about 6.15, and, after consultation, the two officers arrived at the conclusion that the two lights were the North-West Channel and Sand Cay Lights, and not the Tortugas Lights as they expected.

The helm was at once put hard-a-port, and the vessel, proceeding at full speed, took the ground immediately afterwards on what proved to be the north of Lavina Bank. Soundings were taken giving 18 ft., coral bottom, all round the vessel. The master came on deck on the 4th, and arranged with two tugs to tow her off. The vessel was lightened by discharging coal, and was floated on the 6th. She anchored, reloaded her coal, and making little or no water, proceeded to Newport News, where she coaled. Here all the crew left, as the master stated, on account of the vessel's list, and shipping a fresh crew, the vessel subsequently sailed for home, eventually arriving in the Tyne, where the cargo was discharged.

She then proceeded to Blyth, where she was docked and found to have received serious damage throughout her bottom, necessitating the expenditure of some £2,500. No lives were lost. The only one who really came out of the inquiry satisfactorily was Mr. Stobbs, a young officer, who appears to have acted throughout in a careful and intelligent manner, and much impressed the Court by the way in which he gave his evidence. The Court accordingly suggested to the solicitor to the Board of Trade that the Board might very properly reimburse Mr. Stobbs the legal expenses incurred by him in attending the inquiry.

While feeling bound to censure the master, the Court bore in mind the fact that he was suffering from a severe attack of fever, and, as regards the chief officer, the Court recognised the candid manner in which he admitted his error, and took that in account in suspending his certificate for the comparatively short period of six months.

At the conclusion of the evidence the following questions were submitted on behalf of the Board of Trade. Mr. Middleton, Mr. Wallace, Mr. Temperley, and Mr. Jacks addressed the Court for their respective clients, and Mr. Burton replied :—

(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 the proper corrections to the courses applied?

(3) Was the vessel supplied with proper charts and sailing directions?

(4) What were the circumstances in which the master relinquished the command of the vessel to the chief officer on the 2nd November last? Was he justified in doing so?

(5) Were proper measures taken to ascertain and verify the position of the vessel at or about noon of the 2nd November last? Was a safe and proper course thereafter steered and was due and proper allowance made for tide and currents?

(6) Was the position of the vessel correctly ascertained at noon of the 3rd November? Was a safe and proper alteration then made in the course and was due and proper allowance made for tide and currents?

(7) What was the land sighted at or about 5 p.m. of the 3rd November? Was a safe and proper alteration then made in the course and was due and proper allowance made for tide and currents?

(8) What was the light sighted at or about 5.30 p.m. of the 3rd November, and was a safe and proper alteration then made in the course and was due and proper allowance made for tide and currents?

(9) What were the lights in sight at or about 5.50 p.m. of the 3rd November? Did the chief officer take them to be the Loggerhead Cay and the Garden Cay Lights? If he did, was he justified in doing so?

(10) Was a good and proper look-out kept?

(11) Where did the vessel strand? Was she seriously damaged through such stranding?

(12) What was the cause of the casualty?

(13) Was the vessel navigated with proper and seamanlike care?

(14) Was serious damage to the s.s. "Firth of Forth" caused by the wrongful act or default of the master, chief and second officers, or any of them?

To which the Court replied as follows :—

(1) There were four compasses on board, viz.: one in the wheelhouse by which the vessel was steered, a standard compass on top of the wheelhouse by which the courses were set, a pole compass, and a spare movable compass aft. They appear to have been in good order and sufficient for the safe navigation of the vessel, and were last adjusted by Lieutenant Drake of the Swedish Navy at Oscarsham on the 29th December, 1901.

(2) According to the evidence, the master ascertained the deviation of the compasses by observation from time to time, but the Court is of opinion that the errors were not correctly ascertained, nor were the proper corrections to the courses applied.

(3) The vessel was supplied with charts of the Gulf of Mexico, published by the U.S. Coast and Geodetic Survey, dated October, 1900, and corrected to July, 1901, which were sufficient for the navigation. No sailing directions were produced, nor do there appear to have been any on board the vessel.

(4) Soon after leaving Mobile on the 31st October last, the master was seized with an attack of fever, which, on the 2nd November, had increased to such an extent as to incapacitate him from navigating the vessel. At 5 p.m. on that day he relinquished the command to the chief officer, and, in the opinion of the Court, was justified in doing so.

(5) Observations were taken to ascertain and verify the position of the vessel at or about noon of the 2nd November last, but the Court is not satisfied as to their accuracy. A safe and proper course was not then set and thereafter steered. No allowance was necessary for tide or currents.

(9) Observations were taken by the first and second officers at noon of the 3rd November for the purpose of ascertaining the position of the vessel. The first officer, who was then in command, placed the vessel in latitude 25° 9′ N., longitude 83° 20′ W., while the second officer placed her in latitude 25° 9′ N., longitude 82° 29′ W., and at the time, questioned the accuracy of the first officer's finding. Subsequent events proved the correctness of the position ascertained by the second officer, who, throughout the navigation, acted in a most intelligent and praisworthy manner. The alterations then made to S.E., and, at 4 p.m., to E.S.E. (by standard compass) by the chief officer, despite the protest of his subordinate, were not safe and proper. No allowance was necessary for tide and currents.

(7) The land sighted at or about 5 p.m. of the 3rd November was Marquesas Cays. The alteration then made in the course to S. (by standard compass) was not

safe and proper. No allowance was necessary for tide and currents.

(8) The light sighted at or about 5.30 p.m. was, according to the chief officer, Sand Cay Light, but, in all probability, the North West Channel Light. The alteration then made in the course, viz. S.W. (by standard compass), was not safe and proper. No allowance was necessary for tide and currents.

(9) The lights sighted at or about 5.50 p.m. of the 3rd November were the Sand Cay Light and the North West Channel Light. They were mistaken by the chief officer for the Loggerhead Cay and the Garden Cay Lights respectively. He was not justified in doing so.

(10) A good and proper look-out appears to have been kept.

(11) The vessel stranded about 2½ miles N.W. of Lavina Bank and sustained serious and material damage thereby.

(12) The immediate cause of the casualty was negligent and improper navigation on the part of the chief officer in not correctly ascertaining and verifying the position of the vessel, and setting improper courses. At the same time the master is not free from blame, as, on the 2nd November, he failed to correctly ascertain the errors of the compass, and, under the circumstances, set an unsafe course.

(13) The vessel was not navigated with proper and seamanlike care.

(14) The stranding of, and serious damage to, the vessel were caused by the wrongful act and default of the chief officer, William Tate, and the Court hereby suspends his first mate's certificate, No. 001039, for the period of six months from the date hereof. At the same time, the Court censures the master, James Russell Brady, for failing to correctly ascertain the errors of his compass, and for setting a course to pass through the Rebecca Channel, especially when he himself was unable to take command of the vessel.

WM. ANGUS,
W. J. SANDERSON, } Justices.

We concur.

E. M. HUGHES,
W. COWIE, } Assessors.

(Issued in London by the Board of Trade on the 27th day of February, 1903.)