

RIVER MEANDER INQUIRY.

Judgment, No One to Blame.

At Newcastle yesterday the Court delivered judgment in the Board of Trade inquiry into the circumstances attending the loss of the Loudon steamer River Meander, owned by the American Levant Line, Ltd., whilst on a voyage from New York to Barcelona with a cargo of 5,000 tons of grain and general cargo in November last.

The Court stated that the cost of the vessel to her owners, who purchased her last May, was £39,400. The owners valued her when she sailed on her last voyage at from £42,000 to £45,000. Having regard to appreciation in the value of steamers the Court considered that this estimate might be taken as approximately correct. The insurances stated to have been effected in connection with the vessel were £34,000 on hull and machinery, £2,000 on freight, £7,000 on disbursements, and £2,320 on premiums. There was no direct evidence that the vessel sustained damage on the passage from Smyrna to New York in October and November last. It was, however, proved and admitted that on the passage the vessel made water in No. 1 port bilge, that she also made water in No. 3 hold, or the deep tank on the port side, and that water was found in the 'tween decks on the port side when cargo was discharged at New York. As regarded the first point, the master suggested that the water was due to sweating, but he eventually abandoned that theory, while the chief engineer expressed the opinion that it came through the plating of the ship. The Court was of opinion that the leakage was caused either by a defect in the shell of the vessel or by water passing through leaky valves and so into the bilge. There was no direct evidence that any defect did, in fact, exist in the shell of the vessel or in the valves. As to the water found in the deep tank, there was no positive evidence to show how it occurred. It was suggested it came through the ventilators into No. 3 'tween decks, and from there flowed over the hatch into the lower hold. The Court was unable to accept that theory, and considered it found its way into that hold either through the shell of the vessel or through suction or other pipes from the engine-room, although there was no direct evidence on the point. As to the water in the 'tween decks, it was suggested this came through the ventilators. In the opinion of the Court that might have been the cause, but not to any appreciable extent.

The broad fact remained that the cause of the influx of water into the vessel was not ascertained, and consequently no repairs of any kind, except some necessary repairs to the port fore bilge and suction pipe, were effected before leaving New York on the 26th Nov. Under these circumstances the Court was of opinion that the vessel should have been dry docked at New York for the purpose of definitely ascertaining what was the cause of her making water on the passage out. When the vessel was turning into her berth at Camden, Delaware River, on 11th Nov., the flood tide set her down with her port bilge on to a bank, said to have been of soft mud. The contact was slight, and, beyond choking the main injection valve inlet with mud, there were no indications at the time of the vessel having been

on the ground, or of having sustained any damage. When the vessel left New York on Nov. 26 she was not in a good and seaworthy condition as regarded her hull. Her equipment was satisfactory, her pumps were sufficient and in good condition, and in working order, except that the bilge injection valve, which was connected to the circulating pump, proved to be inoperative when the engineers tried to make the connection on the other pumps being overpowered. Her cargo was properly stowed, trimmed, and secured from shifting. The vessel was practically upright, having only a slight list. The top part of the vessel sustained some small damage about the decks on the 28th Nov., due to a gale and heavy sea. That was of no importance, as it was all stated to be above the weather deck and did not affect the seaworthiness of the vessel.

There was no direct evidence to show what was the cause of the damage which occurred on the 29th Nov., but the court was of opinion that it was owing to the development of some defect in the skin of the vessel, and was of a most serious nature, resulting in a rapid influx of water into the engine-room and stokehold which the pumps were unable to overcome, and in a lesser degree in Nos. 4 and 5 ballast tanks. The court was of opinion that the master and chief engineer used prompt measures to ascertain the cause of the influx of water to keep it down and to preserve the vessel, but considered steps might have been taken by the chief engineer to discover whether the bilge injection pipe was clear by removing the valve chest cover, and that it was an error of judgment on the part of both the master and the chief engineer to neglect to close the tunnel door.

In the opinion of the court the same cause of influx of water operated on both the passage to and from New York. At eight a.m. on the 29th Nov. the various pumps were in good working order, and did not at any subsequent time break down or cease working, with the exception of the bilge injection. When the vessel left New York she had a slight list to port, so slight as to be of no importance. The influx of water at or about eight on the 29th Nov. increased the list, the wind being on the starboard bow, but it never became heavy. At about ten at night when the crew left the vessel for the Ikbal the list was described as being from ten to fifteen degrees. Every reasonable effort was made to get the vessel upright by the use of the pumps. The crew left the vessel when in latitude 29 59 north and longitude 63 40 west. At that time there was about 17 feet of water in the engine-room and stokehold, and an unknown quantity in Nos. 4 and 5 ballast tanks, which they were unable to sound after eleven a.m. that day, when between one and two feet were found. At the time the crew left the vessel the weather was clear, with a fresh wind from the north-west, rough, confused swell and comparatively smooth sea. The Ikbal stood by until 8 45 next morning, when it was ascertained that the River Meander was deeper in the water, her after deck being completely awash, heavy seas making a clean sweep over the poop and bridge deck. It was decided that towage was impossible, as the vessel was apparently settling down fast, so the Ikbal proceeded to Halifax at full speed. The vessel was navigated with proper and seamanlike care and was not prematurely abandoned. The serious damage to and abandonment of the vessel were not caused by the wrongful act or default of the master, Andrew McGregor, or the chief engineer, Geo. Falconer, or either of them.

