

Sherlock and the Spirit of the Sea

So long as the oceans are the ligaments which bind together the great, broadcast British Empire, so long will there be a dash of romance in our minds. For the soul is swayed by the waters, as the waters are by the moon, and when the great highways of an empire are along such roads as these, so full of strange sights and sounds, with danger ever running like a hedge on either side of the course, it is a dull mind indeed which does not bear away with it some trace of such a passage.

--Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, "De Profundis," 1892

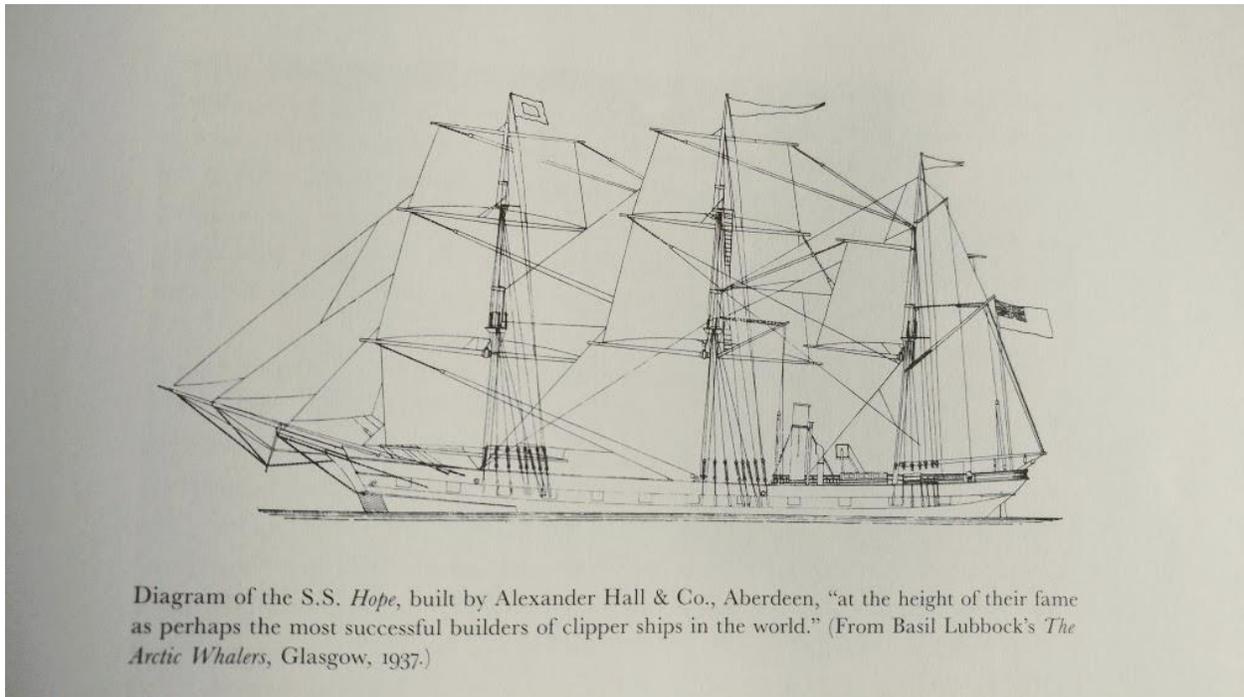


Diagram of the S.S. *Hope*, built by Alexander Hall & Co., Aberdeen, "at the height of their fame as perhaps the most successful builders of clipper ships in the world." (From Basil Lubbock's *The Arctic Whalers*, Glasgow, 1937.)

Imagine yourself on the deck of a 19th century sailing ship a mere 45 feet long, dwarfed by the rigging towering above you. Even though the ship is equipped with one of those new-fangled steam engines, if you run out of coal or have a breakdown, you'll be back at the mercy of the winds and currents. With a footprint no larger than a modest suburban house, this vessel is home to at least fifty other souls. You'll be sharing these tight quarters for weeks or months at a time, so you'd better hope that your shipmates are decent, law-abiding types. If they're not, you'll have no way of escaping them, or even calling for help. Wireless communication from ship to ship and ship to shore is still in the future, not becoming common until the early 20th century. You don't know what's happening to your family and friends back home, and they have no hope of knowing the fate of your ship until it either arrives at its next port or passes mail off to another land-bound ship.

If you're in Arctic waters, you'll be buffeted by ice floes, blown about by sudden unpredictable gales, and occasionally blinded by mists and fogs that seem to come out of nowhere and trap you inside a cloud. Would the tropics be pleasanter? Think again. Without air conditioning and refrigeration, you can bake under the blazing sun or retreat to your cramped and stifling quarters, and hope that you don't fall prey to some tropical fever. Better not cool off with a dip in the ocean – you might find the black fin of a shark following you.

Sound intimidating? Sir Arthur Conan Doyle had already braved these hardships and more when barely out of his teens. In 1880, at age 20, before he had even finished medical school, he signed on as ship's surgeon on the whaler *Hope*, for a six-month cruise through Arctic seas. He "came of age at 80 degrees north latitude." Arctic whaling was, as Doyle put it, "dangerous work," but he returned safely with his taste for adventure not yet sated. In late 1881 he sailed again as ship's surgeon, this time on the steamer *Mayumba* bound for West Africa. The physical dangers and isolation were less, with much of the trip spent pottering from one port to the next along the African coast rather than wandering among the ice floes, but Doyle apparently found both the surroundings and the company less congenial than those of the whaling ship. However, these two early voyages provided him with a wealth of experience that he would mine for literary material for the rest of his life, both within and outside of the Holmes canon.

Doyle had some fun with the impossibility of ship-to-shore communication in his 1881 story "That Little Square Box." A nervous passenger on a trans-Atlantic voyage overhears two shady characters discussing how, with the help of a mysterious mechanical box they brought aboard, the world will hear of the fate of their ship long before it reaches land. Immediately deciding that the two are terrorists planning to blow up the ship in a gigantic fireball visible in distant lands, our cowardly hero puts the two under surveillance and tries in vain to convince the captain and other passengers of the danger. Finding no help from that quarter, he finally works up his courage and interrupts the two men as they are about to spring the mechanism of the box. Not surprisingly, they overpower him and continue their dastardly plan. The trigger falls, the box is opened, and out burst two carrier pigeons, racing to see which will carry word of the ship back to shore first. The victorious pigeon wins a good deal of money for its backers, but even under pigeon-power, the news only has a range of about a hundred miles.

Although carrier pigeons were a surprisingly common means of 19th century communication, they did not come standard on all ships, and normally a ship had to make landfall before anyone could know its whereabouts. In "The Five Orange Pips" (1891) Holmes deduces not only the route but the nature of the ship carrying the men who are sending threatening letters to the Openshaw family. The letter from Pondicherry arrives seven weeks before the fulfillment of the threat, while the letter from Dundee arrives only four days before. Since the letters were carried by steam-powered mail boat, they traveled much faster than the murderers making their way to England in a sailboat. Although Holmes is not in time to prevent Openshaw's death, he arranges for the murderers to be apprehended when they return to America. However, they never arrive, and the only indication of their fate is a single spar with the initials L.S., for the name of their ship, the *Lone Star*, seen floating far out in the Atlantic. The sea has exacted justice in its own way.

The fate of a ship that never makes it back to port, (a not uncommon occurrence of the time) may become an unsolvable mystery, and an atrocity committed on board may never come to light– but then again, you can't always rely on the sea to keep its secrets forever.

In two of the Holmes stories, crimes at sea catch up to the criminals on land many years later. In “The Adventure of Black Peter,” Captain Peter Carey of the *Sea Unicorn* has been living ashore for over a decade, but his character has not been improved by land life. He is as violent and abusive to his family and neighbors as he was to his crew when afloat. He has built a replica of his shipboard cabin on his estate, and one night he is discovered transfixed to the cabin wall with the very harpoon displayed so proudly on that wall. No-one in the neighborhood is sorry to hear of his gruesome demise, but justice must be done, and Holmes is called in to investigate the crime. He untangles a blackmail plot by a former shipmate who saw Carey murder a shipwrecked man in the black of night so he can steal the man’s valuable securities. After a dozen years, Black Peter finally faces the consequences of his crime.

In “The *Gloria Scott*” (Holmes’s very first case, the one that convinces him to become a detective), tragedy at sea takes an entire lifetime to become tragedy on land. James Armitage, sentenced to transportation to Australia for a minor crime of embezzlement, becomes caught up in a revolt by the convicts on the transport ship *Gloria Scott*. After a successful mutiny, he and a handful of others are set adrift by the leader of the convicts for refusing to commit cold-blooded murder. This turns out to be a stroke of luck, as the transport ship is blown up in a last battle, leaving only one survivor, who is rescued by the men in Armitage’s lifeboat. The fugitives are picked up by a passing ship, and by posing as honest shipwrecked sailors, they make it to Australia, where Armitage changes his name, makes his fortune in the gold fields, returns to England as a rich and respectable colonial, and lives a long, productive, unblemished life. Meanwhile the *Gloria Scott* is recorded as “lost at sea,” like so many ships that simply vanished in the limitless ocean. But once again, a blackmailer brings the truth to light. Ironically, the fugitive Armitage rescued from the wreckage returns decades later to extort money in exchange for silence about the fate of the ship. Even a lifetime of virtue on land can’t protect Armitage from a reckoning for his early crimes, and the shock and fear of exposure drive him to his death of stroke.

The Holmes canon relies on purely rational, natural explanations for even the most bizarre and mysterious occurrences. Doyle kept up this tradition in many of his non-canonical sea stories as well. “The Fiend of the Cooperage” (1897) draws on Doyle’s experiences on the *Mayumba* on the African coast, with its vivid descriptions of life in a small tropical outpost. But along with his evocations of the delicious pepper-pot stews, the fragrant and beautiful orchids, and the melodious sounds of a tropical rainstorm, Doyle induces shivers with the gruesome depredations of a terrifying phantom that silently crushes its victims to death and vanishes without a trace. Despite the natives’ tales of Voodoo and malignant spirits, the phantom is ultimately revealed as an enormous python washed down from up-country in a recent flood.

Rational explanations are all well and good, and they’re certainly the only kind that Holmes will accept. But the experience of sailing on a 19th century ocean vessel, especially on a long trip in an extreme environment like the Arctic, must incline a man of artistic temperament to see the supernatural and mysterious on all sides of his fragile, isolated ship. “The Captain of the *Polestar*,” one of Doyle’s most haunting stories, was published in 1883, not long after his return from his ocean adventures. The narrative is a fictional extract from the journal of a young medical student who has signed on as ship’s surgeon on an Arctic whaler, and it shows how deep an impression the Arctic experience made on the young Doyle. His description of being icebound is one of the most vivid in polar literature:

“My fears have been confirmed, and the thin strip of blue water has disappeared from the southward. Nothing but the great motionless ice-fields around us, with their weird hummocks and fantastic pinnacles. There is a deathly silence over their wide expanse which is horrible. No lapping of the waves now, no cries of seagulls or straining of sails, but one deep universal silence.”

Doyle's alter ego in the story, John McAlister Ray, starts out very much like Holmes, unwilling to accept anything but a natural explanation for the distinctly unnatural events that keep occurring around the ship. Locked into the ice near the end of a long voyage, with supplies running low, uncertain when (or whether) they will get back to port, the sailors are becoming more and more alarmed by noises that sound “sometimes like a bairn crying and sometimes like a wench in pain.” The stolid old harpooner swears that he's “never heard seal, old or young, make a sound like that.” Meanwhile, a strange white figure that might or might not be human flits about on the ice, luring sailors to chase after it before disappearing. The captain, who should be using his influence to discourage the superstitions of the crew, instead seems to be the most profoundly affected by the apparitions, to the point that young Ray decides the ship is being commanded by a madman and declares that “I sometimes think I am the only really sane man aboard the vessel.”

Soon Ray is forced to abandon his cherished skepticism as he himself begins hearing the terrifying noises, while the captain's behavior becomes ever more erratic. At last, as Ray watches on deck on a moonlit night, the captain leaps onto the ice and dashes off in pursuit of a wraith-like white figure, which flees before him forever out of reach until both vanish in the distance. When the search party finally finds the captain's body the next day with outstretched arms and a bright smile on his face, they see the ice crystals from his jacket whisk up in the breeze, dance about him for a moment, seem to bend over him one last time, and then race off in the direction of the sea. Though Ray refuses to admit that he sees anything more than drifting snow, his companions insist that the shape of a woman stooped over the corpse and kissed it before hurrying away across the ice. The inference is clear that the captain has been pursuing the ghost of his lost beloved, and has at last been reunited with her.

Even after all he has experienced, Ray still has a hard time acknowledging the supernatural, imploring his readers to remember that “I do not write from conjecture or hearsay, but that I, a sane and educated man, am describing accurately what actually occurred before my very eyes. My inferences are my own, but I shall be answerable for the facts.” Holmes himself could not have said it better.

Why did Doyle, who wrote so movingly about the sea, never set a Holmes story aboard ship? Holmes must have made at least a few ocean voyages, if only to get to America and back in pursuit of German spies in “His Last Bow.” And yet, even though many Holmes stories have plot points that depend on some aspect of sea travel, we never get to see Holmes and Watson in the closed world of a trans-Atlantic steamer in mid-ocean, tracking down clues, making deductions, and apprehending the villain far from the support of Scotland Yard or any local constabulary. Was the deck of a ship simply too far from his beloved London for Holmes to want to exercise his powers there? Or was Doyle reluctant to place Holmes, about whom he had such mixed feelings, in the midst of settings that affected him so powerfully in his youth? Whatever the reason, we Sherlockians can still have fun imagining our own versions of Holmes and Watson at sea, stalking the bad guys under a full moon on a Victorian steamer as it sails into a never-ending sunset.