



Arthur Conan Doyle Encyclopedia

The Return of Sherlock Holmes Adventure XXXIII -- The Adventure of Black Peter

SUMMARY (Diogenes Club)

The senior Neligan was a principal partner in a bank which was in deep financial trouble. In an honest effort to save the bank and its investors, he set off in his light yacht for Norway to invest them there. In the stormy September gales of the North Sea, his light boat floundered and he was the sole survivor. He managed to retain the securities in a tin box.

Neligan was picked up by the Sea Unicorn which was returning from a whaling expedition in the Arctic. Carey, the captain of The Sea Unicorn, murdered Neligan for the securities and the murder was witnessed by Cairns.

Cairns found Carey years later and attempted to blackmail him in exchange for the securities. A fight ensued and Cairns pinned Carey to the wall of his cabin with a harpoon.

A few months prior to his murder, Carey sold some of the securities. Neligan, Jr., who had kept a close watch on the market since his father's disappearance, discovered that some of the securities had been sold and traced Carey as the seller. He tracked Carey down. When he arrived on the scene, Carey had just been murdered.

Neligan, Jr. returned later to obtain the securities and was captured by Holmes and Hopkins. He was charged with Carey's murder. He was a gracile young man who was totally incapable of impaling another human with a harpoon.

Holmes solves the crime and captures Cairns who confesses but claims self-defense.



Young Neligan is released and the unsold securities returned to him. Cairns fate is unknown but it is inferred that his claim of self-defense was legitimate.

Holmes and Watson plan to leave soon on a tour of Norway.

SUMMARY (ACD Encyclopedia)

Captain Peter Carey, a former whale fisher nicknamed "Black Peter" by his crew because of his dark moods, was living in Forest Row with the wife and daughter he often abused when he was drunk. He's been murdered in the shed he built in his garden, where he used to sleep, his corpse pierced in the chest by a harpoon.

Stanley Hopkins, a young police inspector who admires Holmes, contacts the detective because he's at his wit's end on this case. All he found to go on is two rum glasses, a sealskin tobacco pouch with the initials P.C. inside (although the captain rarely smoked), and a bloodstained notebook containing figures in front of the initials JHN.

As the three men inspect the crime scene, Holmes notices the door has been unsuccessfully tampered with, so they decide to lie in ambush that night, presuming the thief will come back with better tools. And indeed, they catch a young man who breaks in to look at an account book. His name is John Hopley Neligan and he's the son of a long-missing, failed banker. His father had sailed to Norway on a little yacht with a box of securities and never returned. However, some of those securities reappeared on the London market few months ago, sold by Carey. Neligan came to ask for explanations, but claims Carey was dead upon his arrival. Hopkins, unconvinced, arrests Neligan for the murder.

Holmes, realizing that the frail young man couldn't have committed a murder requiring such physical strength, goes back to London and, under the name of Captain Basil, sends a telegram to recruit sailors. Three men show at his house and among them, Holmes handcuffs Patrick Cairns, a harpooner, who immediately confesses to the murder. In 1883, he saw Carey kill the banker Neligan and steal the securities. Shortly thereafter, the captain retired and Cairns started to search for him to claim his share. He met him in the shed, but the discussion turned to fight and, picking up the harpoon hanging on the wall, he impaled Carey with it.

SUMMARY (Wikipedia)

Forest Row in the Weald is the scene of a harpoon murder, and a young police inspector, Stanley Hopkins, asks Holmes, whom he admires, for help. Holmes has already determined that it would take a great deal of strength and skill to run a man through with a harpoon and embed it in the wall behind him.

Peter Carey, the 50-year-old victim and former master of the Sea Unicorn of Dundee, who lived with his wife and daughter, had a reputation for being violent. Carey did not sleep in the family house, but in a small cottage that he built some distance from the house, whose interior he had decorated to look like a sailor's cabin on a ship. This is where he was found harpooned. Hopkins could find no footprints or other physical evidence. However, a tobacco pouch made of sealskin and with the initials "P.C." was found at the scene, which was full of strong ship's tobacco. This is rather unusual, as Peter Carey—or "Black Peter" as people called him—seldom smoked. Indeed, Hopkins found no pipe in the cabin. Carey was found fully dressed, suggesting that he was expecting a visitor, and there was some rum laid out along with two dirty glasses. There were brandy and whisky, too, but neither had been touched. There was also a knife in its sheath at Carey's feet; Mrs. Carey has identified it as her husband's. A little notebook was also found at the scene. It contains the initials J. H. N. and the year 1883. It also says C. P. R. on the second page, which Holmes reckons stands for Canadian Pacific Railway. The first set of initials is likely a stockbroker's, as the little book is full of what appears to be stock exchange information.

Holmes decides to accompany Hopkins to Forest Row, and upon arrival, Hopkins observes that someone has tried to break into Carey's cabin, but failed. After examining the inside of the cabin, Holmes deduces from the lack of dust that something has been taken from a shelf, even though the burglar did not get in. The stolen item was a book, or possibly a box. Holmes believes that the burglar will likely try again, this time bringing a more useful tool for the job. So, Holmes, Dr. Watson, and Hopkins all lie in wait for the burglar that night, and they are not disappointed. Along he comes, he breaks into the cabin, and goes through one of Carey's old logbooks, cursing when he finds that the information that he wants is missing, having been torn out of the book. As he is leaving the cabin, Hopkins moves in and arrests him.

He is John Hopley Neligan—which matches the initials in the notebook—the son of a long-vanished, failed banker. He claims he was looking at Carey's logs to test a theory of his. His father disappeared with a box full of securities after his bank failed. He took them on a yacht bound for Norway. He believes that his father's boat may have been driven north on the North Sea by bad weather, and met the Sea Unicorn, captained by Carey. He believes that Carey knew something about his father's disappearance, and that possibly his father was murdered by the man who has now himself become a murder victim as he has traced some of his father's long lost securities back to Carey. Hopkins takes Neligan off to the station, even though Neligan swears that he has nothing to do with the murder. Holmes believes this to be true, because Neligan is a slight, anemic thin man, hardly capable of running a man through with a harpoon.

Holmes saves Neligan from the noose by finding the true killer in a most unusual way. He advertises for a harpooner, posing as a sea captain named Basil. He gets three applicants at 221B Baker Street for the job,

and one of them is indeed Peter Carey's killer, as confirmed by his name, Patrick Cairns, and the fact that Holmes had established that he was once Carey's shipmate. Holmes also felt sure that a murderer would want to leave the country for a while. Holmes handcuffs the unaware Cairns after which Cairns confesses. While he freely admits to killing Carey, he furiously denies that it was murder, claiming self-defence. He was actually at Carey's cabin to extort hush money from him. Neligan's father had indeed come aboard the Sea Unicorn with his tin box of securities, and Carey had murdered him by throwing him overboard while he believed no-one was looking, though Cairns had witnessed the event. While Carey initially had agreed to the payoff, when Cairns came to collect, things were different. The two drank together, during which Carey's mood darkened. When Carey reached for his knife, which Cairns viewed as a threat, he took action. Cairns then examined the box of securities, but finding them impossible for him to sell, escaped, leaving his tobacco pouch on the table.

The rum was another clue. Holmes was sure that it, and the fact that the brandy and whiskey had been left alone, were sure signs that the killer was a seaman. Neligan is released and the securities returned to him, although the ones that Carey sold cannot be recovered.