

THE MYSTERY OF THE MARIE CELESTE

A Solution Offered Nearly Forty Years After the Ship Was Found Crewless Under Full Sail.

AMONG all the tales of the sea, in fact or fiction, the mystery of the Marie Celeste remains unique. The main facts of the case, often repeated, have been speculated upon for forty years without reaching a satisfactory solution. It will be recalled that the ship was found off the Azores in 1872 deserted by all her crew and apparently in perfect condition. All that is known of this baffling case may be quickly told.

She had sailed from New York on Nov. 7, commanded by Capt. Benjamin S. Briggs. The Captain's wife and one small child were aboard.

The ship carried a cargo of petroleum, and this was found to be intact when the deserted brig was boarded. She was only twenty-eight days out of New York when discovered, indicating that her voyage across the Atlantic had been prosperous.

The obvious theory that the ship had been deserted in a storm would not seem tenable because the rigging did not indicate rough weather, and everything about the boat was found to be remarkably ship-shape. In the cabin a sewing machine, used by the Captain's wife, was found with a piece of sewing still held beneath the needle.

The toys which the Captain's child had been playing with were scattered about the floor. The Captain's gold watch hung beside the cabin clock.

Had there been mutiny the appearance of the cabin would have been different. A careful examination of the vessel failed to reveal any blood stains or signs of violence of any kind, so that the theory of pirates could not be sustained.

Although the early history of the Marie Celeste has been so widely published and discussed the second chapter of her remarkable history, which is no less dramatic, is almost unknown. On a subsequent trip the ship was deliberately loaded with a variety of shoddy merchandise, billed at exaggerated prices, and deliberately run ashore and wrecked in the Caribbean Sea in order to collect the insurance.

This remarkable sea mystery was discovered and proved in court by Arthur N. Putman, a New York Appraiser, who is a veritable Sherlock Holmes in ferretting out sea mysteries. Mr. Putman conceived his suspicions from some letters

relative to the insurance which passed through his hands.

Although the case was so rare as to seem improbable, Mr. Putman made the trip to the scene of the alleged shipwreck under very trying circumstances, donned a diving outfit, and explored the wreck himself, and secured valuable evidence by interviewing natives and local officials in this remote section who had been in any way connected with the crime. From these investigations Mr. Putman prepared his case, returned to New York, and started a search for the original crew, then widely scattered. Through indefatigable efforts the Captain and crew were finally rounded up and tried.

It was a clear case of barratry, as developed in the trial. The Marie Celeste had been loaded with a remarkable variety of worthless stores. There were many barrels of fish spoiled long past eating. There were cases of wine which had been long discarded.

The ship was piled up on a reef some distance off shore on a perfectly clear day, with the sea unusually calm. It was shown in court that the mate, who was at the wheel, reported to the Captain several times that they were off their course. The Captain told him to obey orders and keep quiet.

When the ship finally struck the Captain ordered the crew to cut away the mast, to lend dramatic effect to the shipwreck story, while grog was handed out freely to all on board. Thereupon the crew quietly rowed ashore and reported the loss to the authorities.

The scene of the shipwreck was well chosen. It was extremely remote, and necessitated a journey by horseback of several days from the nearest port. Mr. Putman made the trip, nevertheless, in running down his clues, and by very skillful detective as well as legal work perfected his case. In the end the jury disagreed because one man could not see his way to imposing the death sentence upon the Captain.

As to the original mystery of the Marie Celeste, no one is perhaps better prepared than Mr. Putman, from his long experience and ingenuity in seafaring matters, to draw conclusions from this very baffling evidence.

He discards the theory of mutiny, pi-

rates, or storm. He lays special stress upon the fact that a single boat was missing from the deserted boat, and this was one which the Captain and crew would probably have used in abandoning the boat. Mr. Putman has discovered that the rope of this boat was cut, not untied, indicating that when the boat was abandoned it was done with the greatest possible haste.

Still another bit of evidence generally overlooked is that the log of the ship several times reports ominous rumblings and small explosions from the hold. Mr. Putman considers the testimony complete.

He concludes that the crew had been terrified by a series of small explosions in the petroleum cargo. Such a cargo naturally gives off explosive gas, and

such rumblings and explosions are not uncommon. This terror is indicated in the entries in the ship's log.

It is supposed that one day, probably in good weather, there was an especially violent explosion. A sailor may have gone below with a light or a burning cigar and set off the accumulated fumes.

This explosion was violent enough to blow off the covering of the hatch, which was found in an unusual position. So great was the terror of the Captain and his crew that they at once piled into the lifeboat, cut the rope and put to sea