

'Somewhere in Norway'

An essay by Chris Redmond, reprinted from *The Sherlock Holmes Review*, 1989

The puzzle in "Black Peter" is in its last sentence. "If you want me for the trial," Sherlock Holmes tell Anthony Hopkins, "my address will be in Norway – I'll send particulars later." He does not say why he is going to Norway, and if Hopkins did ask the reason, the question, as well as its answer has been excised from the end of Watson's narrative.

Jack Tracy, in his *Encyclopaedia Sherlockiana*, casually states that Holmes and Watson "followed up the Carey case" in Norway: that is, he implies that in spite of the arrest of Patrick Cairns, and the return to John Hopley Neligan of most of the missing securities, some part of the investigation was not complete in Holmes's mind. That does seem a natural inference from the reference to Norway at the end of this, the only Canonical case in which Norway figures at all. (Neligan's father, the absconding banker, was on his way to Norway when he went adrift and was rescued, then murdered, by Carey.) Still, the natural inference is not always the correct one, as followers of Holmes's methods will have learned.

Here is the difficulty. When Holmes announces that he is off to Norway, the case has been solved amid mutual congratulations. The loose ends which remain are of a legal or financial nature, having to do with the prosecution of Cairns and the winding up on the Dawson and Neligan bankruptcy. Such matters are unlikely to be of any interest to Holmes. Furthermore, they have nothing to do with Norway. Possible witnesses to the skullduggery aboard the Sea Unicorn are based in Dundee, not in Norway. Dawson and Neligan conducted its affairs in Cornwall, and presumably, London. The securities were registered in South America and (if CPR does stand for Canadian Pacific Railway) Canada. No one involved with the case ever so much as set foot in Norway, with the possible exception of Nelligan's original crew, who can have no light to shed on any part of the business. In any case no part of the business stands unexplained, unless it is the whereabouts of the pages missing from the logs of the Sea Unicorn; and if Cary tore those out he must have burnt them at once.

And yet Holmes is setting out for Norway. Nor is he going there by way of vacation, as Arthur Conan Doyle did in the same decade, (becoming so enamoured of recreational skiing that he later introduced the sport to Switzerland, or so the story goes.) Holmes did not take vacations, and there is no reason to think that he was making the sort of convalescent trip, on Watson's orders, that is mentioned once or twice in other tales. It is tempting to conclude that some other case is involved - that, stretching the limits of coincidence, Holmes's two cases with Norwegian connections occupied him in the same week. If there was such a case, we have no clue of its nature; it was not the affair in which his client was the King of Scandinavia, which had taken place several years before. In any case, it would have drawn him to Sweden, (set of the government), rather than Norway.

An active imagination can conceive other reasons for the trip; Did Holmes, indeed, propose to take up Arctic whaling, (as, again, Doyle had done)? Did he intend to address the Royal Norwegian Geographical Society under the name of "Sigerson"? Perhaps he actually gave his address as "Norwood," an unexciting suburb of London, and Watson's handwriting betrayed him as usual. Was he off to study the Sign of the Fjord?

Drawing the line somewhere, we return to the affair of Peter Carey, and to an incident whose absence in the tale strikes the reader with dog-in-the-nighttime clarity. This story should end not with the confession of Peter Cairns, but with Holmes's acquittal and absolution – the verdict he renders in the cases of Leon Sterndale, Jack Croker, and other such heroic killers. For all the hideous picture we are given of Carey's life, both in his seafaring years and since retirement, we must conclude that Holmes does not believe that he deserved to die, and hence Holmes does nothing to save his killer from justice. Can it be that, after all, the harpooning of the savage whaler was worse than he deserved?

Carey's vices were many, but his crimes, (in a day when spouse abuse was no crime), were two: theft of some of the Neligan securities, and murder of Neligan himself. So Cairns says, so Hopkins believes, so also Holmes professes to believe. But Cairns himself admits that there is no other witness to the murder, and the evidence about the securities is highly circumstantial: The papers seem to have been almost as anonymous as banknotes. We are, as usual, in deep waters - to be precise, the deep waters of the North Sea, somewhere between Dundee and Bergen, where an absconding banker met a hot-tempered whaler over a tin box worth a million pounds .

What if Neligan still lives? What if the securities that came into Carey's possession were not the proceeds of theft, but a bribe from Neligan in exchange for silence? What if Cairns were attempting to blackmail his former captain, not over murder, but over his involvement in the banking scandal? And, what if the bulk of those CPR, Argentine and Costa Rican securities came, comfortably in Neligan's custody, to the nearest shore to where the Sea Unicorn picked him up: that is, to the rocky shore of Norway?

Then, indeed, there might be an excellent reason for Holmes to visit Norway. He might be able to move freely in that country in the guise of Sigerson, without attracting the official attention that might be given to inquisitive telegrams from a British detective – although, to be sure, it would be a challenge to pass off Watson as anything but an Englishman. He might be able to trace Neligan, perhaps recovering the securities, (or such that remained unspent a dozen years later), and thus restoring the fortunes of half the county families of Cornwall. (Whether the Tregennis family derived any benefit from that restoration, and so developed a gratitude which led Holmes to choose Poldhu Bay for his convalescence two years later, we cannot know.)

Finally, two questions remain. If Holmes knew, or strongly suspected, that Neligan and some of his securities were yet to be found, why did he not tell Hopkins? If he was not prepared to tell Hopkins, why did he hint at the idea by mentioning Norway as his destination? Perhaps the answer to both is to be found in Hopkins's own admission that "I am the pupil and you are the master." It is as unwise to tell one's pupils everything as it is to leave them entirely in the dark. For the promising Hopkins, Holmes must have thought, a hint will be enough – as, in the end, it has been enough for us.