

Mystery on the High Seas

You have probably heard of the Titanic, but do you know about the Mary Celeste? Forty years before the Titanic's fateful voyage, another ship met tragedy on the high seas. While we know that an iceberg caused the sinking of the Titanic, we do not know what happened aboard the Mary Celeste. It's a mystery from history.

The Mary Celeste set sail from New York City in November, 1872. There were ten people on board. When she was found later that winter by Captain Morehouse and the crew of his ship, the Dei Gratia, all the people were gone.

There was no sign of damage to the Mary Celeste. Items belonging to the passengers were still on board and in good condition. There were toys on the floor, sheet music on the pipe organ, and clothing hanging up ready to be worn. It looked as though the passengers had simply vanished right in the middle of their daily activities.

While many things were left aboard, some things were missing. The ship's register, navigation book, and tools for sailing were gone. The life boat was gone. There were still valuables on board, such as the captain's wife's jewelry. There was plenty of food and water, enough to last another six months. So what made the people abandon ship?

There are a number of theories, or ideas, of what happened to the crew of the Mary Celeste. Some people believe that the ship was taken over by pirates. But there was no damage to the ship or signs of a fight. And many valuables remained on the ship. Other people believe that the crew became drunk or scared and turned on the captain. But again, the clues don't add up. Why wouldn't the crew take over the ship itself?

Another set of theories has to do with perils in the water – whirlpools, icebergs, and sea monsters. Could the kraken have eaten the crew? Somehow it doesn't seem likely.

A final theory is that Captain Morehouse and his crew had something to do with the abandoned ship. They were the only eye-witnesses and could possibly have conspired with the captain of the Mary Celeste to attract money and attention. All accounts of the captains are positive, however, so it's hard to believe that they could hatch such a plan.

The fate of the Mary Celeste was big news at the time. The newspapers printed all kinds of information about the incident, some true and some made up. The only people who really knew what happened were the ten passengers themselves. And they were never found.



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NAME: _____ DATE: _____

1. What was the name of the boat that found the abandoned ship?
(Literal)
 - a. The Mary Celeste
 - b. The Morehouse
 - c. The Dei Gratia
 - d. The Kracken

2. Which items below were *not* left behind on the boat? (Literal)
 - a. Toys
 - b. Jewelry
 - c. Food and Water
 - d. Navigation Book and Register

3. Which clue makes it unlikely that the ship encountered bad weather?
(Inferential)
 - a. The ship was undamaged.
 - b. Valuables were left behind.
 - c. There was sheet music on the pipe organ.
 - d. The life boat was missing.

4. Why might newspapers at that time print details of the story that were untrue? (Inferential)
 - a. To make people interested in krakens
 - b. To sell more papers
 - c. To warn people not to go on the Titanic
 - d. To frame Captain Morehouse

Instructions for teachers:

These questions can be used to assess understanding of the reading passage.

The item in bold is the correct answer for each question.

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