



## The Adventure of Black Peter

Simplified for CEFR B1 Readers

### Part 1: The Harpoon

I have never seen my friend Sherlock Holmes in better form than in the year 1895. His fame had brought him many clients — some of them among the most distinguished people in England. Yet Holmes, like all true artists, cared nothing for money or status. He would ignore the problems of powerful lords if they bored him, and spend weeks on the case of an ordinary person whose situation fired his imagination.

Among that year's remarkable cases was the mystery surrounding the death of Captain Peter Carey. No account of Holmes's work would be complete without it.

One morning in July, Holmes had been absent from our Baker Street flat so frequently that I knew he was deep in an investigation. Several rough-looking men had come asking for a "Captain Basil" — which told me Holmes was working in one of his many disguises, as he sometimes did when investigating dangerous people in the rougher parts of London.

I was eating breakfast alone when Holmes came in carrying a large harpoon — the long, barbed weapon that whalers throw to catch whales.

"Good gracious, Holmes! You haven't been walking through London with that thing?"

"I drove to a butcher's shop in Allardyce Street," he said cheerfully, "and spent the morning stabbing a pig's carcass hanging from a ceiling hook. I wanted to know how much force is needed to drive a harpoon through a body. I could not do it with a single blow, even with my full strength."

Shortly after, Inspector Stanley Hopkins arrived from Scotland Yard — London's famous police headquarters. He was a sharp, alert young man of about thirty, with the upright posture of someone used to wearing a police uniform. Holmes thought well of him, as Hopkins greatly admired Holmes's scientific methods of detection. But that morning, Hopkins sat down with a look of total dejection.

"Failure, Mr. Holmes. Absolute failure. It's my first big case and I am at my wits' end."

## Part 2: Black Peter Carey

Hopkins gave us the details. Captain Peter Carey was fifty years old, born in 1845. He had been one of the most daring and successful seal and whale hunters of his generation, sailing from the Scottish port city of Dundee. He captained the steam sealer *Sea Unicorn* and made several profitable voyages before retiring in 1884. He eventually settled in a quiet place called Woodman's Lee, near Forest Row in the county of Sussex in southern England.

In ordinary life, Carey was a grim, silent Puritan — at least when he was sober. When he drank, which was often, he became a completely different and terrifying person. His household — his wife, his twenty-year-old daughter, and two servants — lived in fear of his violent rages. He had been taken to court once for attacking the local vicar, the Church of England priest who had come to speak to him about his behaviour. His neighbours loathed and avoided him. The village folk knew him as "Black Peter" — a name given not only for his dark complexion and great black beard, but for the violent moods that made him so feared.

Beside his main house, Carey had built a small wooden cabin where he slept alone every night. He kept the key in his own pocket at all times, made his own bed, and allowed no one else inside. The windows were covered by curtains and never opened. Local people would sometimes see the light burning there late at night and wonder what Black Peter was doing in his private retreat.

One Wednesday night, Carey's daughter heard a terrible scream from the direction of the cabin. But her father often shouted and roared when drunk, so no one investigated. The next morning, the hut door was found open. Such was the terror the man inspired that it was midday before anyone dared to look inside.

What they found sent them running to the village. Captain Carey was dead. A steel harpoon had been driven through his broad chest and deep into the wooden wall behind him, pinning him like an insect mounted on a board. Two dirty glasses and a bottle of rum — the strong spirit preferred by sailors — sat on the table. Near the door lay a tobacco pouch made of sealskin, with the initials "P.C." stamped inside and some coarse ship's tobacco remaining in it.

Hopkins had taken over the case within an hour of the discovery.

### **Part 3: The Notebook**

Holmes had already read the inquest report carefully. At the inquest — the formal British legal inquiry held to establish the cause of an unexplained death — evidence had been gathered, but no one had been charged.

Holmes pressed Hopkins on the tobacco pouch. "He kept no pipe, yet he had tobacco. And it was sealskin — like the pouches men make from their own catches on the Arctic seas."

Hopkins then produced a more dramatic clue: a worn, discoloured notebook found on the floor, with the initials "J.H.N." on the first page and the year "1883." Inside were columns of numbers, headed "C.P.R.," "Argentine," "Costa Rica," and "San Paulo."

"I took these to be stock market securities," said Hopkins. "I thought 'C.P.R.' might be a broker's name."

"Try the Canadian Pacific Railway," said Holmes quietly.

Hopkins struck his knee in frustration. "Of course! So 'J.H.N.' must be the investor — and possibly the murderer. The motive could be robbery."

Holmes agreed to travel to Sussex and see the crime scene.

### **Part 4: Woodman's Lee**

We took the train and then a carriage through the remains of the ancient Weald — the great forest that once stretched across Sussex and Kent and had sheltered the Anglo-Saxons against invaders for centuries. Much of it had been cleared long ago to fuel England's early iron furnaces, though the tall trees that remained were beautiful.

At Woodman's Lee, Hopkins introduced us to Carey's widow — a gaunt, grey-haired woman with frightened eyes, worn down by years of cruelty. Her daughter stood beside her, pale but defiant, and said plainly that she was glad her father was dead. It was, as Holmes later remarked, a household that made one feel relieved to step back into the sunlight.

At the cabin, Hopkins noticed fresh scratches around the lock and window frame. Someone had tried to break in very recently.

"They'll come back tonight," said Holmes. "Let us be here waiting for them."

We spent the afternoon walking in the Sussex woods while Holmes thought. He examined the cabin interior carefully for two hours, but found little of note except a gap on a dusty shelf where something — a book or a box — had recently been removed.

### **Part 5: The Night Visitor**

After eleven o'clock that night, the three of us crouched silently among the bushes near the cabin window in the rain and darkness. There was something both tense and strangely thrilling

about waiting there in the English countryside, like hunters at a water hole, uncertain what creature might emerge from the dark.

Just after midnight, a figure crept along the path. He worked the door lock open with a penknife and slipped inside. He lit a candle — electricity was still not common in rural England at this time — and began searching urgently through the captain's old logbooks, the daily journals that all sea captains were required to keep. He found the right year, turned to August, then slammed the book shut with obvious fury: the relevant pages had been torn out.

As he turned to leave, Hopkins seized him by the collar.

The young man was perhaps twenty years old, slight and pale, dressed in a Norfolk jacket — the loose, belted tweed jacket fashionable for country pursuits among English gentlemen of the period. He was shaking with fear.

His name was John Hopley Neligan.

### Part 6: The Neligan Story

Once Neligan had calmed himself, he told us everything.

His father had been a partner in a West Country banking firm called Dawson and Neligan. When the bank collapsed, it ruined dozens of wealthy families across Cornwall — the county at the far southwestern tip of England — who had trusted them with their savings. The official account was that the elder Neligan had stolen the bank's securities — financial documents representing investments worth a large sum — and fled.

The truth, his son insisted, was different. His father had genuinely believed that if he could reach a safe place and gradually convert the securities into cash, he could repay every creditor. He had sailed for Norway in his private yacht just before a warrant was issued for his arrest. He left his family a list of the securities he was taking, swore he would return with his honour restored — and was never heard from again. The yacht and everything aboard it, the family assumed, had gone to the bottom of the sea in a storm.

Then, some time ago, a trusted family friend who worked in finance noticed that some of those very securities had reappeared on the London market. After months of careful investigation, young Neligan had traced the sales back to Captain Peter Carey.

He had come to Sussex to confront Carey directly. But Carey was murdered before Neligan could speak to him. Reading the inquest report, Neligan noticed that Carey's cabin contained the logbooks of the *Sea Unicorn*. He came hoping to find the entry for August 1883 — to discover whether the *Sea Unicorn* had encountered his father's yacht, which the autumn storms of that year might easily have blown far off course, northward into Arctic waters. Instead, he found the pages torn out.

When Hopkins showed him the notebook with his initials and a bloodstain on the cover, Neligan's composure collapsed entirely. Hopkins arrested him on suspicion of murder.

## Part 7: Holmes Is Unsatisfied

On the morning train back to London, Holmes was thoughtful.

"Hopkins is pleased with himself," he said. "He shouldn't be. His theory has a fatal weakness. Young Neligan is thin and weak. I spent an entire morning practising with a harpoon on a butcher's carcass and could not drive it through with one blow. The wound that killed Carey required tremendous force — the kind that comes from years of physical labour at sea. Neligan has never wielded a harpoon in his life. The real killer is someone far more powerful."

Back at Baker Street, a letter was waiting. Holmes smiled at it and immediately dictated two telegrams — the rapid written messages transmitted by wire that were, in the 1890s, the fastest way to communicate across a city. One went to a shipping agent at Ratcliff Highway in the East End of London, where the docks and maritime businesses were concentrated: *Send three men tomorrow morning at ten.* The other was to Hopkins: *Come to breakfast at nine-thirty. Important.*

## Part 8: The Real Killer

Hopkins arrived the next morning confident in his solution, but Holmes dismantled it systematically. The harpoon wound, the rum on the table, the sealskin tobacco pouch with coarse sailor's tobacco — all pointed to a professional seaman, specifically a whaler from Dundee. The initials "P.C." on the pouch were a coincidence: they were not Peter Carey's initials at all, since Carey barely smoked and kept no pipe.

Holmes explained that he had spent three days sending telegrams to Dundee to obtain the crew list of the *Sea Unicorn* for 1883. He then placed job advertisements in the East End for harpooners willing to serve on an Arctic expedition under "Captain Basil." He expected the killer — likely now unemployed and stranded in London — to apply.

Three men arrived at Baker Street that morning. The first two were harmless. The third was a man of extraordinary physical presence: a broad, powerful figure with a tangled beard and fierce dark eyes. His name was Patrick Cairns. He had been a harpooner on twenty-six voyages, all from Dundee.

As Cairns leaned forward to sign the false contract, Holmes snapped handcuffs onto his wrists. What followed was a brief but violent struggle — Cairns was enormously strong — until Watson pressed a revolver to his temple and he went still.

## Part 9: Patrick Cairns Speaks

Cairns told his story without self-pity.

In August 1883, he was spare harpooner on the *Sea Unicorn* under Captain Carey. Returning home through bad weather south of the Arctic ice pack, the ship came across a small yacht that had been blown far north by a week of southerly gales. Only one man remained aboard — the crew had abandoned ship and headed for the Norwegian coast in a small dinghy, and were probably drowned.

The sole survivor came aboard. He spoke at length with Captain Carey in private and brought only one possession: a tin box. No one ever learned his name. On the second night, he disappeared. The official story was that he had fallen overboard in the rough weather.

But Cairns had seen the truth with his own eyes. In the middle watch of a dark night — while the rest of the crew slept — Captain Carey had thrown the man over the side into the sea, two days before they sighted the Shetland Lights on the far northern coast of Scotland.

Cairns said nothing and waited. He believed Carey had committed murder for the sake of whatever was in the tin box. Years later, having tracked Carey down through a mutual acquaintance, Cairns went to Sussex to demand money for his silence. The first evening went smoothly enough. But when he returned two nights later, Carey was drunk and in a vicious temper. They drank together. Carey's mood grew darker. Then Carey lunged at him with a large clasp knife.

Cairns had already noticed the harpoon on the wall. He grabbed it and drove it through Carey before Carey's blade could leave its sheath.

"I killed him, yes," said Cairns. "But he was coming at me with a knife. Call it what you like."

He had taken the tin box, but found it contained nothing but documents he couldn't sell. He found himself stranded in London with no money, and went looking for work — which led him directly into Holmes's trap.

### **Part 10: Resolution**

"Your lesson, Hopkins," said Holmes, not unkindly, "is never to stop looking for the alternative. You were so focused on Neligan that you never seriously considered anyone else."

He instructed Hopkins to release young Neligan immediately and to apologise to him. The tin box was rightfully Neligan's property. Unfortunately, the securities that Carey had already sold were gone forever.

"As for the trial," Holmes added with characteristic lightness, "Watson and I will be somewhere in Norway. I'll send you our address."

*The Adventure of Black Peter was written by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle and first published in 1904 in The Strand Magazine. The story is set in 1895 during the reign of Queen Victoria, whose long rule (1837–1901) gave its name to the Victorian era. Scotland Yard, The Strand Magazine, and Baker Street were all real London landmarks; Holmes himself, of course, was not.*