

□ **READING CHALLENGE**

# The Ghost Ship Mary Celeste

*A ship found sailing alone in the Atlantic with no crew, warm food on the table, and no explanation*

<b>Level</b>	B1 — Intermediate
<b>Age Group</b>	Teens (11-16)
<b>Topic</b>	True Stories
<b>Duration</b>	~15-20 minutes
<b>Skill</b>	Reading
<b>Vocabulary</b>	15 words
<b>Quiz</b>	5 questions

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On the afternoon of 4 December 1872, a British-Canadian ship called the Dei Gratia was sailing across the Atlantic Ocean, about 600 miles west of Portugal. The crew noticed another ship in the distance, moving strangely. It was drifting slowly, its sails partly set but damaged, and there was no one visible on deck. The helmsman watched through his telescope and felt uneasy. A ship sailing without anyone steering it was never a good sign. Captain David Morehouse ordered his men to approach the mysterious **vessel**. What they found when they climbed aboard would become one of the greatest unsolved mysteries in maritime history.

## An Empty Ship

The ship was the Mary Celeste, an American merchant brigantine that had left New York City on 7 November 1872, bound for Genoa, Italy. On board had been Captain Benjamin Briggs, his wife Sarah, their two-year-old daughter Sophia, and a crew of seven sailors — ten people in total. The Mary Celeste was carrying a **cargo** of 1,701 barrels of industrial alcohol, worth a considerable sum of money. But when the Dei Gratia crew boarded her, every single person had vanished.

The strange thing was that the ship itself was in reasonable condition. The **hull** was sound, and there were no signs of a violent struggle. The cargo was mostly **intact** — only nine of the 1,701 barrels were empty. Personal belongings of the captain and crew were still in their cabins. Captain Briggs's navigational instruments, some maps, and the ship's papers were missing, but clothing, boots, pipes, and even a small harmonium belonging to Mrs Briggs remained untouched. There was food and fresh water on board. The ship was still **seaworthy**. Whatever had happened, the crew had **abandoned** a perfectly good ship in the middle of the ocean.

## The Last Known Movements

The crew of the Dei Gratia searched the Mary Celeste carefully for clues. They found the ship's **logbook**, which recorded the daily position and weather conditions during the voyage. The last entry was dated 25 November 1872, nine days before the ship was found. At that point, the Mary Celeste had been near the island of Santa Maria in the Azores, a group of Portuguese islands in the mid-Atlantic. But the ship was discovered about 400 miles east of that position, meaning it had sailed on by itself for over a week with no one on board.

The ship's only lifeboat was missing, which suggested that the crew had deliberately left the ship rather than being swept overboard by a wave. A frayed rope was found trailing behind the Mary Celeste, as though a small boat had been tied to it and had eventually broken free. The main **navigation** instruments — the chronometer, sextant, and the ship's register — were gone too, taken by whoever had left. This was important: sailors would only take navigation equipment if they expected to travel some distance in a lifeboat. But why would an experienced captain like Briggs abandon a seaworthy ship?

## The Salvage Hearing in Gibraltar

Captain Morehouse and a small crew sailed the Mary Celeste to Gibraltar, where they filed for **salvage** rights. Under maritime law, anyone who rescued an abandoned ship at sea could claim a share of the ship's value and its cargo. But the British authorities in Gibraltar were suspicious. Frederick Solly Flood, the Attorney General of Gibraltar, was convinced that something criminal had taken place.

Flood ordered a thorough inspection of the Mary Celeste. Investigators found what appeared to be bloodstains on the deck and on a sword found in Captain Briggs's cabin. Flood suspected **foul play** — perhaps the crew had murdered the captain and his family, or perhaps Captain Morehouse and Captain Briggs had secretly planned an insurance fraud together. The two captains were known to be acquaintances; they had even dined together in New York shortly before both ships departed.

However, when the stains were analysed, scientists could not confirm that they were blood. The sword showed no evidence of violence. During weeks of **testimony** and investigation, no evidence of a crime was found. In March 1873, the court awarded Captain Morehouse and his crew a salvage payment, but it was much smaller than expected — only about one-fifth of the ship's total value. Many historians believe the low payment reflected the court's lingering suspicion, even though nothing could be proved.

## Theories: What Happened?

For over 150 years, people have tried to explain what happened aboard the Mary Celeste. Dozens of theories have been proposed, ranging from the scientific to the absurd. The mystery has **baffled** historians, scientists, and maritime experts alike. Here are some of the most discussed explanations.

**The Alcohol Fumes Theory:** This is considered by many historians to be the most plausible explanation. The Mary Celeste was carrying 1,701 barrels of industrial alcohol. Nine barrels were found empty. Some researchers believe that fumes from leaking alcohol could have built up below deck, creating a risk of explosion. If Captain Briggs opened the cargo hatch and saw or smelled the fumes, he might have feared the ship was about to explode. In a panic, he could have ordered everyone into the lifeboat, intending to trail behind the ship on a rope until the danger passed. If the rope snapped in rough weather, the lifeboat would have drifted away, leaving the crew stranded at sea with no way to get back on board. A 2006 experiment by Dr Andrea Sella at University College London demonstrated that alcohol fumes could create a sudden pressure wave powerful enough to blow open a hatch, yet leave no burn marks — exactly matching the evidence found on the Mary Celeste.

**The Seaquake Theory:** Some scientists have suggested that an underwater earthquake near the Azores could have shaken the ship violently, causing the crew to believe it was breaking apart. In a panic, they might have abandoned ship, only to find they could not return. Seaquakes can make a ship vibrate so severely that people on board believe the hull is cracking, even when no real damage occurs.

The Waterspout Theory: A waterspout is a spinning column of water that rises from the sea into the clouds, similar to a tornado over water. Some researchers have proposed that a waterspout struck the Mary Celeste, terrifying the crew. This could explain why they left so quickly without taking many personal belongings. However, waterspouts rarely cause serious damage to large ships, and experienced sailors would likely have known this.

The Piracy Theory: Could pirates have attacked the Mary Celeste, killed or kidnapped the crew, and left the ship? This was one of the earliest theories, but it has serious problems. Nothing valuable was stolen. The cargo of alcohol, the personal belongings, and even money found in the captain's cabin were all untouched. Pirates interested in profit would not leave 1,701 barrels of alcohol behind.

The **Mutiny** Theory: Did the crew turn against Captain Briggs? This theory suggests that the sailors drank some of the industrial alcohol, became violent, and either killed the Briggs family or forced them off the ship. But industrial alcohol is poisonous — drinking it would have caused blindness or death, and there was no evidence of a struggle on board.

The **Conspiracy** Theory: Some people have suggested that Captains Briggs and Morehouse planned the whole thing together as an insurance fraud. Briggs would abandon the ship, Morehouse would “find” it, and they would share the salvage money. But this theory has a fatal flaw: Captain Briggs was known as an honest, deeply religious man with an excellent reputation. He also had his wife and baby daughter on board. No insurance fraud would be worth risking their lives at sea in a small lifeboat.

## The Afterlife of the Mary Celeste

After the salvage hearing, the Mary Celeste changed owners seventeen times over the next twelve years. The ship gained a reputation as unlucky, and many sailors refused to serve on her. Her final owner, a man named Gilman Parker, deliberately wrecked the ship on a reef near Haiti in January 1885, hoping to collect insurance money. The **speculation** was confirmed when investigators discovered he had loaded the ship with worthless cargo while insuring it for a high value. Parker was charged with fraud, but he died before the case went to trial.

The mystery of the Mary Celeste became famous largely because of a short story written by a young, unknown author named Arthur Conan Doyle. In 1884, Doyle published “J. Habakuk Jephson's Statement” in a literary magazine. The story was a fictional account of the Mary Celeste mystery, but many readers believed it was a true report. Doyle changed the ship's name slightly to “Marie Celeste” — a misspelling that has stuck in popular culture ever since. The real name was always Mary, not Marie. Doyle, of course, went on to create the world's most famous detective: Sherlock Holmes.

## What We Will Never Know

Despite 150 years of investigation, no one has ever definitively explained what happened to the ten people aboard the Mary Celeste. Captain Briggs, his wife Sarah, baby Sophia, and the seven crew members were never seen or heard from again. No bodies were ever found. No lifeboat was ever recovered. The alcohol fumes theory remains the most widely accepted explanation among historians today, but it is still just a theory — an educated guess based on the available evidence.

The Mary Celeste reminds us that the ocean keeps its secrets well. In an age before radio, satellites, and GPS, ships that got into trouble in the middle of the Atlantic had no way to call for help. Whatever frightened the crew badly enough to make them leave a safe, floating ship for a tiny lifeboat in the vast ocean, they made a decision that cost them everything. We may never know exactly what happened on that November day in 1872. But the empty ship sailing silently through the Atlantic waves, with meals left on the table and clothes hanging in the cabins, remains one of the most haunting images in maritime history. The Mary Celeste asked a question that no one has been able to answer: what could possibly make ten people walk away from safety into the unknown?

## Vocabulary

#	Word	Definition
1	<b>abandon</b>	to leave something or someone behind permanently, especially in an emergency
2	<b>cargo</b>	goods or products carried by a ship, plane, or truck
3	<b>vessel</b>	a large boat or ship used for carrying people or goods
4	<b>intact</b>	complete and not damaged; in one piece
5	<b>navigation</b>	the process of planning and following a route, especially at sea or in the air
6	<b>mutiny</b>	when sailors or soldiers refuse to obey their officers and take control
7	<b>salvage</b>	to save goods or a ship from damage or destruction, especially at sea
8	<b>hull</b>	the main body or frame of a ship that sits in the water
9	<b>logbook</b>	an official written record of events during a voyage or journey
10	<b>foul play</b>	criminal or violent activity, especially murder
11	<b>testimony</b>	a formal statement about what someone saw or knows, especially in court
12	<b>speculation</b>	guessing about something without having all the facts
13	<b>seaworthy</b>	in good enough condition to sail safely on the sea
14	<b>conspiracy</b>	a secret plan made by a group of people to do something harmful or illegal
15	<b>baffled</b>	completely confused and unable to understand something

## Comprehension Quiz

1. When was the Mary Celeste found abandoned in the Atlantic Ocean?
  - A) 15 November 1870
  - B) 4 December 1872
  - C) 7 January 1873
  - D) 22 March 1871
  
2. What was strange about the condition of the Mary Celeste when it was found?
  - A) The ship was sinking and badly damaged
  - B) All the cargo had been stolen
  - C) The ship was in good condition with cargo intact, but no people on board
  - D) The ship was on fire when the Dei Gratia crew arrived
  
3. What was the last entry in the Mary Celeste's logbook?
  - A) A message calling for help
  - B) A routine navigation note dated 25 November, ten days before discovery
  - C) A warning about a dangerous storm
  - D) A note about pirates attacking the ship
  
4. Why was Captain Morehouse treated with suspicion during the salvage hearing?
  - A) He was known to be a criminal
  - B) He and Captain Briggs were acquaintances, and officials wondered if they had planned an insurance fraud
  - C) He refused to answer any questions in court
  - D) His crew confessed to attacking the Mary Celeste
  
5. What is the alcohol fumes theory about?
  - A) The crew became drunk and fell overboard
  - B) Fumes from the industrial alcohol cargo may have caused a small explosion, frightening the crew into abandoning ship
  - C) The alcohol cargo caught fire and destroyed the ship
  - D) Pirates used alcohol to poison the crew

## Answer Key

#	Answer	Question
1	<b>B</b>	When was the Mary Celeste found abandoned in the Atlantic Ocean?
2	<b>C</b>	What was strange about the condition of the Mary Celeste when it was found?
3	<b>B</b>	What was the last entry in the Mary Celeste's logbook?
4	<b>B</b>	Why was Captain Morehouse treated with suspicion during the salvage hearing?
5	<b>B</b>	What is the alcohol fumes theory about?