Stories for Thinking #3 - 'The Mystery of the Mary Celeste'

(Nonfiction, 1872)

There are many mysteries connected with the sea. One of the greatest mysteries of the sea concerns a sailing ship called the *Mary Celeste*.

The *Mary Celeste* set sail from New York on November 7th, 1872. It was bound for Italy with a full cargo. The ship was commanded by captain Benjamin Briggs, who took with him his wife and two year-old daughter. There were seven men in the crew. As the ship sailed out into the Atlantic Ocean no-one would have guessed how the voyage would end.

Almost one month later, on December 5th the *Mary Celeste* was sighted by the lookout of another ship called the *Dei Gratia*. 'Ship on the starboard bow, captain!' called the lookout. The captain of the *Dei Gratia* came on deck and looked through his telescope.

'I can see the name on the side,' said the captain. 'It's the *Mary Celeste*. My old friend Benjamin Briggs is the captain. I shared dinner with him the night before he sailed.'

So the captain of the *Dei Gratia* ordered a signal of welcome to be flown from the highest mast. But he was puzzled when his signal was not answered. The *Marie Celeste* sailed slowly past. Strangely, although the sails were full, they were not catching the wind.

The captain of the *Dei Gratia* called for his most powerful telescope, and peered carefully through it. What he saw surprised him. There was no-one at the steering wheel of the *Mary Celeste*. There was no lookout. In fact there was no sign of life at all. The captain ordered the ship to turn and sail towards the *Mary Celeste*. As the *Dei Gratia* came close the captain sent his first-mate in a small boat to investigate what was happening on the strange ship.

The First mate rowed across and pulled himself up the side of the *Mary Celeste*. When he climbed on deck he found the ship deserted... and so began the great mystery. Captain Briggs, his family and crew had all disappeared. Everything else was just as it should be on board ship. There was food still left on the captain's table. By the men's beds there were personal belongings including their pipes and their money. The beds were still neatly made. The only thing missing was a small boat, and the only strange thing to be found on deck was a sword covered in brown stains. The *Mary Celeste* was like a ghost ship. What could have happened?

Many theories were suggested to account for the strange empty ship. Perhaps they were all washed overboard? But there was no sign of bad weather or rough seas. Perhaps they sailed off in the small boat and were lost. But why should they do that, leaving their clothes and money behind? Perhaps they had been murdered by pirates? But there was no sign of any fight. The brown marks on the sword were checked. They were not blood, only rust.

None of those who sailed on the *Mary Celeste* were ever seen again, and no clues were found to explain the mystery. Whatever the truth was, it remains one of the secrets of the sea.