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Opening extract from

Young Sherlock Holmes 5: Snake Bite

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CHAPTER ONE

There was a dark line on the horizon. Sherlock could see it as he gazed out across the ocean. Mostly the sky was a clear blue, but there, in the distance, it shaded down to an unhealthy purple darkness, like an old bruise. He would have assumed that it was land, except that it was off to the west of the ship. The only land nearby was to the east – the southernmost tip of Africa.

He wondered if he should tell the First Mate – Mr Larchmont – about it. Mr Larchmont had taken Sherlock under his protection and given him a place on the crew after Sherlock had woken up to find himself on the ship, already sailing away from England. Perhaps he should tell Captain Tollaway himself, but the Captain was a remote figure, rarely seen on deck. Maybe he should just tell one of the other sailors. Sherlock glanced around, but they were all going about their duties unconcerned – as he should be. He was meant to be swabbing down the deck: clearing off the bits of wood and lengths of old rope that had accumulated over the past few days, along with the fine rime of salt that covered everything thanks to the spray from the ocean



and the evaporating heat of the sun.

He shook his head and went back to his mopping. He was the least experienced sailor on board. It wasn't his job to bring things to the attention of the others. They didn't like it.

He dipped his mop into his bucket and swabbed a patch of deck where one of the sailors had bled, earlier that morning. The man had caught his little finger in a coil of rope which had been suddenly whipped away by a movement of the sails, taking his finger with it. The ship's doctor – actually one of Mr Larchmont's assistants, who had some knowledge of medicine – cleaned and bound the wound, and the sailor was now resting in his hammock with a double ration of rum to numb the pain. That left a gap in the duty roster which Sherlock knew he would be expected to fill.

For what felt like the thousandth time, he wondered how he had gone from being a boy living in Hampshire to a sailor on a ship bound for China. There was a gap in his memory between suddenly falling asleep back in his uncle's library in Farnham and waking up on the *Gloria Scott*. The best explanation he could come up with was that he had been drugged, abducted and left on the ship before it sailed, but who would do that to him, and why?

The only answer he could come up with was the criminal organization that called itself the Paradol



Chamber. He had crossed them too many times. Maybe this was their revenge?

For a while Sherlock had planned to jump ship at the first opportunity and try to find his way back home, but logic eventually overcame homesickness. The *Gloria Scott* was a known quantity – he was friendly with the crew, he had a hammock and food, and he knew that the ship would be returning to England eventually. If he were to abandon the ship whenever it docked for supplies he would be alone, in a foreign country. He could fall prey to any number of criminals, and there was no guarantee that any ship he could find heading home would be as comfortable as the *Gloria Scott* – and the *Gloria Scott* was far from comfortable.

Sighing, he pushed the detritus of the deck over to the side. There were gaps in the railing there through which he could push it off and watch it fall towards the water. The sea birds – albatrosses and seagulls – which followed the ship swooped to investigate, in case there was food among the wood and the rope strands. Far below, the detritus hit the water with a splash of white spray.

Sherlock raised his gaze towards the horizon again, to check out that dark line, but his eyes were caught by a movement beneath the water. As he watched, a glistening grey shape broke the surface. It was a fish, but one that seemed to be bigger than he was – as big as his



tutor, Amyus Crowe. He gasped in surprise as another five – no, ten or more shapes broke the surface after their leader. They had long, beaky snouts, and flat tails, and their eyes were large and dark.

'Checkin' out the girlies?' someone called from behind him.

Sherlock turned his head and shouted back, 'One of them says she's your wife! She says you promised to send her half your wages, but you never did. She's come to collect!'

There was laughter from the sailors on deck. Sherlock had quickly found that they were always probing each other with personal jokes. It reminded him of dogs – always snapping at each other and play-biting to establish who was in charge. You could either take offence, in which case the jokes would get harsher and more pointed, or you could join in, and in doing so elevate your position. Sherlock had been taking the second option ever since he had joined the crew, and it seemed to be working. They accepted him, and he wasn't at the bottom of the pecking order. He was a long way from the top, but at least he was treated as one of them, not as an outsider.

One of the crew – Jackson, his name was – stood close to Sherlock. He indicated the things in the water with a twist of his thumb. 'Never seen their like before, I warrant.'



'That's true,' Sherlock admitted. 'What are they? Can we eat them?'

Jackson crossed himself. 'They're called porpoises,' he said, 'and it's bad luck to kill one, let alone eat it. They keep the ship company. Some say that if a sailor falls overboard, then the porpoises will circle around and keep him afloat, and fight off any sharks that try to get to him.'

'Sharks?' Sherlock asked.

'The wolves of the sea,' Jackson said. 'Teeth like a band saw. Take your arm off just by brushing their mouths against it.'

'Right. I'll try not to fall in then. Or, if I do, I'll try and do it when there are some porpoises around.' He took the opportunity to nod towards the horizon. 'What's that?' he asked. 'The colour looks . . . strange.'

Jackson lifted his gaze to the horizon, and frowned. 'You've got good eyesight,' he admitted. 'That looks to me like a tropical storm. Mr Larchmont will want to know about it. You want to go and tell him?'

Sherlock shook his head. 'You do it,' he said. He knew that Mr Larchmont kept a mental list of all the sailors, with a little mark against their name to denote how well or how badly he thought of them. Those marks slid up or down depending on whether the sailors were working hard or not, how observant they seemed, how

deferential to him and to the Captain they were and how many fights they got into on board the ship. By being the first sailor to draw Mr Larchmont's attention to the storm, Sherlock could get some additional points – if it *was* a storm. But by passing the opportunity to Jackson, Sherlock could make the sailor into more of a friend, and that might prove useful in the future.

'Thanks,' Jackson said, eyeing Sherlock curiously. 'I'll not forget that.'

He turned away and headed towards the raised section at the back of the ship where the wheelhouse was located, and where Mr Larchmont could usually be found.

Sherlock glanced at the horizon again. The dark line was now more pronounced. It stretched as far above the horizon as a couple of fingers held at arm's length, and its edges seemed to be stretching out to either side, like arms seeking to encircle the ship. There was something about the unnatural purple colour of the storm that made him feel sick in the pit of his stomach. He could feel a warm breeze on his face, blowing from the direction of the storm. He noticed that the deck was pitching beneath his feet more heavily than it had been even a few moments before. When he looked at the grey-green mass of the sea he could see that the waves were getting higher, and the white spume on their tops was blowing off like the froth from a



pint of beer and floating above the water.

'Ahoy! All hands on deck!' a gruff voice called. Sherlock turned to see Mr Larchmont standing on the raised area to the rear of the ship. Jackson was standing beside him. 'Raise as many sails as possible, and tighten all the ropes,' Larchmont shouted, his voice carrying clearly all the way from one end of the *Gloria Scott* to the other. 'There's a storm coming, boys! There's the mother of all storms coming, and we're going to try to outrun it.' He grabbed Jackson by the shoulder. 'Go and notify the Captain,' he said, more quietly. Sherlock could tell the words from the shapes his mouth made. 'Tell him what's happening.'

'Aye aye, sir,' Jackson responded, and turned away.

The deck of the ship was suddenly a seething mass of activity as sailors ran or climbed in all directions. Larchmont's gaze fell upon Sherlock, who was standing still in the midst of the chaos. 'Avast, young stowaway! Get up that rigging and check the foremast sail ropes for tightness or I'll leave you behind in a rowing boat to face the storm yourself!'

'Aye aye, sir!' Sherlock raced for the nearest web of rigging. It led like a spider's web of rope up towards the stacked sails. The rope was rough against his skin, and he felt his newly developed muscles straining as he pulled himself upward. The ship pitched and tossed as the rough

waves pushed against it: for a moment, as it leaned over, Sherlock looked down and saw the sea directly beneath him. The waves almost seemed to be reaching up for him – hundreds of white hands clawing their way up from the water. He shook off the image and kept climbing.

He got to the bottom-most sail and scrambled along the yard, fingers clenching against the rough wood, checking in turn each of the ropes that tied the top of the sail to the yard. They were all tight – no chance of them giving way in the storm unless it was particularly bad. He kept a firm grip on the ropes to prevent himself from falling, and kept an eye out for splinters on the wooden yard. He'd seen what happened to sailors when they got a splinter embedded in their skin: the wound could get infected and swell to twice its usual size, and then it was touch and go whether the injured area would have to be removed. There were a thousand and one ways to get badly hurt on a ship. For once, Sherlock could see Mycroft's point – the safest way to live your life was just to stay at home all the time. But if you did that, you missed out on all the adventure. He smiled to himself. Maybe the best thing to do was to make friends with a doctor – that way you would always have treatment close at hand.

Distracted by his thoughts, his hand slipped on a patch of algae that had somehow gained purchase on a length

of rope and he found himself falling. He clenched his legs tight on the yard but the weight of his body dragged him around until he was hanging upside down. The wet canvas of the sail kept slapping against his face as the wind caught it. He couldn't get his bearings. Which way was up? He arched his back and reached out to where he thought the yard was, but his clutching hands kept grabbing at air.

He could feel his legs slipping. Any second now he was going to plummet all the way to the deck – head downward.

His right hand caught hold of something warm. He grabbed frantically at it, and felt himself being pulled upright. His left hand clutched at a rope and he heaved at it desperately. Suddenly he was the right way up again. He glanced over to the face of the person who had saved him. It was a young sailor named Gittens. He stared down at Sherlock from where he crouched clutching on to the mast with his left arm.

'Thanks,' Sherlock gasped.

'Landlubber!' Abruptly he let go of Sherlock's hand and clambered up the mast to the next sail without looking back.

Sherlock manoeuvred himself to the mast and pulled himself upright using a trailing rope. It was like holding on to the top of a tree trunk in the middle of

an earthquake. The mast whipped back and forth as the ship was tossed around on the waves. He took a moment to look out towards the distant horizon, and then wished he hadn't. The storm now took up a full quarter of the sky. It was gaining on them.

The other sailors were getting on with their duties, and Sherlock knew that he should be getting on with his. Despite the pounding of his heart, and the terror that he could feel trickling like ice along his nerves, he scrambled past the mast and out along the other side of the yard to checked the ropes there. They were all sound. By the time he got back to the mainmast he was soaked with a mixture of sea spray and sweat, and his muscles ached as if he had run a marathon. Gratefully, but carefully, he clambered down the web of rigging to the deck.

He had never been so happy to feel something firm beneath his feet as he was at that moment.

Mr Larchmont was standing nearby. 'Rigging secure on the foremast, sir,' Sherlock reported.

'Good work, laddie.' The First Mate turned to stare at him. 'You've the makings of a good sailor. If we get through this storm and make Shanghai in one piece, you can stay on. If you want.'

'I'd like that, sir,' Sherlock replied. If only to get back to England, and my friends, he thought.



Larchmont strode away, berating some poor sailor who had let a length of rope run through his fingers too fast, and was now looking at the bloody palms of his hands in shock. 'Get out of the way, you ham-fisted idiot!' Larchmont shouted. 'Let someone who knows what they're doing have a go!' As he grabbed the end of the rope and pushed the man away Larchmont turned to see what was happening across the deck. 'Batten all the hatches!' he yelled. 'Secure every last thing that moves. Oh, and get those goats and sheep below decks before they become shark-food!'

A creak of wood attracted Sherlock's attention. He glanced upward, towards where the masts were swaying and the sails were flapping. The sails were pushed taut by the wind, and the masts almost seemed to be bending forward under the immense pressure. A broad V-shape of foam swept backwards from the bow of the ship, and Sherlock could hear a hissing sound as the ship cut the waves apart. He glanced up again. The pure blue of the equatorial sky had turned a strange metallic shade. Something was missing, and it took him a moment to work out what it was. Birds. The ever-present seabirds had vanished. Knowing there was a storm coming, they had probably taken their chance to get out of the way, riding the precursor winds to a calmer area. Very sensible too, Sherlock thought.



It seemed suddenly a lot colder on deck, and the light had taken on an ominous shade. Glancing back, towards the ship's stern, Sherlock saw that purple clouds were obscuring half the sky now. A smattering of raindrops splashed across his cheeks and forehead – not cold and needle-like, as he would have expected back in England, but fat and warm. Sherlock braced himself with his arm wound through the rigging and looked around, trying to work out if there was anything he could be doing to help. He saw something that made his heart clench in sudden fear. As the front of the boat was twisting one way, the back of the boat was twisting the other. The whole structure of the ship was *flexing* in the grip of the wind and the waves. For Sherlock, who had been thinking of the ship as something solid, it was a revelation, and not a good one. He suddenly realized how fragile was this little structure of wood and cloth that had become his world.

'Sherlock!' a voice called. 'Sherlock! Over here!'

He glanced towards where the voice was coming from. One of the hatches was still unbattened, and a figure was poking out of it, black hair plastered across his face and eyes. It was Wu Chung, the ship's Chinese cook. He was a big, jolly man with a black ponytail, a long moustache that hung down on either side of his mouth and skin that was pockmarked by some disease. He had become the closest thing to a friend Sherlock had on the *Gloria*



Scott, and he was even patiently teaching Sherlock how to speak Cantonese – the language that was spoken in Shanghai, where they were headed.

Sherlock released his grip on the rigging and staggered over to the hatch, trying to anticipate which way the deck was going to pitch as he did so.

The cook caught his arm to stop him from being blown past. 'Need you in the galley,' he shouted against the roaring of the wind. 'My pots and pans, they are all over place. Need to get them secured.'

'All right!' Sherlock shouted, and followed Wu down the hatchway ladder and into the interior of the ship.

The corridors were a flickering mass of shadows, as the pitching and tossing of the *Gloria Scott* caused the lanterns, which were attached to hooks along the walls, to roll back and forth. The light from the candles inside them made everything look yellow and sick. Without the sight of the horizon to keep his sense of balance intact, Sherlock was beginning to feel the same. The smell down there was the usual combination of unwashed humans and candle tallow. Water sloshed across the decks as the ship moved. Usually it was only in the black depths of the hold that water penetrated, but it seemed to be present everywhere.

Sherlock followed Wu to the galley, which was a narrow room at the end of one of the corridors. The stove had



already been doused, Sherlock noted, otherwise sparks might spill out and set fire to something. The copper pans which Wu used were supposed to be hanging from hooks on the ceiling, but most of them had fallen off and were rolling around the floor. The few remaining ones were swinging dangerously. A blow from one of them could knock a man out cold. Cupboards and drawers were built into every available nook and cranny, and as the ship lurched from side to side the doors were swinging open and then shut again, and the drawers were sliding out and back. It was as if a malevolent poltergeist was trying to cause chaos. The sound was deafening.

Wu shoved a hand towards Sherlock. 'Take!' he said. Sherlock raised his cupped hands up, and Wu dropped ten or more thin wooden wedges into them. 'Make drawers and doors fast,' he said. 'Do it now!'

Sherlock got the idea. Quickly, avoiding the obstacle course of swinging pans, he wedged all the cupboard doors and drawers shut by thrusting the wooden triangles into any gap he could see and hammering them home with the heel of his hand. Wu, meanwhile, did his best to get the rest of the pans down without them bashing his brains out and shove them into the biggest cupboard.

All around them, Sherlock could hear the wooden beams of the ship creaking, thanks to the stress under which they were being put. Once, in London, he had

seen a wooden cart come apart as it tried to take a corner too fast, toppled over and hit the ground. Now here he was, inside a glorified wooden box held together with nothing but nails and tar, too far from the coast to swim for safety if the ship came apart.

Was this what the Paradol Chamber had in mind for him? Was this their punishment?

When all the drawers and doors were secured, he turned to Wu. The creaking and groaning of the ship's beams were too great for him to make himself understood, so he gestured around and raised his shoulders in a shrug as he yelled, 'I want to be on deck!' Actually, he didn't – he just didn't want to be trapped inside the ship if the storm capsized them, but Wu wasn't a sailor. Wu nodded. His pox-scarred, moon-shaped face was serious. He half pushed Sherlock towards the door, steering him left, away from the hatch that led up to the deck. Sherlock resisted. When Wu tried to push him again, Sherlock grabbed at his wrist and shook his head violently.

Wu obviously wanted to be as far from the storm as possible, and if that meant being deep inside the bowels of the ship then that was fine with him.

Wu tried to push Sherlock again, but Sherlock shook his head. 'No!' he yelled. Wu seemed to lip-read what he was saying, because he let go of Sherlock's shoulder and then patted it sadly. It was a goodbye, of sorts. Wu

obviously wasn't expecting to see Sherlock again.

Sherlock slid past the Chinese cook and half ran, half stumbled towards the ladder which led up to the hatch.

He turned as he put his foot on the bottom rung, and saw the cook's broad back vanish around a corner. He scuttled up the ladder, hoping that Wu was wrong, and that they would both survive. That they would *all* survive.

Three sailors were attaching the wooden hatch cover when he popped his head over the edge. They were soaked from head to foot, and their faces were haggard with strain and fear. One of them pulled him up while the others fastened the cover down and nailed it on.

Things were worse than before, up on deck. The sky was now a uniform purple from horizon to horizon – or at least, it would have been if the horizon had been visible. As it was, visibility dropped to zero a few hundred yards from the ship. Sherlock spent a second or two taking it all in – the waves, taller than the ship, the spume that covered everything, the sharp tang of salt in the air – and then ran for the nearest rigging where he could wind his arms through the ropes and hang on for dear life. As he was halfway to his goal the ship suddenly lurched to one side and the horizontal deck became a wooden slide down which he skidded, splinters catching in his clothes. He slammed into the railing around the edge of the ship,



nearly breaking his legs, and would have gone through one of the gaps and vanished into the churning waters below if he hadn't managed to grab hold of a brass knob that was bolted securely to the wooden rail. He'd often wondered what the knob was for – none of the sailors ever seemed to tie anything to it – but whatever use it had he was thankful that it had been there when he needed it. Carefully he pulled himself back on to the deck and wound first one arm and then the other around the rail, closely followed by his legs.

His heart was hammering in his chest, and he could feel his throat closing up with terror. The storm had overtaken them with frightening speed.

Other sailors were scattered around the deck, each one with his arms wound into the rigging so that a wave wouldn't carry him off the deck and into the heaving sea.

A flash of light suddenly blinded him. Automatically he counted seconds – one . . . two . . . and then a tremendously loud *crash* echoed all around. Sherlock could feel it through the wood of the deck and railings as much as hear it. Two miles. The storm was still two miles away. He knew that because Mycroft had once told him that each second's gap between thunder and lightning meant that the storm was another mile away.

And if this was two miles from the centre of the storm then what was it like in its centre?



Through the rain and the spray, he could see Mr Larchmont standing at the wheelhouse. His legs were braced against the deck and his hands were clamped on a rail hard enough that Sherlock could swear that they were actually embedded in the wood. His hair was whipping around his face. He didn't look scared, or even concerned. He just looked determined. He stared straight down the centreline of the ship as if daring the storm to do its worst. Sherlock saw his lips move and, incredibly, heard the commanding tone of his voice even above the storm.

'*Loosen the sails!*' he yelled. '*Loosen those sails if you ever want to see your mothers and your lovers again!*'

Sherlock glanced up at the sails, and immediately understood. They were pulled tight under the force of the wind – so tight that they might rip from top to bottom if the storm got any worse – and if the *Gloria Scott* was two miles from its centre then it might very well get worse. The ropes that held the sails were also pulled as tight as violin strings. They might break, leaving the canvas to flap about destructively. The wind might also be strong enough to topple the ship over, if it didn't rip the canvas. If the sails were loosened then the crew at least had a chance. They would be adrift and at the mercy of the storm, not knowing where they might end up, but their chances of getting through this would be increased.



Incredibly, some of the sailors scrambled from their places of safety across the deck for the points where the sail rigging was attached. Sherlock wasn't sure if they were more scared by Mr Larchmont than they were by the storm, or whether they just knew that they had to risk their very lives in order to save the ship. Whatever the reason, they grabbed for where the ropes were wound around hooks and stanchions and, two or three together, taking the strain, they released the tension in the ropes and reattached them loosely. Immediately the wind caught the sails and pulled the ropes tight, but as the wind shifted the sails flapped loose and the ropes sagged, only to be pulled tight again moments later.

Sherlock glanced out past the railing, and caught his breath. Once, a year or more ago, he had woken up in a bedroom in a château in France belonging to Baron Maupertuis. Thinking he was in Farnham, he had thrown open the curtains, and been shocked speechless by the sight of mountains outside the window. Suddenly he was back there again, staring at mountains in bemusement, but these mountains were made of water, and they were a lot closer. Close enough that he felt he could almost reach out and touch them.

Suddenly the immensity and the grandeur of the world struck him. A feeling of exultation seemed to flood through his body, washing away all the fear and

replacing it with wondrous amazement. Farnham was small. London was small. There was so much else out there to see. How could Mycroft bear to stay in his flat and in his club and in his office, scuttling between them in a closed carriage, when there was all this spectacle in the world?

The real storm broke over an hour later, but in Sherlock's mind it had lost its power over his emotions by then. From that moment on he was just a spectator, awestruck at what he was seeing. All physical sensation – fear, tiredness, pain, hunger – all of it faded away in the face of the incredible sights and sounds of nature at play. It didn't matter that the *Gloria Scott* was being tossed around like a leaf on the edge of a waterfall; it didn't matter that lightning struck the mainmast twice, leaving gashes of scorched wood and the smell of burning in its wake; it didn't matter that so much water was sloshing across the deck that the planks were invisible and the battened hatches were obvious only because the water would suddenly break against their edges and spray upward. None of it was important. The ship and the sailors were like ants in the face of something massive and unstoppable and beautiful.

At one stage he slipped somewhere between sleep and a hypnotic state, his eyes open but seeing nothing.

He gradually came to his senses to find that the storm had abated. Sailors were moving across the



deck, tightening the lines, unbattening the hatches and sweeping as much water as possible off the deck and back into the sea. The sky was blue again, blue and clear. There were birds flying behind the ship once more, waiting for food to be thrown overboard.

Mr Larchmont was standing a few feet away. He glanced over at Sherlock.

'Enjoy your little sleep?' he asked.

Sherlock knew what he was expected to say. 'Ready for duty, sir!' he snapped, climbing to his feet.

'Glad to hear it,' Larchmont said. He looked up at the foremast. 'I see some loose lines there. I would be much obliged if you would tighten them for me.'

'Aye aye, sir!' Sherlock headed for the rigging, but turned back and looked at Larchmont for a moment. 'How many sailors did we lose, sir?'

Larchmont shook his head. 'Too many,' he said quietly. 'And good men, all of them.'

