

Danger! Being the Log of Captain John Sirius by Arthur Conan Doyle Based on the presentation by Tom Feller

I am not sure when I first heard of Doyle's short story "Danger!" It was either in a biography of Doyle or in a side note in William Baring-Gould's *The Annotated Sherlock Holmes*. However, my interest increased greatly when I read *Dead Wake: The Last Crossing of the Lusitania* by Erik Larson. "Only a few prescient souls seemed to grasp that the design of the submarine would force a transformation in naval strategy. One of these was Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. . . . Doyle's forecast was dismissed as too fantastic to contemplate," Larson writes. I then sought out the story, which is available for free on the Internet. The plot is a simple one, and, aside from the narrator, there is little characterization. Norland, a small fictional country in Europe is at war with Great Britain. Captain John Sirius, the commander of Norland's eight-boat submarine fleet, successfully blockades the island, and famine forces Great Britain to surrender.

Among the ships the Norland fleet sinks is the White Star ocean liner *Olympic*, an actual ship slightly smaller than its sister ship the *Titanic* and larger than the *Lusitania*, which was sunk by a German U-Boat in 1915. When the *Olympic* was launched in 1910, it was the largest ocean liner in the world. Briefly surpassed by the *Titanic*, it was once again the largest when Doyle wrote the story in 1913. During World War I, it was converted into an armed troopship and managed to ram a U-Boat in 1917. It returned to civilian service after the war. After White Star merged with Cunard, the new owners decided that it was not worth retrofitting the ship from steam engines to diesel, so it was sold for scrap in 1935.

Doyle also correctly forecast that the submarines would attack American ships, which the Germans began doing early in 1917. Those attacks led to the United States entering the war. This gamble backfired against the Germans, because the infusion of American troops into the western front in 1918 turned the tide against them and led to the German surrender that year.

Responses to Doyle's story were mostly negative. According to Pierre Nordon, author of *Conan Doyle: A Biography*,

Sir Arthur sent copies . . . to various authorities on the subject, inviting them to give their views in *The Strand Magazine* on the hypothetical situation in the story *Danger*. Twelve responses were published, including seven from admirals. Only two agreed with Conan Doyle: a civilian, Sir Douglas Owen, Professor at the London School of Economics, and an admiral, Sir Percy Scott. The former said that Conan Doyle carried out his mission as a writer by his warning to the public. . . . Admiral Fitzgerald declared his confidence in the enemy's sense of 'fair play'. So did Admiral Henderson, who also counted on the powers of the resistance of British warships. Baring-Gould quoted Admiral Sir Compton Domville as saying, "I think [the story] most improbable, and more like one of Jules Verne's stories."

Speaking of Jules Verne, *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea* was published in 1870. In 1874, American immigrant John Philip Holland submitted a submarine design to the U.S. Secretary of the Navy. It was rejected, but in 1878, Holland built a small prototype submarine for the Fenians, a group of Irish revolutionaries whose aim was to free Ireland from the English. Then in 1881, Holland built the "Fenian Ram," a 31-foot-long submarine, but the Fenians stored it in a warehouse where it remained for 35 years and was never used.

Starting around 1900, various navies started to build submarines. During that year, the U.S. Navy bought its first submarine, designed by Holland, and the British navy ordered five submarines, also designed by Holland. Nonetheless, British Rear Admiral A. K. Wilson declared the submarine “underhand, unfair, and damned UnEnglish.”

In 1902, The Krupp shipyard in Germany built a 40-foot submarine on spec. The German navy ordered one, and the Russian navy three. The German navy launched the U-1 in 1906 and began its tradition of numbering submarines rather than naming them.

The Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria-Hungary was assassinated in Sarajevo, Serbia, on June 28, 1914. The very next month “Danger!” appeared in *The Strand*, and then on August 4, 1914, Great Britain declared war on Germany after its army invaded Belgium. On February 4, 1915, Germany declared the seas around the British Isles to be a war zone, and on February 18, 1915, Germany declared that all ships belonging to Great Britain and its allies would be sunk without warning, which led to the U-20 torpedoing and sinking the *Lusitania* on May 7, 1915. The ship was sunk by one torpedo at 2:10 p.m. eleven miles off the southern Irish coast. It went down in 18 minutes, and 1,198 people died, including 128 Americans. There were 761 survivors.

The *Lusitania* carried 1,264 passengers and 695 crew members. First class passengers totalled 290, which was about half capacity. Since second class was overbooked with 601 passengers for cabins with a maximum capacity of 460, some of them were upgraded to first class. There were only 373 passengers booked in third class when the ship’s capacity was 1,186. There were more than 4 million rounds of small arms ammunition, almost 5,000 shrapnel casings, and 3,240 brass percussion fuses in the cargo holds.

The ship was constructed to the specifications of the British admiralty in case it should have to be converted into an armed merchant ship during wartime. Although it was never armed, it was listed on the 1914 edition of *Jane’s All the World’s Fighting Ships* as an auxiliary cruiser.

At maximum cruising speed of 25 knots, the *Lusitania* consumed about 910 tons of coal per day. On its final cruise, however, its number 4 boiler was shut down to conserve fuel, which reduced its maximum speed to 21 knots. When it was torpedoed, it was cruising at 18 knots so that it would arrive in Liverpool at high tide and not have to wait to enter the port.

The *Lusitania* was unescorted on its final cruise, but the *Lusitania’s* captain, William Thomas Turner, ordered the ship’s watertight doors closed, posted double lookouts, enforced a black-out at night, and had the lifeboats pre-positioned so that they could be launched as quickly as possible. Unlike the *Titanic*, the *Lusitania* had enough lifeboats for everyone. Unfortunately, it listed to the side, and because of the speed with which it sunk, only six of the 48 boats were successfully launched. Captain Turner survived and was absolved of any wrong doing. *Kapitanleutnant* Walter Schwieger, the commander of the U-20, was killed in action on September 5, 1917 when he was commanding the U-88.

In January 1917, German U-Boats begin to attack neutral, including American, ships, which led to the American declaration of war on Germany on April 6, 1917. Although Germany finally defeated the Russians in 1917, the entry of the United States into the war, as I mentioned earlier, led to the German defeat in 1918, and on November 11, 1918, the Armistice was signed.

(End of article. Delivered at the February 17, 2018 meeting of the Nashville Scholars.)