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Opening extract from

Hook's Daughter

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Published by

Chicken House Ltd

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First published in Great Britain in 2015
Chicken House
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United Kingdom
www.doublecluck.com

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Cover and interior design by Helen Crawford-White
Typeset by Dorchester Typesetting Group Ltd
Printed and bound in Great Britain by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CRO 4YY

The paper used in this Chicken House book is made from wood grown in sustainable forests.

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

British Library Cataloguing in Publication data available.

PB ISBN 978-1-910002-21-6
eISBN 978-1-910002-22-3



Children Have Sticky Fingers and Ask Impertinent Questions

There have always been pirates. Why, even as far back as Eve, on the day she was considering whether or not to eat that apple, a pirate was almost certainly planning to sail in and take it from her.

I expect that you'd like to know about the most famous of all pirates, Captain James Hook. As I am the world's foremost expert on him, naturally you turned to me. Children come to me all the time, begging to hear what I know. I graciously seat them in a circle around me, lean in and whisper, 'Not a chance.'

I don't like children all that much.

However, last Thursday I became an old man. It occurs to me that some day I will die. Like many my age, I hope that I may go peacefully, in the midst of

a hostage situation or a failed arson attempt. But I digress . . .

We were talking about Captain Hook.

Almost everyone knows the main points of his story: Peter Pan, the iron hook, the crocodile, and so on and so forth. What came after, however – with Jocelyn, Hook's last request and such – now, that's far more interesting.

What's that? You've never heard of young Jocelyn Hook?

I'm not surprised. I'd venture to guess that a list of things you know nothing about could fill volumes. However, today appears to be your lucky day – you are about to be enlightened. The fact that I am the one who must provide the enlightenment can only mean that today is my unlucky day, but sometimes these things cannot be helped.

There is no use putting it off any longer; it is time to tell what I know, lest the girl's story die with me. Settle in, I suppose. Do be sure not to touch anything, and for heaven's sake, please don't breathe so loudly. If you're quite comfortable, I'll pour myself a little drink and begin. If you are not comfortable, I'll begin anyway. Your comfort is of little concern to me.

CHAPTER ONE



In Which Our Heroine Displays a Clear Need *for* Professional Help

The week before Jocelyn's grandfather decided to send her away to finishing school was an eventful one, even by her standards.

On Monday, the girl's newest tutor found his pupil unable to do her history lesson. Someone had torn most of the pages from her lesson book in order to make paper boats. This same unidentified person had then floated the paper vessels on the garden pond, after setting them on fire, of course. Jocelyn sat at her desk, the very picture of wide-eyed innocence – with a spot of soot on her nose and the faint smell of smoke still clinging to her rumpled dress.

If you ask me, her tutor was wrong to turn in his resignation. True history is filled with burning fleets.

On Tuesday, Jocelyn startled the head cook, who

rather foolishly did not expect a twelve-year-old girl to come flying down the front banister brandishing a wooden sword and singing a bawdy sea shanty at the top of her lungs. A tea tray of French pastries dropped on the manor's finest Persian rug was clearly no one's fault but the cook's own.

Wednesday, Thursday and Friday were much the same: Jocelyn tore her new silk stockings trying to climb the high iron fence surrounding Hopewell Manor in order to see out and 'scout for enemy ships approaching'. Her finest blue sash went missing, only to be discovered beneath the hedgerow, one end tied into a complicated sailor's knot, the other a noose. She even scandalized the third-floor serving maids by refusing her evening bath with a shouted, 'Look out, ye dog-livered landlubbers! I'm the most feared girl pirate to ever live! I'll see you keelhauled before you get me to walk the plank!'

All these things were bad, to be sure, but not entirely out of character for the girl. It was what she did on Saturday that made Sir Charles Hopewell IV, Jocelyn's grandfather and guardian, feel he had to take drastic action.

On that fateful day, Sir Charles invited Lord and Lady Trottington and their one-day-perhaps-quite-eligible son, Ambrose, to a dinner party in order to show off his lovely young granddaughter. To his great dismay, the evening did not go as well as he had hoped.

Jocelyn sauntered into the dining room twenty minutes after the soup course had been served, with twigs in her unruly dark curls, muddy knees, grass stains on the seat of her dress, and a tattered adventure novel tucked under her arm. Her grandfather glowered at her and muttered something under his breath about interviewing for yet another governess as soon as possible.

Jocelyn laughed at his scowl, plopped her book down on the sideboard and seated herself directly across from Ambrose. She couldn't help but see that the young gentleman was unabashedly picking his nose. She stared in fascinated interest. Ambrose took no notice but continued with his mining.

'I am sorry for coming in late,' Jocelyn said to the boy, 'but I was lost in the best part of my book. A giant Cyclops threatened to eat Odysseus and his crew. In order to escape and return to their ship, they had to get the monster drunk, wait until he was firmly asleep, find a sharp stick and' – Jocelyn leant in and spoke in a reverential whisper – 'gouge his terrible Cyclops eye out. Isn't that marvellous?'

Ambrose yawned. He did not bother to remove his finger from his nostril, choosing instead to speak around it. 'That's rather disgusting talk for the dining table.' His sinus excavation paused for the briefest of moments while he looked Jocelyn over. 'You are pretty enough, I suppose, but I can see that you may need to learn some manners if we are to court when

we are older.'

Jocelyn immediately decided dinner should not last much longer. If Ambrose wanted a display of manners, she would give him one. For the next quarter of an hour the girl laughed too loudly, slurped her soup, dribbled gravy in her lap and used her sleeve instead of a napkin.

Sir Charles and Lord Trottington took no notice; they were deep in discussion about the proper application of wig powder. Lady Trottington examined the quality of the silverware with an expression of silent disapproval. Ambrose removed his finger from his nose and inserted it in his ear. He pulled out a sticky glob of wax, sniffed it and wiped it on the tablecloth.

Clearly, it was time for Jocelyn to play her trump card.

'You know,' she said in a loud voice, 'I think my father would like to meet you. He's been away, but I expect he'll come for me anytime now. Perhaps you have heard of him? Captain James Hook?'

Lady Trottington fainted dead away into her plate of jellied eels. Lord Trottington let out a terrified scream. (Who would have guessed him to be a soprano?) As for Ambrose, the thorough scrubbing a housemaid gave his chair later that evening stood as testament to his reaction to Jocelyn's pronouncement.

The next day, Sir Charles demanded that his granddaughter take an unusual outing with him: a stroll

down execution dock. After a public hanging, the bodies of pirates and other criminals were placed in iron cages, called gibbets, and put on display. Sir Charles planned to employ a time-honoured tactic used by parents the world over: frightening the child into obedience.

As the pair walked along the dock, a horrifying scene played out above them. The gibbets creaked and moaned as they swayed, calling to mind the sounds of ghosts in all the old stories.

Their occupants varied in looks, depending on freshness. Those that had been long exposed to the elements were reduced to little more than rags and bones. Skulls grinned down at the gentleman and his granddaughter, empty eye sockets staring. Worse still were the remains of the more recently deceased. Some had swelled so much that they pressed into the bars, rather like an overly ample woman trying to squeeze into a too-small corset.

A few moments of the terrible view ought to have been sufficient. Sir Charles pressed a handkerchief to his nose and ushered the wilful child back to the safety of their carriage. They travelled most of their way home in silence. As the pair reached the manor gates, Sir Charles, wanting to be sure of his success, questioned his granddaughter: 'And what did you learn today, Jocelyn?'

The girl looked up at him with red-rimmed eyes. 'Two things, Grandfather. First, if I am to be a pirate

and sail with my father, I must be a very good one and not get caught. Second, I will never, ever wear a corset.'

That very evening, Sir Charles penned a letter to Miss Eliza Crumb–Biddlecomb herself. Even with his best efforts, he had been unable to make any head–way in turning Jocelyn into a lady. It was time for professional help.