Lovereading4kids.co.uk

Helping you choose books for children

0-5 5-7 7-9 9-12 12+

opening extract from

Peter Pan in Scarlet

written by

Geraldine McCaughrean

published by

Oxford University Press

All text is copyright of the author and illustrator

please print off and read at your leisure.

Chapter One

The Old Boys

"I'm not going to bed," said John – which startled his wife. Children are never ready for bed, but grown-ups like John are usually hankering for their pillows and eiderdowns from the moment they finish dinner. "I'm not going to bed!" said John again, and so ferociously that his wife knew he was very frightened indeed.

"You have been dreaming again, haven't you?" she said tenderly. "Such a trial."

John scrubbed at his eyes with his knuckles. "I told you. I never dream! What does a man have to do to be believed in his own house?"

His wife stroked his shiny head and went to turn down the bedclothes. And there on John's side of the bed, something bulged up through the coverlet. It wasn't a hot-water bottle or a teddy bear or a library book. Mrs John folded down the sheets. It was a cutlass.

With a sigh, she hung it on the hook behind the bedroom door, alongside the quiver of arrows and John's dressing gown. Both she and her husband liked to pretend it was not happening (because that's what grown-ups do when they are in trouble) but secretly they both knew: John was dreaming of Neverland again. After every dream, something was left behind in his bed next morning, like the stones

around a dish after a serving of prunes. A sword here, a candle there, a bow, a medicine bottle, a top hat… The night after he dreamt of mermaids, a fishy smell hung about the stairs all day. The wardrobe was piled high with the dregs of dreams – an alarm clock, a pirate's tricorn hat, an Indian headdress. An eye-patch. (The worst nights were when John dreamed of Captain Hook.)

Mrs John plumped up the pillows with a brisk blow of her hand – and a gunshot ran out through the whole house, waking the neighbours and terrifying the dog. The bullet shied about the room, bouncing off the lamp-stand and smashing a vase. Cautiously, with two fingers, Mrs John drew the pistol from under the pillow and dropped it into the bin, like a kipper found to be not quite fresh.

"They are so *real!*" whimpered her husband from the doorway. "These wretched dreams are just so *REAL!*"

All over London and even as far afield as Fotheringdene and Grimswater, old boys were dreaming the same kind of dreams. Not young, silly boys but boys grown up: cheerful, stolid boys who worked in banks or drove trains or grew strawberries or wrote plays or stood for Parliament. Cosy at home, surrounded by family and friends, they thought themselves comfortable and safe …until the dreams began. Now each night they dreamed of Neverland and woke

to find leftovers in their beds - daggers or coils of rope, a pile of leaves or a hook.

And what did they have in common, these dreamers? Just one thing. They had all once been Boys in Neverland.

"I have called you all together, because something must be done!" said Judge Tootles, twirling his big moustache. "It is not good enough! Gone on far too long! Won't do! Enough is enough! We must act!"

They were eating brown soup in the library of The Gentlemen's Club off Piccadilly – a brown room with brown portraits of gentlemen wearing brown suits. Smoke from the fireplace hung in the air like a brown fog. On the dining table lay an assortment of weapons, the sole of a shoe, a cap, a pair of giant bird's eggs.

The Honourable Slightly fingered them thoughtfully: "The flotsam of Night washed up on the shores of Morning!" he said (but then the Honourable Slightly played clarinet in a nightclub and was inclined to write poetry).

"Call Mrs Wendy! Mrs Wendy would know what to do!" said Judge Tootles. But of course Wendy had not been invited, because women are not allowed in The Gentlemen's Club

"I say we should let sleeping dogs lie," said Mr Nibs, but nobody thanked him, because dogs are not allowed in The Gentleman's Club either.

"Mind over matter!" exclaimed Mr John. "We must just *try harder* not to dream!"

"We tried that," said The Twins mournfully. "Stayed awake all night for a week."

"And what happened?" asked Mr John, intrigued.

"We fell asleep on the London omnibus on the way to work, and dreamed all the way to Putney. When we got off, we were both wearing war paint."

"How perfectly charming," said the Honourable Slightly.

"Last night we dreamed of the Lagoon," added the second Twin.

There was a murmur of heartfelt sighs. Each of the Old Boys had dreamed lately of the Lagoon and woken with wet hair, and dazzle in his eyes.

"Is there a cure, Curly?" enquired Mr Nibs, but Doctor Curly knew of no cure for an outbreak of unwanted dreams.

"We should write a letter of complaint!" boomed Judge Tootles. But nobody knew of a Ministry for Dreams or whether there was a Minister of State for Nightmares.

In the end, with nothing solved and no plan of campaign, the Old Boys sank into silence and fell asleep in their armchairs, their brown cigars dropping ash on to the brown carpet. And they all dreamed the same dream.

They dreamed they were playing tag with the mermaids, while the reflections of rainbows twisted around and between them like water snakes. Then, from somewhere deeper down and darker, came a hugely slithering shape that brushed the soles of their feet with its knobbly, scaly hide…

When they woke, the Old Boys' clothes were sopping wet, and there on its back, in the middle of the Gentlemen's Library was a prodigious crocodile, lashing its tail and snapping its jaws in an effort to turn over and make supper of them.

The Gentleman's Club emptied in the record time of forty-three seconds, and next day Members everywhere received a letter from the management.

The Gentlemen's Club
Brown Street, off Piccadilly, London W1

23rd April 1926

We regret to inform you that the Club will be closed for redecoration from 23rd April until approximately 1999.
Your obedient servants,
The Management

In the end, of course, it *was* Mrs Wendy who explained it. "Dreams are leaking out of Neverland," she said. "Something must be wrong. If we want the dreams to stop, we must find out what."

Mrs Wendy was a grown woman, and as sensible as can be. She had a tidy mind. For six days in any week she strongly disapproved of dreams littering up the house. ···But on the seventh, she was not *quite* so sure. Recently she had begun hurrying to bed, eager for that twilight flicker that comes between waking and sleep. From behind closed eyelids she would watch for a dream to come floating towards her - just as once she had watched at her bedroom window, hoping against hope for a small figure to come swooping through the local stars. Each bedtime her heart beat faster at the thought of glimpsing the Lagoon again, or hearing the cry of the Neverbird. Above all, she longed to see Peter again: the friend she had left behind in Neverland all those years before.

Now Neverland was rubbing against the Here and Now, wearing holes in the fabric in between. Tendrils of dream were starting to poke through. All was not well. Somehow Mrs Wendy knew it.

"Perhaps the dreams are messages," said one Twin.

"Perhaps they are warnings," said the other.

"Perhaps they are symptoms," said Dr Curly putting his stethoscope to his own forehead and listening for the dreams inside.

"I'm awfully afraid they may be," said Wendy. "Something is wrong in Neverland, gentlemen. ···And that is why we must go back."

Chapter Two

First find your fairy

"Go back!?"

Go back to Neverland? Go back to the mysterious island, with its mermaids, pirates and redskins? The Old Boys snorted and blustered and shook their heads till their cheeks flapped. Go back to Neverland? Never!

"Preposterous!"

"Ridiculous!"

"Poppycock!"

"Fol-de-riddle!"

"I'm a busy man!"

In the rosy gloom of her parlour, Mrs Wendy poured more tea and passed round the cucumber sandwiches. "As I see it, there are three problems," she said, ignoring their cries of protest. "First, we have all grown too big. No one but a child can fly to Neverland."

"Exactly!" Judge Tootles looked down at the straining buttons of his waistcoat. Over the years, he had indeed grown too big, in every direction.

"Secondly, we can no longer fly as we could then," said Mrs Wendy.