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Opening extract from

Plundering Paradise

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Published by

Oxford University Press

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Graylake School 1717

Cold gnawed on him like a rat. Around him, the dun and grey blankets of the other beds rose and fell like the swell of a bleak, dirty sea. Nathan had no idea what had woken him—he was still exhausted—and yet some upheaval had washed him up above the waterline of sleep. He was afraid, without knowing why.

A master's black gown hung from a peg on the wall. It had hung there, unclaimed, for as long as Nathan could remember, threadbare, almost transparent with age, like the ghost of a hanging man, swaying in the draughts. As many nightmares as moths had fluttered towards Nathan out of that black gown swinging, swinging from its hook.

He thought about his sister. This was the only time of day when it was acceptable to think about a sister. Once the day had got under way, there would be no excuse to mention her. For Nathan to mention Maud to one of the other boys would be like referring to his nursery hobbyhorse or teething ring. Secretly, Nathan thought it rather a betrayal of sisters, to pretend they did not exist. So he made a point of thinking about Maud, in the privacy of first light: mousy little Maud, keeping house, cooking and supervising meals, polishing spoons, and reading to her father.

With their mother dead, all such housewifely duties had settled on Maud like an inch of dust, obscuring the pictures Nathan carried in his mind.

draught, while the eminent masters of Graylake School, speaking Latin, erected over him towering pinnacles of knowledge: history, the classics, mathematics and divinity, rhetoric and philosophy. He felt the moisture in his eyes congeal, the facts lodge in his brain like rats in the neck of a python, indigestible.

So inside his head, he was fighting pirates.

Further back, in a desk in the fourth row, a real pirate sat—the son of a pirate, at least. To Nathaniel Gull, son of a country parson, Tamo White seemed as exotic and strange as a basilisk or giant orc. To be the son of a pirate! Not that Nathan had ever spoken to him, not above a few words. He was real, after all, and the whole point of pirates (as far as a boy in a Greek lesson is concerned) is their far remove from reality, their Romance!

Pirates were meat and drink to Nathan, their treasure caves somewhere he daily chose to spend time, rather than listen to his lessons. He knew the names of more buccaneers than saints. He knew their ships, their ports-of-call, their homes and histories. He knew which had fallen into piracy by bad luck, and which had been driven to it by the sheer wickedness in their souls. He knew what pirates ate and wore, and the oaths they spat from between gold teeth. He knew how they died, craven or penniless, begging forgiveness for their crimes. He had read it all in Exquemelin's *Bucaniers of America* and Dampier's *Discourse of Wind.* And during Greek lessons he imagined himself a sea lord, with letters from the king urging him to purge the oceans of pirates. While Mr Pleasance, the Greek master, chanted lists of irregular verbs, Nathaniel Gull fought pirates, blade-to-blade across the wooden desk-tops of a forty-gun carrack. *'Surrender, foul wretch, scourge of the main! Throw down your flintlock and tell your*

'Gull. Son of Gull. Should I not have hesitated as I entered that name in the rolls of this academy? Should I not have said to myself: Hold, Dr Thrussell, will not this Gull, son of a Gull, not gull us in time? Will he not prove us gullible in our hospitality? May he not snatch, like a herring gull, the perfect eggs of knowledge, uncouth and gluttonous and cruel? Well, sir, you have gulled us indeed, sir! Indeed, you have gulled us, Mister Gull!' The pun seemed to give Thrussell too much pleasure for him to leave it behind and move on. Nathan sensed he was not intended to smile at the doctor's wit. 'Gulled us, I say! Tricked and deceived us! We who believed—too gullibly, I see!—that a man of the church might be relied upon for honesty and plain dealing!'

'Father?' said Nathan. 'What's the matter with father?'

'Oh, nothing! Nothing! *He* has simply quit the field! He has escaped the consequences of his actions! He has left others, such as me, to suffer the difficulties wrought by his perfidiousness!'

'Where has he gone?' asked Nathan, trying to guess. It was like trying to grab the spoke of a turning wheel.

'Heaven, we must assume,' said Thrussell, adenoidal with sarcasm, 'since the mercy of the Lord is infinite. And there, I dare say, he continues *passing himself off* as a godly man, a man of religion!'

The room took a sudden swing to the left. The floor heaved. The windows bulged like eyes. A horse in the stables beyond shrieked with shock.

' . . . though he will find few friends, I venture to suggest, when it is discovered what manner of man he truly is!'

'My father's dead, sir?' said Nathan.

at his desk, the boys looked at him with pity, thinking he must have been flogged. Little Goody Gull flogged? Unheard of! Extraordinary! He took off his jacket and bundled it under the lid of his desk. His shirt sleeves dropped even further past his fingertips. Only as he tried to shut the lid did he catch sight of *Bucaniers of America* among the primers and copy books.

The Greek master looked at him, eyebrows raised, derisively asking permission to proceed with his interrupted lesson.

'It's my father. He's de—' said Nathan, dazed.

The master stepped forward at once and laid a hand on his shoulder. 'I'm sorry, boy. My sincere sympathies. That's a terrible loss for any son to bear.'

Nathan waited a few seconds to wake up from the bad dream he was in. But it did not end. 'I have to leave.' The class stirred, ready to be indignant on his behalf. 'There's no money. My fees weren't . . . ' There was no alteration in the face of the Greek master, but the class of boys stirred with a different murmur now, a single shocked intake of breath. Gull was not worth two halfpennies. Gull was a pauper.

'Sit down,' said the master, pressing a little harder on Nathan's shoulder.

'I have to go. I'm not allowed . . . ' But his mind was on seventy other things more real—vacations, coach rides, birthdays, conversations, all fallen irrevocably into the past. He must put right the mistake—rush home and prove to himself that his father was, in truth, perfectly well, really grafting apple trees in the orchard, or writing a sermon in the study.

The Greek master took the pirate book from under Nathan's arm and, opening it at random, placed it on the desk, bending the boy's head over it, giving him time to take in the dreadful news while the lesson

Even when the jackets started to pound on him, with their metal buttons and thick cuffs, he tried to go on dragging the box towards the door. He dropped *Bucaniers of America* from under his arm, and though it was his dearest possession, he hoped, as they grabbed it and broke its spine and kicked it from one to another across the dormitory floor, that it would at least give him time to escape.

But as the book disintegrated the boys turned back towards Nathan, twirling their jackets again, baring their teeth. They broke open the flimsy box containing all his worldly goods, and began flinging them about. Beaulieu pocketed the half-sovereign, Betterton the bag of pennies. They threw his commonplace book through the window, his good quill into the grate. They snatched the black gown off its peg on the wall and wrapped it round Nathan's head as they bundled him into the box and slammed the lid on his back. Down the stone staircase they bumped him—'Let's sail him down the river!' 'Let's set him alight!'—until the joints split and the wooden sides bowed and the lock dangled by a single nail. And all the while, the boy inside said not a word, uttered not a sound but for the grunts forced out of him each time his lungs were knocked empty. Who was there to call on for help? No one. He had no one in the world. He could not breathe. *'Our Father, who art in Heaven . . . '*

'Stop!'

It was not a master speaking.

'Stop, or I'll split you!'

It was a boy's voice.

The chest had rolled on to its lid, and Nathan had to squirm his way out of it, like a tortoise from under its shell, sliding blindly down the remaining stairs

round his shoulder, and together they walked down the school drive.

Tamo White lived outside school bounds, in a rented apartment in the town. Such things were permitted to older boys with large personal allowances or money of their own. White had a bank account with eight hundred pounds in it, and some guardian with even bigger sums in trust.

'My father wanted me to live a blameless life,' said White. 'But he also wanted me to have the proceeds. The proceeds from his . . . working life. Never saw any paradox in that, the old man.'

In place of the sabre, he held now a red-hot poker newly pulled from the grate. He plunged it into an earthenware jug of red wine. Nathaniel's eye never left the poker, reflecting the steam, the bubbles that spilled over, the shine of the silver tankard.

As Nathan studied the art of mulling, Tamo studied the boy he had rescued. Sleeves dangling, his shoulders slumped forwards; whenever he turned to look at something he did not swivel his head, but turned the whole set of his body, with a cautious, anxious stiffness. The blue veins made his shaven head look like a Stilton cheese, and his nose was red and sore at the tip.

'I wasn't there, either, when mine died,' said White. 'I don't know if they did things right. I've never even seen his grave.'

'Oh! A grave. I never thought,' said Gull. 'There has to be a funeral, I suppose.' He lifted the tankard to his lips and scalded himself on the hot wine.

'My father took it into his head, when he got sick, to send me back to England for a good education and

their blue jackets. And his ashes to be mixed with molasses and used to caulk rum barrels. For saying those things about Papa. Even if they were true. Which they weren't.'

Tamo swallowed. 'My word!' he said, and took the earliest opportunity to remove the jug of wine into the bedroom. Locke, in *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*, forbade wine or strong drink, and with a needy vicar for a father, it was probably the first time Goody Gull had tasted alcohol. Another tankard and the lad would either pass out, or go looking for Thrussell to punch him in the mouth.

As Tamo came out of the bedroom, carrying a jacket of his own for Nathan to wear, he was asking what Nathan meant to do next, whether he had anywhere to go, someone who would take him in. But there was no answer.

Gull had slithered out of the chair on to the hearth mat. He was asleep, in a drunken stupor, only his head on the chair-seat, his wet boots hissing among the embers.