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The Blue-Eyed Aborigine

written by

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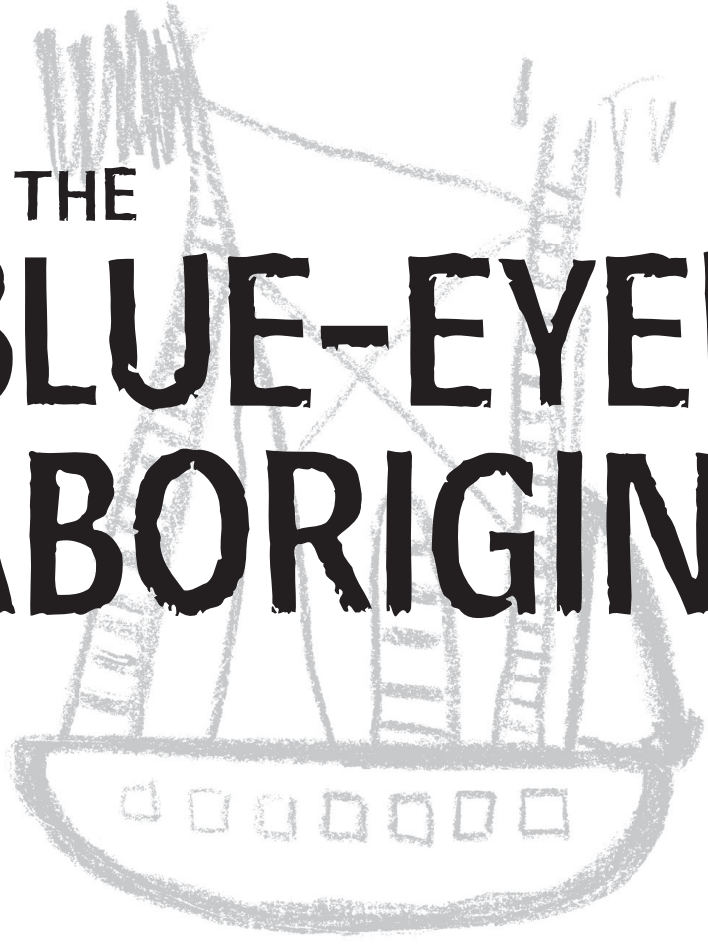
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THE BLUE-EYED ABORIGINE

ROSEMARY HAYES

FRANCES LINCOLN
CHILDREN'S BOOKS



Chapter One

June 1629

Jan Pelgrom was miserable. He'd been a cabin boy for more than five years.

He spat on the deck. Nearly eighteen – and still a nobody. A puny, spotty, ugly youth with no chance of promotion.

His fair hair was the colour of mouldy hay, filthy and full of lice. He scratched his head, but it didn't stop the itching. His bare feet were black and calloused, his jerkin was stained and stinking, and his loose shirt and trousers were worn out and stiff with salt. On board, there was no way to wash your body in fresh water, let alone your clothes. Some of the sailors washed their linen in their own piss, but Jan didn't bother.

As for the drinking water – it was stale and full of tiny, wriggling worms. And it stank! You had to hold your nose before drinking it.

Jan couldn't wait for the voyage to end. He'd never thought he would miss his life in Holland and the crowded shack in Bemmel he'd shared with his large family. Bemmel was a long way inland, but he had always wanted to go to sea and he'd dreamed of serving on one of the great ships that sailed to foreign lands. He'd fulfilled his dream but it wasn't the romantic life he'd imagined. There was only the monotonous reality of life on board and he often found himself yearning for the windmills and dykes and big wide skies of home.

This voyage had already lasted for nearly eight months. They were sailing on the new ship, *Batavia,* from Texel in Holland to Java in the Indies, and everyone was bad-tempered. They'd been frozen with cold in the stormy northern seas, fried by the sun along the coast of Africa and buffeted by gales in the Southern Ocean.

Now, at last, they were in calmer, warm waters heading north again. Only a few more weeks to go, God willing!

'Cabin boy!'

Jan dodged away, as an older sailor cuffed him.

'Go and turn the sandglass,' he said.

Jan shook his head and muttered, 'I'm not on till first watch.'

The sailor grunted, and Jan moved swiftly away in case he was given an extra job.

Cabin boy! He smarted, and kicked out at the ship's cat as it slunk past him.

Jan made his way to the upper deck where the Commander, the Captain, the officers and the rich passengers lived. His next job was to empty the chamber-pots. He sighed. Unlike the crew and the soldiers and the poorer passengers, the people on the upper deck could use the two lavatories with wooden seats that jutted out from the stern. Jan couldn't understand why they needed pots in their cabins as well.

Emptying the pots was a foul job, and he often slopped them on his way to toss the contents overboard. He scowled as he passed two wealthy passengers, who turned away from him and shuddered.

'Stinking boy for a stinking job,' whispered one, just loud enough for Jan to hear. Jan lowered his eyes and said nothing.

Backwards and forwards he went with his pots of piss. He preferred being in charge of the sandglass – or even waiting at the Commander's table. That at least was clean work. But he wasn't often asked to serve at table these days. The Commander and the officers liked to see the younger, prettier boys, not a pug-faced, spotty youth like him.

But at least he didn't have to muck out the pigs and chickens any more. By now, all the animals had been eaten – or had died.

Jan took a moment to stand on deck and breathe in some fresh air. He knew the lines of *Batavia* intimately. She was squat and square-sailed with a prow hanging close to the water while her decks curved sharply upwards. She'd been new when she left Texel, but now the pale green paint and red-and-gold decorations looked chipped and weatherbeaten.

Jan yawned, and headed for his quarters on the gun deck. There was nowhere else to go between watches. He and the rest of the sailors lived there, spreading out their palliasses and sea chests between the huge cannons. As Jan climbed down the ladder, the smell that greeted him was overpowering – a stink of unwashed men, vomit

and sweaty, filthy bedding.

As Jan made his way over to his palliasse, he passed a group of sailors huddled together in a dark corner. They stopped talking as he approached and waited for him to move away. It wasn't a happy ship, *Batavia*. People were always whispering in corners. The discontent seeped down from the top – from the uneasy relationship between the Commander and the Captain. Commander Pelsaert was no seaman. He was always unwell; and the Captain hated him.

But then, Captain Jacobsz hated a lot of people; it was best to keep well out of his way. He was an experienced sea captain but he had a vile temper, especially when he was drunk, and Jan was scared of him. Whenever their paths crossed, Jacobsz always scowled at Jan and, if he did speak to him, it was only to find fault. Luckily, Jacobsz only saw him when he had to serve at table or, occasionally, when he was turning the sandglass.

And Jan was becoming even more scared of the Captain – since an event a few weeks earlier.

Jan had been coming off watch after turning the sandglass. The moon was shining but its light was pale and at first he hadn't realised what the shape

was, close to the ship's rail. But he recognised the smell, the unmistakable stink of human shit.

Then he had heard moans, and he'd stopped in his tracks and turned towards the sound. Someone was there, lashed to the ship's rail. He went closer – and then staggered back in horror. The stinking, huddled mass was Lucretia van der Meylen, a beautiful, well-born young woman. She was writhing and moaning, trying to free herself. What had happened? He'd edged forward again, and by the soft light of the moon he had seen that she was half-naked and that her private parts were covered with shit and tar.

Jan had only hesitated for a moment. He knew that Captain Jacobsz was behind this. He wouldn't have done it himself – he was too clever for that – but he would have ordered it – ordered it as an act of revenge. Jan had seen him making advances to Lucretia and he'd seen her rebuking him sharply when he touched her glossy hair and suggested who knows what.

Then, 'I'll get help,' Jan had muttered, and he had run to the Commander's quarters and pounded on the cabin door.

'The Lady, sir,' he'd shouted. 'The Lady Lucretia's

been hurt!'

Although the Commander was ill, he had come quickly, and by now some of the other passengers had heard Jan shouting and were gathered on the deck staring at Lucretia.

One of the sailors had untied her, and a woman had come forward with water and a blanket and had coaxed Lucretia to stand up. Then the woman had taken her below, half-carrying her through the silent crowd that had parted to let her pass. Jan noticed that Lucretia's long brown hair had been chopped short.

Just then, someone had held up a lantern and Jan had seen a smirk cross the Captain's face.

Captain Jacobsz was not a man to be crossed.

Jan sighed, and settled down on his filthy mat. For a while he thought about the brewing discontent on board and prayed that they'd reach Java before anything bad happened. Everyone knew that Jacobsz despised Commander Pelsaert, but he was friendly with one of the other Company employees – the Under Merchant, Jeronimus Corneliez.

Corneliez wasn't an easy man to size up; he was quieter than the blustery, ill-tempered Captain, but he had charm and authority. Now he *was* a leader, and together, these two men made a powerful force – Jacobsz the expert seaman and Corneliez the leader. But there was something else about Corneliez – something steely and cold, something about his eyes that seemed to look straight through into your soul.

At last, despite the noise and stench surrounding him, Jan fell into an exhausted sleep.

It seemed no time before someone roused him with a well-aimed kick. It was time to eat.

They ate from a bowl of rations issued by the cooks, each containing enough for six sailors. Jan took his place next to the carpenter, Tweis.

No one talked much. Everyone knew what they would be eating. The fresh food they'd taken on in Africa was long gone. All that was left now was pickled or dried: dried peas, pickled fish, pickled vegetables. And ship's biscuit, full of weevils.

Jan ate his food hungrily and winced, as he worried at a rotting tooth. He'd tried to pull it out but it wouldn't come.

'Your breath stinks,' said Tweis.

Jan grunted. 'No more than yours.'

Tweis turned to the man on his other side, one of the locksmiths, and whispered something, giggling. But the locksmith scowled and said nothing in reply. Jan looked up and caught his eye, but the man looked away. Jan shrugged. Best leave him alone. Everyone had their moods.

Their meal over, Jan and some of the other cabin boys were sent to the orlop deck where the soldiers were housed, and set to work cleaning their quarters with buckets of seawater and a mop. But nothing could shift the smell of unwashed bodies and stale urine.

Jan hated the orlop deck. The space between floor and ceiling was too low for a man to stand and the cramped conditions made the soldiers ill-tempered. Many were French mercenaries, going to protect the Company's fortress in Java. They were a tough lot and the tension that existed between them and the sailors had led to their being quartered in a different part of the ship.

At last Jan finished and went back to the gun deck to catch a few hours' sleep before his midnight watch.

One of the other boys would come and call him in time to take his post turning the sandglass and

ringing the bell for the watch. The sandglass was the only way of telling the time on board and if a cabin boy failed in his duty, the consequences were dire. Jan had been a cabin boy for a long time and he'd been whipped often enough for his carelessness.

But this time he woke early. Something disturbed him. He lay dozing, enjoying the brief respite before work. And as he lay there, he heard whispering.

'What about the boy? Can he hear us?'

Jan tensed and lay completely still. He recognised that voice. What was *he* doing down here?

A short laugh. 'No. He won't stir till they come to wake him. Sleeps like a baby.'

Then some more whispers. Jan didn't catch exactly what was said, but he'd heard enough. Enough to know that, if he moved a single muscle or showed any sign of being awake, he'd be as good as dead. The voices grew louder again.

'There are plenty who'll be with us. We'll be a strong force.'

'What of Pelsaert? What shall we do with the Commander?'

Then that unmistakable voice again.

'Commander! Call him a Commander! He's useless! Can't make a decision. Sick as a dog most

of the time… he's no leader! We'll drown the man.' There were murmurs of assent. And then the whispers died down and Jan couldn't make out what was being said.

At last, the meeting broke up but, as they were dispersing, there was that voice again, speaking very quietly.

'So, we're with the Under Merchant, then?'

'Aye. Aye, we're with Corneliez,' muttered the others. Then there was silence and Jan heard someone leave the group. The men whispered urgently among themselves – whispering that stopped when, moments later, one of the younger cabin boys came down to the gun deck. As usual, the older men cuffed the boy and made jokes at his expense.

Then the boy was at Jan's side.

'Your watch, Pelgrom.'

Jan didn't move. The boy poked him.

Jan groaned. 'Get off. I'm coming.'

He staggered to his feet and rubbed his eyes.

The locksmith looked up. 'You could sleep for the dead,' he said.

Jan nodded. He didn't dare look the locksmith in the eye, for his had been one of the whispering voices.

But the other, the harsh voice which had scared him. That had been the voice of the Captain, Captain Jacobsz. What was going on? The Captain *never* came down to the gun deck.

Jan looked round nervously. There was no sign of Jacobsz now.

Jan made his way thoughtfully along the passageway and up on deck. He was glad to get away – not just from the stink and the cramped conditions, but also from the edginess and suspicion that was brewing down there.

He walked across to the sandglasses which were mounted close to the ship's bell and not far from the whipstaff. Jan didn't mind turning the sandglasses. As long as you didn't forget to turn them the moment the sand had run out from top to bottom – that was the worst crime.

There were three sandglasses, one set to run out in one hour, one in half an hour, and a little half-minute glass. Jan's job was to turn the half-hour and the hour sandglasses. And every half hour, during his four-hour watch, he rang the ship's bell. Sailors were put on four-hour watches throughout the day and night, and the bell told the whole company where they were in the watch and

when to change.

So it was one bell for the first half-hour of a watch, two bells for an hour, three bells for an hour-and-a-half and so on until, finally, eight bells for four hours.

And then Jan would go off duty and the whole thing would begin again. Another watch, another eight bells.

Jan enjoyed the first watch of the new day. It was a quiet time and he was only disturbed by a sailor coming in to use the half-minute glass and check the speed of the ship.

A gusty south-west wind filled the ship's sails and she sped forward. It was a clear, bright night and the moon revealed the shape of *Batavia* as she ploughed onwards to the north.

The hatches were battened down and the only light came from the moon and from the enormous lantern, five feet tall, which hung over the stern.

The first watch was the most difficult of the day. It was when men were at their least alert. This is why, Jan liked to think, he was often chosen for it. He was older than all the other cabin boys – more experienced. But it was also why the Captain often

came up on this watch, to assure himself that all was well.

It was nearly 3 a.m., towards the end of the watch, when Jan heard the familiar sound of a small doorway opening. He tensed, his stomach knotting. Jacobsz!

But Jacobsz didn't bother with Jan. He went to talk to the steersman, before joining the sailor on lookout, and the two men watched together, their shapes picked out by the moonlight. Jan glanced up at them from time to time, wondering what thoughts were going through the head of the Captain. Why had he been down in the gun deck? Why had he been whispering with that group of sailors?

Jan started to feel drowsy, and he shook his head sharply. He glanced at the Captain, hoping those sharp eyes hadn't noticed his drooping head.

But the Captain was talking to the lookout. The other man was shouting and pointing, his voice urgent.

'There's white water ahead, sir!' he cried. 'Could be a reef!'

Then the voice of the Captain. 'Nonsense, man. It can't be. We're miles from land.' He laughed,

and lightly punched the sailor. ‘Why, it’s just moonbeams on the waves, that’s all.’

Then Captain Jacobsz left the lookout and went back to speak to the steersman.

‘Hold your course,’ he said firmly.

And so when *Batavia* struck the reef a few minutes later, she did so at full speed with all her sails set.