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PUFFIN

PUFFIN BOOKS

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ALWAYS LEARNING

PEARSON

DEADWEATHER

Nobody lived on Deadweather but us and the pirates. It wasn't hard to understand why. For one thing, the weather was atrocious. Eleven months out of twelve, it was brutally hot and humid, with no wind at all, so on a bad day the air felt like a hot, soggy blanket smothering you from all sides.

And the other month was September, which meant hurricanes.

Then there was the volcano. It hadn't actually blown in ages, but it belched smoke and shook the earth enough to scare away anybody who might've overlooked the pirates and the weather. The only reason it didn't scare me, even though plenty of things do, was because I'd been born and raised halfway up its slope and didn't know any different.

That's how I felt about the pirates, too. There were two kinds on Deadweather: the normal ones, who hung around down in Port Scratch, drinking and getting into knife fights whenever they weren't off raiding Cartager gold ships; and the busted-down,

broken ones, who'd lost too many limbs or eyes or organs to crew a ship, but not enough to kill them outright. A few of those stayed in the Scratch, patching together a living in the taverns and the gun shops, but most of them hobbled up the mountain to work for Dad on the ugly fruit plantation.

I don't know what he paid them – it couldn't have been much, because we didn't have much. But I guess it was enough, since none of them ever staged a mutiny or tried to kill us all in our sleep.

They slept down in the barracks and mostly kept to themselves in the orchards, except for Quint the house pirate, who cooked for us and did some occasional sewing. Dad had his hands full running the plantation, so he left the rest of the housework to the kids – the kids being me, my sister Venus and my brother Adonis. I was the youngest, which I didn't much like. Adonis whaled on me every chance he got, and even though I fought back as best I could, he had three years on me, so I usually got the short end of it – especially after he turned fifteen and shot up past six feet, with shoulders almost as wide and thick as Dad's.

Fortunately, as Adonis got bigger, he also got more lumbering, so eventually I figured out I could duck the beating by running to the orchards and climbing an ugly fruit tree, way up to where the branches got too thin to bear his weight. He knew Dad would skin him if he hurt one of those trees, so he'd just glower at me from under his heavy, black eyebrows, and shake his fist and bellow that he could wait for me forever. Then he'd get bored and wander off.

Venus used to knock me around, too, right up until the day I got big enough to take her in a fight. She backed off for good after that, except to constantly tell me how stupid I was, and how Dad

had tried to sell me but couldn't find a buyer at any price, and how someday she was going to marry a Rovian prince and the prince would have me ground up and fed to his horses.

"They'll gobble you up, Egbert, bones and all," she'd say, sneering down her long, sharp nose at me.

At some point, I found out horses don't eat meat, but I never bothered to tell Venus. Just like I never bothered to tell her no prince of Rovia would ever marry a commoner, let alone try to find a wife by leaving the Continent and sailing thousands of miles across the Great Maw to a sweaty little pirate-infested island so unimportant it didn't even show up on the maps of the New Lands in *Geography of the World*.

There was no point in telling her any of that, because Venus ignored any fact she didn't like, and the ones she couldn't ignore, she screamed at. And whenever she screamed, Adonis would come running – not because he cared about Venus one way or another but just for the excuse – and I'd get slugged, unless I got to a tree fast enough.

And if I did, he'd stand under it and yell the same fist-shaking curse every time: "Treat a lady like that, I'll 'ave the pirates cut yer tongue out!"

Venus was hardly a lady, except in her own mind – she belched when she ate, and picked her nose at the table – and anyway, it was an empty threat. None of the field pirates could stand Adonis, so if he'd ever ordered them to cut my tongue out, the ones who still had legs would have kicked him in the shins.

But Adonis wasn't much for facts, either. Or any kind of learning – I'm not even sure Mr Sutch managed to teach him how to read properly.

Mr Sutch was our first tutor, and the only good one, which was probably why he didn't last. This was years back – I was just seven when he showed up, which would have made Venus nine and Adonis ten. I guess Dad had figured out by then that we weren't going to learn to read and write by ourselves – especially since the only book in the house was a chewed-up copy of *Principles of Citrus Cultivation* – so he'd sent out a flyer with the captain of the cargo ship that hauled the ugly fruit harvest up to the Fish Islands.

When the ship came back six months later, Mr Sutch was on it – all bony and worried-looking, and pulling out a handkerchief every two minutes to wipe the sweat-fog from his glasses. Right from the start, it was obvious he was a bad fit. The volcano and the pirates had him scared out of his pants, and on his first night, I overheard him out on the porch with Dad, complaining in his reedy voice that he'd been lured to Deadweather under false pretences.

Dad snorted. "Stuff! Don't even 'ave one."

"One what?"

"A wot-ye-say. A faults pretences."

"What I mean . . . is that your advertisement specifically indicated this position was on Sunrise Island."

"Nah, it didn't."

"Sir, if I may –" I was inside, listening from under the sitting room window, so I couldn't see them, but I heard a crinkling of paper as Mr Sutch unfolded what must have been Dad's flyer. "Right here, line three – it says 'Sunrise Island'."

"Nah, look – says '*roundabout* Sunrise Island'."

"No, it . . . that word there? It's 'roundabout'?"

"Wot ye think it was?"

"I honestly didn't know what that word was."

"Now ye do. Says 'roundabout'."

"That's not even remotely correct spelling!"

"Quint read it fine."

"Who's Quint?"

"House pirate. In the kitchen. Got stumps fer legs. Smart one, he is. Reads AND writes."

"Look, sir . . . spelling issues aside, this island is HARDLY 'roundabout Sunrise'!"

"Wot ye mean? Head down to the Scratch, 'op a boat, east nor'east . . . catch the wind right, be there in three hours. 'At's roundabout, seems to me."

"Well, I'd very much like to do that. And as soon as possible – I think it's the least you can do for me under the circumstances."

"Wot? Put ye on a boat? Can't. 'Aven't got one – I'm a farmer. And the cargo ship's sailed, won't be back till next season . . . Might get one o' the pirates to take ye, fer the right price. 'Ave ye got a gun?"

"What? No! I'm a man of learning."

"Wouldn't chance it, then. Man shows up in the Scratch with money in 'is pocket and no gun, not likely to go well for 'im . . . Looks like yer stuck 'ere, then. So – gonna teach me kids? Or ye gonna pick fruit? 'Cause them's the only jobs need doin' round 'ere."

Once he realized he wasn't going anywhere soon, Mr Sutch did his best to educate us. But it was a tough job. When he started, none of us could read a word or add higher than our fingers, and when we talked, we all sounded like pirates. That particularly bothered him, because he was a very formal sort, and he couldn't

abide the fact that we not only didn't speak what he called "proper Rovian," we couldn't even see the point of it.

"Ye understan' us, yeh?" said Venus. "So wha's the need fer all these *duh*s and *guh*s and *yoooooooo*s?"

"My dear young lady," he said – and kindly, too, not at all sarcastic, because it was still his first day and Venus hadn't bitten him yet – "how can you expect to grow up and marry a Rovian prince if you're not capable of speaking like a princess?"

Looking back, I do wish he hadn't put the idea in Venus's head that all she had to do to marry a prince was start saying "you" instead of "ye", because once it got lodged in between her ears, there was no getting it out, and for years afterwards, we had to listen to her natter on about it. But I guess it was effective, because unlike Adonis, she actually did manage to stop talking like a pirate.

The rest of the tutoring she hated almost as much as Adonis did. As for me, I loved it – not so much for its own sake, but because Mr Sutch was the first person I'd ever met who didn't seem likely to slug me at any second, so spending time with him was a real treat. I did my best to speak properly for him, and to read, and add and subtract and even multiply things, although the multiplying could get pretty tricky.

And when Venus and Adonis complained to Dad, I kept my mouth shut. Fortunately, they didn't get anywhere with their complaints.

"What we 'ave to learn things fer?" Adonis would gripe. "It's stupid!"

"Nah, got it backwards. Need learnin' 'CAUSE yer stupid."

"Wha's the point?"

"Good for ye!"

"Why?"

"Just is."

"Why?"

"'Cause yer mum wanted it!"

There was no arguing with that. So my brother and sister just glared daggers at me and went back to their primers, and whenever Dad was off in the orchards – which was most of the time – they made life as miserable as they could for Mr Sutch. Not that he needed much help to be miserable on Deadweather.

I was almost through the last of his primers and starting to like reading for its own sake when he suddenly disappeared. Venus and Adonis liked to say he was murdered by a field pirate, but the fact that he vanished right around the time a cargo ship lifted anchor for the Fish Islands probably wasn't a coincidence.

Dad would have sent out another flyer, but then the Barker War got going, and for the next year or two, nothing sailed on the Blue Sea unless it had at least twenty guns on it. It was hard times – for the last few months of the war, we had nothing left to eat but ugly fruit, which gave everybody the trots.

The war was named for the Barker Islands, way down south where most of the fighting was. Like all the shooting wars in the New Lands, it was between Cartage and Rovia. They were the only two Continental powers with colonies on this side of the Great Maw, and the only kinds of people around at all except for Natives, who didn't have any guns or ships and who'd been cleared out of the islands so completely that I'd never even seen one up close. There were still tribes of them on the mainland – that's where the gold on the Cartager treasure ships came from – but that was several days' sail from us, and there was no reason to ever go there,

since it was all wilderness except for a few Cartager ports like Pella Nonna.

The actual shooting only came near us once. It started as a distant rumble in the darkness, off and on, sort of like thunder but not quite, and at first it hardly seemed threatening. But Dad rousted everybody out of bed, loaded us down with all the food we could carry from the pantry and started marching us up the hill without telling us why.

He had his pistol belt on, and he carried his rifle, along with a big rucksack stuffed with supplies. Dawn was breaking, but the fog made it hard to see.

"Where are we going?" Venus whined.

"Time fer questions later. Just haul that pack."

"I can't! It's too heavy!"

"Then make Egbert carry it."

After Dad said that, Venus and Adonis both dumped their loads on me, which weighed me down so much that my legs were shaking when I finally caught up with them at Rotting Bluff. Dad kept a single cannon there on a rough stone parapet overlooking the sea to the north-west. We helped him load it – I don't know why, because from the sound of the battle raging out in the fog, there were a lot more ships than one cannon could ever stop. But Dad wanted it loaded anyway. Then we sat and waited, as the battle got steadily louder and more frightening.

"'Oo's fightin'?" For the first time I could remember, Adonis was curious about something.

Dad was hunched over the parapet, his elbows resting on it to hold his beat-up brass spyglass steady as he squinted through the lens into the fog. "Dunno. Cartager Navy, that's certain. Not sure

who's takin' 'em on, though. Might be Rovians proper . . . but I think it's the pirates."

"The Cartagers comin' 'ere?"

"'Ere or Sunrise. Could be both."

"Why 'ere? Sunrise got all the silver."

"Yeh. But them rich folks on Sunrise don't steal Cartager gold. Pirates on Deadweather been doin' that longer'n you been alive. Reckon the Short-Ears got a mind to put an end to it. Wipe out the Scratch fer good."

Ordinarily, Dad wasn't much for talking, other than to order us around – and the fact that he was bothering to explain things to us was almost as unsettling as what he was saying. Venus, for one, looked like she might cry. "Wouldn't wipe *us* out, would they?"

"Dunno why not," said Dad.

"I don't want to get eaten!" she cried. I don't know where she got the idea that Cartagers were cannibals.

Dad didn't, either. He took his eye from the spyglass to cock an eyebrow at her. "Nah, won't eat ye. Just slit yer throat."

Around mid morning, the fog lifted, and we finally got a glimpse of the battle on the horizon – two massive Cartager men-of-war and five two-decker galleons were slugging it out against just four single-deck pirate sloops, muzzle flashes blinking through the smoke that hung around their sides.

"Don't much like them numbers," muttered Dad, his face knitting into an even darker scowl than usual.

But as the hours passed, it was clear the pirates were giving better than they got. All but two of the Cartager galleons had gone under before any of the pirate sloops sank, and when the first of the big men-of-war keeled over around mid afternoon,

Dad – who hadn't lowered the spyglass from his eye for hours – gave a sharp huff of surprise that almost sounded like a laugh.

By sunset, it was over. The men-of-war had burned or sunk, and the last remaining Cartager galleon had been boarded and captured and was creeping back towards Port Scratch behind the two surviving pirate sloops. As he led us back down to the house, Dad's mood was so chipper that I heard him whistling to himself.

We were all headed for bed when we started hearing gunfire from the direction of Port Scratch. Venus got panicky and ran out to the porch, where Dad had settled in with a bottle of rum.

"Is it Cartagers?! Are they coming to eat us after all?"

Dad cocked his head and listened. "Nah. No invasion, that – it's a party."

"A party? For true? Can we go?"

"Nah, girlie. Pirate party's no fun for them's not pirates."

For a week afterwards, several times a day Venus would stop whatever she was doing, let out a happy little sigh and declare, "I'm sooooo glad the Short-Ears didn't come and eat us."

"Wouldn't a' minded feedin' 'em Egbert," Adonis would chime in. Then he'd cackle – no matter how many times he said it, it never stopped being funny to him – and take another swing at me.

BY THE TIME the war ended, we were half starved – and in my case, it wasn't just for food. I'd worked up a taste for reading from Mr Sutch's primers, but they'd all disappeared with him, and *Principles of Citrus Cultivation* was starting to get pretty tiresome, especially considering that it didn't have much of a story and I'd read it so many times I could recite big chunks with my eyes closed.

"What ye always readin' that book fer?" Dad asked me once.

"It's the only one we've got," I said.

He just scowled at that, but it must have stuck with him, because when the cargo ships started running again and he sent out a flyer for a new tutor, he wrote "MUST ONE BOOKS" in big block letters at the bottom of it. I secretly fretted over his spelling, but I didn't dare correct it – and I guess it got the point across, because when Percy finally showed up, he brought almost a wagonload of books with him.

I can still remember the first time I saw Percy and his books lurching up towards the house on top of one of the fruit wagons, the horses all lathered from the effort and Percy's massive belly jiggling at every bump. I practically fainted with joy – I'd never seen so many books, and I instantly knew the man who'd brought them to us was going to be the most important person in my life: a teacher, friend and saviour all rolled into one big, fat, sweaty package.

It turned out I was dead wrong about Percy, except for the fat and sweaty part. As horrible people go, he was miles ahead of Venus and could practically outdo Adonis.

When he first arrived, though, we all thought he was some kind of genius. Not just because he had so many books (which we assumed he must have read), but because he acted like a genius would – all scornful and disgusted with how ignorant we were, and capable of tossing around all manner of facts, seemingly off the top of his head.

Percy could tell you everything from where the wind came from (a giant hole in the sky, somewhere west of the New Lands), to why seawater was salty (fish poop), to whether you could multiply fractions together (you couldn't, and if you tried, they'd

break). And he spouted his knowledge constantly – that is, during the half hour a day when Dad was within earshot. The rest of the time, he napped. Unless he was eating, which he did so often that Quint took to hiding our pantry food in sacks out behind the woodpile. Sometimes, the rats got into them, but even when they did, they left more for us than Percy.

Percy sussed out pretty quickly how things stood in our house – that Dad wanted us educated but wasn't too clear himself on what that meant – so he struck a deal with Venus and Adonis that they'd pretend to learn while he pretended to teach them, and whatever else they did with their time was fine by him, so long as they left him alone.

At first, he ignored me and couldn't have cared less whether I read his books. So I dug into them, and it didn't take long before I learned enough to realize Percy was a complete fraud, and none of his facts made a lick of sense.

After that, he did his best to keep me away from the books for a while – mostly with a stick, which he could swing pretty fast considering how lazy he was – but the situation was no good for either of us, because it meant I couldn't read and he couldn't nap. So eventually we struck a deal of our own: he'd let me read the books as long as I kept my mouth shut about what was in them and didn't let on to Dad that Percy was a fake.

It was fine by me, because even though I hated Percy's guts, I figured if he left, he'd take his books with him. And I really loved his books. There were a hundred and thirty-seven of them, and eventually I read them all at least once, even the terrible ones.

The things I learned from them staggered me – and not just the immediately helpful stuff, like the eating habits of horses (no meat,

especially human meat, even if it's ground up) or the real reason seawater is salty (I forget, but it's definitely not fish poop). For the first time in my life, I realized there were whole other worlds beyond mine. On the Continent alone, there were cities, and countries, and kings, and castles, all going back a thousand years or more.

And not only did Deadweather turn out to be just a ragged little flyspeck in the Blue Sea a couple of hundred miles east of the vast wilderness of the New Lands but even Sunrise Island – a place that had always seemed, during the twice-yearly trips we took there for holidays and shopping, like the rich and bustling centre of the universe – only appeared in *Geography of the World* as an afterthought at the very bottom edge of the Fish Islands map, and wasn't mentioned at all in *A New History of the Rovian Kingdom and Territories.*

Once I started to learn about the larger world, I'd lie awake at night in my little windowless room off the kitchen, and imagine what it would be like to be part of it somehow – to live a life that mattered, to be and to do things worth reading about in books.

But I never thought for a moment it was possible. I wasn't high-born, or rich, or brave, or strong, or even smart – none of those things that made the characters in the novels and the people in the history books so special.

I knew the world was out there. I just didn't see a place for myself in it. And even if there might be, I had no idea how to go about finding it.

It never occurred to me that the world might come find me – and that without my lifting a finger to make it happen, one day my life would change, completely and forever.

But it did. And this is the story of it.