

PIRATES BOY

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E.B. COLIN



Kelpies

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To the *first three* pirates,
Theo, Frances and Oscar



**NORTH
AMERICA**

**ATLANTIC
OCEAN**

**THE CARIBBEAN
COLONIES**

SOUTH AMERICA



THE CARIBBEAN COLONIES

CUBA

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Jamaica

X St Pierre,
Martinique

X Caracas,
Venezuela

SOUTH AMERICA



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FRANCE





It is as we are sailing away that I hear him. Not a voice, but the faintest of splashing. I look down and see the small bump of a nose and a swirl of hair just above the ocean's surface.

'There's someone in the water,' I shout. 'A boy!'

Our captain, Black Johnnie, looks down and sees him too.

'Heave to!' he yells. 'Man overboard!'

'He ain't one of ours,' says Bart, the navigator. 'Are you sure? Fast in, fast out, you always say.'

'We have enough time,' he replies and nods back at the *White Stag*, the Merchant Navy ship we have just plundered. 'Look how she blazes.'

The boat is on fire: the decks, the masts, even the

sails, are in flames. It fills the night with the roar of burning timber and the leap of orange and yellow.

Heading for Scotland, the *White Stag* had been loaded up with sugar and tobacco, with molasses and rum from the Colonies. We had spied her from afar and then crept up in her wake in the pale glimmer of dawn. Rather than resist, the crew had welcomed us on board and declared mutiny. McGregor was the name of their former captain. After the crew had restrained him, we had tied him up with rope along with two soldiers sent to guard the ship. And then we had thrown them into a small rowboat with enough bread and water to last a couple of days and cast them adrift.

We took the *White Stag's* cargo, plus six trunks full of silver and gold coins we found in the captain's cabin, loaded it in our hold, then gave the crew their promised cut, a chest of French doubloons to split. Once the crew were all aboard the ship's dinghy, they threw a lighted torch into the *White Stag's* hold.

'Good riddance,' one of them had shouted. 'May your timbers sink to the bottom of the sea and rot!'

'And as for you, Captain McGregor,' another yelled, 'may the sharks be more merciful than you ever were.'

It clearly hadn't been a happy voyage so far.

As we keel round to pick up the boy, however, a

musket fires. In the spill of light from the blazing cargo ship, the rowboat appears. McGregor and his soldiers have managed to escape the ropes and now, to our surprise, they seem to be pursuing us.

'Who tied the knots?' demands Black Johnnie.

'You did,' I tell him.

He frowns, then looks as if he is going to deny it. But this is no time for an argument.

'Just get the lad on board,' he shouts. 'As quick as you can.'

The boy looks about seven or eight years old and should weigh next to nothing. And yet it takes four men to drag him out of the water. We soon realise why. Padlocked around his ankle is a thick metal chain, which plummets right down to the seabed. If we want to save him, we have to pull up the chain. And whatever is at the end of it.

Another bullet whistles past us. The rowboat is coming closer. We don't fire back. Although none of us would admit it, the guns we use for raids are only for show. Right now we have about two bullets between us. We have cutlasses and dirk knives in our belts, but they are not much use at this distance.

And so we haul length after length of the chain over the side as fast as we can. But it is a very long chain. Bullets begin to whistle over our heads and we keep

ducking to avoid them. Several hit our ship's bow and, like a tap turned on, a stream of seawater begins to pour into the hull.

'Is there more chain?' asks our captain.

There is more chain. Lots more. Our efforts are beginning to look increasingly futile. Sensing this, the boy begins to sob.

'You could cut off the foot,' someone offers, which only makes him cry harder.

'Not a good plan,' says Black Johnnie.

The same thought that has occurred to me must have occurred to him. Whatever is at the end of the chain is so valuable that the child has been made into a human buoy, whose body, dead or alive – as long as the fish don't get there first – will mark the spot.

'Work faster,' he tells the crew. 'All hands to it!'

The rowboat is so close now that I can hear the strain of effort of the men as they row. McGregor is standing in the bow, the musket in his hands aimed straight at Black Johnnie. Only the swell of the sea makes him hesitate. But as he comes nearer, the size of his target increases. Black Johnnie, however, hasn't noticed.

I open my mouth to shout out. But by the time I have my captain's attention it might already be too late. Since I'm eleven and not allowed to handle a gun, I raise my own weapon – a slingshot loaded

with pebbles – and fire. I hit McGregor square in the jaw so hard that he staggers and falls back into the sea with a loud splash. The soldiers raise their oars and rush to help him. The whole boat starts to list to one side; clearly none of them has had much rowing experience. Even as I watch, however, McGregor clambers out of the water and over the side. He is younger and fitter than he looks. As soon as he is back in the boat he scans our crew and picks me out. His stare makes something inside me run cold. At first I think it is the gash on his forehead or the hiss and creak of the blazing cargo ship behind him as it starts to go down. And then I realise with a shiver what it is. I've seen his face before.

'How much more?' Black Johnnie shouts as the marines slice the oars back into the water and start to row. 'We must be almost there.'

'Got it!' shouts one of the men as the end of the chain falls with a clatter on to the deck. Attached to its end is an ordinary-looking box made of lead.

'Bring to.' Red Will at the bridge reacts immediately. 'Keep her full before the wind! Aloft!'

Our ship, the *Tenacity*, is a schooner. With its narrow hull and shallow draft, she is one of the fastest ships on the ocean. We turn, the sails fill up with wind, then we billow forward and begin to slip across the sea

as smoothly as a swan. McGregor and the soldiers bob helplessly in our wake.

'Start rowing,' I yell back at them. 'If you're lucky you might reach dry land in a week.'

They do not look amused.

On deck, all attention turns to the boy. One seaman hurries below decks to find a gully knife to prise open his shackles, another to bring up a flagon of water or something stronger. But still he cowers beneath the bow looking terrified. It is not the fact that he almost drowned that frightens him. It is his present company: us.

'Are you pyrates?' he whispers.

'We are Gentlemen of Fortune,' I reply. 'Brave, proud and free.'

He closes his eyes, and seems to shrink – as if by sheer force of will he could make himself disappear.

I leave him alone, as this seems the only possible kindness, and find Black Johnnie standing on the bridge, a picture of elegance in his green velvet frockcoat and scarlet pantaloons. His hat is cocked and his boots shine like black glass. He gives a nod back to the rowboat. I can just about make out the furious faces of McGregor and the rowers, but we are moving swiftly away from them.

'Maybe we were a little harsh,' Black Johnnie says.

'In my opinion, that man deserves more than a pebble in the face,' I reply.

'So what would you advocate, Silas?'

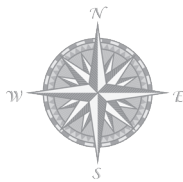
'I myself would like him immersed in seawater for a considerable time to see how he likes it.'

Only in the middle of my words, I yawn. I can't help it; I have been up all night. Black Johnnie smiles down at me.

'Would you indeed?' he says softly.

I hear it before he does: the firing of a musket at the very end of its range. The shot hits him in the left shoulder, with such force that he is thrown back against the rail.

'Well, I'll be damned, he got me.' Black Johnnie sounds surprised rather than hurt. And even though he is a grown man, he closes his eyes and passes out.





'Captain's been hit!' I yell. 'Black Johnnie's been hit!'

When the crew realise what's happened, every one of them drops what they are doing and runs to the captain's side. The surgeon, who doubles as the cook, lets the salt-cod stew burn, the watch is abandoned, even the Jolly Roger flag, in the middle of being taken down by the fourth mate, flaps loose on its ropes and then blows away. Only our course, the wheel secured by a length of rope, doesn't waver.

'I'll survive,' says Black Johnnie when he comes round. 'But look at my beautiful coat. It's ruined!'

The velvet is soaked right through, now black instead of green.

'I'll fix it,' I tell him. 'Or maybe I won't. In my

opinion, the colour never did suit you.'

'Indeed?' says Black Johnnie. 'Thank you for that.'

Everyone laughs and I'm not sure quite why. I feel colour rise right to the roots of my hair.

'Will you do something else for me, Silas?' the captain asks as the surgeon works on his shoulder.

'Of course,' I reply, thinking he is going to ask me to fetch him something from below, a glass of fresh water or a clean rag.

'Take care of the boy,' he says. 'We don't want him dead before we can put him off in a safe place.'

'But what about the box?' I ask.

'Leave the box,' he says. 'Let him keep it until his guard has dropped. We don't want to frighten him any further.'

How can I say no? The captain's injury is, in a roundabout kind of way, my fault. If I hadn't spotted the boy in the sea then none of this would have happened.

I find the boy curled up and fast asleep in the same place I left him. He is pale and small and the skin around his right ankle is red and bruised. His feet are bare and turning blue with cold. It is a wonder, not just that he has survived his ordeal, but that he has survived a life at sea at all. He has something wrapped up in his arms: the lead box. In

his sleep, he whimpers, and as I watch, he starts to weep.

‘No,’ he mutters in a dream. His voice is refined, Scottish, but not entirely so. ‘You let me be!’

If he were awake, I would set him straight. I would tell him that he need not be scared. I would assure him that he will come to no harm. If he believes that pirates are cowardly and cruel, lacking in basic morality and dressed in rags, then he has been fooled. Picaroons, buccaneers, Brethren of the Coast, are the most courageous, most generous, most colourful men that ever sailed.

He may have been told that the Golden Age of Piracy is over. It is true that the days of Kidd and Blackbeard, Every, Tew and Low, when the seas were abob with precious things and the gallows were nothing more than an idle threat, are gone. With so many ships ploughing back and forth between Europe and the Americas, and so much easy wealth to be made, the trade routes are now closely patrolled. If caught, a pirate can expect no sympathy. The sentence is death.

And yet, although we may be the last of our kind, I doubt that any of us would choose another life. Although our skins are black, white, brown, yellow and red, we dress like royalty in satin and silk and velvet. And no matter where we have come from, no

matter what we have done or what has been done to us, we have sworn on our life to equality, to loyalty and freedom. How do I know? Because I was lost and then was saved and now I am a pyrate's boy.

I will do as Black Johnnie asks. I will watch over the boy with the box.

While I am looking at him, however, his eyes suddenly spring open and he sits up straight.

'It's locked,' he says. But his face says more: *if you touch the box, I shall jump back overboard.*

