

VOYAGE OF PLUNDER

Being the true story of my, Daniel Markham's, capture by pirates, of my misadventures in distant parts of the world, and finally, of my falling into wicked ways, for which I suffered dreadfully.

CHAPTER ONE

There are few men in this world who can say they have seen their father die twice. God's truth, I might be the only one.

Mine is not a pretty tale, but it begs telling nonetheless. It begins when I was three years old, after my mother died.

When the men started coming to our home . . .

They slipped in and out like ghosts, shadows dancing from wall to wall. They talked in low whispers with my father. If the weather was warm, I would lie in my bed and listen to the whispers. For me, it was a comforting sound, like the water in Boston Harbor as it caresses the shore. But if the weather was cold, wintry, I would cry when left alone, my tears turning to ice, the heat from the warming pan long gone. One of the men would scoop me up, blankets and all, and carry me to sit before the roaring fire.

My favorite was Josiah Black. Ofttimes he sat me on his lap as I alternately turned my gaze from Josiah to the fire and back to Josiah again, pulling my blanket close. Josiah was tall. His skin was pale, his nose strong and sharp, his hair black and shining as a crow's. His eyes were like wells of ink, and he smelled of tobacco and rum. It fast became my favorite smell.

On these nights, my father would finally say, "Do you not think Daniel should go to bed?" 'Tis past the midnight hour."

Puffing contentedly on his long pipe, Josiah would reply, "There will be time for sleep later. Let the boy stay."

When I was seven years old, too big to be sitting on anyone's lap, Josiah Black took me to a hanging. I'd never seen a pirate hanged before.

There were three of them. I knew they were evil men—wicked to the core, doomed, for I'd heard it at the meetinghouse the Sunday last. I clenched Josiah's hand and watched the pirates kick the empty air, wondering if they could already see the gaping jaws of hell and the everlasting lake of fire.

When finally they hung still, and after I was done staring, I tugged on Josiah's hand. "I'm hungry."

But he seemed not to remember I was there, instead staring at the bodies that spun slowly on their ropes. His grip on my hand was like iron, his face hard.

We stood there a long time before Josiah said, "Come, Daniel my boy," and we went home to a meal of codfish chowder, bread, cheese, quince tarts, and ale. Josiah watched me as I ate, saying to my father, "Hanging brings out the hunger in Daniel."

There were other men besides Josiah, of course, men who stirred the shadows, whispering among themselves, sometimes peering anxiously out the window at a gathering storm. But by morning, like as not, none remained except myself, my father, and our few servants. The walls were silent. The men were gone. We were alone again.

The air outside my coverlet was often freezing. After my father would awaken me, he'd

press me to his bosom, tickle my nose, and tell me to rise and shine like a good lad. Then I would race to the kitchen hearth to sit in the chair at the chimney side, my feet scorched by the snapping fire, my front sizzling, my back shivering. And I would open my hand to inspect a trinket one of the men had given me the night before. A carved piece of ivory. A fancy coin. A tooth of gold. A pearl. A child's ring.

I had many such treasures.

Somehow I believed life would carry on so. That although the years would pass, nothing would change—the nights always filled with whispers, with ghosts, the mornings filled with treasure.

But all things change.

It began at the meetinghouse one Sunday in the form of a woman named Faith. The year was 1694, and I was twelve years of age. Faith was just a few years older than me. Sixteen, I think. On this day, I sat with the other boys on the gallery stairs. It was November, and I could see my breath. My hands and feet had frozen into lumps. But I dared not stamp my feet nor rub my hands together. If I did, I could be sure of a sharp rap on the head from the watchful deacon, whose duty it was to rap boys on the head. So I just breathed hard and watched the clouds of breath from all of us boys, like fog in the harbor.

My father sat by himself in a pew. The pews were of the hardest wood, straight-backed, meant for keeping one awake. They were divided into squares, and my father had the best pew square in the meetinghouse, directly before the pulpit. The Seating Committee had assigned it to him because he was a goodly man, the wealthiest, and had once been married to the governor's daughter. My father's name was Robert Markham, and he was a merchant. On that Sunday he wore a powdered periwig, its voluminous curls lending my balding father both warmth and dignity.

(Just that morning, while we were getting ready for Sunday meeting, my father had called for me; he had misplaced his spectacles and needed help finding them. After a bit of searching, I found them tucked in the curls of his periwig! We shared a hearty laugh, and I warmed despite the frosty air. "Ah, Daniel," my father had finally gasped, his eyes sparkling with tears of laughter as he drew me into a fatherly embrace, "whatever would I do without you?")

Now, at the meetinghouse, at the start of the sermon's second hour, the commotion began. If it could be called a commotion. A cough, weak and delicate, coming from the women's section. It was Faith Grey. (No one can leave during meeting, not unless one is dying. And so Faith coughed.) Heads turned. The minister frowned. The sermon paused, started, paused. I was relieved by such an interruption. I rubbed my hands and stamped my feet and the deacon didn't notice, so upset was he by all the head turning.

Then Faith stopped coughing. But even though she stopped, one head kept turning—my father's. Every few seconds he turned to look at her, not seeming to care that the minister frowned and the sermon faltered once again. I could tell by the sinking of my heart that things were about to change. And they did.

A year later, Faith Grey and Robert Markham were married, and Faith moved into our house. Immediately the men stopped coming. There were no more whispers, no more treasures, no more Josiah Black.

I hated Faith.

Skin pasty white, hair mousy brown, eyes not even brown or green but in between and so nothing at all. Plain, plain, plain was Faith. What my father saw in that drab mouse I cannot say.

She pretended to be my mother, once calling me “son,” smiling her drab smile. I told her not to call me “son,” that she was not my real mother. My *real* mother . . . Abigail, the daughter of the former governor of Massachusetts. Abigail, who died of fever when I was three years old. I had vague memories of my mother’s arms wrapped around me, the brush of her lips against my forehead.

I knew my real mother was beautiful, for I had a golden locket with her miniature and I had been told many times by my father while he sat by the fire with that wistful look in his eye. My mother had eyes the color of the ocean, like my own. Tawny hair streaked with gold—the color of a sunset—like my own. A smile that was not drab like Faith’s, but full of laughter and ease. A straight nose—a heavenly nose, my father called it—so unlike that round nothing-nose Faith was always blowing, raw, moist, and tipped with pink.

Often, I stared at my mother’s miniature, imagining what she would look like if she were still here. She would look nothing like Faith, of that I was certain. I snapped the locket shut and pressed it against my lips.

Now, when school let out for the day, I did not return home until late.

Instead, I visited my mother’s grave in the churchyard. I knelt, the tombstone cold and gritty under my fingers, telling her things I would not tell another. I told her my secrets and my sorrows. About Josiah, wondering where he was and whether I would see him again. About my father loving Faith now.

Once, lying beside her grave, I fell asleep; hours later I awakened, much stiffened.

The wildflowers I’d laid on the grassy mound were already wilting. I sat up, stretching, surprised to discover that someone had covered me with a cloak while I’d slept. And lingering on the fibers of the wool, I smelled tobacco and rum.

Josiah?

I jumped to my feet, casting my gaze about. The tombstones. The trees rustling in the evening breeze, pink blossoms falling gently like snow. The church with its towering steeple. “Josiah?” I said aloud.

But, alas, there was nothing.

Nothing but the beat of my heart.

In my fourteenth year, I began apprenticing at my father’s place of business.

It was located at the wharf, the sign reading ROBERT G. H. MARKHAM, MERCHANT. Inside it was cramped and cluttered. It smelled of beeswax polish, wood smoke, tobacco, and ale. I enjoyed working there because then I could be with my father without Faith around. I could pretend that everything was the way it used to be.

One day I sat at my desk beside the fire and watched as my father conducted his business. Beneath his wig, his features were soft, rounded, for he loved rich foods and fine ales. He talked with customers, with ships’ captains, added columns of numbers with a flourish of his quill pen. I grew drowsy.

“Done with your work, Daniel?”

I jerked my head up off my desk realizing with a start that all the customers had left. Outside the panes of leaded glass, it was dark. I must have dozed.

“Not quite. I’ll be finished in a moment.” Embarrassed to have been caught napping, anxious to please my father, I stifled a yawn and reached for my last bit of paperwork, rubbing a dent on my cheek where my quill had made an impression.

I studied the parchment for a moment, puzzled, still half groggy with sleep. It was a

ship's manifest—a list of cargo: iron ingots, sugar, gold, jewels, silks . . . A princely treasure certainly, but that was not what caught my attention; it was the ship's name: *Norfolk*.

I arose from my chair and approached my father. "Wasn't the *Norfolk* looted by pirates a few months back?"

"Eh?" He looked up from what he was doing.

"Wasn't the *Norfolk* looted by pirates? The news was all over Boston."

He frowned as if not remembering.

I held the parchment in front of his face. "Then why would we have its manifest?"

He took the document from me, studied it briefly, then put it aside. "I'll take care of it later."

"But, why—"

"Daniel, please. Not now. Pray be a good boy and listen to me. I must have a word with you about something else." He paused, glancing at me before looking away. "I've made a decision, son."

I held my breath, suspecting that things were about to change again, as at the meetinghouse two years before.

Digging in his pocket, he pulled out his snuff box and handkerchief. He inhaled a pinch of snuff, sneezed, wiped his nose, then cleared his throat, his eyes a little watery. "Now then. Daniel, you're a smart lad, and I'm sure you'll understand that this is difficult for me to say. Please don't make it harder than it already is. You see, Daniel, your mother and I—"

I stiffened. "She's not my mother."

For a few moments he said nothing, shuffling a few papers about his desk before turning back to me with a sad look on his face. "Yes. Well. I have decided that matters have become much too difficult here in Boston."

"What do you mean?" My chest squeezed, and I felt as if I could not breathe.

"What I mean is," he said, giving my shoulder a pat, "Faith is to have a child. Daniel, it sorrows me to tell you this, but I've decided that your mother's health is too weak for the northern winters. She's of a delicate constitution. Therefore, come the end of the week, we'll be leaving Boston, just the three of us. There is a plantation in Jamaica that my agent has secured—"

But I heard no more. I brushed my father away and fled the room. I don't remember opening the door, except there was a blast of cold air and suddenly I was outside. Running. Past the wharf, down the streets, dogs yapping at my heels.

Faith.

I hated her.

Compiled by Michele Torrey, author of *VOYAGE OF PLUNDER*.

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