

Moonfleet



J Meade Falkner



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MOONFLEET

J. MEADE FALKNER

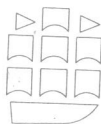
*Simplified and brought within the 1200 word vocabulary
of New Method Supplementary Reader, Stage 3, by*

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LONGMAN

LONGMAN GROUP LIMITED

London

*Associated companies, branches and representatives
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This edition first published 1935

Second edition (reset & re-illustrated) 1959

*New impressions *1960; *1961; *1962 (twice);
*1963; *1964; *1965; *1966 (twice); *1967;
*1968; *1969; *1970; *1971;
*1972; *1974 (twice);
*1976; *1977*

ISBN 0 582 53453 4

NOTE This volume is published by arrangement with Messrs. Edward Arnold & Co., the publishers of the original book.

*Printed in Hong Kong by
The Hong Kong Printing Press Ltd*

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I fell upon a mass of soft earth

One

IN MOONFLEET VILLAGE

The village of Moonfleet lies half a mile from the sea on the west bank of the River Fleet. This river is only a narrow stream in the village, but beyond the village it is broader and becomes a wide lake.

When I was a child I thought that this place was called Moonfleet because the moon shone so brightly on the lake. But I learned later that the real name of the village was Mohune-fleet, which had been changed to Moon-fleet in the course of time. The Mohunes were a great family who were once lords in this part of the country.

My name is John Trenchard. I was fifteen years old when this story begins. My mother and father were dead and I lived with my aunt,¹ Miss Arnold.

The story begins in the winter of the year 1757. I was reading a book about Aladdin in the hole underground, and the wizard who shut the door because Aladdin would not give him the lamp. The story made me think of one of those fearful dreams, when we dream that we are shut up in a little room, and the walls are coming in closer, and closer——

I stopped reading and went out into the street. The sun had gone down, but it was not yet dark. All was very quiet. I could hear a sound farther down

¹ Aunt = mother's (or father's) sister.



A sexton in a grave-yard

the street—tap! tap! tap! It was Ratsey, the *sexton*. He was cutting the name of some dead person on a grave-stone. I went and looked in at the door of his house.

“Here, John,” said he, “come in and hold the lamp for me.”

He was cutting a picture of two little ships on the stone. The men on the ships were fighting.

Under the picture was written :

DAVID BLOCK

AGE 15: KILLED BY A SHOT FIRED FROM
THE SHIP “ELECTOR,” JUNE 21, 1757

Everyone was talking about poor David. He was the son of Elzevir Block who kept the *Why Not Inn*. Elzevir had only this one son.

At that time much money had to be paid to the King by all who brought any goods into the country. The smugglers were men who brought goods into the country without paying this money. They brought their ships to some part of the shore where there was no one to see them, and carried the boxes and *barrels*

on to the land. The Revenue men were the men who were paid by the King to stop the smugglers.

Elzevir was a smuggler, and, of the two ships on the grave-stone, one was the smugglers' ship, and the other was the Revenue ship.

Mr. Maskew had much land near Moonfleet. It was said that Mr. Maskew told the Revenue men about the plans of the smugglers, and that he was in the Revenue ship when David was killed.



"Ah," said Ratsey, standing back to look at the picture on which he was working, "it was bad to kill a young boy like that. And they say that the three smugglers who were taken prisoners will be hanged. On Monday I will paint the flag red, and put black paint on the ships. Now walk down to the Why Not with me. Elzevir is very sad. We must go and talk to him."

I knew that my aunt would be angry if I went to the Why Not. But I went.

The Why Not was not the real name of the inn. Its real name was the Mohune Inn. The mark of the Mohune family was a big Y, and this mark was

painted above the door of the inn. And people called it, laughing, "The Y," or "The Why"; or the "Why Not."

Ratsey opened the door of the Why Not and I followed him into the room. There was sand on the floor and wooden chairs set round the walls. At each end of the room was a table. At the far end there was a fire—which gave the only light. Near the fire sat Elzevir, looking into the fire. He was a very large, strong man. Few knew anything about him, and people often wondered why he kept the Why Not, for he seemed to have plenty of money—but he gained little by keeping the inn.

Elzevir turned as we came in, and he looked angrily at me.

"Why do you bring this child here?" he said to Ratsey.

"John is not a child," answered Ratsey. "He is the same age as David, and he has just been helping me to finish the stone for David's grave."

"Yes," said Elzevir, "David lies in peace. But those who killed him shall have no peace." I knew that he meant Mr. Maskew.

The men sat down and talked. After some time, Elzevir looked up at me and said, "Boy, it is time for you to go home. Blackbeard walks about at night, and you do not want to meet him!"

Blackbeard was one of the Mohunes. His body was in a grave under the floor of the church. But it

was said that he could not rest there because he was always looking for a jewel which he had lost. There were few who would go near the church after sunset, for fear of seeing Blackbeard. Cracky Jones was found lying dead in the grave-yard one summer morning, and it was thought that he had met Blackbeard in the night.

The real name of Blackbeard was John Mohune. He was captain of a prison in which King Charles² was put after the war. The King had a great *diamond*. John Mohune said that he would allow the King to escape if the King gave him this diamond. The King gave John Mohune the diamond. Then, when the King was escaping, John Mohune caught him and put him back in prison. —This thing was discovered and orders were given to put John Mohune in prison. But he



The King gave him the diamond

ran away. He hid the jewel somewhere. And men say that he could not find it again, or that he could not reach the place where it was hidden. And that is why his spirit walks about at night.

Now I often went to the grave-yard; for I loved looking at the sea as I sat there. But I was afraid to

² King Charles the First was a bad King of England. The people rose up against him and he was put in prison, and afterwards killed.

go there at night. One night I saw a light moving about there. It was very late. No *man* would be in the grave-yard so late as that!

Two

THE MOHUNES MOVE

It was Sunday—a few days after my visit to the Why Not. The weather had been bad. Heavy rain had fallen; the river swelled and water covered a great part of the village. Only the grave-yard was dry, but the water had reached its walls.

It was late afternoon and I was walking with Ratsey. As we came to the grave-yard we decided to go across it, for that was the nearer and easier way to our homes because of the water in the roads. As we came through the grave-yard we met Mr. Glennie coming from the church, and we stood talking to him near a high grave which stood up, like a table, between two trees, one on each side.

The sun was going down, and the clouds stood in the sky like strange shapes of men, and the red sun shone through them, lighting them up. I was afraid to be in the grave-yard so late, and on such a night. I put my hand on Ratsey's arm, and was going to tell him that I must go home.



We stood talking in the grave-yard

Then there came a sound and I stood there unable to move for fear. For the noise came from under the ground. Old Mrs. Tucker was with us, and she cried out, "It is the Mohunes, the Mohunes rising from their graves," and she turned to run away.

"Don't be silly," said Mr. Glennie, standing there quietly as if nothing had happened. "There are graves under us, and some of them are as big as rooms, for all those of one family are buried together in the one place. The water has got in there, and the coffins¹ are being moved by the water."

¹ A coffin is a box in which the body of a dead man is put.

"Well, Mr. Glennie," said Ratsey, "you may be right, but there is a saying 'When the Mohunes move, it means death for someone.'"

"When the Mohunes move, it may mean many things," said Mr. Glennie; "but this time the Mohunes are not moving; they are being moved—by the water."

I was glad to get out of the place, and went quickly home. But, as I went, I was thinking of John Mohune, called Blackbeard, and the jewel which he had hidden. Perhaps he had hidden it in his grave. Perhaps he was still seeking it. Perhaps every night as the sun went down, he rose from his coffin and began to seek again the bright diamond for which he had sold his honour. I walked faster as these thoughts came to me. Did he seek only in the grave—or in the grave-yard?—or did he go out into the village, in the dark lanes and shadowy places?

And I remembered Cracky Jones.

The next day was Monday, and I thought that I would go to the grave-yard again, to hear if the Mohunes were moving. I would go not just at sunset, but a little before, and be out of the grave-yard before the sky became red and the shadows were too dark to see into them.

I came round the corner towards the big grave like a table,—and there I saw Ratsey and Elzevir. Ratsey had his ear against the side of the grave as if he were listening. Listening to *what*?

I could see that Ratsey was angry because I had seen him. I turned to run away.

"Ah, John," said he, "what are you doing in the grave-yard at this time of the day?"

I said, "I came to listen if the Mohunes were still moving."

"I cannot tell you whether they are moving or not," he answered. "I have no time for such foolish things. But the water has washed away the earth from under the stones and I have to set them right again. Will you run along to my house and tell them that I shall be late home this evening, for I must stay and do this work now."

I knew that he was finding a reason for sending me away; but I did not want to stay where I was not wanted. So I ran to his house and did as I was asked. But, as I left the door of Ratsey's house, I saw him coming down the street. And when he saw me, he laughed.

Three

UNDERGROUND

Now this high, table-like grave was a place where I loved to sit. For, sitting there, under the shade of the trees, I could look out over the sea and watch the

ships passing. It was clear that others loved to sit there also, for there was a path worn towards it as if many feet had come this way.

For several weeks after my meeting with Ratsey and Elzevir, I kept away from the place, but later I began to go there again.

One afternoon I was sitting in my usual place looking out to sea. The air was warm and everything was so quiet that I could hear old George singing as he worked in the fields on the hill-side. Ever since the heavy rain (which I have told of) the weather had been fine, with strong winds and no rain. This had dried up the land so that in many places it had broken in long lines, like a badly baked pot, and in other places it had fallen away into holes.

It was four in the afternoon and I thought it was time for me to go back home. Just then I heard a sound under me—right under the grave on which I was sitting, and I saw that the earth was falling under the stone, leaving a great hole so big that one might go through it on hands and knees.

Now there was never a boy who saw a hole underground who did not want to go into it. And it was so with me. I jumped down off the grave-stone and went, feet first, into the hole. I fell upon a mass of soft earth, and found myself standing up under the stone.

This was what I had expected. I thought that there was some sort of underground room and that the top of it had fallen, and so made the hole through

which I had come. But I soon saw that I was wrong. The hole into which I had come was only the end of a passage, and this passage led gently downwards. This was a wonderful discovery. The passage would surely lead to the place where Blackbeard had hidden his diamond. I thought what a fine thing it would be to get the jewel—how rich I should be!

It seemed strange to me that the passage was so clean and the air in it so good. I looked at the ground under my feet, and could see the marks of many feet on the soft earth.

I set out to go along the passage, holding my hands in front of me so that I might not run against anything in the darkness. For, as I went, the light became less and less. After a time there was so little light that I turned round and looked back. I could see the glimmer of light which came through the hole under the grave. But behind me was black darkness. A sudden fear came upon me, and in a minute I was pulling myself up through the hole, and was out on the grass in the grave-yard—out in the evening sunlight and the soft, sweet air.

I ran home to my aunt's house, for it was time for the evening meal. And there was another reason: I knew that I must have a candle. I had decided to go down that underground passage again, but I must have a candle to give me light when I did it.

✓ Four

SMUGGLERS' HIDING-PLACE

My aunt was angry with me because I was so late. During the meal she said nothing. And, of course, I told her nothing of what I had discovered. When the meal was finished she stood up.

“John, I have noticed that you are often out late at night. This is not good for a young boy. You must not go outside the house after sunset. Bed is the right place for children when the sun has gone down. I will now read to you.”

My aunt sat down and began to read. What she read was all about goodness, and “beautiful lives” and children who were too good to be true. But my mind was full of diamonds and Blackbeard and the underground passage. . . . At last the reading was finished. I kissed my aunt and went up to my bedroom.

That was the last time I ever kissed her, or lay in that bed.

The moon was bright. I did not take off my clothes, but lay down on my bed—and waited.

After waiting a long time I knew my aunt must be sleeping. I took off my shoes and went quietly down. I found a good candle in my aunt's store-room. Then I went quietly out of the house.

I kept in the shadows as I walked along the street.