

Reading Booklet

Year 6 Reading Assessment - Fiction



Moonfleet

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By John Meade Falkner

This text features two separate extracts from the novel *Moonfleet*, an adventure story about a group of smugglers, set in the eighteenth century on the south coast of England.

The village of Moonfleet lies half a mile from the sea on the right or west bank of the Fleet stream. This rivulet, which is so narrow as it passes the houses that I have known a good jumper clear it without a pole, broadens out into salt marshes below the village, and loses itself at last in a lake of brackish water. The lake is good for nothing except sea-fowl, herons, and oysters, and forms such a place as they call in the Indies a lagoon; being shut off from the open Channel by a monstrous great beach or dike of pebbles, of which I shall speak more hereafter. When I was a child I thought that this place was called Moonfleet, because on a still night, whether in summer, or in winter frosts, the Moon shone very brightly on the lagoon; but learned afterwards that 'twas but short for 'Mohune-fleet', from the Mohunes, a great family who were once lords of all these parts.

My name is John Trenchard, and I was fifteen years of age when this story begins. My father and mother had both been dead for years, and I boarded with my aunt, Miss Arnold, who was kind to me in her own fashion, but too strict and precise ever to make me love her.



'The Why Not?' was not the real name of the inn; it was properly the Mohune Arms. The Mohunes had once owned, as I have said, the whole of the village; but their fortunes fell, and with them fell the fortunes of Moonfleet. The ruins of their mansion showed grey on the hillside above the village; their almshouses stood half-way down the street, with the quadrangle deserted and overgrown; the Mohune image and superscription was on everything from the church to the inn, and everything that bore it was stamped also with the superscription of decay. And here it is necessary that I say a few words as to this family badge; for, as you will see, I was to bear it all my life, and shall carry its impress with me to the grave. The Mohune shield was plain white or silver, and bore nothing upon it except a great black 'Y. I call it a 'Y', though the Reverend Mr. Glennie once explained to me that it was not a 'Y' at all, but what heralds call a *cross-pall*.



Cross-pall or no *cross-pall*, it looked for all the world like a black 'Y', with a broad arm ending in each of the top corners of the shield, and the tail coming down into the bottom. You might see that cognizance carved on the manor, and on the stonework and woodwork of the church, and on a score of houses in the village, and it hung on the signboard over the door of the inn. Everyone knew the Mohune 'Y' for miles around, and a former landlord having called the inn the '*Why Not?*' in jest, the name had stuck to it ever since.

More than once on winter evenings, when men were drinking in the '*Why Not?*', I had stood outside, and listened to them singing 'Ducky-stones', or 'Kegs bobbing One, Two, Three', or some of the other tunes that sailors sing in the west. Such songs had neither beginning nor ending, and very little sense to catch hold of in the middle. One man would crone the air, and the others would crone a solemn chorus, but there was little hard drinking, for Elzevir Block never got drunk himself, and did not like his guests to get drunk either. On singing nights the room grew hot, and the steam stood so thick on the glass inside that one could not see in; but at other times, when there was no company, I have peeped through the red curtains and watched Elzevir Block and Ratsey playing backgammon at the trestle-table by the fire. It was on the trestle-table that Block had afterwards laid out his son's dead body, and some said they had looked through the window at night and seen the father trying to wash the blood-matting out of the boy's yellow hair, and heard him groaning and talking to the lifeless clay as if it could understand. Anyhow, there had been little drinking in the inn since that time, for Block grew more and more silent and morose. He had never courted customers, and now he scowled on any that came, so that men looked on the '*Why Not?*' as a blighted spot, and went to drink at the Three Choughs at Ringstave.

My heart was in my mouth when Ratsey lifted the latch and led me into the inn parlour. It was a low sanded room with no light except a fire of seawood on the hearth, burning clear and lambent with blue salt flames. There were tables at each end of the room, and wooden-seated chairs round the walls, and at the trestle table by the chimney sat Elzevir Block smoking a long pipe and looking at the fire. He was a man of fifty, with a shock of grizzled hair, a broad but not unkindly face of regular features, bushy eyebrows, and the finest forehead that I ever saw. His frame was thick-set, and still immensely strong; indeed, the countryside was full of tales of his strange prowess or endurance. Blocks had been landlords at the '*Why Not?*' father and son for years, but Elzevir's mother came from the Low Countries, and that was how he got his outland name and could speak Dutch. Few men knew much of him, and folks often wondered how it was he kept the '*Why Not?*' on so little custom as went that way. Yet he never seemed to lack for money; and if people loved to tell stories of his strength, they would speak also of widows helped, and sick comforted with unknown gifts, and hint that some of them came from Elzevir Block for all he was so grim and silent.

He turned round and got up as we came in, and my fears led me to think that his face darkened when he saw me.

