

You loved your last book...but what
are you going to read next?

Using our unique guidance tools, Love**reading** will help you find new books to keep you inspired and entertained.

Opening Extract from...

The Adventuress

Written by Nicholas Coleridge

Published by Orion Books

All text is copyright © of the author

This Opening Extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.
Please print off and read at your leisure.

THE ADVENTURESS

The irresistible rise of Miss Cath Fox

NICHOLAS COLERIDGE



First published in Great Britain in 2012 by Orion Books,
an imprint of The Orion Publishing Group Ltd
Orion House, 5 Upper Saint Martin's Lane
London WC2H 9EA

An Hachette UK Company

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Copyright © Nicholas Coleridge 2012

The moral right of Nicholas Coleridge to be identified as the
author of this work has been asserted in accordance
with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act of 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be
reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted
in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical,
photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without the
prior permission of both the copyright owner and the
above publisher of this book.

Except for those already in the public domain,
all the characters in this book are fictitious,
and any resemblance to actual persons living
or dead is purely coincidental.

A CIP catalogue record for this book
is available from the British Library.

ISBN (Hardback) 978 0 7528 8620 6
ISBN (Export Trade Paperback) 978 1 4091 1147 4
ISBN (Ebook) 978 1 4091 1438 3

Typeset by Deltatype Ltd, Birkenhead, Merseyside

Printed in Great Britain by CPI Group (UK) Ltd,
Croydon CRO 4YY

The Orion Publishing Group's policy is to use papers
that are natural, renewable and recyclable products and
made from wood grown in sustainable forests. The logging
and manufacturing processes are expected to conform to
the environmental regulations of the country of origin.

Chapter One

On a blazing Saturday morning in June 1982, there drove through the great iron gates of St Mary's Boarding School for Girls between Petworth and Horsham in West Sussex a long procession of smart family motor cars. At least two hundred Mercedes Estates, Volvos and Range Rovers, fully laden with parents, brothers and sisters, picnic baskets and dogs, were forming up in lines around the perimeter of the sports fields. The keenest and best-prepared parents had arrived as early as eight o'clock, in order to bag the shadiest picnic spots under the horse chestnut trees, or beneath the spreading boughs of the holm oak beyond the long-jump sandpit. For ten long days England had been held in the grip of a heatwave, and the forecast for today was for temperatures reaching the high eighties. After several years of cold, rainy sports days, no one could quite believe it.

Just inside the gates stood groups of girls in their games kit, waiting for their parents to show up. The school grounds were primed to perfection. For days, groundsmen had been mowing, rolling and strimming, whitening the lanes of the running track, and erecting tea tents and Portaloos behind the sports pavilion. Exhibitions of pottery were set up on trestles, and mothers in summer dresses and fathers in blazers and panama hats strolled between them, admiring their daughters' handicrafts. By the open hatchbacks of cars, families were spreading rugs and unpacking picnics and cool boxes and jugs of Pimm's with mint and slices of fruit, and tipping water into dog bowls for thirsty spaniels.

Watching all this activity from her window beneath the eaves of the main school building stood Cath Fox. She was naked but for red satin knickers and she was smoking a cigarette, held between forefinger and thumb, blowing smoke out of the window in great nonchalant gusts.

Had anyone barged into her room at that moment, they would have seen three tattoos of various shapes and sizes on her back, thigh and upper arm: a spider's web protruding above the elastic of her knickers, a scorpion on a shapely thigh and the word *Callum* stencilled into a heart shape. Since arriving at St Mary's, Cath had been careful to conceal the tattoos from her fellow staff members. Old Ma Perse – or Mrs Violet Perse MA (Cantab) as the headmistress styled herself – would have been horrified, as would Cath's boss, Mrs Bullock, senior matron. But she had shown her tattoos and belly button piercing to some of the pupils – the ones she trusted – and it tickled her to see the look of fascinated shock on their sheltered little faces. Cath was the same age as the sixth form girls, but sometimes she felt twice that; they'd hardly lived, most of them still virgins.

From the window Cath could see the whole of the school grounds spreading out beneath her; a hundred and thirty acres of sports fields and parkland. She looked down at the cars parked round the fields and wondered what they must be worth, that many posh motors, not even locked and keys left dangling in their ignitions. Callum would have had a field day; not that she was telling that tosser where she was living now, no way.

She stepped away from the window and considered herself critically in the mirror. She'd got her figure back; if anything it was better than before. Her stomach didn't have a pinch of fat left on it. And her tits looked perky; not as big as they'd been, but they stood up nicely. She glanced down at her ankles and frowned: a bit porky. The pupils at St Mary's mostly had better ankles than she did, she'd noticed that about them. She liked her face though, which everyone agreed was attractive, though her hair was too mousy in colour. Her eyes were large and brown and ringed with mascara. Overall, she liked what she saw, she was OK, quite sexy, she knew that.

Slipping into a long-sleeved cotton dress which covered her tattoos, Cath headed downstairs. First she took the narrow flight from the attic to the dormitory floor where the girls slept, then went through numerous fire doors which led down to the mezzanine, and finally the wide carved wooden staircase hung with portraits of retired headmistresses which took you to the front hall. Before it had been turned into a school, the house had been the private mansion of some loaded aristocratic family, the Haddon-Carews, and it still felt more

like a palace than a school to Cath. Her own school had been nothing like this, and that was the understatement of the year.

In fact, before she got the job, Cath hadn't known places like St Mary's even existed. She'd hardly ever left the Allaway estate in Wymering; the worst pre-war council development in Portsmouth, people said, long overdue for demolition. But now she was working at this posh girls' school, seventeen years old and a matron's assistant, folding and sorting laundry, pairing up socks, cleaning out basins, name-taping games kit, all under the controlling eye of that old witch Mrs Bullock. Cath hated the job but it provided a place to stop and a few quid in her pocket and it wouldn't be for ever. And it had its compensations.

Emerging into the sunshine of the front lawn, Cath wondered how she was going to fill her day. She was meant to be on duty serving teas in the marquee later on, but that wasn't until after speeches. There was a staff buffet going on somewhere, but Cath didn't fancy it; she thought she'd do better crashing one of the family picnics.

She strolled down the lines of cars and felt the approving looks of several of the fathers as she passed by. It was a pleasant feeling being looked at, even by dirty old goats in their fifties. Having seen their wives setting out the picnics, Cath wasn't surprised the dads preferred looking at her, and she swayed her hips as she paraded, to give them something to gawp at.

She hoped no one would recognise the dress she was wearing, which she'd pilfered from one of the girls' clothing cupboards earlier in the week. One of the advantages of tidying the dorms during lessons was having free access to their stuff. When she saw something nice from Miss Selfridge or Chelsea Girl, she took her pick. After all, most of the girls had more than enough already, didn't they?

Not far beyond the all-weather netball court, Cath spotted Annabel. Annabel Goode was one of the pupils Cath was friendly with, who'd been shown the tattoos. You could almost say they'd become mates, sort of, though Annabel only knew about the parts of Cath's life she'd chosen to tell her. Not the thieving or Callum and certainly not Jess. In any case, Cath had no illusions. Annabel and the other pupils at St Mary's came from totally different worlds; they could never be genuine mates, it wasn't going to happen.

Annabel saw Cath approaching and gave her a big, friendly smile.

‘Miss Fox, hi, come and join us.’ With her happy, open face, lustrous brown hair, English-rose skin and perfect white teeth, she was one of the prettiest girls at St Mary’s, and one of the nicest. When old Ma Perse the headmistress required a senior pupil to show prospective parents around the school, she often chose Annabel Goode, because anyone who spent an hour or two in her company invariably decided to send their daughter there, hoping they would turn out like Annabel.

‘I want you to meet my parents,’ Annabel said. ‘Mummy, Daddy, this is Miss Fox I was telling you about, the one who’s our favourite matron.’ Cath was introduced to Annabel’s father, Michael Goode, a dark-haired man of about forty-eight and not bad looking, and her mother Felicity, a pretty blonde with an eager, submissive face.

‘You know Miss Fox and I are actual twins?’ Annabel told her parents. ‘She was born on April the twenty-third 1965 as well.’

Michael Goode, who had assumed Cath was several years older than his daughter, looked surprised.

‘Would you like to join our picnic?’ Annabel asked. ‘We’ve got way too much food. We’ve joined up with Sophie and Mouse’s families and everyone’s brought masses.’

‘Please do join us, if you’d like to,’ said Felicity, Annabel’s mother, and Michael nodded encouragement and handed her a tankard of Pimm’s.

Soon Cath was sitting on tartan picnic rugs with the Goodes, the Peverels and the Barwell-Mackenzies, who had parked their cars together and assembled tables and many fold-up chairs for their shared sports day picnic. Felicity Goode, who was known as Flea, unpacked two large serving dishes of coronation chicken, Mrs Peverel produced a fricassee of chicken and Mrs Barwell-Mackenzie a Pyrex dish containing cold roast chicken legs, bowls of tomatoes and hard-boiled eggs. Punnets of strawberries and cartons of Cadbury’s Mini Rolls and Mr Kipling apple and almond tarts were set out on Pyrex plates. Soon Cath was introduced to Annabel’s younger brother and sister, and Annabel begged Cath to show them her tattoos, since they had never seen a real tattoo before. With a sigh, Cath rolled up the hem of her dress to reveal the scorpion. But the children seemed less enthralled by the tattoo than the fathers, who leant forward the better to see it, with great exclamations of interest and encouragement. Michael

Goode was particularly impressed and wondered aloud whether he should get one himself.

‘Please not, thank you very much, darling,’ said Felicity, with a nervous frown.

‘I wasn’t actually asking your opinion, Flea,’ Michael replied. ‘I was asking Miss Fox. What do you reckon, Miss Fox, do you think it’d be an improvement if I got a tattoo done?’

Cath held him with a bold stare before bashfully dropping her eyelids.

‘Up to you, Mr Goode. They look cool, if you choose the right thing.’

‘What do you recommend then? A mermaid? An anchor on my arm?’

‘What about a one-eyed trouser snake, Michael?’ joked Mr Peverel, who was a friend of long-standing. ‘Bloody agony to have it done though . . . can’t say I’d be brave enough to get a tattoo myself.’

‘But Miss Fox has one,’ Michael reminded him. ‘Sparky lady.’

‘No, Dad,’ said Annabel. ‘She’s got *three* tattoos, not just one. And a *piercing*.’

‘Has she indeed?’ replied her father, looking at Cath with renewed interest. ‘This expensive school of yours must be more exciting than I realised, Annabel.’ And he retrieved a corkscrew from the picnic basket and opened another bottle of wine.

Sports day was now officially the hottest day of the year. According to the car radio it had topped ninety degrees in Haslemere, which wasn’t that far from St Mary’s. The 1500 metres inter-house relay was cancelled, it being decreed too hot for such a long-distance race. An Airedale terrier almost died having been locked in a boiling Rover whilst its owners were watching the long jump. An elderly grandparent suffered sunstroke and had to be taken inside to lie down in sick bay. All over the playing fields, picnics were running low on bottled water and juice and having to fall back on alcohol.

At the Goodes’ picnic, girls and their siblings kept peeling off to compete in events, and Cath accompanied Annabel to watch her younger sister, Rosie, take part in the brothers-and-sisters race. When they returned to the picnic, the three families were discussing their forthcoming summer holidays to Corfu, Sardinia and Cornwall. Cath was only too aware, from listening to the girls’ conversations in

the dormitories, that they all took glamorous holidays in the summer, with villas in the sun, or cottages at the seaside in Devon, Cornwall or Norfolk. Some of the girls went away all summer long, staying with schoolfriends in different locations.

‘And what about *you*, Miss Fox?’ Michael Goode asked. ‘Are you getting away anywhere nice this summer, once you’ve got shot of the girls? I should think you’ll need a good holiday by then.’

But Cath replied that she had no plans. If truth be told, she had no clue where she’d go or what she’d do – she could hardly go back to Portsmouth – but she didn’t say that to Mr Goode.

‘Tell you what,’ said Michael. ‘Here’s an idea – why not come down to Cornwall with us for a bit? We were just saying we’ll need someone to help us with the kids and the cooking. We’d pay you, of course. Wouldn’t that be a good solution, Flea? Take Miss Fox to Rock as an extra pair of hands?’

Felicity looked like she wasn’t convinced, but Annabel loved the idea. ‘Oh, Miss Fox, *do* come, please say yes. It’s so amazing in Rock, you’ll love it. There’s this great sandy beach and masses of our friends go. And you can surf. We take this house right by the beach.’

‘I’d like that,’ replied Cath. ‘Cornwall, yeah, that’d be OK.’

And so the plan was made. Cath would join the Goodes in Rock for the first three weeks of July. She would be paid forty pounds a week and be expected to prepare breakfast, do some food shopping each morning, tidy round and keep an eye on the younger children, living as part of the family.

Annabel promised her she’d have an amazing time.

Michael advanced her money for her train fare to London, from where she would travel down to Rock by car with the Goodes.

If Flea had misgivings about the scheme, she could not think of any reasonable grounds on which to object to it, and so she kept them to herself.

Cath had many secrets, but some of her secrets were buried deeper than others. There were lifestyle secrets, like her tattoos and piercings she realised would make problems for her, should they become widely known in the stuffier quarters at St Mary’s. Then there was the secret of her Thursday afternoons in Petworth, which she knew would get her sacked instantly if any of that ever came out, and would

conceivably put her inside as well. Which would be an irony seeing as how she'd vowed not to end up like her dad, in and out of prison all his life. Last time she'd been in Petworth, the lady at the stall in the antiques market had given her a peculiar look and offered much less money than usual, which put Cath on her guard. Perhaps she should travel to Brighton next time, but it was a lot further to get to. But these were not the secrets that kept her awake at night.

She was sitting in the matrons' room, ostensibly unpacking baskets of clothes from the school laundry. There were several dozen pairs of knickers, bras, summer Aertex shirts, nighties, pyjamas, mufti – the St Mary's name for home clothes – all waiting to be sorted and placed on the foot of the girls' beds or in their lockers. She was no stranger to the lockers, having rifled through several of them earlier that day. The haul lay in her pocket now; a tangle of gold and silver chains wrapped inside a Kleenex tissue. There had been richer pickings than usual, since she'd targeted the fourth form dorms in which several girls had recently been confirmed. Cath had learnt how generous the girls' godparents could be at confirmations. She had three gold crosses on chains, two charm bracelets and a seed pearl necklace as proof.

You could say it was reckless but Cath saw it as a calculated risk. In her next break, she'd take the haul up to the attic and hide it under the loose floorboard behind the water tank. The water tank was next to her bedroom, but in the unlikely event of anyone discovering it, no one could pin anything on her. And they'd be disposed of soon enough in any case.

Sometimes, when she thought about it, she was amazed how simple it was to nick stuff at this school. There was so much of it lying around, like Aladdin's cave or Ali Baba's cave or whatever: clothes, jewellery, shoes, cassettes, fountain pens, all crammed into lockers and bedside cabinets. Mrs Perse had recently given the girls a lecture at assembly about stealing, after Cath had done over the first year dorms, but Cath had just sat there, gazing innocently into space.

It had started slowly enough, when she opened a package addressed to a girl named Nicola Sturridge. All incoming parcels at St Mary's had to be opened in the matrons' room, in case they contained contraband cosmetics or tuck. Cath had been intrigued by a Jiffy bag with a Cartier label, and thought she'd take a look while the girls were in chapel. Inside was a beautiful travel clock in a red crocodile case; you

could see it was worth a mint. Before she'd thought twice, Cath had slipped it into her pocket and chucked the packaging. It was child's play, no one even knew Nicola had received a parcel.

A couple of days later she'd taken the clock into Petworth. Petworth was one of those stuck-up English market towns, full of genteel tea shops with spinning wheels and scones, and antiques shops flogging barometers and grandfather clocks. She walked round the whole place looking for somewhere that might buy the Cartier clock off her. After a couple of rebuffs, she found an antiques market selling old Victorian postcards, teacups and pincushions. One of the stalls dealt in jewellery, and the lady with her hair in a bun offered thirty quid for the clock in cash, no questions asked.

After that, it became a weekly fixture, visiting Petworth. It was what she did on her afternoons off.

She liked keeping busy, so as not to dwell too much on Callum and what might be going on at home. You could work yourself into a right state if you allowed yourself to. She hated her mum and couldn't get the picture of her out of her mind – she'd never forgive her, the dirty old tart. And she wouldn't forgive Callum either, even if her mum had initiated it as he kept on claiming. But Callum had looked like he was enjoying it well enough, that's how it had seemed to Cath when she'd discovered them together. Disgusting. How could he betray her like that? Especially considering the kid. It was Jess's *nan* he was shagging, for Christ's sake! Well, fuck them. She was well shot of the lot of them, she knew that.

But she did still wonder, especially at night when she couldn't get off to sleep, obsessing over their affair and what had happened with Jess. And she missed her brothers. She wondered how Doyle was getting along without her; he was all right, Doyle. And how Bodie was doing at his new school. And if she was honest she missed Callum too: she'd been with Callum three years, since she was fourteen, off and on. Well, she knew where to find him, at the door of Nero's, keeping out the scummers. That's where Cath had first seen him, the hardest bloke she'd set eyes on. It had taken her three Saturdays in a row to nail him; she didn't let on for weeks she was under age. A lot of people in Pompey had been jealous of her when she'd got Callum – there were enough women after him, everyone fancied nightclub bouncers.

Did she miss Jess? Cath wasn't sure you could miss a baby. Don't

get me wrong, she thought, it's not like she had a *problem* with babies, it's just with Jess not being able to speak, or do little beyond cry all day, she didn't feel much for her one way or the other. And then Callum went and ruined everything, just when they were talking about getting married and making it official, for Jess's sake as much as their own, by jumping in the sack with her own mum.

The very next day Cath had left town. Far as she was concerned, she wasn't bothered if she never clapped eyes on Portsmouth or any of them ever again.

The bell rang for lunch and Cath headed down to the dining room. One of her duties was to supervise the girls' tables in the big dining hall, pulling them up on their table manners and looking out for anorexics. Cath thought it was rather funny, considering what she knew about fine table manners could be written on the back of a stamp. They hadn't eaten at a table at home more than twice in her life, not even at Christmas. The Fox family ate their meals on the couch in front of the TV; her dad had been in prison for the past three years in any case, eating off a Styrofoam tray in front of another TV in his cell.

Cath took her place at table 17. At the head of the table sat Colin Woodruff, the geography teacher with whom she sometimes had casual sex. He was an OK bloke with a Hillman Hunter and a fondness for village pubs, and he helped pass the time and kept her mind off Callum. At lunch, she listened to the prattle of thirteen-year-old girls about ponies, pop music and their impending summer holidays. All the places they were going to – Paxos, Malaga, the Algarve – Cath hadn't heard of before she arrived at St Mary's, but already they seemed almost familiar. Talking to the pupils was an education. Sharp as a needle, Cath knew she was absorbing a lot, about where families like these lived, their preferred counties, cars, servants, prejudices and assumptions. She even found herself picking up on their pronunciation and vocab.

Across the dining hall she spotted Annabel in animated conversation with her table of friends. They looked so carefree and innocent, Cath didn't know whether she felt envious or contemptuous. Annabel sensed she was being watched, looked up and saw Cath, smiled, and gave a pretty little wave. Annabel felt there was no one she admired in the world quite so much as Cath Fox, with the possible exception of

her father. Cath was so pretty and wore clothes so well, and was way more sophisticated than any of the girls at school. She'd had proper boyfriends and worked in bars and sold candy floss at a funfair. In the evenings, before lights out, Miss Fox sometimes came into the dorm and perched on the end of their beds and talked to Annabel and her friends, and they envied the things she'd seen and done. When she'd first shown them her tattoos, it was a sign she trusted them. It was deliciously subversive.

Cath wondered what it would be like, going on her holidays with the Goode family.