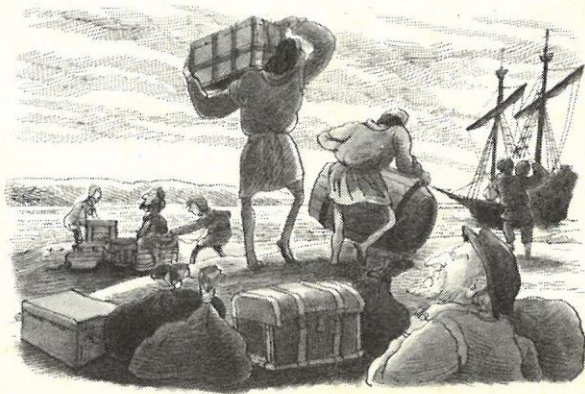


Chapter Three

Rats and Ropes

The October dawn was damp and drizzly. Most dawns are on the west coast of Ireland. The men in our pirate crew hurried to their ships with heads down and backs loaded with food sacks and water barrels, weapons and tools.



The ship smelled of tar where the planks had been patched to keep the grey waters out. I stepped onto the shaking gangplank. Or maybe it was a steady gangplank and it was my *legs* that were shaking. No one tried to stop me. I darted into the cabin on the stern deck and waited in the dark with only a family of rats for company.



At last, I felt the ship begin to move and the old oak timbers creak as they twisted in the waves. Feet ran over the decks, ropes and pulleys cracked and clacked in the

breeze, and men shouted to one another over the crash of the waves against the hull.

I rose stiffly and sent the rats scuttling into a hole in the cabin wall. I opened the door and cold spray hit me in the face like a slap with a wet fish. My ma was standing by the steering oar at the stern, looking at a yellowed chart and talking to the steersman.

“When we’ve passed Lands End, head east-north-east,” she was saying.

I said, “Hello, Ma!” and waited to see her scarred face burst into a smile like sunshine. She turned. Her face was as grey as a thundercloud and twice as dangerous. “What are you doing here, you idiot child?” she screamed.

“Doing what *you* did, Ma! Going off to sea to be a pirate,” I said. I tried to sound cheerful, but my voice was shaking.

“I’m not having you eating the food or drinking the water that my crew need. I’m not having you getting under our feet when we fight. I’m not having you bring bad luck to this voyage,” she said sternly.

“I won’t, Ma,” I croaked and I felt tears bubbling behind my eyes.



Ma turned to a passing sailor. “Throw this child overboard.”

“But, Ma –” I began to wail, as the man strode towards me. His hand touched my wet leather jerkin and I wriggled away.

I jumped down onto the main deck and headed for the mast. The crew stopped work to watch the fun as the pirate stalked after me.

Ropes hung down from the mainsail and I gripped one. I hauled myself up and felt the sailor’s hand on my shoe. I pulled upwards and the shoe came away in his hand, but at least I was free.



I kept climbing till I reached a small platform – the crow’s nest – at the top of the mast. In the wind it swayed like a willow tree. I clung on tight.

“You’ll come down when you’re cold or hungry enough,” Ma snarled. “Or you’ll fall asleep and drop into the sea.”

“Ma-a-a-a!” I sobbed. “You wouldn’t throw your own daughter into the sea. You wouldn’t!”

I don’t know if she really would. I’ll never know. Maybe she was just trying to frighten me, to teach me a lesson. But the mast shook in the wind, and I slipped off the platform. I reached out and felt a rope. I held it with hands as tight as a



hare-hound's jaws. As I flapped around like a fish in a basket, I looked out over the sea. "Sail!" I cried. "I see a sail. Another ship!"

Ma ordered a small sailor, "Get up there and see what it is."

The man climbed like a monkey. He pushed me roughly back up into the crow's nest and joined me.



"English cog!" he shouted. "Trade ship."

Slow and low in the water. Fully loaded, I'd say, Ma'am. North by north-west, I reckon."

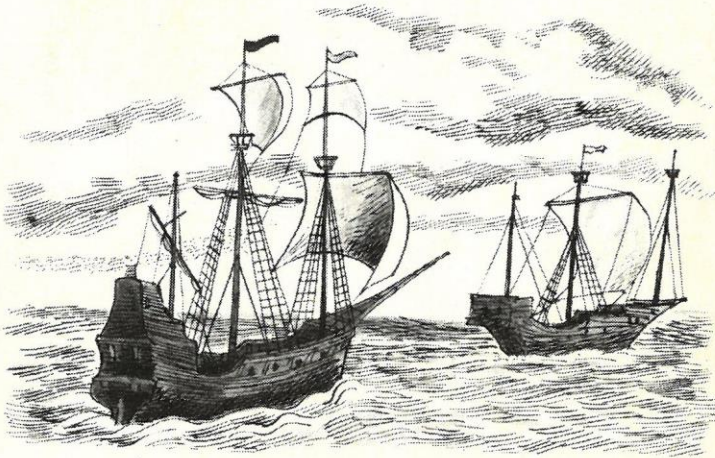
"Crew to attack stations!" Ma roared.

Men raced across the deck to haul out the cannon and collect weapons. The monkey-man helped me down to the deck.

My cold swim was forgotten.

Chapter Four Whiskers and Warships

Ma had a black flag hauled to the top of our mast. It was a sign to the other ship to stop or die.



The crew of the English ship lowered their sail. They knew it was no use trying to outrun us – they were too slow. They stood at the side rails and stared, sullen and afraid.



“I’m Grace O’Malley,” Ma called across, “the greatest pirate that ever lived. We are coming alongside. We will take a share of your goods and not harm you,” she promised. “What are you carrying?”

"Linen and woollen cloth. A little silk," an English sailor called back.

Ma grinned at me. "Silk, Catherine. You'll have a new dress when we get home."

"So you're not going to throw me in the sea?"

She shrugged. "Only if the ship is too crowded," she joked. At least, I think it was a joke.

It took most of the morning to carry the bales of cloth across. Slowly, the English ship grew lighter and rose, and ours sank lower. When the last of the cloth was on board, the cog sailed back to Plymouth and we turned around slowly.

Our ship was riding in the water like a fallen tree. "We'll be in Dublin this time tomorrow," Ma told the crew. "Our prize will fetch a good price in the market. And we didn't even have to sail to Spain."

A small man with the face of a mouse and a thin, whiskery beard stepped forward. I knew he was Seaman Michael Paterson. "Three cheers for Captain Grace O'Malley, Pirate Queen of Ireland. Hip, hip – "

"Ship ahead!" came a cry from the crow's nest.

The cheer from the crew died in their throats.



"We haven't room below deck to take any more loot," Ma called back. "Let it go."

"It's an English warship, Captain Grace. And it's heading this way," the lookout called.

"Set sail for Ireland!" Ma cried, and the crew raced to raise the sails. But now we were low in the water and heavy with that cloth. We were as slow as the cog we'd just robbed.

The English warship drew closer and we could see her sailors loading the cannon on the decks.



"What do we do, Captain?" Paterson moaned. "They have twenty guns, we have six. They'll blow us out of the water."

Grace O'Malley wrapped a large arm around his shoulder and grinned. "No, they won't, Seaman Paterson. No, they won't. Gather round, crew – I have a plan. After all, I *am* the greatest pirate that ever lived."



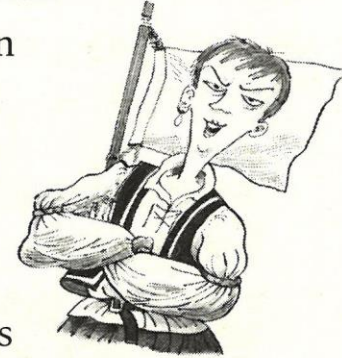
"Gather round, crew!" Paterson shouted. "Captain O'Malley has a wonderful plan to save us all."

When the sailors gathered on the deck, my ma spoke quietly over the sound of the slapping waves. “Now, lads, we’re in a tight spot. But we’re still alive. If we stand and fight, we’ll probably die. So what I think we should do is surrender.”



“No-o-o-o,” Paterson moaned. “They’ll take us back to Plymouth and hang us all. I’d rather die fighting.”

Grace O'Malley shook her head. “These are English sailors, Michael. They have a way of doing things. It’s the way of gentlemen. If we raise a white flag, they won’t fire on us. Their captain will come on board and he will ask me to hand over my sword as a sign that we surrender.”



“Then they’ll take us on their ship and hang us.”

“That is the gentleman’s way,” Grace nodded. “But we are not gentlemen. At least, *I’m* not.”

The crew chuckled. “So what do we do?”

“When their captain climbs aboard our ship, we capture him. We say we’ll cut his throat if they don’t let us sail home to Dublin.”

“Grace O’Malley, you’re not just the greatest pirate in Ireland,” Paterson laughed.

“No, no, no, Michael,” grinned Ma. “I’m the greatest pirate the world has ever seen!”