

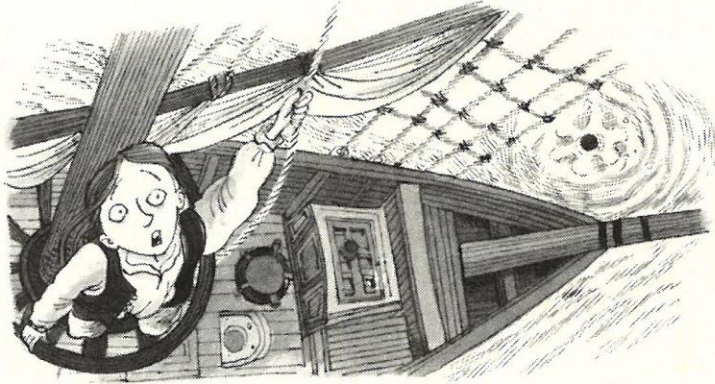
Ma told me to climb the mast and fasten a white flag at the top. Then I was to climb back down and hide in the cabin while our crew fought the English.

I tied the flag around my neck so my hands were free to climb. Before I reached the top, I saw the English sailors loading their cannon. The knot on the flag around my neck was tangled and my cold fingers were too numb to untie it.

First I saw a puff of grey smoke from the mouth of an English cannon. Moments later, I heard the sound of the explosion

and then the splash as it landed in the water just in front of our bow.

"They missed," I muttered and suddenly the flag came free.



"Hurry up, child," Ma roared at me. "That was a warning shot. The next one will hit the mast and it'll be the end of you!"

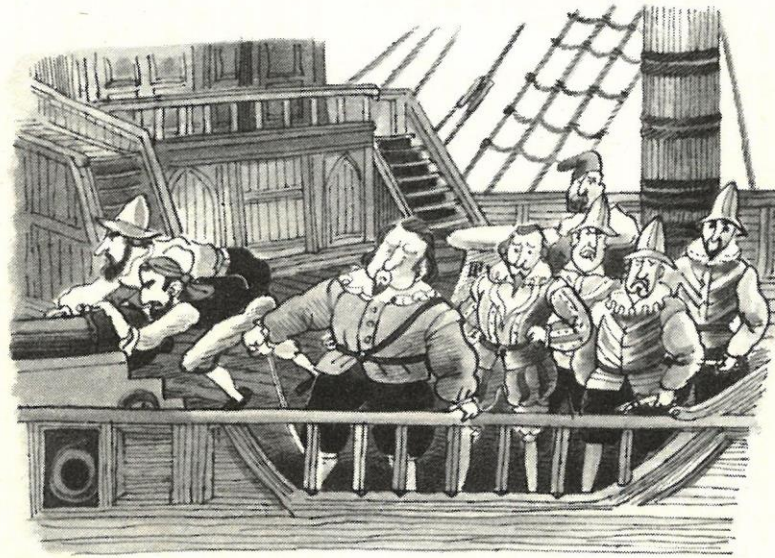
"Wait!" I cried to the English ship, but my words were whipped away by the wind.

Ma waved a fist at me. "You, Catherine O'Malley, are a disgrace to the O'Malley name!"

"Sorry, Ma," I moaned, as I wrestled with the flapping flag.

"You're as much use as a comb on a bald man's head."

"I know, Ma," I muttered, as the flag at last flew free and fluttered in my face. I clung onto the crow's nest and watched as an Englishman in a fine red coat with golden buttons stepped onto the deck of the enemy ship.



"I am Captain Dudley of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth's fleet," the man shouted over the whipping water.

"Good for you," Ma snorted.

"I'm going to cross to your ship and take your sword as a sign of your surrender," he went on as the English frigate lowered its sails and let the wind drift it towards our side. I climbed halfway down the mast, till I was just over my ma's head.

I heard her speak softly to the crew, "He'll get my sword all right – in the throat, if I have my way."

Old Hugh O'Neil stepped forward. "Kill Captain Dudley and they'll blow us out of the water," he warned. "We need to take him prisoner, then they won't dare fire on us."

"I know that, I know that, old man," Ma snapped.

Everyone on the ship seemed to hold their breath as the English sailors threw a rope with a hook onto our deck and fastened our ships together.



They placed a plank between the ships and we watched as the English captain climbed onto our ship.

The Englishman was so fat the buttons on his red coat were bursting. But I wasn't looking at the gleaming gold buttons so

much as the polished pistol he held in his hand.

"We've been waiting years to capture you, Grace O'Malley," he said. "Queen Elizabeth has heard of your evil robbing ways."

"Is that right?" Ma laughed. "What an honour for me to be so popular with old Queen Bess."

"Hand over your sword," Captain Dudley said, and jabbed his pistol towards her.

I could see Ma's plan would never work. If she tried to jump at him with her sword, he would fire his pistol and kill her. Then I remembered the tale she'd told in the draughty hall of the castle. I was clinging to the mast, just above his pistol arm.

I let go and fell towards him.

At that very moment, Ma decided to make a grab for the captain's pistol. She

jumped forward. Dudley jumped back. I landed on Ma's head. She fell forward and cracked her head on the deck. She gave a soft groan and the light in her eyes went out.



Chapter Six

Richmond and Ruffs

The English captain had my ma carried across to his ship. Seaman Michael Paterson jumped forward and pushed his mouse face close to Captain Dudley. I thought he was going to fight and die for Ma.



But he just whined, “Oh, Captain, sir, we are so very happy to be free of the pirate queen! We’ve been her slaves for years.”

The rest of the black-hearted crew began to nod and agree to Paterson’s lies.

“Let us go free,” the little seaman snuffled. “We’ll go back to our old mothers and our weeping wives. We’ll never set foot on a pirate ship again. If we do, you can cut off the feet that touch the decks. Isn’t that right, lads?”

“Aye,” they agreed.

Captain Dudley looked around and his long, fine nose sniffed the air as if he were smelling rats. He was. “It’s Grace O’Malley we want. I haven’t room on my ship to arrest the lot of you. Clear off back to Ireland.”

The crew hurried across the decks to set sail for freedom. I ran after Captain Dudley. “I want to go with my ma!” I told him.

The man just shrugged and nodded.

Ma was fastened in chains and put in the captain's cabin. She woke as we set sail along the coast of England. "What happened?" she muttered, rubbing her head.

"Something fell on top of you," I said.



Before she could ask, the cabin door opened and Captain Dudley walked in. "Well, Grace O'Malley, Queen Elizabeth

herself has asked to see you before we hang you. The Queen of England wants to meet the Queen of the Pirates."



"It's a great honour," Ma said coldly. "An honour for Elizabeth, that is," she added.

"We'll be at Tilbury dock tomorrow morning," said the man. "Here's some bread and cheese for you and the girl." Then he left.

Ma grinned. "Not just bread and cheese, Catherine, my dear. But a knife to cut it with. A knife I plan to plunge into the heart of Queen Elizabeth, if the woman has a heart."

"No, Ma! They'll kill you if you try."

"They plan to hang me anyway," she argued. "I may as well take that Tudor witch with me."

And nothing I could say would change her mind.

Ma had slipped the knife into her boot, and next day we rattled over the rutted roads of London to Greenwich Palace. Crowds were waiting at the gate.

"They've come to see the greatest pirate in the world," Ma laughed, and waved at the people.

We were led across a courtyard and through a door that was big enough to

make a Connacht ship. The hall was crowded with gentlemen in satin jackets of more colours than a rainbow and ruffs as big as cartwheels. The ladies were in silk but in dull shades of brown and black.



Ma leaned towards me and whispered, "See? The queen doesn't like ladies to shine brighter than her."

"No, Ma," I said.

We stood in front of an empty throne and Ma looked around. "Have you all had a good look, you English peacocks?" she shouted. "You can tell your children you've seen the greatest pirate in the world."

Suddenly, a door behind the throne opened and the people in the court bowed very low. The Queen of England walked in.