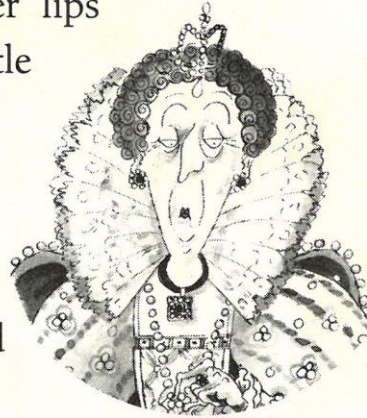


Chapter Seven

Teeth and Tales

Queen Elizabeth walked slowly. Her ugly face was painted white, and red powder was brushed on her lips and cheeks. Her little black eyes glittered like wet coal and she hobbled under the weight of her dress, which was crusted with jewels.

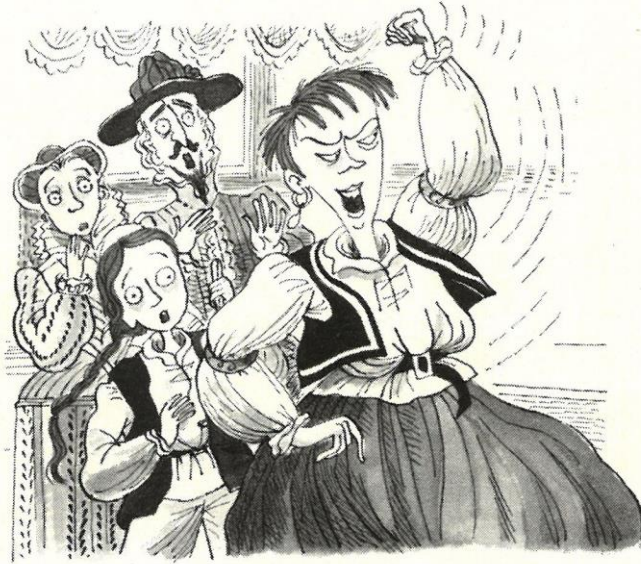


While everyone except Ma had their heads bowed to the floor, I dropped to my knees. With a quick flick,

I'd raised Ma's skirt and pulled the knife out of her boot.

Queen Elizabeth frowned. "You should curtsy before your queen."

Ma gave a secret smile and bent her knees in a deep curtsy. I watched as she swept back her hand and felt in her boot for the knife. Her hand jerked upwards and she cried out, "Aieeee!", her killing scream.



She looked at the empty hand. She blushed. She gave a giggle. "Er... I... er... eeee... er... oh, my knees... my *knees*. The old bones hurt these days," she mumbled, to cover her foolish cry.

The English queen nodded. "I know, my dear, I have the same problem. My doctor gives me some good ointment made from goose grease. I'll get my maids to fetch you some."

"It will be a great comfort when you hang me from the gallows tomorrow."



Elizabeth looked at Ma, curious. "So you're the pirate I've heard so much about."

"And you're the queen I've heard a bit about. You're not very tall, are you?"

I heard a gasp from the crowd at my ma's cheek. The old queen smiled and showed black and broken teeth. "I haven't got my father's massive body, but I do have his huge heart, Grace O'Malley, and that's what counts in a queen. You should know that."

Ma nodded. "That's true, Bess," she said.

No one in the room seemed to breathe.

"How did you get into the pirate trade?" the queen asked. She sat on her throne and patted her ginger wig straight. "Sit by my side and tell me."

Ma moved to the seat by the throne and began her old tale. "It all started with my father. A big, bullying brute of a man."

"Same as my father... King Henry the Eighth... though we used to call him Henry the *Ate*, he grew so fat!"



For the rest of that morning, my ma told her tales of piracy and the fights she'd had. The queen asked some questions, but mostly she listened like a child at the feet of her nurse.

When the midday sun shone high in the sky, we were led off to a small room at the side of the throne room to eat. And at the end of the day, the weary old queen said, "It has been a pleasure to meet you, Grace."



Ma sighed. "And it will be your pleasure to hang me in the morning."

"Hang you? Goodness me, no! The sign of a great queen is this – you should know when to be cruel and when to show mercy.

And I am showing mercy to you, Grace O'Malley. Go back to Ireland and your family."

Ma blinked. "You're setting me free?"

"I am," Old Queen Bess said with a smile. "Rest here tonight and I'll have a ship sail you back to Connacht tomorrow."

Chapter Eight

Freedom and Feathers

Ma gave the queen a wide smile. "You really do have a heart as big as a horse."

The queen limped to the door, stopped and looked back. "Of course, if I catch you attacking any more English ships, I'll hang you from the tallest tree in Ireland."

"Of course," Ma said. "What about Spanish and Scottish ships?"

"Oh, help yourself to those!" Elizabeth chuckled. She waved a pale hand wrapped in a cloud of jewels and was gone.

Ma ruffled my hair. "She's not such a bad old bird, after all."

"No, Ma."

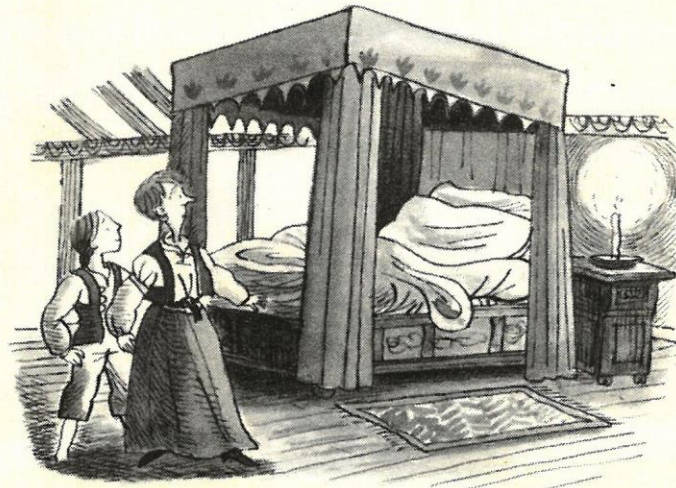
"In fact, I'm rather glad I didn't kill her when I had the chance."

"Me too, Ma."

"I wonder what in the devil's name happened to that knife?" she muttered.

I felt the blade hard under the back of my belt where I'd pushed it. "I wonder, Ma."

Servants led the way to a fine room in the palace and I climbed into the soft, goose-feather bed next to my ma.



"I like this," she said as she lay back sleepily. "Maybe we'll rob a ship that has a goose-feather bed on board, eh, Catherine?"

"No, Ma, you need to give up pirating," I moaned. "If the Spanish catch you, they won't forgive you like Queen Bess did."

Ma gave a long sigh. "You're right, Catherine, you're right. But it would be a terrible pity to retire when I'm the greatest pirate the world has ever seen."

"Yes, Ma," I said, and fell asleep in the arms of the greatest ma the world has ever seen.



Epilogue

In this story Catherine is made up. Grace O'Malley (born around 1530) was real. She was the Pirate Queen of Connacht with three galleys and 200 warriors. She cut her hair short so she could sail with her father. That's probably how she got her nickname Granuaile, which means "bald".

Her father always refused to let her sail with him, so she had to hide on one of his ships. Her first husband, Donal, was a pirate on the west coast of Ireland. When he died, she took over his fleet of ships.

She was hated by the English, who ruled Ireland, and they set out to arrest her.

Grace also took over her second husband's castle. She was trapped there by an English army. She took lead from the roof, melted it and poured the boiling lead on the English heads to drive them away. When her father died, she took over his fleet, too. She began to raid England and Scotland as well as Ireland.

In 1593, she went to London to meet Queen Elizabeth. The two women were about the same age – around 60 – when they met at Greenwich Palace.

Grace wore a fine gown, but had a dagger hidden on her person. Guards found it before she could attack the queen. Grace said she was carrying the dagger to defend herself. Queen Elizabeth believed her.

Grace refused to bow before Elizabeth because, she said, Elizabeth wasn't the Queen of Ireland. Still, Elizabeth liked Grace O'Malley and set her free. Grace said she would stop her rebel raids and Elizabeth said she would stop the English soldiers attacking Grace's castles. But Grace broke her promise and soon went back to her wicked ways.

Both women died in the year 1603.