

Orkney

As the *Revenge* sailed through the sound of Hoy in Orkney in mid January, 1725, a notice, written in Gow's best hand, was posted on the deck for the crew to read - if they could read at all. It stated:

1. Every man shall obey his commander in all respects, as if the ship was his own, and be under monthly pay.
2. No man shall give or dispose of the ship's provisions, whereby may be given reason of suspicion that everyone hath not an equal share.
3. No man shall open or declare to any person or persons what we are, or what design we are upon; the offender shall be punished with death on the spot.
4. No man shall go on shore till the ship is off the ground and in readiness to put to sea.
5. Every man shall keep his watch night and day, and precisely at the hour of eight, leave off gaming and drinking, everyone repair to their respective stations.
6. Whoever offends shall be punished with death; or otherwise, as we find proper for our interest.

This had all been threshed out at a meeting held in the great cabin the previous day. Gow gave his crew instructions on their behaviour while the ship would be in the bay at Stromness.

"While in conversation with the folk from the islands and other ships' crews which will be at anchor there too, we must all abide by the same account. We must not betray ourselves or give any cause for suspicion at all, so I will tell you our story. First of all we will change the name of the ship back to that of the *George*. Do not forget this or let slip. Second, we came from Cadiz bound for Stockholm and thence to Dantzick, but we have had a long passage and, by reason of contrary winds, have lost our opportunity of passage through the Sound which, by now, will be full of ice, if not completely frozen up. In want of shelter to clean the ship, water and provisions we have come to Stromness. We shall pay for what we need. Tell the folk that by the time the ship is cleaned, the weather will be warmer and we will be on our way. This is not hard for us all to remember. But do not forget, any one of you, that if you change any, or the littlest detail, which would put us into danger, the penalty is death."

"That seems clear enough," Oly observed as he and Peter cleared up after the men. They came out on deck. It was bitterly cold. Both boys stood in every stitch of clothing they possessed and this was still, by no stretch of the imagination, enough. "Gow will have to find us some warm clothes if we are to survive this place for the winter," Peter moaned. Large, dark red cliffs rose to the starboard as the *George* rode the tide. The ship was swung to port round a flat, grassy headland and dropped anchor, in the lee of a small island in a narrow bay. Beneath a steep, heathery slope to the ship's west ran a straggle of several stone houses along the shore. Each building stood with its gable end to the sea and most had a small pier jutting out into the water. Gow seemed relaxed as the ship was made secure. "My mother and father live just over in that house." He pointed to one of the larger buildings. "Father is a merchant. He bought that piece of land when I was a boy. He does well with the ships from London going off to Canada. Different merchant ships come here to shelter and buy provisions before sailing to Sweden and Norway too. You'll meet my folks, I'm sure. First, though, we must get this ship smartened up inside and out. Here we must make a fine impression." And he went about his business.

"I hope his mother can knit," said Peter, and John Harris and Oly laughed so loudly that Gow turned to look at them. Peter nudged Oly's arm.

From her tiny, square kitchen window, John's mother watched the ship drop anchor in the bay. She was baking bannocks. It was warm in her kitchen. The sun was ready to set, golden, on this frosty afternoon. She wiped the condensation off with her floury hand as she watched the ship's longboat being lowered into the water. There was something about the way one of the crew on that boat moved and held his head. Margaret Gow stepped outside onto the pier.

"John," she cried and rushed to the steps to greet her long lost son, John Gow.

"Father," she cried. "John's home!" William Gow poked his head out from his store, but there was little sign of excitement. He had seen how this son had hurt them, running off at the first sign of trouble; trouble over a young girl. Not a single letter had they received; just the odd message from passing merchant ships. He followed his excited wife, his son and two crewmen into the steamy kitchen. There, the proud mother listened to the story of the merchant ship, *George*, the Baltic and the ice. She was so pleased to have her son back home; and captain of his own ship. Her mind worked quickly. There would be her gentry acquaintances to tell; dinners to arrange, socialising. In fact, there was so much to be getting on with that very evening, she would

need to go out and start, right away. She bundled the warm bannocks into a cloth and ushered the three seamen over the pier into their longboat.

"I'll see you tomorrow Son" She made him promise to visit at 11.00a.m.

As Peter and Oly scrubbed the main cabin, after the men had gone to make a start at cleaning the hull next day, William Harvey was taken to join them. Gow had finally decided that this young man could be trusted enough to be freed from the cell below deck. He was to remain within sight of the pirate crew at all times and do as he was bid. The boys were pleased to have his company as they worked and Harvey was pleased to be away from the two miserable French men in their stinking quarters. Any amount of work would be preferable to the existence he had endured down there. The boys went on deck. Gow prepared to have the *George* moved north east to a beach in the bay. Once he was satisfied with the position, over a shallow sandy seabed at high tide, Peter, Oly and Harvey, along with most of the men scrambled over the side and waded ashore. Peter held Hubbins aloft and set him on the rocks. The bewildered cat looked cold and thin as it picked its way to drier land.

"Don't run off Hubbins," Peter reminded the cat as the men laughed at it keeping its paws one hundred percent dry. The cat went to hunt voles in the withered grass on dry land as the men crunched through several years' worth of barnacles and crusty growth scraped off ships hulls on this lonely looking beach which Gow called the Cairston Shore. The boys wished they could be at the opposite side of the bay where they could see houses and people.

"Maybe we'll be sent on some errands around the bay, and we can meet the Stromness people," Oly hoped.

"Stromness girls, eh Oly? You need a wife." Peter shoved him. William Oliver who was a quiet, pale skinned lad seemed young for his age. He was, perhaps, more in need of his mother than a wife.

While the crew watched the tide go out from round the *George*, their task was to prop up the hull using huge driftwood logs, gathered here through decades by umpteen ships' crews, for this purpose. The men worked with lanterns in the late afternoon as the tide reached its lowest ebb. They were satisfied that the ship would be secure to work on during low water over the next few days.

Days and nights, as it turned out, because here in the north of Scotland in January, daylight hours are only six or seven hours long. Gow did not want the *George* to be stuck on this shore for longer than absolutely necessary, so the men were ordered to work at every low tide; light or dark, rain or shine. The boys' arms, necks and backs ached as they scrubbed off the rough barnacles. They rubbed oil into the hull.

"She must glide after the big prizes just waiting for us next spring," was Rollson's encouragement. The boys quaked at the prospect.

On fine days local folk would walk around the shore to chat to the men working on the ship. Peter let the older men do all the chatting. He did not want to be asked too many questions, and he had difficulty with their dialect. The local people seemed to talk so fast and they asked so many questions. They hardly let you answer their first question before they were asking the next, and the next...

One Sunday afternoon Peter counted around thirty people who came for a walk to chat with the crew. Hubbins, who was growing fat on Orkney voles, loved all the attention and rolled in the long grass at their feet in the winter sun. Peter heard the visitors discuss their captain, John Gow. They told Peterson and Belbin, who were keeping watch, how delighted they were to see how well this young Stromness man had done for himself; captain, no less, of his own ship. Belbin and Peterson teased Gow when he returned to the ship from visiting his parents.

"That's just the way it must appear. Perfect," he told the men.

Work progressed on the ship through several wet days. It was miserable.

When some children came to play nearby on the next fine day, Peter watched them with envy. They brandished sticks like swords and wore woollen hats which they had stuck huge seagull feathers in on each side like horns. They clambered over a mound of stone rubble, where one defended the mound from the other two, eventually defeating his enemies. The three sat eating hard boiled eggs after their battle. Peter went to have a chat.

"I'm Harald Maddadson and I'm the Earl of Orkney," boasted the smallest boy. "And that's my cousin and my enemy, Erlend." He pointed to the little girl. "She's really my sister, Mary Flett."

"I am Sweyn Asleifson. I can kill any one you like if you pay me enough. I am a real Viking," said the big lad.

"Who are you? Are you all pirates, come to take the ships in Stromness?" The children roared with laughter. Peter managed a nervous chuckle.

"I am Peter Hansen from Sweden and we are cleaning the ship ready to sail across the North Sea. Do you like sailing Sweyn?"

The children rolled about in the grass, laughing. Peter could not see the joke.

“He’s not really Sweyn, Dummy. He’s Cheem Craigie. We’re just playing. Sweyn Asleifson died hundreds of years ago. Everyone knows that,” Mary jibed.

“I’m not really Harald Maddadson, and I’m certainly not the Earl of Orkney,” the little boy added. “But I am Cheem’s cousin, Ben Flett. She,” he pointed to Mary, “is my peedie sister.”

“Why is she called peedie?” asked Peter.

“Because that’s what she is,” retorted Ben.

“I am not,” she raged. “I will be six next month, so I’m catching up with you, Ben Flett.”

“So peedie means you are younger than your brother. I see.” Peter thought that was sorted but Mary shook her curls.

“Don’t they tell you anything in Sweden? It is a good job you have reached Orkney. Peedie means small. But I’m catching up on my big brother. It’s my birthday really soon and I eat far more than him, so I’m not going to be a peedie sister for much longer.” She whacked her poor brother’s bottom with her wooden sword.

“I’m used to all this,” was all Ben said.

“Come and play with us.” Cheem invited.

“Another time.” Peter was called away by Peterson. Enough work had been done below the water line on the hull. The *George* was to be floated off at high tide. Gow said they had just made it. “The ship’ll need to come off today or we’ll be stuck here for the neap tides; two weeks.”

Peter called for Hubbins who trotted reluctantly, but surprisingly obediently, to Peter who lifted the fat little cat back on board the ship.

Thankfully the *George* floated off without difficulty and the men restacked the logs ready for the next ship to need them. It felt good to have the ship safely at anchor in the bay once again. Gow and the men were more relaxed. Next morning, however, the work went on. A plank was lowered over the side and the three boys, Peter, Harvey and Oly were set to work scrubbing the hull and soaking oil into the wood, but now they did not have to worry about the tide. No more paddling around in chilling water with lamps in the half dark. Once it was dark, that was it, they shouldn’t have to work.

The longboat was constantly used to bring on water and supplies, and ferry Gow to and from shore. Peter watched as several eminent townfolk were brought on board to be entertained by the captain. Stromness appeared to rejoice at the return of one of its young men with his pockets filled. The town’s people had no cause to doubt the respectability of the ship and its crew; by all appearances the captain’s circumstances were flourishing. Money was spent lavishly and liquor bestowed ungrudgingly to all who came on board. On a coast where smuggling was merely winked at, the inhabitants of Stromness were not too critical or too inquisitive. The *George* was no more formidable than any other merchant man visiting the port as trading vessels were all heavily armed. Gow wore some of the finest suits belonging, at one time, to Captain Wise and Captain Somerville. His main pirate crew looked respectable. The visitors were well impressed. Gow went off on several occasions to visit some of his parent’s wealthy friends’ homes as their guest. One evening Peter and Oly ferried the captain and Peterson ashore. A fine carriage waited for the men who were to spend the night as guests of a wealthy landowner and his wife at their mansion, seven miles from Stromness. The two returned the following evening, and both looked pleased, with a sparkle in their eyes and a spring in their step. They gathered the core pirate crew in the main cabin. The boys were not included.

A young man accompanied the crew back to the *George* one day. His parents, friends of Gow’s parents, had sent him out to the ship ask if they could be considered to supply fresh milk, butter, eggs and cheese to the ship. The youth emerged from the captain’s cabin looking pleased. Gow ordered William Harvey, Peter and Oly to row the lad ashore. “You can have a walk with Peter Craigie, but you will be back on board by eight.” That’s a whole six hours Peter thought as he grabbed Hubbins to come along on the adventure. At last they could explore among the houses of Stromness. The bay was sheltered from everything but a south easterly.

“Lucky for you,” Craigie told them as the boys rowed ashore, “you have not experienced one of those. The ships get into bother in the bay then. If it’s a high tide at the same time, the townfolk have to bail out too. The sea will lap right up into their kitchens. The houses are built to stand storms. They are built with the gable end, the strongest part facing the sea. Look at the tiny windows in the end of them. The houses are snug on a wild winter’s night.”

“Unless the sea comes right in around their feet!” Peter laughed.

The boys tied the little boat along side a stone jetty and walked through a narrow close, passed one of the houses. Its door opened onto the close. “This is fine and sheltered.” Peter suggested.

"It's fine today," Craigie explained, "But if there's a strong southerly blasting up this muddy lane between the houses and hill at the back, you can be blown into the close, flying straight passed the door and almost into the sea. Or you can be sucked right out of it into the gutter!"

"And you say you love living here?" Peter gibed.

"Come and we'll climb Brinkie's Brae. You have enough time. We can go and get something to eat from the folks before you have to be back." Craigie was excited to have some boys to roam with round his favourite haunts.

The boys wandered between the houses and scrambled up the steep hill overlooking the bay. The air was still and voices could be heard clearly from the three ships at anchor in the bay at Stromness that afternoon. To the south of the *George* lay a Scottish vessel. The boys watched as a small boat made its way from their ship to this merchant man. The little boat was well laden, since, as the boys were aware, a deal had been struck between the ships' masters. Gow was trading some of that beeswax and copper in exchange for wine and brandy. Peter wondered if this was wise, but he had better things in his mind. The boys gathered their breath at the top of the hill, scattering a flock of raggy sheep as they threw themselves on the heather and laughed at Hubbins who leapt and bounded after voles and young rabbits. Peter Craigie picked up a rock and started to hack at a boulder.

"Look at this rock," he said. "You don't find much of this around. I'm sure this could be worth a pile of money." Peter and Oly rolled down to the boulder.

"That's granite." Oly was unimpressed.

"Oh well. Since this is the only place I've ever seen it, and I've been miles round the coast from Stromness, I was sure it was valuable. I've always thought, since I was a peedie boy, that some day I'd make my fortune selling lumps of this stuff."

"Sorry, but there's nothing too special about it. You'll have to think of another way to that fortune." Oly suggested

"I know." Peter sat up. "Come and join us. We are going to make our fortunes. The captain has promised that he will send Oly home with his pockets full of gold, didn't he Oly?"

Oly glowered at Peter and cleared his throat, but Craigie was right on to them.

"So how will you all make a fortune? I don't think cabin boys make fortunes. My dad says I'm better off on the land."

Oly had to get them out of this somehow. "Peter likes to joke with the crew about pots of gold at the end of every rainbow. The captain just plays along with us sometimes." Oly nudged Peter behind Craigie's back.

The sun was beginning to set so the boys followed Craigie back down Brinkie's Brae and about half a mile north of the bay they came to a croft, Peter Craigie's home.

They entered through a low doorway and turned right into a dark room with a fire burning, right in the centre of the floor. Peat smoke stung the boy's eyes.

"This is my mother, this is my cat, Willa, and her three new kittens," The kittens slept in a child's rocking cradle by the fire but Willa jumped up, arching her back and hissing at Hubbins. But Hubbins was more interested in the smell of fine food. The mother cat climbed back into the cradle.

"And this is my pesky little brother, James."

A voice came from a sort of stone cupboard in the wall said, "Hello. I know you." The young boy jumped out of the strange stone bed and, in the smoky gloom, Oly and Peter recognised him.

"I thought you were called Cheem," Peter puzzled.

"I am. These fellas know nothing," the boy explained to his brother. "First they thought I was Sweyn Asleifson, and now they won't believe I am Cheem!"

"It's easy really. Cheem is the same as Jim, or James. It's just the way we say it. And don't be so cheeky to our visitors Cheem." Mrs Craigie was frying liver on an iron girdle suspended over the fire.

"Dad will be through from the byre in a while. Stay and have a bite to eat."

Oly made himself comfortable in a big chair made from driftwood and straw. The woven straw scratched his back even through his tunic, but he was warm. There was a mixture of new smells. There was the peat smoke, the cooked liver and a pungent smell wafting through from the byre. Just a rickety wooden door separated the living quarters from the byre. Animals and the family slept under the one roof. Cosy, he thought, but smelly. In little alcoves around the walls of the room were hens and two ducks. Willa jumped out of her bed and stretch before sliding under the outside door. The kittens made a few sleepy squeaks for their mother. Cheem and his big brother picked them up and gave the boys one each to stroke. Hubbins jealously watched.

Mr Craigie entered, stooping through the low door from the byre.

"I've heard a lot about your ship in the last few days." His wife gave him a sideways glance.

“We’re pleased to do business with your master though. Did you get on fine with Gow?”

His son nodded. “I’m to take supplies to them starting tomorrow,” his son replied.

Mrs Craigie handed the boys a plate with a scrap of liver each and a bit of bere bannock with cheese. The each were given a beaker of ale out of a barrel which stood in the corner with a cloth over the top. They boys struggled with the kittens and the plates, but Cheem took the sleepy kittens and tucked them back in their cradle.

“The cats are forever falling into the ale but these ones are too small to jump up there yet,” he said.

“Have any cats been in recently?” William Harvey enquired without sounding too concerned.

The Craigie family laughed heartily, but there was no reply to the question. The boys drank up.

“What do you think of me going off with the ship Dad?” Peter Craigie’s question brought instant silence.

“Absolutely no way are you going on that ship,” was the stern reply.

“But Dad, these boys have a fine life. I may come home rich.”

“I will not discuss it further. And do not think of breaking our hearts and going off.”

“I know why. I know why.” Cheem piped up.

“Enough!” His mother had the final word.

The meal was quiet after that. The boys thanked the family and took their leave and the cat. Peter Craigie and his brother asked if they could go as far as the head of the bay with the boys. “No further,” their father insisted.



“Your father will not let you sail with us it would seem,” said Harvey. “I wonder why.”

“It is because of all the rumours going round about your ship.”

Cheem was dying to tell all. “Dad heard that the Captain Watt off the *Margaret*, the ship anchored nearest to the Sound of Hoy in Stromness Bay has recognised one of your crew, a boy called Jamieson, and another called Macaulay is on board too, he says. They had deserted from his ship in Amsterdam. Watt had surely seen Jamieson rowing back and forth from the *George*.”

“We do have crew on board with those names,” said Oly. “Go on.”

Peter Craigie told the boys the story his father had heard. “Well, Captain Watt went over to see your Captain Gow and Watt says that Gow tried to deny he had ever heard of Jamieson. But one of your crew jumped up and says, “He’s just gone ashore but he’ll be back soon.” So Gow then admitted he had Jamieson on board and Macaulay too. Gow took Watt to the cabin for a chat. When Watt was leaving the ship he noticed it was in a bad state and was heavily armed. The crew were more interested in their weapons than keeping a clean ship. He is sure that your captain is up to no good. So Dad will never let me join you.”

The three boys off the *George* were worried about this news but did not give anything away. They knew their lives depended upon their silence and their behaviour at this point.

Quietly, without adding to the tale, or denying anything, they thanked Craigie and Cheem. “My peedie brother is daft. But we’ll see you around,” was all Craigie said and they parted.

Rowing back to the *George* in the dark, the boys talked of their predicament. What would they do? Who should they speak to?

“I think we should get off this ship now, all of us. We should not go back there tonight.” This was William Harvey’s solution.

“No. Where would we go? This is an island. We’d either get caught by the law here or by our own crew. It’s no use either way. We are pirates.” Oly was bleak.

Peter thought it would be better to speak to John Gow.

But Oly insisted that they should plan to escape. “We must try to get away, all three of us together, but each one of us must take any opportunity to go if there is a chance. I am sure some of the other men will be eager to go. The boys off the *Bachelor* would be off if they could. Being here on an island does not help our situation.”

“We will run off together in a boat and head for Scotland.” Peter made it sound simple.

“I can’t see us all getting away at the one time.” Said Oly grimly. “We must each go whenever we have a chance. Do not make a fuss or wait for each other. Just get away.”

The boys were now close to the jetty so kept quiet, but they nodded in agreement.

They were back on board by eight. William Harvey and Peter went on watch. Oly went to his hammock.

At sunrise Gow took Peterson and Winter to a Swedish ship which had come into the bay the previous evening. Later that day Oly and Jamieson along with Rollson and Gow traded with the Swedish crew for some rope.

Oly had been ordered to smarten up and Gow wore his finest from Captain Somerville's chest. The captain and Oly did not return that night to the *George*.

Peter was one of those who were set to work cleaning the hull from the longboat. They watched a stout visitor board the ship. This wealthy man from Scotland, named Andrew Beaky, was not pleased to find Gow had gone ashore, but did business with Rollson and Belbin in the captain's cabin. They had had too much to drink and so William Harvey was ordered to row the man back over to Stromness. As they worked, the men in the longboat noticed that the ship *Margaret* was preparing to leave, and in the early afternoon it caught the tide and sailed out to the west.

On the longboat, four men and Peter scrubbed the side of the hull. They heard Peterson and Winter as they were greeted by William Melvin on the *George's* deck above.

"That's the last we'll see of the captain for days," said Peterson. "He's got designs on that young lady, Helen Gordon, whatever good will become of that. I reckon that she is the reason he agreed to be master of this ship; so that he could sail back into his home port as master of his own ship and woo her away from her father, that trumped up churchman. Well it has worked, and now we have happily got rid of him for a while we can really get going."

"There's trouble brewing in town though," Winter went on. "The old lady of the house we were entertained at is claiming someone took her jewel box." The men heard Belbin laugh. "Oh my!" he squealed. There was laughter on the deck.

"It was a start," Belbin went on. Gow has talked of many, many rich friends. I've noted them all."

"But that's not the worst of it. Some kids have been shouting that we're hunting for gold and that Captain Watt, who sailed off this day, visited the authorities before he sailed and has left a letter to be forwarded to the Commissioners of Customs in Edinburgh.

Gow's mother has taken ill. She ordered Captain Watt off the pier the other day for causing ugly rumours, as she put it, about her precious son. But he was back the next day, brandishing the letter. He broke the news to her that her son is a pirate captain. Captain Watt had all the details. The old lady has taken to her bed."

"How do you have all this knowledge?" Belbin sneered.

"The town is buzzing man!"

"Where's Gow then; does he know all of this?" Belbin sounded worried now.

"No no. He is away with his sweetheart for the day to another of his big houses. He's got William Oliver running along like a butler."

The men laughed and headed to the captain's cabin.

As afternoon light faded, the men prepared to give up work the hull of the *George*. As Peter grasped the rope to climb out of the longboat he was knocked back by an enormous bundle of sailcloth as it was lowered over the ship's side.

"Don't make a sound down there. Wait." The whispered instructions came from the deck of the *George*.

Peter and his companions waited in wonder. Further provisions appeared on the end of the loading line followed by five shadowy figures which made a total of ten escapees off the *George* now huddled in the longboat.

"Push away Dobson. Get away from the damned ship," Phinnes whispered.

"But William Harvey and Oly and Hubbins...." Peter began. A hand was clapped over his mouth and a rasping whisper warned him to be silent.

In the gloom Peter could make out Dobson's stout figure sculling with one oar as the longboat slipped quietly from the *George*. As the men passed John Gow's parents' pier, four of the strongest men took oars and the little boat was rowed off into the pitch blackness of Scapa Flow. None of the pirate crew on the *George* had heard them go. The ten were free.