

# The Cutlass Crew - Synopsis (preliminary)

At the Feast of Misrule, the world is turned upside down. Masters dress as servants. Fools become prophets. And Gentlewomen become fierce pirates. Our story, set in 1583, is based on the adventures of Lady Mary Killigrew. Inspired by the spirit of mischief, she forms a Cutlass Crew of her female servants and sets sail to plunder. But when Lady Mary offends Good Queen Bess, she risks losing treasure, liberty and life. Will she be pardoned and the natural order be restored? Climb aboard to find out!

**PROLOGUE** Dapper, insouciant pirate Sir Digory Piper sets the scene. Sir Digory was a licensed privateer who looted for Queen Elizabeth in the 16th century (and has a feminine side too!)

**Scene 1 The Great Hall, Arwenack House, Cornwall** It is January 6th 1583, Epiphany and the Feast of the Lords of Misrule. Lady of the Manor, Mary Killigrew is dressed as a servant and servants, including her maid Betty, Ned, Nan, Oswald and Susan, are wearing their masters' clothes. Walter, Myles, Edmund and Thomasina arrive dressed as pirates, alongside a group of Travelling Players. Clement, the eldest player takes the part of Tom O'Bedlam and sings of his wild wanderings to the world's end. Mary is intrigued by the prospect of wandering free. The pretend pirates then relate the adventures of Grace O'Malley, the Irish privateer, before the Toastmaster presents the cake which, as the Cook explains, contains a dried pea which grants a wish to its finder. Mary finds it and makes a wish to be a pirate. But the party is broken up by Sir John Killigrew, disguised as a groom, who warns everyone that Sir Digory Piper has been sighted nearby. Sir John expects Lady Mary to return to the normality of women's tasks whilst he conducts man's work, but she has Grace O'Malley in mind.

**Scene 2 The Long Gallery, Arwenack House** A storm is blowing and four seamstresses sit by the fire spinning thread, pleased to be indoors and engaged in feminine pursuits. Ladies in Waiting arrive and join in the song, celebrating their fine, soft clothes and indoor lifestyles. Gardeners burst in to the disgust of the women. They bemoan their lives in the fields and the Footmen who join them also feel the call of the sea. It is a call which seems to divide the sexes, but Lady Mary reiterates her desire to be a pirate and a second Grace O'Malley, despite Betty's warning that Sir Digory will be taken to the dreaded Tower. Parry announces that a strange boat – a Spanish caravel – has been seen in the harbour, which Mary thinks may be part of a Spanish treasure fleet. She orders that its crew be brought to her.

**Scene 3 A jetty near Arwenack House** The storm is at its height. Merchant Don Felipe, his nervous wife Leonora and Don Diego the captain of the caravel, disembark from their sodden rowing boat – having abandoned their ship in the harbour. They console themselves with a Spanish carol before deciding to speak English (except for Leonora who only speaks Latin) and pretend to be wool merchants. Parry meets them and welcomes them to Arwenack.

**Scene 4 The Long Gallery, Arwenack House** Lady Mary is peering through her spyglass, surrounded by cooks, footmen and servants including Betty, Cicely, Susan, Ned, Oswald and Nan. Everyone is excited. The Cook has prepared a potion to put in the welcome mead. Lady Mary spies Parry leading the Spanish 'guests' and anticipates taking their ship and becoming a pirate. She gives her servants piratical names and orders them to gather weapons and make stinkpots – noxious bombs made of the most frightful smells which would make the hardest-bitten cry for mercy. Parry enters with Don Diego, Don Felipe and Leonora. After being greeted, they glug down a glass of the drugged mead and introduce themselves. Don Diego spins a yarn that his ship is full of wool not treasure, but then falls asleep because of the doctored mead. Lady Mary and her crew-to-be prepare to capture the treasure-crammed caravel and begin their careers as pirates.

**Scene 5 Aboard the caravel, Sonora** The Night Watch Pio, Paco and Pepe are playing the card game Primero, guzzling sherry and philosophising. They are settling down to rest when muskets are fired and stinkpots are hurled. The masked raiding party is Lady Mary and her Cutlass Crew – Nan, Susan, Cicely, Parry, Ned and Oswald. The Spanish sailors are overcome and bundled into the hold. Lady Mary orders that the treasure be hidden in one of the secret tunnels in the Cornish cliff-face. Her piratical career has begun.

**Scene 6 In a tavern (and aboard the Sonora)** A crestfallen Sir Digory tells us that the Cutlass Crew are making merry whilst he languishes. He leads a group of revellers in recounting their adventures. Next we see the dashing pirates amassing treasure, though wealth is not their main motivation. It is freedom which excites them. But Piper reflects that the Cutlass Crew have been denounced as traitors because they stole from the Queen. Their free-spirited adventures must end.

**Scene 7 The Knot Garden, Arwenack** The Cutlass Crew – Parry, Susan, Cicely, Betty, Ned and Oswald – are back home again. They know the Queen is angry with them and believe it is time to hang up their cutlasses. Sir John arrives in a fluster, looking for Lady Mary. He has heard that the three Spaniards have been found half-starved. They've said that Lady Mary stole their ship and the Queen has sent soldiers to arrest Lady Mary. Parry is worried that Lady Mary's journey might be at an end.

**Scene 8 The Royal Bedchamber, Whitehall Palace** Singers and musicians led by lute teacher John Dowland are singing a melancholy song – a galliard – about Captain Digory Piper, whilst Queen Elizabeth commands her Maid Jolye to comb her hair. The Queen demands that Piper is brought to her so that justice can be meted out

**Scene 9 The Bloody Tower** A Yeoman carries a bunch of keys and is allowed to pass by a Soldier. He leaves and we see that Lady Mary is held captive by Jeffries the gaoler (accompanied by his wife Margery and their bloodthirsty daughters Dorcas, Amphyllis, Eunice and Grissell). She wants to know why she has been left in the Tower, though the gaolers daughters imagine worse fates! Jeffries says she went against the natural order. He would not help her escape even if bribed with her 'lost' loot, because he fears Sir Julius Caesar the Master of the Rolls.

**Scene 10 The Royal Bedchamber** Sir Digory is brought before the Queen, with Joyle and Dowland in attendance. He explains as a poet and dreamer he meant no offence by plundering English ships – and brings a song and a unicorn's horn. The Queen is delighted and they retire together.

**Scene 11 The Bloody Tower** Sir Julius and his quartet of Cringing Lawyers enter. An Englishman through-and-through, Sir Julius's job is to protect the Queen and punish pirates. He tells Lady Mary of her grisly fate to come, but she remains defiant as she is taken to Whitehall.

**Scene 12 The Council Chamber, Whitehall Palace** All are gathered to watch Lady Mary's trial. Amongst the crowd are Sir John, Betty, Nan, Cicely, Susan, Ned and Oswald, Margery, Dorcas, Amphyllis, Eunice and Grissell. In the witness box are Don Diego, Don Felipe and Leonora. The crowd relish the thought of the entertainment to come. Lady Mary is escorted by Jeffries. Sir Julius ascends to the Judge's bench and accuses her of piracy and a most unforgivable crime – entering a man's world. The Spaniards add to the list of accusations. Lady Mary says she cast off her submissive role not for greed, but to experience freedom and for love of Nation. Sir Julius is unmoved, but Queen Elizabeth appears from her hiding place and delivers her verdict. She rejects the notion that hearth and home is the only place for a woman and is prepared to offer mercy in the face of true repentance and appropriate recompense. Lady Mary 'finds' her memory of where the loot is hidden and promises to hereafter serve the Queen and the Golden Mean.