

TOUGHNUT ANGEL

The Tale of a Real Life Adventuress of the Old West

By Jane Carlile Baker

Chapter One

From Potato Famine to Coffin Ship

1850



The red circle is at Cobh, also known as Queenstown, where Nellie and her family left for America. Middleton, where Nellie was born, is about 20 miles northeast of Queenstown.

Nellie gawked. The giant sails bulged with the wind over the rotting ship docked at the Queenstown Wharf. The sails looked like the wings of a great bird preparing to fly. Maybe the English forced all these other Irish on the wharf to fly away to America, as they did her family. She didn't want to lose Mum in all these people. The masts, giant wooden poles that held up the sails, reminded her of those gigantic men who'd burst into their cottage two nights ago. The sun had set over their little farm just a few miles outside Midleton, and she and Fannie were sharing soda bread. "One for me, and one for you."

Right before the men tore a hole in their evening, she'd looked out the window at the stick trees of winter thinking it odd that the sunset could be beautiful when everything else in Ireland had become ugly. All her family and neighbors were thin, ragged and many sick. Rotten potatoes littered their fields and smelled like something had died.

Mum saw her gaze. "The potato disease causes famine through every county in Ireland, lass. We starve because those murderous English steal all the other crops and send them to England."

Mum spoke the truth. Nellie knew someone from almost every cottage in Midleton who had died. Even her best friend, Bridget.

Grandmother stopped rocking to add her thoughts to Mum's. "The English steal not only our country, but the roofs over our heads. Irish people would never do that to anyone."

Nellie felt helpless to fight such a huge enemy. She was only six, after all. The grownups tried to fight them, but they failed. Once she grew up, she would get strong and have courage. She wouldn't have to depend on anyone, and she'd make a lot of money so

she could take care of herself. She wished she could stop thinking about night before last when the sheriff tore their own cottage apart.

One of the men headed for the ships began to sing in a loud tenor voice, and others joined him. She knew this song – *The Wearing of the Green*. Her family had sung it in the evenings when they gathered in each other's cottages to relax together.

... I met with Napper Tandy, and he took me by the hand
And he said, "How's poor old Ireland, and how does she stand?"
"She's the most distressful country that ever yet was seen
For they're hanging men and women there for the Wearin' o' the Green."
"So if the color we must wear be England's cruel red
Let it remind us of the blood that Irishmen have shed
And pull the shamrock from your hat, and throw it on the sod
But never fear, 'twill take root there, though underfoot 'tis trod.

Usually singing made her happy, but today, as they left the only home they'd ever known, the singing voices pulled sadness over Nellie like a fog.

The wooden sailing ship swayed, bigger than anything she'd ever seen, but it looked worn out. Nellie glimpsed splintered holes in the boards of its side as they hurried along, and some of the sails were ripped. The ship didn't look like it would keep the sea out or sail against a storm. "Mum?"

Mum's eyes followed hers to the ship. "We don't have any choice, Nellie. Some people don't have tickets. At least while he evicted us the landlord included these to get rid of us." Mum showed Nellie their tickets and shifted Fannie to her other hip so she could take Nellie's hand. Evicted us. That must be the fancy word for throwing people from their home into the lane, tearing apart their roof and ripping their door off. "Hold my hand so no one will take you. We must hurry and get aboard before she sails! Your grandmother promised she'd pray, and we'll trust God. He is all we have."

That awful night Grandmother had rocked with a slow creak, creak and hummed a melody Nellie had heard a thousand times. She darned a hole in Nellie's shawl and had handed it to her just before the men burst in. Nellie heard their shouts ringing in her head. "Out with ye! Get out now. I warn you!" Mum wrenched free of a deputy who had grabbed her arm, and scrambled for the bundle she had made of their belongings. They'd had to choose only the possessions they needed and could carry on their backs. Nellie had to stop thinking about it. Stop it!



Bridget O'Donnell and her two daughters during the Potato Famine in Ireland. Frances, Nellie and Fannie may have looked very much like this when they left for America.

She tripped and lost her grip on Mum's hand, and as she fell she wished Papa were here. He would lift her up on his strong shoulders, safe, out of the way of harm. Her head hit hard, and the rough timber of the wharf scratched her face. He couldn't lift her up. Papa had been in Heaven since before she turned six in August. She hated that she had to search her mind to remember his laughing blue eyes and big smile.

Mum turned. "Nellie!"

Mum and Fannie looked fuzzy, and Nellie felt dizzy. Maybe it would be nice to lie here and rest a bit while her head cleared. She fingered the timber, thinking of Papa's self-made cottage door and smiled to herself about how he'd crowed over his

workmanship to anyone who mentioned it. “No one’s coming through that thick door whom we don’t want inside.” But they had, and then they’d torn his door off its hinges and thrown it in the ditch like garbage. She’d heard it splinter. She must, must stop thinking about it. Someone tripped over her legs. She needed to get up before someone stepped right on her. She looked up again. Mum crouched over her, but now Nellie could see her clearly. Fannie’s forehead crumpled, and she looked about to cry. Nellie sat up.

“Are you all right, then?”

She rubbed her elbow. “And it’s just a little scratch.”

Mum pulled her to her feet, and they hurried on. Nellie caught the words of a lady they passed. “Right, it’s not enough for the English to be after stealing Paddy’s crops and homes on Erin’s soil. They aim to make us disappear like leprechauns on these coffin ships.” They put dead people in coffins. Nellie hoped the lady didn’t mean what it sounded like she meant.

They found a building with a sign, M-e-d-i-c-a-l and I-n-s-p-e-c-t-i-o-n on the front. A man forced Nellie’s mouth open, pressed a dry stick on her tongue, turned his wrist onto her forehead and pulled her bottom eyelids down. He smelled like medicine. “Pass.” Mum held out one of the three tickets. The inspector stamped it. Then he examined Mum and Fannie the same way. Nellie released the breath she’d held when he stamped their tickets, too. They only had each other. They must stay together.

A ship’s bell rang, and Nellie’s mind went back to Midleton again. She heard the church bell in her little village ring for the poor to come for their dole of food. The sheriff pulled Mum’s hand up, and forced those three coffin ship tickets into it. “The landlord

says to be on this ship because he will not give you one scrap of anything if you choose not to go.”

“But there are only three. My mother ...”

“She’s too old. She would not survive.”

Nellie’s insides turned to fire, and she whispered to Fannie. “One day, when I am big enough, I will find these Englishers and kill them. You just see if I don’t.” Yet inside, even as she hissed those words, she knew she wouldn’t. Grandmother and Mum had both told her that God didn’t want people to kill each other. The English must not count starving the Irish to death as killing.

At the wooden ramp that led to the ship, a man who wore a dark blue coat with brass buttons put his hand out, palm up. He never even glanced at them. “Tickets.” Mum slapped their three into his hand. He pocketed them, and they started the climb up the slick plank. Nellie began to smell the sour smell of sickness. Irish men, women and children flowed onto the old sailing ship, most bony and poor, just like Nellie, Mum and Fannie.

Her mind returned to Midleton. Their neighbors were almost all sleeping in the church. That wicked sheriff had shouted at their backs. “No rent, no home to come back to.” Nellie and her family had found room among their friends on the rough board floor of the church the night before they left for Queenstown.

If only Papa hadn’t died. He had though, of the dysentery. Mum had told them the name of the disease that caused him all that pain. Nellie had cried over him almost every day at first. She had decided just after he died, when the pain in her heart made it feel squeezed shut, never to love anyone except Mum, Fannie and Grandmother that

much, ever again. He had called her his “right hand man” and his “fine stock” when they pulled up potatoes together or fed the chickens. He had loved her, and she had loved him right back.

But that was before. Now they were at the mercy of sailors instead of the sheriff and his deputies. As soon as they passed a table where a sailor took their names, Fannie pulled at the basket. “I’m hungry!” Mum concentrated on winding through the crowds, so Nellie unwound Fannie’s fingers from the basket and shushed her peckish sister.

In a short time, men on the wharf heaved the great ropes off giant logs that held the pier up. The pier slid away from the ship, and Nellie watched a sailor climb up a web of ropes attached to the mast into the pink and gold morning. She might not be able to fight the sheriff’s men, but sure and she could find adventure up there.

“Mum, I’ll be right back.”

She ran toward the web of ropes and climbed after the sailor.

“Nellie! Oh no, someone, get my girl.”

Nellie heard Mum, but she just could not stop. She had found adventure, at least a little, and she meant to live it.

The ropes were far apart. She used both her hands and feet to climb. As she did, the ocean and sky opened up before her in waves, clouds and sea birds. The sailor above her scrambled out on a side arm to work on a sail. The air smelled cleaner and cleaner. A strong arm engulfed her waist.

“Escapade’s over, lassie. Down you go.”

She feared to look down and search her captor's face to find out whether he was a friend or an enemy. "Oh please, sir, take me up with you. It's just a little adventure I want." She hoped for a friend.

He did not move for a moment, and then he tucked her under his left arm and began to climb. A cheer came up from the deck. Nellie looked down at the people's upturned faces. They looked small from up here.

"Please sir, could I climb too? I've had so much of being forced."

She felt him hesitate, and she hung under his arm waiting for him to decide. "Put your hand on the next rope. I'll come behind in case you lose your balance."

Up and up they went until they came to a little landing at the very top of the mast. "I can't let you stand there alone. Take a look around. Then we'll descend."

When she looked behind her, she saw his blue eyes. Could Papa have found a way to give her this moment? The sailor's eyes understood, for sure. He smiled at her. "Fill your eyes, lass. Tis a long journey."

Nellie looked to the north. Ireland's green looked beautiful against the blue sea where other sailing ships rocked in the breeze, and white gulls glided about in the air almost even with her head. It would be wonderful to fly. To the west were white capped waves. Something swam in the water to the south, but too far off for her to recognize it. She didn't look east. England lay east, and she would not bless it by noticing.

"It's much easier to climb than to descend. I'll hold you. If your foot missed a rope, you'd fall. I've already taken a risk for you. I'll not go to the brig, too."

Nellie prepared for a licking when she got to the deck. However, Mum must have exhausted herself with just getting aboard the ship, or maybe the dangers they'd already

faced had taken the fight out of her. She took Nellie from the sailor, and hugged her so tight Nellie lost her air. “Mum, it was wonderful! The air is clean up there. You can see forever!”

Mum’s voice muffled in Nellie’s dress. “Oh my girl, what am I to do with you? You are as determined as your mum, but you scared me to death. You did. Please wait for adventure until we arrive in America. Promise me then.”

“Sure and I ... promise.”

Mum sighed and began to recite an old Gaelic prayer she had taught them. Nellie and Fannie joined her. No one should recite alone.

Deep peace of the running waves to you.
Deep peace of the flowing air to you.
Deep peace of the smiling stars to you.
Deep peace of the quiet earth to you.
Deep peace of the watching shepherds to you.
Deep peace of the Son of Peace to you.

If Mum had been that frightened, Nellie would keep her promise.

She watched Ireland’s shore shrink smaller and smaller as their ship rolled out of Queenstown Harbor. *Goodbye Ireland. I will pray your potatoes get well and ... I’ll always be your daughter. I promise I will never put money ahead of people like those English do.*

Grandmother still lived there, and her aunts and uncles and cousins. Her life lay behind her. Yesterday, Nellie had hugged Grandmother’s thin waist while they stood in the churchyard waiting their turn at the wash basin.

“Couldn’t you come with us to America?”

“No, child. I am far too old to make the crossing. Our Father is giving you a brand new life. Look at what you are gaining. Let go of what you’ve lost.” Nellie grabbed Grandmother around her waist, planning never to let go.

Fannie jumped off the church steps. “I want a turn!” She stomped her foot.

The sun fast chased the black sky west over Middleton. The east gave way to gray.

Grandma pressed her rosary into Nellie’s hand as she let go, at the same time covering a cough.

“No. I can’t take your rosary – you are so ill.”

“You need it more than I.”

The hair rose on Nellie’s neck. What future did they face that Grandmother feared? “Why, are we in danger?”

“And it takes many days to sail to America, Nellie. We are hearing that the voyage is difficult. You will need to be stronger than ye ever have before.”

Nellie breathed in and out slowly and brushed her hand over her neck hair to smooth it back down. Hating the famine, the English, the loss, she dropped the rosary into her pocket. “Will you pray for us, then?”

Grandmother’s bony chin got little bumps in it and wiggled up and down. “And that I will, every moment.”

“For sure and I’ll love you forever, Grandmother.”

“And I you, lassie. And I you.”

Fannie got her hug, and when Grandmother let Fannie go, Mum turned to her. Nellie watched her grandmother squeeze her eyes shut and whisper in Mum’s ear as they hugged. Finally, Grandmother released Mum. “Go then, the sun rises, and America

waits.” She handed Mum her basket, now full of something covered by a cloth. Then she brushed the air toward the road. “You go on, now. Cousin Michael waits for you.” She turned her back to them, her hair a white lace curtain caught by the breeze.

They trudged away. All that day they walked. Nellie had bound her feet in old rags. Her shoes had long since worn out. Parts of the rags tore off, and she saw she left bloody tracks. She looked behind Mum. She left bloody tracks, too. They spent the night at Uncle Dan and Aunt Ellen’s cottage. This morning they walked a few more hours, beginning in the dark. But they arrived.

Nellie turned slowly around, her legs wide apart to keep her balance and gazed at the ocean that now surrounded the ship. She hadn’t expected the waves to roll almost as high as their deck nor the wind to be so full of salt smell. “Would it be all right to make our way to the front?”

Fannie clapped her hands. “Yes, the front, Mum.”

Mum smiled for the first time since they’d left Grandmother. “And we could do that.” She grasped their hands, and they made their way past a family who sat upon a trunk. A little red-haired girl, Nellie thought about her own age, smiled at them. Nellie smiled back. It would be nice to have a friend on the journey.

The three of them ducked under ropes and dirty brown sails, and they dodged people looking for their space on the ship. Finally they came to the bow. Nellie’s eyes roamed over the crashing waves and through the clouds and fog to the dim horizon. She breathed in the salt spray. She liked the salt smell a lot better than the ship’s rotting smell, and it helped her stomach stop churning.

Mum removed the towel from Grandmother's basket and handed Nellie and Fannie each an oatmeal cake and a hunk of cheese. Nellie tried not to put more than one bite in her mouth at a time and savored the nutty taste.

"Hey! You colleens can't come up here! Go below, women alone don't belong on deck."

Mum didn't move, so neither did Nellie. She'd seen Mum's blarney at work before, and expected a little now.

The sailor pulled on Mum's arm to turn her around. "I said go below, Missus. Take your bairns, and skedaddle! And watch yeerself, there are wicked men on this ship who'd love to relieve you of that basket."

Mum smiled at him. "Aw, you're a Scot, then. And I know you'll understand. Just a little longer. We've never been upon the sea before."

"You'll be sick of it by the time we make Boston, for sure."

Mum turned and looked to the horizon. "Right, but today is our first day, and we're after getting a little enjoyment for ourselves."

The sailor smiled down at Nellie and Fannie, then back at Mum, who now looked back at him. Watching her eyes, Nellie again thought Mum a beautiful lady. "Well, all right then. Keep your lovely brown-haired bairns happy for a bit." He turned to his work.

His muscles moved under his blowing shirt as he wound a rope as thick as a grown man's leg around a giant metal mushroom. And she'd be willing to do that job. Why couldn't they stay alone on deck? Why must a girl like her go below? There would be no wind in there, sure and begorah. She turned again into the wind and made up her

mind to forget about going below. Besides, that sickness smell came from there. Below? She'd not go below!

A man whose cheeks were blown up like bubbles held his hand over his mouth and raced to the side. Nellie pulled away a bit of her hem, and walked over to hand it to him.

He blotted his mouth, and smiled at her. "And I'll be thanking you kindly, lass."

Mum and Fannie looked about as peaked as the man, but Mum picked Fannie up. "Look way over there and watch for fish to jump from the water." Both Fannie and Mum's color improved as they gazed away from the ship.

They stood watching the ocean for hours. Nellie wondered if she might see Boston soon, but the sun sank into the ocean ahead, and the sailors herded the few passengers still on deck into the hold. Nellie heard a pot-bellied brute yell at the little red-headed girl's family. "Down with ye!" The family wrestled their trunk into the dark hole. Before the little girl descended, she turned, saw Nellie, and waved.

A frowning sailor turned on them. Mum hid Nellie behind her and clutched Fannie to her front.

"No," Mum replied. "We'll sleep on deck."

"And you will not."

Nellie dropped Mum's hand and slipped behind a metal mushroom. She pressed her nose against its cold top and peeked over. The sailor pushed Mum, and as he did he plucked Fannie from Mum's arms and dangled her above the dark hole in the deck.

"Either you climb down, or I drop her."

Fannie screamed and struggled.

Nellie rushed to them, pressing her lips together so the sailor didn't hear, *Leave my sister alone, or I'll be after throwing your own wicked self down that hole.*

Mum grabbed Fannie back. Nellie watched her hold her head high and step down the ladder.

Since Mum and Fannie must go, she would go. Nellie stepped onto the rickety ladder above Mum's head, keeping her eye on the legs of the sailor, and descended into the coffin, praying that tomorrow she might see sunlight again.

Summary

- Nellie Cashman's life began in Midleton, County Cork, Southern Ireland in August, 1844.
- The Irish potato famine, caused by the potato blight, began in 1845. The blight's fungus caused white mold and black spots on the leaves and then rotted the potatoes to pulp.
- Many Irish people died from diseases caused by not having enough to eat.
- Because Nellie's father had died and there was not enough work for her mother, they couldn't pay their rent, and were evicted.
- The famine forced Nellie, her sister Fannie, and her widowed mother, Frances, to leave Ireland for the United States sometime around 1850. Thousands of other Irish people left Ireland for either the United States, Canada or Australia.