CHAPTER ONE

n which Manchán's Mother tries to force him against his Will to become a Monk. Manchán's Father's three favourite Things. An Introduction to Manchán's annoying Sister Méabh. A Pig called Muck and Pagan-of-the-Six-Toes. A brave Escape.

It was a fine sunny day, and the only dark cloud around was Manchán's face, scowling at his family. For a week now his mother had been hinting at a surprise and at last he had found out what it was. Her brother, the abbot from the monastery across the lake, had come to collect him, for Manchán was going to be sent to become a monk. A *monk* for heaven's sake!

'Don't say that,' said Brother Abstemius.

'Say what?' said Manchán.

'You know what,' said Brother Abstemius, and Manchán sighed.

'Right,' he said. 'Sorry.'

'For your penance,' added Brother Abstemius, 'you shall peel two bushels of turnips for Brother Cook. He needs them for breakfast in the morning.'

Turnips! For breakfast, moaned Manchán, though not out loud. Brother Abstemius was watching

him much too closely for that. Was this how being a monk was going to be?

'There's nothing wrong with monking,' said Manchán's mother, glaring at him. 'It's a very respectable profession. People will look up to you.'

Great, thought Manchán, his mind still reeling from the turnips.

'Is "monking" really a word?' asked Manchán's sister Méabh. 'It doesn't sound like a word to me.'

'Of course it's a word,' said Manchán's father, who couldn't read. 'It's a word like fishing, or hurling, or singing.' He listed off the three things in life that were the most important to him. Now monking was added to the list. 'Good man, Manchán,' he said. 'You'll bring honour to the family.'

Manchán frowned. 'Why can't I bring honour to the family by fishing or hurling or singing?' he asked. 'Like you do.'

His father scratched his head but couldn't come up with an answer. He gave up and waited for Manchán's mother to explain.

'Because,' she said, 'monking is a *respectable* profession.'

'That's it,' replied Manchán's father, nodding. '*Respectable*.' He said the word as if he wasn't quite sure what it meant, which he wasn't.

'It is the *most* respectable profession there is, after chieftain,' said Brother Abstemius modestly, 'and that is something.'

Manchán's mother smiled. Brother Abstemius was her actual brother and had brought much honour to her family with his monking,

as opposed to messing, or mucking about, which Manchán was very good at.

'*Being* a monk,' said Méabh. 'Not *monking*!'

In fact, Brother Abstemius had brought so much honour to Manchán's mother's family that he very nearly made up for her marrying Manchán's father. And now Manchán was about to make up for the rest.

'Anyway, Manchán's good at singing,' continued Méabh, 'and hurling. And two out of three's not bad.'

Thanks, thought Manchán, and blew his cheeks out so hard his ears popped. Things had to be really bad if Méabh was defending him like that. Or maybe she just didn't want him to leave home because there'd be nobody around to bully after he was gone.

'But Manchán's terrible at fishing,' said Méabh. 'Once he caught a hunter from the kingdom across the river on his hook and nearly started a war. Do you want to hear the story?' she said to Brother Abstemius, who looked mildly interested.

'No, he doesn't,' said Manchán. 'So shut up, all right?'

'He hooked him by the seat of his pants,' said Méabh, 'while he was crouching in the reeds, and dragged him into the mud.'

'It wasn't my fault,' said Manchán. 'It was the wind. And you weren't there either, so you don't know!'

Méabh laughed. 'Stop *lying*,' she said. 'You're not allowed to *lie* while you're *monking*. Isn't that true, Brother Abstemius?'

Brother Abstemius's eyebrows wriggled like caterpillars. 'It is true in any case,' he intoned sternly, 'but it is especially true for monks.'

'And what's the penance for lying?' asked Méabh innocently. 'How many bushels of turnips do you have to peel?'

'It depends on the lie,' said Brother Abstemius. 'I work with a scale of one to ten. But go on with the story.'

Manchán sighed. It looked like the stupid story was going to be told whether he liked it or not, and then they would all have a great laugh

at his expense. To cheer himself up, he would do his trick of imagining it had happened to somebody else. That would nearly turn it into a good story, except for two things. It didn't happen to somebody else, and these kinds of things were always happening to Manchán.

'It was a fine summer's morning when Manchán set off in his coracle,' Méabh declaimed.

'There wasn't a cloud in the sky and the water was as smooth as Daddy's head.'

'It wasn't always smooth,' said her mother, sighing. 'When I met your father he had hair all the way down to his waist. And lovely plaits.'

'Aye,' said Daddy, remembering. 'But they were a lot of work.'

'Manchán took the coracle without permission and headed off down to the lake with it,' said Méabh.

'No, I didn't,' said Manchán. 'I asked the day before if I could take the coracle out by myself and Daddy said I could. Didn't you, Daddy?'

'When you were older, is what I said,' his father corrected him.

'But I was older,' said Manchán. 'I was a whole day older.' He glanced over at Brother Abstemius, who was shaking his head and doing his eyebrow wriggle again. You could practically see him counting bushels.

Manchán's mother said, 'This is part of the reason we are sending you to be a monk, Manchán. It will teach you not to stretch the truth. Now, Méabh, you can tell the rest of the story some other time. Manchán has to pack.'

'Wait a second,' said Manchán. 'I thought you were just *discussing* sending me to be a monk. Nobody said you'd made up your minds.'

'Well, we have,' said Manchán's mother, and looked at her husband for support.

'Er ...' he said. 'Your mother thinks it will bring honour to our family. And it's just for a year,' he added quickly. 'If you don't like it, we'll think of something else.'

Manchán turned and stamped away. What else can you do when your entire family has turned against you? And the last thing he wanted was for Méabh to see him crying, especially if it was because he was angry, not sad. He stamped into their hut and untied the door so it fell closed behind him. That was the thing about deerskin doors. They kept the wind and the rain out all right, but you couldn't slam them the way you could the wooden ones. But only the chieftains

had wooden doors, and Manchán's father was a very long way away from being a chieftain.

Outside he could hear Brother Abstemius speaking to his mother. 'Don't worry,' he was saying. 'We'll take very good care of Manchán. He'll be settled in no time whatsoever.'

'I'm not a bit worried,' answered Manchán's mother. 'It will do him a lot of good.'

'You're the one who should be worried,' said Méabh. 'Not us.' She gave a short, sharp laugh.

Go on and laugh, thought Manchán bitterly, standing in the middle of the hut. He wiped the tears from his cheeks and waited for his eyes to adjust to the darkness. There were no windows in the hut for light because nobody had invented glass yet, at least nobody local, and a window without glass is just a hole for rain and wind.

'Manchán,' shouted his mother from outside, 'pack your things and get a move on. Brother Abstemius hasn't got all day, you know.'

Manchán started packing. He only had a few things anyway, like most people back then. He

packed them into a bundle and tied it to his hurley stick. Then he went and quietly kicked a hole in the wall at the back of the hut. The hut was built of sods and sticks, so the wall gave quickly enough and made hardly any noise. With a bit of luck, he could make it to the river and borrow a coracle while everybody else went haring off in the wrong direction. *That will show them*, he thought, getting down on his knees and widening the hole. Behind him his father's voice drifted in through the deerskin door.

'You know,' he was saying, '"Honour to the Family" could be a really great title for a song.' He started humming like a bee, settling the tune in his head.

'Why don't you compose the song *after* my brother has gone?' said Manchán's mother, interrupting him. Then she raised her voice again. 'Manchán, what's taking you so long?'

'I'm packing,' shouted Manchán. 'There's no law against packing, is there?'

The hole was wider now and he could see daylight. *Nearly there*, he thought. *Soon I'll be on my way and then they'll be sorry.* He pressed the palms of his hands together and shoved them forward into the hole like a swimmer practising a dive. He had just managed to force his head through after his hands when Muck appeared.

'Muck,' said Manchán, 'move. You're in the way.'

Muck was Manchán's pig, a small dark pig with pink ears and a tail that wagged like a dog's. He was smarter than a dog too, and followed Manchán everywhere. Now he pressed his snout up against Manchán's nose and grinned at him. Muck loved Manchán. And why wouldn't he? How many other pigs had owners who liked to grub around in the dirt with them? None, was the answer. Of course he adored the boy.

'Muck,' whispered Manchán, pressing his head forward and trying to twist his shoulders through at the same time, 'I said, get out of the way.'

But Muck just pressed his forehead against Manchán's and started shoving back. He thought the whole thing was a game. Muck loved playing games.

'Muck,' groaned Manchán, because a pig, even a small one, is as solid as a rock and twice as heavy. With his shoulders still pinned, all Manchán was able to do was prod Muck with his fingers to try to get him out of the way, which to Muck was like being tickled.

Wheee wheee wheeee, squealed Muck in delight. Muck loved being tickled.

'Muck, stop squealing,' hissed Manchán, scrabbling with his toes on the floor of the hut behind and getting nowhere fast. 'Somebody will hear you.' By 'somebody', of course, he meant his mother.