

ALISON PLOWDEN



ELIZABETH
REGINA

ELIZABETH REGINA

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The
History
Press

Early before the day doth spring,
Let us awake my Muse and sing:

It is no time to slumber,
So many joys this time doth bring,
As time will fail to number.

But whereto shall we bend our layes?
Even up to Heaven, againe to raise
The Maid, which thence descended:
Hath brought againe the golden days,
And all the world amended.

Rudeness itself she dothe repine,
Even like an Alchemist divine,
Gross times of iron turning
Into the purest forms of gold:
Not to corrupt, till heaven waxe old,
And be refined with burning.

John Davies,
Hymns of Astrea

CONTENTS

Elizabeth Regina
The Age of Triumph, 1588–1603

Title Page

Epigraph

Prologue: The Year Eighty-Eight

- 1 A Most Renowned Virgin Queen
- 2 God's Handmaiden
- 3 Fair Stood the Wind for France
- 4 A Maid in an Island
- 5 Great Eliza's Glorious Name
- 6 A Very Great Princess
- 7 The General of Our Gracious Empress
- 8 The Madcaps All in Riot
- 9 A Taper of True Virgin Wax
- 10 Epilogue: Queen Elizabeth of Famous Memory

Sources and Bibliography

Notes and Abbreviations

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THE YEAR EIGHTY-EIGHT

*The Spanish fleet did float in narrow seas,
And bend her ships against the English shore,
With so great rage as nothing could appease,
And with such strength as never seen before.*

It was late in the afternoon of Friday, 19 June 1588 when Captain Thomas Fleming brought the barque Golden Hind scudding under full sail into Plymouth Sound. The Lord Admiral Charles Howard and a group of his senior officers were out on the Hoe relaxing over an after-dinner game of bowls when Fleming came panting up to report that the Spanish Armada had been sighted that morning off the Scillies and Sir Francis Drake, so the story goes, remarked that there was time enough to finish the game and beat the Spaniards too. The story may well be true. The wind was blowing from the south-west and at three o'clock the tide had begun flooding into the Sound. Until the ebb, round about ten in the evening, the English battle fleet was effectively immobilised and there could have been plenty of time to finish a leisurely game of bowls.

But all through that night Plymouth harbour seethed with activity as the crews sweated at the gruelling task of towing the heavy warships put on the ebb tide, and by daybreak the bulk of the fleet was riding at anchor behind Rame Head. All through that night, too, the beacon fires flung the news from hill-top to hill-top – leaping along the south coast from the Lizard to Beachy Head, up to Bristol and South Wales, across the Sussex Downs to the Surrey hills and the heights of Hampstead and into the Midland shires:

*Till Belvoir's lordly terraces the sign to Lincoln sent,
And Lincoln sent the message on, o'er the wild vale of Trent;
Till Skiddaw saw the fire that burst on Gaunt's embattled pile,
And the red glare on Skiddaw roused the burghers of Carlisle.*

The long nervous wait was over and England was as ready as she would ever be to meet the onslaught of Spain. Sir Walter Raleigh and his cousin Richard Grenville commanded in the vulnerable West Country and Sir John Norris, responsible for coastal defences from Dorset to Kent, had detached three thousand men to guard the Isle of Wight, regarded as another key point. In Essex, which would be in the front line if the Duke of Parma's army, now embarking at Dunkirk, succeeded in making the crossing, the Earl of Leicester was gathering fourteen thousand foot and two thousand horse; while Kent Lord Hunsdon had raised another eight thousand. The inland counties were also doing their bit, a little reluctantly – the imminence of danger by seaborne invasion was naturally harder to impress on men who had never seen the sea. But Sir Henry Cromwell on a visit to London was so struck by the sense of urgency round the capital, by the sight of guarded ferries and crossroads and of men drilling with musket and caliver on every open space, that he wrote home to Huntingdon in a strenuous effort to convey the immediacy of the crisis and ordering all captains and leading gentlemen to stay at their posts, ready to march at an hour's warning.

A notably easy-going and unmilitaristic nation was doing its best and no one questioned the courage and resolution of the islanders as they prepared that long-ago summer to defend their lives and liberties, their homes and their religion. Equally, no one with any military experience could doubt that a

encounter between Parma's Blackbeards – hard-bitten veterans of a dozen bloody campaigns commanded by the best general in Europe – and Queen Elizabeth's untrained, sketchily equipped citizen army would result in anything but a massacre. The business must be settled at sea, or the country would go down in fire and slaughter, famine, pestilence and persecution. Fortunately, the seamen, although fully conscious of the awesome nature of their responsibility, had every confidence in their ability to hinder the enemy's quiet passage into England. Francis Drake, writing to the Queen from Plymouth in April, assured Her Majesty that he had not in his lifetime 'known better men and possessed with gallanter minds than the people which are here gathered together, voluntarily to put their hands and hearts into the finishing of this great piece of work'. The navy, in fact, was itching to get to grips with the Armada.

The two fleets first sighted one another west of the Eddystone about three o'clock in the afternoon of Saturday 20 July and during that night the English succeeded in recovering the weather gauge. In other words, they stood out to sea across the enemy's bows and, by a very nice piece of seamanship, indeed, worked their way round to the seaward and windward flank of the advancing Spaniards. So, on the morning of Sunday the 21st, began the pursuit up the Channel. At the outset both sides had received some unpleasant surprises. The Spaniards by the realisation that they were opposed by ships faster and more weatherly than any they had seen before, and the English by the sheer size of the Armada and the great defensive strength of its crescent-shaped formation. Even with their superior fire-power and manoeuvrability, they knew that unless they could break that formation, it would be impossible to do it serious damage.

On the following day the Armada lost two capital ships, though neither as a result of enemy action. One blew up after a fire started in the magazine. The other lost her rudder and had to be abandoned. On Tuesday the wind veered. The English fleet temporarily lost the advantage of the weather gauge and a somewhat confused battle was joined off Portland Bill, the English trying to weather the Armada's seaward wing, the Spaniards trying to grapple and board their irritatingly nimble adversaries. Meanwhile, Martin Frobisher in the *Triumph*, the biggest ship in either fleet, together with five middle-sized London merchantmen, had become separated from the main body of the fleet on the shoreward side and was being attacked by Don Hugo de Moncada's galleasses – a hybrid form of sailing ship cum galley. Whether Frobisher was really in difficulties or was attempting to lure the galleasses into a trap has never been made clear but, as the wind veered again to the south, Howard's *Ark Royal*, followed by the *Elizabeth Jonas*, the *Galleon of Leicester*, the *Golden Lion*, the *Victory*, the *Mary Rose*, the *Dreadnought* and the *Swallow*, stormed down to the rescue, pouring broadside after broadside into the *San Martin de Portugal*, the Spanish admiral's flagship, as he went. 'At which assault', reported Howard, 'after wonderful sharp conflict, the Spaniards were forced to give way and to flock together like sheep.'

On Wednesday there was a lull. The English had been using up their ammunition at an unprecedented rate and were obliged to send urgently to Portsmouth 'for a new supply of such provisions'. Howard was not particularly pleased by the way things were going. Whenever the fleet had come to blows the English had had the advantage, but the Armada was now well on its way towards the rendezvous with Parma, still maintaining strict formation and still relatively intact. But on board the *San Martin*, the Duke of Medina Sidonia also had his problems. He, too, was running short of ammunition and was increasingly worried by the fact that so far he had been unable to make any contact with the Duke of Parma.

On Thursday there was another indecisive skirmish off the Isle of Wight and on Saturday 27 July the Armada suddenly dropped anchor off Calais. The English promptly followed suit and for the next

twenty-four hours the two fleets lay within culverin shot of each other. Medina Sidonia had made up his mind not to go any further until he had heard from Parma and at once dispatched an urgent message to Dunkirk asking for forty or fifty flyboats to be sent without delay, 'as with this aid', he wrote, 'I shall be able to resist the enemy's fleet until Your Excellency can come out with the rest and we can go together and take some port where the Armada may enter in safety.' No one, it seemed, had yet explained to Medina Sidonia that the only flyboats operational in the neighbourhood of Dunkirk were the Sea Beggars, tough little craft of the embryonic Dutch navy commanded by Justin of Nassau which had come down from the Scheldt Estuary and were now efficiently blockading the Flemish coast. The Spanish fighting ships drew twenty-five to thirty feet of water, which they would not find at Dunkirk, or Nieuport, the other port of embarkation, and as long as Justin continued to keep Parma's army penned up in its shallow, sandy harbours, the all important junction of the invasion force and its escort was – short of a miracle – going to be impossible.

Meanwhile, Charles Howard had been joined by the squadron of thirty-odd ships left to guard the mouth of the Thames, and that Saturday night the whole English navy, a hundred and fifty sail great and small was assembled in the Straits of Dover. No one seems to have told Howard that the Dutch were in position and, hag-ridden by the fear that Parma might turn up at any moment, he was determined to lose no time in flushing the Armada out of Calais Roads. The obvious way to do this was with fireships and about midnight on Sunday, eight small craft 'going in a front, having the wind and tide with them, and their ordnance being charged' were set on fire and let loose.

Fire was, of course, one of the greatest dangers a wooden sailing ship had to fear, and panic swept through the crowded anchorage as the Armada cut its cables and scrambled out to sea in the darkness. The fireships, although they did no actual damage, had achieved something which the English fleet had not yet been able to do and had broken up the Spaniards' formidable crescent formation. All the same, and due in large part to the stubborn courage and leadership of the Duke of Medina Sidonia, the scattered ships rallied, collected themselves and by Monday morning were ready to do battle once more.

Sir William Winter, second in command of the squadron which had been waiting off the North Foreland, told Francis Walsingham that 'about nine of the clock in the morning we fetched near unto them being then thwart of Gravelines, and they went into the proportion of a half-moon. The fight continued until six of the clock at night, in the which time the Spanish army bare away north-north-east as much as they could; keeping company one with another, I assure Your Honour, in very good order.' This was the fiercest fight and the nearest thing to a set battle which had taken place since the Armada had entered the Channel, but although the Spaniards had, for the first time, taken a real beating, Charles Howard was still not very happy. Sending an anxious plea to Walsingham for more victuals and munition, he wrote: 'Ever since morning we have chased them in fight until this evening late and distressed them much; but their fleet consisteth of mighty ships and great strength'. And he added a postscript. 'Their force is wonderful great and strong; and yet we pluck their feathers little and little.' Francis Drake was rather more optimistic. 'God hath given us so good a day in forcing the enemy so far to leeward as I hope to God the Prince of Parma and the Duke of Medina Sidonia shall not shake hands this few days.'

God was certainly playing his part and, as Francis Drake always firmly believed, he was apparently a Protestant God, for during that night the wind blew hard from the northwest, driving the unhappy Armada remorselessly towards the shoals and banks of the Dutch coast. The *San Mateo* and the *San Felipe* went aground on the banks off Nieuport and Ostend to be snapped up by the Sea Beggars, and by dawn on Tuesday, 30 July it seemed as if the whole fleet must be pounded to death on the Zeeland

Sands while the English looked on from a safe distance. Then, suddenly, the wind veered again and the next day Drake wrote exultantly to Walsingham: 'We have the army of Spain before us and mind, with the grace of God, to wrestle a pull with him. There was never anything pleased me better than the seeing the enemy flying with a southerly wind to northwards. God grant you have a good eye to the Duke of Parma; for with the grace of God, if we live, I doubt it not but ere long so to handle the matter with the Duke of Sidonia as he shall wish himself back at St Mary Port among his orange trees.' As they set off in pursuit, still worried by shortages of food and ammunition, neither Drake nor Howard yet realised that they had seen the last of the Invincible Armada.

During those momentous ten days which were to settle the fate of western Christendom, Queen Elizabeth, 'not a whit dismayed', was in London, taking no notice of the specially picked force of two thousand men who were guarding her precious person and showing an alarming inclination to go down to the south coast and meet the enemy in person. It was largely to divert her Majesty's mind from such an unsuitable excursion that the Earl of Leicester had suggested she should pay a visit to his camp at Tilbury and so 'comfort' the army concentrated to the east of the capital, 'at Stratford, East Ham and the villages thereabout'. Elizabeth took the idea up eagerly. In fact, by this time the crisis was over and the battered Armada was being driven into the North Sea, but William Camden wrote: 'Whereas most men thought they would tack about again and come back, the Queen with a masculine spirit came and took a view of her Army and Camp at Tilbury, and riding about through the ranks of armed men drawn up on both sides of her, with a leader's truncheon in her hand, sometimes with a martial pace, another while gently like a woman, incredible it is how much she encouraged the hearts of her captains and soldiers by her presence and speech to them.'

The visit was a roaring success. The Queen had come down the Thames by barge to Tilbury, where she was received by Leicester and his officers, and greeted by a salvo of cannon fired from the port. She then got into her coach and set off to inspect the camp to a martial accompaniment of drums and fifes. A contemporary versifier, who rushed into print with a very long (and very bad) poem entitled *Elizabetha Triumphans*, probably captured the spirit of the occasion as well as anybody:

*Our peerless Queen doth by her soldiers pass,
And shows herself unto her subjects there,
She thanks them oft for their (of duty) pains,
And they, again, on knees, do pray for her;
They couch their pikes, and bow their ensigns down,
When as their sacred royal Queen passed by.*

Leicester's belief that the Queen's presence would be good for morale was undoubtedly fully justified.

*The soldiers which placed were far off
From that same way through which she passed along,
Did hollo oft, 'The Lord preserve our Queen!'
He happy was that could but see her coach ...
Thrice happy they who saw her stately self,
Who, Juno-like, drawn by her proudest birds,
Passed along through quarters of the camp.*

Elizabeth spent the night at a nearby manor house, and next day came back to Tilbury to see a mock battle and to review her troops. Bare-headed and wearing a breastplate, she rode along the lines of men escorted only by the Earl of Leicester, the Earl of Ormonde, bearing the sword of state, and a page who carried her white-plumed helmet. She had dismissed her bodyguard for, as she was presently

say, she did not desire to live to distrust her faithful and loving people. Such fear was for tyrants. She had always so behaved herself that, under God, she placed her chiefest strength and safeguard in the loyal hearts and goodwill of her subjects.

Her dazzled and adoring amateur army did not see a thin, middle-aged woman with bad teeth and wearing a bright red wig perched on the back of an enormous white gelding. Instead they saw the personification of every goddess of classical mythology they had ever heard about, every heroine from their favourite reading, the Bible. They saw Judith and Deborah, Diana the Huntress and the Queen of the Amazons all rolled into one. But they also saw their own beloved and familiar Queen.

*Her stateliness was so with love-show joined,
As all there then did jointly love and fear.
They joyed in that they see their Ruler's love:
But feared lest that in aught they should offend
Against herself, the Goddess of the land.*

It was in this hectic emotional atmosphere that Elizabeth made her famous Tilbury Speech. She had not come among them for her 'recreation and disport' she told the soldiers, 'but being resolved, in the midst and heat of the battle, to live or die amongst you all, to lay down for my God, and for my kingdom, and for my people, my honour and my blood, even in the dust. I know I have the body of a weak and feeble woman, but I have the heart and stomach of a king, and of a king of England too, and think foul scorn that Parma or Spain, or any prince of Europe should dare to invade the borders of my realm; to which, rather than any dishonour shall grow by me, I will myself take up arms, I myself will be your general, judge and rewarder of every one of your virtues in the field. I know already for your forwardness you have deserved rewards and crowns; and we do assure you, in the word of a prince, they shall be duly paid you.'

Small wonder that her audience rose to her with 'a mighty shout' and when the Queen had gone back to London, a little disappointed perhaps that she had not after all been called upon to take arms herself, Leicester wrote to the Earl of Shrewsbury: 'Our gracious mistress hath been here with me to see her camp and people, which so enflamed the hearts of her good subjects, as I think the weakest person among them is able to match the proudest Spaniard that dares land in England.'

The year '88 which, it had long been prophesied, would see many 'most wonderful and extraordinary accidents', had seen a small island, only half an island in fact, triumphantly defy and repulse the assault of the greatest power in Europe and may surely be said to mark the high noon of the Elizabethan epic. It had also marked the consummation of a unique love affair between ruler and people. But no nation can live for long in such a white-hot passion of love and pride, and even Elizabeth Tudor rode through the camp at Tilbury her world was changing. Economic pressures and other pressures and aspirations, as yet barely recognised or understood, of a society still emerging from an age of old certainties and dogmas were building up beneath seemingly solid ground, until within the lifetimes of children already toddling in Armada summer – they were to erupt in a manner which effectively killed the old certainties for ever.

A MOST RENOWNED VIRGIN QUEEN

*Sacred, imperial, and holy is her seat,
Shining with wisdom, love, and mightiness:
Nature that everything imperfect made,
Fortune that never yet was constant found,
Time that defaceth every golden show,
Dare not decay, remove, or her impair;
Both nature, time, and fortune, all agree,
To bless and serve her royal majesty.*

A little before noon on Sunday, 24 November 1588, the head of a very grand procession indeed emerged from the courtyard of Somerset House, turned right into the Strand and set off past Clement Danes and Essex House towards Temple Bar and the City. It was an awesome spectacle, for the greatest names in the land were on their way to church to give thanks to the Almighty for the recent glorious deliverance from invasion and conquest by the mighty power of Spain.

Everybody who was anybody was in town that Sunday morning. Behind the heralds and the trumpeters and the gentlemen ushers rode the nobility, the privy councillors, the judges and bishops and all the great officers of state, the scribes and the men of war, all the brilliance and dignity, all the glamour and gallantry and professional expertise of the Elizabethan establishment: old Lord Burghley and sombre Secretary Walsingham; the Lord High Admiral Howard of Effingham and Lord Chancellor Christopher Hatton, Hunsdon and Pembroke, Knollys and Egerton, that dazzling all-rounder Sir Walter Raleigh and Archbishop Whitgift, the Queen's 'little black husband'.

After the Queen's men came the Queen herself, surrounded by the gentlemen pensioners and riding in an open chariot throne drawn by two white horses. Four pillars at the back end of this contraption supported a canopy 'on the top whereof was made a crown imperial', while in front two smaller pillars accommodated a lion and a dragon. Next came the Master of the Horse, the young Earl of Essex leading the royal palfrey, and a contingent of ladies of honour with the yeomen of the guard in their gorgeous red and gold liveries, halberds in their hands, brought up the rear.

At Temple Bar the city musicians were in position over the gateway, ready to strike up a welcoming tune, and the Lord Mayor and his brethren, the scarlet-robed Aldermen, waited to greet Her Majesty and escort her through Fleet Street and up Ludgate Hill to St Paul's. According to long-established custom, the way was lined by the city companies in their livery hoods and wearing their best clothes all standing in order behind railings draped with blue cloth and all 'saluting her highness as she proceeded along'. Lesser mortals seized what points of vantage they could from which to cheer the Queen and gape at the grand folk in her train.

The procession reached Paul's Church between the hours of twelve and one, and was received at the great West Door by the Bishop of London with more than fifty other members of the clergy drawn up in support, all in their richest copes and vestments. Descending from her chariot, the Queen at once fell on her knees and there and then 'made her hearty prayers to God' before being conducted down the long west aisle of the cathedral, where the banners captured from the Armada ships hung on display, while the litany was changed before her. She then crossed the transept and took her place

the gallery in the north wall of the choir, facing the open air pulpit cross, to hear the Bishop of Salisbury preach a sermon 'wherein none other argument was handled but that praise, honour and glory might be rendered unto God, and that God's name might be extolled by thanksgiving'. Elizabeth did not normally share her subjects' inordinate enthusiasm for sermons, but on this occasion she listened with gracious attention to the eloquent Dr Pierce and when he had finished she herself addressed the assembled congregation, 'most Christianly' exhorting them to give thanks – the people responding with a great shout, wishing her a long and happy life to the confusion of her enemies. Her obligations to a benevolent deity having been thus handsomely discharged, the Queen processed back through the church the way she had come and went to dine in state at the bishop's palace.

This solemn ceremony marked the climax of a series of public holidays, thanksgiving services, sermons, bonfires and other victory celebrations; but although the nation rejoiced, there was little euphoria and less complacency. The thousands who thronged the churches that autumn had needed no urging to give thanks to God as they reflected soberly on the providential nature of their escape from the King of Spain's invincible Armada, and no thinking person believed that this would be the end of the matter. Certainly the Queen did not. One crisis, perhaps the greatest, had been met and overcome but as she brought a highly satisfactory day to its close, repeating her triumphal journey through the city streets back to Somerset House, the November dusk ablaze with a 'great light of torches', she harboured no illusions about the nature of the hazards which lay ahead.

Elizabeth Tudor was fifty-five now (the same age as her father had been when he died) and had just celebrated the thirtieth anniversary of her accession. By the standards of her day she was already well past middle-age, but if she was daunted by the prospect of beginning a new career as a war-leader so late in life, she gave no sign of it in the presence of her loving people. To a casual glance that spare, wiry figure and high-nosed profile had altered amazingly little over the past thirty years and the Queen's carefully cultivated public image was still, convincingly, that of a woman in her prime. She had once nearly died of smallpox and on at least two occasions since had been ill enough to cause serious anxiety, but she had always possessed great recuperative powers and in her mid-fifties her general health seems to have been excellent; even the ulcer on her ankle which had troubled her on and off for nearly ten years had healed at last. Physically she was as active as ever, dancing six or seven galliards in a morning and walking and riding with undiminished energy; while anyone rash enough to suppose that her mental powers might have begun to decline quickly discovered his mistake. She had kept up her lifelong habit of devoting some part of almost every day to study of serious reading and, as her godson, John Harington, records: 'Her highness was wont to sooth her ruffled temper with reading every morning, when she had been stirred to passion at the council, or other matters had overthrown her gracious disposition. She did much admire Seneca's wholesome advisings when the soul's quiet is flown away, and I saw much of her translating thereof.'

Unfortunately, the soothing properties of Seneca were not always efficacious. When stirred to passion, her Highness was still quite capable of filling the air with good round oaths and was subject on occasion 'to be vehemently transported with anger'. Elizabeth in a rage could be heard seven rooms away and she was not above throwing things, or boxing the ears of the nearest maid of honour. 'When she smiled', wrote Harington, 'it was a pure sunshine that every one did choose to bask in; but anon came a storm from a sudden gathering of clouds, and the thunder fell, in wondrous manner, on all alike.' The Queen's bark, however, was usually worse than her bite and these tension-relieving explosions were always kept in the family. No outsider ever saw her other than graciously smiling or regally dignified.

But if, in 1588, Queen Elizabeth appeared to be at the peak of her form – tough, vigorous and

autocratic, her appetite for the pleasures and problems of life seemingly unquenchable – time had not dealt so kindly with her contemporaries. Lord Burghley, now in his late sixties, was still in harness but increasingly burdened by the weight of his years and infirmities. Francis Walsingham was a sick man and most of the older generation of councillors and courtiers were nearing the end of their careers. Death, indeed, had already torn one gaping hole in that charmed circle of intimates whom the Queen honoured with pet names, and the procession to St Paul's had been the first great pageant of the reign in which the flamboyant figure of Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester, had not figured prominently.

Leicester, as commander-in-chief of the home forces, had spent a strenuous summer helping to organise England's land defence and, although he was much the same age as the Queen, he had not worn as well as his mistress. Paunchy and red-faced, his white hair receding fast, little trace remained of the dark, slightly sinister good looks which had once earned him the opprobrious label of Gypsy. When the invasion scare was finally over and his headquarters at Tilbury had been dismantled, the Earl came back to London and was present at a grand military review held at Whitehall on 26 August, watching with the queen from a window while his young stepson ran two tilts against the Earl of Cumberland. Next day he left for the country, intending to take the waters at Buxton. He stopped en route at Rycote Manor near Oxford, home of the Norris family where he and Elizabeth had often stayed together in the past, and from there he scribbled one of his affectionate little notes to the Queen. A week later he was dead, 'of a continual fever'.

In the excitement of the time, the disappearance of this great landmark of the Elizabethan scene went unmourned and almost unnoticed by the general public. Leicester had never been liked. 'He was esteemed a most accomplished courtier', observed William Camden, 'a cunning time-server and respecter of his own advantages ... But whilst he preferred power and greatness, which is subject to be envied, before solid virtue, his detracting emulators found large matter to speak reproachfully of him and even when he was in his most flourishing condition spared not disgracefully to defame him by libels, not without mixture of some untruths. In a word, people talked openly in his commendation but privately he was ill spoken of by the greater part.'

People, of course, had always resented his special relationship with the Queen (in some quarters he was still blamed for her failure to get married), and he'd recently become a prime target of the Catholic propaganda machine. *Leicester's Commonwealth*, the familiar title of a book published anonymously in Antwerp in 1584, had not only raked up the old scandal of his first wife's death but accused its victim, in exuberant and imaginative detail, of pretty well every iniquity known to man, from fornication and covetousness to murder and treachery. In spite of official attempts to suppress it, this little masterpiece of character assassination enjoyed an immediate runaway success with the numerous section of the community who'd always suspected the Earl of being a bad lot and were only too happy to see their prejudices confirmed in print. So much so that, at least according to the chronicler John Stow, 'all men, so far as they durst, rejoiced no less outwardly at his death than for the victory lately obtained against the Spaniard'.

For the Queen it was a grievous loss and Camden noted that she took it much to heart. Elizabeth had first known Robert Dudley when they were both children and ever since she came to the throne he had been one of her closest and most constant companions, her 'brother and best friend', and more than that, it had often been whispered. One of the Spanish government's secret agents in London picked up a story that the Queen was so grieved that she had shut herself up in her chamber for several days, refusing to speak to anyone, until finally Lord Burghley and some of the other councillors were obliged to have the doors broken open. This report is not confirmed by any other source, and sounds both improbable and uncharacteristic. Elizabeth had learnt to conceal her innermost feelings before

she was out of her teens, and as she grew older she 'either patiently endured or politely dissembled her greatest griefs of mind and body. Besides this, September 1588, when the magnitude of the victory lately obtained against the Spaniard was just beginning to dawn on her subjects, was emphatically not the moment for the Queen to parade a private sorrow which would be shared by no one. But she kept that note from Rycote. Fifteen years later it was found in the little coffer which always stood at her bedside. Across it she had written: 'His last letter.'

Meanwhile, Robert Dudley's death had created a vacancy on the committee of England's most exclusive club and some people thought this would work to the advantage of Sir Christopher Hatton, another close friend of long standing and the only member of Elizabeth's inner circle who had stayed single for her sake. But although she never forgot old friends, the Queen had already found another Robert in Leicester's twenty-year-old stepson, Robert Devereux, second Earl of Essex. In many ways the choice was an obvious one. Nobly-born, brilliant and beautiful, Essex was plainly marked out to become a leader of the rising generation and, as such, one whom an ageing sovereign would be wise to keep under her eye and attached to her interest. Apart from that, Elizabeth was fond of the boy, who had undoubted claims on her favour. Fatherless from the age of nine (the first earl having died of royal service in Ireland), young Robert had been one of the Queen's wards and his mother, born Lettice Knollys, was the Queen's cousin.

Essex made his debut at Court when he was sixteen, under the sponsorship of his stepfather, and the following year he went with Leicester to the Netherlands to see something of the world and gain some martial experience. He did well in the fighting round Zutphen, where Philip Sidney received his deathwound, and Sidney, that beau ideal of Elizabethan youth, bequeathed his best sword to his 'beloved and much honoured Lord, the Earl of Essex'.

When Essex returned to England in December 1586, he had just passed his nineteenth birthday and the shy adolescent had developed into a mettlesome young blood, impatient to make a name for himself. He certainly made an immediate impact on the social scene for, as well as his striking good looks and impressive connexions, he was fortunate enough to be endowed with the gift of pleasing, 'a kind of urbanity or innate courtesy', which captivated the Queen and won him a popularity enjoyed by few other public figures of the time; the Londoners in particular taking him to their hearts and gazing with sentimental approval on this 'new adopted son' of royal grace.

Elizabeth was seldom given to sentiment and even more rarely visited by maternal yearnings, but she never lost her eye for an attractive man and Essex, with his engaging youthfulness, his cozening ways and eager devotion, offered a welcome addition to her court. Soon his tall, red-headed figure was seen everywhere at her side, and when her insomnia was troublesome she would keep him with her into the small hours, chatting or playing cards. He was, of course, still far too raw and inexperienced to be trusted with any serious responsibility, but he possessed breeding, courage and style, all attributes which the Queen looked for in her young men, and there seemed no reason to doubt that he would go far.

Even in these early days, though, Essex had his ups and downs, and in July 1587 he first betrayed a glimpse of the paranoid tendencies which would end by destroying him. During the course of his summer progress that year, the Queen paid a short visit to the Earl of Warwick, Leicester's elder brother, and Lady Warwick rather unwisely insisted on including Essex's sister Dorothy in her houseparty. Four years earlier Dorothy Devereux had made a runaway marriage in somewhat unsavoury circumstances to a man of considerably inferior rank and, as a result, had become persona non grata at Court.

The Warwicks were old and privileged friends, and kind Lady Warwick was no doubt counting on

the Queen's fondness for Essex to smooth over any unpleasantness. But Elizabeth refused to meet Lady Dorothy and gave orders that she was to stay in her own rooms, a slight which Essex had no hesitation in blaming on the evil machinations of Walter Raleigh, whom he regarded as his most dangerous rival. After supper that evening he attacked the Queen for putting such a disgrace on his sister and himself 'only to please that knave Raleigh'. How could he give himself to the service of a mistress who stood in awe of such a man, he demanded, and proceeded to pour out a tirade of abuse against Raleigh – the scene gaining an added flavour from the fact that Sir Walter, in his capacity as Captain of the Guard, was on duty at the door and could hear everything that was said. The Queen was annoyed. She refused to listen to a word against Raleigh and the quarrel rapidly degenerated into a lively exchange of personalities, Elizabeth making some pungent comments on the manners and morals of her young friend's female relatives in general and his mother in particular. (She had reluctantly forgiven Leicester for marrying the widowed Countess of Essex, but she never forgave his cousin Lettice.)

Essex shouted that he would not endure to see his house disgraced and his sister should no longer remain to disquiet her Majesty. As for himself, he 'had no joy to be in any place', but nothing would induce him to stay where his affection was spurned for a wretch like Raleigh. Unimpressed, the Queen turned her back on him to resume her interrupted conversation with Lady Warwick and, though it was almost midnight by this time, Essex stormed away to rout his sister out of bed. Since some kind of grand gesture was now clearly called for, he made up his mind to return to the Netherlands and embrace a soldier's career. He would probably be killed and then people would be sorry! As happened, of course, he got no further than the port of Sandwich before a royal messenger caught up with him and fetched him back – an eventuality he had doubtless been banking on.

In his own account of this rather foolish episode, Essex told a friend that he had been driven to do as he did by 'the extreme unkind dealing with me', a phrase which was to become his constant refrain although, in fact, the Queen showed remarkable forbearance towards his tantrums. In November she finally yielded to the persuasions of the Earl of Leicester and bestowed his long-held and prestigious office of Master of the Horse on his stepson. The following year Essex was appointed cavalry commander of the army concentrated round Tilbury and created a Knight of the Garter – meteoric progress for a youth not yet twenty-one.

He continued to make his presence felt about the Court, where his obsessive jealousy of anyone who seemed to threaten his position as *jeune premier* led him to pick a quarrel with Charles Blount, another likely young man whose prowess in the tiltyard had attracted favourable notice. Essex got the worst of the duel fought in Marylebone Park and when the Queen heard of his discomfiture she snorted that, by God's death, it was high time someone took him down and taught him better manners or there would be no rule with him! One way and another, her red-haired protégé looked like becoming something of a problem child, but Elizabeth was not unduly perturbed. She liked a man to show some spirit and, in any case, she had more important matters on her mind just then.

After Lord Howard of Effingham finally abandoned his pursuit of the Spanish fleet off the Firth of Forth early in August, there had been a period of uncertainty, almost of anticlimax. Although it had been harassed in the Channel and badly mauled in the engagement off Gravelines, the Armada still represented a formidable fighting unit and for weeks Europe seethed with rumour and speculation. The Spaniards had put into a Scottish haven to refit and were only waiting for a favourable wind to return to the attack. There had been a great battle off the Scottish coast with at least fifteen English galleons sunk. The survivors had taken refuge in the Thames estuary and Drake (in European eyes France's Drake was the English navy) had been wounded, killed, taken prisoner, had fled and vanished in the

smoke. More level-headed and better-informed observers, notably the Venetians, were of the opinion that the Armada, driven northwards into hostile, dangerous waters and already seriously short of provisions and ammunition, would have been in no condition to fight any sort of battle. On the contrary, it would probably be as much as it could do to salvage the remains of the fleet by sailing home round Ireland and, as the reports which presently began to filter across the Irish Sea made plain, it had indeed been a desperate business of *saue qui peut*.

The realisation that King Philip's long-heralded crusade against the heretical islanders had ended in total and humiliating failure may have taken some time to penetrate, but when it did finally sink in Queen Elizabeth's international prestige rocketed. The King of France, who had his own reasons for welcoming a Spanish defeat, did not hesitate to praise 'the valour, spirit and prudence' of the Queen in England, declaring that her recent achievement 'would compare with the greatest feats of the most illustrious men of past times'. Alone and unaided she had repulsed the attack of so puissant a force as Spain and triumphed over a fleet which had been the wonder of the world. The Venetian ambassador in Paris commented that the English had now proved they were the skilled mariners rumour reported them to be, for while they had always been on the enemy's flank they had not lost a single ship. The Queen, for her part, had kept her nerve throughout and had neglected nothing necessary for the occasion. 'Her acuteness in resolving on her action', continued Giovanni Mocenigo admiringly, 'her courage in carrying it out, show her high-spirited desire of glory, and her resolve to save her country and herself.' Even the Pope, who seldom missed an opportunity to annoy the King of Spain, lavished praises on the Queen. What a matchless woman she was! Were she only a Catholic she would be his best beloved. While as for Drake – what courage! What a great captain!

Now, of course, everyone was waiting to see what the Queen, and Francis Drake, would do next, for now, if ever, was surely the moment for a counter-attack – perhaps another of those brilliant smash-and-grab operations which had become synonymous with the name of El Draque. The Venetian ambassador in Spain, in a despatch datelined Madrid, 22 October, remarked that no small trouble would arise if Drake were to take to the sea and sail to meet the Peruvian fleet, or make a descent on the shores of Spain, where he would find no obstacle for his depredations. He might even destroy a part of those Armada ships which had managed to survive the dreadful journey home and were now lying scattered and helpless in various places along the coast, many of them quite unguarded and some in harbours which had no forts.

The idea of meeting the Peruvian fleet had already occurred to Elizabeth, and as early as the end of August she had summoned Drake to Court to discuss 'the desire that her majesty had for the intercepting of the king's treasure from the Indies'. In normal circumstances Drake would have required no encouragement to set off on a treasure hunt but, as he felt obliged to point out, after the hectic summer the Queen's ships were all in urgent need of refitting, and since the American silver fleet usually arrived round about the end of September there would scarcely be enough time to get a suitable force ready for sea. This was perfectly true. It was also true that Francis Drake, now standing at the peak of his remarkable career, had a rather more ambitious exploit in mind.

Ever since 1580, when the King of Spain had annexed the kingdom of Portugal, together with the wealth of its eastern empire and its first-rate ocean-going navy, the possibility of embarrassing him by supporting the rival claimant to the Portuguese throne had been explored by various people on more than one occasion. The dispossessed Dom Antonio, Prior of Crato and bastard nephew of the last native king of Portugal (or, as some unkind persons maintained, bastard son of a Lisbon merchant) had spent the greater part of his exile in England – a sad little man with a straggling beard who, like most exiles, painted an optimistic picture of the strength of his party at home and was lavish with

promises to anyone who seemed even remotely interested in his cause. Drake, acutely conscious of the strategic importance of Lisbon, had always been interested in Dom Antonio's cause and in conference with the Queen he put forward a plan for a landing in Portugal based on the capture of Lisbon, whose population, if Dom Antonio was to be believed, would rise as one man to welcome its rightful king.

In his designs on the Portuguese mainland, Drake found a powerful ally in Sir John Norris, veteran of the war in the Netherlands and generally regarded as England's most distinguished professional soldier. Black John Norris and his comrades could see in the prospect of an expedition to Portugal those opportunities for profit and glory so conspicuously absent from the apparently endless slogging match being fought over the dismal wastes of Flanders, Brabant and Zeeland, and they very naturally threw the whole weight of their influence behind it. The seizure of Lisbon would also open up the chances of putting into operation another plan long-cherished by the sailors, especially John Hawkins, for establishing a permanent presence in the Azores, those vital off-shore islands belonging to the Portuguese crown, which lay across the sea routes from both America and the East. Such a project had not been feasible while a Spanish navy commanded the whole western coastline of the Peninsula, but things were different now.

England's reply to the Armada – at least according to the scheme devised by her men of war and laid before the Queen and Council during the first fortnight of September 1588 – was thus to be a two-pronged assault on what might be described as the soft underbelly of the Spanish empire. The advantages of having a friendly government in Portugal hardly needed to be spelt out. Even if the expedition did no more than spark off a popular revolt – and there was some independent evidence to suggest that the Portuguese were growing increasingly restive under the heavy-handed rule of King Philip's viceroy – it should still be enough to force the King to divert men and materials from the Netherlands, that other scene of popular revolt against his rule, and with any luck keep him occupied at home for a considerable time to come. As for the other half of the proposed enterprise, the Venetian ambassador in Madrid told the Doge and Senate in December that 'those who understand declare that if Drake were to go now to the Azores, he would not only ruin the whole of the India traffic but could quite easily make himself master of those islands; especially as the garrison is said to be dissatisfied and if the Azores were captured that would be the end of the Indies, for all ships have to touch there. And if Philip could be cut off from the life-giving stream of silver flowing in from the mines of Central America, then he might indeed be rendered permanently harmless, the king of figs and oranges wistfully envisaged by Sir Walter Raleigh.

In theory, and as persuasively presented by Drake and Norris, it looked a good plan – just the sort of bold offensive stroke which the hawks around the Queen had been urging on her for years. It was certainly an audacious plan – rather too audacious perhaps for a small country with no standing army and little recent experience as a military power. It would also depend heavily on imponderables like the weather and the attitude of the Portuguese people. But the Queen could see as well as anyone that here was an opportunity which might never come her way again and she was ready to have a go, surprisingly ready in the context of the European situation as a whole. The trouble, of course, was money. It would cost a great deal of money to finance an undertaking on this scale and Elizabeth quite simply did not have the necessary cash at her disposal.

In the autumn of 1584 she had possessed reserves of 'chested treasure' amounting to three hundred thousand pounds, reserves prudently set aside for a rainy day while the going was good. But the cost of military aid for the Dutch rebels had, over the past three years, added up to nearly four hundred thousand pounds and the cost of defending England against the Armada had come to more than two hundred thousand. Since the ordinary revenues of the Crown, even when supplemented by

Parliamentary grants, were nothing like enough to meet outgoings of this kind, the Queen had been obliged to draw heavily on her savings and by the autumn of 1588 they had dwindled to a mere fifty-five thousand pounds which, at current rates of expenditure, would barely see her through another six months. Nor was there any prospect of current rates of expenditure being reduced in the foreseeable future. True, it should now be possible to cut down on home defence, but the navy would soon be pressing for a new ship-building programme and the Queen dared not pull out of the Netherlands where Philip's formidable lieutenant the Duke of Parma still commanded the army which had been intended for the invasion of England.

Everyone who knew anything about such matters knew that all the skill and courage of the English mariners, all the superior manoeuvrability and fire-power of their ships, might very easily have gone for nothing if, after the battle of Gravelines, the Armada had had the use of a deep-water port in which to refit and revictual; a port where it could have rendezvoused with Parma before carrying out its primary task of convoying his bargeloads of seasoned troops across the Channel. So long as Parma remained in Flanders it would continue to be vital to secure the mouth of the Scheldt estuary against any future armadas and that meant continued aid for the Calvinist Dutch of Holland and Zeeland. It also meant that the towns of Flushing and Brill, Ostend and Bergen-op-Zoom must remain in friendly hands whatever the cost.

There were other inescapable calls on the Queen of England's purse. Money was needed for Ireland and for Scotland, where it was important to keep King James in a good temper by paying his pension regularly. Moreover, events in France strongly suggested that Elizabeth might soon find herself having to subsidize her friends in that country as well. One way and another, she was beginning to be seriously worried about the financial situation and had started to explore the possibility of raising a foreign loan. No wonder she'd been so interested in ambushing Philip's treasure fleet – the quickest and most satisfactory form of foreign borrowing that could have been devised.

Drake and Norris quite understood the Queen's predicament and they had accordingly worked out an ingenious scheme by which rather more than two-thirds of the cost of the Portugal Expedition, as it came to be known, would be put up by private shareholders. If the Queen would contribute twenty thousand pounds and six of her 'second sort' of ships victualled for three months, plus a train of siege artillery for dealing with the defences of Lisbon, then Drake and Norris Incorporated undertook to raise forty thousand pounds and twenty or so armed merchant ships to make up the fleet. They further promised that if Elizabeth would appoint a treasurer and pay five thousand pounds into the kit straight away, she would not be asked for another penny piece until the other 'adventurers' had given their sureties for the whole of their forty thousand. The two commanders were to have the Queen's commission to recruit six thousand men for foreign service, while the remainder, two to three thousand in the original estimates, would be borrowed from the force of seven thousand more or less trained and experienced troops maintained by the Crown in the Netherlands under the terms of the Anglo-Dutch treaty of 1585. The Dutch would also be asked to provide transports, more siege guns and gunpowder.

The practice of waging war by joint stock company may seem fantastic (and it did seem both fantastic and immoral to a whole generation of nineteenth century historians), but the logic of Elizabethans could see nothing unreasonable in appealing to the business instincts of the Queen's wealthier subjects who, while they would have jibbed at paying higher taxes, could easily be persuaded to invest in a project which offered the chance of a handsome return. In any case, it was certainly the only method by which such an operation could have been financed in the time available.

It was not, of course, an ideal method – the most obvious snag being the fact that, when the two

conflicted, commanders with their backers' interests to consider would naturally be more inclined to concentrate on taking prizes than on purely strategic objectives, and this was a snag which the Portugal Expedition encountered in its very early stages. The Queen and Council were still examining the small print of the prospectus when news began to come in from Spain that the battered survivors of the Armada, fifty or more capital ships, were limping home, not to Lisbon or the other western ports where the expedition could have finished them off at leisure, but to the nearest available refuge, Santander and San Sebastian deep in the Bay of Biscay. This was an unfortunate complication. It would be difficult and perhaps dangerous for Drake to have to take his fleet so far to leeward and then to come out again on the long windward beat to Cape Finisterre, but to Elizabeth the destruction of those ships was a matter of paramount importance and altered her whole concept of the enterprise.

The Queen has often in the past been accused of lacking any grasp of generalship, and of consistently impeding her gallant soldiers and sailors by her cheeseparing habits, her reluctance to take risks and her inability to make up her mind. This is an old canard, only recently beginning to be contradicted by modern scholarship, and one which arose, at least in part, from the fact that Elizabeth's war aims were always rather different from those of her gallant soldiers and sailors. Unlike Walter Raleigh and his fire-eating friends, the Queen had no particular desire to see Philip's great empire 'beaten in pieces', an eventuality likely to create as many problems as it solved. What she wanted – had always wanted – was to see the Netherlands restored to its old dominion status and given a measure of religious toleration, while remaining under the protection and sovereignty of Spain. She wanted an agreed share of trade with the New World for English merchants and, above all, relief from the constant burdensome dread of Spanish aggression. In short, she wanted a sensible and unexciting settlement of a foolish and wasteful quarrel.

Elizabeth may not have been a tactical expert, but she brought to the conduct of the war the same shrewd judgement and long experience of men and affairs which served her so well in other directions, and every instinct told her that the quickest way – probably, indeed, the only way – of forcing Philip to the negotiating table would be to destroy his naval strength once and for all. The King was a stubborn man and every report coming in from abroad spoke of his resolute determination to avenge his honour and go on serving God's cause. He meant to rebuild his shattered fleet – if necessary he would sell the very candlesticks on his dinner table – and return to the attack at the earliest possible moment. Those fifty odd ships in the Biscayan ports therefore represented both an invaluable asset and a unique opportunity. With all his resources, it had taken Philip the best part of seven years to assemble his first Armada. He'd lost half of it in the Enterprise of England and if the remaining half could be destroyed while it still lay immobilised, unrigged, unmanned, unarmed and defenceless, he might very well never be able to assemble another. For with no Spanish navy to interfere, it should be a comparatively simple matter not only to cut off the King's American revenues but also the supplies of grain and munitions, timber and cordage coming in from France, the Netherlands and the Baltic – at least until he was ready to see sense and start talking.

This is certainly how it looked to the Queen of England, and all the available evidence suggests that if she had been in a position to call the tune, she would have scrapped the plan to restore Don Antonio, which was bound to be a chancy business at best, and instead gone straight for the enemy's jugular vein. Unfortunately, though, the Queen was paying less than half the piper's wages and could hardly expect Drake and Norris to abandon their cherished Portuguese adventure altogether, but she did make it very clear that Lisbon was now to be regarded as no more than a sideshow. The expedition was to go first to the ports of Guipuzcoa, Galicia and Biscay and do their best endeavour either to take or destroy all the ships of any importance they found there. Only then might they go on to Lisbon and

intercept the shipping in the Tagus, but they were not to attempt a landing unless they had reasonable grounds for believing that Dom Antonio's supporters were as numerous 'and stand so well affected towards him as he pretendeth, and that there will be a party of the Portugal nation that will be ready to aid the king and join with his forces against the Spaniard'. Elizabeth was clearly worried that Drake was placing too much reliance on his protégé's optimistic assurances and might run himself and his fleet into a trap. If all went well at Lisbon, they might stay just long enough to see the new king settle in and then go on their other important task in the Azores; but, in her Instructions, the Queen again emphasised that 'before you attempt anything either in Portugal or the said Islands, our express pleasure and commandment is you shall first distress the ships of war in Guipuzcoa, Biscay and Galicia'.

The expedition had intended to sail in February 1589 – it was important that the troops drawn from the Netherlands should be back in time for the summer campaigning season and every month that passed gave Philip more time to repair and refit his ships of war – but a series of misunderstandings, with the Dutch, always notoriously touchy and difficult to deal with, caused several weeks delay. Then the drafts from overseas were held up by freezing weather at the ports and after that the fleet itself was penned up in Plymouth Sound for a full month by persistent southwesterly winds, so that it was not until April before they finally got away. By this time the Queen had been let in for considerably greater expense than she'd budgeted for (more than double the expense as it turned out), and the size of the expeditionary force had swollen to very nearly double the original estimate, which, of course, had played havoc with the logistical calculations.

The vast majority of these extra mouths so improvidently taken on the strength by Drake and Norreys were 'gentlemen and divers companies of voluntary soldiers offering to be employed in this action' among them being no less a person than the Earl of Essex, who had defied the Queen's prohibition and slipped away from Court to join Sir Roger Williams on board the *Swiftsure*. Like the rest of the volunteers, Essex was motivated by a mixture of enthusiasm, restlessness and greed, but in his case acute financial difficulties added an extra spur. 'If I should speed well, I will adventure to be rich', he wrote in one of the letters he left behind in his desk; 'if not, I will never live to see the end of my poverty.' This chance to recoup his fortunes and perhaps win some useful glory into the bargain had seemed too good to miss; but Elizabeth was furious and some historians, with a lack of perceptiveness only matched by their vulgarity of mind, have accused her of being more concerned with missing the company of her fancy man than over the shoddy provisioning of her army.

Such a flagrant disregard of her wishes by one so close to her was naturally hurtful – 'our great favours bestowed on you without deserts, hath drawn you thus to neglect and forget your duty; for other constructions we cannot make of these your strange actions' – but to a woman engaged in a lifelong struggle to stay on top in a world which took male superiority for granted, open insubordination of this kind had far more serious implications. In any case, for a nobleman of Essex's standing, who also held a responsible office in the Household, to go absent without leave and attempt to depart the realm without the sovereign's licence, was an insult to the Crown which no self-respecting monarch could have overlooked.

The Queen therefore fired a threatening salvo across the bows of her generals down in Plymouth. Sir Roger Williams was to be relieved of his command forthwith and placed under close arrest until her further pleasure was known, as they would answer for the contrary at their peril; 'for as we have authority to rule, so we look to be obeyed, and to have obedience directly and surely continued unto us'. If Essex had now come into their company, he was to be sent back to London at once, 'all dilatory excuse set apart'; and a posse headed by the truant's grandfather was despatched to the West Country.

But this time Essex did not mean to be caught. Making the journey in a record thirty-six hours, he had gone straight to Falmouth where Roger Williams, a bloody-minded little Welshman generally believed to be the original of Shakespeare's Captain Fluellen, was waiting for him, and the Swiftsure promptly put to sea.

The fact that the second-in-command of the land forces of such an important undertaking apparently thought nothing of taking himself, his noble stowaway and one of the Queen's ships off on a private marauding expedition down the coast of Spain, only rejoining the main body at Lisbon when things looked like getting interesting, illustrates as clearly as anything can the extraordinary difficulty of imposing any sort of effective central control. Indeed, the whole history of the Portugal Expedition is an illustration of the government's inability to control the rugged individualism of its servants, for when the fleet did at last set sail it made not for San Sebastian or Santander, where forty Armada galleons were still slowly refitting, but for Corunna – or the Groyne as the English called it – Drake having got wind of a valuable prize in the vicinity. In fact, they found the harbour almost deserted. One warship and some half-dozen other assorted vessels were destroyed and the army stormed and sacked the lower town, spreading alarm and despondency in the surrounding countryside and seizing a large quantity of stores. (Any complaints about shortage of victuals after Corunna can only have been due to slackness and inefficiency on the part of the officers.) All this could, or should, have been accomplished in a couple of days but Norris and the sappers, for reasons best known to themselves, proceeded to waste a precious fortnight in a fruitless attempt to take the fortified upper town, while the rest of the army predictably got drunk on the local wine and went down with the local dysentery. Then, after the troops had finally been re-embarked on 8 May, the expedition set course straight for Lisbon.

The excuses subsequently offered for this piece of disobedience included unfavourable winds (always a useful one at sea) and lack of heavy guns to deal with shore batteries (the promised siege train never having materialised). But Elizabeth had already heard from William Knollys, who'd been with the fleet as far as Corunna, that there had been eight days fair wind for the Bay of Biscay prior to the descent on the Groyne and she was not impressed, remarking sourly that Drake and Norris 'went to places more for profit than for service'.

The Queen was, in fact, far from satisfied by the way things were going and she wrote to her commanders reminding them that: 'before your departure hence you did at sundry times so far from promise as with oaths to assure us and some of our council that your first and principal action should be to take and distress the king of Spain's navy and ships in ports where they lay, which if ye did not ye affirmed that ye were content to be reputed as traitors'. These were strong words, and Elizabeth ended by urging both men not to be 'transported with an haviour of vainglory which will obfuscate the eyes of your judgement'.

Whether it was vainglory or, more likely, the profit motive which obfuscated the judgement of Drake and Norris, there are strong reasons for assuming that they had always privately considered Lisbon as their main objective and, oaths regardless, had never intended to make more than a token gesture in the Biscayan area. After all, if they pulled off the more spectacular part of their mission, nobody was going to remember those semi-derelict galleons at Santander.

Nevertheless, when the expedition arrived off Cascaes at the mouth of the Tagus, it muffed its best and probably only real chance of success by a mixture of irresolution, faulty intelligence and plain ineptitude. The Spanish governor, having received ample warning of the English approach, had naturally used the time to take what precautions he could, but Cardinal Archduke Albert, with barely seven thousand troops, many of them unreliable Portuguese, under his command, might have found

hard to withstand a determined assault undertaken jointly by the fleet and the army, and bold action might also have encouraged the Portuguese to come out for Dom Antonio. Instead, it was decided to land the army at Peniche, nearly fifty miles north of Lisbon, presumably with the idea of carrying out a reconnaissance in France, while Drake took the fleet back to Cascaes, promising to meet Norris at the Tagus.

This loss of contact was to prove disastrous. The army encountered no opposition to speak of on its march down the coast but, apart from a handful of barefoot peasants and a gentleman bringing a basket of cherries, it gathered no support to speak of either. The heat, the aftermath of their excesses at Corunna and a virulent form of Portuguese tummy was playing havoc among the inexperienced amateur troops and by the time they reached the outskirts of Lisbon, Norris had only about six thousand men fit for duty. He had no artillery, such heavy guns as there were being still on the ships; there was obviously not going to be any internal revolt and, worst of all, Drake had not come upriver in support. No general could have risked an attack in such circumstances and on 29 May, despite Dom Antonio's pleas, Norris began to retreat to Cascaes. It was a grievous disappointment all round and nobody had made their fortunes. Plunder had been forbidden as long as there was any hope of the Portuguese playing their part, although, as one of those present observed wistfully, 'had we made our enemies of the suburbs of Lisbon, we had been the richest army that ever went out of England'. According to John Norris's brother, Edward, the soldiers found a wonderful store of riches in the form of merchandise, spices and victuals, 'but for lack of carriage they were forced to leave all behind them'.

It was at Cascaes at the beginning of June that the expedition had its first and only stroke of luck when Drake at last picked up the prize he'd been hoping to take at Corunna – sixty ships from the Baltic ports, some laden with grain and marine stores, and other in ballast, intended, so it was thought, to reinforce King Philip's 'decayed navy'. This was better than nothing, but it was nothing like enough, and after six largely wasted weeks the expedition still had to justify itself. On 5 June it was decided to abandon Lisbon. The prizes were sent home with the worst of the dysentery cases, and the Earl of Essex, having distinguished himself by a few flamboyant and perfectly useless gestures, such as wading ashore shoulder high through the waves at Peniche and offering his personal challenge to the gates of Lisbon, condescended to go with them. The fleet then set course for the Azores, but a strong southerly gale intervened and they never even sighted the Islands, let alone any treasure ships. Blown back on to the coast of Spain, Drake landed at Vigo and sacked the town, finding a great store of wine 'but not any thing else'. By now there were only about two thousand men in a fit state to fight the ships, including the Queen's Revenge, were feeling the strain, and time was running out. Drake, with twenty of the best ships, made a last desperate effort to reach the Azores, but once again the weather turned nasty with southerly gales and storms. The great Portugal Expedition scattered before them and by the beginning of July the last stragglers had come trailing dejectedly and rather badly tempered back to Plymouth.

GOD'S HANDMAIDEN

*All English hearts rejoyce and sing,
That feares the Lord and loves our Queene;
Yield thanks to God, our heavenly King,
Who hytherto her guide hath been.
With faithfull hartes, O God! we crave
Long life on earth her grace may have!*

By no stretch of the imagination could the Portugal Expedition be regarded as a success. ‘The miserable action’ thought the rear-admiral, William Fenner, and John Norris was afraid that his Majesty would ‘mislike the event of our journey’, although, as he rather plaintively pointed out, ‘if the enemy had done so much upon us, his party would have made bonfires in most parts of Christendom’. It was true that, if nothing else, the expedition had shown up the weakness of Spain’s defence, demonstrating English ability to descend on the coast of the peninsula more or less as they pleased. Colonel Anthony Wingfield, hastening into print with his account of the Portugal Voyage, could boast that they had ‘won a town by escalade, battered and assaulted another, overthrown a mighty prince of power in the field, landed our army in three several places of his kingdom, marched seven days in the heart of his country, lien three nights in the suburbs of his principal city, beaten his forces into the gates thereof, and possessed two of his frontier forts’.

According to the Venetian ambassador, the events of May and June 1589 had caused Philip great anxiety, ‘not so much on account of the loss he suffers as for the insult which he feels that he has received in the fact that a woman, mistress of only half an island, with the help of a corsair and a common soldier, should have ventured on so arduous an enterprise, and dared to molest so powerful a sovereign’. But while the King undoubtedly smarted at this further humiliation – a complete black-out on news from Corunna and Lisbon was imposed in Madrid – the fact remained that little or no permanent damage had been done, and in August Tomasco Contarini could tell the Doge that the Spanish fleet of forty great and twenty smaller ships, although seriously undermanned, had left Santander for Corunna. In the same despatch he reported the safe arrival at the Azores of five ships of the India fleet, including one especially rich vessel from the Moluccan Spice Islands, and towards the end of November word came from the Duke of Medina Sidonia that the American treasure ships, belated but unscathed, were anchored at Seville. A literally golden opportunity of bringing the war to an end had gone and was not likely to recur.

In the circumstances, the Queen of England kept her temper remarkably well. In public she was gracious, assuring Drake and Norris ‘for both your comforts that we do most thankfully accept of your service and do acknowledge that there hath been as much performed by you as true valour and good conduction could yield’. Essex, needless to say, had already been forgiven. In spite of everything Elizabeth found it very difficult to stay angry with him for long and even Roger Williams escaped further castigation – England possessed few enough experienced professionals in the military field. But while the Queen had too much common sense to indulge in useless recrimination, or to undermine the nation’s confidence in its heroes, the expensive failure of the Portugal Expedition – especially its failure to go to Santander – continued to rankle and it was probably not entirely coincidental that Sir Francis Drake spent the next five years on the beach.

No more large-scale operations on the Spanish mainland were contemplated, at least for the time

being. Instead, the English reverted to that element where they were most at home, the sea, and to the game they played so much better than anyone else. Before the war – or, more accurately, in the days when it was still possible and politic to pretend the war did not exist – the name of the game had been piracy, a matter for private enterprise surreptitiously abetted by the Crown. Now things were different. The sea-dogs had turned respectable and the Crown was asserting its right to confiscate the cargoes of neutral vessels trading with Spain. This was a new concept of war at sea and led to a flood of protests from such irritated neutrals at Denmark, Poland and Germany. But the Queen held firm. ‘Her Majestie thinketh and knoweth ... that whenever any doth directly help her enemy with succours of any victuals, armour or any kind of munition to enable his ships to maintain themselves, she may lawfully interceede the same.’

The Channel blockade was, of course, an official matter, the concern of a naval squadron stationed in the Downs with instructions to stop and search any vessel whose master failed to produce a pass issued by the Lord Admiral. Out in the Atlantic, though, off the Azores and westward to the Spanish Main along King Philip’s colonial trade routes there was still plenty of room for the individual privateer, and privateering was the growth industry of the eighties and nineties. Most of it, and most of the profits, passed into the hands of syndicates of hard-headed businessmen in London, Bristol and Plymouth dealing in prize cargoes of relatively prosaic commodities like hides and sugar, ginger and cochineal; but the age-old romantic lure of the treasure hunt, the unquenchable hope of one day seizing some great carrack stuffed with gold and jewels, silks, ivory and spices such as would make a man rich beyond his dreams, operated powerfully on all sorts and conditions of the Queen’s subjects. Outstanding among them were men like Walter Raleigh and the Earl of Cumberland, both of whom financed and led their own expeditions, but nearly all the leading figures at Court put money into privateering ventures – even the sober Robert Cecil was not immune to the prevailing fever. Some people, notably the merchant bankers of the City of London, did very nicely out of privateering, which in a good year brought in prizes worth up to £300,000, and the seaport towns of the south and west prospered on the pickings; but many a likely lad ran off to sea to make his fortune only to die miserably far from home of typhus or scurvy or some other nastiness, and many an optimistic gentleman ruined himself and his family trying to get in on the act.

The Queen herself was often a shareholder in prize-hunting forays, more than once going in partnership with the Earl of Cumberland, and in 1590 a dozen royal ships, commanded by Martin Frobisher in the *Revenge* and John Hawkins in the *Mary Rose*, spent the summer in Spanish waters lying in wait for the American flota. Their presence created something of a panic, especially among the merchants of London and Seville; while from the colonial administrators in Puerto Rico and Havana, where privateers had already picked up a couple of silver ships, came anguished complaints that the English were daring them at their very doors. The English, reported a Dutch observer in the Azores, are become lords and masters of the sea and need care for no one. As it turned out, Frobisher and Hawkins enjoyed a negative success. They saw nothing of the treasure fleet for the simple reason that Philip had been driven to cancel that year’s sailing, a confession of weakness which resulted in widespread failures among the Italian banking houses, a mutiny by Parma’s unpaid troops in the Netherlands and still further delay in Spain’s naval recovery.

Meanwhile, the focus of the land war was shifting. In July 1589 the last of the Valois kings was assassinated, an event which set alarm bells ringing in London. Henry III may never have been a conspicuous success either as a man or a monarch, but he had always somehow contrived to resist the pressures of the reactionary pro-Spanish elements around him and to preserve a tenuous link of friendship with Elizabeth. His death seemed likely to lead to a renewal of the civil wars which had

ravaged France intermittently over the past forty years and, worse, to Spanish intervention; for the heir to the throne was the Huguenot leader, Henry of Navarre, and the prospect of a Protestant king would surely push the fanatics of the Catholic ultra party into extreme measures. The Catholic League was heavily subsidised by Spain and a Leaguer victory, with the consequent addition of France to Philip's clientage, was not something which the Queen of England could regard with equanimity. Henry of Navarre, an experienced, hard-bitten warrior, could be relied on to fight for his rights, but unfortunately he was also stony broke. Without money from somewhere soon, he would be unable to continue the struggle for Paris and the north, where the League was strongest, and would probably be forced to withdraw south of the Loire, leaving the Channel coast and the Channel ports open to England's enemies.

So, when a special envoy from the new king appeared at Court in August with an urgent appeal for assistance, Elizabeth responded with uncharacteristic promptitude and on 7 September the sum of twenty thousand pounds in cash was handed over at the Lord Treasurer's house in Covent Garden. Henry could scarcely believe his eyes. When the Queen's gold reached him, he is reported, credibly enough, to have said that he'd never seen so much money in his life. It was nothing like enough, of course, and within a year the loan had trebled. In the autumn of 1589 a small expeditionary force under the command of Peregrine Bertie, Lord Willoughby, embarked at the port of Rye to spend three uncomfortable months campaigning with Henry's forces. Other contingents were to follow, and over the next five years Elizabeth spent getting on for four hundred thousand pounds altogether in aid to the King of France. In 1589, too, she'd had to find an extra six thousand for the King of Scotland to help him put down his Catholic rebels and set up house for his Protestant Danish bride.

Old Lord Burghley reflected the difficulty his generation sometimes experienced in adjusting to a situation which had transformed England's ancestral enemies into her most valued allies when he wrote to the Earl of Shrewsbury: 'My lord, the state of the world is marvellously changed, when we true Englishmen have cause for our own quietness to wish good success to a French king and a King of Scots.' Burghley, who seldom missed an opportunity to moralise, added, 'this is the work of God for our good, for which the Queen and us all, are most deeply bound to acknowledge his miraculous goodness, for no wit of man could otherwise have wrought it'.

For her part, the Queen may well have wished the Almighty could so have arranged matters that her friends were not invariably penniless. By 1590 the last of her peace-time savings had gone and already she was being driven to such distasteful expedients as extracting forced loans, or 'benevolences', from her wealthier subjects and selling off crown lands – £125,000 worth in 1590 alone. It was financial necessity which drove her to call another Parliament in the autumn of 1588. The session should have opened in November, but some sharp-eyed individual pointed out that the last instalment of the subsidy vote in 1587 was still being collected and to ask, as the government would have to do, for another grant of double the size before payment of the old was complete would scarcely be tactful. The assembly had therefore been postponed until February.

The Queen got her double subsidy. These were exceptional times – the House of Commons could see that – and, being a responsible, patriotic body of men, they had no wish to appear ungenerous. Only Henry Jackman, member for Calne in Wiltshire, seems to have spoken against the supply bill. In his view the danger of invasion, 'the principal and almost only persuader for the bill', was no longer imminent, 'the teeth and jaws of our mightiest and most malicious enemy having been so lately broken'. Higher taxation, on top of the recent burden imposed on the counties by home defence and having to contribute to the loan now being raised, would, he argued, breed discontent among the people and, worse, create a dangerous precedent 'both to ourselves and our posterity'.

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