

Chapter 1

CAPTAIN-GENERAL OF THE OCEAN SEA

‘You know’, said the duke, looking out of the window at the rolling hills of his estate at San Lucar, ‘I think I should have been a farmer. I like land. I like the look of the olive groves, the smell of the soil.’

The duchess laughed. ‘Just as well you like land’, she replied, ‘Since you own so much of it.’ It was true. The thirty-seven-year-old Duke of Medina-Sidonia was one of the richest men in Europe. He didn’t need to work, but when King Philip appointed him Captain-General of the coast of Andalusia, in south-west Spain, he had been delighted. He felt he was doing his bit for king and country. Besides, he liked organizing and was quite good at it, as he had showed defending Cadiz against the English the previous year.

He turned towards his wife with a smile. ‘You know what I mean, my dear. I mean I prefer land to water. I enjoyed taking on that devil Drake and his infidel pirates because I hated the thought of them setting foot on Spain’s holy soil.’

The duchess moved to his side. ‘Soon you won’t have to worry about Drake or anyone else, Alonso. When Parma captures London, they’ll all be dead or in prison.’

‘As long as Parma’s army gets to London’, said the duke with a sigh. ‘We’ve got to get the fleet to the

Netherlands first.'

'And you don't have to worry about that, either,' said the duchess, straightening the lace on his collar. 'That's the sailors' job. You'll be safe here in Spain.'

'Thank goodness!' muttered the duke. Remembering he had letters to write, he went off to find his secretary.

Carlos, the Duke of Medina-Sidonia's bald secretary, was an efficient, fussy man who had served the Duke's family for almost forty years. He made it his job not only to handle the Duke's correspondence but to know everything that went on in his household. He knew, for example, that the fourth stable boy was courting the under-cook's daughter, and that the gold buttons on the duke's new coat were worth just under a ducat each. So when a messenger arrived with a letter from the king, Carlos made sure it was he who put it in the duke's hands.

The secretary stood watching the duke's face as he broke the wax seal and began to read. After a few seconds, his forehead wrinkled into a frown. 'Not bad news, Your Grace?' Carlos asked sympathetically.

'Awful', the duke replied. 'The worst I have ever received.'

Carlos picked nervously at his fingernails. 'May I be so bold as to ask Your Grace what this news is?'

'You may', said the duke with a sigh. 'His Majesty wishes me to take command of the English invasion fleet. The Armada.' Carlos' jaw dropped in astonishment. 'I can't do it, Mr Secretary', the duke went

on, checking the letter in case he had made a mistake. 'I'm not the right man. I can get the Armada ready for sea, but I cannot possibly sail with it. I am no naval commander. Besides, I get seasick just looking at a ship.'

Carlos disliked the sea even more than his master. He was terrified that if the duke went to sea, he might have to go too. So that afternoon he helped his master write a polite letter to the king explaining why the Duke of Medina-Sidonia was not a suitable commander for the Armada. He lacked experience of war and the sea; he was in debt, his health was poor, and he had no idea what the plans for the Armada were.

The king did not change his mind. In a second letter he told the duke that, whether he liked it or not, he was now Captain-General of the Ocean Sea and commander of the Armada.

'In which case, Mr Secretary', the duke said slowly, 'I suppose we'd better pack our things and get to the ships at Lisbon as quickly as possible.'

'I beg your pardon', stammered Carlos, turning pale green and picking fingernails more vigorously than ever, 'but did Your Grace say "we"?''

The Duke nodded. 'Of course, Mr Secretary! I could never manage without you. If I'm going to sea, then you're coming with me!'

Chapter 2

‘SMASH THEM AT SEA!’

The rumours started as soon as the first buds appeared on the windswept trees. A Dutch captain told drinkers in the Queen’s Head tavern, Plymouth, that Spain was ready to attack England with two hundred ships. By the time the story reached London, the number of ships had risen to a thousand. A merchant returned from France to say that the king of Spain himself was coming in a golden galleon. And in mid-June, a Cornish farmer reported seeing Spanish soldiers in the lane outside his cottage.

These, and many other hare-brained stories, all proved to be false alarms. ‘Whistles in the wind’, Sir Francis Drake had called them. But it was now early July, and England’s most famous sailor had just received reliable reports that the Armada finally had set sail.

Walking along the grassy slopes of Plymouth Hoe, Drake and his commander-in-chief, Charles Howard, were discussing the best way of beating off the Spanish attack. ‘Smash them at sea’, explained Sir Francis. ‘We probably won’t manage to hit them in harbour – like we did last year – so it must be a sea fight. The last thing we want is thousands of those Polish devils coming ashore with their pikes and artillery and whatnot. We wouldn’t stand a chance.’

Lord Howard swatted away a wasp and asked, 'But if we leave English waters with, say, forty ships, Sir Francis, and the Spanish manage to give us the slip, what happens then?'

'Give us the slip?' cried Drake. He swung round to face Lord Howard. 'What crawling Catholic scum has ever managed to give me the slip? Tell me that!'

'Not many, I suppose,' smiled Howard. 'But the idea still worries me.'

Drake's eyes flashed like ships' lanterns in his weather-beaten face. 'Forget your fears, Lord Howard. God is on our side. We are His swordsmen, sent to beat down the Pope's thieving slaves. As I've told you a thousand times, their ships are no match for ours. Guns are the thing in a sea fight nowadays, and we can out-gun a Spaniard any day.' Howard took a deep breath. 'Very well, Sir Francis. If attack really is the best means of defence, then I suppose we'd better go and find this Armada straight away.'

'God be praised!' exclaimed Drake. 'We'll sail with the morning tide!'

Tom Barnecut had been trying to have a private word with Sir Francis Drake for days. He had even followed him onto Plymouth Hoe and watched him talking with Lord Howard. Now, as the captain came hurrying towards him on his way back to the town, the boy saw his chance. 'Excuse me, sir,' he called boldly, 'but I'm at your service!'

'Eh? What's that, boy?' Drake kept up his steady

stride down the grassy slope. 'I'm in a hurry.'

Half running, Tom fell in beside him. 'Please may I serve with you on the Revenge, sir? I want to fight the Spaniard.'

Drake looked at him out of the corner of his eye. He seemed a strong enough lad.

'Name?' he barked.

'Tom Barnecut, sir. Cornish, sir, of Polperro.'

Drake nodded. 'Age?'

Tom hesitated for half a second. 'Sixteen, sir.' Drake flashed him an angry glance.

'Well, I'll be sixteen next year.'

'That's better. Served at sea?'

'Father's a fisherman, sir.'

'Right. Know the Holy Book? What's the Second Commandment?'

Tom was glad he had paid attention in church. 'We are not to have idols or graven images, like the Papists fill their churches with, sir.'

'Well said, Tom lad! A man after my own heart. I'll see you aboard the Revenge before nightfall.'

Tom could hardly believe his ears. As Drake strode off into the town, the boy knelt on the grass and thanked God for his good fortune. He was happier and more excited than he had ever been in his life. Not only was he going to fight the Spaniard, but he was going to do so under the command of his greatest hero – Sir Francis Drake. He'd be the envy of all Polperro!