

Chapter Thirty

ARMADA

THE Church of England split the religious issue and avoided the horrendous bloodshed which occurred elsewhere in Europe as Catholic fought Protestant. It laid the ground for a new sense of national identity, one which was to be further consolidated by threats from outside. The effect of such threats is always to draw together rival parties in opposition to the common external enemy. That was to be Spain, until Elizabeth's reign the Tudors' key ally abroad. It was still England's ally in 1558, but thirty years later was to send an army of conquest, the great Armada, to subject the country, dethrone the queen and re-establish Catholicism. The defeat of that invasion, the embodiment of the might of the vast Spanish Empire which stretched around the globe, by the navy of a tiny island kingdom was to send shock waves across Europe. Elizabeth assumed an aura of almost cosmic grandeur and the country emerged with a new sense of mission and purpose.

At the opening of the reign, however, the enemy remained the traditional one of France, a situation made worse by the fact that its king was married to the ruler of Scotland, Mary Queen of Scots, who, because of her descent from Henry VII's daughter, Margaret, was heir to the English throne in the event of Elizabeth having no children. Mary was also Catholic. Fortunately for the English government the threat from France suddenly lessened, for the French king died and Mary was forced to return to her native kingdom. Mary Queen of Scots was a beautiful and passionate woman who inspired deep personal loyalty, but she was also wilful and politically inept. She found her own country in the throes of the Reformation, and her reign was one long disaster, so much so that in 1568 she was forced to flee over the border into England and seek succour at the hands of her cousin, Elizabeth.

Elizabeth was faced with an appalling problem, although she swiftly realised that Mary returned either to France or Scotland could be an even bigger one. When she fled to England, the Scottish queen stood accused of complicity in the murder of her second husband, Lord Darnley, and an investigation of this charge was staged, inconclusive enough to leave Mary tainted with enough guilt to justify confining her in a series of fortress-houses in the midlands for almost the next twenty years.

Nonetheless Mary, as both Elizabeth's heir and a Catholic, remained a perpetual threat. Over the years the Scottish queen was to be the focus of a whole series of plots aimed at replacing Elizabeth with Mary. The first of these followed hard on what was the only significant uprising against the new government, the 1569 rebellion. This plot involved the Duke of Norfolk and the two northern earls of Westmorland and Northumberland, all Catholic and all deeply resentful of the power of William Cecil and others who made up the new regime. Norfolk was sent to the Tower before he could act, but the two others attempted to raise the north. The plot was a total failure, one which the plotters paid for not only with their own lives but those of eight hundred other people, as the north was once more subjected to the full might of Tudor rule. Behind the scenario of the rebellion had been the intention that Norfolk should marry the Scottish queen and reign jointly. That scheme was re-enacted two years later in an intrigue known as the Ridolfi Plot, which this time involved the Spanish ambassador. Norfolk was executed for his part in this, but it set the pattern for the long series of plots against Elizabeth which followed, all involving the Queen of Scots.

The rule of Elizabeth was very fragile in its early years but it was to benefit from two things. The first was the quality of her government which put down sure foundations and built up widespread support across a broad section of society and, in addition, ensured financial stability after the roaring inflation of the middle years of the century. The second was the disintegration of England's continental neighbours into long-lasting civil wars. In France there were three decades of civil war between Catholics and Protestants, or Huguenots as they were called. The queen from time to time would aid the Huguenots, until the might of Spain grew so overpowering that France and England became allies. In the Low Countries, England's most important commercial link, there was an uprising against the rule of the king of Spain. Once again Elizabeth was able cautiously to intervene in aid of the rebels, but she always carefully avoided anything which would lead to a direct confrontation with Spain.

This was to work well for over twenty years, valuable years during which the Elizabethan state established itself, gained confidence and attracted deep loyalty from its people, but in the 1580s things changed dramatically with a series of events which precipitated the sailing of the great Armada. Spain was indeed a world power. Philip II ruled over the whole Iberian peninsula, having conquered not only Portugal but also most of Italy, the Low Countries and all of South America. Other members of his family, the Habsburgs, dominated Germany and Central Europe. Up until the 1580s the greatest enemies of Philip's far-flung empire were the French and the Turks. Then, quite suddenly, the English became far more serious on many counts. A new generation of bold maritime adventurers, headed by Sir Francis Drake, increased their

attacks on the convoys of gold and silver from the New World upon which the Spanish Empire depended. Worse, Spanish domination of the New World was threatened by English attempts to found a colony named Virginia in honour of the queen. Finally in 1585, Elizabeth actually signed a treaty with the Low Countries' rebels, the Dutch, and sent an English army under the leadership of her favourite, the Earl of Leicester. During the same period she supported and encouraged the attacks made by the claimant to the Portuguese throne on Spanish colonies. All of this led Philip to conclude that his reputation had been gravely impaired and that England and her queen should be wiped out and become a province of the vast Habsburg empire. That conclusion was reinforced when, in the aftermath of yet another plot, Mary Queen of Scots was brought to trial and executed in February 1587.

Mary was immediately billed as a martyr to the Catholic cause and this touched the vital nerve which, more than anything else, drove the king on to seek revenge. For Philip II the vast fleet and army he assembled was a crusade. The men recruited to take part in it prepared for the conquest of England in the same way that they did for battle against the infidel Turk. Most of Catholic Europe, headed by the pope, contributed ships, men and money to the Armada. He even blessed the banner which adorned its flagship. Prayers were said in the monasteries of Spain for the success of this holy war. From the outset, Philip never doubted but that God was on his side and that it was his duty to depose a heretic queen and restore England to the Catholic faith.



Such a powerful threat called for an equal fervour of purpose on the English side. The queen, a superb actress, was presented to her people as the chosen vessel of God, a virgin – for by now it was clear that she would never marry – sacred and set aside to lead the Protestant cause, not only on the part of England but Europe. By the 1580s the anniversary of her accession to the throne, 17 November, had become a national holiday in which court and country joined in celebrating what was seen as the years progressed as a God-ordained deliverance from the joint yoke of Spain and the pope. The splendour of the monarchy and the magnificence of the queen replaced the spectacle of the pre-Reformation Catholic church and provided a new potent focus of loyalty. When, in 1588, the great Armada finally sailed, much of the future destiny of Europe was seen to be embodied in the confrontation.

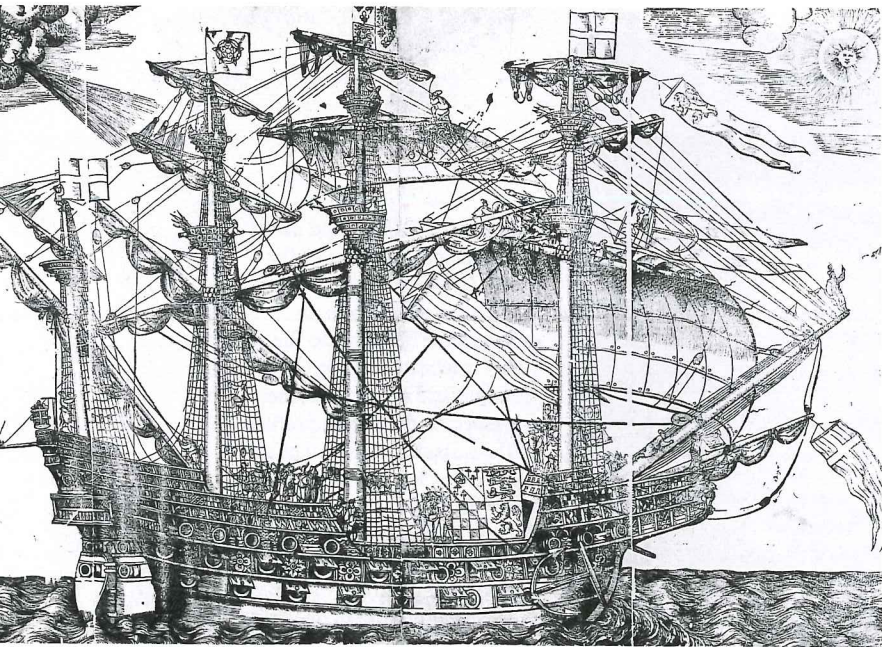
Philip's great fleet was one part of his strategy against England. Its main purpose, however, was to enable a Spanish army to cross the Channel from the Low Countries and land. From the outset therefore the campaign was never seen as a sea battle but as an invasion followed by an advance on London. That had always been the scheme from as far back as 1586 when Philip had first made up his mind to invade. The fact that it took two years before the Armada eventually sailed reflected not only changes of plan and lack of money but even more the devastating effect of Sir Francis Drake's raid on the Spanish fleet in Cadiz harbour in April 1587 when thirty ships were sunk. When the Armada at last set sail in April of the following year it consisted of one hun-



Images of the Virgin and saints were replaced by those of the Virgin Queen. Courtiers wore jewels such as this one to express their devotion to the queen celebrated as both monarch and lady, the former expressed by the proud profile on the outside of the locket and the latter by the lyrical miniature of her inside by the court painter, Nicholas Hilliard. Within she is beauty's rose, without, the guardian of the church, symbolised by Noah's ark.

dred and thirty ships with some seven thousand sailors and seventeen thousand soldiers with a further seventeen thousand who were to cross from the Netherlands.

England was not then a great maritime power. There were thirty-four royal ships to which was added one hundred and ninety private ones which were requisitioned and fitted out for battle. There were, therefore, in terms of number more English ships than Spanish and, which was of far greater importance, of a different kind. They were much smaller and were thus able to manoeuvre more easily than the cumbrous Spanish galleons. In addition, English guns and gunnery was recognised as the best in the world, with artillery that could shoot at a great distance to deadly effect when the encounter came. At the end of 1587 Lord Howard of Effingham was put in charge of the fleet with Lord Henry Seymour as second in command. In June 1588, as the Armada approached, Howard and Drake waited at Plymouth with ninety ships while Seymour waited elsewhere with another thirty. Meanwhile on land there had been a similar mustering of forces to defend the realm. Fifteen years before the county militia had been set up, each county pledging to select and train men to fight with pike and musket. The signal for seventy-six thousand men to muster was given through a series of beacons set on high points along the coast. When the time came on 30 July and the Armada was sighted, the beacons blazed along the Cornish coast proclaiming its approach.



The *Ark Royal* was the flagship of the Admiral of the Fleet, Lord Howard of Effingham. It was built in 1587 for Sir Walter Raleigh but acquired by the queen before it was launched.

Meanwhile London had been put in readiness with thousands of men to defend the queen. Not far away at Tilbury, under the Earl of Leicester, an army of seventeen thousand soldiers was camped. There Elizabeth, arrayed like an Amazon with a breastplate, reviewed her troops and delivered the greatest speech of her reign casting herself as the beloved ruler of her people fearlessly leading them into war for God and country.

'... I come amongst you. . . being resolved in the midst and heat of battle to live or die amongst you all. To lay down for 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. . .'

Although no one knew it at the time, her speech was delivered when the danger had already passed. The first shots had been fired off Plymouth in July but they had been indecisive. On 1 August the Armada advanced in what looked to the English fleet like a mighty crescent. More fighting ensued and on 6 August the Armada reached Calais where it waited for news of the Spanish army which was to cross the Channel from the Low Countries. Unknown to the Spaniards it had been blockaded by the Dutch rebels. Then came the English master-stroke. Fire ships were sent in at night amongst the ships of the Armada, forcing them to weigh anchor and drift northwards, thus renewing the battle and, at the same time, rendering impossible any link-up with troops crossing from the Netherlands. Now came the main battle off Gravelines with huge losses on the Spanish side. By the end of that day the Armada was in danger of being driven by winds on to the sandbanks unless it headed into the North Sea. The Spanish in their battered ships had no other choice. They were forced into making a terrible voyage all around Scotland. There had already been large losses of men and there were few victuals left. The weather was bitterly cold, something for which they were totally unequipped. Worse, one by one ships were either lost or wrecked on the coasts of Scotland and Ireland. Over eleven thousand men perished and what survived and reached Spain was the wreck of a fleet.

Richard Hakluyt, the chronicler of England's mar-



A gold pendant set with rubies in the form of a salamander recovered from one of the Spanish ships, the *Girona*, wrecked on its homeward journey off the west coast of Ireland. Such a jewel would have been worn by one of the highest-ranking officers.



The homeward journey of the Spanish Armada. A contemporary coloured engraving records the defeat at Gravelines and the route

northwards which the Spanish fleet was forced to take via Scotland and the west coast of Ireland. Many ships were unable to follow course and foundered.

itime enterprise wrote: 'Never was any nation blessed of JEHOVAH with a more glorious and wonderful victory upon the seas, than our vanquishing of the dreadful Spanish Armada, 1588.' To England and Protestant Europe this was seen as God's judgment and his handmaiden went in triumph through the streets of London to St. Paul's Cathedral to give thanks amidst the acclamations of her people. Elizabeth became a legend within her own lifetime. In a sense she became England. The defeat of the Spanish Armada made a reality of what her government had striven to achieve, a united people held together by the crown, Protestant, patriotic, fearless in defence of queen and country. Although in political terms the victory may have changed little and the country was to remain involved in a costly war for the rest of the reign, in moral ones it gave a confidence and creative energy to what was in essence a new civilisation and society, that of the England of Elizabeth I.