



HISTORY SHAPERS

THE STORY OF SIR FRANCIS DRAKE

OLIVER ELTON



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by

OLIVER ELTON



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PLEASE NOTE

In this series, you will read about historical figures who displayed courage, bravery, self-sacrifice, and many other admirable traits. Their stories remind us that many people in history took bold actions and made tough choices. Yet, even those who achieved great things sometimes held ideas or pursued goals that were not beneficial to everyone. History is full of complex individuals—parts of their lives inspire us to be brave and stand up for what is right, while other parts remind us to consider the unintended consequences of our actions.

As you explore these biographies, we invite you to reflect on the qualities that enabled these figures to achieve greatness and the lessons we can learn from their mistakes. Maybe you too can become a History Shaper—someone who learns from the past and helps to make our world a better place for everyone.

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PHILIP OF SPAIN

During the life of Francis Drake, Philip the Second of Spain was the most powerful king in Europe. Spain and the Netherlands belonged to him, parts of Italy, France, and Germany, and a great part of America. From Mexico, Peru, and the West Indian Islands, Spanish ships sailed home with treasure of silver and gold, as they do in fairy tales, while Portuguese ships traded in Africa for slaves and gold and ivory, and had even ventured as far as the then little-known East Indies. Lastly, Philip added Portugal and its possessions to his vast inheritance, and would have liked to hold all the world "for God and for Spain." Being himself a good Catholic, he wished to see all men of that faith, and to those who did not believe in it he was a merciless foe, and he shed the blood of many martyrs.

Now Drake hated Philip and the Pope more than anything in the world, as much as he loved England and honoured his own Queen Elizabeth. He spent most of his life in making war against the King of Spain in one way or another, calling it all, as he told Queen Elizabeth, "service done to your Majesty by your poor vassal (or servant) against your great enemy."

During Drake's life wars about religion were raging in

almost every European country. In France the struggle ended by most people remaining Catholics, just as England, after Elizabeth's reign, was always a Protestant country. But such changes really take long to come about, especially in days when news travelled slowly, when there were no trains or steamships, and no penny newspapers.

Francis Drake was born when Edward the Sixth was king, in a farmhouse near Tavistock in Devonshire; but while he was quite a young child his father, who was a Protestant, had to fly from his country home, owing to an outbreak of anger among his Catholic neighbours. So the first stories the little Francis would hear must have been tales of this time of persecution, when many of his father's friends had to hide in woods and caves, and lost all they possessed. From his very cradle he must have been taught to hate the "Papists."

The new home was rather a strange one, for the old books say Drake's father went to Kent, "to inhabit in the hull of a ship, wherein many of his younger sons were born. He had twelve in all, and as it pleased God that most of them should be born upon the water, so the greater part of them died at sea. "The father seems to have been a sailor at one time, and he now got a place among the seamen of the King's Navy, to read prayers to them. The Navy ships were anchored off Chatham when not in use, and here, in an old unused warship, the elder Drake and his family made their floating home. Here most of the

twelve boys were born, a troop of merry children, and many a fine game they must have had on the decks.

The sound of wind and waves must have been familiar to them as they went to sleep at nights, and they grew up strong and fearless, and, living as they did among sailors, must have early set their hearts on going to sea and having adventures.

At the death of King Edward the Sixth, the Catholic Queen Mary began to reign, and Philip, then Prince of Spain, came over to marry her. He looked "very gallant," they said, in his suit of white kid, covered with gold embroidery, and was followed by a train of splendid-looking Spanish nobles, and he brought quantities of gold and silver, borne on the backs of horses. But the English people hated the foreign marriage, and so strong was this feeling that in the winter before the wedding even the children in the streets shouted against the Spaniards and snowballed them as they went to Court. Perhaps Francis Drake and his brothers left their usual games to play at being Philip and the English, like some other lads, of whom we read that their play became so real and exciting that they were only just prevented from hanging the boy who acted the part of Philip. The King of Spain might have seen his son upon the English throne, but this hope, like so many of his, was doomed to be defeated, for Mary died childless, and Elizabeth came to the throne.

As Drake's father was at this time a poor man, he put his son Francis to learn seamanship of the master of a

bark or small ship that used to coast along the shore and sometimes carried merchandise to France and the Netherlands. At this time he must have had to suffer many hardships and to live a rough life, but he learned his business well, and “was so diligent and painstaking, and so pleased the old man his master by his industry,” that at his death he left his bark to Francis Drake.

Later Drake grew weary of this little ship, that “only crept along the shore,” and longed for something more than such safe and simple voyaging, so he seems to have sold the bark and taken service with his kinsmen, the Hawkins brothers, who were rich merchants and owned and sailed their ships. And so began Drake’s roving life.

“THE TROUBLESOME VOYAGE”

The four centuries before the sixteenth, in which Drake lived, have been called the Age of Discovery. The world widened before men's eyes as new lands and seas, new peoples, and even new stars, became known to them. The little country of Portugal was the first to begin those discoveries. Her ships explored the coasts of Africa and traded there. One of her mariners discovered the passage round the Cape of Good Hope to India, the Spice Islands, and China, and for long she had no rival in her trade.

About fifty years before Drake was born, America was discovered by Christopher Columbus, an Italian sailor in the service of Spain. The ships in use in those days were very different to any we see now. There have been three kinds of ships made, ships with oars, ships with sails, and ships with steam. They are divided into two kinds, fighting ships and merchant ships.

The old-fashioned galley was long and low-decked, and could be rowed or sailed. In the middle of the ship, between two platforms or upper decks, the rowers were chained to their seats. Three or four men worked each of the long oars, or sweeps as they were called. There were twenty-five oars or more on each side of the ship. The

rowers or galley-slaves were generally prisoners taken in war, and to “be sent to the galleys” was a terrible fate. They lived on the benches, ill-fed and ill-clothed, with only an awning to cover them when in port, though the low sides of the ships protected them a little from the weather and from the fire of the enemy. Drake seems always to have released the slaves he took on Spanish galleys. Once, we are told, they included “Turks, Greeks, Negroes, Frenchmen, and Spaniards.”

The sailors who worked the ships were free. The ships were always armed, at first with shields and spears and arrows, later with guns and powder. With such ships the Italians fought many great battles on the Mediterranean, and in such ships, the Norsemen had invaded England and raided the Northern Seas; and, with his *caravels*, or light Spanish ships, Columbus reached the islands which he called the West Indies. In later voyages he reached the mainland of America, but to the day of his death he always believed that he had found the coast of Asia. Another Italian sailor, named Amerigo, also in the service of Spain, gave his name to the New World. The Italians had long been good sailors and ship-builders, and great fighters at sea, and they had the glory of discovering America, though they gained no possessions there.

Spain, at that time the most powerful state in Europe, seized upon a great part of the new land, and found there gold and silver mines. The natives they first subdued and

afterwards forced to become Christians, as the custom was in warfare with a Pagan race.

The American Indians, however, have never been easy to subdue, and have always had an undying affection for their own way of life. The Spaniards found them unfitted for hard work in the mines. The Portuguese had already captured negroes in their West African settlements, and numbers of those were sent to America as slaves.

From the time of Henry the Eighth the English were building and buying fine ships, and learnt to sail them so well that they began less and less to use the old galley ship with its many oars. They traded mostly with Spain and the Low Countries; but as they got better ships, and became expert sailors, they wanted to go farther away, to discover new countries and get more trade. They began to sail to the Canary Islands, to Africa, and America.

The Hawkins family had taken a large part in this new activity. The elder William Hawkins had sailed to Brazil; and his son, John Hawkins, with whom Drake took service, made several voyages to the “Isles of the Canaries.” Having learnt something about the West Indies, he made several voyages there, carrying with him numbers of negroes to sell, whom he took, partly by the sword, and partly by other means, on the coast of Africa.

Hawkins and the other adventurers who joined him brought home great riches. In the account of those early voyages we see the beginning of a quarrel with Spain,

which was to last through the reign of Elizabeth, till Philip sent his great Armada to invade England.

The third and most famous voyage of John Hawkins to the West Indies was called "the troublesome voyage," for it ended in disaster. It was the biggest venture that had yet been made by the English, and Drake took part in it. Hawkins sailed with six ships. There were two "great ships" of the Royal Navy—the *Jesus*, commanded by Hawkins himself, and the *Minion*; the *William and John*, named after and owned by the Hawkins brothers; and three smaller ones, the *Swallow*, the *Angel*, and the *Judith*, the last being under the command of Francis Drake.

They got slaves in Africa and sold them in the West Indies, though not without difficulty, because the Spaniards had been forbidden by their king to trade with the English. As they were about to start on their way home, the ships met with fearful storms, and as the *Jesus* was much shattered, Hawkins made up his mind to seek for haven. They were driven at last into Vera Cruz, the port of the city of Mexico. Here they sheltered, hoping to buy food and repair their fleet. Now in this very port lay treasure which was said to be worth thousands of pounds. It was waiting for the fleet of armed ships which was to take it safely back to Spain. The Spaniards were much dismayed to see the English ships, with their Portuguese ships and prisoners captured on the voyage, come, as they thought, to seize their treasure. It was this very danger they had

feared when Hawkins first began his slave trade and disturbed the peace of the Spanish colonies.

Next morning thirteen great ships appeared, and proved to be a Mexican fleet returning with a new Viceroy or Governor from King Philip. A solemn and peaceful agreement was made, and the Spanish ships were moored alongside the English ones, which were already in possession of the harbour. However, the Spaniards afterwards broke faith and fell upon the English, and a great and fierce fight took place, which lasted from ten in the morning until night. The *Angel* and the *Swallow* were sunk, and the *Jesus* so damaged that it could not be brought away.

As the remaining ships were sailing away the Spaniards sent two “fire ships” after them. This was not an unusual way of fighting in those days. The empty, burning ships were sent to try and fire the enemies’ ships, and were borne along, flaming, by the wind, an awful and terrifying sight. The men on the *Minion* became panic-stricken, and set sail without orders. Some of the men from the *Judith* followed in a small boat. The rest were forced “to abide the mercy of the Spaniards,” which, Hawkins says, he doubts was very little.

“The same night,” he goes on, “the *Judith* forsook us in our great misery. In the end, when the wind came larger, we weighed anchor and set sail, seeking for water, of which we had very little. And wandering thus certain

days in these unknown seas, hunger forced us to eat hides, cats and dogs, mice, rats, parrots, and monkeys.”

Some of the men asked to be put on land, rather than risk shipwreck and starvation in the overcrowded boat. Hawkins did, in the end, get safely home, with his weather-beaten ship, and the survivors of his feeble, starving crew. But he says that, if all the miseries and troubles of this sorrowful voyage were to be written, the tale would be as long as the “Book of Martyrs.” Some of the men that were left also reached England, after weary wanderings and years of terrible sufferings. Some were put to death as heretics, and others were sent to the galleys as slaves. Others, more fortunate, were sent to serve in monasteries, where the monks made kind and gentle masters.

Five days before Hawkins reached England, the little *Judith* struggled into Plymouth Harbour with Drake and his load of men. William Hawkins sent him at once to London on horseback, “post, post haste,” as the old letters say. He carried letters to the Lords of Council, and to Sir William Cecil, the Chief Secretary of the Queen. So he rode swiftly along the country roads, only stopping to fling himself off one weary, smoking horse on to the back of a fresh one. The people would gather round him as he made the change, and wonder what great news was going to town.

William Hawkins said in his letter: “There is come to Plymouth, at this present hour, one of the small barks



DRAKE CARRYING TO COURT THE NEWS OF HIS VOYAGE.

of my brother's fleet, and as I have neither writing nor anything else from him, I thought it good, and my most bounden duty, to send you the captain of the same bark. He is our kinsman, and is called Francis Drake."

He was to tell the whole story, and the Queen was to hear it. He was to tell of the losses of John Hawkins, and of his absence, which his brother says "is unto me more grief than any other thing in the world."

Drake was much blamed at the time for deserting his general. It is difficult for us to see what he could have done. His little ship was crowded, and he had small store of food and water, and he no doubt thought it best to get home as soon as possible. His story of Spanish treachery and English loss must have roused the country side. The excitement was at its height when the *Minion* appeared off Cornwall.

A man "for goodwill" came riding to William Hawkins, at Plymouth, to get help. He sent a bark, with thirty-four mariners and a store of fresh food and other necessities. And again letters were sent to London with the news. Haste! Haste! post haste!

NOMBRE DE DIOS

It was in January 1569 that the “troublesome voyage” ended for Drake, and in the summer of that year he married a Devonshire girl, named Mary Newman. The stories of his most famous voyages are found in an old book, called “Sir Francis Drake Revived.” This was first printed by his descendant, another Sir Francis Drake, in the reign of Charles the First. It was written by some of the voyagers, and it is thought that Drake himself wrote part of it and corrected it. It is supposed that Drake presented the manuscript to Queen Elizabeth, for he dedicates it to her as the “first fruits” of his pen. He also says that his labours by land and sea were not more troublesome than the writing of it.

After his losses and misfortunes in the Indies, it seems that Drake could get no amends from Spain, though he had lost both kinsmen, friends, and goods of some value. Queen Elizabeth could not think of making war with Philip. Her country was poor, her father’s navy was ruined. She had no proper army, and she had trouble enough on her hands in France and Scotland.

Therefore Drake decided to help himself in what he was pleased to call his quarrel with the King of Spain. The

old writer says that the story of his life shows how “so mean a person righted himself upon so mighty a prince. The one was in his own conceit the mightiest monarch in the world, the other only an English captain.”

Drake now made two voyages that really prepared the way for his great and famous one to Nombre de Dios. He probably paid his expenses by plundering ships or selling slaves. On the 24th day of May 1572, Drake started with his ship, the *Pascha* of Plymouth, and the *Swan* of Plymouth, in which his brother, John Drake, was captain. They had on board seventy-three men and boys. All of these came willingly, and had not been *pressed*, or compelled to serve, as the custom then was.

Drake's ships had a very good passage, and never stopped till they reached one of the West Indian Islands, in twenty-five days. Here they stayed three days to refresh the men, and to water the ships. The third day they set sail for the continent. They steered for a bay named formerly by them Port Pheasant. It was a fine, safe harbour. As they rowed ashore in one boat, smoke was seen in the woods. Drake manned and armed the other boats.

When they landed, it was found that a certain English-man, called John Garret, of Plymouth, had lately been there. Some mariners who had been with Drake in his other voyages had shown him the place.

Garret had left a plate of lead, nailed fast to a mighty, great tree, on which these words were engraved:—

“CAPTAIN DRAKE.

“If you happen to come to this port, make haste away! for the Spaniards which you had with you here, the last year, have betrayed this place, and taken away all you left here. I depart from hence this present day of July, 1572.—

Your very loving friend,

JOHN GARRETS

The smoke came from a fire which Garret and his company had made before they went. It had been burning for at least five days before Drake's arrival. Drake had brought with him “three dainty pinnaces,” made in Plymouth, and stored on board ship in pieces. He intended to put them together in this place. So the ships were anchored, and the place simply but strongly fortified with great logs.

Next day an English boat appeared. The captain was James Rance, and he had thirty men, some of whom had been with Drake the year before. They brought with them a Spanish *caravel*, or merchant ship, which they had taken the day before, and a pinnacle. They joined Drake's expedition. In seven days the pinnaces' were set up and furnished out of the ships. Some negroes on a neighbouring island told them that the townsfolk of Nombre de Dios were in great fear of the *Cimaroons*, or “Maroons,” as our sailors called them. They had attacked the town of Nombre de Dios, and the Governor of Panama was to send soldiers to defend it. These were negroes who had fled some eighty

years before from the cruelty of the Spaniards. They had married Indian women, and had grown into a strong fighting tribe, who had two kings of their own, and lived one on the east, and one on the west, of the road from Nombre de Dios to Panama. This was the road by which all the gold and silver from the mines of Peru was sent to the port of Nombre de Dios, to be shipped for Spain. It was carried by trains of mules.

Drake hastened his plans. Three ships and the *caravel* were left with Captain Rance. He chose seventy-three men, for the three pinnaces (the fourth was that taken by Captain Rance), took plenty of arms, and two drums and a trumpet. The men were drilled and given their weapons and arms, which had been kept up till then "very fair and safe in good casks." Drake encouraged them to the attack. In the afternoon they set sail for Nombre de Dios, and were very near before sunset. They lay there under the shore, out of sight of the watch, till dark. Then they rowed near shore as quietly as possible, and waited for the dawn.

But Drake found the men were getting nervous, so when the moon rose "he thought it best to persuade them it was day dawning," and the men had not time to get afraid, for they got there at three in the morning. They landed with no difficulty. But the noise of bells and drums and shouting soon told them that the town was awake and alarmed. Twelve men were left to keep the pinnaces and ensure a safe retreat. Drake's brother,

with John Oxenham and sixteen other men, went round behind the King's Treasure-house, and entered the eastern end of the market-place. Drake, with the rest, passed up the broad street into the market-place, with sound of drum and trumpets. They used fire-pikes, or long poles with metal points, to which torches of blazing tow were fastened, and served both to frighten the enemy and to light Drake's men, who could see quite well by them. The terrified townsfolk imagined an army was marching upon them.

After a sharp fight in the market-place the Spaniards fled. Two or three of them were captured, and commanded to show Drake the Governor's house. But he found that only silver was kept there; gold, pearls, and jewels being carried to the King's Treasure-house, not far off.

"This house was very strongly built of lime and stone for safe keeping of the treasure. At the Governor's house we found the great door open where the mules are generally unladen. A candle stood lighted on the top of the stairs, and a fair horse was saddled ready for the Governor himself, or for one of his household. By this light we saw a huge heap of silver in the lower room. It was a pile of bars of silver.

"At this sight our Captain commanded straightly that none of us should touch a bar of silver. We must stand to our weapons, because the town was full of people. There was in the King's Treasure-house, near the waterside, more gold and jewels than all our pinnaces could carry.

This we could presently try to break open, though they thought it so strong.

“But now a report was brought by some of our men that our pinnaces were in danger to be taken, and that we had better get aboard before day. This report was learnt through a negro named Diego, who had begged to be taken on board our ships when we first came. Our Captain sent his brother and John Oxenham to learn the truth. They found the men much frightened, for they saw great troops of armed townsfolk and soldiers running up and down. Presently, too, a mighty shower of rain fell, with a terrible storm of thunder and lightning. It came down violently, as it does in these countries. Before we could reach the shelter at the western end of the King’s Treasure-house, some of our bowstrings were wet, and some of our match and powder hurt.

“Our men began to mutter about the forces of the town. But our Captain, hearing, told them: ‘He had brought them to the mouth of the treasure of the world; if they went without it, they might blame nobody but themselves afterwards.’

“So soon as the fury of the storm was spent, he gave his men no time to consider their doubts, nor the enemy no time to gather themselves together. He stepped forward and commanded his brother and John Oxenham to break the King’s Treasure-house. The rest, with him, were to hold the market-place till the business was done.

“But as he stepped forward his strength and sight



DRAKE WOUNDED AT NOMBRE DE DIOS.