



## Extract from *The Paradoxal Compass: Drake's Dilemma*

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### **Night Falls, Quickly**

The travel narratives of the early explorers are riddled with memory-holes and evasions. Dates that don't agree, glaring omissions, the merest glimpses of what we should now like to know so much more about: I'm drawn to these muddles that get hushed up and played down and rubbed out. What did those islanders in Cornwall, or the Eskimos on the other side, make of Davis' mapping their world? Drake might be in favour of the dignity of all human beings by the time he and Diego met, but it's true he had commanded slave ships less than ten years earlier. If Diego was paid on the same basis as European crew-members, how did he fit in socially? What did he think of the West Country or London once he got there? What did they think of him?

Gappiness of this kind is as endemic to historical as to personal memory. Among the gappiest voyage of them all is the one on which Diego eventually died, namely Drake's circumnavigation of 1577-80. And it isn't only 'operational details' that the chroniclers kept so close to their chests. There was, for example, a traumatic episode where the thinness of detail strongly suggests more than the protection of technical data.

Thomas Doughty's execution at Port St Julian is an enduring enigma. There are whole online forums devoted to the subject. I'll summarise briefly. Doughty was a lawyer by training, one of the 'gentleman adventurers' on board. An investor in the voyage, he seems also to have had inside knowledge of its purposes and was made commander of a Portuguese prize taken off the Cape Verde Islands. A chest on board was broken open without the

General's authorisation. Amidst the accusations and counter-accusations, Doughty claimed magical powers and sounded out some of his crew as allies in a plot to seize command of the expedition.

The whole affair is very obscure and Doughty's motives are baffling. Class conflict, clash of temperament, political and / or sexual intrigue have all been suggested. The argument had simmered for months by the time they reached Port St Julian, in what is now Argentina. Drake formally charged him as a sorcerer and a traitor, and with attempts at 'hindrance and overthrow' of the voyage. After a trial of dubious legality, Doughty was beheaded.

Every detail of every narrative has been exhaustively picked over. Two centuries later, Dr Johnson confessed himself mystified and two centuries on from Dr Johnson nobody is any clearer. But another episode, similarly opaque, has received much less attention. It obviously mattered at least as much to those who were there. It is the only event, from the Indonesian section of the journey, on which all accounts are agreed about the date.

After calling at one of the Spice Islands, the *Golden Hinde* had already for some weeks been trying to reach the Indian Ocean. The ship needed to travel west but the prevailing wind and the lie of the land forced it to travel south instead, along rugged coasts and now through uncharted waters off Celebes. Through a maze of islands, deep bays and narrow peninsulas the ship had laboriously picked its way until, on the evening of January 9<sup>th</sup> 1580, open water at last appeared up ahead. It must have been a huge relief to everybody.

The crew, half way round the world and more than two years out of Plymouth, knew they were now approaching the start of the long run homewards. Ballasted with enough treasure to pay off the entire national debt, additionally loaded with six tonnes of spices, the vessel's hull was low in the water but freshly careened and this was a state of the art war ship. Fortune had been with them. The General ordered full sail to be set.

We know a curious fact about Drake's daily routine. He retired to his cabin promptly at eight, every evening, presumably to complete the day's entry in that long since vanished log book. Yet this fact is never placed alongside another: when the *Golden Hinde* struck a coral reef that evening, it was at 'the beginning of the first watch', which is to say, just after eight o'clock.

‘Natural’ it may have been, but this was no mere mistake. In an over-confident novice it would have been a disastrous blunder. In a mariner of Drake’s standing, it was something stranger and far worse. His authority rested upon his abilities as a navigator and a man of action. The strangely sloping weather deck, as the crew swarmed up on to it, and the realisation that their General was capable of such a blunder, must have seemed unbelievable at first, then deeply disorienting.

That order to set full sail, at nightfall, upon a sea for which they had no reliable charts, was one of the very rare occasions on which this great navigator spectacularly misjudged his situation. A short time after the order was given, the vessel lurched abruptly to starboard and rose out of the water, stuck fast, keeling over dangerously. The same strong wind that had so recently filled its sails with fresh hope, now jammed its timbers against the rock and held them there. It was now all that prevented the ship’s rolling off and capsizing at once.

This was the 16<sup>th</sup> century’s Apollo 13 moment. Night had just fallen, quickly, as it does in the tropics. They had no reliable charts and the nearest land was about twenty miles away. Mission Control, for these stranded sons of Renaissance Europe, was still somewhere like Heaven, not somewhere like Houston.

The wind holding them fast kept up for twenty hours. The episode is generally treated as a frightening but mercifully brief interruption to the *Golden Hinde*’s progress around the planet and into the history books. That is certainly a view which the officially sanctioned accounts encourage. But in the first of those versions, published nine years after their return, the entire episode is glossed over in two short paragraphs. Such reticence should raise suspicions. Those involved were still alive, with interests to safeguard. Almost half a century must pass before *The World Encompassed*, the first full official account, would appear. Though more detail is given there, striking contradictions and omissions remain.

There exists also the curiously fragmented ‘Anonymous Memorandum’ which casts doubt on both of these accounts. This Memorandum has long been well known to historians and its authenticity is not in question, but it includes two phrases which have not, to my knowledge, been much dwelt upon.

The ship, of course, survived the ordeal. Had it turned out otherwise the History Channel would be searching still for The Lost Treasure of the Pelican. Once the ship had regained the open sea, Drake summoned the ships’ chaplain, Francis Fletcher, and ordered

him to be shackled to a 'staple' driven into the forecandle deck. We have already encountered Fletcher the wildlife watcher. Not long out of Cambridge when he joined the expedition, he had meanwhile travelled in Italy and as we'll see he appears to have acted on board as a physician as well as the crew's confessor. Protestant opinion took hygienic reform of conditions on English ships seriously, which can only have enhanced Fletcher's status. A Spanish prisoner noted that he was highly respected by the crew, who listened attentively to his sermons.

The notes he made about this section of the voyage were long ago lost. But what the Anonymous Memorandum tells us is that, shortly after this narrow escape, Drake 'excommunicated' Fletcher 'out of the Church of God, and from all the benefits and graces thereof.' He called him 'the falsest knave that liveth' and furthermore 'denounced' him 'to the devil and all his angels'. ~~threatening That~~

Clearly there had been a disagreement. From the official narrative we gather that there were, broadly speaking, three things which happened during the stranding. Fletcher did the religion: he preached, led prayers and finally, when all hope was lost, he offered communion. Drake took on the technical side, descending into the hold to man the bilge pump. The ship was found not to be taking on much water, so he waited for daylight then took the boat out to look for any ground within 300 fathoms to which they could fasten the anchor, thereby levering the ship off the rock. Finally, it is known that the crew threw several cannons and three tonnes of spices over the side, before the wind shifted and the ship was re-floated.

It has always been assumed that Fletcher, as he preached, interpreted their stranding as divine retribution, particularly for Doughty's execution. That seems very likely but Drake's words hint at more than that. Those who knew Drake described him as a well-spoken man. The violence of these words suggests that he has just had a very nasty fright.

It must have been through his chaplain's preaching that the offence had come, so the theological inflection to Drake's insults, denouncing Fletcher 'to the devil and all his angels', will have been no accident.—Angels, in January 1580, were no sentimental frippery and the devil certainly wasn't. These years take far more of their colouring from the Middle Ages than we are accustomed to imagine. The existence of angels was still believed in quite literally and the devil also had command of several squadrons. His had fallen through pride, through turning their minds away from God and his creation, to admire their own 'sublimity

and honour' instead. They were to be found scattered throughout the physical universe, hiding in caves and mines, for example, from which they emerged to do men harm.

Even stranger is the other phrase that has been missed. Drake threatened to hang him if he ever again even once came 'before the mast.' That last phrase refers to the part of the ship where the crew lived. This is clearly an accusation that Fletcher had tried to incite a mutiny. It also strongly suggests he had met with some success. 'The General', in other words, had found his authority seriously questioned during those twenty hours and Fletcher had done the questioning. This was about much more than the dubious legality of Doughty's execution. A question about Drake's leadership and purpose had been opened up, at a very awkward moment and by a highly respected member of the crew.

We are not told exactly what that question was, but we can make a pretty good guess. We can certainly do better than explain it away as some kind of left-over from the Doughty Affair but the trial at Port St Julian offers some useful hints. During and after the trial, Drake made two related but different points about class. The first point, made in a speech to the jury, was that the voyage, which could not, he argued, continue with Doughty alive, was unlike any other. If they sailed on 'the worst in this fleet shall become a gentleman.' In context, this was not far short of a bribe. Drake was implicitly offering them a share in the treasure, rather than fixed wages. At a religious service after the execution, he interrupted Fletcher to deliver the 'sermon' himself, threatening anyone who questioned his command with the same fate. Doughty's treachery was traceable to idleness, he argued. The 'gentlemen' and the 'mariners' were now to 'hale and draw together'.

He offered his crew, in other words, a new start, a personal interest in the plunder and a deceased hate figure, in the form of Doughty, who was alleged to have conspired against their bettering themselves in this way. So when Fletcher raised the question of their shipwreck as divine retribution, it would have been retribution not only for Doughty's execution but for the crew's complicity in that death. In re-opening the question he went right to the heart of what the voyage had been for.

## **Listening with an Earthenware Pot**

Francis Fletcher was an educated man who had, for more than two years now, heard the confessions and tended the injuries of crew-members. He had won their confidence. These were men who had enlisted for a trading voyage to Egypt. They had not enlisted for a three year journey to the ends of the earth. There are clear signs that on this, as on other long-range voyages of the time, what we would call depression was a problem. But he knew also that to weigh freedom from all debt, forever, to weigh long coveted fields and houses, not to mention bragging rights, against abstractions like justice, is to ask much.

Francis Drake was not an educated man and was keenly conscious of this. He was, however, one of the world's great navigators and a famous man. He also knew his crew, but as their General and, ultimately, as their paymaster. His authority rested on the ability to bring his men home and make them rich. His skills as a man of action would make this possible.

There is another curious circumstance here which historians do not dwell on. All detailed accounts are agreed that the cannon were jettisoned only after Fletcher had preached and celebrated communion. By then, almost an entire day had passed since the ship ran aground. His hesitation is of course understandable: Drake was loath to disarm the vessel. He was by then the most wanted man on the planet. Indeed, we know, as he could only guess, that the flotilla of Spanish ships sent to intercept him left harbour in the very same week that the *Golden Hinde* was 'delayed' off Celebes. They were still only half way around the world. To complete this journey un-armed was to take a gigantic risk. Drake had only just blundered as never before and had now, additionally, to explain to his men that he was not going to lighten the vessel by the readiest means available.

Fletcher could do little more, at first, than seek to contain some of the hysteria. He would have done so in the language of the time. Doubt not, he would have assured them, that from death we go straight into life. He would have meant it, too. This was an age of literal faith and he was that faith's official representative on board. A lamp unto our feet and a light unto our path is God's word. He would have called upon the Judge of all men, in all ages, in all places, to visit them here with His spirit.

*'Of your great goodness, merciful father, you have fashioned us even of the dust to be living creatures according to your image. Your providence has breathed into us also the knowledge of our salvation in the redemption of Christ. Visit us now on these horrible seas and fearful waves – visit us in the greatness of your fatherly kindness and fortify our faith that we waver not in this most perilous place and dangerous time...'*

Once these negotiations with the celestial powers were underway, Tom Moone would have been sent below decks. Moone was a large man, a hedonistic and violent mercenary and a firm friend of the General's. He had personally guarded Thomas Doughty as he awaited 'trial' and seems to have taken keen pleasure in terrorising and robbing the Spanish inhabitants of coastal settlements. As ship's carpenter on one of Drake's earlier expeditions, he had been trusted to carry out secret orders to scuttle a vessel. Someone was needed now who could remove decking at speed, allowing access to the damaged timbers. Moone had the skill, the physical courage and the devotion to Drake. He would surely have made one of the small party which made that descent.

Fletcher would have noted Tom Moone and other of the General's 'old heavy friends' being sent below. As Fletcher prayed on deck, these men fetched from the galley an earthenware pot to detect the exact location of any broken timbers. Placed with its open end against the lower deck, an ear pressed against its base would detect a low roaring when they had found the place.

Was it the absence of Drake's 'heavy friends' or the urgency of their plight or both which inspired Fletcher to venture certain risky suggestions? The scriptures and the Church Fathers are, after all, not exactly silent about this kind of thing. *He that loveth gold shall not be justified, and he that followeth corruption shall have enough thereof. Gold hath been the ruin of many, and their destruction was present. It is a stumbling-block unto them that sacrifice unto it, and every fool shall be taken therewith.* Fletcher would certainly have been able to summon such verses.

Or did he venture even closer to the bone? *And men go forth to admire lofty mountains and the ocean and the course of the stars, and forget their own selves while doing so.* Knowing passages of St Augustine would have been one way to taunt the General. Would he have refrained now, when Drake, who gave no quarter himself, had never looked so vulnerable?

Or was it, rather, as much as Fletcher could do to hold their attention at all as the vessel shifted uneasily beneath them, bumping against the rock, ready to split at any moment? Might it even have been in silence that they prayed?

From that part of his notes which has survived, it's clear he interpreted the ship's treatment by the elements as a direct and literal expression of God's verdict on their behaviour. Of a fifty-six-day storm which the ship had survived in the South Pacific, he wrote: 'it Pleased him againe for his name sake to heare the prayers of them w<sup>ch</sup> vnfeignedly called vpon his holly & reuerend name... Wherefore hee caused the Sonn by day & the moon & stars by night to shine vpon vs.'

There is no reason to imagine he saw this present disaster any differently. Indeed, that it had struck precisely when the ship was farthest from home would surely have impressed him as significant. God had given them exactly half the circumference of the globe to reveal to Him their purpose in setting out. The assumption that a technical competence would see them through had been abruptly suspended. This reversion to a religious interpretation of the voyage was accompanied by a sudden inversion of the command structure. And both of these, for Fletcher, were part of a divine plan to rescue this mission from itself.

This was dangerous reasoning but as an experienced preacher, he could quickly have sought refuge in generalisation.

*'Thou most dear father who hast alone the ends of all things in thy hands, watch over thy servants with thy holy power. May the frailty of our flesh never drive us into doubt of your loving kindness. That were death indeed, but they only need fear death that are troubled in their consciences and seek not your comfort.'*

But this surely was the time to speak truly. Now or not at all. He might well have raised, perhaps obliquely, the subject of Doughty, might have expressed his regret at having not done more to save him, at having gone along, however grudgingly, with Drake's 'deal'. This would have been the time to recall the plasters and ointments and balms with which he had sealed up so many injuries. Now was the time to attend to that deeper self-inflicted moral injury from which they were all suffering. He might have described himself as guilty as any of that 'brave gentleman's' execution. The Doughty he recalled to the men then, or re-invented for the occasion, would have been invested with many fine qualities. He would have been the man who had questioned Drake's plans from the outset. The man who had seen that

their future swoop on the Spanish trading routes would be actuated by greed. That it would, at the same moment, both succeed brilliantly and ruin them morally. So here it all was, come horribly true.

Drake often led services himself. This was no time, and it would not have been in character, even in this most precarious moment of his career, to let such a sermon go on too long. He interrupted with some words of his own. Their tone was that of the bluff commander – I imagine them a little self-consciously jaunty, to disguise both the injury and the shame.

*‘To preach the Gospel with no fine rhetoric, Master Fletcher, lest the Cross of Our Redeemer should lose its power to speak home – such is the Minister’s true office. A Minister does not give up his ship for lost, any more than he may give up a soul for lost. Matters regarding the ship fall rather within the Captain’s competency. Of souls, too, I may perhaps speak, when the chaplain is so eager to fear the worst. I am content – so may we all be – that my soul goes hence to a far better place, when God wills it. For his part, furthermore, the Captain fears there has been some sharp altercation between our ship and a certain Signor Rock. What think you, Master Parson? Shall we endeavour to part them or no?’*

That he personally manned the bilge pumps is usually cited as evidence of a great captain in action. He left the mere Fletchers of this world to moralise their dilemma into a thousand similes. But it is also possible that the Drake who sought in this way to divert attention back to his competency in practical matters was a dangerously isolated commander, scrambling to reassert his badly damaged authority. And simultaneously fleeing and terminating a sermon he wanted no more of.

The bilge water would also, it’s worth mentioning, have been the best guide to the state of the hull. What he would have feared, as the first bucket filled, was sea water that smelt just like sea water. Bilge water in a sealed hull soon develops its own unmistakable reek, especially in the Tropics. Drake manned the pumps himself because he wanted to be the first to know what the bilge smelt like. It smelt bad, which was great news. The hull was still sound. The *Golden Hinde* was not finished yet, and neither was he. After he went below, we should imagine the crew waiting for the sound of a bell. For even here Drake had managed to work in a No-Popery feature: Spanish prisoners who were shown around the vessel reported their indignation at seeing a bell looted from a church set up above the bilge pump. If Drake needed help, he would have rung that bell. He didn’t ring it. A little credibility had been salvaged.

At first light, if the tide had not already floated them clear, the ship's boat would be lowered. If lead and line could detect good ground anywhere close by, the ship's anchor would be fastened upon the sea bed, creating a fixed point towards which the ship could be prised loose from the rocky cleft in which she had stuck fast.

### **The Barbarous People of the Heathen**

Time and again the crew would have seen the lead drop and then watched as the line was paid out after it. The sloping deck offered a clear view of these proceedings to anyone who could bear to watch. 300 fathoms of line found nothing all morning and faith in the General must surely have been at the very least wavering. As they had prayed for the high tide to lift them off, now they prayed for the low tide to bring some sea bed within reach. But the tide here, it seemed, was no Christian tide. The wind which neither slackened nor strengthened held them upright here, but was that wind an agent of the Christian God, or was it rather the bewitched agent of some foreign demon? The longer this lasted the greater the strain on the ship's structure and their exhausted nerves alike.

The swift and violent end to which they had first prepared themselves gave way now, in their sleep-deprived ruminations, to an even grislier scenario. It lurked not very far beneath the everyday consciousness of any long-distance mariner in that age. The ship was built to last, after all. She might remain here, intact, for weeks, while they quickly ran through their supplies. Perhaps God had devised a more cunning set of torments.

It is significant that, in the narrative we have, the sailors speculate at this point about the 'barbarous people of the heathen' which are sure to inhabit that island looming on the horizon. It is, of course, a property of the barbarous people of the heathen that they eat not only each other but also and especially any strangers that chance upon their shore. It was surely the prospect of cannibalism – their own – which they were actually contemplating.

We should consider also that they were two degrees south of the equator in the hottest season of the year. Strong winds might have taken the edge off the worst of the heat and humidity but would only have added to the dangers of dehydration. The ship's boat carried

twenty at most. They were fifty-nine. Which twenty would sail with the General if he decided to leave?

Any departure was sure to be justified as reconnaissance and a search for fresh water. Those who wished to believe that were free to do so. Meanwhile the thirst intensified and the water they had was strictly rationed. As they watched that vain search for some sea-bed, even as they prayed, they must also have been remembering, doing the calculation in their heads. Would it be those who had spoken up for Doughty, or those who had kept quiet? Is it not highly likely that Drake set an armed guard on the weapons store the moment his ship hit?

None of this is to suggest that the chaplain and the crew did not continually implore the Heavens to be merciful as they watched from that tilted deck. *God does not delight in the death of a sinner*. It was not to be believed that the reef could fall away beneath them so steeply on all sides. Christ would be merciful yet.

The image of these men as maritime heroes and / or international gangsters is so deeply imprinted that the scene on that deck, as the last hope trickled away, is hard for us to picture. Their famous General, out there on the water, the day after his nightmare mistake, would not, I think, have resembled very closely that Son of Devon who smiled confidently from the pages of *Proud Heritage*. Haggard, sleepless, here was a man in serious trouble. Tossed violently back and forth in a little boat on an angry sea, he desperately cast about for the luck which had abruptly deserted him.

Having taken that boat as close to the reef as he dared, Drake gives the order to return to the ship. As he steps on board, having found nothing, so those other explanations for the disaster, hinted at earlier by the chaplain, surge back to the fore. The ingenuity of the greatest mariner on the planet cannot avail against the truth: their collision with this rock is divine retribution.

Drake knows this is the perception he is returning to. He has put it off for as long as he could. But at last his wizardry has failed him and failed them all. The ship's boat is swung back onto the weather deck and secured against the railings. It is 'by general voice determined' that the chaplain shall give a sermon and then offer communion.

## **Earth, Ashes and Emeralds**

Francis Fletcher had with him, in his cabin, a physician's chest but the bottles of medicine inside were all smashed during a storm off Brazil. By the time they made landfall on the other side of the Atlantic he had nothing to treat the crew, many of whom were ill. He found that seal fat would heal sores and went in search of medicinal herbs, too. The expedition lost its surgeon early on. Fletcher's notes clearly suggest that he filled at least part of the role which then became vacant.

His physician's chest somehow came to the attention of the Patagonian Indians with which they made contact in the (southern) winter of 1578. Fletcher seems to have liked them. His description of their egalitarian society immediately precedes his account of Doughty's show trial and execution and the implied contrast is hard to miss. The use they made of plants and animal fats interests him too and he is attracted by their love of music. They, in turn, discover hitherto unsuspected potential in his physician's chest full of glass fragments. Much to its owner's delight, it is adapted by their musicians as a novelty percussion instrument.

When Drake threatened Doughty's supporters after the execution, the chaplain would have been among those he was addressing. Yet only weeks later, having broken through into the Pacific, Drake was hit in the face with an arrow during a fight with Native Indians on the island of Mocha. Might it not have been Fletcher who extracted the tip and tended the wound? Fletcher would certainly have administered the last rights to Diego, Drake's servant, who died from wounds received in the same fight. Did this restore the bond of trust, or only put it under further strain?

Perhaps they hardly knew themselves. Less than two weeks later, after the attack on Santiago, Drake gave gold fittings taken from the cathedral there to Fletcher. Was this as close as the great man came to apologising? Was it thanks? In England, Catholicism was closely associated with the witchcraft of which Doughty had been accused. Was this a veiled accusation, then, or was it barbed with mockery, an accusation of some weakness for Popery? Or was he deliberately aiming at a sinister incoherence? In any case, Drake was known to them all, but especially to Fletcher, as a man of flesh and blood, as vulnerable to injury and, it now appeared, as liable to error, as anyone else.

The Fletcher, then, who addressed the crew on that deck more than a year later, addressed men he knew well at the very limits of their endurance. This was the experienced crew of a state of the art war ship, utterly undone by a single calamitous error of judgement. This voyage had transformed their expectations so many times already, but the future had never been so dark. He had more than a license to say exactly what he thought. He had a duty to do so. One subject in particular would have been fresh in his mind.

Maria was one of three or four slaves they had taken during their run up the western sea board of the Americas. If that really was her name, was she Catholic, then, when they found her? Did the crew of the *Golden Hinde* proceed to impress upon her the virtues of the Protestant faith? Was she convinced? She was pregnant, anyway, by the time the ship reached the Spice Islands. Drake left her and the two other Negroes on the island where they had spent some time careening the ship and feasting on crayfish so enormous that one of them could feed three or four men.

Another anonymous account, the 'Short Abstract of the Present Voyage', written by a crew-member, states that Maria became pregnant 'between the captaine and his men pirats'. It is quite possible that this reflects nothing but somebody's intense dislike of the General. But even William Camden, a contemporary and an admirer, reproached his conduct in this affair. The 'fair Negroess' had been 'given him for a present by a Spaniard whose Ship he had spared.' His conduct in setting her 'on Shoar' had been 'inhumane.'

The 'falsest knave that liveth': that is how Drake damns his chaplain. This can only be the response to a very serious accusation. Since none of the official accounts tells us what it was, what are the other possibilities?

There was da Silva, too. The Portuguese pilot, seized along with his ship off the Cape Verde Islands, was pressed into service as their guide to the Brazil coast. He seems to have been popular. Both Drake and Fletcher befriended him. He also attended their religious services and was seen doing so by Spanish prisoners, who were sure to report that to the Inquisition once they were set free. So to abandon da Silva to his fate in Guatalco, Mexico, the following year was certainly to abandon him to the ministrations of the Holy Office.

Seen a certain way, Drake might stand accused of many things. Daring master of surprises, he caught the Spanish napping: isn't that how the story runs? But Fletcher could have turned that against him easily enough. They had been taken for Spaniards or Portuguese

everywhere they went in the Pacific, because no English boat had ever been seen there before. Like the Spanish and the Portuguese, they wore beards, too. Their equipment and their appearance were barely distinguishable from those of their enemies. Yes, that had given them a tactical edge. But what if their motives, too, were identical to those of their enemies? Had English greed not proved to be much the same as Spanish greed?

These would have been dangerous arguments, coming from a chaplain of all people. But some such 'dangerous argument' certainly was raised. Wasn't their cover, about a new religion through which Christ would set the world free, really just that, a cover? Protestant fig-leaf trumps Catholic one. To question this would have come perilously close to treason. But perhaps this is where the reference to the devil and all his angels comes from. What if this new gloves-off Fletcher represented the *gould* and *sylver* in their hold as devils? Their condemnation of Doughty, their seizure of one ship after another since – this had been devil worship. Here, now, was the destruction they had brought upon themselves.

No 300 fathoms of line would ever come close to measuring the depth of the trouble they were in. He would have argued, with St Paul, that the wisdom of this world is foolishness before God. *'You who have knowledge of our innermost hearts, keep us from all sinful intentions and injurious dealings with our fellow men. Grant that we may possess at last the heavenly wisdom to do as we ought.'*

For the Greeks, as Fletcher would have known well, eyesight was a divine gift allowing men to admire and study the heavens. This was how they had learnt to harmonise the natural truth of reason within them and that of the stars in their unerring courses. This was how they learnt to regulate our actions. But what the General had applied to the heavens instead was the wisdom of this world. Their skills, their compasses and quadrants and traverse boards, had warped their understanding all down one side. They might think of themselves as the new men but theirs was merely the old sin of pride.

An illustration would have come to mind easily enough. The two brightest stars in the Little Bear, known as 'the Guards' for their proximity to the Pole Star, were used by mariners as a clock and would certainly have been used so by the crew of the *Golden Hinde*, just as the Southern Cross was, and is, used in the southern hemisphere. Were the heavens, then, a time-piece, a useful appliance, an ingenious device? Was this what the new learning amounted to? Had it made of the stars so many navigational aids, so many pegs by which to lever ourselves back and forth about the world?

But *seek her early*, said the Preacher, *wisdom is worth more than emeralds. Neither breadth nor space shall keep us from the Word of God*, said Paul. *'If you, Lord, have determined to gather us to your people, so prepare us every one that our death may be to your glory and to the salvation of our souls. We are but earth and ashes. Possess us at last, oh Lord, with a holy unity, in the fear and love of your majesty...'*

In what they all took to be their last moments upon earth, what flashed upon the preacher's inner eye was all they *might* have sailed for, and had not. He implored these men to send each one of them a fathom line deep into his own heart, to sound his own motives and actions, right to the bottom, to see them for what they had been and repent at last, while a little time was still left to them to move God's pity.

But this was not yet his final word. He had listened the previous day, with the rest of the crew, to Drake's order that the guns were not to be thrown over the side. In God's name he now countermanded that order, adding that as much of the cargo as was ready to hand should also be jettisoned. And he added a proviso, a saving clause, the crucial distinction that made this an act of obedience, all be it to a higher authority. This action, he argued, would only find favour with God if every man, in carrying it out, acknowledged his part in the collective guilt and in this way un-burdened himself of it. It must be their souls and not their ship only which they sought to lighten.

So Fletcher preached. The import of his words would not have been lost upon his listeners as he prepared the sacraments and invited the crew of the *Golden Hinde* to the Lord's table. It was a dangerous Christ they remembered that day on the sloping deck. In bundling those sacks of ginger and cloves and pimento through the main deck gun ports, each one worth its weight in silver, the longing for redemption and survival were completely fused. To the General this was mutiny, but Fletcher had claimed to be speaking on God's orders and Drake would have been a fool to contradict him. His command was, in effect, suspended.

Perhaps the behaviour of the crew just as the wind began to swing round would have been most mysterious of all. They would have been attuned, for twenty hours now, for the slightest change in its direction or force. Perhaps even below deck they were so at one with this vessel by now, they would have sensed the alteration in a moment. There was nothing of theology in this. This was mastery of a craft pure and simple. And the moment this change was detected, the polarity of the situation was instantly reversed.

## Fetching the Future Home

Tom Brewer was Drake's trumpeter and definitely one of the General's 'old heavy friends'. But I like to think at this moment at least, he came into his own. Drake in the same moment recovered all his daring. Just as it had been lost, so his whole reputation was restored to him now, in an instant. *There came a bearing Gale of wind on one Side, as if it were sent from Heaven.*

By some channel of communication unknown even to themselves, the crew took to their stations at once. This would be a matter of split-second timing. But he was the man to carry this off if anyone was. With the first change in the wind the ship seemed only to settle back a little further on her timbers. What Drake recognised in that slight movement was that this was none other than the extraordinary hand of God reaching down to them.

The signal Brewer gave was unlike any blast on that trumpet he had ever given: to more than one sailor, dangling aloft, frantically unfurling sail, at the limits of exhaustion, heads swimming with religious imagery and fear and remorse, it must have seemed like Judgement Day. The ship began a roll from which it could not possibly recover. Nothing could prevent them now from going the same way as their guns and merchandise. You could almost feel the water reaching in through those empty gun ports to pull the ship under. They clung on – what else was there? – as the ship heeled and rolled, then bucked and kicked.

The *Golden Hinde* sat gently righting herself alongside the reef, water streaming from her decks, risen from the waves to new life. But the General remained all vigilance, his eyes on the rapidly filling sails now easing the ship away from what it had been pinned against. They must not lurch, now, into further trouble. He instructed the steersman, called on mariners above to reduce sail, ordered any remaining un-spoilt cargo to be returned to the hold. The *Golden Hinde* was Francis Drake's ship once again. He set a special watch as the ship, more cautiously this time, threaded her way south. Once open water had been regained, Brewer's trumpet was heard again, calling gentlemen and crew to a general assembly in the forecastle.

Fletcher, wherever Drake's 'heavy friends' found him, would have been 'brought thither like a prisoner', just as Doughty had been before his trial. Drake probably knew that to execute him outright would make a mutiny more likely rather than less. But he wanted to give Fletcher the fright of his life and let everyone watch, lest anyone be tempted ever again to see in him an alternative commander.

Drake addressed the prisoner sitting on a chest – I picture him cross-legged, in a kind of celebrity-yogic posture, his informal, CEO manner fairly crackling with a fiendish mischief. As in the appeal he had made during Doughty's trial, he would have taken this earliest opportunity to remind everybody just how rich they would soon be, if they only trusted in him now.

'I fasten this posy that I have composed, thus, about the prisoner's arm and assure you all, before I answer Master Fletcher's sermon, of one last thing. I make a solemn promise. The King of Spain, through his envoys at court, shall surely petition the Queen upon our return, as he did when we chanced upon certain mules of his in the hills above Nombre de Dios, relieving them of a heavy load. Once again they will urge that we restore to them that they have lost through their own negligence.

'And we, my friends, shall swear in writing that the sums of which they speak are much exaggerated. So we shall. Only silver and some gold was here and there taken – how much we know not. But a very small sum in relation to what is reported. So we shall swear, every one of us. And among the signatures to that deposition, Francis Fletcher, yours shall be the first.'

It was all very well for the Fletchers of this world, he would have continued, already warm to his theme, all very well for the Francis Fletchers, with their college learning, to talk. His own education had been otherwise. Would Fletcher be so scornful of the world as it was now opening up if his family had paid tithes and patched cob walls, had eaten cheese and watched the roof beams blacken, one generation after another? He would not so lightly condemn the new freedom, with all its risks, if he had known the old incarceration, and its tedium.

Might he not have reminded them of how he himself had watched the King's men carrying away the old landlord's treasure, from Tavistock Abbey, taking it away to the Tower of London? It would take Philip five years to make up the losses they had inflicted on his

reserves of silver and gold. It was only thus that the Anti-Christ would be brought to nothing. Did the chaplain really think God had no purpose in placing these means, rather, in the hands of true believers than in those of idolaters and blasphemers? How little did this 'chaplain' trust in his own religion! How poorly did he understand the ways of his own God!

He had claimed their very use of the stars was in breach of God's law, when God himself had created and ordained 'the lights in the firmament of heaven' to be 'for signs and for seasons and for days and for years', for the measurement of time, that is. How then was it against God's will to use them as just that? Why had he accepted the gifts the General offered him, the golden ornaments taken from the church in Santiago de Chile, if he despised money? And why had he agreed, with everyone else, to sail for a share of the proceeds, if his conscience was against it? If Doughty had been a wronged gentleman, if he was a sacrificial lamb upon the altar of gold and silver, then why had he, Fletcher, signed the deposition against him?

Whatever it was that had stung Drake so in the sermon would certainly have been answered now. To the suggestion that he had abandoned, never mind mis-used, Maria, he would have given no quarter. Yet I suspect it would have been upon his honour as a Christian that he rejected the suggestion. If there was any truth in the charge that he had 'got rid' of Maria and the child, he might well have answered that Fletcher was fully complicit. He would have had to baptise the child, making him responsible for it. This was why he had not objected to leaving them there.

And was it only with terror of the sentence to be passed that Fletcher listened to this? Was this a trial? Did he feel his own complicity in Maria's abandonment? Or wonder, even for a moment, how it might have been to sail into Plymouth Sound with that child on board?

What they had done was not un-lawful, the General continued. It was merely un-tried. In every age there are those who understand that distinction and those who do not. Those who condemn it as un-lawful are, like most of humanity, clinging to the wreckage of the old forms. And there they would perish if those who understood the times better came not to their aid. He knew men well: that was why he had not told them where the ship was really bound. They would live to thank him for it, but they would have to trust and obey him first. It was not only for the silver that they had sailed. Above all, it was the future they had been entrusted to go out and find and fetch home again, in the name of the true God.

Fletcher's sermon he condemned as a shameful loss of self-command, as both an act of insubordination, tending to undermine the Captain's authority, but worse than that, as tending to undermine that general discipline without which no ship ever came home safe. It was true – the gold and silver was what others would admire, on their return. But the self-command required to bring it back – this was beyond the comprehension of ordinary men. And yet it was better known to the simplest man on this ship, than to the chaplain himself.

‘For your false sermon, delivered with intent to weaken the men’s resolve in our time of greatest peril, I do hereby ex-communicate you out of the church of God, and from all the benefits and graces thereof, and I denounce you to the devil and all his angels. I charge you furthermore not once to come before the mast. If you do, I swear I shall see you hanged!’

The crowd parted to allow the General passage. One or two pressed forward immediately to read the verse for themselves, hardly able to believe it said what their General said it did. Tom Drake, burly brother and reliable henchman, stood solemnly over the former chaplain, appointed to stand guard and very proud indeed of the appointment. For those too far away to read it for themselves, or disinclined, perhaps, to try, he eagerly lent his assistance: ‘Francis Fletcher, the falsest knave that lives!’ he cried out, then resumed his grinning, complacent airs.

Some there were that met Tom’s eye and some that smiled, too, as they did so, but upon most the effect of the General’s angry words was still working. One or two might savour the savagely comic touches of his performance but its larger meaning was now added to the still astonishing fact of their having survived at all. And which among them could fault the General? He had never faltered. He had maintained his good humour even after all hope was seemingly gone and so had been prepared, uncannily so, the moment it returned. He had been vindicated.

And yet there was in this crowing over Fletcher, plainly, also an anxiety to forestall mutiny, that served to remind many of how fully persuaded they had been by the chaplain’s sermon. Not everyone went quite so far as Tom in his admiration for the General.

The crew went their ways with a general uneasiness, knowing this question now officially closed. Each man, as he went, stowed it below decks as best he could, hammering down planks, securing hatches. Though for some days, certain glances exchanged could not but betray them to one another.

It was above all by the looks they did not exchange with Fletcher during the weeks he spent there exposed to general derision, that they communicated, each to himself, that the matter was not closed and never would be. Fletcher in chains and that 'posy' around his arm set the General's seal of ownership upon this story. And it has been in his ownership ever since. Under those planks and hatches this story has lain, for four centuries and more.

The return of the treasure was indeed demanded by the Spanish upon the ship's return to England. Elizabeth famously responded by having Drake knighted. Where exactly upon his ship, she asked her favourite sea captain, would he like to receive the honour? He selected the weather deck, just by the capstan where Fletcher had preached, so that the assembled dignitaries and the crew, but most of all so that Francis Fletcher himself should have as clear a view as possible.

In private the Queen quipped she was so cross with Drake that she would 'take away all his treasure.' He was actually paid some ten thousand pounds. A further eight thousand was distributed to the crew. The rest was paid out to investors. The quantity of precious metals claimed by the Spanish authorities was denied by the crew, in writing. The first signature at the foot of the document, which still exists, is that of Francis Fletcher.