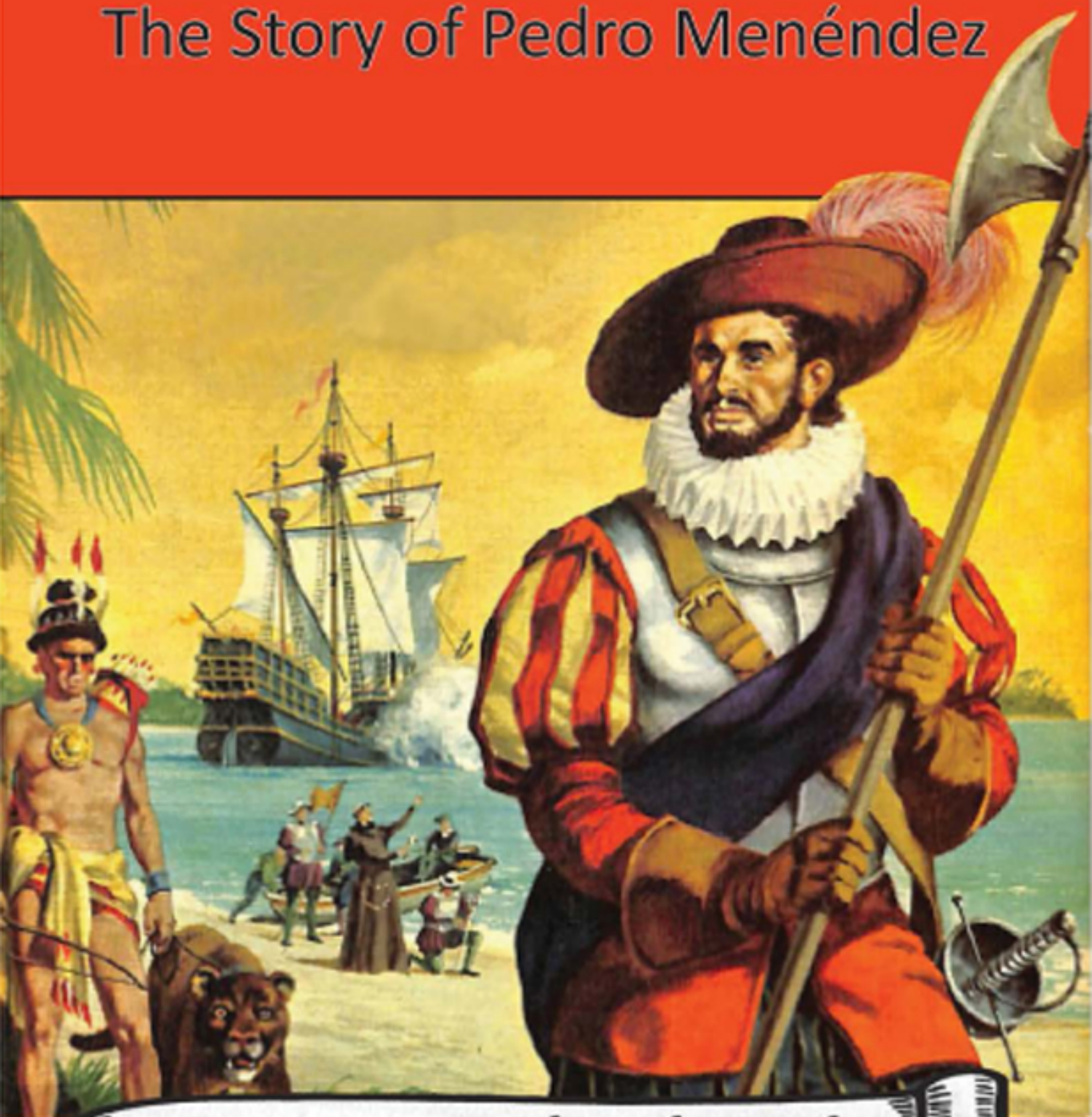


The Sea Tiger

The Story of Pedro Menéndez



Portraits in Faith and Freedom

Frank Kolars



The Sea Tiger

The Story of Pedro Menéndez

by Frank Kolars



Illustrated by Craig Pineo

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Portraits in Faith and Freedom

SET 3: SPANISH AND AMERICAN HEROES

The Sea Tiger: The Story of Pedro Menéndez
Padre Pro: Mexican Hero

Statement on Portraits in Faith and Freedom

Bethlehem Books is bringing back this series of biographies originally made available in the 1950's and 60's by publishers who wished to introduce young people to a wide range of arresting and faithful Catholic lives. Slightly edited now for the modern reader, these biographies present key people and events from the past that help us reflect anew on the meaning of freedom. They depict how powerfully men and women of faith have formed and influenced the world in which they live.

Web Resources

To access printable maps, a timeline, and pertinent internet links, visit <https://www.bethlehembooks.com/sea-tiger-story-pedro-menendez-831>

About Usage of Outdated Terms

In republishing the books that form our *Portraits in Faith and Freedom* series, the editors considered whether it would be worthwhile to update the authors' usage of words like "Indian" and "Negro" to the more current preferences: "Native American" and "African American." Though some editing at times proved reasonable, it was found that changing the original terms did not always work well for the context of the times in which the story takes place. Additionally, in these works—written in the 1950s and early 1960s—it is clear that the authors, as well as the original publishers, held attitudes of genuine interest and respect for Native Americans and African Americans. For that reason, in most cases, we have let the words stand.

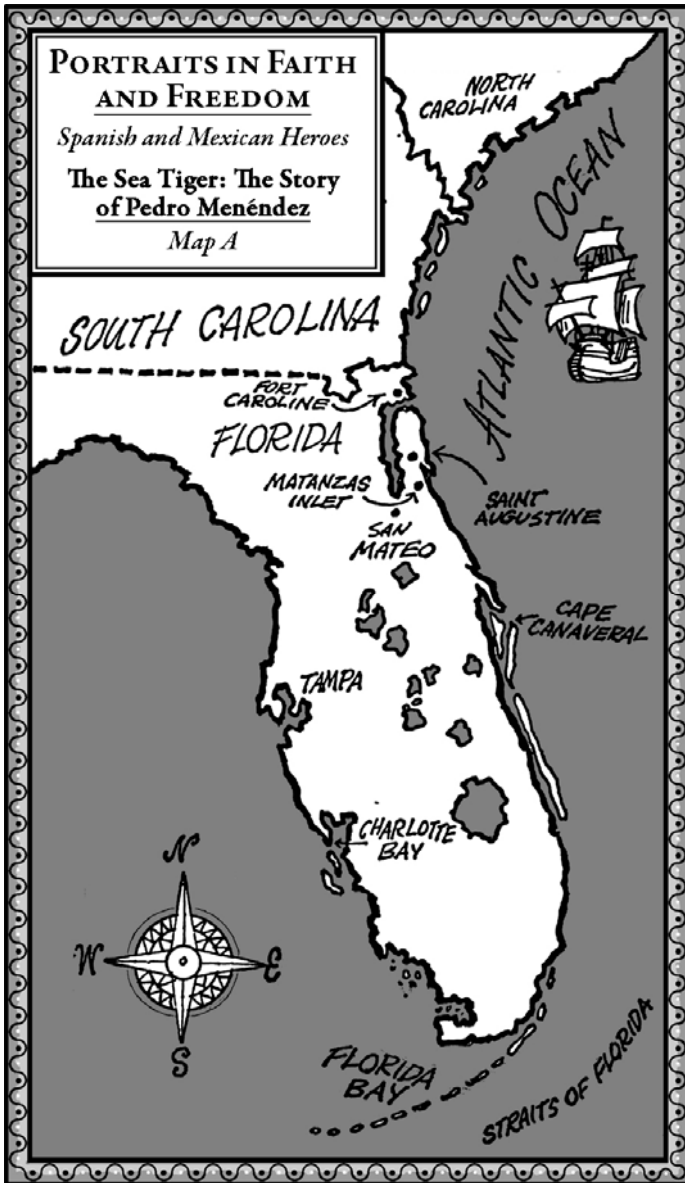
Bethlehem Books

For
My Wife, Jean

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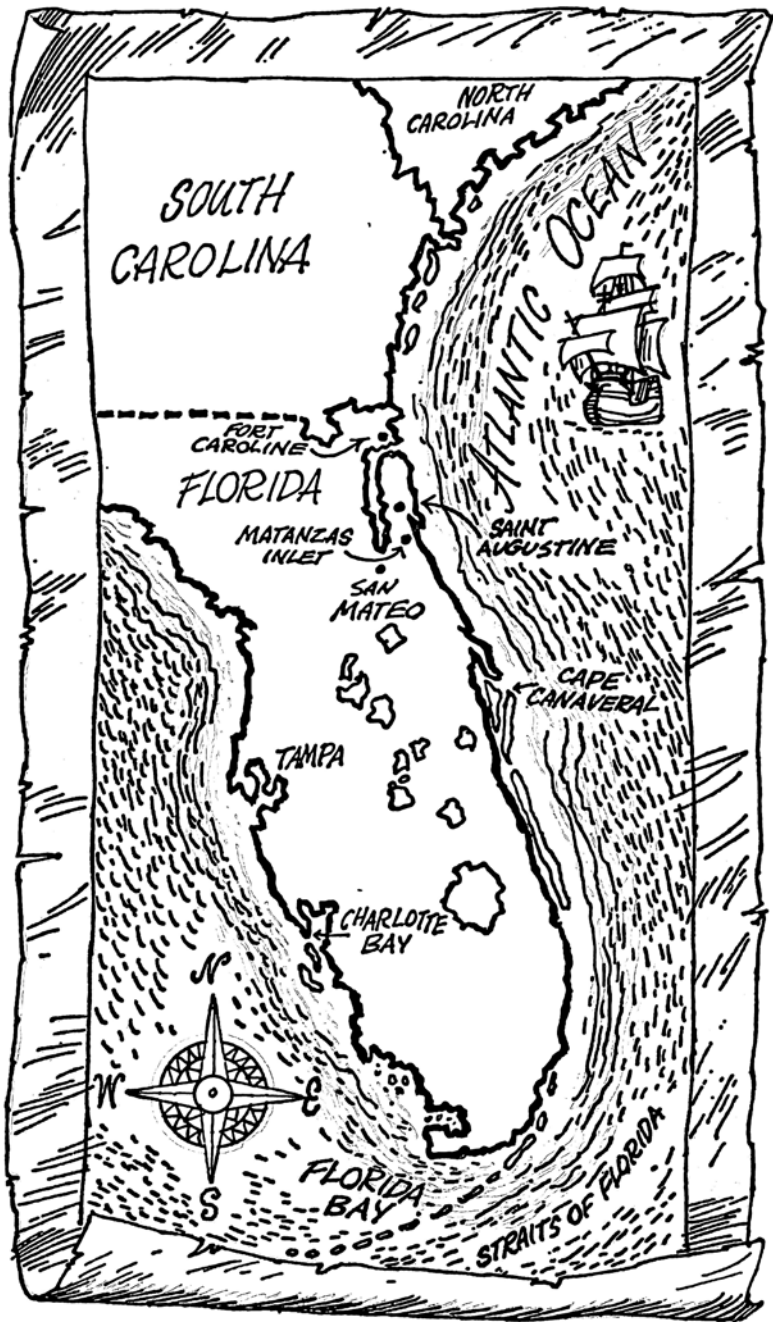
Maps

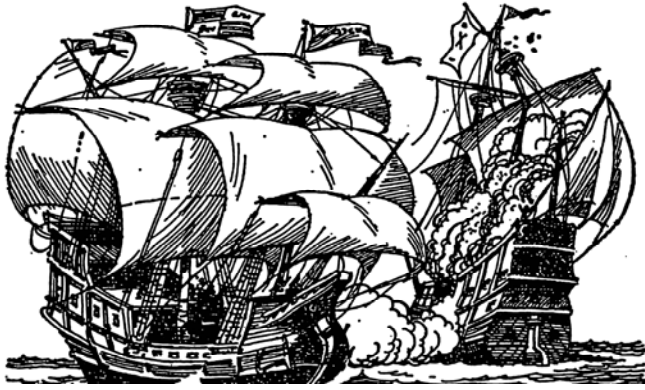




Author's Note

Slowly but progressively the chronicle of Florida, the place of our country's first permanent settlements, is claiming its rightful prominence in the history books of America. This is the story of the man who founded those settlements, among them St. Augustine, the oldest city in the United States. His name was Don Pedro Menéndez de Aviles. More and more his figure is emerging as one of history's most remarkable characters. He was unique. Where the term "struggles" aptly fits the strife and exertions of most leaders, it does not apply to Menéndez. Rather there is the lift and rush of sustained acceleration in the long list of his smashing victories over the pirates of two continents in clearing the path for Spain's foothold in the New World. Some biographers variously ascribe the success of his nearly incredible exploits to his indomitable will, or to his uncanny memory for details, or to his iron constitution. Others feel that for his phenomenal victories a perfect integration of all three qualities is necessary to account.





1. The Lone Corsair

ON AN AFTERNOON in the late spring of 1531, the seaport of Aviles in Asturias, Spain, rang with noisy activity. They were loading the cargo vessel *El Cid*. Wharfmaster and captain shouted orders; pulleys squealed and cargo booms creaked to the strain of hemp lines plunging their burdens down through the hatches deep into the dark hold. The seamen's green and white striped sweaters, the dyed leather jackets of the dock hands, the brass buttons and red sashes of officials—all stood out in sharp colors, like a painting come to life in the dry air and hard blue sky of Spain.

No one seemed to notice anything peculiar about the long sleek ship that stole down from the north. Perhaps they were too busy. Or perhaps the ship was too far out. Besides, she dipped her colors in a friendly salute to those on shore and continued steadily south.

But one pair of eyes noticed.

A mile out in the bay, much nearer to the strange ship and screened behind an upthrust of rock, the sole occupant of a small skiff looked up idly from his fishing line as the big ship swung past. He gazed but a moment, when suddenly his eyes flew wide and he sucked in his breath.

He was twelve-year-old Pedro Menéndez. He was sun-soaked and deep of chest. He was as at home in the water as a frog, and save for a pair of short canvas pants, as naked. He could not think

back to a time when his life had not been filled with the things of the wharf and the ships and the sea.

His first glance had been one of only casual interest in the shape and rig of the strange ship. Her sides seemed very high, but he had at once seen that this was because a weather canvas was stretched along the top of her railings. It was a moment later that his attention had been jolted. A strong gust of wind had for a split second flipped up a small section of canvas. A deck hand immediately fastened it in place; but in that brief instant Pedro had seen what looked like a gunport and, lurking in its shadows, the mouth of a big twelve-pounder.

But could he be sure? Was that one quick glance enough? If he was right, it meant that the whole length of canvas was masking a row of gunports, that she was heavily armed. And there could be but one reason for such a ship to want to hide her guns. She was a pirate, and she was on the hunt!

Pedro chewed on his lip in doubt. Was he really sure enough to go at once to the wharf and tell the wharfmaster and *El Cid's* captain? Should he tell them to hold up *El Cid's* sailing tomorrow morning and wait for next week's guard ship patrol? No. They'd laugh at him. Well, not laugh, maybe, but they'd listen and nod their heads in mock seriousness, and wink when they thought he didn't see; and then they would pat him on the head and say, "Thanks, sonny, now you just run along and play and we'll attend to it." And that would be all.

Eyes narrowed against the sun glare on the water, he peered south. Five miles down the coast a high promontory of land bulked out into the sea. Pedro studied it thoughtfully. Although he was only twelve, youths of that time matured rapidly; and Pedro, with his love of sailing, had been forced into making quick decisions before now. Very well, he thought, let us say she is a pirate. With her guns hidden, she comes slowly down the coast, seeking a nice fat merchant ship on which to pounce. She spies *El Cid*, a fine prize. But she cannot get at *El Cid*. The fortress guns up on the hill would blow her out of the water. So what does she do? She marches by, oh, so innocently, on down the coast. To go elsewhere and look for other prey? Oho, not the pirate. She is too clever, the pirate. She will go only until she is out of sight behind that big bulge of land. There she will lie

through the night. And just before dawn, she will steal out, straight out of sight beyond the horizon. And there—with her canvas stripped off and all her great teeth showing—she will await the coming of *El Cid*.

Thus reasoned Pedro. And now all that remained was to follow the ship five miles down the coast and make sure she anchored behind the cliff. With this proof he need have no fear of ridicule when he told the port officials his news.

Hand over hand, he pulled up his anchor, stepped the slender mast and spritsail of his ten-foot skiff, and in moments was cracking down the bay after the big ship, now a good two miles off. She was much faster than his skiff even in the fresh, offshore breeze. But that was all right. The farther he was left behind, the better. There would be less chance of his being noticed and suspected of spying. And if his reasoning had been right, the ship would be anchored behind the bulk of land when he got there.

His plan was to hug the shoreline. When he reached the cliff he would slip ever so carefully around it, take but the barest peep, and then swing about and make all speed for the port. He peered ahead. The ship was just rounding the promontory, and as he gazed, she was swallowed from view behind its mass. He expelled a long breath. Good. They couldn't have seen him, else they would not have kept going on like that, he told himself. From now on, no danger. Just be cautious as he rounded the cliff.

He was very near. A hundred yards. Another. Fifty more yards and he would be there, satisfy himself that the ship had anchored, and be away to safety. It was then that the ship's longboat, propelled by six husky oarsmen, shot out from behind the cliff.

Faster than he could think, his hands slammed the rudder over. For an age the skiff seemed to falter. Then her sail filled tight and she headed out to sea. It was his only path of escape. They had neatly tricked him. They had lowered the longboat and waited to cut him off. As long as he headed straight out, he could prevent capture. That is, if they didn't overtake him. He shifted in his seat, balancing the skiff, getting the fullest benefit of every ounce of power from the stiff land breeze. Looking back, he strained his eyes, trying to gauge his speed against theirs. Judging from the longboat's bow wave, he was holding his own, and he could keep it that way as long as the breeze held.

It was dangerous to keep going out into deep water in such a small skiff, but maybe the rowers of the longboat would tire, maybe give up. Then he would be free to angle back to the harbor. He raised his eyes from the pursuing boat to the shoreline. He was far enough out now to see the pirate ship hovering in the shadow of the cliff. Her guns were uncovered and glinting dully in the afternoon light. Suddenly he tensed. Slowly, slowly but unmistakably, the big ship was coming out, headed in his direction. Once her towering sails got the full force of the wind, she would run him down in no time.

Then, as Pedro's lively hopes of escape changed to the dread certainty of being captured, three strange things happened in quick succession. First, the ship was blotted out in a burst of black smoke as sea and air jarred to the thud of a twelve-pounder. But nowhere could Pedro's sharp eyes detect the splash of a cannonball. Second, all in a flash, the longboat made a wild turnabout and went spurting back to the ship, the oarsmen flailing the water as though a very demon were in hot pursuit. And third, once they had scrambled aboard, the ship swept straight out to sea, totally ignoring Pedro, whom they could have rammed by the slightest turn northward.

So astonished was Pedro at the ship's strange conduct that for long moments he stared after its diminishing sails, unmindful of his own predicament. As she vanished below the earth's curve, he roused himself. He was far out, and while he gazed at the ring of the empty sea, a change came to the air. The wind dropped and the sail went slack, and over the sea stole a whisper, a hush of waiting. The sun slipped behind a cloud and the afternoon darkened, but on the horizon's rim a line of brassy, metallic brilliance lit the world. As Pedro watched, the eerie band of light broadened. And now his little skiff began to lift and fall to the send of a mounting sea. There was no wind. Only one thing made waves behave like that. A great storm was grinding out there under the weird light, and the pressure of its giant waves was pushing up huge swells even this far off. It explained the hasty leave-taking of the pirate. From her crow's nest the lookout had seen the storm afar; the cannon had called in her longboat, and she had given up all prospect of seizing *El Cid*, to put enough distance between herself and the shoreline to keep from being caught and pounded to pieces on a sand bar or smashed on the rocks.

Even as these thoughts raced through his mind, a violent gust from the open sea heeled his skiff over and almost tore off his sail. Fingers stiff with fear, he shortened the canvas and grasped the tiller, pointing the skiff to where the harbor should lie. He tried to hope that he would make the safety of the snug port and not be caught out here alone, lost in a wilderness of tumbling seas. But he knew that it was too late for such hope. The storm was almost upon him. His only hope now was in prayer. And as he prayed he prayed aloud—he would do his best and leave the rest in the hands of God. It was to be his way of prayer through his whole life. And the life of Pedro Menéndez de Aviles was one that has been seldom matched in situations of hazard or daring.

Between the deep smoking craters and the wind-tossed crests, the waves were now up to thirty feet. As the skiff topped the next breaker, Pedro shot a glance across the spume-driven sea. Far to the north and east a black smudge lay on the horizon, scarcely an inch high at this distance. It was the great stone wall of the harbor.

As the skiff shot down the long slant of each gully and staggered to the top of the next, Pedro clung desperately to the tiller. One unguarded moment, one miscalculation in the swirling water of a breaker, and he would be swamped, sent skimming to the bottom like a clam shell. But as he fought to keep off disaster, one part of his mind struggled with the problem of entering the harbor.

At the rate he was being driven landward he would be there in a matter of minutes, distant though it seemed. The channel leading between the fifteen-foot stone harbor walls was little more than a hundred feet wide. If he missed it, the skiff would be smashed to matchsticks against the wall. In the morning there would not even be wreckage to show where he had perished.

Now he could hear the crash of the waves against the wall and see the great sheets of water flung skyward. He looked up, judging distance and direction. He would have but one try at the channel. If that failed, it would be the end. His brief look heartened him. Wind and waves were at his back and he was in direct line for the channel. These were the only conditions which would give him a chance. Any veering to right or left in these seas would swamp him. And between the canvas stretched tight as a drum up forward and the tiller back aft, he held the skiff rigid to the mark.

He was less than an eighth of a mile from the channel when the mast broke. There was a creaking sound, a splintering crash, and mast and sail toppled forward, fouling up the bows of the skiff and sending her into a lurch that shipped a hogshead of water. Then with the channel only a few hundred yards away, but with the skiff wallowing drunkenly at the mercy of the waves, young Pedro Menéndez again summoned up from somewhere within him the stubborn purpose and trust in God that would one day make him famous on two continents and would later cause many chroniclers to call him the greatest sea captain of his times.

