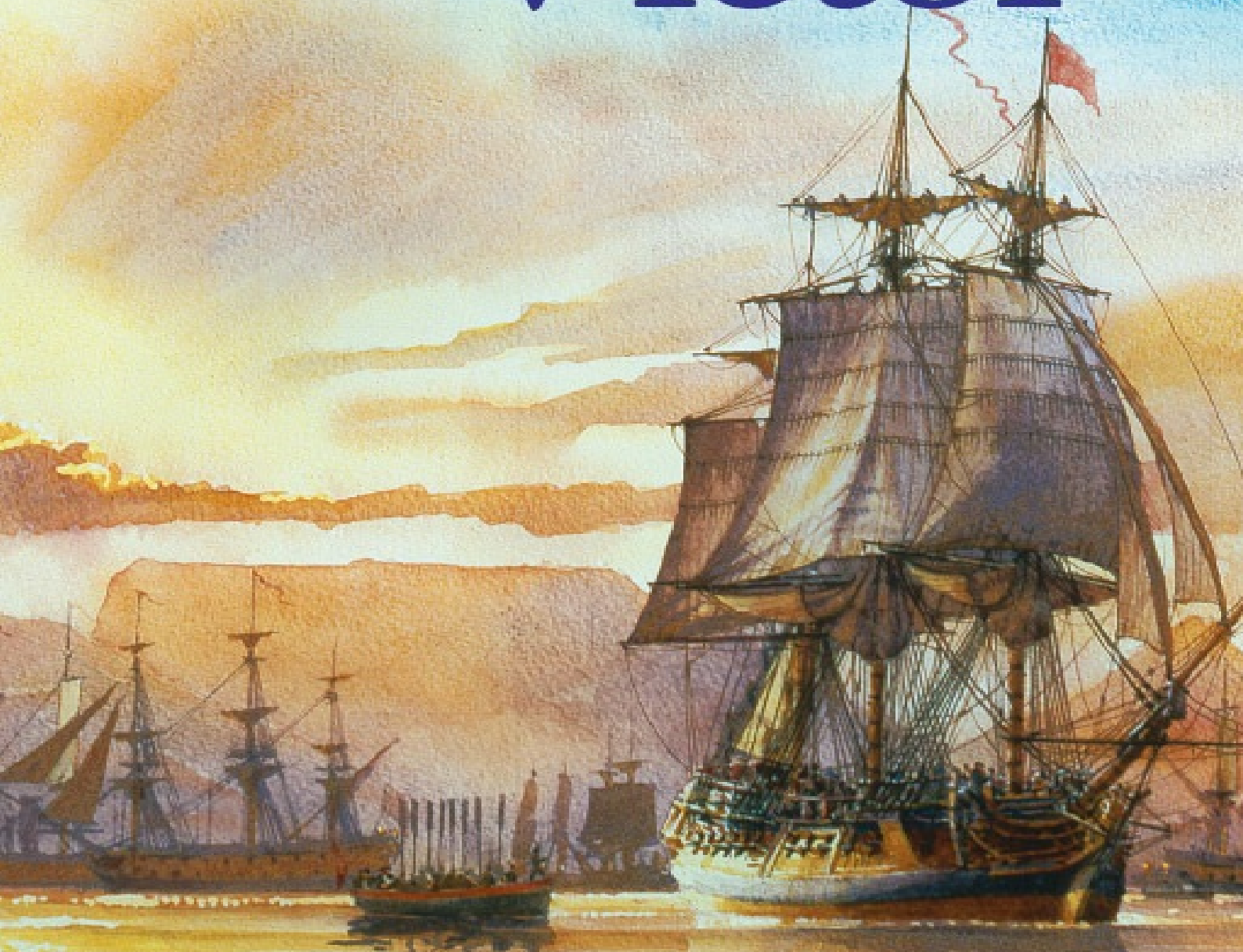


THE *only*
Victor



Alexander Kent

THE ONLY VICTOR

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THE ONLY VICTOR

the Bolitho novels: 18

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*We few, we happy few, we band of brothers;
For he today that sheds his blood with me
Shall be my brother . . .*

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE, *Henry V*



1 “IN THE NAME OF DUTY”

CAPTAIN DANIEL POLAND of His Britannic Majesty’s frigate *Truculent* stretched his arms and stifled a yawn, while he waited for his eyes to accustom themselves to the darkness. As he gripped the quarterdeck rail and the dim figures around him took on identity and status, he was able to accept the pride he felt for this command, and the fashion in which he had moulded his company into a team, one that would react to his wishes and orders with little room for improvement. He had been in command for two years, but would not be fully “posted” for a further six months. Then, and only then, would he feel safe from disaster. A fall from grace, an unfortunate mistake or misunderstanding of some senior officer’s despatches—any of these could hurl him down the ladder of promotion; or worse. But once a post-captain with matching epaulettes on his shoulders, little could shift him. He gave a brief smile. Only death or some terrible wound could do that. The enemy’s iron was no respecter of the hopes and ambitions of its victims.

He moved to the small table by the companion way and raised its tarpaulin hood so that he could examine the log by the light of a small shaded lamp.

Nobody on the quarterdeck spoke or disturbed him; every man was well aware of his presence and, after two years, his habits.

As he ran his eyes along the neatly written comments of the most recent officers-of-the-watch he felt his ship lift and plunge beneath him, spray whipping across the open deck like cold hail.

In an hour all would be different. Again he felt the same twinge of pride, *cautious* pride, for Captain Poland trusted nobody and nothing which might bring displeasure from his superiors, and which in turn might damage his prospects. But if the wind held they would sight the coast of Africa, the Cape of Good Hope, perhaps at first light.

Nineteen days. It was probably the fastest passage ever made by a King’s ship from Portsmouth to Poland thought of the England they had seen fall into a rain squall as *Truculent* had thrust her way down-Channel for open waters. Cold. Wet. Shortages and press gangs.

His gaze fastened on the date. The first of February, 1806. Perhaps that was the answer. England was still reeling from the news of Trafalgar, which had exploded less than four months ago. It seemed people were stunned more by the death of Nelson, the nation’s hero, than the crushing victory over the French and Spanish fleets.

Even aboard his own ship, Poland had sensed the change, the damage to morale amongst his officers and seamen. *Truculent* had not even been in the same ocean at the time of the great battle, and to his knowledge none of the people had ever laid eyes on the little admiral. It irritated him, just as he damned the luck which had taken his ship so far from a fight out of which only glory and reward could result. It was typical of Poland that he had not considered the awesome lists of dead and wounded after that memorable day off Cape Trafalgar.

He peered up at the pale shape of the bulging mizzen topsail. Beyond it there was only darkness. The ship had rid herself of her heavy canvas and changed every sail to the pale, light-weather rig. She would make a fine sight when the sunlight found her again. He pictured her rapid passage south, with

the mountains of Morocco misty blue in the far distance, then south-east across the Equator with the only landfall the tiny island of St Helena, a mere speck on the chart.

It was no wonder that young officers prayed for the chance to gain command of a frigate, when once free of the fleet's apron strings and the interference of one admiral or another, they were their own masters.

He knew that to his company a captain was seen as some kind of god. In many cases it was true. He could punish or reward any soul aboard with impunity. Poland considered himself a just and fair captain, but was sensible enough to know that he was feared rather than liked.

Each day he had made certain that his men were not lacking in work. No admiral would find fault with his ship, either her appearance or efficiency.

His eyes moved to the cabin skylight. It was already sharper in the gloom, or maybe his eyes had become completely used to it. *And there would be no mistakes on this passage*, not with such an important passenger down there in the captain's quarters.

It was time to begin. He walked to the rail again and stood with one foot on the truck of a tethered nine-pounder.

The ship's second lieutenant appeared as if by magic.

"Mr Munro, you may muster the Afterguard in fifteen minutes, when we shall wear ship."

The lieutenant touched his hat in the darkness. "Aye, aye, sir."

He spoke almost in a whisper, as if he too were thinking of the passenger, and the noise of the Royal Marines' boots above his sleeping cabin.

Poland added irritably, "And I don't want any slackness!"

Munro saw the sailing-master, who was already at his place near the big double-wheel, give what might have been a shrug. He was probably thinking that the captain would blame him if the dawn horizon was as empty as before.

A burly figure moved to the lee side of the deck and Poland heard him fling some shaving-water into the sea. The passenger's personal coxswain, a powerful man by the name of John Allday. One who seemed to have little respect for anyone but his vice-admiral. Again, Poland felt a sense of irritation—or was it envy? He thought of his own coxswain, as smart and reliable as anyone could wish, one who would take no nonsense from his crew. But never a friend, as Allday appeared to be.

He tried to shrug it off. Anyway, his coxswain was only a common seaman.

He snapped, "The vice-admiral is up and about, apparently. Call the Afterguard, then pipe the hands to the braces."

Williams, the first lieutenant, clattered up the ladder and tried to button his coat and straighten his hat when he saw the captain already on deck.

"Good morning, sir!"

Poland replied coldly, "It had better be!"

The lieutenants glanced at each other and grimaced behind his back. Poland was usually realistic in his dealings with the people, but he had little sense of humour, and as Williams had once put it, divided his guidance evenly between the Bible and the Articles of War.

Calls shrilled between decks and the watch below came thudding along the glistening planking, each man bustling to his familiar station where petty officers stood with their lists, and boatswain mates were waiting to "start" any laggard with rope's end or rattan. They were all aware of the importance of the man who wore his reputation like a cloak, and who for most of the lively passage

had remained aft in Poland's quarters.

"There she comes, lads!"

Poland snapped, "Take that man's name!"

But he looked up nevertheless and saw the first frail glow of light as it touched the whipping and frayed masthead pendant, then flowed down almost like liquid to mark the shrouds. Delicate, salmon pink. Soon it would spread over the horizon, expand its colour, give life to a whole ocean.

But Poland saw none of these things. Time, distance, logged speed, they were the factors which ruled his daily life.

Allday lounged against the damp nettings. They would be packed with hammocks once the ship lay on her new course. Landfall? It seemed likely, but Allday could sense the captain's unease, just as he was aware of his own private anxieties. Usually, no matter how bad things had been, he was glad, not relieved, to quit the shore and get back to a ship again.

This time it was different. Like being motionless with only the ship's wild movements to give the sensation of life around them.

Allday had heard them talking about the man he served and loved as he loved none other. He had wondered what he had really been thinking as *Truculent* had ploughed through each long day *Something apart*. Not their ship. He let his mind explore the thought, like fingers probing a raw wound. *Not like the old Hyperion*.

October 15th, less than four months ago. Was that all it was? In his heart he could still feel the crash and roar of those terrible broadsides, the screams and the madness, and then— The old pain lanced through his chest and he clutched it with his fist and gasped in great mouthfuls of air, waiting for it to ease. Another sea, a different battle, but always a reminder of how entwined their lives had become. He could guess what the stiff-faced Poland thought. Men like him could never understand Richard Bolitho. Nor would they.

He massaged his chest and gave a little, private smile. Yes, they had seen and done so much together. Vice-Admiral Sir Richard Bolitho. Even their paths had been spliced by fate. Allday wiped the spray from his face and shook his long pigtail over his collar. Most folk probably believed that Bolitho wanted for nothing. His last exploits had swept the seaports and taverns of England. A ballad had been composed by Charles Dibdin or one of his fellows: "How Hyperion Cleared the Way!" The words of a dying sailor whose hand Bolitho had held on that awful sunlit day, although he had been needed in a hundred other places at once.

But only those who had shared it really knew. The power and the passion of the man behind the gold lace and gleaming epaulettes, who could lead his sailors, be they half-mad, half-deafened by the hellish roar of battle; who could make them cheer even in the face of the Devil and the moment of certain death.

And yet he was the same one who could turn up the noses of London society, and invite gossip to the coffee houses. Allday straightened and sighed. The pain did not return. Yet. They would all be surprised if they knew just how little Bolitho did have, he thought.

He heard Poland snap, "A good man aloft, Mr Williams, *if you please!*"

Allday could almost feel pity for the first lieutenant, and hid a grin as he replied, "Already done, sir. I sent a master's mate to the foremast when the watch came aft."

Poland strode away from him and glared when he saw the vice-admiral's coxswain loitering.

"Only the Afterguard and my officers—" He shut his mouth and moved instead to the compass.

Allday stamped down the companion ladder and allowed the smells and sounds of the ship to greet him. Tar, paint, cordage and the sea. He heard the bark of orders, the squeal of braces and halliards through their blocks, the thud of dozens of bare feet as the men threw themselves against the tug of the rudder and wind and the ship began to change tack.

At the door of the great cabin a Royal Marine sentry stood near a wildly spiralling lantern, his scarlet coat angled more steeply as the helm went hard over.

Allday gave him a nod as he thrust open the screen door. He rarely abused his privileges, but it made him proud to know he was able to come and go as he pleased. Something else to gall Captain Poland, he thought with a grim chuckle. He nearly collided with Ozzard, Bolitho's small, mole-like servant, as he scuttled away with some shirts to wash.

"How is he?"

Ozzard glanced aft. Beyond the sleeping quarters and Poland's swaying cot the cabin was almost in darkness again, but for a single lantern.

He murmured, "Not moved." Then he was gone. Loyal, secretive, always there when he was needed. Allday believed Ozzard was still brooding about the October day when their old *Hyperion* had given up her last fight and gone down. Only Allday himself knew that it had been Ozzard's intention to stay and go with her to the seabed, with all the dead and some of the dying still on board. Another mystery. He wondered if Bolitho knew or guessed what had almost happened. To speculate why, was beyond him.

Then he saw Bolitho's pale figure framed by the broad stern windows. He was sitting with one knee drawn up on the bench seat, his shirt very white against the tumbling water beyond.

For some reason Allday was moved by what he saw. He had seen Bolitho like this in so many of the ships they had shared after that first meeting. So many mornings. So many years.

He said uncertainly, "I'll fetch another lantern, Sir Richard."

Bolitho turned his head, his grey eyes in dark shadow. "It will be light enough soon, old friend. Without noticing it he touched his left eyelid and added, "We may sight land today."

So calmly said, Allday thought, and yet his mind and heart must be so crammed with memories, good and rotten. But if there was bitterness he gave no hint of it in his voice.

Allday said, "Reckon Cap'n Poland will cuss an' swear if there ain't, an' that's no error!"

Bolitho smiled and turned to watch the sea as it boiled from the rudder, as if some great fish was about to break surface in pursuit of the lively frigate.

He had always admired the dawn at sea. So many and such different waters, from the blue, placid depths of the Great South Sea to the raging grey wastes of the Western Ocean. Each unique, like the ships and men who challenged them.

He had expected, hoped even, that this day might bring some relief from his brooding thoughts. A fine, clean shirt, one of Allday's best shaves; it often gave a sense of well-being. But this time it eluded him.

He heard the shrill of calls again and could picture the orderly bustle on deck as the sails were sheeted home, the slackness shaken from braces and halliards. At heart he was perhaps still a frigate captain, as he had been when Allday had been brought aboard as a pressed man. Since then, so many leagues sailed, too many faces wiped away like chalk off a slate.

He saw the first hint of light on the crests, the spray leaping away on either quarter as the dawn began to roll down from the horizon.

Bolitho stood up and leaned his hands on the sill to stare more closely at the sea's face.

He recalled as if it were yesterday an admiral breaking the painful truth to him, when he had protested about the only appointment he could beg from the Admiralty after recovering from his terrible fever.

"You *were* a frigate captain, Bolitho . . ." Twelve years ago, maybe more.

Eventually he had been given the old *Hyperion*, and then probably only because of the blood revolution in France and the war which had followed it, and which had raged almost without respite until this very day.

And yet *Hyperion* was the one ship which was to change his life. Many had doubted his judgment when he had pleaded for the old seventy-four as his last flagship. From captain to vice-admiral; it had seemed the right choice. The only choice.

She had gone down last October, leading Bolitho's squadron in the Mediterranean against a much more powerful force of Spanish ships under the command of an old enemy, Almirante Don Albert Casares. It had been a desperate battle by any standards, and the outcome had never been certain from the first broadsides.

And yet, impossibly, they had beaten the Dons, and had even taken some prizes back to Gibraltar.

But the old *Hyperion* had given everything she had, and could offer no further resistance. She was thirty-three years old when the great ninety-gun *San Mateo* had poured the last broadside into her. Apart from a short period as a mastless stores hulk, she had sailed and fought in every sea where the flag was challenged. Some rot in her frames and timbers, deep down in her worn hull, undiscovered by any dockyard, had finally betrayed her.

In spite of everything Bolitho had witnessed and endured during a lifetime at sea, it was still so hard to accept that she was gone.

He had heard some say that but for his judgment in holding and defeating the Spanish squadron the enemy would have joined with the Combined Fleet off Trafalgar. Then perhaps even brave Nelson could not have triumphed. Bolitho had not known how to react. More flattery? After Nelson's death he had been sickened to watch the same people who had hated him and despised him for his liaison with *that Hamilton woman* sing his praises the highest and lament his passing.

Like so many he had never met the little admiral who had raised the hearts of his sailors even in the squalor most of them endured on endless blockade duty or firing gun-to-gun with an enemy. Nelson had *known* his men, and given them the leadership they understood and needed.

He realised that Allday had padded from the cabin, and hated himself for bringing him out here on a mission which was probably fruitless.

Allday would not be moved. *My English oak*. Bolitho would only have hurt and insulted him if he had left him ashore at Falmouth. They had got this far together.

He touched his left eyelid and sighed. How would it torment him in the bright African sunlight?

He could recall the exact moment when he had faced the sun and his damaged eye had clouded over, as if a sea-mist had crept across the deck. He felt the chill of fear as he relived it: the Spaniard's sharp breathing as he lunged forward with a cutlass. The unknown sailor must have realised the fight was over, that his own shipmates were already flinging down their weapons in surrender. Maybe he had simply seen Bolitho's uniform as the enemy, *all authority everywhere*, which had brought him to this place of certain death.

Jenour, Bolitho's flag lieutenant, attempting to defend him, had had his sword struck from his hand, and there was nothing to stop the inevitable. Bolitho had waited for it, his old sword held o

before him, and unable to see his would-be assassin.

But Allday had been there, and had seen everything. The Spaniard's cutlass had gone clattering across the blood-stained deck, his severed arm with it. Another blow had finished him. Allday's own revenge for the wound which had left him almost constantly in pain, unable to act as swiftly as he once did.

But abandon him, even out of kindness? Bolitho knew that only death would ever part them.

He pushed himself away from the window and picked up the fan from his sea-chest. Catherine took the fan. She had made certain he had had it with him when he had boarded *Truculent* at Spithead.

What was she doing now, all those six thousand miles astern? It would be cold and bleak in Cornwall. Crouching cottages beyond the big grey house below Pendennis Castle. Winds from the Channel to shake the sparse trees on the hillside, the ones Bolitho's father had once called "my ragged warriors." Farmers making good damage to walls and barns, fishermen at Falmouth repairing the boats, grateful for the written protection which kept them safe from the hated press gangs.

The old grey house would be Catherine's only sanctuary from the sneers and the gossip. Ferguson, the estate's one-armed steward, who had originally been pressed into naval service with Allday, would take good care of her. But you never knew for certain, especially in the West Country.

Tongues would wag. *Bolitho's woman. Wife of a viscount, who should be with him and not living like some sailor's whore.* They had been Catherine's own words, to prove to him that she did not care for herself but for *his* name and *his* honour. Yes, the ignorant ones were always the most cruel.

The only occasion when she had revealed bitterness and anger had been when he was called to London, to receive his orders. She had stared at him across the room they shared which overlooked the sea, that constant reminder, and had exclaimed, "Don't you *see* what they are doing to us, Richard?"

In her anger she was beautiful in a different way, her long dark hair in disorder across her white gown, her eyes blazing with hurt and disbelief. "It is Lord Nelson's funeral in a few days time." She had stepped back from him as he had made to calm her. "No, listen to me, Richard! We shall have less than two weeks together, and much of that time spent on the road. You are worth a hundred of any other men, though I know you would never say it . . . *Damn their eyes!* You lost your old ship, you have given *everything*, but they are so afraid that you will refuse to attend the funeral unless you can take *me* with you, when they are expecting Belinda!"

Then she had broken and had let him hold her, his cheek in her hair like the time they had watched the first dawn together in Falmouth.

Bolitho had stroked her shoulders and had replied gently, "I would never allow anyone to insult you."

She had not seemed to hear. "That surgeon who sailed with you—Sir Piers Blachford? He could help you, surely?" She had pulled his face to hers and kissed his eyes with sudden tenderness. "Dearest of men, you *must* take care."

Now she was in Falmouth. Despite all that offered protection and love, a stranger nonetheless.

She had accompanied him to Portsmouth on that cold blustery forenoon; so much to say still unsaid. Together they had waited by the old sally-port, each aware that these same worn stairs had been Nelson's last contact with England. In the background, the carriage with the Bolitho crest on its doors waited with Matthew the coachman holding the horses' heads. The carriage was streaked with mud, as if to mark the time that they had spent together in its secret privacy.

Not always so secret. Passing through Guildford on the way to London, some idlers had raised cheer. "God bless you, Our Dick! Don't you mind they buggers in Lonnon, beggin' yer pardon."

Ma'am!"

She had watched his reflection in the carriage window and had said quietly, "See! I am not the only one!"

As the frigate's gig had pulled strongly towards the sally-port she had clasped her arms around his neck, her face wet with rain and drifting spray.

"I love thee, dearest of men." She had kissed him hard, unable to release him until the boat had hooked on with a noisy clatter. Then, and only then, had she turned from him, pausing just briefly to add, "Tell Allday I said to take good care of you."

The rest was lost as if darkness had suddenly descended.

There was a sharp tap at the screen door.

Captain Poland stepped into the cabin, his cocked hat jammed beneath one arm.

Bolitho saw his eyes flit around the shadows, as if he expected to see his quarters completely changed or gutted.

Bolitho sat down again, his hands on the edge of the bench seat. *Truculent* was a fine ship, he thought. He pictured his nephew, Adam, and wondered if he had yet accepted the greatest gift, the command of his own frigate. His ship was probably commissioned by now, even at sea like this one. He would do well.

He asked, "News, Captain?"

Poland looked at him squarely. "Land in sight, Sir Richard. The Master, Mr Hull, thinks it is a perfect completion."

Always the caution. Bolitho had noticed it before when he had asked Poland to sup with him a few times during the voyage.

"And what do you think, sir?"

Poland swallowed hard. "I believe it to be true, Sir Richard." He added as an afterthought, "The wind has dropped—it will take most of the day to stand close to the mainland. Even Table Mountain is only plainly visible from the fore-topmast."

Bolitho reached for his coat, but decided against it. "I shall come up. You have performed a fine and exceptional passage, Captain. I shall say as much in my final despatches."

It would have been comic at any other time to see the swift changes of thought and expression on Poland's sun-reddened features. A written compliment from the vice-admiral, *the hero*, which might facilitate an even quicker advancement for the captain.

Or might it be seen differently by those in office? That Poland had found favour with the same man who had flouted authority, left his wife for another and tossed honour to the winds . . .

But it was not *any other time*, and Bolitho said sharply, "So let us be about it, eh?"

On the quarterdeck Bolitho saw Jenour, his flag lieutenant, standing with the ship's officers, and marvelled at the change he had seen in him since his flag had been hoisted above *Hyperion*. A keen, likeable young man—the first in his family to enter the navy—Bolitho had once doubted if he would survive the campaign, and the battles they would have to share together. He had even heard it said that some of the "hard men" of the old ship's company had taken bets on how long Jenour would live.

But survive he had—more than that, he had come through it a man, a veteran.

It had been Jenour's beautiful sword, a gift from his father, which had been parried aside and jerked from his grip as he had run to Bolitho's aid, before Allday could bound forward and deliver the

fatal stroke. Jenour had learned from that experience, and many others. Bolitho had noticed that since *Hyperion's* last fight, whenever the young man wore his sword, it carried a strong lanyard for his wrist as well as its decorative knot.

It was interesting, too, to see the respect with which *Truculent's* officers treated Jenour, although most of them were older and by far more senior. The thirty-six-gun frigate had been on constant patrol and convoy duty since Poland had taken command. But there was not a member of her wardroom who had ever been in a major fleet action.

Bolitho nodded to the officers and walked to the larboard gangway which, like the one on the opposite side, joined the quarterdeck with the forecastle. Beneath it the vessel's main armament was already being checked and inspected by the gunner and one of his mates. Poland was certainly thorough, Bolitho thought. He was by the rail now, his eyes on the barebacked seamen as they packed home the hammocks in the nettings like neat lines of pods. Some bodies were already brown, some showing a painful rawness from too much exposure to the unaccustomed glare.

The sun was rising as if from the ocean itself, the lines of low rollers curling away like molten copper. *Truculent* was already steaming, despite the lingering chill of night. She would look like a ghost-ship when the heat really enfolded her and every sail dried out in its intensity.

Bolitho pitied the officers on watch in their hats and heavy coats. Poland obviously believed that there was never a proper moment to relax any show of authority, no matter how uncomfortable. He wondered what they thought of his own casual rig. There would be time enough for pomp and tradition when he made contact with the fleet, which was allegedly assembled off the coast. For all they had seen on passage they could have been the only ship afloat.

Immersed in his thoughts, he began to walk slowly up and down, a measured distance between the wheel and the taffrail. Sailors working on the ever-necessary repairs and maintenance, splicing and replacing frayed cordage, painting and washing down, glanced up as his shadow passed over them. Each man looked quickly away if their eyes chanced to meet.

Mr Hull, the frigate's taciturn sailing-master, was watching three midshipmen who were taking turns to prepare a chart. Beside him, as officer-of-the-watch, the second lieutenant was trying not to yawn, with his captain in such an uncertain mood. There was a smell of cooking from the galley and the lieutenant's stomach contracted painfully. It was still a long wait before the watch changed and he could be relieved.

Hull asked quietly, "What d'ye reckon 'e thinks about, Mr Munro?" He gestured shortly toward the tall figure in the white shirt, whose dark hair, tied to the nape of his neck, lifted in the light breeze as he strode unhurriedly up and down.

Munro lowered his voice. "I know not, Mr Hull. But if half of what I hear about him is true, then he has plenty to choose from!" Like the others, Munro had seen little of the vice-admiral, except for one meal together, and once when he and the captain had summoned the lieutenants and senior warrant officers to explain the purpose of his mission.

Two strong forces of ships had been ordered to the Cape of Good Hope with soldiers and marines for the sole purpose of landing and laying siege to Cape Town, with the intention of retaking it from the Dutch, Napoleon's unwilling ally.

Then, and only then, would the shipping routes around the Cape be safe from marauding men-of-war and French privateers. There was also a dockyard which, once repossessed, would be vastly improved and expanded, so that never again would English ships be forced to fend for themselves, waste valuable months beating back and forth seeking other suitable anchorages.

Even Captain Poland had seemed surprised at Bolitho's open confidence with subordinates he did not know, especially when most flag-officers would have considered it none of their business. Munro glanced at the flag lieutenant and recalled how Jenour had described that last battle, when *Hyperion* had led the squadron and broken through the enemy's line, until both sides had been broadside to broadside.

You could have heard a pin fall, he thought, as Jenour had described the death of the old two-decker, the ship which Bolitho had twice made into a legend.

Jenour had looked down at the wardroom table and had said, "Her stern was rising all the time, but at her foremast the admiral's flag was still close-up. He had ordered them to leave it there. A lot of good men went with her. They could have no better company." Then he had raised his head and Munro had been shocked to see the tears in his eyes. "Then I heard him say, just as if he was speaking to the ship, *There'll be none better than you, old lady.* And then she was gone."

Munro had never been so moved before by anything; neither had his friend the first lieutenant.

Poland's voice cut through his thoughts like a dirk.

"Mr Munro! I would trouble you to cast an eye over those idle roughknobs who are supposed to be working on the second cutter—they seem more intent on gazing at the horizon than using their skills. Maybe they should not be blamed if the officer-of-the-watch is day-dreaming, what?"

Mr Hull bared his teeth in an unfeeling grin.

"Got eyes everywhere, 'e 'as!" He swung on the midshipmen to cover Munro's embarrassment. "An' wot d'you think you're adoin' of? Gawd, you'll never make lieutenants, nary a one o' ye!"

Bolitho heard all of it, but his mind was elsewhere. He often thought of Catherine's despairing anger. How much of what she said was true? He knew he had made enemies down the years, and many had tried to hurt and damage him because of his dead brother, Hugh, who had gone over to the other side during the American Revolution. Later they had used young Adam for the same purpose, so it was likely that the enemies were truly there, and not merely in his mind.

Did they really need him to come to the Cape so urgently; or was it true that Nelson's victory over the Combined Fleet had changed strategy out of all recognition? France and Spain had lost many ships, destroyed or taken as prizes. But England's fleet had been badly battered, and the essential blockading squadrons outside enemy ports were stretched to the limit. Napoleon would never give up his vision of a mighty empire. He would need more ships, like the ones which were building at Toulon and along the Channel coast, vessels of which Nelson had spoken many times in his written duels with the Admiralty. But until then, Napoleon might look elsewhere—perhaps to France's old ally, America?

Bolitho plucked at the front of his shirt, one of the elegant selections Catherine had bought for him in London while he had been with Their Lordships.

He had always hated the capital, its false society, its privileged citizens who damned the world because of its inconvenience to them, without a thought for the men who daily gave their lives to protect their liberty. Like—He thrust Belinda from his mind, and felt the locket which Catherine had given him. Small, silver, with a perfect miniature of her inside, her dark eyes, the throat bared as he had known and loved it. In a compartment at the back was a compressed lock of her hair. That was new, but he could only guess how long she had owned the locket, or who had given it to her. Certainly not her first husband, a soldier of fortune who had died in a brawl in Spain. Perhaps it had been a gift from her second, Luis Pareja, who had died trying to help defend a merchantman taken by Bolitho and then attacked by Barbary pirates.

Luis had been twice her age, but in his own way he had loved her. He had been a Spanish merchant, and the miniature had all the delicacy and finesse he would have appreciated.

So she had come into Bolitho's life; and then, after a brief affair, she had gone. Misunderstanding a misguided attempt to preserve his reputation—Bolitho had often cursed himself for allowing it happen. For letting their tangled lives come between them.

And then, just two years ago when *Hyperion* had sailed into English Harbour, they had found one another again. Bolitho leaving behind a marriage which had soured, and Catherine married, for the third time, to the Viscount Somervell, a treacherous and decadent man who, on learning of her renewed passion for Bolitho, had attempted to have her dishonoured and thrown into a debtor's prison from which Bolitho had saved her.

He heard her voice now as clearly as if she were standing here on this rapidly drying deck. "Keep this around your neck, darling Richard. I shall take it off again only when you are lying by my side as my lover."

He felt the engraving on the back of the locket. Like the small wisp of hair, it was new, something she had caused to be done in London while he had been at the Admiralty.

So simply said, as if she were speaking to him even as he recalled it.

May Fate always guide you. May love always protect you.

He walked to the nettings, and shaded his eyes to watch some gulls. It made him tremble merely think of her, how they had loved in Antigua and in Cornwall for so short a time together.

He moved his head slightly, holding his breath. The sun was strong but not yet high enough to—He hesitated, then looked hard at the horizon's glittering line.

Nothing happened. The mist did not edge out like some evil disease to mock his left eye. *Nothing*

Allday was looking aft and saw Bolitho's expression, and felt like praying. It was like seeing the face of a man on the scaffold when given a last-minute reprieve.

"Deck there!" Every face looked up. "Sail on the starboard quarter!"

Poland called sharply, "Mr Williams, I'd be obliged if you would take a glass aloft!"

The first lieutenant seized a telescope from the midshipman on watch and hurried to the main shrouds. He looked surprised: Bolitho guessed it was at his captain's unusual courtesy, rather than the task.

Truculent's sails were barely filling, and yet the stranger's top-gallants seemed to be speeding down on a converging tack at a tremendous rate.

He had seen it many times. The same stretch of ocean, with one ship all but becalmed, and another with every stitch of canvas filled to the brim.

Poland glanced at Bolitho, his features expressionless. But his fingers were opening and closing on his sides, betraying his agitation.

"Shall I clear for action, Sir Richard?"

Bolitho raised a telescope and levelled it across the quarter. A strange bearing. Perhaps not one of the local squadron after all.

"We will bide our time, Captain Poland. I have no doubt you can be ready to run out in ten minutes, if need be?"

Poland flushed. "I—that is, Sir Richard—" He nodded firmly. "Indeed, in less!"

Bolitho moved the glass carefully, but could only make out the mastheads of the newcomer; saw

the bearing alter slightly as they drew into line to swoop down on *Truculent*.

Lieutenant Williams called from the mainmast crosstrees, "Frigate, sir!"

Bolitho watched tiny specks of colour rising to break the other ship's silhouette as she hoisted signal.

Williams called down the recognition and Poland could barely prevent himself from tearing the signals book from the midshipman's fingers. "Well!"

The boy stammered, "She's the *Zest*, sir, forty-four. Captain Varian."

Poland muttered, "Oh yes, I know who *he* is. Make our number—lively now!"

Bolitho lowered the glass and watched. *Two faces*. The midshipman's confused, perhaps frightened. One moment he had been watching the first hump of land as it eased up from the sea-mist and the next he had probably seen it all vanish, the prospect of an unexpected enemy, death even suddenly laid before him.

The other was Poland's. Whoever Varian was he was no friend, and was doubtless much senior, to command a forty-four.

Lieutenant Munro was in the shrouds, his legs wrapped around the ratlines, heedless of the fresh tar on his white breeches, and even thoughts of breakfast forgotten.

"Signal, sir! *Captain repair on board!*"

Bolitho saw the crestfallen look on Poland's face. After his remarkable passage from England without loss or injury to any man aboard, it was like a slap in the face.

"Mr Jenour, lay aft if you please." Bolitho saw the flag lieutenant's mouth quiver as though in anticipation. "I believe you have my flag in your care?"

Jenour could not contain a grin this time. "Aye, *aye*, sir!" He almost ran from the quarterdeck.

Bolitho watched the other frigate's great pyramid of sails lifting and plunging over the sparkling water. Maybe it was childish, but he did not care.

"Captain Poland, for convenience's sake, yours is no longer a private ship." He saw doubt alter his understanding on Poland's tense features. "So please make to *Zest*, and spell it out with care, *The privilege is yours*."

Poland turned as Bolitho's flag broke at the foremast truck, and then gestured urgently to the signals party as bunting spilled across the deck in feverish confusion.

Jenour joined Munro as he clambered back to the deck.

"That is what you wanted to know. *There* is the real man. He'd not stand by and see any of his people slighted!" *Not even Poland*, he almost added.

Bolitho saw sunlight reflecting from several telescopes on the other frigate. *Zest's* captain would not know anything about Bolitho's mission, nor would anyone else.

He tightened his jaw and said gently, "Well, they know now."

2 REMEMBER NELSON

“MAY I ASSURE YOU, Sir Richard, that no disrespect was intended . . .”

Bolitho walked to the cabin stern windows, half listening to the clatter of blocks and the surge of water alongside as *Truculent* rolled, hove-to in the swell. This would need to be quick. As predicted by Poland’s sailing-master, the wind would soon return. He could not see the other frigate, and guessed that she was standing slightly downwind of her smaller consort.

He turned and sat on the bench seat, gesturing to a chair. “Some coffee, Captain Varian?” He heard Ozzard’s quiet footsteps and guessed that the little man was already preparing it. It gave Bolitho time to study his visitor.

Captain Charles Varian was a direct contrast to Poland. Very tall and broad-shouldered, self-confident: probably the landsman’s idea of a frigate captain.

Varian said, “I was eager for news, Sir Richard. And seeing this ship, well—” He spread his big hands and gave what was intended as a disarming smile.

Bolitho watched him steadily. “It did not occur to you that a ship from the Channel Squadron might not have time to waste in idle gossip? You could have closed to hailing distance, surely.”

Ozzard pattered in with his coffee pot and peered unseeingly at the stranger.

Varian nodded. “I was not thinking. And *you*, Sir Richard —of all people, to be out here when you must be needed elsewhere . . .” The smile remained, but his eyes were strangely opaque. *Not a man to cross*, Bolitho decided. By a subordinate, anyway.

“You will need to return to your command directly, Captain. But first I would appreciate your assessment of the situation here.” He sipped the hot coffee. *What was the matter with him? He was on edge, as he had been since . . .* After all, he had done it himself as a young commander. So many leagues from home, and then the sight of a friendly ship.

He continued, “I have come with new orders.”

Varian’s inscrutable expression sharpened immediately.

He said, “You will know, Sir Richard, that most of the force intended for retaking Cape Town from the Dutch is already here. They are anchored to the north-west, near Saldanha Bay. Sir David Baird commands the army, and Commodore Popham the escorting squadron and transports. I have been told that the landings will begin very shortly.” He hesitated, suddenly uncertain under Bolitho’s level gaze.

“You are with the supporting squadron.” It was a statement, and Varian shrugged while he moved his cup across the table.

“That is so, Sir Richard. I am still awaiting some additional vessels to rendezvous as planned. When Bolitho said nothing he hastened on, “I had been patrolling in the vicinity of Good Hope and then your topsails were sighted. I thought a straggler had finally arrived.”

Bolitho asked quietly, “What of *your* senior officer— Commodore Warren? I am surprised that he would release his biggest fifth-rate at a time when he might need your full support.”

He had a vague picture of Commodore Warren in his mind, like a faded portrait. He had known

him briefly during the ill-fated attempt by the French Royalists to land and retake Toulon from the Revolutionary army. Bolitho had been a captain then like Varian, and his ship had been *Hyperion*. He had not seen Warren since. But the navy was a family and he had heard of him serving on various stations in the West Indies and the Spanish Main.

Varian said abruptly, "The Commodore is unwell, Sir Richard. In my opinion he should never have been given—"

Bolitho said, "As the senior captain you have assumed overall charge of the supporting squadron, is that it?"

"I have made a full report, Sir Richard."

"Which I shall read in due course." Bolitho moved his hand consciously away from his eyelid and added, "It is my intention to hasten the attack on Cape Town. Time is of the essence. Which is why this fast passage was of the utmost importance." He saw the shot go home but continued, "So we will return to the squadron in company. I intend to see Commodore Warren without delay."

He stood up and walked to the quarter windows to watch the crests beginning to ruffle like crumpled lace in the wind. The ship was rising to it. Eager to move again.

Varian tried to recompose himself. "The other vessels, Sir Richard?"

Bolitho said, "There are none. There will be none. As it is I am authorised to despatch several of the ships here directly to England."

"Has something happened, sir?"

He said quietly, "Last October our fleet under Lord Nelson defeated the enemy off Cape Trafalgar."

Varian swallowed hard. "We did not know, Sir Richard!" For once he seemed at a loss. "A victory *By God*, that is great news."

Bolitho shrugged. "Brave Nelson is dead. So the victory is a hollow one."

There was a tap at the door and Poland stepped into the cabin. The two captains glanced at one another and nodded like old acquaintances, but Bolitho sensed they were completely divided as if by the bars of a smithy's furnace.

"The wind is freshening from the nor'-west, Sir Richard." Poland did not look again at the other man. "Zest's gig is still hooked on to the chains."

Bolitho held out his hand. "I shall see you again, Captain Varian." He relented slightly. "The blockade continues around all enemy ports. It is vital. And though heartened by our victory at Trafalgar, our own forces are weakened by it nonetheless."

The door closed behind them and Bolitho heard the shrill of calls as Varian was piped over the side into his gig.

He moved restlessly about the cabin, remembering one of the meetings he had had with Admiral Sir Owen Godschale at the Admiralty. The last one, in fact, when he had outlined the need for urgency. The Combined Fleets of France and Spain had been thoroughly beaten, but the war was not won. Already it had been reported that at least three small French squadrons had broken through the tightly stretched blockade, and had seemingly vanished into the Atlantic. Was this to be Napoleon's new strategy? To raid ports and isolated islands, to prey upon supply ships and trade routes, to give the British squadrons no rest while they, the French, gathered another fleet?

He could almost smile at Godschale's contemptuous dismissal of the enemy's strength. One group which had outwitted the blockading squadron off Brest had been under the veteran Vice Admiral

Leissègues, and his flagship was the 120-gun first-rate *Impérial*. Hardly small.

The French might even have their eye on Cape Town. It was impossible to guess at the havoc they could create there. They could sever the routes to India and the East Indies as surely as the blade of an axe.

He remembered the studied coolness between Godschale and himself. The admiral had been contemporary of his; they had even been posted together on the same date. There was no other similarity.

Bolitho was suddenly conscious of the distance between himself and Catherine. Godschale, like so many others, had tried to keep them apart, may even have plotted with Belinda to have Catherine dishonoured and lost in lies. But Bolitho doubted that. The admiral was too fond of his own power and comfort to risk a scandal. Or was he? It was openly said that Godschale's next step was to the House of Lords. There might be others there who would wish to destroy them through Godschale.

Catherine's words rang in his ears. *Don't you see what they are doing to us?*

Perhaps this mission to the Cape was merely a beginning. To keep him employed without respite, knowing that he would never resign, no matter what they did.

He crossed to the rack and touched the old family sword, dull by contrast with the fine presentation blade below it. Other Bolithos had worn it, proved it, and sometimes had fallen with it still gripped in a dead hand. He could not see any of them giving up without a fight. The thought gave him comfort, and when Allday came into the cabin he saw him smiling, the first time for a long while.

Allday said, "The whole squadron will know about Lord Nelson by now, Sir Richard. It'll take the heart out of some." He gestured towards the nearest gunport as if he could already see the African mainland. "Not worth dyin' for, they'll say. Not like standing 'twixt the *mounseers* and English clearin' the way like we did!"

Bolitho was moved beyond his own anxieties and said, "With old oaks like you about, they'll soon take heed!"

Allday gave his slow grin. "I'll wager two o' the cap'ns will have some grief afore long as well."

Bolitho eyed him severely. "You damned fox! What do *you* know of it?"

"At present, not much, Sir Richard. But I does know that Cap'n Poland was once the other gentleman's first lieutenant."

Bolitho shook his head. Without Allday he would have nobody to share his feelings or fears. Others looked to him only for leadership—they wanted nothing more.

Allday took down the sword and wrapped it in his special cloth.

"But it's what I always says, Sir Richard, and every true Jack knows it." He gave another grin. "It's aft the most honour may be, but foward you finds the better men. An' that's no error!"

After Allday had gone Bolitho seated himself at the table and opened his personal log. Inside was the letter he had started when England's mist and drizzle had faded astern, and the long passage had begun.

When she would read it, or if it even reached her, he would not know until she was in his arms. His skin against his, her tears and her joy mingled with his own.

He leaned over the letter while he touched the locket through his new shirt.

Another dawn, dearest Kate, and how I long for thee . . .

He was still writing when the ship changed tack yet again, and from the high masthead came the cry that the assembled ships had been sighted.

Bolitho went on deck at noon, and felt the sun strike his face and shoulders like fire; his shoes stuck to the deck-seams as he strode to the hammock-nettings with a telescope from the rack.—

Mountains, red and pink in the harsh, misty glare, and over all the sun, which was like burnished silver, strong enough to drain all colour from the sky around it.

He shifted the glass slightly, his legs braced as the lazy offshore swell lifted the keel and rolled noisily down either beam. Table Mountain, a paler wedge, but still shrouded in haze and mystery like some giant's altar.

There were the ships. His eyes moved professionally across the mixed collection. The elderly sixty-four *Themis*, which he knew was Commodore Warren's ship. Warren was ill. How ill? He had not enquired further of Varian. It would show his hand, or display uncertainty when he must soon need these unknown men to trust him without question.

Another frigate, some schooners and two large supply vessels. The cream of the attacking force would be as Varian had described, to the north-west where the ships could anchor well offshore, whereas here there was only one natural bank shallow enough to ride at their cables. Beyond the hundred-fathom line the sea's bed fell away to infinity, a black oblivion where nothing moved.

He saw sunlight flashing on glass and knew they were watching *Truculent's* slow approach, surprised by his flag at the fore as Varian had been.

Captain Poland joined him by the side.

He said, "Do you think it will be a long campaign, Sir Richard?"

He spoke with elaborate care, and Bolitho guessed he was probably wondering what had passed between himself and Varian in the cabin. Bolitho lowered the telescope and faced him.

"I have had some dealings with the army in the past, Captain. They are more used to campaigning than I care for. A battle is one thing—you win or you strike. But all this drawn-out business of supplies and marching is not for me."

Poland gave a very rare smile. "Nor me, Sir Richard."

Bolitho turned to look for Jenour. "You may signal for water lighters when you are anchored, Captain. A word of praise to your people will not come amiss either. It was an admirable passage."

A shaft of sunlight like the blade of a lance swept down on them as the Afterguard hauled over the great driver-boom.

Bolitho gritted his teeth. *Nothing*. They had to be wrong. There was nothing. He could see the other ships plainly in spite of the unwavering glare.

Jenour watched him and felt his heart thumping against his ribs. Then he saw Allday coming at the old sword protruding from his polishing cloth.

Their exchange of glances was swift but complete. Was it too soon to hope? For all their sakes?

The two frigates rounded-up and anchored in the late afternoon considerably earlier than even the taciturn Mr Hull had predicted. As signals were made and exchanged, boats lowered and awnings spread, Bolitho watched from the quarterdeck, his mind exploring the task which lay ahead.

It was strange how the land never seemed to draw any closer, and because of the difficult anchorage it gave an impression of brooding defiance. The point to the north-west which had been selected for the first assault was a good choice, possibly the only one. Bolitho had examined the charts with great care, as well as the maps supplied to him by the Admiralty. Up there at Saldanha Bay the coastal waters were shallow and protected enough to land soldiers and marines under the cover

men-of-war, which could offer fire. But once ashore the true difficulty would begin. Saldanha Bay was one hundred miles from Cape Town. Foot soldiers, some sick and weary from weeks and weeks at sea in their cramped quarters between decks, would be in no fit state to march and skirmish all the way to Cape Town. The Dutch were excellent fighters and would harry rather than confront them every mile. When they finally reached the Cape, the enemy would be ready and waiting. It seemed unlikely that any large force of Dutch soldiers would be sent to contest the landings. It would leave them in danger of being cut off by this supporting squadron.

Bolitho felt his impatience returning. A campaign then, lengthy and costly. A war of supply-lines to be fought by soldiers, many of whom had been confined to garrison duties in the Indies. The Island of Death, as the army called them, where more men died of fever than under the enemy's fire.

Jenour strode aft and touched his hat. "Your despatch to the general has gone, Sir Richard, taken by the courier schooner *Miranda* this moment."

Bolitho shaded his eyes to watch the small and graceful schooner tacking away from the other vessels, her commander doubtless grateful to be free of other authority, albeit for only a few days.

Bolitho watched the redness of evening spreading along the glittering horizon, the masts and yards of the small squadron suddenly like bronze. Ashore telescopes would have observed *Truculent*'s arrival as they had doubtless studied all the others.

He remarked, "You are in irons, Stephen, so why not spit out what you think?"

But for his self-control, Jenour would have blushed. Bolitho always knew. It was pointless to pretend.

"I—I thought—" He licked his dry lips. "I would have thought that the Commodore might have requested to come aboard." He fell silent under Bolitho's scrutiny.

Bolitho said, "In his place I would have done just that." He recalled Captain Varian's tactless remark. "Call away the gig, Stephen. My compliments to Captain Poland and explain that I am going across to *Themis*."

Fifteen minutes later, sweating steadily in his dress coat and hat, he sat in the gig's sternsheet with Jenour beside him, and a critical Allday crouching with the boat's coxswain.

As they pulled slowly abeam of the other ships, Bolitho saw officers-of-the-watch doffing their hats, motionless figures in shrouds and rigging staring in silence, their bare arms and shoulders like parts of the bronze around them.

Allday leaned forward, his mouth just inches from Bolitho's ear.

"Y'see, they *knows*, Sir Richard. Only here an hour an' the word has gone through the whole squadron!" He saw one of the oarsmen staring at him and scowled over Bolitho's epaulette. The man dropped his gaze and almost lost the stroke. He had probably been surprised at seeing a seaman, even an admiral's personal coxswain, chatting with his master, while the latter even turned his head to listen.

Bolitho nodded. "Lord Nelson will be sadly missed. We'll not see his like in our lifetime."

Allday leaned back again and rolled his tongue inside his cheek to restrain a grin. *I'm not too sure o' that*, he thought.

Bolitho watched the *Themis*'s bowsprit and tapering jib-boom sweeping out to greet them. She was an old ship and had been employed on every sort of duty other than the line of battle. Originally sixty-four, she had been stripped of some of her armament while she was carrying soldiers from one trouble spot to the next; she had even been to the penal colony in New South Wales. Transport and receiving ship, and now with the war demanding everything that would stay afloat, she was here, pa

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