

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



Success To The Brave

Alexander Kent

Contents

About the Book
About the Author
Also by Alexander Kent
Title Page
Dedication
Map
Epigraph

1. Flag at the Fore
2. 'Old Katie'
3. Man of Action
4. A Place to Meet
5. 'There may be thunder ...'
6. No Easy Way
7. To Start a War
8. Faith
9. A Close Thing
10. The Face of Loyalty
11. Revenge
12. The Letter
13. A Holy Day
14. No Better Sentiment
15. Last Farewell
16. The Secret
17. Fair Warning
18. How Sleep the Brave?

Epilogue
Copyright

About the Book

1802 - Richard Bolitho is summoned to the Admiralty in London and given his orders for a difficult and, to him, distasteful task. Even an advanced promotion to vice-admiral to make him one of the youngest ever appointed does not compensate for his sudden and thankless mission. Bolitho and his wife are expecting their first child, and for once he is loath to quit the land for the demands of duty.

The Peace of Amiens, signed a few weeks earlier, is already showing signs of strain as the old enemies wrangle over the return of colonial possessions won and lost during the war. In the little sixty-four-gun *Achates* Bolitho sails West for Boston, and discovers that to be a man of diplomacy is not enough. As threat and counter-threat weave a web of intrigue around his lonely command he balances success against the danger to the men who must follow him even to the cannon's mouth.

About the Author

Douglas Reeman did convoy duty in the navy in the Atlantic, the Arctic, and the North Sea. He has written over thirty novels under his own name and more than twenty best-selling historical novels featuring Richard Bolitho under the pseudonym Alexander Kent.

Also by Alexander Kent

Midshipman Bolitho
Stand into Danger
In Gallant Company
Sloop of War
To Glory We Steer
Command a King's Ship
Passage to Mutiny
With All Despatch
Form Line of Battle!
Enemy in Sight
The Flag Captain
Signal - Close Action!
The Inshore Squadron
A Tradition of Victory
Colours Aloft!
Honour This Day
The Only Victor
Beyond the Reef
The Darkening Sea
For my Country's Freedom
Cross of St George
Sword of Honour
Second to None
Relentless Pursuit
Man of War
Heart of Oak

The stirring story of the life and times of Richard Bolitho is told in Alexander Kent's bestselling novels.

- 1756 Born Falmouth, son of James Bolitho
- 1768 Entered the King's service as a Midshipman on *Manxman*
- 1772 Midshipman, *Gorgon* (*Midshipman Bolitho*)
- 1774 Promoted Lieutenant, *Destiny*: Rio and the Caribbean (*Stand into Danger*)
- 1775-7 Lieutenant, *Trojan*, during the American Revolution. Later appointed prizemaster (*In Gallant Company*)
- 1778 Promoted Commander, *Sparrow*. Battle of the Chesapeake (*Sloop of War*)
- 1780 Birth of Adam, illegitimate son of Hugh Bolitho and Kerenza Pascoe
- 1782 Promoted Captain, *Phalarope*; West Indies: Battle of Saints (*To Glory We Steer*)
- 1784 Captain, *Undine*; India and East Indies (*Command a King's Ship*)
- 1787 Captain, *Tempest*; Great South Sea; Tahiti; suffered serious fever (*Passage to Mutiny*)
- 1792 Captain, the *Nore*; Recruiting (*With All Despatch*)
- 1793 Captain, *Hyperion*; Mediterranean; Bay of Biscay; West Indies. Adam Pascoe, later Bolitho, enters the King's service as a midshipman aboard *Hyperion* (*Form Line of Battle! And Enemy in Sight*)
- 1795 Promoted Flag Captain, *Euryalus*; involved in the Great Mutiny; Mediterranean; Promoted Commodore (*The Flag Captain*)
- 1798 Battle of the Nile (*Signal – Close Action!*)
- 1800 Promoted Rear-Admiral; Baltic; (*The Inshore Squadron*)
- 1801 Biscay. Prisoner of war (*A Tradition of Victory*)
- 1802 Promoted Vice-Admiral; West Indies (*Success to the Brave*)
- 1803 Mediterranean (*Colours Aloft!*)
- 1805 Battle of Trafalgar (*Honour This Day*)
- 1806-7 Good Hope and the second battle of Copenhagen (*The Only Victor*)
- 1808 Shipwrecked off Africa (*Beyond the Reef*)
- 1809-10 Mauritius campaign (*The Darkening Sea*)
- 1812 Promoted Admiral; Second American War (*For My Country's Freedom*)
- 1814 Defence of Canada (*Cross of St. George*)
- 1815 Richard Bolitho killed in action (*Sword of Honour*) Adam Bolitho, Captain, *Unrivalled*. Mediterranean (*Second to None*)
- 1816 Anti-slavery patrols, Sierra Leone. Battle of Algiers (*Relentless Pursuit*)
- 1817 Flag Captain, *Athena*; Antigua and Caribbean (*Man of War*)
- 1818 Captain, *Onward*; Mediterranean (*Heart of Oak*)

SUCCESS TO THE BRAVE

Alexander Kent



arrow books

For Winifred with my love.
Until we meet again



How sleep the brave, who sink to rest,
By all their country's wishes blest!

WILLIAM COLLINS, 1746

Flag at the Fore

RICHARD BOLITHO LEANED his palms on the sill of an open window and stared across the courtyard to the far wall and the sea beyond.

It should have been a perfect May day, and even the squat silhouette of Pendennis Castle which guarded the Falmouth approaches and the entrance to Carrick Roads seemed less formidable. After nine years of war with France and her allies England was at peace. It was still hard to accept. When a strange sail appeared off the coast the young men of Falmouth no longer stood to arms in case it was an enemy raider, or hurried inland with less enthusiasm if the newcomer proved to be a King's ship. The latter always meant the arrival of the hated press-gangs and men snatched from their homes to serve at sea, perhaps never to return. No wonder it was hard to believe it was all over.

He watched the carriage resting in the shadows near the stables. *It was nearly time.* Soon the horses would be led out and harnessed. It was no longer next week or even tomorrow. It was now.

Bolitho turned and waited for his eyes to grow accustomed to the room after the reflected sunlight. The big grey house which had served the Bolitho family for

generations was very still, as if it too was holding its breath, trying to hold back the inevitable.

It had been seven months since he had returned here after the battle which had destroyed the enemy's hopes of an invasion and had equally crippled the French bargaining power at the peace negotiations. Seven months since he had married Belinda and had known a sublime happiness which he had never expected.

He walked to the foot of the great staircase and glanced at the shadowy family portraits. They must all have stood here at such a moment, he thought. Wondering when or if they would ever see the house again. His great, great grandfather, Captain Daniel Bolitho, on the deck of his blazing ship. He had died in the War of the Protestant Alliance. The Bolitho features were very clear in the portrait. Like Bolitho's father and his brother Hugh, also dead, and all the others.

Now he was off to sea again and the past few months seemed to have gone in the turning of an hour-glass. When he had been summoned to the Admiralty in London he had not known what to expect. With the Peace of Amiens signed and apparently holding, it seemed as if all the bitterly won lessons had been thrown aside. Most of the fleet had been laid up and thousands of officers and men discharged to fend as best they could.

Posts for junior flag-officers would be few and handed out as favours by the lords of admiralty. Bolitho had been astonished when he had been told of his orders to sail with a minimum of delay for America and then the Caribbean. Not in command of another squadron, but in a small two-decker with a mere frigate for communications and general escort.

He had been courteously if formally received by Admiral Sir Hayward Sheaffe who had succeeded old Admiral Beauchamp. He had seemed to stamp the difference between war and peace, Bolitho thought. Beauchamp, worn

out by illness, had died in harness without knowing his last strategy had succeeded with the French invasion fleet's destruction. Sheaffe was cool, practical, the perfect administrator. It had been hard to imagine his ever being through the mill from midshipman to his present lofty appointment.

In this quiet room Bolitho could recall Sheaffe's words as if they had just been uttered.

'I know this must seem a hard decision, Bolitho. After your escape from an enemy prison and your subsequent victory over the French admiral, Remond, you will have been expecting, and many would say rightly so, a more stable appointment. However ...' His voice had lingered on the word. 'War does not end with the last ball fired. Their lordships require a man of tact as well as action for this task. It is not without reward, I think. You are to be promoted to Vice-Admiral of the Red.' His eyes had studied Bolitho's features to seek his reaction. 'The youngest and most junior on the Navy List.' He had added dryly, 'Apart from Nelson, that is, the nation's darling.'

So that was it. Sheaffe was jealous of those who had become known and admired by friend and enemy alike. In spite of his status and power, Sheaffe still envied them.

Perhaps that was why he had failed to mention that the real reason for Bolitho's concern was that Belinda would be having their first child in just a matter of weeks. Sheaffe knew about it, it had even reached the London newspapers that the church here in Falmouth had been packed to the doors with officers and men of Bolitho's squadron on that special October day in 1801, last year. Perhaps he was jealous of that fact also?

Bolitho had said nothing. If Sheaffe wanted him to explain, to plead for a delay in the sailing date, he had not understood him at all.

He heard her steps on the flagged floor beyond the entrance and straightened his back.

Even with the sunlight behind her, and her face part hidden in shadow, she was beautiful. He never got tired of watching her, of the longing she roused in him. The sunlight touched her chestnut-coloured hair and the soft curve of her throat.

She said, 'It's time.'

Her voice was low and level, and Bolitho knew what the effort was costing her.

As if to mock their emotions he heard the hoofs of the two horses on the cobbles, the untroubled voices of the grooms.

She moved towards him and placed her hands on his shoulders. 'I am so *proud* of you, dearest. My husband, a vice-admiral -' Her lip quivered and a new brightness in her eyes betrayed her distress.

He held her gently, her once slender body pressing against his as if the child was already with them.

'You must take every care while I am away, Belinda.'

She leaned back in his arms and looked at him searchingly as if she needed to remember every detail.

'You are the one who must take care. You have seen to all my wants. Everyone is so kind, wanting to help, to be near, when all I need is you.' She shook her head as he made to speak. 'Don't worry, I will not break down. In spite of your leaving, I am *happy*, can you understand that? Each day in the past months has been like the first time. When you hold me it seems a new experience. When you enter me and we are one, I am filled with love for you. But I am not a fool and would never wish to stand between you and your other world. I see your eyes as you watch a ship sail into Carrick Roads, your expression when Thomas or Allday mentions some place or experience I can never share. When you return I shall be waiting, but wherever you are, we shall remain as one.'

There was a tap at the door and Allday stood watching them, his homely face grave and uncertain.

'All ready, sir.'

Allday, like an oak, who represented so much of that other world which Belinda had described. Now in his best blue coat and nankeen breeches he looked every inch a sailor, the coxswain of a vice-admiral. He had stayed at Bolitho's side since he had been a junior captain. Together they had seen fine and terrible sights, had suffered and rejoiced in equal proportions.

When he had been told of the unexpected and advanced promotion, Allday had remarked cheerfully, 'Flag at the fore at last, eh, sir? Quite right too, in my opinion. Don't know what took 'em so long.'

'Thank you.'

He saw Allday open the new coat for him to slip his arms into the sleeves. Once the impossible dream when he had paced the deck as a harassed lieutenant, or even when he had taken command of his first ship.

She was watching him, her chin raised, her fingers clasped as if to contain her thoughts and words.

'You look so handsome, Richard.'

'That 'e does, ma'am.' Allday patted the lapels into place and made certain that each bright epaulette with the twin silver stars was exactly right.

At sea it would be different, Allday thought. But here in the big house they had given him a real home. He looked away, unable to watch their faces. He was one of the family. Almost.

She said quietly, 'I could come as far as Hampshire with you.'

Bolitho held her again. 'No. The ride to the Beaulieu River would take a lot out of you. Then there is the return journey. I'd be sick with worry.'

This time she did not argue. Although neither mentioned it, each knew that a wrecked coach had once destroyed his happiness, another such accident had given both of them this new life.

Bolitho was grateful that he had to join his ship where it was too far for her to follow and risk an accident with their first child. It was bad enough to be leaving her when she most needed him, without that. Ferguson, his trusted steward, would be here in the house, and the doctor was within easy call. Bolitho's sister Nancy had been more at the house than in her own palatial residence with her husband the squire, who was known throughout the county as the King of Cornwall.

And next week Thomas Herrick's wife Dulcie would be coming all the way from Kent to keep Belinda company at the time of the birth.

Herrick, almost embarrassed by his promotion to rear-admiral, had been given command of a small squadron and had already sailed to Gibraltar for orders.

There would not be many familiar faces this time, Bolitho thought. Maybe it was just as well. No reminders. The doubts, like the successes, were best left in the past.

She said, 'Take good care of yourself, Richard. I hate your leaving, but at the same time I understand why you must go.'

Bolitho held her against him. Why were there never the right words until it was too late?

Ever since his return from the Admiralty with his secret orders she had somehow contained her disappointment, her dismay. Only once during the night had she exclaimed, 'Why you? *Must* you go?' Then, like part of a bad dream, she had lapsed into an uneasy sleep, her question still unanswered.

He heard Allday's voice beyond the door, supervising the loading of some final piece of luggage aboard the carriage. Poor Allday, he thought. Off again after all he had endured with him as a prisoner of war in France. He was always there when he was needed, the relationship stronger than ever, and when Bolitho needed someone to confide in

outside of his officers and the chain of command, Allday would be ready to speak out.

Often Bolitho had felt badly about Allday's loyalty. Beyond his service as his coxswain and friend he had nothing. No wife to keep house for him and await his return from the sea, no home beyond these walls. It did not seem fair to drag him off yet again when he had more than earned the right to put his feet firmly ashore for all time. But Bolitho understood that Allday would be resentful and hurt by the suggestion he should not accompany him.

I must leave now.

They walked together to the big double doors, quietly determined, dreading the actual moment.

The sunlight engulfed them like an enemy, and Bolitho looked at the carriage with something like hatred. He had already said his farewells to his sister, to Ferguson, his one-armed steward, to the many familiar faces who worked in and around the big grey house below Pendennis Castle.

He said, 'I shall send word by the first available courier brig. When I reach America I shall probably be required to return home immediately.'

He felt her arm stiffen against his and despised himself for giving her hope.

Admiral Sheaffe had left him in doubt that the mission was important. To sail for Boston, 'neutral ground', as he had called it, and there meet French and American officials to formalize the handing over of an island as part of the agreement made under the Peace of Amiens.

It all seemed wrong to Bolitho. To hand back an island to the old enemy which had been won with British blood. He had blurted out as much to Admiral Sheaffe. 'We gained a peace, Sir Hayward, we did not lose the war!'

Perhaps in that cool Admiralty room it had sounded childish.

Sheaffe had replied calmly, 'And we do not wish you to *provoke* a war either, sir!'

As if to finalize the moment of departure, one of the horses stamped its hoof on the cobbles.

Bolitho kissed her hard on the mouth and tasted the salt of her tears.

'I shall return, Belinda.'

Very gently they prised themselves apart and Bolitho walked down the worn steps to the waiting carriage.

Allday was standing with a groom, but Bolitho gestured to the open door.

'Ride with me, Allday.'

He turned and glanced back at her. Against the grey stone she looked strangely vulnerable and he wanted to hold her just once more.

The next instant he was in the carriage and the wheels were clattering over the cobbles and through the gates.

It was done.

Allday sat with his fingers clasped and watched Bolitho's grave features and tried to measure the depth of his mood.

Seven months ashore seemed a lifetime to Allday, although he knew better than to suggest as much to Bolitho. It was probably the longest he had been away from a King's ship since that first time when he had made his living here in Cornwall as a shepherd, when a man-of-war, one commanded by Bolitho, had dropped anchor and landed her press-gang to scavenge for hands. There had been several local men caught that day. Allday had been one, the steward Ferguson another. Poor Ferguson had lost an arm at the Saintes but, like Allday, had stayed with Bolitho ever since.

The warm air, the heavy scent of the countryside were making him drowsy, and he knew that although Bolitho wanted companionship for the long haul to the Beaulieu River in Hampshire where their next ship was lying, he did not want to gossip. There would be time enough for that in the weeks and months ahead.

Another ship. What would she be like? Allday was surprised that he could still be curious. In his strong position as the vice-admiral's personal coxswain he had nothing to fear from anyone. But he was too much of a seaman not to be interested.

Not a great first rate of a hundred guns or more, not even a new seventy-four like *Benbow*, Bolitho's last flagship, but the smallest ship of the line still in commission.

His Britannic Majesty's Ship *Achates* of sixty-four guns was one of a dying breed. More like an oversized frigate than a massive line of battleship which could withstand the pounding and destruction of close action.

She was twenty-one years old, a true veteran, and had seen every kind of combat in her time. She had spent most of her recent years in the Caribbean and had sailed countless leagues from her base in Antigua to the far south along the Spanish Main.

Allday wondered uneasily why she had been allotted to Bolitho as his flagship. To his simple reasoning it seemed like one more slur. He should have been given a knighthood for what he had done and endured for England. But always there seemed to be someone in authority who nursed some dislike or hatred of the man for whom Allday would willingly die if need be.

He thought of the parting he had just witnessed. What a fine pair they made. The lovely lady with the long chestnut hair and the youthful vice-admiral whose hair was as jet-black as the day Allday had joined his ship as a pressed hand.

From the opposite seat Bolitho saw Allday's head loll into a doze and felt the strength of the man, was grateful for his presence here.

Allday had thickened out and looked as if nothing could ever break him. *The oak*. He smiled to himself in spite of

his sense of loss at leaving Belinda when she most needed him.

He had known Allday like a raging lion on the reddened deck of one ship or another. And he had seen him in tears as he had carried Bolitho below when he had been badly wounded in battle. It was impossible to imagine any place without Allday.

Bolitho also thought about his new flagship for this special commission which would take him to America and the Caribbean.

There was comfort in knowing that her new captain was also a good friend. Valentine Keen, who had once been one of Bolitho's midshipmen, who had shared excitement and sorrow in very different circumstances. *Achates'* previous captain had died of a fever even as his ship had sailed home from Antigua to the yard where she had been built to undergo a much needed overhaul and refit.

It would be good to have Keen as his flag-captain, he thought. He watched Allday's head fall to his chest and remembered it had been he who had once saved Keen's life, had personally cut a jagged splinter from his groin because he had not trusted the ship's drunken surgeon.

Bolitho watched a group of farm workers by a field gate as they paused to drink rough cider from great earthenware jugs.

A few glanced at the carriage, one even raised his arm in salute. The word would soon be around Falmouth. A Bolitho was leaving again. Would he return?

He thought of Belinda in that big, quiet house. If only ...

Bolitho looked at the new gold lace on his coat and tried to settle his thoughts on the months ahead. He was not the first sea officer to leave home when a wife or family most needed him.

Nor would he be the last.

The peace could not endure, no matter what the politicians and experts proclaimed. Too many had already

died, too many scores were still unsettled.

With sixty of England's one hundred ships of the line laid up and out of commission, and some forty thousand seamen and marines discharged, the French would be stupid to ignore such complacency.

He tried to concentrate on *Achates'* eventual destination, the island of San Felipe which lay across the Windward Passage between Cuba and Haiti like a rugged sentinel. The island's history was as wild and bloody as some others in the Caribbean. Originally Spanish, it had been occupied and held by France until the American Rebellion when it had been seized by Britain after a series of attacks at great cost to both sides.

Now, as part of the agreement with France, the island was to be handed back as a sign of good faith. But when Admiral Rodney's ships had taken the island in 1782, just a year after *Achates'* keel had first slipped into salt water, it had been a barren, hostile place. Now, according to all the information Bolitho had obtained from the Admiralty, it was both prosperous and thriving.

The present governor was a retired vice-admiral, Sir Humphrey Rivers, Knight of the Bath. He had made his life on San Felipe, had even named the port Georgetown to mark the island's permanent place under the British flag.

There was an excellent harbour, and the island's trade thrived on sugar, coffee and molasses, the growing prosperity owing much to a secondary population of slaves which had been brought originally from Africa.

Admiral Sheaffe had explained that whereas in war San Felipe had provided an excellent outpost to command the routes to Jamaica and a strategic base for hunting down enemy privateers, in peace it was a liability, unnecessary to the British Crown.

It had made no sense at the time, and as the carriage gathered speed down a steep incline and the sea reappeared on Bolitho's right, it made even less now.

Surely if the island was worth dying for it was worth keeping?

It seemed like a betrayal, more callous than Bolitho would have believed possible. Why then had he been chosen for the task instead of a skilled politician?

A man of tact as well as a man of action, Sheaffe had said.

Bolitho smiled grimly. He had heard that kind of explanation many times. If you were proved right others received the praise. If you made the wrong move you took all the blame.

He shut his orders from his mind. It was useless to plan beyond the written word. Everything might have changed by the time his ship next dropped anchor.

It would be strange not to have Browne as his flag-lieutenant. Intelligent, skilled with the ways of admiralty and government, Browne had been a tower of strength since he had been appointed as his aide. Now Browne was the lord and master of estates and property Bolitho could only guess at, his father having died in the last few months.

Browne had come to Cornwall to say his farewell. It had been a wrench for both of them. Bolitho had decided then and there he would ask his nephew, Adam Pascoe, to take his place. With so many young officers being put ashore it seemed right to offer him the post, even though it went against Bolitho's instinct to use his authority to grant a favour. But he loved his nephew as if he had been his own son, and they had come through many hazards together. The experience would do him good.

Browne had raised a doubtful eyebrow at the idea. Perhaps he had been trying to warn him against having one so close as an aide, one who is supposed to stand aside and remain impartial when required.

But to be without a ship at the age of twenty-one, when he most needed a chance to further his career, had seemed a more weighty argument.

Bolitho rested his head on the warm leather seat.

Valentine Keen, Adam and Allday. They would sustain each other. There would be no other familiar faces this time, or would there?

Achates had originally commissioned at the Nore, whereas Bolitho was more used to West Country ships or those from Spithead.

Belinda had been so pleased at his sudden and advanced promotion, when all he had wanted was to be with her when their first child was born.

Vice-Admiral of the Red. It barely seemed to matter. Some had even compared him with Nelson! Curiously enough, this made Bolitho uneasy, as if he were merely playing a part. It was indeed odd to realize that *Achates* was almost a twin of Nelson's favourite and his last command before his own promotion to flag-rank. His famous *Agamemnon* had been laid down and built in the same yard, that of Henry Adams of Bucklers Hard on the Beaulieu River.

The dwindling number of sixty-fours had one sure advantage. Bigger than anything faster. Faster than anything bigger. No wonder captains of heavier vessels looked on them with begrudging admiration.

Nelson had once said of his little *Agamemnon* that she was an excellent sailer and even when running close to the wind under storm-staysails could match many a frigate.

Bolitho wondered if Keen was equally agreeable with *Achates*. After his recent command of a powerful seventy-four he might already be regretting his decision to accept the role of Bolitho's flag-captain.

The horses slowed to a gentle trot while some sheep crossed the narrow road and bustled their way into an adjoining field.

A young woman with a child on her hip, her husband's midday meal carried in a red handkerchief, stared at the

carriage as it moved past. She bobbed her head to Bolitho and flashed him a white smile.

Bolitho thought of Belinda, how she would manage when their child was born. A son to follow the tradition, to walk the deck of a new generation of King's ships. A daughter perhaps, to grow up and win the heart of a young man in a world he might never know.

Bolitho had confided little of his mission to Belinda. He wanted to keep her free of worry. Also she might resent the reason for his leaving her when she had time to think about it.

He tried to think about San Felipe's governor, the man who would have to hand over his tiny kingdom to their old foe.

He glanced at Allday, now rolling gently to the carriage's motion and fast asleep. He had known all about Sir Humphrey Rivers, Knight of the Bath.

Bolitho smiled. Allday gathered information about the comings and goings in the fleet and hoarded it as a magpie guards its treasure trove of coloured glass and beads.

Rivers had captained a frigate named *Crusader* during the American Revolution at about the same time when Bolitho had been given his first command, the little sloop-of-war *Sparrow*.

He had made quite a name for himself hunting French privateers and taking prizes of every shape and size. One day near the Chesapeake he had misjudged the danger in his eagerness to run down an American brig. His *Crusader* had ploughed into some shallows and had become a total wreck. Rivers had been taken prisoner but had been returned to Britain after the war.

He was said to have made influential friends during his captivity, and afterwards when he had been promoted to command a squadron in the West Indies. He had money in the City of London, property too in Jamaica. He did not

sound like the kind of man who would fit easily into the plans of the government in Whitehall.

Bolitho grimaced at his reflection in the dusty glass. Not even if the plan was to be offered by someone of equal rank.

The carriage wheels dipped and shuddered through some deep ruts in the road and Bolitho winced as the pain of his wound dragged at his left thigh like a hot claw.

Belinda had even helped to dispel his self-consciousness about that. Occasionally when the pain was re-awakened he found himself limping and he had felt humiliated because of her.

He stirred on his seat as he recalled her touch in the night, her soft body against his, the secret words which had been lost in their passion for one another. She had kissed the wound where a musket-ball and the surgeon's probe had left an ugly scar and had made the injury more a mark of pride than a cruel reminder.

All this and more he was leaving behind with each turn of the wheels. Tonight it would be worse when the carriage stopped for the first change of horses in Torbay. It was better to join a ship and sail with the first possible tide and leave no room for regrets and longing.

He looked at Allday and wondered what he really thought about quitting the land yet again with his future as uncertain as the next horizon.

Flag at the fore. Allday was genuinely proud of it. That was something which the Admiral Sheaffes of this world could never understand.

'Old Katie'

CAPTAIN VALENTINE KEEN walked from beneath the poop and crossed to the larboard nettings. Around him and along the upper gun-deck, and high overhead on the yards and rigging, the hands were hard at work.

The officer of the watch touched his hat to Keen and then moved to the opposite side of the deck. Like everyone else, he was careful to appear busy but unconcerned at his captain's presence.

Keen glanced along his new command. He had already been pulled around *Achates* in his gig to study her lines and her trim as she rocked gently above her black and buff reflection.

Ready for sea. It was every captain's personal decision as to when that possibility was a fact. There was no room for second thoughts once the anchor was catted and the ship standing out from the land.

It was warm and humid even for May, and the protective folds of the land were misty with haze. He hoped that some kind of wind would soon get up nonetheless. Bolitho would be impatient to get away, to cut his ties with the shore, although Keen knew his reasons were different from his own.

He shaded his eyes and looked up at the foremast truck. *Achates* had never worn an admiral's flag before. It would

be interesting to see if it changed her.

He moved into a patch of shade by the poop ladder and watched the activity along the upper deck. The ship had a good feel to her, he thought. Something permanent and hard-won over the years. Several of her lieutenants had once served aboard as midshipmen, and most of her hard core of warrant officers, the backbone of any man-of-war, had been on the books for years.

There was an air of confidence about her, a lively eagerness to get away from the land before she too suffered the fate of so many others. Keen's own ship, *Nicator*, a seventy-four, which had distinguished herself at Copenhagen and later in the Bay of Biscay, was already laid up in ordinary. Unwanted, like her people who had fought so hard when the drums had beaten to quarters.

The previous captain had served in *Achates* for seven years. It was strange that he had commanded the ship for so long a period and had left no trace of his own personality in his quarters. Maybe he had invested it in his ship's company. They certainly seemed contented enough, although there had been the usual desertions during the overhaul here. Wives, sweethearts, children grown out of all recognition; Keen could hardly blame them for giving in to the temptation to run.

Keen ran his finger round his neckcloth and watched one of the ship's boats being swayed up and over the gangway and then lowered on to its tier. Every boat would have to be filled with water if this heat held to stop it from opening up.

Keen examined his feelings. He was glad to be leaving, especially with Bolitho. He had served under him twice before in other ships. First as midshipman, then as third lieutenant. They had shared the pain of losing loved ones, and now that Bolitho had married, Keen was still alone.

His thoughts wandered to his orders which Bolitho had sent to him.

A strange mission. Unique in his experience.

He glanced at the starboard line of black eighteen-pounders, run out as if for battle to allow the sailmaker and his crew maximum space on deck for stitching some canvas.

Peace or war, a King's ship must always be ready. Twice Keen had served under Bolitho between the wars and had known the folly of over-confidence where a signed peace was concerned.

He heard feet on the companion ladder and saw Lieutenant Adam Pascoe climbing on deck.

It never failed to surprise Keen. Pascoe could have been Bolitho's young brother. The same black hair, although Pascoe's was cut short at the nape of the neck in the new naval fashion, the same restlessness. Grave and withdrawn one moment, full of boyish excitement the other.

Twenty-one years old, Keen thought. Without a war and its demands on lives and ships Pascoe would be lucky to gain advancement or a ship of his own.

'Good-day, Mr Pascoe. Is everything in the admiral's quarters to the flag-lieutenant's liking?'

Pascoe smiled. 'Aye, sir. With four of the after eighteen-pounders removed to the hold and replaced by Quakers, the admiral will have plenty of space.'

Keen looked at the quarterdeck and said, 'I have seen him content with ten paces of a deck. Back and forth, up and down, his daily stroll to arrange his ideas, to exercise his mind as well as his limbs.'

Pascoe said suddenly, 'I see no sense in this mission, sir. We fought the enemy to a standstill so that he *needed* a peace to lick his wounds. And yet our government has seen fit to give up almost all of our possessions which we won from the French. Everything but Ceylon and Trinidad we have let go and cannot even decide definitely to keep Malta. And now San Felipe is to go the same way, and the admiral's lot is to have the dirty task of doing it.'

Keen regarded him gravely. 'A word of advice, Mr Pascoe.'

He saw Pascoe's chin lift stubbornly. That wary glance Keen had grown to know in the past.

He said, 'In the wardroom the lieutenants and others can speak as they please provided their private views do not spread among the people. As captain I stand apart, so too does the flag-lieutenant. Despite your wish to serve your uncle, I suspect you accepted the post more to please him than yourself?'

Keen knew he had guessed correctly and saw the shot go home.

He added, 'Being a sea officer is totally different from being an admiral's aide. You have to be discreet, cautious even, for there will be others who might wish to win a confidence.'

He wondered if he should go further and decided it was too important to avoid.

'Some may want to harm your uncle. So stay clear of the rights and wrongs of something you cannot alter. Otherwise, hurtful or not, it were better for you to go ashore right now and beg a replacement from the port admiral at Spithead.'

Pascoe smiled. 'Thank you, sir. I deserved that. But I'd not leave my uncle. Not now. Not ever. He is everything to me.'

Keen watched the young lieutenant's unusual display of emotion. He knew most of the story anyway. How Pascoe had been born out of wedlock, the son of Bolitho's dead brother. Bolitho's brother had been a renegade, a traitor during the American War, and had commanded an enemy privateer with no less audacity than John Paul Jones. It must have been hard on Bolitho. And on this youthful officer who had been sent to seek out Bolitho by his dying mother as his only hope of a future.