

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS

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# Colours Aloft

Alexander Kent

**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*)

## ***Contents***

Cover

About the Book

About the Author

Also available by Alexander Kent

Title Page

Dedication

1. Ebb Tide

2. In Distress

3. No Deadlier Enemy

4. Bait

5. Darkness at Noon

6. *Supreme*

7. Surrender or Die

8. The Fire Still Burns

9. Attack

10. Retribution

11. A Time for Caring

12. Divided Loyalties

13. West Wind

14. Speak with Pride

15. Fate

16. Men of War

17. Beneath the Flag

Epilogue

Copyright

## About the Book

September 1803

Vice-Admiral Sir Richard Bolitho finds himself the new master of the *Argonaute*, a French flagship taken in battle. With the Peace of Amiens in ruins, he must leave the safety of Falmouth.

What lies ahead is the grim reality of war at close quarters - where Bolitho who will be called upon to anticipate the overall intention of the French fleet. But the battle has also become a personal vendetta between himself and the French admiral who formerly sailed the *Argonaute*.

Bolitho and his men are driven to a final rendezvous where no quarter is asked or given.

'One of our foremost writers of naval fiction . . . authentic, inspiring, well characterized and, finally, moving' *Sunday Times*

## About the Author

Alexander Kent is the author of twenty-eight acclaimed books featuring Richard Bolitho. Under his own name, Douglas Reeman, and in the course of a career spanning forty-five years, he has written over thirty novels and two non-fiction books.

*Also available 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  
Success to the Brave  
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  
Band of Brothers

# Colours Aloft

Alexander Kent



arrow books

Kim, my love

'And the sailor lost his heart to her,  
but she had given him hers long before.'

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*Ebb Tide*

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IT WAS UNUSUALLY cold for mid-September and the cobbled streets of Portsmouth Point shone like metal from the overnight rain.

Vice-Admiral Sir Richard Bolitho paused at a corner and stared back at the George Inn where he had stayed for two days since his arrival from Falmouth. There was the old Blue Posts Inn too, a plume of smoke pouring from a chimney, a reminder of long-lost times when he had begun a voyage as a lowly midshipman.

He sighed and turned to his companion who was waiting for him and as they rounded the corner Bolitho felt the Solent's chill wind like a challenge.

It was morning and yet the narrow streets were all but deserted. For this was 1803 and the fragile peace had been swept away in the first broadside of May. No young man or casual idler loitered here for fear of the dreaded press gangs. Like a lesson repeating itself with little learned from before, he thought. He saw his nephew watching him, his eyes troubled, and was reminded of a remark made at the George Inn just that morning while he and Adam had played out a last cup of coffee. The man had been a traveller and had been watching the two sea officers in conversation, and later had said that he had originally taken them for brothers.

Bolitho faced his nephew, hating the moment of parting but knowing it was selfishness to detain him further. Adam Bolitho was twenty-three and in his uncle's eyes was little

changed from the day he had first joined his ship as a midshipman.

But there was a difference, a marked one. Adam had gone through danger and pain, sometimes at his side, other times not. The line of his mouth and the firmness of his chin showed he had learned well, and the solitary gold epaulette on his left shoulder said all the rest. A commander at twenty-three and now with a ship of his own. The little fourteen-gun brig *Firefly* lay out there beyond the wall, lost amongst the sprawling anchorage with its big men-of-war, transports and all the life of a naval port at war.

Bolitho looked at him fondly without really seeing him, but catching glimpses of small, swift pictures of what they shared.

He said almost without realizing it, 'Your father would have been proud of you today.'

Adam stared at him, his eyes anxious but pleased. 'That was good of you.'

Bolitho tugged down his gold-laced hat to compose himself. Then he said, 'If I had to discover a reward for myself in all this, it is here and now, seeing you about to sail with your own command.' Impetuously he gripped his arm. 'I shall *miss* you, Adam.'

Adam smiled but his eyes remained sad. 'You were looking back just now, Uncle?'

'Aye.' They fell in step again and Bolitho tried to contain the feeling of depression which had been his shadow since leaving Falmouth. Was this then the last time? Was that the cause of his apprehension? Would he end up like so many others on some torn and bloodied deck never to return home?

Adam said, 'He thought we were brothers. A compliment to me I thought.'

He laughed and Bolitho saw the midshipman again.

Bolitho adjusted the boat cloak about his shoulders. His flagship was waiting for him too. Perhaps the weight of

responsibility which lay in his sealed orders would drive away his doubts and lose them far astern like the land.

They would all be out there waiting for him. Thank God he had managed to keep Valentine Keen as his flag-captain. There would not be too many other familiar faces this time, he thought.

The Peace of Amiens, as it was called, had lasted less than a year but in that time their lordships and a complacent government had seen fit to run down the fleet in numbers and men to a maniac proportion. Sixty out of a hundred sail-of-the-line laid up, and forty thousand sailors and Royal Marines thrown on the beach. Bolitho had been lucky to stay employed when so many had lost everything. It was ironic that his last flagship, *Achates*, had fought and won the first real battle after the Peace against the odds at a time when the fleet needed to hear of a victory of any kind. It was a further twist of fate that the French admiral's ship *Argonaute*, which they had taken as a prize after one of the fiercest close actions Bolitho could recall, was now about to break his flag at the foremast. *Achates* had been an old ship and would remain in the dockyard for many more months. She had never really recovered from her earlier battles in the Caribbean. *Argonaute* was new by comparison and had been on her first commission when they had beaten her into surrender.

He wondered briefly if prize ships ever resented their new masters and onetime enemies. Bolitho had once been flag-captain in a prize ship but could not recall any strange behaviour in his command.

Anyway there was no choice. They needed every ship and experienced seaman they could get. For whereas England had allowed her strength to sap away, the old enemy across the Channel had done the reverse. New ships, young, eager captains, and a vast army bent on final victory painted a gloomy picture for the future.

Some Royal Marines were sheltering by the sally port wall and sprang to life as the two officers drew near.

It felt strange not to have Allday with him at this moment, Bolitho thought. Hogg, Keen's coxswain, would be at the stairs with the barge this time. Allday had asked to go and visit someone. That in itself was strange. Allday never asked favours or discussed personal matters, and for a moment Bolitho had wondered if he had intended to accept his earlier offers to stay ashore. He had been at sea all his life apart from a brief spell when he had learned to be a shepherd. He had earned his freedom from the navy a thousand times over. And in *Achates* his life had nearly ended. Bolitho often thought of that day when his coxswain had taken a sword thrust in the chest which should have killed him instantly. He was usually his old cheerful, irrepressible self, but the wound showed itself none the less. He found it hard to straighten his back when he walked, and Bolitho knew just how much it hurt his pride. He had often compared Allday with an oak, or a faithful dog. He was neither. He was a true friend, one whom he could trust, who saw more of Bolitho the man than any other.

They reached the stairs and Bolitho saw the barge swaying below him, Hogg, the coxswain, and a young lieutenant standing by the boat, faces upturned, heads bared. The tossed oars were in perfect white lines, the tarred hats and checkered shirts of the bargemen saying much for what Keen had already achieved with a new company.

Keen would be watching him right now with his telescope, and probably his new flag-lieutenant, Hector Stayt, whom he had also sent on ahead of him. Stayt was a fellow Cornishman whose father had served with Bolitho's father. He was highly recommended but looked more like an adventurer than someone who was supposed to show diplomacy when so required.

A thousand worries and regrets rushed through his mind but his face was composed as he turned to his nephew once again. From one corner of his eye he had seen Adam's little gig standing well clear while they waited for their youthful commander.

The tide was on the ebb and he saw an old man gathering driftwood where the shingle showed itself. The man glanced up and looked directly at the two officers. They *could* be brothers. Each with black hair and the same steady grey eyes. Adam's hair was cut short in the new fashion for sea officers; Bolitho retained the queue at the nape of his neck.

The man on the shingle threw up a mock salute and Bolitho nodded. A last farewell.

He said, 'Take each step with care, Adam. You'll get your frigate after this if you stay out of trouble.'

Adam smiled. 'I am sailing for Gibraltar with your dispatches, Uncle. After that I fear the fleet's apron strings will tether me.'

Bolitho returned his smile. It was like seeing himself being reborn. 'Apron strings can stretch.' He clasped him against his boat cloak, oblivious of the rigid marines and the watching bargemen. Almost to himself he said, 'God be with you.'

Then, as Adam doffed his new gold-laced hat and allowed his raven hair to ruffle in the wind, Bolitho hurried down the stairs. He nodded to the lieutenant. A face from the recent past, except he had been one of *Achates'* midshipmen then.

'Good day, Mr Valancey. It will be a hard pull in this wind.'

He saw the flush of pleasure on the youngster's face because he had remembered his name. Any link would help.

He seated himself in the sternsheets and then waved to Adam as, with oars dipping and rising like wings, the smart, green-painted barge thrust clear of the piles.

With unseemly haste the little gig pulled towards the stairs, and as they swept around the stern of an anchored transport the sally port was hidden from view.

There were many vessels at anchor, their black and buff hulls shining dully in the rain and spray. Beyond them the Isle of Wight was little more than a misty hump, but the wind was steady. Was he glad to go this time?

The lieutenant coughed nervously. 'The frigate yonder is *Barracouta*, sir.' He flinched as Bolitho glanced at him. The frigate must have dropped anchor this morning otherwise he would have been informed. She was to be one of his new squadron under Jeremy Lapish who had commanded a brig like Adam's when he had last served under him. In war the chance of promotion, like death, was ever present. But it was sensible of the lieutenant to tell him and also showed that he took an interest in the comings and goings within the fleet.

Bolitho said, 'What is your appointment?'

'Sixth lieutenant, sir.' One step up from the gunroom.

Hogg swore under his breath and snarled, '*Oars!* Easy there!'

The oar blades hovered, dripping and motionless, as Hogg put his weight on the tiller bar. A longboat was cutting directly across their path, so full of people it looked almost awash.

Hogg glared at the youthful lieutenant and when he remained silent cupped his hands and bellowed, 'Stand away there! Make way for a King's officer!'

Somebody waved and the longboat veered towards some nearby transports.

Bolitho saw that one of the passengers was a young girl, her head and shoulders unprotected against the spray and wet breeze. She twisted round between two companions to see who was shouting and Bolitho's eyes met hers across fifty feet of tossing whitecaps. He stared at one of her hands as she gripped the gunwale. She wore manacles on her wrists, but she turned away before he could see more.

He asked quietly, 'Who are those people?'

Hogg eased the tiller carefully, still outraged that such a thing could happen under the eyes of *his* admiral.

He said gruffly, 'Convicts, sir.'

Bolitho looked away. Going to Botany Bay probably. What had she done, he wondered? Who was she?

'Ready, bowman!' Hogg was gauging the last cable or so with great care.

Bolitho saw the tapered masts of *Argonaute* as the barge swept around another two-decker. She was a fine-looking ship, he conceded, shining in her new livery with a huge Red Ensign streaming out from her poop to welcome him aboard. She had fine graceful lines and Bolitho knew from hard experience she was an excellent sailer. Her poop deck was rather longer than her English counterparts but otherwise she was little different from any seventy-four, the backbone of the fleet.

But as she drew closer Bolitho saw there were slight differences which any Frenchman would notice. The stronger bow and stiffly raked jib boom and the gilded stern gallery which seemed almost flamboyant after earlier French ships. It was hard to see her with her decks puddled in blood, as embattled men hacked and thrust at each other to hold their ground. Many good hands died that day and on their way home to Plymouth. The dockyard had done magic with their battered charge, Bolitho thought. He had been tempted to visit his new flagship several times during her refit and repairs but had stayed away. Keen would hardly have been pleased to have his admiral come aboard in the midst of such confusion.

Bolitho had wanted to go, needed to see and speak with people he understood. He tossed the cloak from his shoulders to reveal the gleaming epaulettes, each with its two silver stars. Vice-Admiral-of-the-Red, apart from Nelson the youngest on the Navy list. Even that he could not get used to. Like the title which had made everyone so pleased but which left him feeling awkward, embarrassed.

More pictures flashed through his mind as he watched the ship and gripped the old family sword between his knees.

London, the bright liveries and bowing footmen. The hush as he knelt before His Britannic Majesty, the lightest tap of the sword on his shoulder. Sir Richard Bolitho of Falmouth. It had been a proud moment surely? Belinda had looked so radiantly happy. Adam and Allday beaming like schoolchildren. And yet -

He saw a cluster of figures around the entry port, the blues and whites of the officers, the scarlet of the marines. His world. They would be watching his every move. Usually Allday would have been on hand to make sure he did not lose his balance or trip over his sword.

The thought of ever being without Allday was beyond belief after what they had seen and endured together. He would be aboard before the ship weighed. He must. *I need him more than ever.*

He saw the lieutenant staring at him and for a terrible moment imagined he had spoken aloud.

But Valancey was merely anxious and stood aside as Bolitho waited for the barge to sway heavily against *Argonaute's* fat flank.

Then he was swarming up the side and through the entry port, his ears cringing to the slap and click of bayoneted muskets presenting arms, and the fifes and drums breaking into 'Heart of Oak'.

There was Keen, his fair hair visible as he doffed his hat and strode to meet him, even as Bolitho's flag broke smartly from the foremast truck.

'Welcome, Sir Richard.'

Keen smiled, not realizing that the greeting had caught Bolitho unawares. It sounded like somebody else.

'I am glad to be here.' Bolitho nodded to the assembled officers and the watch on deck. If he had still expected to see some sign of the battle he was disappointed. Newly paid deck seams and blacked-down rigging. Neatly furled sails

and every upper-deck eighteen-pounder with all its tackles and gear perfectly in line as if on parade.

He looked along the deck and through the criss-cross of standing and running rigging. He could see the white shoulder of the figurehead, depicting the handsome youth who had been one of Jason's crew in the mythical *Argo*. Less than three years old from the day she had slid into the water at Brest. A new ship by any standard, with a full complement of six hundred and twenty souls, officers, seamen and Royal Marines, although he doubted if even the resourceful Keen had gathered anywhere near that total.

They walked aft beneath the poop deck. By making it longer than in English third-rates, the builders had given better and more spacious accommodation to the officers. In battle, however, as in any man-of-war, the deck would be completely cleared from bow to stern so that every gun, large or small, could be worked without obstruction.

They ducked beneath the deckhead beams and Bolitho saw a marine sentry marking the screen doors of his quarters right aft.

'When Allday comes aboard, Val, I want - '

Keen glanced at him curiously. 'He preceded you, Sir Richard.'

Bolitho felt a great sense of relief, as he had of fear when Allday had been hacked down on that terrible day.

It was quite dark between decks and Bolitho allowed his feet to guide him by instinct. The smells were like old friends. Tar, oakum, paint, damp canvas. Like the ship's fabric itself.

He nodded to the marine sentry and entered the stern cabin. A spacious dining table brought from Falmouth, the wine cabinet which followed him from ship to ship, and aft in the broad day cabin a fine carpet laid upon the black and white check canvas covering of the deck.

Keen watched his reactions as little mole-like Ozzard, who had been aboard for several days, hurried from the sleeping

space. He too watched as Bolitho walked slowly to The Chair.

Bolitho had had it made in Falmouth. Belinda had disagreed about it and thought he should have something more elegant, as suited his position.

Bolitho touched the high back, which, like the rest of the chair, was covered with dark green leather. It was soft as a woman's skin under his hand.

He handed his sword to Ozzard and sat down in the chair which would become so important when he could share none of his doubts and worries with his subordinates. Strong arms to rest on, a high back to shut out things or people when needed.

Keen grinned. 'Came aboard an hour before we quit Plymouth Sound.' Feet pattered overhead and Keen moved towards the door.

Bolitho smiled, 'Be off with you, Val. You've much to do. We shall speak later.'

The door closed and he watched his cabin servant padding about with a tray and some glasses. Was Ozzard sorry to be leaving the security and safety of Falmouth? If so, he did not show it. Bolitho waited for Ozzard to place a glass of claret by his side and then withdraw to his pantry. A fine servant, dedicated even beyond his unfailing terror whenever a ship cleared for action. He was well read and full of surprises for one so small and mild. He had once been a lawyer's clerk. It was said he had gone to sea to escape jail or worse. Like Allday, he was totally dependable.

He glanced around the great cabin. Contre-Amiral Jobert must have sat here often enough in those other days. Must have cocked his head when he heard the lookouts cry out that they had sighted *Achates*.

The other door opened and Yovell entered with the usual pack of letters under one arm.

'Good day, Mr Yovell.'

'Good morning, Sir Richard.'

They smiled at one another like conspirators. For if Bolitho had gained a title, Yovell's status had been raised from mere clerk to secretary. With his sloping, fat shoulders and small gold-rimmed spectacles he looked like a prosperous merchant.

Yovell had found a new clerk to assist him, a fresh-faced youth named John Pinkney, whose family had lived in Falmouth for many generations. Ozzard too had gained an assistant; his name was Twigg, but Bolitho had only seen him once when he had called at the house in Falmouth.

He found he was on his feet and was pacing the cabin as if he was trapped.

There was so much he had wanted to say to Belinda. There had been a strangeness between them since their visit to London. She loved him, but because of the difficult time she had had during Elizabeth's birth there had been a barrier. A coolness. He could not be certain if -

He looked up, angry without knowing why, as the sentry tapped his musket on the deck and called, 'Admiral's cox'n, *sir!*'

That marine would soon get to know that Allday came and went as he pleased.

Allday came in and stood in the middle of the carpet, his head just beneath the skylight.

He looked little changed, Bolitho thought, in his blue jacket with the special gilt buttons, and his nankeen trousers to mark him out as the admiral's coxswain.

'All done, Allday?' Perhaps he would shake him out of his gloom.

Allday stared around the cabin and then back to Bolitho and the new chair.

'Fact is, sir.' He fidgeted with his coat. 'I had a bit o' news.'

Bolitho sat down. 'Well, what is it, man?'

'I've got a son, sir.'

Bolitho exclaimed, 'You *what?*'

Allday grinned sheepishly. 'Somebody wrote a letter, sir. Ferguson read it to me, me not bein' able - '

Bolitho nodded. Ferguson, his steward in Falmouth, could always keep a secret. He and Allday were as thick as thieves.

Allday continued, 'There was a girl I used to know. On the farm, it was. Pretty little thing, smart as paint. Seems she died, just a few weeks back.' He looked at Bolitho with sudden desperation. 'Well, I mean, sir, I couldn't just do nothin', could I?'

Bolitho sat back in the chair and watched the emotions hurrying across Allday's homely face.

'Are you certain about this?'

'Aye, sir. I - I'd like you to speak with him, if it's not too much to ask?'

Feet moved overhead and somewhere a boatswain's call trilled to summon more hands to hoist some stores inboard. In the cabin it seemed apart, remote from that other shipboard life.

'You brought him aboard then?'

'He volunteered, sir. He's worn the King's coat afore.' There was pride in his voice now. 'I just need - ' He broke off and looked at his shoes. 'I shouldn't have asked - '

Bolitho walked over to him and touched his arm. 'Bring him aft when you're ready. Blast your eyes man, you have the *right* to ask what you will!'

They stared at each other, then Allday said simply, 'I'll do that, sir.'

The door opened and Keen looked in at them. He said, 'I thought you should know, Sir Richard, *Firefly* has just weighed and is setting her tops'ls.'

Bolitho smiled. 'Thank you.' He looked at Allday. 'Come, we'll watch him leave, eh?'

Allday took the old sword down from its rack and waited to clip it to Bolitho's belt.

He said quietly, 'He'll need a good cox'n of his own afore long, an' that's no error.'

They looked at each other and understood.

Keen watched them and forgot all the demands, the signals which awaited attention and which he must discuss with his admiral. Bolitho and Allday were the rock which would stand when all else fell. He was surprised to discover that this realization still moved him deeply.

Several of the hands working about the quarterdeck withdrew as Bolitho and their captain walked to the nettings. Bolitho could feel their eyes even though his back was turned. They would be pondering on his reputation both as their leader and as a man.

The little brig was heeling over to the wind, showing her copper as she tacked between two anchored seventy-fours.

Bolitho took a glass from the signals midshipman. The youth seemed vaguely familiar. He trained the glass across the nettings and for a few moments saw *Firefly's* commander staring across at him, near enough to touch. He was waving his hat slowly from side to side, then one of the ships shut him from view. Bolitho lowered the glass and the scene fell away into the distance.

He handed the telescope to the midshipman. 'Thank you, Mr - '

'Sheaffe, Sir Richard.'

Bolitho eyed him curiously. Of course. He should have remembered that Admiral Sir Hayward Sheaffe had made a point of putting one of his sons in *Argonaute*. It was unlike him to forget such things. Even Keen's comment, 'Lose the brat overboard and I'll lose my command to boot!'

He had visited Sheaffe at the Admiralty several times since his return to England. One rank only separated them. It could have been an ocean.

Keen was watching him and as they walked to the opposite side said, 'There was no real urgency to come

aboard just yet, sir. It may be another week before the full squadron is assembled here.'

He thinks I need to leave the land, Bolitho thought.

He said, 'A small enough squadron it will be too, Val. Four sail-of-the-line, *Barracouta* and the little brig *Rapid*.'

Keen grinned. 'There is also *Supreme*, sir.'

Bolitho smiled ruefully. 'Tops'l cutter. She hardly ranks with her name, eh?'

He considered the three other seventy-fours. One familiar face amongst them. Captain Francis Inch was in command. Bolitho swung round, his voice almost pleading as he asked, 'What has become of us, Val? *We happy few*, remember?'

Keen said, 'I think of it often.' Bolitho's mood disturbed him. He had heard the reason, or some of it, the rest he could guess. Bolitho's beautiful wife was concerned about his career, although to most sailors a vice-admiral, with or without a knighthood, was about level with the Almighty.

She wanted him to leave Falmouth, to purchase a fine residence in London where his name would be noted and acted upon.

Leave Falmouth? Keen had been at their wedding there, and knew the Bolitho house below Pendennis Castle better than most. Bolithos had always lived there; it was as much a part of them as the sea itself.

Bolitho was looking across at his one frigate *Barracouta*. Lapish, her young captain, had less than three years' seniority, not even posted. The sight of the anchored frigate, her yards and decks alive with working seamen, jabbed at another memory. The first time he had spoken sharply to Belinda. She had been talking about Nelson. Practically everyone did in London, but not of his courage and his victories, but about his outrageous and unacceptable behaviour with *that woman*.

Belinda had said, 'You rank the same as Nelson, but he has a fleet whereas you are being given a squadron!'

Bolitho had said, 'A fleet is not built on favours!'

Curiously enough, despite his fame and his position, Nelson had only two frigates for his whole command, but Bolitho had been too upset to mention the point at the time.

The little admiral had hoisted his flag in *Victory*, that old and respected first-rate, and had sailed for the Mediterranean to seek out the French at Toulon or make sure they stayed bottled up like those in the Channel Ports.

He had seen Belinda recoil at his tone and they had stared at each other like strangers.

She had said quietly, 'I say and do things because I care.'

Bolitho had retorted, 'Because you think you know best! *This* is our home, not London!'

Now, watching the ships, remembering lost faces, he wondered what had really provoked him. Enough to bring him here, no matter what it was.

He said softly, 'All those men, little more than boys some of them. Farquhar, Keverne, Veitch,' he looked away, 'young John Neale, remember? And the rest, where are they? Dead, maimed, ekeing out their lives in one poxy hospital or another, and for what?'

Keen had never seen him like this before. 'We'll beat the Frogs, sir.'

Bolitho gripped his arm. 'I daresay. But a lot of good men will have to pay for others' complacency and stupidity.'

He controlled his voice and said calmly, 'I will go aft and read my dispatches. Dine with me tonight, eh, Val?'

Keen touched his hat and watched him leave the quarterdeck. He saw Stayt, the new flag-lieutenant, strolling towards the poop and wondered if he could replace Bolitho's nephew or the previous aide Browne. He smiled sadly. *With an 'e'*.

Keen walked to the quarterdeck rail and rested his hand on it. Soon the ship would be alive again, a working creature, driven by her pyramids of canvas, expected to deal with anything, anywhere. He glanced up to Bolitho's flag at the fore. There was no man he would rather serve,

none he respected more. Loved. From the moment he had joined Bolitho's ship as a midshipman he had found his affection growing. Amidst death and danger in the Great South Sea, when Bolitho had almost died of fever, he had still found the strength to support him in his own loss. Keen still thought of the lovely Malua, who had died of the same terrible fever. Unlike most sea officers, he had never married, had never really recovered from losing her.

He looked along his command and felt vaguely pleased with all they had achieved in so short a time. He recalled the never-ending broadsides, the carnage above and below decks in that last battle. He touched his left shoulder where a splinter had smashed him down. It still ached on occasions. But he was alive. He looked at the men high above the decks working at their endless splicing and other ropework.

It had been his good fortune to retain some of the older, seasoned men from *Achates*. Big Harry Rooke, the boatswain; Grace, the carpenter, who had been worth his weight in gold during the refit at Plymouth. Even Black Joe Langtry, the fearsome looking master-at-arms, had come aboard *Argonaute*. But they were still well short of seamen. He rubbed his chin as he had seen Bolitho do when he was considering a problem. The port admiral and a local magistrate were doing their best, but Keen wanted prime seamen, not felons. The thought made him glance across at the two big transports, one an ex-Indiaman by the look of her. They were to carry convicts to the new colony. Was it the right way to expand a place, he wondered? A felon was a felon and the gallows a fitter end for his kind.

Paget, the first lieutenant, crossed the deck and touched his hat. 'Permission to exercise the lower battery during the afternoon watch, sir?'

Keen saw him glance aft to the poop and smiled. 'Have no fear, Mr Paget, our admiral greatly approves of efficient gunnery! So do I!'

Paget walked away. A good lieutenant, slightly older than the others, he had been in the merchant service for a time during the Peace of Amiens. He should have a command, albeit a small one. The little *Supreme's* new commander, Hallowes, had been Keen's fourth lieutenant until the battle. Keen could see it now. Adam Bolitho and Hallowes in a madcap attack on *Argonaute's* stern. With a handful of men they had placed charges around the mainmast and brought it down like a gigantic tree. The enemy had struck almost immediately. So why not Paget? His report was good and he seemed competent enough.

Keen began to pace up and down, his chin in his neck-cloth, momentarily oblivious to the rattle of blocks and the hoarse cries of his petty officers as more stores were hauled aboard. Time would tell. One thing was certain, it would be a harder war this time. The feeling of being cheated, even betrayed, after so short-lived a peace would put an edge on every temper.

It would be good to see Inch again, to watch his long horse-face light up when he met Bolitho. It was a sobering thought to realize that Inch and himself were the only post-captains in the squadron. Inch's two-decker *Helicon* would arrive from the Nore at any time. Then, under orders once more, they would put out to sea where every sighting would likely be hostile. To Gibraltar, and then?

While Keen paced the deck immersed in his thoughts, Bolitho wandered about his unfamiliar quarters as Ozzard and some extra hands moved his possessions into their new places.

The old sword was on its rack above the fine presentation one from Falmouth's public subscription. He could remember quite clearly his father giving him the old blade in the grey house where he had been born.

He said gravely, 'England needs all her sons now.' He had been grieving for Hugh's disgrace, his desertion from the

Navy. Hugh should have been given the sword. It would be Adam's one day.

Bolitho walked into the sleeping compartment and stared at himself in his mirror. Where had the years gone? He would be forty-seven next month. He looked ten years younger but the thought, like the others, disturbed him.

He thought of Belinda, back in Falmouth. Would there be more changes when he returned? He grimaced at his reflection then turned away. 'If, more like.'

Ozzard started. 'Sir?'

Bolitho smiled. 'Nothing. I have been ashore for too many weeks. The next horizon will cure that directly.'

Ozzard was packing things into drawers and a fine hanging wardrobe. He liked to be busy. He hesitated over one drawer and made to tidy some new shirts. His fingers touched a miniature portrait of a girl with long chestnut hair and green eyes. She was so beautiful, he thought.

Twigg, his new assistant, peered over his shoulder. 'Shall we 'ang it, Tom? I would if I 'ad a wife like 'er!'

'Get about your work!' Ozzard closed the drawer carefully. It was not Twigg's fault, the miniature looked very like Lady Belinda. But Ozzard knew differently: he had heard Bolitho call out her name when he had been badly wounded. *Cheney*.

Why did she have to die? He picked up a pair of shoes and regarded them unseeingly.

The deck rolled slightly and Ozzard sighed.

This was a life he had come to understand. Better than those poor devils in the convict ships. He gave a gentle smile. If fate had been less kind he might have taken the same one-way passage.

Three days later the small squadron with *Argonaute* in the van stood down-Channel in a brisk northerly wind.

They had sailed on the ebb, but there was no letter. Bolitho locked his own in the strongbox and watched the

land slipping away into the dusk. *My England, when shall I see you again?*

It was like a cry from the heart, but only the sea replied.

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*In Distress*

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BOLITHO WALKED ACROSS the poop and idly watched the other three ships-of-the-line following astern. It was two long days since they had weighed anchor at Spithead and, apart from sail and gun drill, there had been little to break the monotony.

Inch's *Helicon* was directly astern, with *Dispatch* and *Icarus* in direct line although not without a few forthright signals from the flagship.

They had to learn good station-keeping and to respond to every signal without delay. There would be no time later on.

Far away on the starboard quarter, with only her pale topsails showing above the sea and spray, the solitary frigate *Barracouta* held carefully to windward, ready to dash down and investigate any sighting or support her heavy consorts if so ordered. Bolitho could picture them all, and their captains whom he had seen just briefly prior to sailing. The brig *Rapid* and the small, rakish cutter *Supreme* were sweeping far ahead of their flagship, Bolitho's eyes and intelligence.

Bolitho had decided to leave the briefing to Keen when the captains had assembled in *Argonaute's* wardroom. He had always hated speeches just for the want of making them. When they reached the Rock he would know better what was expected and would then lay his intentions before the others.

Inch's face had been creased with delight when Bolitho had greeted him aboard. He had not changed. Still eager and completely trusting, Bolitho knew he could never share his doubts with one so loyal. Inch would agree with everything he said and did, even to the mouth of Hell.

He turned to watch the hands at work on the gundeck. He had noticed several faces he knew from the *Achates*. He had remarked to Keen that it did him credit they had volunteered to serve under him again. He had not seen Keen smile to himself, just as it had never occurred to him that they might have volunteered because of their admiral.

He had seen the loping, misshapen Crocker, the gun-captain who had blown down this ship's mainmast and so finished the battle, looking no different despite his new uniform. He had gained promotion to gunner's mate and was rarely far away when the drills were carried out.

He saw Allday on the larboard gangway with a fresh-faced youth he guessed was his newly discovered son. It did not seem possible, and he wondered when Allday would decide the time was right and proper to bring him aft to the great cabin. Allday would know better than anyone Bolitho's dislike of showing favours in a crowded man-of-war. He would doubtless judge the moment perfectly.

Two bells chimed out from the forecastle and Bolitho stirred restlessly. He felt so apart from the ship and those who followed his flag. Keen and his officers dealt with everything, and day by day *Argonaute's* company were led, encouraged and driven into a working team. Minutes were knocked off the time for clearing for action, for reefing and making sail, but Bolitho could only share it at a distance.

The hours dragged heavily and he found himself envying Keen as well as the other captains who had their ships to fill their days.

He walked to the opposite side and stared at the dull, grey sea with its serried ranks of wave crests. One hundred miles abeam was Lorient. He glanced forward to the figurehead's