


RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS

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Tradition of Victory  
Alexander Kent

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The Life and Times of Richard Bolitho

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## About the Book

June 1801 - After eight years of war between Britain and France there is at last a rumour of peace. But the old enemies are well aware that any settlement will be only a breathing space in which to recover from their terrible losses. To obtain the best terms the French muster a show of strength from Biscay to the Channel ports. At the British Admiralty there are some who see a daring opportunity to even the score at any negotiation table - and who better to undertake it than the young Rear Admiral Bolitho!

Bolitho's small squadron is still repairing the scars of battle earned at Copenhagen - and as he receives his orders from London Bolitho is, for the first time in his life, torn between the demands of duty and his real desire to marry. When the squadron sails it is joined by an additional ship, a frigate with many memories from the past. But where Bolitho's flag leads so his captains must follow, if necessary to the brink of disaster - for theirs is a tradition of victory.

## 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 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  
Success to the Brave  
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  
Band of Brothers  
Heart of Oak

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

- 1756 Bom 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 Karenza 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*)

# A TRADITION OF VICTORY

Alexander Kent



arrow books

*For Winifred,  
with my love*

God and the Sailor we alike adore  
But only when in danger, not before:  
The danger o'er, both are alike  
requited,  
God is forgotten and the sailor slighted.

JOHN OWEN

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*A Touch of Land*

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EVEN FOR THE West Country of England the summer of 1801 was rare with its cloudless blue skies and generous sunlight. In Plymouth, on this bustling July forenoon, the glare was so bright that the ships which seemed to cover the water from the Hamoaze to the Sound itself danced and shimmered to lessen the grimness of their gundecks and the scars of those which had endured the fury of battle.

A smart gig pulled purposefully beneath the stern of a tall three-decker and skilfully avoided a cumbersome lighter loaded almost to the gills with great casks and barrels of water. The gig's pale oars rose and fell together, and her crew in their checkered shirts and tarred hats were a credit to her ship and coxswain. The latter was gauging the comings and goings of other harbour craft, but his mind was firmly on the gig's passenger, Captain Thomas Herrick, whom he had just carried from the jetty.

Herrick was well aware of his coxswain's apprehension, just as he could sense the tension from the way his gig's crew carefully avoided his eye as they feathered their blades and made the boat scud across the water like a bright beetle.

It had been a long, tiresome journey from Kent, Herrick's home, and as the distance from Plymouth had fallen away he had started to fret over what he would discover.

His ship, the seventy-four-gun *Benbow*, had arrived in Plymouth barely a month back. It was incredible to believe

that it was less than three months since the bloody fight itself, the one which was now called the Battle of Copenhagen. The small Inshore Squadron, of which *Benbow* was the flagship, had fought with distinction. Everyone had said so, and the *Gazette* had hinted that but for their efforts 'things' might have gone very differently.

Herrick shifted on his thwart and frowned. He did not notice the stroke oarsman flinch under his stare, nor was he conscious of seeing him at all. Herrick was forty-four years old, and had made the hard and treacherous climb to his present appointment with neither influence nor patronage. He had heard it all before, and despised those who spoke of a sea-fight as if it were a kind of umpired contest.

Those sort of folk never saw the carnage, the broken bodies and minds which went with each encounter. The tangle of cordage and splintered timbers and spars which had to be put to rights without so much as a by-your-leave so that the ruin could be restored into a fighting ship and sent where she could be best used.

He glanced around the busy anchorage. Ships taking on stores, others being refitted. His eye rested on a lithe frigate, mastless and riding high above her reflection, uncluttered by guns and men, as she swung to her warps from a slipway. *Just launched*. He saw the waving hats and arms, the bright flags curling along her empty gunports, her growing confidence like that of a newly dropped colt.

Herrick frowned again. After eight years of constant war with France and her allies they were still short of frigates. Where would this one go? Who would command her and find glory or ignominy?

Herrick turned and looked at the young lieutenant who had come out to collect him with the gig. He must have arrived during his seven precious days in Kent. He was so pale and young, so unsure of himself that Herrick could barely see him as a newly joined midshipman, let alone a

lieutenant. But the war had taken so many that the whole fleet seemed to be manned by boys and old men.

It was useless to ask *him* anything. He was scared of his own shadow.

Herrick glanced up at his square-shouldered coxswain as he steered the boat beneath another tapering bowsprit and glaring figurehead.

This shivering boy posing as a lieutenant had met him at the jetty, doffed his hat and had stammered in one breath, 'The first lieutenant's respects, sir, and the admiral is come aboard.'

Thank God the first lieutenant had been there to greet him, Herrick thought grimly. But what was Rear-Admiral Bolitho, an officer he had served in many parts of the world, a man whom he loved more than any other, doing aboard *Benbow now?*

It was easy to see him in those last moments outside Copenhagen. The smoke, the terrible din of falling spars and the jarring crash of cannon fire, and always Bolitho had been there. Waving them on. Driving them, leading them with all the reckless determination only he could use. Except that Herrick, who carried the pride deep within him of being his greatest friend, knew the real man underneath. The doubts and the fears, the excitement at a challenge, the despair at the waste of life if wrongly cast away.

Their homecoming should have been different for him above all others. This time there was a woman waiting. A beautiful girl who could and would be a reprieve from all which Bolitho had held dear and had previously lost. Bolitho had been going to London, to the Admiralty, and then back again to his home in Cornwall, that big grey house in Falmouth.

The gig straightened up on the last leg of the journey, and Herrick held his breath as he saw his ship stand out from the other anchored vessels, her black and buff tumblehome shining in the sunlight as a personal welcome. Only a

professional seaman, and above all her captain, would see beyond the fresh paint and pitch, the blacked-down rigging and neatly furled canvas. The *Benbow's* fat hull was almost hemmed in by lighters and moored platforms. The air vibrated with the din of hammers and saws, and even as he watched another great bundle of new cordage was being swayed aloft to the mizzen topmast, the one which had been shot away in battle. But *Benbow* was a new ship and had the strength of two older consorts. She had suffered badly, but was out of dock, and within months would be at sea again with her squadron. In spite of his usual caution, Herrick was pleased and proud with what they had done. Being Herrick, it never occurred to him that much of the success had been due to his own inspiration and his tireless efforts to get *Benbow* ready for sea.

His eyes rested on the mizzen mast and the flag which flapped only occasionally from its truck. The flag of a Rear-Admiral of the Red, but to Herrick it meant so much more. At least he had been able to share it with his new wife, Dulcie. Herrick had been married such a short time, and yet as he had given his sister away in marriage to the beanpole Lieutenant George Gilchrist, just four days back in Maidstone, he had felt like a husband of long years standing. He smiled, his round, homely face losing its sternness as he thought about it. His own ability to offer advice on marriage!

The bowman stood up with his boathook at the ready.

*Benbow* had risen right above the gig as Herrick's mind had drifted away. Close alongside he could see the repaired timbers, the paint which now hid the blood from the scuppers. As if the ship and not her people had been bleeding to death.

The oars were tossed and Tuck, the coxswain, removed his hat. Their eyes met and Herrick gave a quick smile. 'Thank you, Tuck. Smart turnout.'

They understood each other.

Herrick looked up at the entry port and prepared himself for the thousandth time. Once he had never believed he would ever hold his rank of lieutenant. The step from wardroom to quarterdeck, and now to being the flag-captain to one of the finest sea-officers alive, was even harder to accept.

Like the new house in Kent. Not a cottage, but a real house, with a full admiral living nearby and several rich merchants too. Dulcie had assured him, 'Nothing is too good for you, dear Thomas. You've worked for it, you deserve far more.'

Herrick sighed. Most of the money had been hers anyway. How had he ever managed to be so lucky, to find his Dulcie?

'Marines! *Atten-shun!*'

A cloud of pipeclay floated above the stolid faces and black shakoes as the muskets banged to the present, and, as the air cringed to the twitter of the boatswains' calls, Herrick removed his hat to the quarterdeck and to Wolfe, his towering first lieutenant, the most ungainly, but certainly one of the best seamen Herrick had ever met.

The din faded away, and Herrick looked at the side party with sadness. So many new faces to learn. But now he only saw the others who had died in the battle or were suffering the pain and humiliation of some naval hospital.

But Major Clinton of the marines was still here. And beyond his scarlet shoulder Herrick saw old Ben Grubb, the sailing master. He was lucky to have so many seasoned hands to weld the recruits and pressed men into some kind of company.

'Well, Mr Wolfe, maybe *you* can tell me why the admiral's flag is aloft?'

He fell in step with the lieutenant with the two wings of bright ginger hair poking from beneath his hat like studding sails. It was as if he had never been away. As if the ship had swallowed him up and the distant shore with its

shimmering houses and embrazured batteries was of no importance.

Wolfe said in his flat, harsh voice, 'The admiral came off shore yesterday afternoon, sir.' He shot out a massive fist and pointed at some newly coiled halliards. 'What's that lot? Bloody birds'-nests?' He swung away from the transfixed sailor and bellowed, 'Mr Swale, take this idiot's name! He should be a damned weaver, not a seaman!'

Wolfe added, breathing hard, 'Most of the new hands are like that. The sweepings of the assizes, with a sprinkling of trained ones.' He tapped his big nose. 'Got *them* off an Indiaman. They said they were free from service in a King's ship. They *said* they had the papers to prove it too.'

Herrick gave a wry smile. 'But their ship had sailed by the time you sorted things out, Mr Wolfe?'

Like his first lieutenant, Herrick had little sympathy with all the prime seamen who were exempt from naval service merely because they were employed by John Company or some harbour authority. England was at war. They needed seamen, not cripples and criminals. Every day it got harder. Herrick had heard that the press gangs and undaunted recruiting parties were working many miles from the sea now.

He glanced up at the towering mainmast and its imposing spread of rigging and crossed yards. It was not difficult to remember the smoke and the punctured sails. The marines in the maintop yelling and cheering, firing swivels and muskets in a world gone mad.

They walked into the coolness of the poop, each ducking between the heavy deckhead beams.

Wolfe said, 'The admiral came alone, sir.' He hesitated, as if to test their relationship. 'I thought he might bring his lady.'

Herrick eyed him gravely. Wolfe was huge and violent and had seen service in everything from a slaver to a collier brig. He was not the kind of man to be patient with a

laggard or allow time for personal weaknesses. But neither was he a gossip.

Herrick said simply, 'I had hopes too. By God, if ever a man deserved or needed —'

The rest of his words were cut dead as the marine sentry outside the great cabin tapped his musket smartly on the deck and shouted, 'Flag-Captain, *sah!*'

Wolfe grinned and turned aside. 'Damned bullocks!'

The door was opened swiftly by little Ozzard, Bolitho's personal servant. He was an oddity. Although a good servant, he was said to have been an even better lawyer's clerk, but had fled to the Navy rather than face trial or, as some had unkindly hinted, a quick end on a hangman's halter.

The great cabin, divided by white screens from the dining and sleeping quarters, had been freshly painted, and the deck was once more covered by checkered canvas with no hint of the battle scars underneath.

Bolitho had been leaning out of a stern window, and as he turned to greet his friend, Herrick felt relieved that there was apparently no change. His gold-laced rear-admiral's coat lay carelessly across a chair, and he wore only his shirt and breeches. His black hair, with the one loose lock above his right eye, and his ready smile made him seem more like a lieutenant than a flag-officer.

They held hands momentarily, compressing the memories and the pictures into a few seconds.

Bolitho said, 'Some hock, Ozzard.' He pulled a chair for Herrick. 'Sit you down, Thomas. It is *good* to see you.'

His level grey eyes held on to his friend for a moment longer. Herrick was sturdier, his face a mite rounder, but that would be his new wife's care and cooking. There were a few touches of grey on his brown hair, like frost on a strong bush. But the clear blue eyes which could be so stubborn and so hurt were the same.

They touched their goblets and Bolitho added, 'What is your state of readiness, Thomas?'

Herrick almost choked on his wine. *Readiness?* A month in port, and two of the squadron's strength lost forever during the battle! Even their smallest two-decker, the sixty-four-gun *Odin*, under the command of Captain Inch, had barely reached safety at the Nore, so deep by the bows had she been. Here in Plymouth, the *Indomitable* and the *Nicator*, seventy-fours like *Benbow*, were in the throes of repair.

He said carefully, '*Nicator* will be ready for sea soon, sir. The rest of the squadron should be reporting readiness by September, if we can bribe some help from these dockyard thieves!'

'And *Styx*, what of her?'

Even as he asked of the squadron's one surviving frigate, Bolitho saw the faraway look in his friend's eyes. They had lost their other frigate and a sloop-of-war. Wiped away, like footprints on a beach at high water.

Herrick allowed Ozzard to refill the goblet before answering, '*Styx* is working night and day, sir. Captain Neale seems able to inspire miracles from his people.' He added apologetically, 'I have only just returned from Kent, sir, but I shall be able to give you a full report by the end of the day.'

Bolitho had risen to his feet, as if the chair could no longer contain his restlessness.

'Kent?' He smiled. 'Forgive me, Thomas. I forgot. I am too full of my own problems to ask about your visit. How did the wedding go?'

As Herrick related the events which culminated in the marriage of his sister to his one-time first lieutenant, Bolitho found his mind moving away again.

When he had returned to Falmouth after the battle at Copenhagen he had been happier, more content than he could believe possible. To have survived had been one

thing. To arrive at the Bolitho home with his nephew, Adam Pascoe, and his coxswain and friend, John Allday, had been crowned by the girl who had been waiting there for him. Belinda; he still found it hard to speak her name without fear that it was another dream, a ruse to taunt him back to hard reality.

The squadron, the battle, everything had seemed to fade as they had explored the old house like strangers. Made plans together. Had vowed not to waste a single minute while Bolitho was released from duty.

There was even a rumour of peace in the air. After all the years of war, blockade and violent death, it was said that secret negotiations were being made in London and Paris to stop the fighting, to gain a respite without loss of honour to either side. Even that had seemed possible in Bolitho's new dreamlike world.

But within two weeks a courier had come from London with orders for Bolitho to report to the Admiralty to visit his old superior and mentor, Admiral Sir George Beauchamp, who had given him command of the Baltic Inshore Squadron in the first place.

Even then Bolitho had seen the courier's dramatic despatch as nothing more than a necessary interruption.

Belinda had walked with him to the carriage, her eyes laughing, her body warm against his as she had told him of her plans, what she would do to prepare for their marriage while he was in London. She would be staying at the squire's house until they were finally married, for there were always loose tongues in a seaport like Falmouth, and Bolitho wanted nothing to spoil it. He disliked Lewis Roxby, the squire, intensely, and could not imagine what his sister Nancy had seen in him when she had married him. But he could be relied on to keep her entertained and occupied with his horses and his spreading empire of farms and villages.

Behind his back, Roxby's servants called him the King of Cornwall.

The shock had really hit Bolitho when he had been ushered into Admiral Beauchamp's chambers. He had always been a small, frail man, seemingly weighed down as much by his epaulettes and gold lace as the tremendous responsibility he held and the interest he retained wherever a British man-of-war sailed on the King's service. Hunched at his littered table, Beauchamp had been unable to rise and greet him. In his sixties, he had looked a hundred years old, and only his eyes had held their fire and alertness.

'I will not waste time, Bolitho. You have little to squander, I daresay. I have none left at all.'

He was dying with each hour and every tight breath, and Bolitho had been both moved and fascinated by the intensity of the little man's words, the enthusiasm which had always been his greatest quality.

'Your squadron performed with excellence.' A hand like a claw had dragged blindly over the litter of papers on the table. 'Good men lost, but others rising to replace them.' He had nodded as if the words were too heavy for him. 'I am asking a lot of you. Probably too much, I don't know. You have heard about the peace proposals?' His deepset eyes had caught the reflected sunlight from the tall windows. Like lights in a skull. 'The rumours are true. We need peace, a peace moulded within the necessity of hypocrisy, to give us time, a breathing space before the final encounter.'

Bolitho had asked quietly, 'You do not trust them, sir?'

'*Never!*' The word had drained the strength from him, and it had taken several moments before Beauchamp had continued, 'The French will force the most advantageous terms for a settlement. To obtain them they are already filling their channel ports with invasion craft and barges, and the troops and artillery to fill them. Bonaparte hopes to

frighten our people into a covenant advantageous only to him. When his wounds are healed, his ships and regiments replenished, he will tear up the treaty and attack us. There will be no second chance this time.'

After another pause, Beauchamp had said in a dull voice, 'We *must* give our people confidence. Show them we can still attack as well as defend. It is the only way we'll even the odds at the tables. For years we've driven the French back into their ports or fought them to surrender. Blockade and patrol, line-of-battle or single ship actions, it is what has made our Navy *great*. Bonaparte is a soldier, he does not understand these matters, and will take no advice from those who know better, thank God.'

His voice had grown weaker, and Bolitho had almost decided to call for assistance for the small, limp figure at the table.

Then Beauchamp had jerked his body upright and had snapped, 'We need a gesture. Of all the young officers I have watched and guided up the ladder of advancement, you have never failed me.' A wizened finger had wagged at him, like part of a memory of the man Bolitho had recalled so vividly from their first meeting. 'Well, not in matters of duty anyway.'

'Thank you, sir.'

Beauchamp had not heard him. 'Get as many of your ships to sea as soon as possible. I have written instructions that you are to assume overall command of the blockading squadron off Bell Ile. Further vessels will be obtained for your convenience just as soon as my despatches are delivered to the port admirals.' He had fixed Bolitho with an unwinking stare. 'I need you at sea. In Biscay. I know I am asking everything, but then, I have given all *I* have to offer.'

The picture of the high-ceilinged room at the Admiralty, the view from the windows of bright carriages, colourful

gowns and scarlet uniforms seemed to blur as Bolitho's mind came back to the cabin in *Benbow*.

He said, 'Admiral Sir George Beauchamp is ordering me to sea, Thomas. No arguments, minimum delays. Unfinished repairs, short-handed, outstanding powder and shot, I shall need to know everything to the last detail. I suggest a conference of all the captains, and I shall draft a letter to Captain Inch which must be sent immediately by courier to his ship at Chatham.'

Herrick stared at him. 'It sounds urgent, sir.'

'I - I am not sure.' Bolitho recalled Beauchamp's words. *I need you at sea*. He looked at Herrick's troubled face. 'I am sorry to burst into your new happiness like this.' He shrugged. 'And to Biscay of all places.'

Herrick asked gently, 'When you went back to Falmouth, sir ...'

Bolitho looked through the stern windows and watched a local bumboat edging towards the *Benbow's* counter. Food and drink to be examined and bartered for. The small luxuries in a sailor's life.

He replied, 'The house was empty. It was as much my fault as anyone's. Belinda had gone away with my sister and her husband. My brother-in-law wanted to show her a newly purchased estate in Wales.'

He swung round, unable to conceal the bitterness, the despair.

'After the Baltic and that hell at Copenhagen, who would have expected I should be sent to sea again within weeks?'

He looked around the quiet cabin as if listening for those lost sounds of battle. The despairing cries of the wounded, the jubilant cheers of the Danish boarders as they had swarmed up through these very stern windows to die on Major Clinton's bloodied bayonets.

'How will she see it, Thomas? What use are words like *duty* and *honour* to a lady who has already given and lost so much?'

Herrick watched him, scarcely daring to breathe. He could see it all exactly. Bolitho hurrying back to Falmouth, preparing his explanations, how he would describe his obligations to Beauchamp even if it turned out to be a fruitless gesture.

Beauchamp had given his health in the war against France. He had selected young men to replace older ones whose minds had been left behind by a war which had expanded beyond their imagination.

He had offered Bolitho his first chance to command a squadron. Now he was dying, his work still unfinished.

Herrick knew Bolitho better than himself. So that was why Bolitho had come to the ship. The house had been empty and with no way of telling Belinda Laidlaw what had been decided.

'She'll despise me, Thomas. Someone else should have gone in my place. Rear-admirals, especially junior ones, are two a penny. What am I? Some kind of god?'

Herrick smiled. 'She'll not think anything like that, and you know it! We both do.'

'Do we?' Bolitho walked past him, his hand brushing his shoulder as if to reassure himself. 'I *wanted* to stay. But I needed to do Beauchamp's bidding. I owe him that much.'

It had been like that old dream again. The house empty but for the servants, the wall above the sea lined with wild flowers and humming with insects. But the principal players were not there to enjoy it. Not even Pascoe, and that was almost as unnerving. He had received a letter of appointment to another ship within hours of Bolitho leaving for London.

He smiled even as he fretted about it. The Navy was desperate for experienced officers, and Adam Pascoe was equally eager to take the first opportunity which would carry him to his goal, a command of his own. Bolitho pushed the anxiety from his mind. Adam was just twenty-one. He was ready. He must stop worrying about him.

The sentry's muffled voice came through the door. Admiral's coxswain, *sah!*'

Allday stepped into the cabin and smiled broadly at Bolitho. To Herrick he gave a cheerful nod. 'Captain Herrick, sir.' He laid a large canvas bag on the deck.

Bolitho slipped into his uniform coat and allowed Ozzard to pull his queue over the gold-edged collar. Only one good thing had happened, and he had almost forgotten it.

'I shall shift my flag to *Styx*, Thomas. The sooner I contact my other ships off Belle Ile the better, I think.' He dragged a long envelope from inside his coat and handed it to the astonished Herrick. 'From their lordships, Thomas. To take effect as from noon tomorrow.' He nodded to Allday who tipped a great scarlet broad-pendant on to the deck like a carpet. 'You, Captain Thomas Herrick of His Britannic Majesty's Ship *Benbow* at Plymouth will take upon yourself and assume the appointment of Acting-Commodore of this squadron with all direct responsibilities thereof.' He thrust the envelope into Herrick's hard palm and wrung the other one warmly. 'My God, Thomas, I feel a mite better to see you so miserable!'

Herrick swallowed hard. 'Me, sir? *Commodore?*'

Allday was grinning. 'Well *done*, sir!'

Herrick was still staring, his eyes on the red pendant at his feet.

'With my own flag-captain? Who, I mean what ...'

Bolitho signalled for some more wine. His heart still ached as painfully as before and his sense of failure no less evident, but the sight of his friend's confusion had helped considerably. This was their world. That other existence of marriage plans and security, talk of peace and future stability were alien here.

'I am certain all will be explained in your despatches from London, Thomas.' He watched Herrick's mind grappling with it and then accepting it as a reality. The

Navy taught you that if nothing else. Or you went under. 'Think how proud Dulcie will be!'

Herrick nodded slowly. 'I suppose so.' He shook his head. 'All the same. Commodore.' He looked steadily at Bolitho, his eyes very blue. 'I hope it'll not steer us too far apart, sir.'

Bolitho was moved and turned away to hide his emotion. How typical of Herrick to think of that first. Not of his right and just promotion, long overdue, but of what it might mean to each of them. Personally.

Allday sauntered to the two swords on the cabin bulkhead, suddenly engrossed in their appearance and condition. The brilliant presentation sword from the people of Falmouth as recognition of Bolitho's achievements in the Mediterranean and at the Nile. The other sword, without shine or lustre, outdated but finely balanced, seemed shabby by comparison. But neither the presentation blade, with all its gold and silver, nor a hundred like it, could equal the value of the older one. The Bolitho sword which appeared in several of those family portraits at Falmouth, and which Allday had seen in the press of many a battle, was beyond price.

For once even Allday was unable to accept the sudden orders for sea with his usual philosophy. He had not stepped on shore this time for more than a dog watch, and now they were off again. He had already been fuming at the unfairness and stupidity which had prevented Bolitho from receiving a proper reward after Copenhagen. *Sir* Richard Bolitho. It would have just the right ring to it, he thought.

But no, those buggers at the Admiralty had deliberately avoided doing what was proper. He clenched his big fists as he looked at the swords. It was buzzing through the fleet that Nelson had received much the same treatment, so that was some consolation. Nelson had raised all their hearts when he had pretended not to see his superior officer's

signal to break off the action. It was so like the man, what made the Jacks love him and the admirals who never went to sea loathe his very name.

Allday sighed and thought of the girl he had helped to rescue from the wrecked carriage just a few months ago. To think that Bolitho might still lose her because of a few stupid written orders was beyond his understanding.

'A toast to our new commodore.' Bolitho glanced at the goblets. The first lieutenant had come aft, his head bowed beneath the deckhead, while Grubb, the master, feet well apart to proportion his considerable weight, was already contemplating the goblet which looked like a thimble in his hand.

Herrick said, 'Allday, come here. Under the circumstances, I'd like you to join us.'

Allday wiped his hands on his smart nankeen breeches and mumbled, 'Well, thankee, sir.'

Bolitho raised his goblet. 'To you, Thomas. To old friends, and old ships.'

Herrick smiled gravely. 'It's a good toast, that one.'

Allday drank the wine and withdrew into the shadows of the great cabin. Herrick had wanted him to share it. More than that, he had wanted the others to know it.

Allday slipped out of a small screen door and made his way forward towards the sunshine of the upper deck.

They had come a long way together, while others had been less fortunate. As their numbers grew fewer so the tasks seemed to get harder, he thought. Now Bolitho's flag would soon be in the Bay of Biscay. A new collection of ships, a different puzzle for the rear-admiral to unravel.

But why the Bay? There were ships and men a-plenty who had been doing that bloody blockade for years, until their hulls had grown weed as long as snakes. No, for Beauchamp to order it, and for Richard Bolitho to be selected for the work, it had to be *hard*, there was no second way round it.

Allday walked into the sunlight and squinted up at the flag which curled from the mizzen.

'I still say he should be *Sir* Richard!'

The young lieutenant on watch considered ordering him about his affairs and then recalled what he had been told of the admiral's coxswain. Instead, he moved to the opposite side of the quarterdeck.

When the anchorage was eventually plunged into darkness, with only the riding lights and occasional beam from the shore to divide sea from land, even the *Benbow* felt to be resting. Exhausted from their constant work aloft and below, her people lay packed in their hammocks like pods in some sealed cavern. Beneath the lines of hammocks the guns stood quietly behind their ports, dreaming perhaps of those times when they had shaken the life from the air and made the world cringe with their fury.

Right aft in the great cabin Bolitho sat at his desk, a lantern spiralling gently above him as the ship pulled and tested her cables.

To most of the squadron, and to many of *Benbow's* people, he was a name, a leader, whose flag they obeyed. Some had served with him before and were proud of it, proud to be able to give him his nickname which none of the new hands would know. *Equality Dick*. There were others who had created their own image of the young rear-admiral, as if by expanding it they would increase their own immortality and fame. There were a few, a very few, like the faithful Ozzard who was dozing like a mouse in his pantry, who saw Bolitho's moods in the early morning or at the end of a great storm or sea-chase. Or Allday, who had been drawn to him when on the face of things he should have had their first meeting marred by the hatred and humiliation of a press gang. Herrick, who had fallen asleep over the last pile of signed reports from the other captains, had known him at the height of excitement and at the depths of despair. Perhaps he better than any other would

have recognized the Richard Bolitho who sat poised at his desk, the pen held deliberately above the paper, his mind lost to everything but the girl he was leaving behind.

Then with great care he began. '*My dearest Belinda ...*'

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*No Looking Back*

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RICHARD BOLITHO LAY BACK in a chair and waited for Allday to finish shaving him. Herrick was standing by the screen door, just out of his line of sight, while around and above them the *Benbow's* hull and decks quivered and echoed to the clatter of repairs.

Herrick was saying, 'I've informed Captain Neale that you will be shifting your flag to *Styx* this forenoon, sir. He seems uncommon pleased about it.'

Bolitho glanced at Allday's engrossed features as he worked the razor skilfully around his chin. Poor Allday, he obviously disapproved of the move to a cramped frigate after the comparative luxury of the flagship, just as Herrick mistrusted any other captain's ability to conduct his affairs.

It was strange how the Navy always managed to weave the threads so finely together. Captain John Neale of the thirty-two-gun *Styx* had served as a chubby midshipman under Bolitho in his first frigate, in another war. Like Captain Keen who was anchored less than a cable away in the third-rate *Nicator*, he too had been a midshipman in one of Bolitho's commands.

He frowned, and wondered when he would hear how Adam Pascoe was progressing, what his appointment was, what manner of captain he now served.

Allday wiped his face carefully and nodded. 'All done, sir.'

Bolitho washed from a bowl which Allday had placed near the stern windows. No word was said, it was something

they had formed over the years. At sea or in harbour, Bolitho disliked wasting time staring at a blank piece of timber while he was preparing himself for another day.

There was so much to do, orders to sign for individual captains, a report of readiness for the Admiralty, approval for the squadron's mounting dockyard expenses, new appointments to be settled. It would be unfair to leave Herrick with too much unfinished business, he decided.

Herrick remarked, 'The mail-boat took your despatches ashore, sir. She's just returned to her boom.'

'I see.' It was Herrick's way of telling him that there was no letter from Belinda.

He glanced through one of the windows. The sky was as clear as yesterday's, but the sea was livelier. He would use the wind to seek out the ships of the blockading squadron where he was to assume control. Off Belle Ile, a key point in a chain of patrols and squadrons which stretched from Gibraltar to the Channel ports. Beauchamp certainly intended that he should be in the centre of things. This particular sector would cover the approaches to Lorient in the north and the vital routes to and from the Loire Estuary to the east. But if it was a stranglehold on the enemy's trade and resources it could also be a hazard for an unwary British frigate or sloop should she be caught on a lee shore or too interested in a French harbour to notice the swift approach of an attacker.

Bolitho was no stranger to *Styx*. He had been aboard her several times, and in the Baltic had seen her young captain engage the enemy with the coolness of a veteran.

Bolitho threw down his towel, angry with himself for his dreaming. *He must stop going over past events.* Think only of what lay ahead, and the ships which would soon be depending on him. He was a flag-officer now and, like Herrick, he had to accept that promotion was an honour, not some god-given right.

He smiled awkwardly as he realized the others were staring at him.

Allday asked mildly, 'Second thoughts, mebbe, sir?'

'About what, damn you?'

Allday rolled his eyes around the big cabin. 'Well, I mean, sir, after this the *Styx* will seem more like a pot o' paint than a *ship*!'

Herrick said, 'You get away with murder, Allday. One day you'll overstep the mark, my lad!' He looked at Bolitho. 'All the same, he has a point. You *could* shift flag to *Nicator*, and I could take command until —'

Bolitho eyed him impassively. 'Old friend, it is no use. For either of us. Today you assume the appointment of commodore and will hoist your broad-pendant accordingly. You will eventually have to select your own flag-captain and attend to the appointment of a new one for *Indomitable*.'

He tried to parry the thought aside. Another memory. *Indomitable* had been in the thick of it at Copenhagen, and it was not until after the order to cease fire that Bolitho had learned that her captain, Charles Keverne, had fallen in the fighting. Keverne had been Bolitho's first lieutenant when *he* had been a flag-captain like Herrick. Links in a chain. As each one broke, the chain got shorter and tighter.

Bolitho continued sharply, 'And I cannot moon about here like a sixth lieutenant. The decisions are not ours.'

Feet clattered in the passageway, and he knew that, like himself, Herrick was very conscious of these precious moments. Soon there would be the busy comings and goings of officers for orders, senior officials from Plymouth to be flattered and coaxed into greater efforts to finish the repairs. Yovell, his clerk, would have more letters to copy and be signed, Ozzard would need to be told what to pack, what to leave aboard the *Benbow* until ... he frowned. Until when?

Herrick turned quickly as the sentry shouted the arrival of the first lieutenant.