

HOME COMING

by

ALEXANDER KENT



A
Richard Bolitho
Story

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Richard Bolitho figure on cover, ship and cannon drawings
by Geoffrey Huband

His Britannic Majesty's sloop-of-war *Guillemot* of eighteen guns plunged and lifted in the short stiff crests of the North Sea. Nine days out of Gibraltar where the sun always appeared to be shining, and the air was always warm, to this bitter October weather which seemed to pierce even the thickest clothing.

England was very near, with Whitstable and the approaches to the Nore and London's great river Thames just miles to larboard.

Running for shelter, and with their country so close now, there was always the danger of a slackening vigilance. For if England was near, then so was the enemy coastline, where any sail might be hostile. Overnight the sloop-of-war had thrashed up-Channel, every man very aware of the proximity of the French coast, the hands called to trim sails and yards time and time again in each watch, finding their way aloft to fist and battle the hard foul-weather canvas as if they had been doing it all their lives. Some of them had.

Guillemot's young commander enjoyed the responsibility, which for the most part he shared with nobody. The vessel had been employed mainly carrying despatches between the various squadrons and England itself, and he knew that if his luck held he would probably be promoted and then "posted" before eventually being given a frigate to command, the dream of every young and ambitious sea-officer. He would miss his lively *Guillemot*,

though: his pride and joy and his first command.

He strode across the slippery wet planking and glanced at the compass. Its light was burning even though it was barely noon. He joined the first lieutenant by the rail and watched the grey sea bursting into agitated white froth as the beakhead crashed down yet again.

"We'll not get in before dark, Aubrey." They both ducked as the sea boiled along the deck, smashing over and around each tethered gun like a millrace. "I'd not risk the London river at the best of times. But with *him* aboard it would be my ruin if something went wrong."

The first lieutenant glanced at the streaming cabin skylight. Delivering despatches or collecting them from some squadron, the whereabouts of which they often had only the haziest idea, was one thing. Carrying an important passenger was another matter entirely.

At any other time they could have landed him at Plymouth or Portsmouth. But the orders left nobody in any doubt. Commodore Richard Bolitho was to be taken straight to London, and thence to the Admiralty.

It had been a strange experience, he thought. Nine days since the commodore had come aboard at the Rock after leaving his flagship *Lysander* there, and yet despite *Guillemot's* relatively small size the officers had barely seen him. Apart from one meal with *Guillemot's* youthful commander

Bolitho had remained for the most part in his cabin aft, having his meals sent to him and sharing them only with his powerfully-built coxswain, a seaman he appeared to treat as an equal.

Guillemot's commander considered his own coxswain but dismissed the notion. A good seaman, honest and reliable as any sailor could hope to be in

the

King's navy, but no companion for an officer.

On reflection, he had never met a real hero before. He had been in skirmishes, once with a Spanish frigate, although *Guillemot's* role was not to engage in heroics but to avoid action and deliver the word of authority as so ordered. Be the ship a majestic three-decker or a lowly brig, they all had to be controlled and directed by the faceless men of admiralty. *Guillemot* was the messenger.

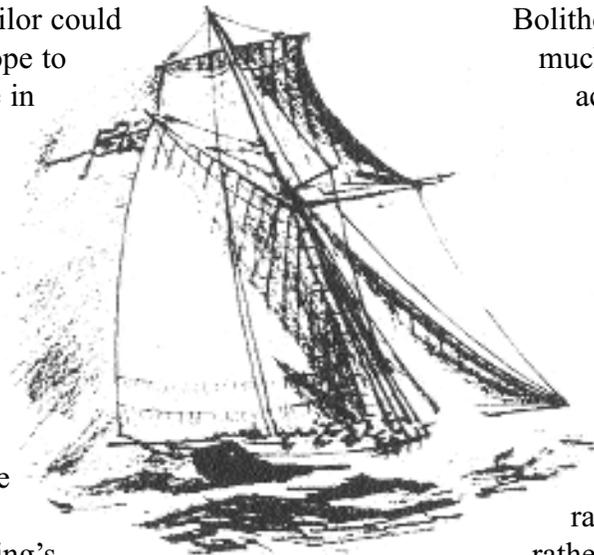
Richard Bolitho had a reputation which usually preceded his arrival in

any new appointment. The older men, the boatswain and some of the other warrant officers, knew of his exploits far better than these youthful lieutenants. He came of a long line of Cornish sea-officers and had fought in every ocean where the English flag was challenged. Stories about him were like part of the navy itself.

Bolitho had been a frigate captain for much of his service and had seen action in some of the fiercest fleet and ship-to-ship battles. It was said that he was due for an early promotion after his last commission in the Mediterranean. If so, he would be the youngest rear-admiral in the fleet after Nelson.

More water surged along the tilting deck and flew from the straining canvas like icy rain. Being a commodore was rather like being a commander. If you fell from Grace it would be all the way, in Bolitho's case back down to captain. The commander grimaced. *In mine, from my own command to a lieutenant once more.* Better to die in the cannon's mouth. He smiled tightly. *Almost.*

Upon *Guillemot's* arrival at Gibraltar they had discovered something of which nobody in England was yet aware. After months of fruitless searching for the French fleet, said to be somewhere in the Mediterranean, Nelson had finally stumbled upon them. Not this time in open water where they could have challenged and



perhaps overwhelmed the English squadrons, but intent on launching the biggest naval and military campaign yet in Egypt. If successful, they would have forced open the gateway to India and beyond.

Bolitho's flagship *Lysander* had been in the thick of it, although when they had anchored close by to take on fresh water in Gib *Guillemot's* officers had been amazed to see how well she had been repaired after the savage engagement in the Bay of Aboukir, which was already being called the Battle of the Nile.

The first lieutenant said in a fierce whisper, "He's coming up now, sir!" He immediately moved to the lee side of the quarterdeck.

Bolitho was wearing an old watch-coat which displayed no mark of rank. He was hatless, so that his black hair was soon soaked in salt spray.

One bell chimed out from the fore-castle and the commander touched his hat.

"Steering due west, sir. The wind has backed a piece - to the nor' east, it would appear."

Bolitho looked at him. His eyes were the colour of the sea, the English coast and the Western Approaches. Grey, and now, as they studied him, penetrating. An old scar cut into his hairline above the right eye. Against his sunburned face it was pale and livid. It was a marvel he had survived, the commander thought.

Bolitho said, "Will you reach London before nightfall?" Then he

shook his head. "No, I see that you cannot." He glanced at the straining rigging and banging canvas. "She is too fair a lady to risk on that river."

The commander had never considered his ship in those terms. "May I ask, sir, have you ever served in a sloop-of-war?"

The smile was distant, and both sad and proud.

"My first command, *Sparrow*. Much like this one. Your first, I understand?"

He had suddenly become a senior officer, no longer a mere passenger, and the commander almost stammered. "Yes, sir." He felt Bolitho's wet hand on his sleeve.

"When you stand in the line of battle..." He looked at him again.

"You will still remember this ship. There will be none quite like her."

Bolitho moved restlessly to the weather side of the quarterdeck, feeling the cold and half-fearful that the fever which had almost killed him in the Great South Sea when he had been commanding the frigate *Tempest* had returned to plague him once more. Because of it, *Tempest* was to be his last frigate, just as the little *Sparrow* had been his first command.

He had seen the surprise, disbelief even in the young commander's eyes when he had revealed his emotions. But then in the navy it was usually like that. Midshipmen saw the vital step from the young gentlemen's berth to the wardroom as an end to all their problems, even as lieutenants viewed

the captain's cabin as total security from day-to-day routine and watch-keeping, and every kind of personal problem.

And the captain, what of him? *What of me?* Would it be flag rank this time, or because of some grudge or another's envy, might it be obscurity?

Even as commodore he had felt the difference. It went far deeper than overall authority, the margin between victory and defeat. The people you thought you knew could change towards you, incomprehensible though the change might be. He thought of his old friend Thomas Herrick, his flag-captain in *Lysander*. They had served together in several oceans and knew one another like brothers.

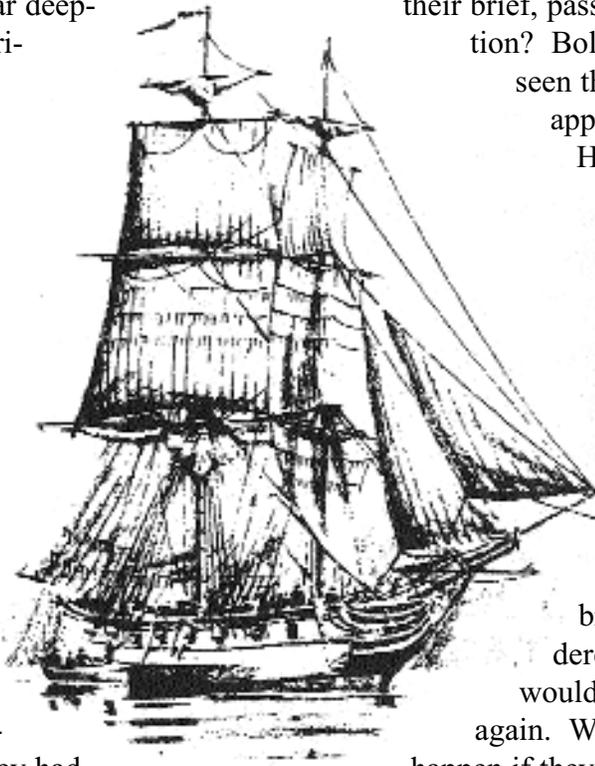
He had been forced to move Herrick to another command, to find his confidence again, to discover the authority he had lost. It had been difficult for both of them, but in the line of battle for the final struggle against a superior French fleet, Herrick had

seemed in full command once more. Or had that, too, been an illusion?

Bolitho gripped a stay to steady himself as the *Guillemot* showed her copper to the angry sky. After *Lysander*, a two-decker of seventy-four guns, she seemed to frisk like a lamb in a field.

He thought of Catherine Pareja. Could Herrick ever forgive or forget their brief, passionate attraction? Bolitho had seen the sharp disapproval on Herrick's open face when he had mentioned the fine wine cooler she had given him for his cabin in *Lysander*. In the same breath he wondered if he would see her again. What might happen if they met?

Herrick had broken disturbing news when he had taken command and hoisted his broad-pennant as commodore. Bolitho's nephew Adam, a junior lieutenant who was also serving in *Lysander*, had been involved in a secret duel on the Rock with another lieutenant, defending his uncle's reputation after rumour and gossip about



Bolitho's brief affair in London with Catherine had begun to circulate. His mouth softened. Kate.

Nothing must happen to damage Adam's chances in the navy. *I am his only champion.* It had broken Bolitho's father's heart when his brother Hugh, Adam's father, had deserted the navy to fight on the other side during the American war. It must never rebound on Adam.

He shivered again. Tomorrow, the London river. Then to the Admiralty to present his report to their lordships, of the great battle and the enemy prizes which *Lysander* had helped to escort to Gibraltar. It was strange to realise that while they had been burying their dead and trying to repair the extensive damage to hulls and spars, the ship which was to have carried the news of the victory at the Nile had been attacked and taken by two Frenchmen, the only two enemy vessels to have survived the battle. England had been entirely unaware of the battle until a few days ago, according to a courier brig they had spoken to as they had clawed their way into the Channel. The celebrations must have brought new life and joy to the whole country. But when the true cost of the victory reached the homes of rich and poor alike, there would be grief to match it.

Bolitho recalled his feelings when the lookouts had sighted England two days ago. Armed with a telescope he had hurried on deck, while the ship was preparing to change tack. The

young commander and his officers had watched him curiously, and seamen had drawn aside as if they thought they might offend him. He was, after all, the most senior officer the little sloop-of-war had ever carried.

His lips had been dry as he had clung to the shrouds in his old sea-going coat, heedless of the tarred rigging and the bitter wind. The visibility had been poor, but as always he had recognized the angry coastline: the notorious Lizard with its boiling spray, where the jagged rocks waited with timeless patience for another victim, a drifting wreck or a vessel doomed on a lee shore. The Lizard. Cornwall. His home in Falmouth only a dozen sea miles away.

It had been then that he had felt it, like a blow in the face. There would be no one there at the old grey house where his family had lived for generations. It would be an empty place now, where only Ferguson, his one-armed steward, and the servants waited for the last Bolitho to return home. The girl with the Chestnut hair and eyes the colour of the green shallows below the headland was gone. His wife. Sometimes Bolitho saw her in his thoughts, waiting at the windows of their room, which overlooked the sea. Watching for the ship which had not returned in time to save her life.

It had been Herrick who had carried that news to Bolitho too, that Cheney had been killed in a coaching accident, and their unborn child with her. As if from a great distance he had heard

Guillemot's commander asking anxiously, "Are you ill, sir? Is something wrong?"

Bolitho had been too overcome by emotion to remember what he had said in reply, but he had gone below, leaving the commander hurt and angry. They had not spoken since. Until now.

And he recalled Adam's question when he had seen his nephew after the duel.

Of Catherine Pareja he had asked, "Uncle, did you take her home? I mean, to your house in Falmouth?"

And his reply. "No, Adam, not to Falmouth."

He watched the gulls swooping and screeching around the counter in the hope of scraps from the galley. Tonight those same gulls would nest in the Isle of Sheppy, or Sheerness itself.

"Oh, Kate, where are you now?" His words were lost in the wind and rattling rigging. It had meant so much to Adam to defend his honour, and even though he had liked her he might never accept her in Cheney's place. Bolitho sighed, seeing her face, feeling her warmth, their need, one for the other.

No, we must never meet again.

"Stand by to alter course! Man the braces there!" Bolitho walked to the companionway. He was a passenger again, with no part to play as the drenched seamen bustled to their stations.

He found his coxswain John Allday seated in the cabin, squinting in the dim light at his latest ship model. A

big man in every sense, but when he worked on his carvings his fingers were capable of all the care and delicacy of a silversmith. He began to get to his feet but Bolitho waved him down as he threw his spray-soaked coat onto a chair.

"Easy, old friend." He sat, half-listening to the squeal of blocks and the thump of the tiller head as the wheel went over. Feet raced across the deck and he could picture the yards swinging round and the sails filling out on the opposite tack, as if he were there with them, as he had watched it so many hundreds of times.

Allday put down his knife and watched him warily. He had seen this mood before, and, by God, they'd gone through so much together. Bolitho still surprised him, however. Allday had never served a better man, nor would he. He would have run long since, otherwise. But he could not understand that Bolitho, a born leader who would rise like a bursting wave when the danger was greatest, could rarely find the confidence in everyday life that others in his position would take as a right.

Repelling enemy boarders, Allday had seen him in ten places at once, the old family sword reaping a bloody harvest until the enemy were driven away or defeated. He had seen Bolitho's sadness, too, when his people had cheered with the wildness that follows every triumph at sea. What did landsmen know? All that talk about King and Country. They had never even set

foot on a man-of-war - that would change their stupid minds. Bolitho's men fought for each other, for the ship around them, but mostly for the captain who led them.

And he had seen him after battle or engagement, when the decks were streaked with blood and pieces of men they had once known and shared a tot with, like this last time at the Nile when Allday had watched him kneel on the splintered deck to hold the hand of a dying man. Not a gentleman or any one who counted, but an ordinary common sailor. Allday was suddenly proud of it. *Like me.*

He jumped as Bolitho asked quietly, "You smile. May I ask why?"

Allday held up his latest hull and eyed it critically. "Did I, sir?" He grinned uncomfortably. "I was just thinkin' I should get a few coins for this one."

Bolitho shook his head. "You won't. I know you. You'll give it to the son of some poor Jack who's never coming home again."

"Mebbe so, sir, mebbe so." He quickly changed tack. "What'll become of us, d'you reckon, sir?"

Bolitho relaxed muscle by muscle. Us. Such a small word to mean so much. Nelson had a coxswain who watched over him and who was always to hand when the fighting was ship-to-ship. And then there had been Stockdale, Bolitho's own coxswain until he had been shot down in the frigate *Phalarope*. Bolitho had never forgiven himself that he had not seen him

fall, and had been unable to comfort him in death. It was in that same ship that he had met Allday, dragged aboard by the press gang at Falmouth. A lion in battle, a man without fear, and yet at other times so gentle. Like the time he had used his knife to cut away a great splinter that had been blasted into a midshipman's groin. The surgeon had been too drunk to do it.

Now each depended on the other. Like the master and faithful dog, each fearful that the other would die first, and leave the loneliness behind.

He realised that Allday was waiting for an answer.

"Another ship."

Allday nodded his shaggy head. "There's always that, sir." He added firmly, "Promotion too. It's your *right*, an' that's no error!"

Bolitho said, "Open that cabinet. I could manage a wet - isn't that what you call it?"

Allday grinned. That was better. His grin widened as Bolitho continued. "I feel certain that the commander would not miss some rum for you."

The officer of the watch, pacing the deck overhead, paused as he heard the laughter through the cabin skylight. He had once heard an old warrant officer describe Richard Bolitho as "a special sort of man". He thought of the battered prizes he had seen at Gibraltar, the pain and the terror there must have been. But most of all he recalled the exact moment when Bolitho had left *Lysander* for the last time to come aboard *Guillemot*. The cheering had

gone on and on, as if the Rock itself were joining in.

It should have been a triumph for the man who had done so much and could still inspire such loyalty, love even, in the face of death.

But when Bolitho had come through the entry port he had seen his expression, and had been reminded of the warrant officer's description. He could not remember ever seeing such sorrow. *A special sort of man.* He continued his watch, his boots squeaking on the streaming planks. He was glad he had seen that quality for himself.

Richard Bolitho returned to the quarterdeck when the afternoon watch was dismissed below. He was surprised, even with all his experience at sea, at how dark it was, how hostile and unfamiliar the landmarks had become.

With a soldier's wind under her coattails *Guillemot* showed no uncertainty as she moved steadily into the turmoil of the Thames. There were ships everywhere, moored to one another or at anchor, while some were tied up three abreast at the crowded wharves and piers. Every sort of ship and cargo, from the East and West Indies, from the Mediterranean where they had sailed and fought such a short time ago. Wines and spices, fruit and perfume. The navy had to fight to keep these lifelines open.

The commander and his officers obviously did not share the *Guillemot's* confidence in such enclosed

waters. There were extra lookouts, and a man in the forechains with lead-and-line, while overhead the sails had been reduced to a minimum, topsails, jib and driver.

Bolitho walked over to join the commander by the big double wheel.

"What do you intend?"

The young man looked at him anxiously. "I had hoped for Limehouse Reach, sir, but it will be dark very soon. I dare not risk the ship. There are more vessels than I had expected. Waiting for the tide, sheltering until first light, I know not." He searched Bolitho's features, expecting criticism or worse.

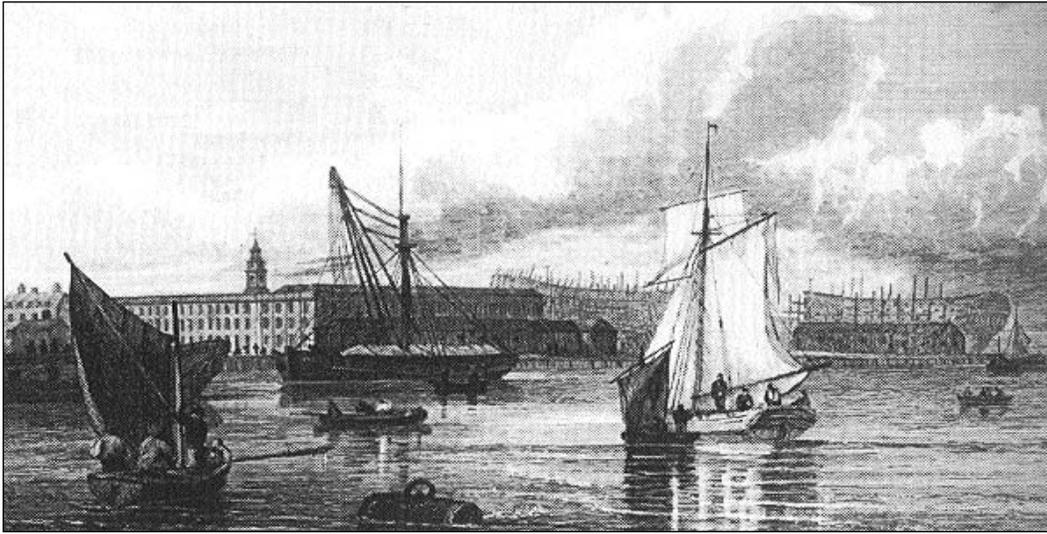
Bolitho said, "Deptford, then?" There was something else which neither the commander nor his subordinates appeared to have noticed. Perhaps the others were too loyal to mention it in the presence of a senior officer, or maybe they were not used to making suggestions to their own captain. But it happened often in the south-east. Blustery sea, rain and bitter cold. Then nothing.

He said quietly, "I think there may be fog on the way."

He saw the surprise and relief at his comment. The commander bobbed his head, his hand moved soundlessly across his chin.

"Fog, sir." He bobbed again. "I think Deptford would be a wise decision." He hesitated and said almost shyly, "Thank you, sir. I am more used to open sea, I must admit."

Bolitho smiled, his teeth very white



Deptford

in his sunburned face.

“Admit nothing, my friend. It is something worth remembering. I shall remain on board until morning. Perhaps you would be good enough to send my chests to Southwark. I can put up at the George Inn until I know their lordships’ true reasons for recalling me.” He looked away so that the commander should not see the pain in his eyes. *I shall board a coach at Southwark. When I eventually leave it, I shall be in Falmouth.*

As the lights began to twinkle along the twisting river *Guillemot* came to rest at her moorings directly opposite the sprawling victualling yard and rope depot at Deptford.

The officer-of-the-guard climbed aboard and from the cabin Bolitho heard the lieutenant explaining why the river was so choked. The press gangs had been abroad amongst the quays and docks, reinforced by sea-

men and marines from the local receiving ship, from as far east as Woolrich.

Bolitho knew that the notorious Execution Dock was not so far away, and guessed that many felons otherwise condemned to hang there would seize upon the navy as an escape if the choice were offered. Only pirates were denied such a luxury, and would hang there in irons until time and the gulls had reduced them to macabre tatters. A terrible warning, but one that was rarely heeded when the dice were down.

Bolitho also overheard them discussing *Guillemot’s* sole cabin passenger. The visiting officer said, “Better that he stays aboard until a suitable escort arrives. With so many of the press gangs and the Marine Police ordered to search and seek out both thieves and deserters, I’d not care to walk the streets myself tonight!”

Ozzard, the mole-like servant Bolitho had given employment on board *Lysander*, was preparing the table for the evening meal, while Bolitho's dress uniform was already laid out in the sleeping compartment in readiness for tomorrow. Allday had probably told the little man that, captain or commodore, Bolitho rarely allowed the weather to deflect him from his intentions.

Bolitho raised the skylight very slightly and heard the commander say, "Then I shall post extra guards myself. What lies over yonder? It is as black as tar."

The lieutenant replied, "A dock or two. Beyond that, Wapping."

There was a crash as Ozzard dropped a plate onto the deck. When Bolitho turned, he was staring at the curved timbers as if he expected to see through them to the place himself.

Allday had come in to polish Bolitho's sword. Wapping? It meant nothing to him. Just another riverside collection of shops and chandlers, inns and ropeworks. Folk who lived off the river and served the ships for their short time in port. Rum, shanties and women. A sailor's haven.

There was sheer terror in Ozzard's eyes, but all he said was, "I'm s-sorry, sir, can't think what happened!"

Wapping obviously meant something to Ozzard. Maybe the answer to why he had volunteered for the navy at Tower Hill. But that was all he said about it, or was ever likely to say.

As he intended that it should be his

last night aboard, Bolitho invited the sloop's commander to sup with him. He thought he might decline the invitation on some pretext or other, or resent being asked to share a meal in what were his own quarters.

Instead, he had accepted with unexpected eagerness. Bolitho had insisted on settling the wine account and had sent some men to collect fresh bread from the nearby naval yard. After *Lysander* and the hazards of the Mediterranean, the bread more than anything made him realise that no matter what lay ahead, he was home.

There was brandy too, and as Bolitho suspected, his companion managed with its help to raise the subject of Aboukir Bay, and *Lysander's* part in it.

He was surprised that he did not refuse to discuss it: he would have earlier. It was the usual sense of guilt and shame, which he had often suffered in the aftermath of cloth action, haunted always by the bewilderment or the accusation in the eyes of dying men, men waiting for the mercy of death, for the end of pain. Eyes that seemed to ask, *why me and not you? You who led us into this, who urged us on, no matter the cost. Why me and not you?*

Men who could cheer even though half-mad with the din of battle. Men who could cry out when a friend fell, or jeer when the enemy's broadside went astray. *Why me?*

He found that he was speaking freely, as if he were describing it as it happened, as if it were not in the past

but immediate and real.

The commander said nothing, but his eyes spoke for all of them. The ones who had yet to see such carnage, and the others who had gone forever.

Once he saw the other man reach over to refill his brandy goblet. Bolitho did not even notice that he had finished it, and there was no taste on his tongue.

“The French fleet was anchored in the bay, but in a rigid line, joined together, each ship at bow and stern so that not even Our Nel could break through. It was a formidable sight, and a larger fleet than ours. Aboard his flagship, the great one hundred-and-twenty-gun *L’Orient*, Admiral de Brueys directed the battle from start to finish.

Only then did the commander speak. “You almost sound as if you admired him, sir.”

Bolitho looked at him without seeing him. “An enemy? Yes, I suppose I did. A fine sailor, courageous and honourable. I think he was as much admired in our ships as in his own.” He paused, lost in thought, recalling it. “The battle raged from that evening all through the night. When dawn found us the sights were too terrible to believe. The bay was covered with burned and drifting corpses, and so many wrecks that I was stunned by the strength of man’s ferocity. The French had no heavy guns on the shore - we had sent many of them to the bottom earlier, otherwise...”

Would they have tipped the bal-

ance? It was something they would never know.

“Our Nel perceived that one weakness when other commanders might have held back. He sailed his ships around the enemy line, and so raked them from both sides. All but two of de Brueys’ ships had either struck or been destroyed. It was overwhelming. But the most horrific sight of all was his flagship *L’Orient* bursting into flames. She exploded, partly destroying other ships nearby.

“De Brueys had lost both legs in the battle. To the very end he remained on deck, propped up in his chair with both stumps in tourniquets, facing his old enemy until his world vanished around him.”

“What of the French now, sir?”

“It was the end of Bonaparte’s dream of India. An entire fleet destroyed, and five thousand men killed, while his army was forced to watch from the shore, undefended and marooned.”

“By God, Nelson must have been proud of his victory!”

Bolitho toyed with his goblet. “Of victory, I believe so. But I think the appalling sights that morning sickened him. He is not like many other victors.”

He recalled the note Nelson has sent across to him in *Lysander*.

You are a man after my own heart, Bolitho. The deed justifies the risk.

He sighed, and hoped that the commander would make his excuses and go.

I doubt that it does. I do not believe Nelson thinks so, either.

The mood left him. "I shall be gone tomorrow. My father once told me something. He said, "Always do your duty. But never be afraid to ask questions."

Then he walked to the stern windows and gasped as his head collided with a deck beam. He rubbed it ruefully. Too long since he had served in small ships... He opened one of the sloping windows and felt the damp air like ice rime on his face. Different smells too. Weed on the jetty piles, drifting rubbish and flotsam from the many barges and lighters. He could hear singing and shouting from a nearby tavern. Violent and angry: men staggering back to the only world they knew.

The door closed. He was alone. Then, very faintly on the wind, he heard the regular chimes from Southwark Cathedral.

The ship felt utterly still, and he leaned out to peer down into the fast-running stream. *Home.*

He shut the window very slowly.

*Oh, Kate. How did I lose you?
Where did it go wrong?*

But like the bay in that terrible dawn, there was only silence.

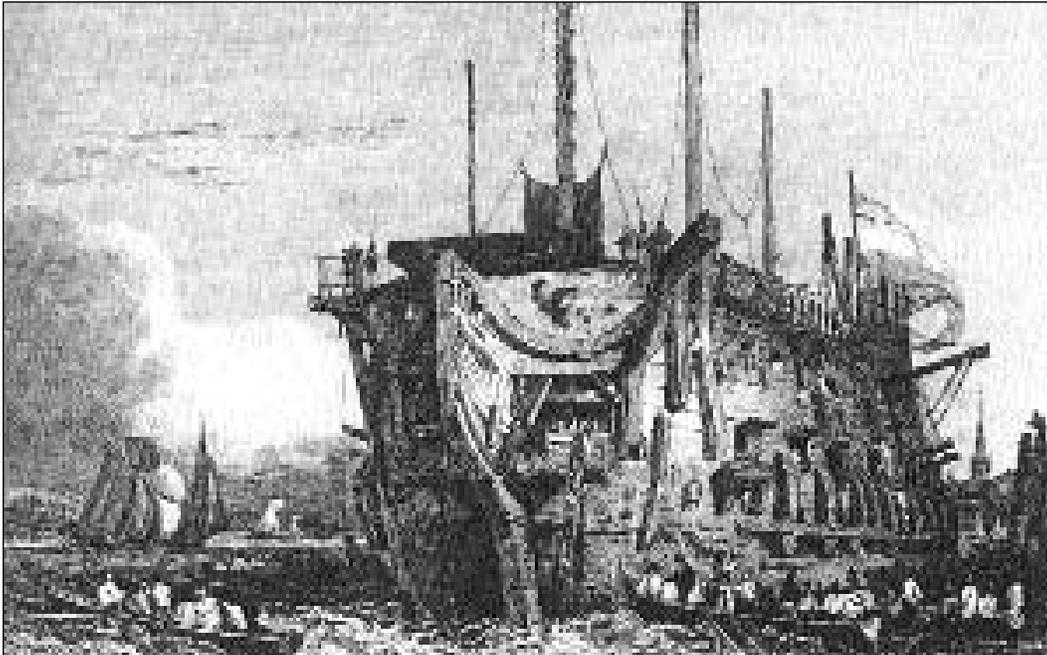
Bolitho opened his eyes, every sense suddenly alert despite the wine and cognac.

So many times. Ready to go on watch, to run to quarters when the drums rattled and men snatched up their weapons, each one wondering if

it was to be his last day on earth. To face a sudden squall, the topmen clinging to the yards like monkeys, fighting the sails and the wild chorus of wind and sea. Or merely to lie in fear, remembering, dreading the next time, and the one after that.

He forced his body to relax, his mouth like a kiln as he realised it was neither storm nor memory which had awakened him. There was nothing. Neither sound nor movement. He climbed from the cot and waited for his body to adjust to the deck. Again, nothing, as if the ship were hard aground. He padded to the door and opened it a few inches. A solitary lantern hung motionless outside the wardroom, and he saw Ozzard curled on the deck near the pantry, his small bag clutched against his face like a pillow. All he owned. So grateful to be his servant, free of running from one ship to the next. A man bedevilled with such memories or secrets that he only slept in short snatches. Small and frail, he must have had some difficulty in persuading the recruiting party to accept him. Not like now. After years of war, with thousands of men crippled or killed and some driven mad by what they had endured, today they would accept anybody and be happy to press all the others.

Bolitho returned to the cabin and peered through the stern window. There had been a lively brazier on the jetty where the watchmen had kept warm and whiled the night away. There was only a twisting glow now,



Prison Ship - Deptford

like ghostly phosphorescence. Fog, dense and unmoving: he could even smell it. He listened, but there was only silence. It might last for days; he had heard of such things in London. He would get few thanks from the Admiralty if he waited for it to clear. At the same time, he knew the fog was not the reason for his impatience. He had to know why he had been recalled. Had he displeased someone? Nelson had been satisfied with the performance of his small squadron, but then Nelson was not loved by ever one, especially the Admiralty.

He heard a click and turned to see Allday framed against the open door.

"Sorry, sir. I thought it might be some gallows-bait prowlin' about." He uncocked his pistol. "They don't seem to run to marines in this little pot

o' paint. Anybody could slip aboard an' they'd be none the wiser!"

Bolitho found that he could laugh. "You couldn't sleep either, eh?"

Allday shrugged. "No matter what they wants us for at the Admiralty, sir, seems only right an' proper they'll offer leave." He put his shaggy head to one side. "Falmouth, sir?"

Bolitho sat down on the bench seat. *Us* again. Most people would envy him. A post-captain to acting-commodore and squadron commander, and with luck promotion and recognition aplenty still before him. And yet it seemed to mean very little to him now. *Us*... Allday on the other hand had nothing much to call his own. But his faith and unshakable loyalty were beyond riches to Bolitho.

"Aye, Falmouth it is." He peered

through the thick glass again. "Like a stonewall. I wonder, could we take a boat direct from here..." He could feel Allday's doubts as if he had voiced them aloud. "Well?"

Allday said, "I've spoken to some of the lads, sir. *Guillemot's* a deepwater vessel, an' most of her company are West Country, from Plymouth an' the like"

"You mean that until an escort is sent for me, I shall have to remain on board because none of the people can find their way on the Thames, or anywhere else in London?" He stood up and banged his head once more. "*Damn!* Just get me over there - I'll find the way somehow, fog or no!"

The door opened and Ozzard seemed to edge around it like a shadow. There was a smell of coffee, and he was carrying a jug of shaving water although it seemed only a few minutes since Bolitho had seen him asleep.

Allday rubbed his hands. "You enjoy the coffee, sir, an' then I'll shave you. We've found our bearings in the Great South Sea in an open boat. I reckons we can find our way across a river!"

"I heard the officer of the guard speak of the Marine Police at Wapping. If we could find them..."

They both turned as Ozzard said in a small voice, "At Wapping, sir?"

Allday said kindly, "You know it, Tom?"

Ozzard fiddled with his coffee pot. "*Knew.*"

Allday fetched his shaving mug. "I

expect somebody will know."

But when the hands were called, and greasy smoke from the galley funnel drifted straight up into the fog, the commander came to make his report. Visibility was worse than ever. Even the jetty was now lost.

He said helpfully, "An escort will surely be sent, sir." Bolitho was abrupt. "When?"

Allday left them to discuss it and was putting his razor away when he noticed Ozzard inside the small pantry, leaning against the bread rack as if he were afraid to let go of it.

"What is it, matey?" He saw the man's sudden fear, the way he was staring at him as if he were trapped. "Now see here, Tom. You knows me, an' you're gettin' to know the Cap'n. In this fleet you asks no questions, see? A secret's a secret, an' any one who tells you different will have to settle with me, an' that's no error."

Bolitho was at the door looking in at them.

"When you have a moment, Allday, I want to ask you something."

They stared at Ozzard as he straightened his back and said, "I used to know Wapping quite well, sir." Afterwards Allday thought he had sounded like a man about to take the first step up to the gallows. In the same small voice he added, "I could show you."

Bolitho looked at him gravely. "I was going to send you with my gear to Southwark."

He could see the doubts tearing at

him like claws. There was something here which perhaps he would one day understand, or perhaps he would never know. But for the moment, it was enough.

He said, "Thank you," and pretended not to notice the relief in Ozzard's eyes that there were to be no questions. "So let's be about it, eh?"

Guillemot's young commander was barely able to contain his anxiety as the gig, which had been lowered earlier, was warped slowly to the entry port.

"I am most concerned, sir!"

Bolitho peered at the boat and then beyond it. The river looked almost black in the strange light, and then vanished within a few feet into the curtain of fog. The water was sluggish, but the current was enough to make the sloop-of-war drag noisily at her moorings.

"It is time." He saw the midshipman by the gig's tiller gazing up, his boat's crew obviously untroubled by this unexpected task. Bolitho could read their thoughts. *It must be all right. No one would dare lose a famous commodore. The officers must know what they were about.*

Allday reached out to assist Ozzard down the side, but Bolitho saw him shake off the helping hand with something like anger.

The commander was saying, "They think the fog could lift quite suddenly, sir."

"Aye, it could. When we reach the other side I shall tell you crew to stand

fast until it does."

"I thought you might, sir. I appreciate it."

Bolitho smiled. It was the commander's real reason for sending a midshipman. *If Guillemot* was ordered to get underway again, the midshipman would be the least missed.

He touched his hat to the murky figures around him and then lowered himself down the side. After a ship-of-the-line it seemed like only two or three steps.

"Very well - Mr. Pym, is it not?"

He saw the youth staring at him, probably too surprised that the commodore should know his name to be frightened of his new responsibility.

Bolitho settled himself in the sternsheets and pulled out his small compass. "When we cast off, try to keep midstream and steer due north. That should take us up Limehouse Reach where with luck," he touched the midshipman's arm and felt him jump, "and your *skill*, of course, we should soon discover our bearings."

Several of the oarsmen chuckled. They were all tough and experienced. not the sort to desert once they trod on dry land. The midshipman cleared his throat. "Cast off!" He almost fell across the tiller bar as the boat veered away from *Guillemot's* side like a leaf on a fast stream. "*Out oars! Give way all!*"

Allday looked at the bottom boards rather than watch as a great iron-ringed mooring buoy slid past. It would have stove in the boat had they

collided.

Somebody cried, "The buggers goin' to ram us!"

The ship came straight at them out of the fog, the bowsprit and tapering jib-boom rising above their heads like a giant lance.

Bolitho said tersely, "Tide's on the ebb, Mr. Pym. That ship is not moving. We are!"

Allday slid across and rested his hand on the tiller. "I've got her, sir." He expected the midshipman to fly at him for assuming control. Instead the youth turned and looked at him and said in a low voice, "Thank you, sir!"

Allday squinted at the compass. "Back water larboard! Give way starboard!" He swung the bar hard over, feeling the river sluicing against the hull, easing the tiller until he was satisfied. "Give way larboard - together, damn your eyes!" Then he grinned as another dark shape seemed to steer right for them, moving fast even though her sails were furled, and her decks deserted. "I'll lay odds them buggers are still abed!"

Drifting timber and other flotsam thudded against the bows or pattered down the side like a blind man's stick. The smells were strong, a pungent combination of all the rubbish that travelled back and forth on the tides until it eventually gave itself up to the estuary and the sea.

Once they heard some one shout from the fog. It was so thick that it might have been anybody, or there could easily have been a ton of cargo

being unloaded. No ship's master wanted to waste time alongside. For one thing, it was dangerous: crime, from robbery to murder, was rife on the London river. And, like an empty hold, there was no profit in idleness. Bolitho reached over and seized Ozzard's shoulder as he leaned over the gunwale. Skin and bones: there was nothing of the man.

"Easy there, you're all we have today!"

Ozzard was twisting his head, his fingers like claws on the painted gunwale.

"We've left the Isle of Dogs astern, sir." He did not even blink as a moored barge appeared to turn and ram them. He was remembering, trying to pierce the fog with his mind. "We shall have to turn left shortly..."

Allday muttered, "*Left*, he says!"

The stroke oarsman called hoarsely, "Can we rest, Mr. Pym?" He was careful not to ask the commodore.

The midshipman looked at Bolitho. "They are pulling against the tide now, sir."

Ozzard glanced at the midshipman as if he had never seen him before. "We we turn left, sir, there are some sheltered wharves. It would be safe enough, I believe."

"Very well." Bolitho looked along the boat. Even the bowman was melting into and emerging out of the fog. "Watch the stroke now, lads!" He studied Allday's intent features. "Be ready. *Left*, remember?"

They could hear water rushing

through some tall piles, as if the river had increased speed in the past minutes.

“Bowman!”

The man in question gratefully withdrew his oar and faced forward with his boathook.

“There it is! Fine to starboard!”

All at once they saw a high pier rising above them, and somebody cursed as his oar was torn from his hands to vanish from its rowlock. Allday called, “Ship your oars!” Then he swung the tiller bar hard over and waited, keeping his balance with difficulty as the boat surged beneath the stinking shelter of the pier.

Ozzard said breathlessly, “Limehouse, sir!”

The oarsmen drooped on their thwarts, sucking in the damp, cold air, a solitary grapnel holding them in position.

Ozzard was murmuring as though to himself, “They used to have a few hulks hereabouts, sir. A receiving vessel too, though she may have been shifted.”

The seamen were chattering amongst themselves but peered aft with resentment as Allday snapped, “Keep silence in the boat!”

Bolitho glanced up at him. It was not like Allday to use his authority on trusted seamen who were doing their best.

There was something about him. Alert, and suddenly very conscious of danger.

“What is it, old friend?”

Hearing him address his coxswain, a seaman like themselves, did much to quench the sudden anger in the boat.

Allday had one hand over his ear. “Shot, sir.” He moved his head very slowly, his hand held out like a studding sail to catch the slightest sound.

They all heard the second shot, although it was hard to judge the distance and the exact bearing.

Minutes dragged past, and the silence but for the ripple of water through the piles was oppressive.

“Watch out!” The bowman snatched his boathook but he was not fast enough. Turning one shoulder like a man in his sleep, a sodden corpse drifted alongside just for a second as if he were going to pull himself aboard. They heard his shoes scrape along the bottom, saw the staring, dead eyes fixed on each one of them before it vanished astern with the other drifting rubbish.

Only Ozzard seemed unmoved. He said, “Watchman. I saw his coat and buttons.”

Bolitho waited for the midshipman to tear his eyes from the river.

“Are your people armed, Mr. Pym?”

He spoke calmly but the midshipman stared at him, unable to believe that there was danger so near.

“I - I have my dirk, sir.”

Two of the oarsman had their cutlasses. That was all. Bolitho looked at Allday. “I know that you are always ready.” He touched the old sword at his side. “Up to us, then.”

Pym almost forgot himself as he

gasped, "We might be outnumbered, sir!"

Bolitho peered at the slimy piles. He was wearing his best uniform. It would not remain so for very long.

There were more shots, and the sound of screams. Then running feet, first on stones and then becoming muffled as they thudded along the pier.

Allday muttered, "Fog's on our side this time!"

There were more shouts, much louder now. Ozzard whispered, "I think some prisoners have broken out of the hulk, sir. They'll kill any one who tries to take them again."

Allday was feeling for his pistol, then he thrust it into his belt and loosed his heavy-bladed cutlass.

He lowered his voice as more cries and screams came out of the dense fog like souls in hell.

"We can wait here, sir. Nobody'll be looking down in this cesspit!"

Bolitho removed his hat and touched his face as a breeze stroked his cheek and moved on to touch the dark water beside the boat. "The fog is changing sides, old friend." He drew his sword and tossed the scabbard onto the bottom boards. The men at the oars had to lean aft to hear him as he said, "A wind is rising. Up there are the King's enemies. So too are they ours."

He stood with care and grasped one of the rusting mooring rings. One slip here and you would more likely die of poisoning than drowning. It was fortunate that these were seasoned sailors,

not newly pressed and confused landsmen. They were used to danger, day in and day out. The sea, the weather, the enemy. It was what they were trained and drilled to combat. The rights and wrongs of it were not their concern. They had to trust their officers, and obey, no matter what.

Bolitho saw the bowman more clearly now, and made out the shape of the pier beyond the gig's bows.

Feet were pounding along the tarred planking, and he heard some one call out for mercy before being hacked down.

He gripped Midshipman Pym's arm, squeezed it until the youth gasped with pain.

"Now hear me, Mr. Pym!" He watched the terror in his eyes retreat very slowly. He could feel him shaking, smell the fear running through him. He would not be able to fight. "Give your dirk to another." He saw his words sink in. "There is something I must ask you to do this day. Do you understand, Mr. Pym? Answer me."

Could this really be sunlight breaking through? It did not seem possible or fair.

Pym nodded loosely, as if his neck were already broken.

"Yes, sir."

"Good, this is what I want..."

Bolitho balanced himself on a filthy cross-beam, gauging the moment, not even sure how long it had been since the first shot, the sudden threat of danger.

He glanced down at the gig's crew, men he barely knew. Would they cast off and leave him to his own resources? It sounded as if there were a lot of people on the pier: anything might happen. Whoever they were, they were not having it all their own way. There was a clash of steel, and a hoarse voice trying to rally some last authority as they retreated along the pier.

One sword, three cutlasses and a midshipman's dirk. It was not much of a force. It might only delay the inevitable, when their corpses would follow the wretched watchman downstream.

He said sharply, "Remember, lads. Those of you in the boat, make as much noise as you can. I want them to think a whole squadron is come upon them!" Nobody laughed, or even spoke.

Bolitho glanced at Allday. "Take care, John." Then without further delay he was scrambling up and over the pier, his fingers slipping on filthy weed, the old sword dangling from his wrist. It was like a curtain rising, the sudden shafts of pale sunshine making it all the more unreal, and half blinding him as he threw his leg up and over the massive timber.

Bolitho had boarded enough ships in all circumstances to recognize instantly what was happening, the first time when he had been no older than the terrified Pym.

It was more of a mob than a controlled attack. Some were obviously

seamen who had been caught by the press earlier and had been released by others, common felons awaiting sentence or punishment. One, at the rear, was hopping in leg-irons, trying to keep up with his fellow prisoners.

A few uniformed figures were retreating from the yelling, oncoming mob, and Bolitho guessed that they were some of the local Marine Police he had heard mentioned. He took a deep breath and heaved himself upright on the pier, his small party of seamen clambering after him, their cutlasses very bright in the watery sunshine.

"*Stand fast there!*" Bolitho saw the few Marine Police falter as he yelled. "In the King's name, I order you to surrender!"

From the gig below the pier he heard the stroke oarsman bellow, "*Huzza! Huzza, lads! Let's be at the buggers!*"

The effect was instant as men skidded to a halt, and one even threw his weapon, a boarding axe, into the river.

Without daring to turn his head Bolitho knew it was Midshipman Pym who had just climbed onto the pier at his back.

Some one yelled, "There's but a few of 'em, you bloody hounds! Cut 'em down!" Like a small tide the front of the crowd surged forward again.

Bolitho parried a boarding pike to one side and hacked down another man who had been caught momentarily offguard by his fine uniform. He saw others moving out on either side.

It could not last much longer.

Only Pym could save them now.

There was a sharp bang of a pistol and then Pym staggered, his hands to his chest, before falling face down on the worn planks.

Bolitho saw men staring and pointing, the madness suddenly gone out of them. Allday roared, "By God, they've killed a King's officer! They're done for now!"

One of the Marine Police, his forehead bleeding from a deep cut, stared with disbelief as more weapons went into the river or clattered onto the pier. He gasped, "There really *are* only a few of you, sir!"

He gestured wildly as the breeze rolled the fog away to reveal his world of wharves, moored vessels and warehouses. Men were lining many of the ships, astonished by the spectacle as several boats pulled briskly from the retreating fog, to spill armed police onto the shingle and mud, while from the inner end of the pier others already blocked all retreat for those who had made their own trap for themselves.

Some of the escaped prisoners were pulling away from the main body on the pier. Protesting, pleading, trying to demonstrate that they had had no part in this murder.

One of the senior Marine Police officers said, "That was bravely done, Captain! I am sorry indeed for the loss of so young an officer. But for you, I fear all my patrol would have perished."

Allday corrected him politely.

"*Commodore* Bolitho, if you please."

There were uniforms all around now, and the prisoners were being handled roughly as they were hustled back towards the nearest houses. Bolitho allowed himself to be assisted down to the gig where he turned and called, "You may get up, Mr. Pym. That was an excellent performance!"

There was a chorus of shouts and laughs as the embarrassed midshipman got to his feet.

Bolitho recovered his scabbard and climbed over to one of the police boats, Allday and little Ozzard following him like conquerors.

Later when they were landed at the Wapping Marine Police station, they were met by the two senior officers, a Mr. John Harriott and the Chief Surveyor. Mr. Armstrong.

The latter was heard to say, "We were of course expecting you, Commodore Bolitho, although doubtless we all imagined it would be in a less spectacular fashion! I will arrange a fast carriage to the Admiralty immediately!" His mouth twitched as he regarded Bolitho's filthy breeches and mud-covered coat, from which one epaulette was missing. "Perhaps we can put you to rights before you leave?"

But Bolitho was gazing at the sand and shingle that covered his shoes. He tested the ground with his foot.

It was not much, but it was England. He was back.

Allday watched his face and grinned. He had never thought he



Manning the Navy

would ever be grateful to the forces of law and order. But this time was different.

An' that's no error.

