

Chapter 1

Thomas Kydd stood awkwardly on the deck of the frigate with his few possessions at his feet. A bare hour ago he had been an ordinary seaman in the old line-of-battle ship *Duke William*. Now, somewhere off the enemy coast of Revolutionary France, he was gazing back at her from a crack frigate as an able seaman, a replacement for prize crew.

A hand lifted in farewell in the boat pulling back to the big ship-of-the-line. It was Whaley, and with a lump in his throat Kydd realised that he would probably never see his broad smile again or share a grog with his other old shipmates. It had started hard – as a young perruquier from Guildford Kydd had been seized by the press-gang six months before, but despite all he had suffered, he had come to admire the skill and courage of the seamen. And now, as a sailor himself, he was parting from the ship that had been his home for so long.

He waved in return and forced his attention back inboard.

Men were waiting on deck – a weatherbeaten older man in plain black and a much worn tricorne, a hard-looking lieutenant in serviceable sea-going blues, a child-like midshipman without a hat, and the man at the wheel, stolidly chewing tobacco. Next to Kydd, Renzi gave a conspiratorial grimace. They had been through much together, he and his friend. The others in the little party looked equally bemused: Stirk, the tough gun captain; Doud, the devil-may-care topman; Doggo, a ferally ugly able seaman; Pinto, a neat and deadly Iberian; and Wong, the inscrutable circus strongman. But there would be no complaint; service in a fast frigate ranging the oceans for prey and prize money was infinitely preferable to the boredom of a big ship on blockade duty.

‘Brace around that foresail – run away with it, you damn sluggards!’ The hard bellow from behind startled Kydd. ‘Away aloft, you dawdling old women – lay out and loose!’ The officer was dressed in austere sea rig, only faded lace indicating that here was the most powerful man aboard, a post captain in the Royal Navy and commander of the frigate.

The men leaped to obey. Kydd saw that they moved with enthusiasm and speed, quite unlike the heavy, deliberate movements he’d been used to in the battleship. Some made a race of it, sprinting along the top of the swaying yard before dropping to the footrope in a daring display of skill.

Artemis responded immediately, the chuckle of water under her forefoot feathering rapidly, the creaking of cordage and sheaves as more sails were sheeted home soon rewarded with an eager swoop across the broad Atlantic swell. Kydd felt the lively response with a lifting of the heart. To windward, in the *Duke William*, the ponderous spars were still coming around, but the frigate was already stretching over the sparkling sea, impatient to be away.

Turning to them, the Captain roared, ‘Lay aft, you men!’ He stood abaft the wheel: with no poop in a frigate the spar deck swept unbroken from the beakhead forward in a sweet curve right aft to the taffrail.

Kydd and the others moved quickly. This was Black Jack Powlett, the famous frigate captain who already had five prizes to his name safe in English ports. There was no mistaking the quality of the man, the hard, penetrating stare and pugnacious forward lean of his body.

He looked at them speculatively, hands clasped behind his back. ‘So you’re all able seamen?’ His eyes flicked over to the fast receding bulk of the three-decker astern. ‘Goddamn it – I’ll not believe Caldwell has only prime hands to spare.’ His voice was cool, but there was a restlessness in his manner, a coiled energy that seemed to radiate out to those around him. His hand stroked his close-shaven blue-black jaw as he tried to make sense of the gift. ‘You, sir!’ he snapped at Doud. ‘Pray be so good as to touch the sheave of the flying jibboom.’

Doud gaped, then turned and darted forward. He was being asked to touch the very tip of the bowsprit eighty feet out over the sea.

Powlett drew out a silver watch. ‘And you, sir,’ he rounded on Renzi, ‘both stuns’l boom irons of the fore t’gallant yard.’

The restless eyes settled on Kydd, who tensed. 'To touch the main truck, if you please.' The main truck – the very highest point in the vessel. Kydd knew that his standing as seaman rested on his actions of the next few minutes.

He swung nimbly into the main shrouds, heaving himself up the ratlines and around the futtock shrouds. On and up the main topmast shrouds he swarmed, conserving his strength for the last lap. At the main topmast top the ratlines

[a]stopped. He stepped out on to the cross trees and looked down. Already at a height of one hundred and thirty feet, he was as far aloft as he had ever been before. But still above was the royal yard – and beyond that the truck.

He grasped the single rope topgallant mast shrouds firmly. At this height the pitch and roll were fierce and he was jerked through a vertiginous seventy-foot arc. His feet pinioning the tarred rope, and hands pulling upwards, he made his way to the light royal yard and past that to the seizings of the main royal backstay. The truck was only a matter of a few feet further, a round cap at the very tip of the mast – but now there was nothing but the bare mast.

The motion was alarming, a soaring through the airy firmament before a whipping stop and surge the other way. The pole mast was only a few inches thick and he locked his legs around it securely before transferring his grip and hauling himself upwards. Not daring to look down he watched the truck come closer – nearer, and then it was within his reach. Something rattled on the far side of the mast. He followed it up and saw that it was a stout chain clamped to the round of the truck. A new-fangled lightning conductor. On a crazy impulse he transferred his hands to the chain and drew himself up to the truck itself. A strong copper rod continued in the thin air beyond the truck.

It was the work of moments to heave himself up and past the cap – and then he was standing erect on the bird-slimed truck, trembling with fatigue and exhilaration and holding the lightning rod in a death grip. He flung up an arm to indicate his position, but before starting his descent he snatched a look at the panorama. Every part of the vessel was now at a level below him, decks, masts, sails. Not a single thing intruded to spoil the totality of his three-hundred-and-sixty-degree view.

Carefully lowering himself back down the mast, he slid the few feet down to the royal backstay. Transferring his grip from mast to stay he soared hand over hand down the backstay to the deck again.

'I do confess I am at a stand. It's no parcel of lubberly landmen we have here, Mr Spershott,' Powlett said to the lean officer next to him.

It took a moment or two for Kydd to realise why the mess deck was so different. There were the same mess tables and ship's side racks for cutlery and mess traps, but here there were no massive cannon regularly spaced along the sides. Aboard the battleship Kydd was used to having his living space between a pair of massive thirty-two-pounder long guns, sharing his domestics with the smoke and blast of broadsides, but here there was only a single function.

It was noon and the berth deck was alive with gossip and laughter after the issue of grog. A ship's boy had shown them to their new mess, half the party to a starboard mess, the other to larboard. They stood awkwardly.

'Hear tell they's promising ter send us some real man-o'-war hands,' said a thin-looking older man at the ship's side. Kydd knew enough about unwritten mess etiquette to realise that this was the senior hand of the mess. Like the others, he deliberately chose not to notice the newcomers.

A handsome, well-groomed sailor replied, 'As long as they're not ship-of-the-line jacks is all I asks. Them big-ship ways – no room fer marching up an' down in this little barky.'

The older man snorted. 'Nor all that there flags an' buntin' all th' time. An' yer've gotta be slow in th' wits to be big ships, else yer intellects rot, waitin' while the ship wants ter tack about.'

'Has t' be a big ship,' came back the other, 'all them pressed men – why, they has to batten 'em down when they makes port, else they'll think to ramble off home, like.'

The older man started, as though seeing the arrivals for the first time. 'Well, look who it ain't. A parcel o' *Royal Billys*! Sit yerselves down then – grog's up.'

Self-consciously Kydd edged over and sat next to a neat, slightly built sailor who held out his hand with a pleasant smile. 'Guess we have t' take ye aboard, we being grievous short-handed 'n' all!' he

said. 'Adam – Nathan Adam.'

'Kydd, Tom Kydd.' He flushed with pleasure, quite unconscious of the striking figure of a seaman he now made. His dark, strong features were well set off by the short blue jacket, white duck trousers, and a red kerchief knotted carelessly over a blue striped waistcoat. His ebony hair gleamed in a tight clubbed pigtail, his tanned, open face bore a broad white smile.

Sliding in easily next to Kydd, Renzi sat opposite. Curious looks met his from around the table, for he was most definitely at variance with the usual man-o'-war's man with his careful, intelligent dark eyes and a face with incised lines of character suggesting dangerous mystery. Renzi's black hair, short to the point of monasticism, also hinted at an inner discipline quite unlike the carefree sailor's.

He was next to a well-muscled black man, who turned to greet him. 'Never bin in a ship-o'-the-line, meself,' he said. 'Guess there's plenty more room in them big ships.'

'Know where I'd rather be,' Kydd said.

The senior hand interrupted. 'Got yer traps?' Kydd fished around in his ditty bag and drew out his tankard, an old brass-strapped wooden one that had once belonged to a close shipmate, now dead.

'Me apologies about the blackstrap,' the man said, up-ending a bottle into the tankard. 'Cap'n thinks to give us this'n instead o' the right sort.' He shrugged. 'Took a thousan' off a Frenchy last week.'

Renzi's eyes widened. He picked up the bottle eagerly and stared at the label. 'My God!' he said. 'Haut Brion, *premier cru*, the seventy-nine no less!' His beautifully modulated patrician tones took them aback quite as much as his words, but in the age-old custom of the sea, no obvious notice was taken of a character quirk.

'Hey, now, yer mate likes our grog, then,' the black man said happily.

The senior hand banged on the table with his grog can, a little of the rich dark wine spilling. Mature and lined, with an oddly soft voice, he announced, 'We has new chums, mates.' The others paid attention. 'Name's Petit, Elias Petit, 'n' yer already knows Nathan. Yon hulkin' blackamoor – we call 'im Quashee, 'n' if yer wants ter raise a right decent sea-pie, he's yer man.'

Kydd nodded. 'Tom Kydd, an' Nicholas Renzi,' he said, gesturing towards Renzi. He noticed the curiosity that Renzi's manner had evoked, but continued, 'and Pinto, er—'

'Fernando da Mesouta Pinto, your service,' the wall-faced Iberian added smoothly.

'Pinto is a Portugee,' Kydd said, 'and Nicholas is my particular friend,' he concluded firmly.

A thatch-haired lad brought up two kids of food and thumped them on the table.

'Thank 'ee, Luke,' Petit said. The lad up-ended a wooden tub to sit on and looked at the newcomers with the frankness of youth. Petit lifted the lid of one wooden container. ''Tis poor stuff only,' he announced defensively, and began doling out the food.

Kydd could hardly believe his eyes. Real china plates instead of squares of dark wood, a pewter spoon and even a fork. And the food! The oatmeal was not only seasoned with herbs but the meat was pig's trotters with collops of real meat – this was a feast.

Petit looked at Kydd curiously. 'So yer likes our scran too,' he said.

Kydd thought of the single galley in the ship-of-the-line serving eight hundred men. You could have anything so long as it could be boiled in the vast coppers. 'Yessir!' he answered. 'We has a saying in *Royal Billy* which we hear before we begins our salt beef.' He assumed an air of reverence.

*Àx4:6Á 'Old horse, old horse, what brought you here?
You've carried me gear for many a year!
An' now wore out with sore abuse
They salt you down for sailor's use!
They gaze on you with sad surprise
They roll ye over and bugger y'r eyes
They eat y'r meat and pick your bones
And send the rest t' Davey Jones!'*

[a] Laughing, they fell upon the food. Kydd glanced across the width of the deck to the mess opposite. Doggo, Wong and the others were clearly enjoying their change of fortune also, and a slow wink broke Stirk's oaken face.

'Hear tell as how y'r Black Jack is a tartar,' mumbled Kydd, his mouth full.

'Not as who would say,' Petit replied. 'The cat ain't seen th' daylight this five weeks or more – Cap'n, he knows it's us what fights the ship for 'im, 'n' so he treats us a-right, does he.'

'What about the first luff?' Kydd asked, absent-mindedly tapping a piece of hard-tack on the table. To his surprise no black-headed weevils squirmed out.

'Spershott? Don't say much. Keeps station on the Cap'n always, he does,' said Petit dismissively. 'It's Parry yer wants ter watch. Second luff. Thinks he's goin' to make his mark b' comin' down on Rowley, the third – it's Devil-bait agin Harry Flashers all bloody day long.'

'An' Neville,' prompted Quashee.

'An' Neville,' agreed Petit. 'Kinda fourth luff, but supernumer'y – wished on us b' the Admiral who wants to put him in the way of a mort o' prize money, my guess.' He grunted and added, 'But a square sort, I'll grant yer.'

Kydd took another pull at his tankard. The wine was rich and smooth. Adam seemed not to relish it. 'Not to y'r taste, Nathan?' Kydd asked amiably.

The courteous expression did not change. 'Christ abstained.'

'Blue light sailor,' said Petit, wiping his mouth. 'But he dursn't top it the preacher wi' us.'

Kydd nodded, and looking at Adam continued with a smile, 'Aye, but Christ made damn sure the wedding wasn't dry, though, didn't he!'

Adam looked at him steadily and sipped his drink.

'Where are we headed, do you believe?' Renzi asked.

'Where there's a Frenchy what swims.' Quashee chuckled. He aped a prize agent reluctantly doling out the guineas – so ludicrous was the sight of his bulk going through the motions that the mess fell about helpless.

Petit clapped him on the back. 'True enough, yer black bastard. That is ter say that we're raidin' commerce, which is ter say that ev'rything what is under sail has ter loose tops'ls to us, 'n' we has first pickin's.'

At the fore hatchway the squeal of boatswain's calls cut through the sociability. Reluctantly the sailors rose.

Evening quarters was exercised every day at sea in *Artemis*. At four bells in the last dog-watch, the entire ship's company closed up for action to the stirring sound of 'Hearts of Oak' on the fife and drum.

Lieutenant Rowley had the gundeck, and stood impassive at the fore hatch. Kydd noted the puffs of white lace that emerged at each sleeve and the luxuriant hair, carefully styled in the new Romantic vogue. His fashionable cynical mannerisms gave the impression of hauteur, heightened by the faultlessly cut uniform. His orders were resonant enough, however. 'Exercise of the great guns – gun captains, in your own time ...'

Stirk mustered his gun crew. His previous ship experience had ensured a rate of gun captain, and with Kydd and Renzi there were three other *Royal Billys*, Wong, Pinto and Doggo.

That left two of the original frigate crew on this gun – Gully, a bushy, round-faced man, and Colton, the second gun captain, a shrewish man with an uneven temper.

The twelve-pounder was only belly-high where the great thirty-two-pounders aboard the lower gundeck of *Duke William* were chest-high. Other than that, the cannon were nearly identical, and Kydd saw that the only real difference was in the number of men. Up to twenty men were needed to serve the big guns. Here, there were but three, together with a gun captain and his second, and the powder monkey.

Stirk was equal to the challenge. 'Right – different ships, different long splices. This barky likes it b' numbers, so 'ere's how we go.' He considered his men. 'Doggo, you're number one, load wad an' shot. Kydd, number two, want you to sponge 'n' ram. Renzi, number three, get the wad an' shot to number one. Gully, is it? Number four on the side tackle, please, mate, with Pinto an' Wong as number five 'n' six on the tackle. Oh, yeah – five an' six as well works the handspike, 'n' everyone bears a fist on the tackle falls runnin' out the gun.'

'An' me, Mr Stirk!' called the gangling boy at the hatch gratings amidships.

'An' Mr Luke, 'oo'll be doin' the honours with the powder,' he added gravely.

He stepped back, bumping into Colton. There was a moment of tension as Stirk stared him down. 'An' the second captain overhauls th' trainin' tackle.'

The routine of loading and firing was simple enough – the gun was run out and fired, then recoiled inboard. The cannon was sponged out, and a cartridge and wad rammed home. A ball was slammed in the muzzle, another was followed, rammed firmly in place, and the gun was run out again ready for firing. It was teamwork that counted, not only with the danger of naked powder brought close to gun blast, but the whole effectiveness of the gun depended on knowing what to do, and keeping out of the way of others when they did their part.

‘We does it slow time first, lads,’ ordered Stirk.

This was Kydd’s first time on the rammer. It was confusing that the rammer and sponge were at either end of the same stout wooden stave. He laid the stave down, sponge inboard, and joined at the side tackle. The gun was run out. The noise seemed more of a heavy rattle than the bass rumble of the three tons of the larger gun.

‘Gun ’as fired,’ Stirk said laconically. He looked pointedly at Colton, but Wong and Pinto thrust past and seized the training tackle at the breech end of the gun to make it ‘recoil’. Kydd had the sponge ready in the bucket, and lifted the dripping sheepskin. Passing the rammer end out of the gunport to get more room, he plunged it into the muzzle.

Renzi, across from Kydd, had an imaginary ‘cartridge’ and ‘wad’ ready for Doggo, who stuffed them into the muzzle. Kydd quickly had the cuplike end of the rammer stabbing down inside the muzzle; Doggo took the shot and another wad and slammed them into the maw. Kydd repeated his ramming and the gun crew hauled together on the tackles to run out; Stirk performed his priming and pointing, and the cycle was over. ‘We does it now in quick time!’ he growled.

They did it again, causing Stirk to groan with frustration. Kydd, in his enthusiasm, had his rammer flailing straight after Doggo’s cartridge but before his wad could be applied, and Wong, used to the huge inertia of larger guns, tripped over at the side tackle and sent his side down in a tangle of cursing men. At that moment a single squeal from a boatswain’s call pierced the din.

‘Still!’ cried Rowley, striding aft to meet the Captain with his first lieutenant. Rowley removed his hat as Powlett stepped on to the gundeck. All movement ceased.

‘Where are our *Royal Billys*, if you please, Mr Rowley?’ Powlett demanded.

‘This way, sir,’ Rowley replied, and with a graceful gesture moved forward.

Kydd watched them approach. Rowley was short enough to stand upright and stepped carefully, as if distrustful of where he trod. Powlett stooped slightly and ranged like a wary lion. Spershott hurried on behind.

‘*Duke Williams*, sir, Tobias Stirk, gun captain.’

Kydd sensed a cold ferocity behind Powlett’s eyes and felt his back stiffening.

‘Your men up to service in a frigate, Stirk?’ Powlett rasped.

Stirk hesitated.

‘Very well – we’ll have the measure of you nevertheless.’ Powlett drew out his watch. He swung round to the twelve-pounder next along. ‘Symonds!’

‘Aye, sir?’ the other gun captain said carefully.

‘You and the *Royal Billys* will exercise together.’

He turned back to Stirk. ‘Run out. On my mark!’

Stirk spat on his hands and glared at his crew.

Powlett consulted his watch. ‘Now!’ His arm swept down and the gun crews leapt into action.

With Wong’s great strength at the training tackle the recoil was accomplished rapidly. With nervous energy Kydd sponged and withdrew, Doggo’s cartridge instantly ready at the muzzle. Kydd returned with the stave – but Doggo hissed savagely, ‘Fuckin’ rammer!’ Kydd had made a stupid mistake. He had not reversed the stave and the wet sheepskin was still inboard with the rammer gaily poking out of the gunport. He tried to turn the stave outside the port but he fumbled and it fell away, tumbling noisily against the ship’s side and into the sea, sinking in the wake astern.

Symonds and his crew laughed cruelly. Spershott stepped over, scandalised. ‘Crown property! This will be stopped from your pay, you rascal.’

Powlett held up a hand. ‘No. *Royal Billys* will carry on with their exercise. And the rest of you may secure and stand down.’ He spared just one glance for the furious Stirk and returned up the ladder.

Liberated from duty, the *Artemis* hands gathered for the entertainment, and for the rest of the dog-watch the red-faced Stirk drove his crew mercilessly to the jeers and laughter of the others.

The days that followed were not easy for the *Royal Billys*. Things moved faster in a frigate. It needed agile feet to get out on a slender yard and back, and her speed of response at the helm took even Stirk by surprise. It was sailing on a different and more challenging plane, but stung by the element of competition they responded nimbly.

It was six weeks he had been in *Artemis*, and Kydd now felt he had found his feet. The middle watch was going slowly. As lookout, Kydd could not pass the time companionably with Renzi, and must occupy himself for an hour staring out into the night. Kydd drew his grego closer about him, the coarse wadmerel material warm and quite up to keeping out the keen night winds. The fitful moon was mostly hidden in cloud, leaving an impenetrable gloom that made it difficult even to discern the nearby helmsman. Kydd gazed out again over the hurrying seas, fighting a comfortable drowsiness.

Something caught his eye, far out into the night. A blink of paleness, suddenly apparent at the extremity of his vision then gone. He stared hard, but could not catch it again. There it was once more! A momentary pallid blob appearing and disappearing in one place.

'Officer o' the watch, sir!' Kydd called. A voice replied from the other side of the deck, and a dark figure loomed next to him.

'Kydd, sir, larb'd after lookout. Saw something way to loo'ard, flash o' white or so.'

'Where away?' It was Parry's hard voice.

The pale object obliged by winking into existence in the general direction Kydd indicated, remaining for a brief space before it disappeared.

Parry had his night glass up instantly, searching. 'Damn it – yes, I have it.' He snapped the glass down. 'Pass the word – my duty to the Captain, and a sail is sighted.' With a captain like Powlett there could only be one response. They would close on the sail, and take their chances.

In the short time before Powlett hastened on deck *Artemis* had braced around and begun bearing down on the strange sail. 'I'll trouble you to take in the topsails, Mr Parry – no point in alarming them unnecessarily.' The pale blob steadied and remained. 'We keep to windward. Stand off and on until dawn.'

After an hour it became clear that the stranger had sighted them and changed course towards them. *Artemis* followed suit to retain her windward position. The stranger soon tired of this and eased away off the wind, and the two ships spent the remaining hours of darkness running parallel under easy sail.

The stirring rattle of the drums died away, and with every man closed up at his post, they waited for the darkness to lift. *Artemis* always met a new day with guns run out and men at quarters: they would never be caught out by the light of day revealing an enemy alongside ready to blow them out of the water.

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The stranger was still there at daybreak five miles under their lee, the summer dawn languorously painting in the colours of the day – darkling sea to a vivid cobalt, lilac sky to a perfect cerulean with vast towers of pure white clouds to the south. It also revealed the sleek low black and yellow lines of a frigate, quite as big as they, and in the process of shortening sail.

Artemis bore down on the vessel, every glass trained on her. The quarterdeck grew tense. 'She does not throw out her private signal, dammit!' grunted Powlett. If this were a Royal Navy ship there was a need to establish the relative seniority of their respective captains. But on the other hand she might well have thought that *Artemis*, end on, could be a French ship and feel reluctant to deter the approach by showing her true colours too soon.

The sailing master, Mr Prowse, took off his hat to scratch at his sparse hair. 'Don't know as I recognises her as a King's ship at all.'

The boatswain took a telescope and stared at the stranger for a long time. 'Could be a Swede, but my money's on her bein' a Frenchy.'

Powlett's response was quick. 'Why so?'

'Cos, sir, she has squared-off hances, much less of a sheer, an' as you can see, sir, the fo'c'sle rail is never carried foward of the cathead – she's French-built right enough.'

'Thank you, Mr Merrydew,' Powlett said quietly.

'If you please, sir.' Parry stood patiently before Powlett, his expression as uncompromising as ever.

'Mr Parry?'

The second lieutenant motioned forward a sailor.

'What is it, Boyden?'

'Sir, that there's the *Sit-oy-en*,' he said definitively.

'The what?'

'*Sit-oy-en*. Seen 'er in Toulong. We was alongside, takin' in wine, we was, sir, last days o' the peace, 'n' she takes a piece outa us comin' down with the tide.'

Powlett stiffened. 'The *Citoyenne* you mean. You're sure? What is her force, man?'

'Thirty-six long twelves, sixes on the quarterdeck, don't remember else. Ah – she's big, an' has a consid' rable crew—'

Powlett nodded. Unlike the world-ranging British frigates, French vessels could re-supply at any time and as a consequence were crowded with fighting men. This one was also smart and confident, and presumably did not have prize crews away.

'And, sir.'

'Yes?'

'Her cap'n is a right tartar, beggin' yer pardon, like, sir. Our second lootenant, he 'eard him ter say that if the new crew didn't shape up sharpish, he promises ter turn 'em over into the galleys – an' that more'n six months ago.'

Lieutenant Neville cleared his throat and said lightly, 'Then we can expect a warm welcome.'

No smile broke Powlett's expression.

'Eyes of the world, I rather fancy.' Rowley's musing was ill-timed, but ignoring Powlett's glower he pursued the thought. 'For the first time in this war – here we have a match of equal force. The only thing to tip the scales will be the character of the nation. Will hot-blooded revolutionary zeal triumph over the lords of the sea? Or does right prevail? It will be a tournament that I rather think will mean more to the country than a single lonely battle far out at sea.'

Parry turned on Rowley. 'Are you in any doubt of the outcome, sir?'

'I would be a fool were I to think other than that it will be a hard-fought contest – but it will go hard for us at home should fortune deny us the victory.'

Powlett broke clear of the group. 'Give 'em a gun and tell 'em who we are, Mr Parry.'

A gun to weather banged out. Overhead the battle ensign broke out, its enormous size streaming brazenly in the breeze.

Powlett bared his teeth. 'Rig the splinter nettings, Mr Parry, and we'll have barricades in the tops.' He glanced at the heavy frigate riding the waves ahead. 'We're going to have to earn our honours today.'

Leaning out of the gunport below, Kydd and Stirk tried to make out the ship ahead. 'He's a Frog, 'n' we's invitin' him to a tea party,' Stirk said, pulling back inboard. 'An' it looks to be a right roaratorious time, he bein' at least our weight o' metal.'

Kydd looked at the enemy again. There was activity at the braces as the ship began a turn. Her profile shortened as she fell away off the wind, showing her ornamented stern and gathering way as she fled from them. Kydd was incredulous. 'She's running!'

Renzi's cool voice from behind answered him. 'As she should, of course, dear fellow. Her captain knows his job is to fall upon our merchant shipping, our commerce – that is the greatest harm she can do our cause. We are of the same force. If he engages, the best he can expect is a costly battle. He will be damaged and cannot proceed to his real work. He must preserve his ship.'

Stirk looked at him in contempt. 'Preserve 'is ship? No man preserves 'is honour by runnin'. Not even a Frenchy!'

Renzi shrugged.

'*Haaands* to make sail!' Powlett wanted royals loosed. *Citoyenne* was shaping a course that took the breeze on her quarter, but *Artemis* was not accounted a flyer for nothing. Taut and trim, she sped along.

Kydd joined the others on the foredeck, watching the chase. Foam-flecks spattered up from the slicing stem, streaming air thrumming gaily in the rigging. The weather was perfect for *Artemis*, and she drew closer; *Citoyenne* was now some small miles ahead and downwind.

Without warning *Citoyenne* angled over, to come as close to the wind as she could lie. *Artemis* followed suit immediately to keep to her weather position, and the two sped over the lifting seas. Powlett rapidly had bowlines fast to their bridles, stretching the forward edges of the sails to their utmost in a hard straining of every stitch of canvas.

'*Haaands* to quarters!'

Kydd clattered down the fore-hatch and closed up at his gun, heart thudding. He pulled down the rammer stave from its becketts at the deckhead and stood clear while Stirk checked gear.

Renzi looked calm and flexed his shoulders. Others finished folding and tying their kerchiefs over their ears. Most stripped to the waist, while some tested the wet sanded deck to decide whether bare feet would give the better grip.

Stirk made a fuss of securing Luke's ear pads. The boy stood wide-eyed on the hatch gratings and from the tone of Stirk's murmuring Kydd guessed that he was doing his best to ease the lad's fears. He wondered what he could think of to say in like circumstances. The gundeck settled, the guns long since run out ready for the first broadside. Stirk waited patiently at the breech with the lanyard from the gunlock coiled in his hand.

Kydd, now perfectly competent at his task after long hours of practice, was icily aware that this was not an exercise. He remembered his previous brush with the enemy, but that had been in a powerful ship-of-the-line; he had seen blood and death but it had ended brutally and quickly. Now, he wondered how he would perform in a much smaller ship, at closer quarters. He shuddered and looked about him. Doggo, his station at the muzzle, was leaning out of the gunport, gazing steadily ahead. Renzi stood with his arms folded, a half-smile playing on his lips. On the centre-line, Luke waited with his cartridge box in his hands, anxiously watching Stirk. Kydd knew that he was more worried about letting down his hero than possible death or mutilation.

The gundeck was strangely quiet, odd shipboard noises sounding over-loud, the cordage tension in working so close-hauled producing a finely tuned high frequency in the wind. Suddenly dry in the mouth, Kydd crossed to the centre of the gundeck, and scooped at the scuttled butt of vinegar and water.

Relatively short-handed, they had crews to fight the guns on one side only, but with a single opponent this was no disadvantage. Rowley paced at the forward end of the gundeck with a London dandy's nonchalance. His action clothing was plainer than usual, but Kydd noticed just a peep of lace at the sleeves, and his buttons gleamed with the glitter of gold. His sword, however, held an air of uncompromising martial serviceability.

'What'n hell?' Doggo shouted.

They crowded to the gunport.

Citoyenne was shortening sail and slowing. As they watched, she relaxed her hard beat to windward into a more comfortable full and bye, and soon lay quietly under topsails. She was ready to turn on her tormentor.

'No – you will await my order!' Powlett's roar was directed at Parry, who had drawn his sword and was pacing about like a wild animal. *Artemis* surged on, the distance rapidly closing. 'Shorten sail to topsails, Mr Prowse. Lay me within pistol shot to windward of her, if you please,' Powlett ordered.

The big courses were brought to the yards and furled, seamen working frantically as if determined not to miss the excitement to come. *Artemis* slowed to a glide.

The ships drew closer. 'Damn me that he doesn't risk a raking broadside,' muttered Merrydew.

As *Artemis* turned for the final run in to place herself parallel to the *Citoyenne* she would necessarily expose her bow to her opponent. Even one round-shot passing down the length of the vessel could do terrible damage, smashing through the guns one after another, maiming and killing in an unstoppable swathe of destruction.

But there was no cannon fire. In silence *Artemis* glided towards the enemy frigate, her own broadside held to a hair trigger. Parry glanced at Powlett, who stood four-square on the quarterdeck, facing the *Citoyenne* as the two ships converged. 'On my signal,' snarled Powlett.

At a walking pace *Citoyenne* slipped forward, enough way on for the rudder to answer. Men crowded on her decks, the knot of officers on her quarterdeck clearly distinguishable. From her open gunports the muzzles of cannon menaced, each one ready to deliver a crushing blow. But still they rested silent.

'Their captain,' Parry whispered.

The blue and gold figure opposite stood erect and proud. His arm swept up and he removed his hat with a courtly bow.

'My God!' Parry blurted.

'Shut up!' Powlett snapped. He removed his own hat, sweeping it down in an elegant leg, then stood tall and imperious. 'Long live His Majesty King George,' he roared. 'Huzzah for the King!' Dumbfounded, the group of officers removed their hats at the wild cheering that erupted from all parts of their vessel.

Opposite, the French Captain waited patiently for the sound to die. Now the ships ran parallel at an easy pace some two hundred yards apart. The Captain turned to one of a nearby gun crew and seized his cap, holding it aloft. It was a Phrygian cap of liberty. 'Vive la République!' The emotion in his voice was evident even across the distance. A storm of hoarse cheering broke out. The Captain clutched the cap once to his bosom, then thrust it at a seaman. Followed by cheering acclamation the man swarmed up the main shrouds, and at the masthead nailed the cap in place.

Powlett straightened. 'Enough of this nonsense,' he snorted, and clapped his hat back on his head. It was the signal. After the briefest of pauses *Artemis's* broadside smashed out in a brutal, thunderous roar, instantly filling the space between the two ships with acrid rolling gun-smoke.

The first broadside was an ear-splitting, mind-blasting slam of sound, choking the gundeck with writhing masses of smoke. Immediately *Citoyenne's* broadside answered. It arrived in a storm of violence, iron round-shot beating into *Artemis's* sides and deck – smashing, splintering, killing.

'Load, yer buggers!' yelled Stirk. The gun crew threw themselves at the task.

There was no time for Kydd to look around, to discover the source of the terrible shrieking nearby. No time to ponder the origin of the heavy clattering overhead, or the strange quiet of the gun next to them. It was impossible to see anything of the enemy through the gunport. They remained unseen under the double volume of gunsmoke.

He wielded his dripping sponge-rammer with a nervous fury, plunging it into the still smoking maw of the twelve-pounder, deep inside with a couple of twists to the left, and out again with twists to the right. Doggo was there in an instant, with the lethal grey cartridge and then a wad into the muzzle. Kydd had the stave reversed and savagely stabbed the rammer down. He caught Stirk's eyes as he looked down the gun from the breech end, his thumb over the vent hole to detect when the cartridge was truly seated, but there was no hint of recognition.

Then the ball, clapped in by Doggo and followed by a final wad. Kydd's movements on the rammer were fierce and positive. If they could get away another broadside before the enemy, it was the same as doubling their firepower.

'Run out!' Stirk shouted hoarsely. The gun bellowed and slammed in.

Kydd leapt into action again, the same motions. The work, the need to intermesh his movements with the others, meant there was no time for fear.

The second broadside from *Citoyenne* came smashing in, a long roll of terrible crashes instead of the massed simultaneity of the first. Kydd froze as they beat in on his senses. To his left, next to him, Kydd saw Gully drop to his knees with a muffled cry. In the smoky darkness it was difficult to see the cause, but the spreading dark stain under him was plain enough. He fell to his side, and scrambled at the fat of his upper thigh. Kydd stared at the foot-long splinter, which had been driven up by a rampaging ball and transfixed him. Gully wept with pain and crawled away in a trail of blood. Stirk's eyes searched wildly for a replacement.

Kydd glanced across the gun and saw Renzi, his face grave, and thought how easy it would have been for his friend to be a victim instead. He crushed the thought, and shoved the side tackle rope into the hand of the unknown seaman who was taking Gully's place.

The enemy were pacing them; there would not be any doubling of firepower – it would be a fight to the death among equals.

Powlett strolled slowly and grimly on the quarterdeck as debris rained down from above. Only the sails of the enemy were visible, but in her fighting tops above the smoke, moving figures could be seen levelling muskets at *Artemis's* quarterdeck.

Neville clasped his hands firmly behind him and paced slowly on the other side of the deck.

Parry had his sword out and was gripping the mizzen shrouds as he glared across at the enemy. Merrydew had disappeared into the hell forward with his mates, and the young midshipman attending on the Captain was visibly trembling.

A second broadside from *Citoyenne* crashed out into the thinning smoke between them. As the awful onslaught struck, Powlett was enveloped for a moment by the powder smoke. Then a sudden shock was transmitted through the deck planking. A thin scream came from out of nowhere and Neville was struck violently, sent sprawling by the flailing limbs of a man falling from aloft. Neville picked himself up; the man now lay untidily, dead.

A round-shot had nearly severed the driver gaff between the throat and peak halliards. The long spar began to sag. Then, in a slow rending, it fell apart. Without support the big sail first

crumpled then ripped from top to bottom, the heavy boom and rigging crushing and entangling the larboard six-pounder crews.

'Can't hold 'er!' the helmsman shouted, spinning the wheel fast to prevent the ship sagging to leeward and the enemy.

Powlett turned to the midshipman. 'Tell 'em to get in the headsails!' he snapped. *Artemis* slowed, her fine sailing qualities useless. Without a driver sail aft if she showed canvas forward they would pivot around in a helpless spiral.

They could neither manoeuvre nor run away. The smoke drifted over the bright sea, revealing *Citoyenne* pulling triumphantly ahead. The sun caught a quick flash of glass on her quarterdeck as her officers eagerly inspected the damage to *Artemis*.

It was obvious that there was no way they could effect a battle repair on the driver quickly – it was a unique fore-and-aft sail that needed special gear to set it out from the mast. And without manoeuvrability they could only take what was coming ...

After a few hundred yards *Citoyenne* began her turn into the wind. This would take her across the bows of *Artemis*, and would let her rake her adversary as she tacked around. This nightmare of a full broadside smashing headlong into her bows and down the length of the vessel was now upon them.

Forward the experienced fo'c'slemen saw the danger and frantically re-set the headsails – jib, staysails, anything. *Artemis* responded, falling away off the wind; but in so doing she kept her broadside to bear, turning in time with *Citoyenne*. With all the fury of helplessness *Artemis* thundered out her broadside again, strikes on *Citoyenne* visible now from her quarterdeck. The reply was thin and ragged, but this was only because most of the experienced French seamen would be at work putting the ship about.

Citoyenne completed her tack and was now ready to pass back in the opposite direction, poised to deliver her next broadside with full crews. Her tactics had also given her the weather gauge, an upwind position, which would allow her now to dictate the conditions of the battle. The French frigate began her pass, but there was one advantage that had been left *Artemis* – *Citoyenne*'s battered side faced them once more, but it was their own undamaged opposite side that awaited the clash.

As the two vessels passed, guns crashed out as they bore, no pretence at disciplined broadsides. Like the pot shots of a crazy drunk, the cruel iron shot pounded into *Artemis* as the ships slipped past.

At one point, Spershott, emerging from below, was flung across the deck like a child's discarded rag doll. He did not move where he sprawled. Two sailors took him by the arms and legs and dragged him below.

Powlett did not pause in his calm pacing.

Citoyenne ceased fire as she reached beyond *Artemis*. The enemy frigate wore around, so sure of her victim that she eschewed the faster tacking in going about for the more deliberate but less taxing wear. In wearing ship, *Citoyenne* would now pass much closer. This was the act of a supremely confident commander, who wanted to finish things quickly.

'Mr Neville!' roared Powlett, from the other side of the deck. 'Repel boarders!' He was grimed in smoke but stood stiff as a ramrod. The French frigate was pressing close because she was coming in to board. With her superior weight of numbers she was going to end it all with a final broadside before boarding *Artemis* in the gunsmoke. 'Aye aye, sir!' Neville yelled back.

Powlett cracked a grim smile. 'Go to it!'

The gundeck was a pit of horror. With the space wreathed in thick choking powder smoke, shot through with screams and cries, Kydd knew only the unvarying cycle of load and fire. The wet sheepskin of his sponge met the blistering iron each time with a mad sizzle.

At each pass of the enemy there was a monotonous crashing and thudding of round-shot strikes.

The guns fell silent. It seemed on the gundeck that *Citoyenne* was taking time wearing around instead of tacking. The smoke gradually cleared, and those who could peered from the gunports. The enemy was returning, closing, with the clear intention of finishing *Artemis*.

'Repel boarders! Awwaaaay, first division of boarders!'

Kydd hesitated.

'Off yer go, cock,' Stirk said, in a hoarse voice. 'An' – best o' luck, mate.'

With his heart pounding with dread, Kydd rushed up the fore-hatch. On deck the ship was in ruinous condition – shot-through sails, ragged and unravelled rigging hanging down and

swinging in the breeze, and scored and splintered decks littered with blocks and debris. The last act had begun.

He stumbled across to the foremast and yanked away a boarding pike from its stand. A boatswain's mate directed him aft where he joined the little group on the quarterdeck. Lieutenant Neville was there with drawn sword. He had thrown off his coat and now stood dramatically in front of them. 'We shall meet the French like heroes and we will drive them back into the sea.'

[a] There was a prickling in his right leg that distracted Kydd. Below the knee a splinter had torn his trouser and had penetrated his flesh before ripping its way out again. It was the coagulated blood sticking and pulling at his leg-hairs that annoyed him. He allowed a twisted smile to acknowledge his first wound in battle, then cut away his duck trousers above the wound.

Astern, *Citoyenne* took in sail preparatory to coming in. On her fo'c'sle her boarders were massed, a menacing, shouting crowd.

'Pikemen at the ready!' Neville called loudly. 'To the bulwarks, advance!'

'Belay that.' It was Powlett. 'Madness – on the deck, get down! They'll be using grape, you fool.'

They fell to the deck, behind the low bulwarks. The forward guns of *Citoyenne* were charged with grapeshot and they unleashed their hail of deadly small balls. The shot battered and tore at the nettings and side, but did not find flesh to tear.

It was a different matter for the carronades on *Artemis*. These ugly little weapons, short and stubby cannon on a slide, could bear aft, and when they replied it was with canister, a sleeting cloud of musket balls, which found targets aplenty in the bodies of the boarders. Shouts and jeers turned instantly to shrieks and cries, and to Kydd's horrified fascination, runnels of blood began coursing down the bow of the ship as it passed by their quarterdeck.

'Silly buggers,' grunted the carronade gun captain.

The other carronade had held its fire and its captain was fiercely concentrating on the changing angle. *Citoyenne*'s bow swept by, but still he did not fire.

'Men, he will attempt to board in the smoke of his broadside,' Neville called loudly. His voice broke with the intensity of his warning.

Kydd understood and rose with the others to the ready. Grounding the butt end of the boarding pike he thrust it forward and outward and tried to remember all he had been told. Soon there would be a final broadside and somewhere from the powder smoke would come a screaming pack of Frenchmen. He had to be ready to meet them.

The enemy boat-space passed with still no firing, but *Citoyenne* was slowing for the kill. Kydd held his breath. Suddenly the remaining carronade blasted off. It caught Kydd unawares, but its shot, a twenty-four-pounder round-shot, was well aimed. It smashed squarely into the base of the enemy's mizzen mast, which slowly fell towards them, bringing down the entire mass of sails, spars and rigging – and the hapless men in the mizzen top – over the side.

But there was an additional and crucial injury. The shot that had chewed a fatal bite from the mizzen mast had first smashed the ship's wheel. Without helm *Citoyenne* was out of control. She surged away for a short time but then swung towards *Artemis*. The angle opened but they were so close that the result was inevitable – the long bowsprit of the French ship speared across the decks of *Artemis* between the foremast and mainmast and the frigate thumped heavily to a stop, her bow hard up against the midships of her prey.

Kydd watched, appalled. Inertia drove at the French frigate, but her locked fore-end prevented her completing the move: hundreds of tons forced the big bowsprit against *Artemis*'s mainmast. It stopped dead, then strained and creaked noisily under the pressure.

Something had to give – either *Artemis*'s mainmast or *Citoyenne*'s entire bowsprit and forward gear. Both ships seemed to hold their breath. There was a series of thunderclap cracking noises. Then French fir gave best to British oak, and in a deafening, splintering surge the bowsprit broke and the whole fore assembly of *Citoyenne* gave way. Her bow dissolved into a tangle of spars, rigging and sails, most of which lay draped on *Artemis*'s midships. Relieved of the frenzy of forces, *Citoyenne* swung into *Artemis* and came to rest alongside.

‘Stand to!’ yelled Neville.

This was now the decisive time – no more manoeuvring, no more waiting. The battle had reached its climax. Seamen spread out along the bulwarks, pikes resolutely outward, but they were so pitifully few.

Powlett stood stock still, staring at the *Citoyenne*.

‘Sir?’ said Neville.

‘There’s something wrong aboard the Frenchy,’ Powlett muttered. There seemed to be confusion, a turmoil of directionless men. A number had begun swarming up the rigging on some desperate mission, but angry shouts indicated that the order had been countermanded or misunderstood. Some milled about the decks but nowhere were boarders massing for the attack.

‘Her captain has fallen,’ Powlett said in a low voice. Then louder, savagely, he said, ‘And we have our chance, Mr Neville.’ He drew his sword. ‘Awaaaay, boarders!’

Neville looked thunderstruck – then grinned. ‘Aye aye, sir! Boarders away!’

A full-throated cheer roared up from the men. This was better than waiting tamely for the enemy. Pikes were thrown to the deck; men raced to the arms chest and snatched their weapons – a brace of pistols, a cutlass, some took a tomahawk. Kydd stuffed a pair of pistols into his wide belt and also grabbed a cutlass, which he held as naked steel. Tensing nervously, he turned back to Neville. The man seemed strangely serene. His eyes flashed then he turned to his men. ‘Boarders to the fore – advance! God save the King!’ With his sword stabbing ahead, he plunged forward. The first division of boarders followed him.

Men scrambled on and up to the remains of the bowsprit. It lay across the battered-down bulwarks of *Artemis* amidships, a perfect bridge into the heart of the enemy. With mad cheering and wild waving of cutlasses they were soon on the broad top of the big spar. Slashing at the entangled rigging, Neville forced his way across to the fo’c’sle of the other ship, to the rapidly gathering band of enraged French. Kydd stumbled and charged with the others, his thoughts a mad whirl of the imperative for victory – and survival.

The gundeck cleared of smoke, revealing the wreckage of battle. The occasional cannon crashed out from their foe, but with the ruin of *Citoyenne*’s fore-rigging there was a pause in the fighting. The after end of *Citoyenne* completed its swing, and the shot-scarred side of the frigate filled the frame of the gunport. Above them on the upper deck came a roar of British cheering.

Renzi looked at the smoke-begrimed Stirk, who met his gaze with a tired smile. ‘Looks like we got ourselves a tartar by th’ tail,’ he said. The slight relative motion of the vessels brought their gunports into line. With men away repelling boarders the British guns could not be served: they had to stand silent until the tide of battle had turned.

Through the port Renzi could see erratic movements in the other ship. Then he understood. The thumping of feet on the deck above was *towards* the ship’s side – it was *they* who were boarding! With a breaking wave of emotion he screamed, ‘We’re boarding! By God, it’s us!’

Stirk glared at him – realisation struck and he threw himself at the midships arms chest, and brought out a cutlass. ‘Move, you bastards!’

Renzi hurled himself to the chest and snatched up a cutlass for himself, jostled impatiently by others.

With a bull-like roar Stirk lunged into the gaping gunport, through and on to the enemy gundeck. Renzi followed close behind, and jumped into the hostile deck, fetching up next to a dismounted gun. The scene was a crazy impression of bodies, live and dead. The low deck-head left no room for subtleties – the swordsman in Renzi sank to butchery, the robust greased steel of the Sea Service cutlass cleaving and plunging.

Their bold attack was unexpected, and opposition melted as more British seamen poured through the gunports and battered a path towards the cabin spaces aft.

Jumping to the enemy foredeck Kydd nearly impaled himself on a pike shoved at him by a

fearfully pale young man. Kydd's cutlass came up and being inside the long pike he turned its length to his advantage – it was easy to force the pike aside, leaving the man at his mercy.

The face sagged in sudden realisation. Kydd's blade slashed forward and with an inhuman shriek the Frenchman crunched and gouted blood. Kydd drew the cutlass back, the grey steel now streaked red.

The man was already at Kydd's feet, a spreading pool of blood under his jerking body. Kydd looked up. A larger seaman with a moustache threw himself towards him, his cutlass ready at point. Kydd clumsily came to an outside half-hanger and felt a violent clash of steel. The cutlass flashed back and Kydd's inside guard was only just in time and instinctive. The assault ended in a deadly slither along his blade to the hilt. It banged against his forehead and he felt the hot burn of a wound.

The man was overbearing, thrusting, slashing – Kydd gave ground. Suddenly his antagonist slipped on the spreading pool of blood, and reflexively threw out his arms. Kydd thrust out and felt his blade jar against bone before sinking deep into softer tissue. The cutlass was jerked from his hands, but it was the man falling to his knees, Kydd's blade jutting from his chest.

Kydd looked around wildly. It was impossible to make sense of the mêlée, and he caught the flash of movement of a French officer who lunged towards him with a rapier. Horror seized Kydd, but in a frenzied split second he remembered his pistols and drew one from his belt. At the full length of his arm he shoved the heavy weapon straight into the face of the officer and pulled the trigger. The man's face became a mask of blood and bone and he crashed to the deck in front of Kydd.

His first victim still lay sprawled on his side. Kydd stamped his foot on the body of the other seaman and heaved out his cutlass. He looked around. Men were fleeing, general confusion. He heard Neville's shouted orders from ahead, and hurried forward to the scrimmage by the boat-space. It had broken up by the time he reached it, but re-formed further aft.

Abreast the main jeer bits a wall of the enemy had formed across the deck and was pressing the seamen from *Artemis* hard. Surrounded by enemy, Neville was in the front, his blade faster than a snake's tongue. Kydd fell back, arms exhausted and burning with fatigue, but there was no retreat. He slashed and parried, swaying forward and back, weariness blunting his skills. Stubbornly he called on his last store of strength, furious that things had to end in this way.

Suddenly, gloriously, there was the sound of wild cheering as Stirk boiled up from the after hatchway in the enemy's rear. He whirled his blade like a lunatic and close behind him were Renzi and the others in a triumphant assault.

The French broke, then ran. Screaming harshly Kydd flailed after them, but they bolted down the hatchway and into the rigging, leaving the British in possession of the deck.

'Follow me!' screamed Neville. Kydd stumbled after him, a huge grin at the sight of Renzi alongside him. They reached the quarterdeck. Neville's sword slashed at the clumsy attempt the French had made to keep the *tricolore* hoisted high on the stump of the wrecked mizzen mast, and the enemy colours tumbled down. He held them aloft in his hands, an ecstatic expression on his face. Insane cheering broke out, again and again, echoed from *Artemis*.

Kydd stopped and lowered his stained weapon in a daze. It was victory! A swelling pride swept over him suddenly and he looked down the long deck of the enemy ship with its piled-up ruin of rigging and bodies, a battlefield of blood and desperation – and knew the warrior's pulsing triumph.

Around him others had come to a stop, as did the French. Sullen and tense, first one, then the rest of the enemy let their pikes, tomahawks and cutlasses drop to the deck. A strange silence hammered at Kydd's ears after the furious clash of battle. Then the sailors began to move again at the shouts of petty officers as they directed their men to surround the prisoners.

Renzi appeared, his smoke-grimed figure and apologetic half-smile making Kydd feel guilty that he had not spared time to think of his friend as he had hewn and slashed his way along the enemy decks.

Beside him Neville staggered then steadied himself against the fallen mizzen. He seemed to be working under some emotional burden. 'Well done, you men. I – I'm proud of you all,' he said huskily. Sheathing his sword clumsily he looked up to where the ensign of the Royal

Navy floated free above the French on the stump of the mast. His eyes did not leave the flags; he seemed to sag.

Worried, Kydd then noticed the deck beneath Neville – bright flowers of scarlet blossomed on the planking. Neville slid down to a sitting position, looking oddly preoccupied. Kydd moved to his side and steadied him, but Neville shrugged off his support irritably. ‘S-secure the prisoners,’ he ordered no one in particular. His eyes had a glassy look.

No one moved: they were staring at him. ‘A-and cu’ away thi’ raffle,’ he said, in a pitiable version of his usual crisp delivery. The eyes focused. ‘Abou’ y-your duty, m-men!’ he ordered, in a querulous tone. Kydd felt at his side – his hand came away steeped in blood. Neville’s eyes turned to him, puzzled, then his body seemed to collapse inwards of itself and, with Kydd tenderly supporting, Neville subsided to the deck. He lay still on his back, but his eyes moved, seeking out the ensign, which they fixed and held. For long moments he did not move, then gently, his body relaxed and stilled.

Kydd waited, but the mantle of death was unmistakable. ‘He’s gone,’ he murmured, and closed the still open eyes. He felt an upwelling of emotion, which threatened to overwhelm him.

A voice spoke next to him, a cool, steadying voice. ‘As of this moment there is no British officer aboard,’ said Renzi. Kydd looked up at him, grateful for the intervention but not sure what he meant.

‘We must find the enemy Captain at once,’ Renzi went on. Of course – the capitulation could not be completed until the Captain had yielded his sword. Renzi crossed over to one of the growing numbers of disarmed French sailors. The man looked dazed as he questioned him, then pointed towards a knot of bodies draped around the base of the mainmast.

The imperatives of war meant that the corpse must be found and deprived of its sword, and Kydd reluctantly approached the charnel house, where men had been dragged to die. Movement caught his eye. Propped up against the mast was a hideously wounded man with his left hip and part of his back blasted away by a round-shot. The man was doggedly biting and tearing at papers, his eyes rolling in unspeakable pain.

Kydd knelt down and saw gold lace beneath the clotted blood. He realised that this was the Captain. Overcome with compassion, Kydd reached out to stop the manic activity.

He was pushed aside by Parry, who grabbed uselessly at the paper fragments. ‘Damn him!’ he said in disgust.

The Frenchman smiled, and passed from the world.

‘The Master believes we shall descry St Catherine’s at seven bells,’ Renzi said. His tone was guarded, but Kydd could tell he was charged with feeling. They were sitting on the fore-hatch, busy with other seamen on endless coils of shot-riven rope. It was not unpleasant – the morning sun was warm and beneficent, their progress a crawl under the jury driver, an ingenious contraption of spare topmast and leather butt lashing.

Kydd had lain sleepless in his hammock all night, trying to put the nightmarish, jerking scenes of death and peril from his mind. Time and again the piteous pale face of the youngster he had slaughtered cringed and begged. Kydd questioned his own humanity until his brain staggered under the weight of his doubts.

Wallowing astern, the *Citoyenne* pumped ship every hour, her hull and rigging a crazy patchwork of hasty repair, but above the tricolour floated *Artemis*’s battle ensign.

‘Did you notice?’ Renzi said, in a low voice.

Kydd knew that his friend would now reveal what was troubling him.

‘The French Captain, Maillot,’ Renzi said quietly.

Kydd remembered the gory corpse, the manic biting. ‘What about him?’

‘The papers he was destroying.’

‘Yes?’

‘It was his commission.’

'But all officers carry theirs on them in battle – in case they're captured.'

'Parry found it amusing,' Renzi said drily. 'Said it was a fine time to find it a worthless Jacobin scrap of paper, that he must destroy it.'

'But—'

'Exactly. I do not believe a man in his last minutes would think to commit such an act.'

'Then why—'

Renzi looked away. 'It was an act by the bravest man I know,' he said softly.

Kydd sighed with exasperation. 'Why so?' he said.

Renzi opened his mouth to speak, but changed his mind. 'You will forgive me, but at times my philosophies lead me down strange paths.' He picked up his splice and continued his work.

'Damn strange, if y' asks me.' Kydd snorted.

Renzi's face lifted – it was troubled. 'Would you have me take the last mortal act of a gallant man and turn it to ashes? Or do I honour his memory and remain silent?'

There was no doubt in Kydd's mind. 'If it is a matter touching on the safety of England then y' have no choice – y'r logic will say, you are overborne by the higher.'

'Yes.'

'Would you be so timid, were you to make the decision under stress o' battle? You would not – the matter is not decided till the flag is down.'

'You are in the right of it, dear fellow.' Renzi stared down for a moment. 'Come,' he said.

He went to the shrouds, pretending to be passing a line. Kydd joined him, understanding that Renzi needed to be away from the ears of others.

'His commission, he would not destroy it – but he would if in his final agony he believed it to be some other paper, one that was of vital urgency to the security of his nation. I believe that in one of his *other* pockets we shall find this paper, whatever it might be.'

Kydd stared at him. 'We must tell this.'

'And have Parry admit his contempt was misplaced? I think not. We find it ourselves, if indeed it is there.'

* * *

The body of Captain Maillot was laid out in the orlop, on the main-hatch. It would be given a funeral with full honours when they reached England in one or two days, but meanwhile it would rest below, sword and cocked hat laid carefully upon it.

A single lanthorn shed a soft light on the still form, and on the marine sentry loosely at attention at the foot of the shroud.

They approached and the sentry snapped awake. 'Gerroff!'

'This the Frog captain?' Kydd asked.

'Yeah – now yer've clapped peepers on 'im, bugger off!'

Kydd sauntered up to the sentry. 'Last chance we gets, y'know. Seein' his face an' that,' he went on. The sentry didn't reply, stiffening his posture.

Renzi glanced meaningfully at Kydd, who tried again. 'It was we who got to him first, you knows,' he said. 'There he was, all gory an' all, we were the ones who saw him, there dyin'.'

The sentry shifted slightly and said from the corner of his mouth, 'Saw yez do yer boardin'. That wuz a plucky do – bad luck to me if it ain't.'

'Then let's see his face, pay our respects like,' Kydd wheedled.

The man looked nervous. 'Me sergeant catches me ...'

Kydd eased a black bottle from inside his waistcoat. He started, as though noticing the sentry for the first time. 'Why, there's m' bad manners. You've been down here, looking after his Nobbs, with never a drop – here, take a rummer while we have a quick peek.'

The sentry offered his musket to Kydd to hold, and took a long pull. Renzi quickly undid the lacing at the head of the shroud to reveal the pale face and staring eyes of Maillot. A sickening odour drifted up.

'Ere, yer can't do that!' The sentry had noticed Renzi move the sword and hat and continue unlacing down the length of the corpse.

'Have another pull if ye likes,' Kydd urged.

Renzi found nothing in the pockets. If there had been an alternative paper it was not there any more. He knew that if they were found, any explanation would be futile. It would be assumed they were robbing the corpse – a hanging offence. He threw a despairing glance at Kydd, then clamped his kerchief to his face and burrowed deeper into the dead Captain's inner clothing. He tried to ignore the coldness of death.

'Hey, stop that, yer thievin' sod!' The sentry had come to his senses, and tried to pull Renzi off the body. Kydd held him back, and at that moment Renzi froze. His hand withdrew. In it was a single sheet of closely written paper. He held it to the light, and Kydd could see his eyes gleam. 'Set him to rights, Tom. We have it.'

The paper was stuffed back and the body restored to a state of proper reverence.

Snatching back the bottle, Kydd hurried after Renzi to the open air again.

'Secret coast signals – priceless,' whispered Renzi. 'But how—'

Kydd grinned back at him. 'Easy! Let's say you overheard the French prisoners talking among 'emselfs, thought it proper to lay it before Black Jack that he might find somethin' interesting should he rummage the body.'