

Chapter One

The evacuation of Toulon left no time for anyone to be shy when it came to being active: the defences were falling to the French revolutionary armies in increasing numbers, the forts being abandoned, blowing their stores of powder, and the general situation was deteriorating by the hour. Even if Lieutenant John Pearce, a naval officer by accident rather than design, thought himself free from the need to respond to orders, to refuse to serve under such circumstances when the fate of the entire garrison was at stake, would have been churlish in the extreme.

Thus he found himself, along with those men for whom he had taken responsibility, aboard the fireship HMS *Vulcan*, heading past the Grosse Tour and into an inner bay known as the Petite Rade, his destination the naval harbour of Toulon, intent on adding to the destruction. Beneath his feet the ship was being primed, which meant the barrels of powder and pitch with which it was equipped were being linked to the fuses and highly

inflammable liquids which would turn the vessel into an explosive fireball.

HMS *Vulcan* was leading a small squadron made up of manned galleys under the command of Captain Sir Sidney Smith, tasked with ensuring that when the port finally fell to the enemy, little of military value would be left for their use. The fireship was to be laid alongside the capital ships of the French fleet, those not fit for sea or vessels that could not be manned and sailed out. Once ignited, HMS *Vulcan* would turn into the torch that destroyed them and they in turn would fire the rest of the vessels tied up to the naval quays.

Not content that such measures would be sufficient, it had been decided that fires must be set on the vessels themselves, to ensure ruin, just in case the French sought to save them. While Pearce agreed that the service was necessary, there were friends with him who did not: the group of fellows, of which he was one, who knew themselves collectively as the Pelicans.

‘They are short of men,’ Pearce insisted.

‘Short of men,’ grumbled Charlie Taverner, the least eager to undertake the service. ‘How can a whole fleet be short of men?’

‘There are not enough hands to crew all the ships in the French fleet, and according to Admiral Lord Hood scarce enough to man the vessels he already commands, given the losses he has suffered.’

‘Old Hood must be desperate to send for you, Charlie.’ That jest got Michael O’Hagan a queer look, which only made the huge Irishman laugh more, his eyes narrowing in that massive head, yet still able to twinkle from the

reflected light of the fires that surrounded the bay. 'Even Rufus here has at least the virtue of being willing.'

'No I ain't,' Rufus Dommet protested: he had been agreeable when asked, but as ever when challenged, wanted to side with Charlie.

'Well,' Pearce sighed, 'we are here now, so unless you're in the mood to swim, it would be best to get through with it and then get back to the hospital to load the wounded afore that too is overrun.'

That was the duty he had been drawn away from. The hospital in question lay on the St Mandrier Peninsula and was extremely vulnerable to enemy attack, protected as it was by a poorly manned and equipped redoubt where the narrow neck joined the mainland; indeed, it would have fallen if its strategic position had been of value. Luckily the French attack was not one designed to take territory but to render the anchorages of Toulon untenable: in short, to drive out the combined fleets of Britain, Spain and Naples, because to stay within range of the shore-based enemy cannon would be too costly.

The name of the man directing this assault was known to all now: not the general in command but the artillery officer, a fellow called Buonaparte, who had cleverly eschewed infantry assaults and instead moved forward his guns in calculated steps that took no account of casualties sustained, creeping ever closer to that inner bay. He knew, as did those he fought, that to command the entrance to the Petite Rade was to trap inside every vessel that remained. Lord Hood had reacted as he should: there were no more British or allied ships to ensnare now, they had all upped anchor and fled to the safety of

the wide outer bay known as the Grande Rade.

HMS *Vulcan* was towing several boats, passing first a steady and departing stream of overloaded fishing and coastal trading vessels, then, within sight of the commercial waterfront, a quay densely packed with people intent on desperate flight, people who knew what was coming with the revolutionary armies: the guillotine and the representatives on mission from the Committee of Public Safety, men driven by a bloodlust that would see it employed for day after day to decapitate those they saw as the enemy of their murderous political philosophy.

‘Look at them, poor souls,’ Michael said.

As the Irishman said this the press became so great that several of those at the front, hoping for a boat, were pushed into the water, their distressed cries echoing over the rumble of the mob. The few boats left at the quay were loading only those with the means to pay, their chattels with them if they had enough funds. Those without means were left to pray or fall; indeed, the harbour was already awash with the floating bodies and possessions of those who had suffered and could not swim.

‘We should be lookin’ to them, not setting ships afire. We’s about the wrong duty.’

‘Who speaks there?’ came a loud and commanding voice. ‘Am I leading traitors to do their duty?’

‘Quiet, Michael,’ Pearce snapped: he knew his friend well enough to guess there would be a response and an impolite one. Then he turned to face the officer commanding the ship, a long-serving lieutenant called Hare, whom he had only met when coming aboard that evening. ‘My man speaks from humanity, sir.’

‘Humanity be damned, sir, when necessity calls. Tell him to mind his tongue or, by God, he’ll feel the lash when this is over.’

That the ship’s captain meant what he said was evident by the look on his face, made more menacing by the fact that it was lit in orange and red by the flames from ashore, these reflecting off the dense, low cloud as well as the still harbour water. Raging along the hills that led up to Mont Faron, the ridge that dominated the port, the fires were caused by the burning defence works, the redoubts and small forts, which had been built since the allied fleets had taken possession of the anchorage in August. Below, the town itself was being bombarded by revolutionary cannon, setting building after building ablaze. The task set for this little flotilla was straightforward: anything that might be of use to the besiegers, soon to be the owners of this premier naval port, was to be torched – the arsenal, the rope-walk, sail lofts and warehouses full of stores.

Given they were almost the first words Hare had addressed to John Pearce his impression of the fellow was based only on what he could see. There was arrogance in his posture: hands behind his back, feet spread to anticipate any slight roll of the ship and a sort of sneer on his heavily pockmarked face.

‘You do not see the need, sir, to offer succour to these poor unfortunates?’

John Pearce should not have spoken, he knew that even as he said the words: regardless of how he perceived his status, to take issue with a fellow officer and one ranked as a master and commander, much senior to him in years

served, was inadvisable at the best of times and this was far from that. Yet he was incapable of allowing roughshod authority to rule his behaviour.

The response was a bark. 'I see the need, sir, to serve my king.'

'Then perhaps, sir, those of Naples and Spain are more Christian sovereigns.'

'Damn you, sir, what do you mean?'

'I mean, sir, that if you look yonder to the outer mole you will observe Neapolitan and Spanish warships taking off the refugees, an act which shames those like us who serve their royal cousin.'

Hare stalked up to him and looked Pearce right in the eye, his nose an inch away. 'You dare dispute with me, sir?'

Pearce held both his ground and the man's eye. 'Not dispute, sir, I merely point out what I see.'

'Well, sir, I will take note of what you do, and if it does not satisfy, you may well find that a court decides you are not fit to hold a lieutenant's commission.'

'They can have it now, sir, given it is not something I value so highly that I will not speak as I find.'

'Gentlemen, please,' said another voice, gentle but authoritative, that of their titular commander, though given he was clad in rating's clothing, check shirt and ducks, it would have been hard to identify him as a post captain. 'We are not lacking in enemies to dispute with, I see no virtue in arguing amongst ourselves.'

'We cannot have troublemaking, Sir Sidney.'

The man actually laughed. 'Then I am in the wrong place, Mr Hare, for I am bent on that very thing.' He

then looked at the other party to the dispute. 'Lieutenant, I confess I do not know your name.'

'Pearce, sir.'

'Then, Lieutenant Pearce, your concern for these poor folk is to be commended.' That brought a hiss from Hare. 'But so is the captain's love of duty. If we do that, which I confess must be our primary concern, perhaps then we will have time to look to our compassion. Captain Hare, I require to be put ashore with the men designated to join me, so that I may supervise the destruction of the port facilities.'

As he uttered those words a cannonball landed right alongside the ship sending up a great plume of water, which, on a windless night, rose to a great height before dropping straight back down again, soon to be followed by a second. Seeking the source, it soon became obvious that some of the vessels chosen to be destroyed were manned and a few of their cannon were being employed to defend them.

'I see the rats have emerged from their cellars,' Smith said. 'Toulon is full of men whose loyalty is attached to a weathervane, for the monarchy one minute and the Revolution now the tide has shifted. Captain Hare, I require that your guns be employed to keep those fellows honest.'

'With the men you propose to take ashore, sir, I am light on gun crews.'

'Then let us oblige, sir,' said Pearce. 'My men and I will happily help work one of your cannon.'

'Well said, Mr Pearce. Now, Captain Hare, let us have the boats alongside and see to what we are about.'

Pearce, Michael, Rufus and Charlie found themselves helping to work a long nine-pounder with the rest of the gun crew made up by a trio of men from *Vulcan* and, if they were unfamiliar with each other, so common was the discipline of the Royal Navy that they were soon serving the weapon handsomely, knocking, at near point-blank range, lumps out of the enemy bulwarks and seeking to silence any counterfire.

Other cannon were playing along the shore, to keep the enemy clear of the route to the arsenal, or to be more precise those Toulonnais who had reason to seek to stop the destruction, the folk who earned their livelihoods in that facility. Already flames were beginning to lick around the major buildings and there was the constant crack of musketry as the detachment of soldiers sent to defend the firing parties went about their duty, albeit with many a returned discharge from the French workers.

Coat and hat off now, John Pearce was on the lanyard, both aiming and firing the weapon, peering through the gun port to do the former, this while the weapon was levered round and the elevation wedged at his command. He stood well clear once the gun was loaded and primed, to haul hard on his line and fire the flintlock, the discharge sending the huge lump of black metal, as well as the trunnion on which it ran, jumping hard back on to its restraining tackles. Powder monkeys raced to and from the magazine with charges taken from the gunner, sat, hopefully safe, behind his wetted screens, this while the more useless ratings fetched balls from the lower-deck storerooms to keep regular the bombardment.

Much as they were playing hard on their enemies,

along with the other vessels in the flotilla, the Pelicans were under return fire and shots were striking home, either slamming into the hull and rocking the whole ship or, aimed better, taking out great chunks of the bulwarks or raking across the deck to land in the water behind, having sliced through rigging and ropes, while all around and beneath him there were men working flat out, still priming the ship.

Pearce never knew what set off one part of that: an enemy shot striking a deadly spark or a piece of foolishness by one of those employed in the task; all he felt was the result. The dull boom coincided with the planking beneath his feet rising up as if forced skywards by a giant's hand. It then began to crack open as the first flames emerged with the rest of the blast, the gun they were working, just run in and unstable, tipping over on its side on the suddenly uneven deck.

He was thrown to his knees, while Michael O'Hagan was blasted backwards to roll along the deck. Rufus Dommet – a terrified look on his young, freckled face – was slammed into the bulwark, while Charlie Taverner, seemingly unaffected, stood still and shocked. Then his tricorne hat went sailing through the air and Charlie dropped down to his knees, holding his ears. John Pearce had felt the same pressure, but he was able to turn to see where the real damage had been done.

The explosion had come from under the quarterdeck, at one time full of people but now utterly empty, with the wheel gone, the front of the poop shattered and the cabin behind it ripped open, the bulkhead shredded to expose a scene of devastation in what had been Hare's quarters.

Getting to his feet with some effort, Pearce headed aft, able on the way to help raise a shocked and bewildered Michael, though in grasping to pull him up he nearly fell over himself.

‘What in the name of Holy Mary was that?’ Michael shouted, though all a deafened John Pearce could hear was a muffled sound that seemed distant. The ship was rocking like a see-saw and it was with some difficulty they made their way across the splintered planking to join men equally bewildered and equally deaf, all shouting at each other and all unable to properly hear what was being said. Looking through the gap that had once been the starboard bulkhead he saw in the water two blue coats, one on his back and another face down.

There was no time for hesitation, no time to issue any orders, he just had to hope the men left standing would show some sense. Kicking off his shoes he dived in, hitting the waters of the harbour, so cold it made him gasp. In an instant he struck out to get to the second blue coat and turn him face up lest he drown and as he reached him a rope landed in the water by his arm. Looping it round the body was not easy but Pearce did manage to get enough of a knot on the man to allow them to haul him back to the ship.

That done he swam over to where Hare lay on his back, his eyes closed, his mouth open. There was no time to see if he was alive or dead, only time to get underneath him and grasp his shoulders, then kick out for the ship’s side. Hands were there as he reached the rough scantlings, ready to haul the captain out, then reach down for Pearce

and help him back on deck, where he found an anxious midshipman leaning over the comatose bodies, examining them.

‘They’re alive,’ he yelled, into the cloth ears around him, looking to see if they had heard, reassured by the eager nods.

Pearce, dripping wet, was quick to realise, after a searching glance, he had to be the most senior person left aboard. He also knew that if there had been one unwanted explosion there could very easily be a second and third which would rip them all to shreds. Issuing the orders that followed his conclusion was a nightmare of endless shouting, always facing the person he was addressing so at least they would have his lips as an aid to comprehension, this while he got back into his shoes and his uniform coat.

‘Prepare a boat. We must get any wounded to St Mandrier, while all the other boats are to be made ready to abandon ship.’

The midshipman mouthed the need to get the cannon loaded and run out, so they would go off as the fire took hold of the ship, helping to demolish whatever they were aimed at. A party had to be organised to man the relieving tackles below decks, given the ship’s wheel had been shattered in the explosion. Those who could handle muskets needed to get them loaded so as to play upon the decks of the two capital ships between which he was going to jam HMS *Vulcan* and keep them clear of renegade French sailors.

‘Do you know where the main fuses are to be lit?’ he shouted to the midshipman, relieved when the lad nodded.

‘Then get to them and stand by to ignite them on my command.’

He turned to a quartermaster’s mate who had not been on deck at the time of the explosion but had rushed to the station immediately it had occurred. ‘Stand by the companionway to shout down the orders to steer.’

That directive was followed by a stream of others, calling for sails to be set by men who seemed to move as slowly as bearers at a funeral. There were no specific commands, anything that would serve to give them steerage way would do, though with no wind to speak of that led to limp and useless sails. Instructions were sent to the men who, on his orders, had piled into the boats, to get up ahead and take tow. Their efforts brought round *Vulcan*’s bowsprit, damned slowly but round all the same, with Pearce shouting to the quartermaster’s mate the orders that would ease the rudder to aid them and, once on course, to get the men from below to lash off their tackles and be ready to disembark.

Onshore he could see the results of what Sir Sidney Smith was about, though he could only hear muffled evidence of the explosions. The arsenal was alight from end to end, the flames seeming to lick the low clouds, creating a glow that lit up everything around the naval harbour in a sort of hellish montage. HMS *Vulcan* had drifted into position, the towing boats having got enough way on her to get her heading to where Pearce needed her to be, her bowsprit right between the bow and stern of a pair of French seventy-fours.

It had to be well timed: Pearce had to get himself and the remainder of the crew off the ship after the fuses were

lit but before they took hold and exploded the powder, he having no true idea of how long that was. So he ordered everyone into the boats and went below himself to join the midshipman, who now stood over a tangle of fuses, long trails of primed cord, with a piece of slow match smouldering away in his hand. Sign language rather than words told Pearce that, once ignited, they would be required to run like the devil. After a nodded acknowledgement, the lad touched the fuse ends and they immediately began to splutter and trail off in a cloud of acrid smoke, progressing towards the various charges.

He and the midshipmen were no longer there. The boy was racing ahead of Pearce, taking the companionway three steps at a time, but he had to be grabbed and directed to where the last boat, manned by the Pelicans, lay rocking and waiting. As soon as they had one foot on the cutter, the oars were dipped and they began to pull away from the ship's side.

Pearce should have sat down, but he was keen to see what the result would be and it was impressive: HMS *Vulcan* went up like a volcano erupting, a great sheet of flame shooting from her deck, that followed by a boom as the powder barrels went up. It was as though she grew to twice her size for a second, but that was blotted out by the mass of flames that engulfed her, great streams of burning pitch shooting out to run along the scantlings of the French seventy-fours, some rising high enough to set afire the standing rigging, that rapidly catching fire.

Taking his naval officer's hat from Michael, who had had the presence of mind to gather it up, Pearce jammed it on his head just as the debris from the explosion began

to fall. Had he not been wearing it the lump of wood might have done him serious harm. As it was, landing on the crown of his scraper, it was hard enough to fell him and knock him unconscious.

‘Row for St Mandrier,’ Michael O’Hagan ordered, a shout that included the boat carrying the two wounded officers. In doing so he completely ignored the bemused midshipman who should have issued any command.

Chapter Two

It was a groggy John Pearce who landed on the hospital jetty, still wet from his dip in the harbour and shivering, helped by Charlie Taverner and Rufus Dommet to stand upright while his boat was secured and the two wounded officers Pearce had rescued were unloaded from the other and taken to be attended to. A quarter of an hour later, inside the building, trying to dry out by the heat of a blazing fire, he was sought out by an anxious Heinrich Lutyens, the surgeon, having seen to his new patients, eager to inform him that there was as yet no sign of the transport supposed to be coming to take off the wounded, as well as those who ran the hospital. Getting a mumbled response he demanded of Pearce's companions what was the matter.

'If you look at this you'll see, Mr Lutyens,' said Rufus, handing him a hat, the crown of which had been flattened. 'Lump of timber did that, your honour.'

'And he had only just donned the bugger,' Charlie added. 'God must love him.'

‘Sit him down,’ Lutyens ordered, and once that had been done he began to run his upright finger back and forth across Pearce’s eye line, before running his fingers through the thick hair on the top of his head. ‘A touch concussed, for certain, but no sign of any abrasion.’

‘Why no transport?’ Pearce asked, in a low voice.

‘I have no idea. It was promised but has yet to arrive and I have to tell you time is of the essence. Word has come from the lieutenant manning the battery protecting us that the French may be massing for an assault, one he fears he will struggle to contain, and I would remind you the marines, too, need to be taken off.’

Pearce heaved himself to his feet, slowly shaking his head to clear it. ‘Then there is no time to sit and ponder. Charlie, where is that mid we had with us?’

‘Still sat in the boat with the men from the *Vulcan*.’

‘Get him here. Heinrich, a pen and paper, I must send word to Admiral Hood and inform him that we face capture and I would appreciate a tot of your medicinal brandy to clear my damned head. Rufus, fetch Michael; you, he and Charlie are to gather every man in this hospital who can fight, or even walk, and any men in the boats not needed to row. We need bodies in that redoubt to give the French pause.’

‘What about you?’ Lutyens asked.

‘Me?’ Pearce replied, picking up his wrecked scraper. ‘I need a new hat, I think. It wouldn’t help if the French saw that.’

‘I’m sure my husband would not begrudge you his.’

The female voice made everyone present turn, to see Emily Barclay, standing in a doorway.

‘With respect, madam, I think I am the last person he would wish to gift anything to.’

If the pause that engendered was short, it was enough to remind those who heard the exchange that bad blood existed between Captain Ralph Barclay, her husband, and Lieutenant John Pearce. It had been Barclay who had illegally pressed the Pelicans into King George’s Navy, Barclay who had survived the travesty of a recent court martial for the offence, the verdict of which, that he was innocent of the charge, being one Pearce was determined to overturn.

‘Then accept it from me, sir.’

‘I do not think your husband would be grateful to you for that offer.’

‘You must leave, sir, my husband’s opinions of my actions to him and I.’

Again no one was minded to mention that she was discussing a relationship that had undergone much recent strain, enough for her to leave both her husband and her floating home on his ship, the frigate HMS *Brilliant*, and take up residence here in the hospital. They had been brought back together because Captain Barclay had ended up as a patient, having required his left arm to be removed after a musket ball shattered his elbow during a failed assault on one of Buonaparte’s most dangerous batteries.

Emily Barclay had not waited for a reply; she had gone to the room in which her wounded husband lay, returning, his hat in her hand. ‘Take it, sir, I beg.’

Pearce had been joking about the hat, but he stepped forward to do as he was asked, not wishing to make light of her gesture. Up close he was struck, as he had

been the first time he had clapped eyes on her, by her beauty. Even now, in a mob cap, a stained apron and showing signs of a lack of sleep, she looked striking: luminous eyes in a face of flawless skin, with just a wisp of her auburn hair escaping to stick to her cheek. The temptation for Pearce to reach out and brush it away was almost irresistible, yet resist he must, there were too many people present.

‘Is Devenow still with your husband?’

‘He is.’

‘Then please tell him he is needed, and if he shows a mind to object, tell him he best come if he does not want his captain to end up, once more, a prisoner of the French.’

The way she pursed her lips then amused him. Was it a reminder of the unpleasant fact of her own confinement after HMS *Brilliant* had been taken in a hot frigate action off this very coast in midsummer, or was it that Devenow probably loved her husband more than she did? He was a man Pearce loathed, a lower-deck bully who generally made the lives of those he messed alongside hell, but if his devotion to Captain Ralph Barclay was absolute, his other quality, that of being a fighter, was of more moment in the present crisis.

Pearce spun round to find the young midshipman, a slip of a lad who could be no more than fifteen and was probably younger, awaiting his pleasure. On the table Lutyens had placed an inkwell, a quill, a shaker of sand and the wax and candle necessary for the seal. Sitting down, Pearce began to write as he spoke.

‘I do not know your name, lad.’

‘Niven, sir,’ the boy responded, with a distinct Scottish accent which had Pearce wondering if he should claim national kinship. Deciding that would only delay matters he issued his commands.

‘Well, Mr Niven, this is to go to HMS *Victory*. Try to get it to Lord Hood or Rear-Admiral Hyde Parker, at the very least into the hands of the C-in-C’s secretary. Do not, and I say this at your peril, be fobbed off by anyone else.’

The reply of ‘Aye, aye, sir’ was tremulously delivered.

Pearce smiled. ‘Have no fear. You will find, young feller, that admirals are human and their bark is very much worse than their bite. You can command the boat crew, I hope?’

‘I can, sir.’

‘Then go and God speed.’

As the boy dashed out of the room Pearce wondered, not for the first time, about a service that entrusted so much to people so young: had he died or been incapacitated in that explosion, a lad like Niven would have taken command and, no doubt, have done his duty. He was also aware that his head was throbbing like the devil, but that had to be set aside.

‘Heinrich, I need some dry clothing and I want the use of anything that can pass as a weapon down to the meanest broom handle. Meanwhile, make sure everyone we do not take with us is ready to leave, for when that ship arrives we must embark with haste, lest the French come on our tail when we spike the cannon and abandon the redoubt.’

‘They will not harm the wounded, surely?’

‘When it comes to the Revolution,’ Pearce replied grimly, for he had had more experience of its terrors than most, ‘I would not want to discount any barbarity.’

Midshipman Toby Burns, not much older than Niven, sat alone in the midshipman’s berth of HMS *Britannia*, noting the passing of time through several bells, alternately fingering the despatch he had been given to convey and the bandage he still wore around his head. Handed to him by Admiral Sir William Hotham in person, he wondered at the quietly delivered order that went with the written communication, the intimation that it was not to be immediately delivered.

He knew what it contained, given he had been present when the admiral dictated the contents to his clerk: an instruction to the commander of HMS *Hinslip*, an empty transport presently lying no more than a cable’s length from the flagship, to proceed to the St Mandrier Peninsula and once there to take off combatants and non-combatants alike. It was that which was said afterwards, when the clerk had departed the great cabin, that hinted at trouble.

‘It would be best, Mr Burns, if this were delayed for several hours. I trust you will see to it.’

Toby Burns could still sense Hotham’s breath on his cheek as the admiral leant close to whisper those words. The look in Hotham’s eye, when he stepped back again, was one that implied Burns would understand the need, but he was not absolutely sure he did and that rendered him fearful. Not the brightest of young men, he nevertheless knew, even if he could not discern the purpose, when he was being used. He also worried that someone would

enter this berth and ask what the devil he was doing here skulking, given every other midshipman in the fleet had been sent away and was now occupied in some harrowing duty to do with the evacuation.

Quickly he checked his bandage again, to ensure it had not slipped from his head; it would be fatal if anyone saw there was no wound beneath. The subterfuge was necessary, given Toby Burns carried a hero's reputation gained when this new war was barely two months old. He knew only too well it was based on false evidence, indeed it was a status that had come to hang like a weight around his neck: he was expected to be brave and reckless when in truth he shied away from conflict of any kind. There was a brief flash of anger as he imagined himself telling Sir William Hotham to do his own dirty work, but that did not last: dread of a tongue-lashing resurfaced all too speedily.

Locked in his own gloom, he dreamt, as he had for months, of being free of the King's Navy. Before joining, sea service was something he had seen in the romantic light in which it was always portrayed: how different the reality from the tales with which he had grown up, of glory and pride in naval service within England's wooden walls. He only had to look around the grubby berth – this being a flagship – an overcrowded home to twenty-four midshipman, had only to smell the bilge that permeated the whole ship, to recoil from the rats that infested the lower decks or eat the monotonous diet and reflect on the character of the men he shared it with, be they mids, officers or ratings, to know the depth and inaccuracy of the myth.

The screen that shut off the berth from the Orlop deck was pulled back and there stood another vision to render

worthless any romance: the skinny young urchin who went by the title of mess steward. A youngster who never went on deck unless ordered and certainly avoided fresh air when it rained, he was as black as ever with the filth that covered him from head to foot, dirt ingrained into his very pores.

‘What the devil do you want?’ Burns demanded, in a harsh tone, for if he was fearful of those who were his naval or physical superiors, he was not one to show any kindness to a creature below him in the pecking order.

‘Now’t,’ the lad replied, showing white uneven teeth that only accentuated his dirty face, a part of him only marginally cleaner than the sleeve with which he constantly wiped it.

‘Come to rummage, I daresay, while the berth is empty,’ Burns snapped. ‘Well, you can carry on for all I care, I have nothing left to steal, all my supposed shipmates having beaten you to it.’

‘I ain’t a fief,’ the lad protested. ‘I came to tidy.’

‘Then,’ Burns barked, standing up, ‘you are singular in this vessel.’

‘What is you about, ’en?’

‘None of your damned business,’ Burns said, pushing past him.

Head down, angry and sick of this imposed prevarication, he made his way up to the main deck and along to the entry port, calling to the sixth lieutenant of the ship, the man on duty, that he required a boat.

‘Require, sir, require?’ Beddows enquired, with an arch expression. ‘What day is it that a midshipman requires from a commissioned officer?’

‘I carry a despatch...’

‘So you say, Burns,’ the officer growled, interrupting him. ‘But carrying a despatch, if indeed you are, does not mean you give up all manners and all courtesy to rank.’

‘I require a boat, sir.’

‘Better, young man, but I think I need a please, as well as a couple of fingers to your hat.’

‘And I think I must tell Admiral Hotham how much you facilitated his instructions.’

Terrified of the words he had used, which due to his underlying anger had come out unbidden, Burns was about to apologise, but then he saw the change of expression on the sixth lieutenant’s face: it went from hauteur to fright in a flash.

‘You are on an errand for the admiral?’

‘I am,’ Burns replied, before adding, in a way that threw caution to the winds, ‘and a most pressing one that you delay, sir, at some peril to your position.’

The feeling he had then, as Beddows rushed to call in a boat, manned by poor unfortunates obliged to lay off the ship in the cold and swell for this very eventuality, made him feel warm for the first time in an age. The sixth lieutenant might not outrank him by much – had he not been a midshipman himself until only a few months previously? – but he had the power to evoke the admiral, the ability to induce fear and that made him top dog. He almost cooed his next words.

‘I will be sure to tell Sir William how you reacted with such alacrity, sir, once you were appraised of his interest.’

‘Obliged, Mr Burns, much obliged.’

'Damn it, what is the man about?' yelled Lord Hood. Aimed at the captain of the fleet, Rear Admiral Hyde Parker, it had a terrible effect on young Mr Niven, who visibly began to shake in his shoes. 'Part of the orders I gave at six bells this morning was to get HMS *Hinslip* to St Mandrier with all despatch. Everyone should be off the peninsula by now!'

Parker, round and smooth of face in contrast to his craggy, grey-haired superior, felt the need to look put out, yet he was far from that, this being just another example of Sir William Hotham, Lord Hood's second-in-command, acting to thwart his superior's wishes. As the administrative officer of the fleet he not only had onerous duties to perform in keeping it up to scratch, he was required to act as a lightning rod for the C-in-C.

'God rot the fellow,' Hood barked, before he cast an eye back to the shivering Niven. 'What's amiss with you, lad, got the ague?'

'No, sir, begging your pardon, sir.'

'Well, there's something amiss with you.'

'Perhaps he fears to be yelled at,' said Parker.

'Who's yelling at him?' Hood bellowed.

'I suspect he thinks you are, milord.'

'Stop shaking, lad, I don't bite.' Hood then furiously waved Pearce's letter, his voice rising once more. 'Excepting when a poltroon does his best to make a fool out of me.'

'I think it would be best to act, milord. Loss of temper will not serve.'

The eyebrows came down to a glower. 'Mind yer manners, Parker, remember who you are addressing.'

‘Of course, milord,’ Parker replied, not in the least contrite.

‘You see what I have to put up with, lad?’ Hood asked a still-quivering Niven, his voice gruff but low. ‘No respect from men who should know better. I daresay you know how to obey an order. You eaten at all?’

‘Yes, sir, dinner, sir.’

‘Dinner, that was hours ago. See that chafing dish on the table yonder?’ The boy nodded, his eye drawn to the highly polished mahogany of a dining table, set with several silver dishes, one of which had a small candle underneath. ‘There’s sausages in there, French mind, and too full of garlic for my taste, but filling. Help yourself.’

Niven did not move until Hood added. ‘Do you know how to obey an order, boy?’

Hood watched as the youngster approached the table in a wary fashion, amused by the way he gingerly opened the dish, but that diffidence did not survive the smell that greeted him. Hood had to actually suppress a laugh, as he saw Niven begin to stuff his mouth to the point where speech would have been impossible.

‘Never met a mid that weren’t starving,’ he said. The humour evaporated when he looked back at Hyde Parker, again waving the letter. ‘This is downright insubordination.’

‘I agree, milord, but it is an indication of how Admiral Hotham feels about the strength of his position.’

Hood began to pace back and forth, evidence of his mood audible by the growling noise emanating from his throat. His political master, King George’s first minister, William Pitt, trying to hold together a fractious coalition,

one that would wholeheartedly prosecute the war with revolutionary France, had warned him to be guarded with Hotham, who had friends amongst the faction known as the Portland Whigs. Indeed the leader of that group, the Duke of Portland, was a strong supporter of Hotham and would no doubt like to see him in command of the Mediterranean fleet.

Hood was a Tory from his greying locks to his silver shoe buckles and had been a member of Pitt's government, the senior naval lord on the Board of Admiralty, before the outbreak of hostilities. He hated Whigs and, of that entire breed, he hated the slimy Sir William Hotham the most. But he was hamstrung by instructions, which had come to him by a private and secret letter from Downing Street delivered to him by the man who had written the note he was holding, Lieutenant John Pearce. Abruptly he stopped both his pacing and his growling, to look at the signature appended to the message young Niven had brought him.

'Ain't Pearce charged with clearing the wounded from the hospital?' Parker nodded, which received a knowing look from his superior. 'And then he's supposed to be on his way back to England?'

'I believe, sir, the idea was that, with the evacuation complete, he would take passage on the first available ship with his companions, the men he calls the Pelicans.'

Hood moved closer to Parker, looking over his shoulder to ensure the midshipman was still intent on filling his face, before speaking softly. 'Would Hotham go to such lengths to dish one man, Parker, and interfere with my orders?' Hood's captain of the fleet declined to reply to

that, though his look was significant. 'Strikes me only London can deal with Hotham and it also strikes me that we have, taking passage home if we can get him off in time, the very fellow to go back to Billy Pitt with my concerns.'

'Unofficially,' said Parker.

'You know I dare not damn the sod in my official communications, they are read to the cabinet. But a private letter...' Hood stood slightly hunched thinking for a moment, before calling to Niven. 'You, lad, what ship are you in?'

'*Windsor Castle*, milord,' Niven replied, wiping a greasy set of lips on his sleeve.

'To which you should now proceed.'

'Yes, sir.'

'Well, you won't be. I have a chore for you. I daresay your captain will not mind if I borrow you for a bit. Parker, I need your help in this, you being better at the political game than ever I will be.'

'I'm not sure I take that as a compliment, milord.'

'It ain't,' hooted Hood, 'it's as close to damnation as it comes. We must get an order direct to HMS *Hinslip* to weigh for St Mandrier immediately, to supersede any instructions to the contrary. Then I need you to help me compose a true account of affairs in this command for our political master.'

'Might I remind you, milord, you require Pearce to agree to both carry and see it delivered. He might refuse.'

'Refuse!' Hood barked, 'I'll see him keelhauled if he tries.'

Niven, his belly full, sat on the footlockers that lay

below the line of nine casement windows that ran the full width of HMS *Victory*'s stern, marvelling at the space and the accoutrements afforded to the high and mighty. A sleeping cabin and a personal privy, a public cabin and a private one that could be combined to entertain several dozen people, the room to walk about, good furniture and even paintings, which stood in contrast to his own meagre berth, a cubbyhole aboard HMS *Windsor Castle*, shared with a dozen of his fellow midshipsmen.

He was enthralled: this was worth working for, worth risking life and limb to achieve, and it took no great leap of his tender imagination to see himself striding back and forth across the chequered canvas that lined the floor, as Lord Hood was doing now, dictating something to the fatter admiral. How grand it must be to have someone of such high rank to write your letters for you! When they had finished, Hood strode back and forth once more, handling without effort the swell of the ship, reading in his hand a letter of several pages, while Admiral Parker penned another. That finished, Niven was called for and handed the second missive.

'You are to return to Lieutenant Pearce and give him this and tell him I beg he read it, which has an order that he attend on me as soon as possible and the reason therein. Now, having done that he may well say words to the effect that he is damned if he will. You will then pass to him this verbal message with my authority. If he refuses my request, I will haul him and his so-called Pelicans into the first ship I can find and send them off to the East Indies. Have you got that, boy?'

'Yes, sir,' Niven replied, nervously.

‘Then repeat it.’

He had to be coached and he stumbled over the words several times, but eventually Hood was satisfied that he had the threat off pat.

‘Right, young feller, on your way back to St Mandrier and be assured I will inform your captain of your exemplary conduct. You’re a credit to the service.’

Niven nearly made five foot as he stretched in gratitude.