

DUDLEY POPE &

RAMAGE'S
Devil

THE LORD RAMAGE NOVELS, NO. 13

RAMAGE'S
DEVIL

Selected Historical Fiction Published by McBooks Press

BY ALEXANDER KENT

The Complete Midshipman Bolitho

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In Gallant Company

Sloop of War

To Glory We Steer

Command a King's Ship

Passage to Mutiny

With All Despatch

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Enemy in Sight!

The Flag Captain

Signal—Close Action!

The Inshore Squadron

A Tradition of Victory

Success to the Brave

Colours Aloft!

Honour This Day

The Only Victor

Beyond the Reef

The Darkening Sea

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Sword of Honour

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RAMAGE'S DEVIL

by

DUDLEY POPE

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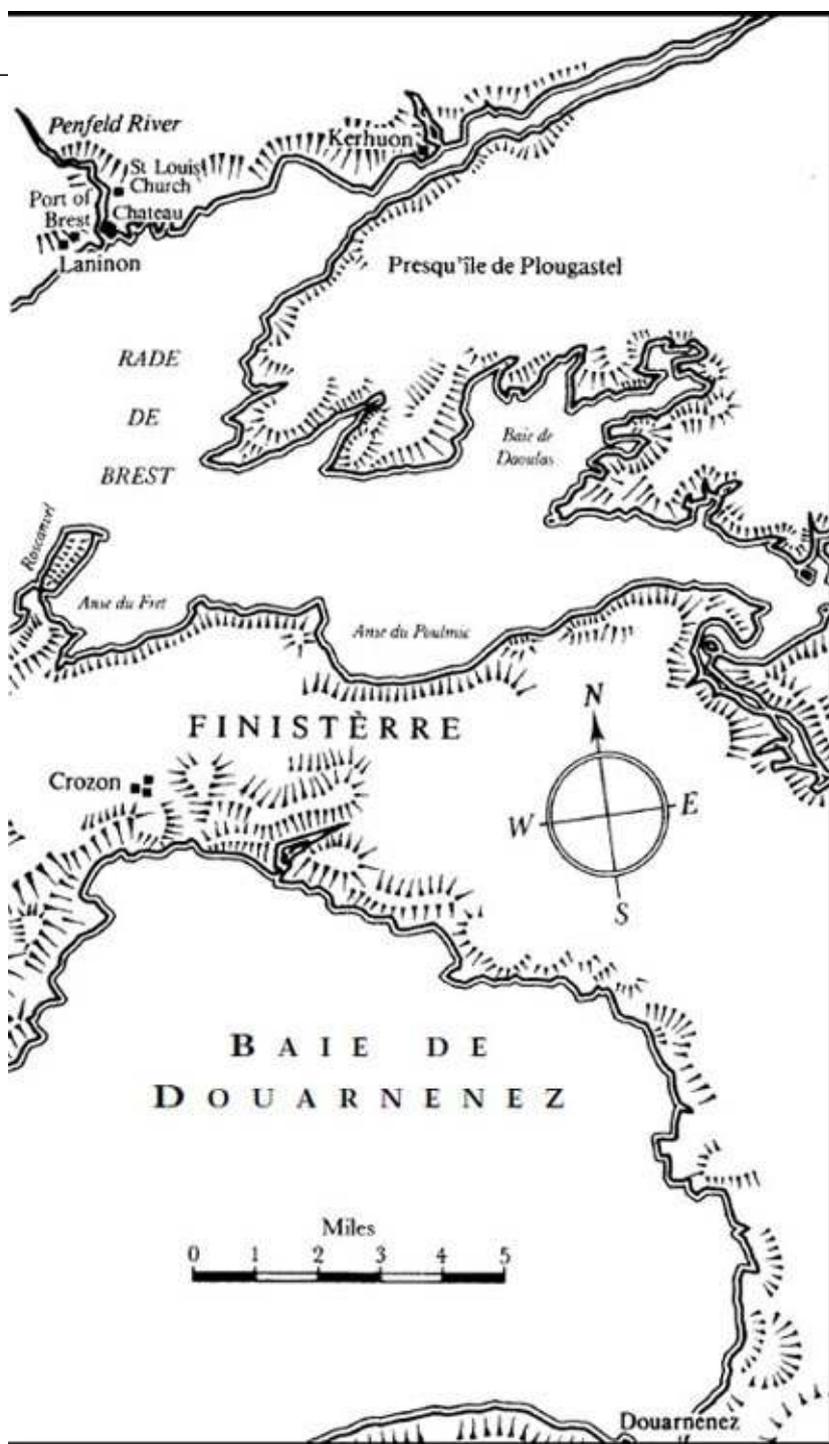
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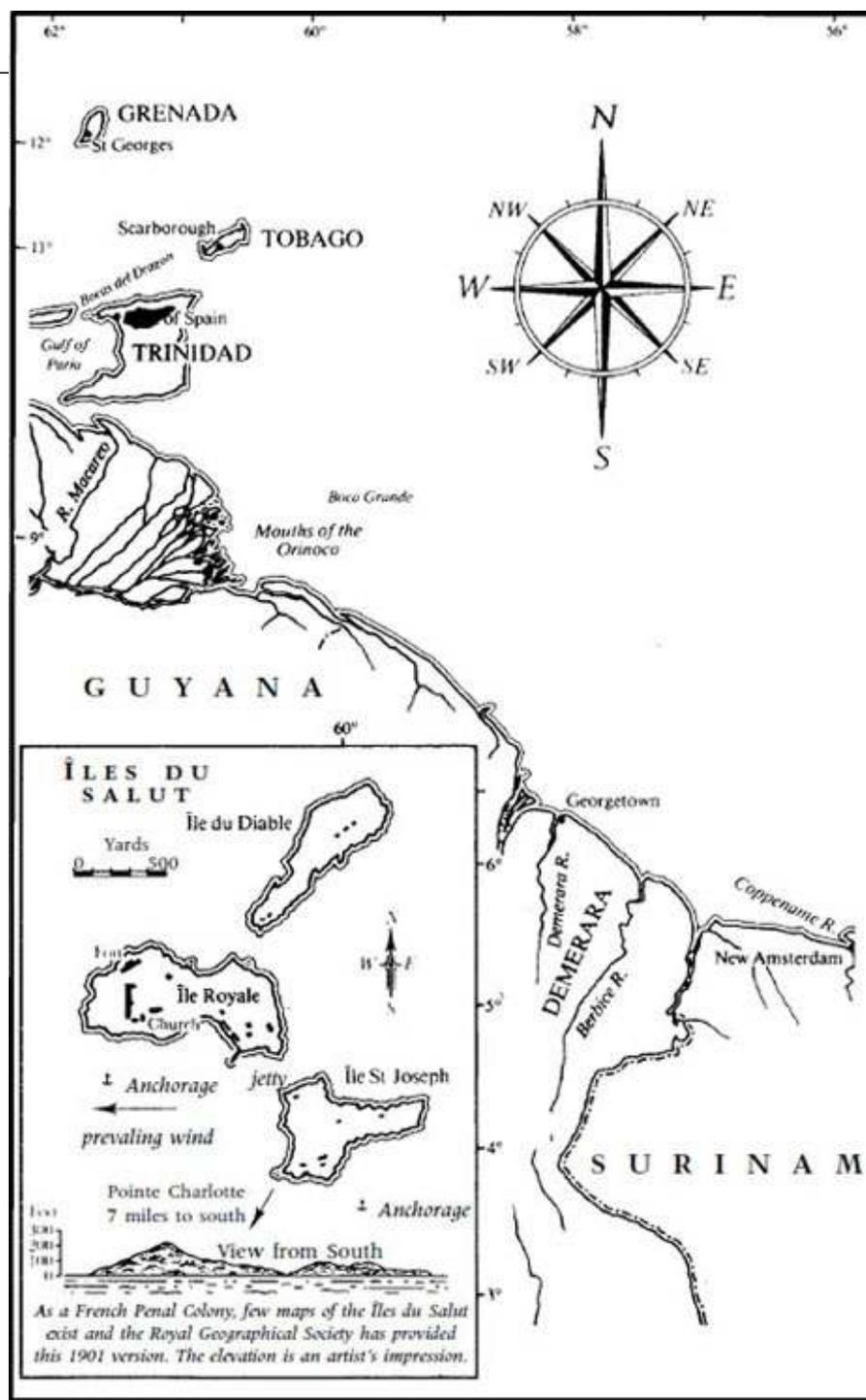
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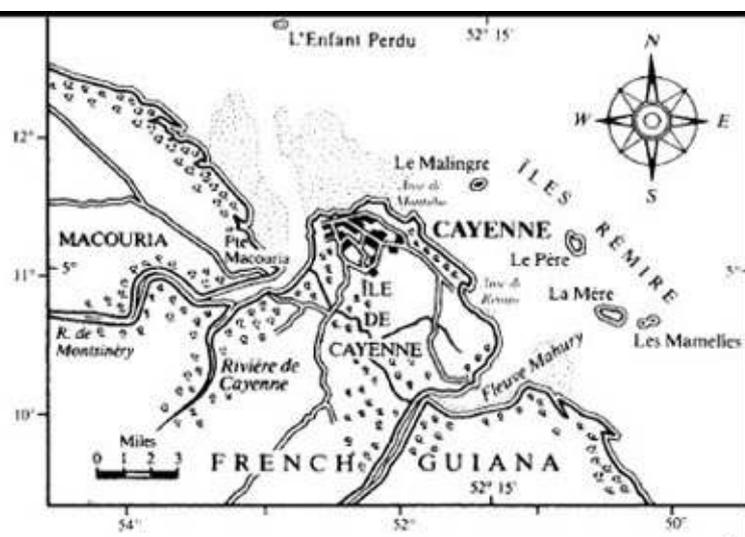
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For the late Frank Casper, sailor, navigator and friend







ATLANTIC OCEAN



CHAPTER ONE

THEY WERE both lying, propped up by an elbow, on the bristling carpet of short, coarse grass which was fighting for its life on top of the cliff, the roots clinging desperately to the thin layer of earth and finding cracks in the rock beneath. The browning leaves struggled against a wind which, although this afternoon little more than a brisk breeze, still whipped up a fine, salty spindrift from the swell surging out to the rocks below and sent it high like invisible smoke across the top of Pointe St Mathieu.

The Atlantic swell, from this height looking like slowly rippling wrinkles, swept in lazily from the west to hit first the barrier of tiny islands and rocky shoals stretching a dozen miles from Ushant, over to their right, down to the Black Rocks, which were in front of them and five or six miles to seaward. After surrounding each rock and islet with a fussy white collar of foam, the swells rolled on inshore to smash against the front of the cliffs sixty feet below with a strangely remote booming that they felt rather than heard, like the tiny tremors of a distant earthquake.

Above them the sky was strewn with white cottonball clouds which seemed to be looking down on the rollers and the cliffs, pleased at finally making a landfall after a long but boring Atlantic crossing. But to the two pairs of eyes long accustomed to the brilliant, almost gaudy sharpness of tropical colours, the sea and sky background seemed washed out, faded and without energy.

Gulls hovered like kites on the wind currents coming up the cliff face and sometimes wheeled over them, as though curious and wanting to see why this dark-haired man and young, tawnyhaired woman should be there alone and just looking seaward, not tending cattle or sheep, their horses tethered by their reins to pieces of rock jutting like teeth. Close by, two brown and white cows cropped the grass with indifference, as though they were supposed to graze a particular area by nightfall, and knew that they were comfortably ahead of their schedule, moving so slowly that the bells round their necks on occasions occasionally gave muffled clangs, apparently reluctant to interrupt the whine of the wind and the distant thunder of the waves.

The occasional contented sigh, the sudden indrawn breath, the gentle touch of a finger, the woman's occasional toss of the head to move strands of tawny hair that blew across her face and tickled, revealed an erotic atmosphere (though neither of them thought of the word) not entirely due to the splendid isolation of Pointe St Mathieu which, with one exception, seemed to be saying that up here, on a sunny afternoon, nature was pausing briefly at the second phase of the cycle of birth, love and death, and smiling.

The exception stood behind them, grey, stark, shadowed in the sun yet not menacing. The ruin of the old Abbey St Mathieu was still solid, the walls forming geometrically precise angles with the flying buttresses. It looked as though it had been lived in until some unpredictable giant or unexpected storm had lifted off the roof and hurled it away.

A couple of artillery batteries, one to the left and the other to the right, with their guns still in position were the only other signs that humans had ever passed this way.

“Les Pierres Noires,” Ramage commented, gesturing down at the handful of black shapes scattered on the sea below them like sheep crouching against the wind on a distant moor. “Known to the Royal Navy as the Black Rocks. It seems strange to be looking down at them from up here, from France. Having the French view ... If these were normal times—wartime, anyway, because that’s all I can remember—the

French lookouts up here would be watching Ushant over there”—he pointed to the rocky island just in sight, ~~the last in a series of smaller ones leading to it like enormous stepping stones~~—“making sure no English ships sneaked along the Chenal du Four inside that great shoal, or round the southern end to get into the Iroise river.

“How different it looks from a British frigate!” he added, the dreaminess leaving his voice. “There’d be the Black Rocks sticking up like ancient teeth and beyond you’d see this line of cliffs with the ruins of the abbey on top. And of course Le Conquet”—he pointed to the right—“and the other villages to the north, although from the deck of a frigate the cliffs mean you can only see church towers and steeples. I remember Conquet’s tall open steeple: I remember that well, a cone-shaped skeleton.

“And French and English alike are here just to watch the Gullet. That’s the mouth of the river down there”—he pointed over the edge of the cliff to their left—“round the corner, as it were, and running up to Brest itself.”

She nodded across to the other side of the Gullet. “What’s that headland over there?”

“The Camaret Peninsula, forming the south side of the Gullet, with plenty of guns to keep out *rosbifs* and trespassers. The little town of Camaret is well inland. I remember seeing Camaret Mill once, but we have gone very close in and had a scare when the wind dropped on a flood tide.”

Sarah said: “All this must remind you of Cornwall.”

He paused, lost for a moment in memories. “Yes, because apart from the cliffs and hills the village names would be hard to distinguish, Delabole, Perranzabuloe, Scorrier, Lanner, Lansallos, Trellick, Lanivet, Lelant, St Levan—all good Breton names: could be within 25 miles of here!”

She nodded, and he added: “And in Cornwall—Portsall, Lesneven, Lanion, Lannilis, Crozon, Plabennec, Kerlouan ...”

“It’s extraordinary,” she commented. “Still, I think one can distinguish the Cornish ones.”

“Can you?” he smiled, eyebrows raised.

She nodded. “Oh yes, even though I’m not Cornish.”

He laughed and leaned over to kiss her. “Don’t be cross with your new husband because he’s teasing you. The first names are Cornish—the ones you thought were Breton. All the second are here in Brittany!”

“But ...”

“Just listen to these: St Levan and Lesneven, Lanivet and Lannilis, Perranzabuloe and Plabennec—the first of each pair are Cornish, the second Breton. I can forgive you for mistaking them! And Botusfleming, Lansallos, Lesnewth, Lezant, Trellick—they hardly sound very Cornish, but they are.”

Sarah smoothed the olive green material of her dress, not bothering that the wind ruffled her hair. “Brest ... the blockade of Brest ... I’ve heard you and your father talk about it,” she said thoughtfully. Her voice was deep; he reflected that he seemed to hear it with his loins, a caress rather than a sound. She was watching a bee circling a buttercup, thwarted as the breeze bent over the golden bell. “We can see the port from here, can we?”

He shook his head. “Bonaparte’s main naval base on the Atlantic coast is well up the Gullet. One has to sail in close under the cliffs (with these and other batteries pelting you if you’re British in wartime).

and usually there's a soldier's wind to let you run in. All the way up to Brest the Gullet narrows like funnel and there are three forts on your larboard hand—if memory serves they're Toulbroch, Menga and de Delec; we'll be able to see them on the way back—and one on the other side. Plus various batteries.”

He half turned, resting on an elbow and looking across at the hills beyond Brest and at the ruined abbey in the foreground. It was built many centuries ago and obviously had been abandoned for at least a hundred years, but he tried to think what men had quarried the rock and hammered and chiselled the blocks to shape to build a monastery on what is one of the bleakest spots in Europe. Here during winter gales it must seem the Atlantic was trying to tear away the whole continent. Were those monks of the Middle Ages (or earlier?) scourging themselves by establishing their home on one of the windiest and most stormridden places they could find? Did they think the harshness made them nearer to God? Were they seeking absolution from nameless guilts?

“This must be the nearest point in France to Canada and America,” Sarah said.

He shook his head. “Almost, but Pointe de Corsen is the most westerly.” He pointed northward along the coast. “Look, it's over there, about five miles, beyond Le Conquet. Hundreds, indeed thousands of English seamen know it because it's a good mark when you're working your way through the Chenal de Four, keeping inside of Ushant and all those shoals ...”

He fell silent, looking westward, until finally Sarah touched his cheek. “Where are you now?”

He gave a sheepish laugh. “Running the *Calypso* into Brest with a south-west wind. Earlier I was beating in against a northeaster, with all the forts firing at me. I was scared stiff of getting in irons and drifting ashore.”

“Southwick wouldn't let you do that,” she said teasing.

Like Ramage, she remembered the *Calypso's* white-haired old master with affection. She said: “I wonder what he's doing now?”

He shook his head as if trying to drive away the thought. “By now he and the *Calypso's* officers and men will probably have the ship ready to be paid off at Chatham.”

“What does ‘paid off’ really mean? I thought it was the ship, but it sounds like the men.”

It was hard for him to avoid giving a bitter answer. “Officially it means removing all the *Calypso's* guns, sails, provisions, cordage and shot (the powder will have been taken off and put in barges on the Thames before she went into the Medway), and then the ship, empty except for a boatkeeper or two, will be left at anchor, or on a mooring. They may take the copper sheathing off the hull.”

“Why ‘may’?” she asked, curious.

“Well, you know the underwater part of the hull of a ship is covered with copper sheathing to keep out the teredo worm, which bores into the wood. Now some peculiar action goes on between the metal so that the ironwork of things like the rudder gets eaten away. Not only that, but after a year or so the copper starts to dissolve as well, particularly at the bow: it just gets thinner. So when a ship is laid up she is usually first drydocked and the sheathing is taken off.”

“You still haven't explained ‘may’—and there's a strange look on your face!”

He sighed and turned back to look at her. “Well, you know my views on this peace treaty we've signed

with Bonaparte, and that neither my father nor I—nor most of our friends—believe Bonaparte truly wants peace. As a result of the treaty, he's already had more than a year to restock his arsenals and from the Baltic get supplies of mast timber and cordage, which we had cut off for years by blockading places like Brest. So now he's busy refitting his fleet: new sails, masts, yards. New ships, too. Now—or very soon—he'll be ready to start the war again."

"Yet all the French we've met in the past weeks seem happy with the peace," Sarah protested.

"We've only talked to two types—innkeepers, who smile readily enough as they take our money, and the monarchists who've returned to France from exile and have been trying to get back some of their possessions. They have to believe that Bonaparte really wants a permanent peace; otherwise they'd be admitting to themselves that they'll soon be exiles in England once again—only this time probably for the rest of their lives."

"You keep on saying Bonaparte will start the war again, my darling, but what proof is there? After all, the ministers in London aren't fools!"

"Aren't they? Have you met Addington or any of his cabinet? And Lord Whitworth, the British minister in Paris, can't have looked out of the embassy window—or else they're ignoring his despatches in London."

"The British government might be stupid and the French innkeepers greedy, but that hardly proves Bonaparte is going to war again!"

"Perhaps not, but we'll know for sure when we ride back through the port of Brest. Will the sight of men-o'-war being refitted in large numbers convince you?"

"Nicholas, why did you propose Brittany for the last part of our honeymoon?" she asked suspiciously.

"Don't you like it?" He was suddenly anxious, the picture of a nervous bridegroom anxious for his bride's comfort. "The weather is fine. Not much choice of food, I admit, but the inns are not full of our countrymen—they go directly to Paris!"

"You haven't answered my question!"

Her eyes, green flecked with gold, were not angry; they did not warn that she felt cheated or duped. It was obvious she would accept it if he gave the real reason. Only evasions or half-truths would upset her, although good food was rarely spoiled by being served on fine china. He leaned over and kissed her. "I have another wife," he confessed solemnly. "I married you bigamously."

She undid the top two buttons of her dress, recently collected from a French dressmaker using materials Sarah had brought with her from England. "The sun has some warmth in it, if you wait long enough, but not enough to tan. Yes," she said matter-of-factly, "I knew about that when you first proposed. Anyway, your mother warned me. In fact she used almost the same words. She said what a shock it had been for her as a new bride when she realized that her husband had another wife. She was very relieved that I already knew about you and your first bride, the navy."

"Well, we met under unusual circumstances."

She blushed as he reached over and undid the next two buttons of her dress, pulling back the soiled material so that he could see her breasts.

"Bonaparte has done one thing for us—the French fashions help lovers," he said, and kissed a nipple.

touching it with his tongue so it stiffened.

It was strange, she reflected, that you held your husband naked in bed; you even walked round the bedroom naked in front of him, and it all seemed quite natural. Yet out here in the sunshine, lying on the grass with bare breasts, she felt shy, as though this was the first time that Nicholas had unfastened a button. But how right he was about French fashions! Unlike in London, bare arms in the drawing rooms were commonplace here and very few French women of fashion bothered with corsets, although those sensitive of their plumpness wore narrow stays. And the flimsy materials! Often they were almost transparent, and most respectable women wore petticoats, but she had seen several women who passed for respectable wearing dresses that revealed their whole body when they stood against the light, and it was quite extraordinary how often they found themselves in front of a window. Still, anything was welcome that freed women from the constriction of corsets: why should women have to live as though squeezed in a wine press for the sake of fashion? Nevertheless, she pictured some women she knew and imagined them freed of corsets: it would be like slitting the side of a sack of corn!

She felt her breasts hardening as he pretended to inspect her nipples for the first time, commenting on their colour and size. Did he really like large nipples?

“Very well,” she said, concentrating with great effort, “so the navy is your first wife and you are honeymooning in Brittany with your second on secret business. *What* business?”

“It’s no secret,” he protested. “Our *passeports* are in order: the French authorities admitted us and welcomed, almost—to the country, enchanted that we are on our honeymoon, so if I happen to be asked to count up the number and type of ships being fitted out in Brest, and perhaps La Rochelle and L’Orient ... well, that would be only the natural curiosity of a couple interested in ships and the sea. After all, you have only just completed a voyage to India and back, and you love looking at ships—don’t you?”

“Of course, dearest,” she said with a smile. “And having closely inspected my breasts, taken my virginity, counted the ships and returned to London at the end of your honeymoon, what do you report to whom—and why? Surely the Admiralty must know what is going on in the French ports?”

“If not what happens on nearby clifftops. No, the Admiralty as such is not the problem. The man who seems to be completely hoodwinked by Bonaparte is the First Lord of the Admiralty, Lord St Vincent. He’s laying up ships of the line and frigates. That in itself doesn’t matter so much because they could be commissioned again in a few weeks, but he’s letting go all the prime seamen: they are being turned loose and are just disappearing like chaff in the wind, looking for work. You can commission all the ships again in a month and get them to sea—*providing* you have the seamen.”

“But, dearest, surely an admiral like Lord St Vincent realizes all that?”

“Of course he realizes he needs trained seamen to commission ships and get them to sea. His mistake is he doesn’t believe we need the ships. He doesn’t think we’ll be at war again with Bonaparte for another five years.”

“Five years? Why not seven, or nine—or three?”

“He’s attempting a complete overhaul of all the dockyards—to get rid of the theft, corruption and inefficiency which ranges from commissioners at the top to workmen at the bottom. It will take at least five years.”

“So, my dear, do you think your honeymoon in Brittany will result in Lord St Vincent changing his mind and not paying off any more ships?”

The whimsical note in her voice took the sting out of the question, and he frowned as he answered. It was a fair question and hard to answer satisfactorily. “It’s almost too late to stop him paying off ships. Most are already laid up. No sooner had we arrived home in the *Calypso* than (as you well know) I had orders to go on round to Chatham and lay her up. That means all those men I’ve been collecting together for years, from the time of my first command, the *Kathleen* in the Mediterranean, will be turned out of the navy the moment the *Calypso* is laid up.”

“And the commission and warrant officers—Southwick, Aitken and the others, yes and young Paolo—what happens to them?”

“Well, they’ll join another ship if they can find a berth, but hundreds of lieutenants and masters will be after a few dozen jobs. Paolo should find another ship because my father has enough influence to arrange a midshipman’s berth. There’s virtually no limit on the number a ship can carry: it depends on the captain.”

She sat upright to avoid the sun dazzling her and wondered if it could possibly tan her bosom a little. Her nipples were so large and brown. Did Nicholas prefer small pink ones, she wondered again. He seemed more than satisfied with them as they were, although she realized new husbands were unlikely to be critical.

“So you lose everyone once the ship is laid up again,” she commented. “Supposing a month later—month after you are back in London—the Admiralty commissions the *Calypso* again and gives you command?”

“I can ask for the officers, and for Southwick, and if they’re not employed I’d probably get them. But the men—not one, unless they heard about it and volunteered, because they’d be scattered across the country, or perhaps serving in merchant ships.”

“And if the war started again?”

“I still wouldn’t get them back. They’d volunteer or be pressed and be sent to whichever ship needed men most urgently. I’d have to start all over again. My name is well enough known that volunteers would join, hoping for prize-money. But—well, you saw that I knew just about everything concerning every man in the *Calypso*.”

“Yes, you seemed to be father confessor to men twice your age. Anyway, at least we’re not at war,” she said and touched his arm. “At least you’re not away at sea and I’m not sick with worry in case you have been wounded. Killed even.”

“That’s a cheerful thought for a summer’s afternoon!” he protested.

“Every time I hold you in bed, I feel a scar,” she retorted. “Like knots in a log. You’ve been lucky so far, the shot or sword cuts have not damaged anything vital. Why, you’ve done more than enough already to be able to resign your commission and just run the St Kew estate.”

“My mother has been talking to you!”

“Not really. She would like you to, and so would your father.”

“He has no faith in the Admiralty or politicians.”

“That’s hardly surprising, considering what they did to him. If they hadn’t made him the scapegoat so many years ago, he would probably have been First Lord now, not St Vincent.”

Ramage shrugged his shoulders. “Perhaps—but I wouldn’t have done so well.”

“Why on earth not?”

“He would have been so determined that no one should accuse him of favouring his son that I probably still be a lieutenant commanding a cutter, probably on the fishery patrol off Newfoundland.”

“So although you might complain about Lord St Vincent’s policies, you’ve done well enough, thank to him.” Sarah was unsure why she was sticking up for St Vincent, who had always seemed taciturn almost boorish, when she had met him.

“Thanks to his predecessor, Lord Spencer. He gave me my first chances in the early days—the chance to win my spurs, as it were.”

“So you have a honeymoon task—to get enough information to persuade the First Lord and the Cabinet to change the country’s policy towards Bonaparte!”

“Not quite,” he said wryly. “Just to convince the First Lord to keep enough ships in commission. I mean we, rather—don’t *want* war; we just want to be ready because we think it is coming.”

She buttoned up her dress. “Come on, let’s get on our way. War *may* be coming, but it’s certain we have only a few weeks of our honeymoon left and Jean-Jacques expects us for an early supper.”

Sarah riding side-saddle brought a stop to the daily life in each village: women stood at the doors of the houses or shops, or came down the paths to the gates in response to cries from their children.

“We’re probably the first foreigners they’ve seen since before the Revolution,” Ramage commented, keeping a tight rein on his horse, which was nervous at the shrill cries and cheers of the darting children.

“They wonder what nationality we are,” Sarah said. “There’d be fewer smiles if they knew we were English.”

“Yes, they won’t like the *rosbifs* here. Still, we could be Spanish, or even French: here in Brittany anyone from another province is a foreigner!”

“But we are obviously *aristos*,” Sarah said quietly. “They probably think we escaped the guillotine during the Revolution and with the peace have returned from exile ...”

Ramage shrugged his shoulders. “I am not very worried about that! It’s more significant that Fort de Toulbroch, Fort de Mengam and the Lion Battery are still fully manned, as though the war was still on and a British squadron might sail up the Gullet any moment.”

“I can see another fort ahead of us. There, just to the right of that church.”

“Yes, the church is at St Pierre and the fort is de Delec, less than a mile short of Brest. This side of it anyway.”

“How many sides are there?”

He laughed and explained: “The port is built on both sides of the entrance of the Penfeld river, just where it runs out into the Gullet. From what I remember of the charts and from what Jean-Jacques said last night, the arsenal is this side, by the entrance to the river. Then as you go upstream there’s the repair

jetty, and a couple of dry docks and another arsenal. Then on the other side, to the east, there's the château with high walls: an enormous fortress complete with gate and towers. There are barracks further inland. The commander-in-chief's house is in the centre of town, the Hôtel du Commandant de Marine, in the Rue de Siam, although why I should remember that I don't know! There's a naval college nearby. All along this side of the river are more quays, for another arsenal which is probably used for storing guns and carriages. On the road to Paris at the main gate, the Porte de Landerneau on the north side of the town, there's the hospital. I remember the map of the town in the Hydrographic Office at the Admiralty, drawn ten or fifteen years ago, noted that the pile of garbage from the hospital was polluting the water. And the cartographer was called St Nicolin. Strange how one's memory dredges up these odd items!"

"Look," Sarah said, "I can see masts. Like trees that have lost their leaves."

"Yes, there's just one more village, Laninon, before we reach the port. Ah, over to the right you can now see the ships at anchor in the Roads in front of the port. Yards crossed, sails bent on—why, it really does look as if Bonaparte is preparing a fleet. To send to India, the West Indies, the Cape? ... Eight ... nine ... eleven ships of the line. Thirteen ... fifteen ... sixteen frigates. Four transports. And various others—corvettes, *frigates en flûte*—"

"What are they?" she interrupted.

"Frigates with most of the guns removed and fitted out as transports. And," he continued, listing what he saw, "they're anchored out in the Roads, ready to sail. I wonder what we will see along the quay once we get into the port ..."

She shivered. "I don't like this, Nicholas. Supposing they stop us in the port and want to see your documents? You captured and sank enough French ships for them to know your name only too well. They could accuse you of being a spy."

"Hardly a spy," he protested. "My papers give my full name. There's nothing secret about our visit—we're on our honeymoon. I'm not writing down lists of ships ... And remember, there's nothing to prevent a French naval officer visiting Portsmouth, or Plymouth—nor anywhere he wants in England. He could probably set up an easel in front of Southsea Castle and paint all the ships he saw riding at anchor at Spithead, and with half a dozen small boys and a sergeant of fusiliers watching him admiringly."

"Yes, but remember what Jean-Jacques said," Sarah reminded him.

"Dearest, poor Jean-Jacques is a stranger in his own country. He's lived in England as an exile since 1793. Nine years. A long time."

"He realizes that. Imagine leaving a château empty, except for vandals, for nine years ... Still, I must say he's done everything to make us comfortable. Thank goodness he brought linen, crockery and cutlery with him from England. The place might be short of furniture but it's still more comfortable than the back of this horse!"

As they jogged along the lane skirting the coast and passing through the village of Laninon before reaching the Penfeld river, Ramage noted the state of the road. Apart from its width it was little more than a deserted track pocked every couple of yards with large potholes. Yet it was obviously the most important road for the defence of Brest because it was the only link (without going miles inland and swinging out again) with the three forts and the Lion Battery. The defences of Brest were between the

port and Pointe St Mathieu, but quite apart from rushing out field artillery or cavalry, it was unlikely a company of soldiers could hurry along here on a dark night without a quarter of them spraining ankles in potholes. Yet summer was the time to fill potholes so that cartwheels and horses' hooves packed down the earth.

By the time they returned to the château, to be greeted by Jean-Jacques, they were weary, feeling almost stunned by the monotonous trotting of the horses. Jean-Jacques' valet, Gilbert, busied himself with buckets of water, filling the only bath in the house. This, a large circular basin about twelve inches deep, had been found outside—the Revolutionaries had used it for watering their horses. Now, with it sitting on a thick bath mat on the dressing room floor Gilbert walked back and forth from the kitchen stove with buckets and jugs of hot water. Finally, with six inches of hot water in the bath and some jugs of cold left beside it, he reported all was ready and left.

Those buttons! Being constantly in the company of a woman with a beautiful body (with a body, he told himself proudly, which delighted a French dressmaker who took pride in cutting and stitching her material to emphasize or take advantage of every nuance of breast and thigh), buttons took on a new meaning for him. Previously they were devices for holding together pieces of cloth; now they could be a gateway to ecstasies.

Slowly she undid the buttons of her dress, starting at the bottom so that finally with a quick shrug her arms the whole dress slid to the floor, and as he started up from the armchair she said: "No, dearest, poor Gilbert has spent the whole afternoon boiling this water—let's use it while it is hot." More buttons, more shrugs, and she stood naked, pleased at his obvious pleasure in watching her. Yes, her breasts were firm; yes, her hips were generous without being plump. Yes, her buttocks had that pleasing fullness: so many Frenchwomen, she noticed, had the flatness of young boys.

She turned slowly, and then picked up the towel. "You bring the soap," she said, and he stood up and began to undress, thankful that while in France he found it easier to forget breeches, which the French seemed to associate entirely with the aristocracy, and wore the trousers which the *sans-culottes* had adopted as a garment and a slogan.

By the time they had bathed and dressed, Sarah wearing a pale yellow dress which was low cut in the latest fashion, Ramage was sure he would doze off at the dinner table. However, in the high-ceilinged dining-room, sparsely furnished with a table and five chairs, they found Jean-Jacques in high spirits. He had, he told them, just been able to trace some more of the furniture left behind and stolen by looters when he fled the Revolution.

Stocky, with crinkly black hair, a nose so hooked that in some lights he looked like a contented puffin and dressed as though Louis XVI was still on the throne, instead of long ago executed by a revolutionary mob, Jean-Jacques wiped his mouth with a napkin. "Landerneau, out on the Paris road, that's where we found them," he said. "A dining table, twelve chairs, the sideboard and wine-cooler."

"Who had them?"

"The mayor. He was using the table and four chairs; the rest were stored in his stable. Luckily his wife was proud of the table and kept it well polished."

"What happens now?" Sarah asked.

"Tomorrow I am sending my bailiff and a couple of carts to collect everything. With plenty of straw to

protect the wood.”

“The mayor doesn’t claim they’re his?” Ramage asked.

“Oh yes, although of course he doesn’t deny they were once mine. He claims the Revolution put an end to all private property.”

“You had an answer ready for that!” Ramage could imagine the conversation.

“Oh yes. He had half a dozen silver tankards on the sideboard with someone’s crest on them, so I said in that case I’d take three since he had no claim to them. His wife nearly had hysterics!”

“But you haven’t made a friend—a mayor can be a dangerous enemy,” Sarah said.

“The Count of Rennes has few friends in Brittany after the Revolution,” Jean-Jacques said grimly. “My real enemy is Bonaparte, so I need hardly care about the mayor of little more than a hamlet. And since Héloïse—well, stayed behind—when I went to England I have no sons to inherit the title or this château at Rennes,” he said quietly, as though talking to himself while he stared back through the centuries, “this ancient capital of Brittany. Two hundred years ago we were one of the half dozen most powerful families in the country. Now the last survivor is reduced to retrieving sticks of his furniture from the local thieves. Where are all my paintings, my silver, my gorgeous carpets, the Gobelins tapestry which ran the length of that wall?”—he gestured to one side of the long dining-room—“the Venetian glassware which has been handed down from father to son for generations? Being used by oafs.

“I don’t begrudge oafs their possessions, but they are just as content swilling rough wine from pottery mugs. They get no pleasure from looking at and using a Venetian goblet; indeed, it just means they get a short measure. To them, a Gobelins is a piece of cloth that keeps out a draught, or makes a good tarpaulin to prevent hay blowing off a rick. I could accept the local people stripping this château when the Revolution began if I thought they’d *appreciate* the treasures they stole. But ...”

Ramage wanted to change the subject to cheer up the Count, whose grandfather had begun the family friendship with the Blazeys, but there was a difficult question to ask, and now was obviously the time to get the answer.

“Héloïse—have you seen her?”

“The Countess of Rennes, in the eyes of my church still my wife, though no doubt divorced by some new law of the Revolution? No, I last saw her here nearly ten years ago, when she refused to escape with me.”

Sarah knew only that the Count had spent his exile in England alone while his wife stayed in France and could not resist asking: “Why did the Countess stay?” A moment later she could have bitten her tongue.

The skin of Jean-Jacques’ face suddenly seemed too tight for the bone structure, but he struggled to present an unconcerned smile. “She agreed with the aims of the Revolution, or at least she said she did. She was very young then. It goes back a long time: she hated her father, who was of course one of the King’s favourites, and she imagined the King once snubbed her at Versailles. Hardly the stuff of a revolution, one might think, but she brooded so that when the mob from Brest and Nantes and Angers came yelling through the gate, crying death to the King (and the Count of Rennes) she met them in ordinary clothes and invited them in and served them my best wine. Meanwhile I escaped with my valet and my life. She was very beautiful. Still is, I expect. She is the mistress of one of Bonaparte’s generals, I believe.”

former corporal, who is not too proud to bed a citizeness who has an old title in her own right and another by marriage.”

He signalled to one of the servants, indicating that the glasses were empty. “The candles are getting low, too,” he said, and apologized to his guests. “Before long we’ll be reduced to using rush dips.”

Sarah said: “You know, all that riding has made me so tired ... Perhaps Nicholas will give you your game of backgammon.”

The Count stood at once, apologetic. “Of course, both of you must be worn out: how thoughtless of me to keep you up talking of sad yesterdays. Yesteryears, rather. But tomorrow perhaps we shall dine at a more suitable table—I must be the first Count of Rennes to entertain in his own dining-room with his guests seated round a scrubbed kitchen table.”

Ramage laughed and turned to Sarah. “In Jean-Jacques’ defence, I should explain that the house I bought in England was furnished with the finest English furniture he could find!”

“Ah, the house in Ruckinge. You know Kent, my dear? Not Ruckinge? I was fortunate enough to be able to carry jewellery with me when I left here for England and by selling some I could buy a house in Kent. Although I love that house, my heart is really here, even though the château is almost empty. I spent my childhood here. My father’s father’s father—so many forebears—grew up here and died of old age. The vaults in the chapel are nearly full. There’ll be just enough room for me. Perhaps the original builder saw into the future and knew how many of us he would need to accommodate!”

“You seem to be full of gloomy thoughts tonight,” Ramage said as he helped Sarah from her chair.

“Yes, and as your host I am appalled that I have to put you in a suite over in the east wing furnished only with a bed, two chairs, commode and a single armoire. And no curtains at the windows.”

“You should see the great cabin of a frigate,” Ramage said dryly.

The Count led them to the door and once out of earshot of the two servants said: “I met an old friend today. He lives at La Rochelle but travelled to Rennes by way of L’Orient to arrange some business. He was an officer in the old Navy and like me escaped to England. He says that five ships of the line and six frigates are being prepared at La Rochelle, and seven and eleven of each in L’Orient. How does that compare with Brest?”

“Eleven and sixteen,” Ramage said grimly. “So 23 ships of the line and 33 frigates are being commissioned along the Atlantic coast. I wonder what’s going on at Toulon?”

“I must admit that’s a large fleet for peacetime,” Jean-Jacques said, and then added, as if to reassure himself that there was a future: “But I am sure Bonaparte wants peace now. At least, he wants to—how do you say, to ‘consolidate.’ You’ve seen how he has sent most of his soldiers home to reap the harvest. There are many hundreds of miles of roads still to be repaired—thousands in fact. Today France is a whole country where reaping, ploughing and sowing will take every available man this year if the people are not to starve. Already he is gambling on a good harvest—a bad one would topple him. People will be short in time of war, but with peace they want full bellies.”

Ramage shook his head. “Ten bad harvests won’t topple a man who controls the biggest army and the most powerful police force the world has ever seen.”

“Still,” the Count persisted, hope overcoming reason, “Bonaparte has concluded a peace with the

Russians, and Britain is isolated. The world is at peace. I have no need to remind you that by the Peace of Amiens England has surrendered most of her colonial conquests—and in return Bonaparte has given up the deserts of Egypt. He has all he wants. You don't suppose he needs Spain, Portugal, the Low Countries, Scandinavia ... ?”

“I do, but I'm probably in a minority,” Ramage said. “Bonaparte has kept control of the Italian states and Switzerland.”

“But he knows he can't beat the British at sea. Think of the Battle of Aboukir Bay—what a disaster for France! He is a soldier; he has created a great army. But he can't use it to attack England because the Channel is in the way. He realizes this. And that is why he sends his soldiers home.”

“But why does he prepare his navy—the navy you say he knows cannot defeat the Royal Navy?”

Jean-Jacques held out his hands, palms uppermost. “Perhaps to make sure they are in good condition before he stores them away—or whatever you sailors call it.”

“Perhaps,” Sarah said, taking Ramage's arm. “You must excuse the bride for dragging her groom off to bed, but she is going to sleep standing on her feet!”

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