Kydd Sea Adventures by Julian Stockwin

KYDD
ARTEMIS
SEAFLOWER
MUTINY
QUARTERDECK
TENACIOUS
COMMAND
THE ADMIRAL’S DAUGHTER
THE PRIVATEER’S REVENGE*
INVASION
VICTORY
CONQUEST
BETRAYAL

*Published in the U.K. as Treachery
To all my shipmates, old and new
Dramatis personae

Thomas Kydd, captain of *L'Aurore*
Nicholas Renzi, his friend and confidential secretary

**Ship’s company, *L'Aurore*** — Gilbey, first lieutenant; Curzon, second lieutenant; Bowden, third lieutenant; Clinton, lieutenant of marines; Dodd, marine sergeant; Oakley, boatswain; Poulden, captain’s coxswain; Stirk, gunner’s mate; Kendall, sailing master; Saxton, master’s mate; Calloway, master’s mate; Earle, midshipman; Doud, seaman; Wong, seaman; Tysoe, Kydd’s valet

**Officers, other ships** — *Admiral Cochrane, Leeward Islands Squadron; *Admiral Dacres, Jamaica Squadron; *Captain Brisbane, Arethusa; *Captain Pym, Atlas; *Captain Dunn, Acasta; *Captain Lydiard, Anson; *Captain Bolton, Fisgard; Captain Tyrell, Hannibal; Lieutenant Beale, Hannibal; Lieutenant Buckle, Hannibal; Lieutenant Briggs, Hannibal; Lieutenant Griffith, Hannibal; Lieutenant Hubbard, Hannibal; Lieutenant Mason, Hannibal; Midshipman Jowett, Hannibal; Midshipman Joyce, Hannibal; Maitland, sailing master, Hannibal

**Army** — Captain Hinckley; Major Wyvill

**Others** — Hayward, seaman; Richard Laughton, Renzi’s brother; *Francis Mackenzie, governor of Barbados; Jonathan Miller, American businessman; Daniel Thistlewood, plantation owner; Louise Vernou, French royalist; Wilikins, confidential secretary to Dacres; Miss Amelia Wrexham, society belle; Charles Wrexham, chairman of planters’ association

*Indicates historical character*
Chapter 1

“S-sir! Mr Curzon’s compliments, an’ we’ve raised Barbados!” came the wide-eyed report.

The frigate *L’Aurore* had been at sea for long weeks, beating up the coast of South America in frantic haste on a mission that might well see the catastrophic situation of the British in Buenos Aires reversed. It had been a voyage of daring speed and increasing privation as provisions and water ran low under the pressing need for hurry. Reduced to short allowance, the griping of hunger was constantly with them.

Captain Thomas Kydd looked up from his desk. “Thank you, Mr Searle.”

The ship’s youngest midshipman hesitated, unsure whether to wait for a response for the second lieutenant.

Kydd laid down his pen. “Tell Mr Curzon I’ll be on deck presently.”

Apprehension stole over Kydd as he contemplated his task: to persuade a senior commander-in-chief to detach part of his fleet to go south in rescue of an unauthorised expedition that had sought to liberate South America from the Spanish.

It had all started brilliantly. Their tiny force had quickly captured the seat of the viceroyalty of the River Plate, Buenos Aires, but then the population had turned on their liberators and forced the
surrender of their land forces. Commodore Popham, still at anchor off the port there, was desperately seeking support to retake the city.

From the quarterdeck Kydd gazed across an exuberant expanse of white-flecked blue sea to a distant light grey smudge, Barbados—where was to be found the Leeward Islands Squadron. There were just hours left to ensure that his arguments to its admiral for weakening the defences of the vital sugar islands by parting with his valuable assets were sound and convincing.

“A noble achievement, our voyage, sir, I’m persuaded,” Curzon offered, as they neared.

“A damned challenging one,” agreed Kydd, absently. There was murmuring that he didn’t catch from the group around the wheel behind him but it wasn’t hard to guess its drift. These were men who had left shipmates as prisoners to the Spaniards and they were expecting to see them freed soon by bold naval action.

Barbados was at its shimmering tropical best. After the intense blue of the deep sea, with its gaily tumbling white combers, and shoals of bonito and flying fish pursued by dolphins, there was now calm and beguiling transparent jade water above the corals. Along the shore coconut palms fringed dazzling white beaches. Neat houses on stilts with distinctive green jalousies perched above the tide line.

It was an impossibly lovely prospect for those who had voyaged so long and endured so much but, mission accomplished, they must leave and return to that grey southern madness.

By the time they had made the bluffs of South Point and left the brown and regular green of sugar fields safely to starboard, anxiety returned to steal in on Kydd. There was the possibility that the Leeward Islands Squadron was at sea, in which case it could be anywhere and would have to be found. However, his real concern was that, as a junior frigate captain, he was going to debate high strategy with a senior admiral. But there was no alternative: too
many brave men depended on what he was about to say.

He was in full dress uniform well before they opened Carlisle Bay. It was soon established that the fleet was in, an imposing sight—three ships-of-the-line, escorting frigates and many others. But Kydd’s eyes were on just one, the largest, which bore the flag of the commander-in-chief, Leeward Islands Squadron.

He knew little of the man: that he was a Cochrane unrelated to the one Napoleon called “the wolf of the seas,” that by reputation he was cautious and punctilious but had nevertheless distinguished himself in battle, and that he was yet another Scot who had reached flag rank in the Royal Navy. None of this was going to help.

An officious brig-sloop rounded to under their lee and, after a brief exchange of hails, L’Aurore was shepherded into the anchorage to take up moorings with three other frigates. It felt odd after so long under a press of canvas to be at rest with naked masts.

In his mind Kydd went over yet again the burden of what he would argue. If successful they could be returning south within days with reinforcements and if not . . . Well, would he have to go back empty-handed?

An expressionless Coxswain Poulden kept tight discipline in the boat’s crew as they approached the flagship. Northumberland was in immaculate order, the welcoming captain in white gloves as Kydd stepped aboard, carefully lifting his hat to the quarterdeck and waiting while the boatswain’s call died away. Then he was escorted to the grand cabin of the commander-in-chief.

“Captain Kydd, is it not?” Cochrane said, in a dry Scots burr, rising from his desk.

“L’Aurore frigate, thirty-two guns, sir.”

“As I can see. Her reputation for speed on a bowline is known even here, Captain.”

“Sir, I’ve news of great importance, a matter that sorely presses, bearing as it does on our situation in the south.”
“Oh? Do carry on then, sir.”

“I’m directed by Commodore Popham, my commander, to make my number with you in respect of an urgent operational request he has to make.”

“I see.” Cochrane’s manner became unexpectedly mild, almost whimsical, as if restraining a humorous confidence. “And you are his emissary. Then do tell what this might be at all.”

“I’m not sure how much you know, sir, of our descent on Buenos Aires, which—”

“You’ll take a sherry, Kydd? I favour a light manzanilla in this climate. Will you?”

“Thank you, sir. We met with some success initially, seizing the city and quantities of silver, but—”

“Do sit, Captain. I’m sure it’s been something of a trial, your long voyage.”

“—but he now stands embarrassed for want of reinforcement,” Kydd went on doggedly.

“Which he begs I might furnish.”

“Sir, the matter is pressing, I believe, and—”

“And I’m therefore grieved to tell you that your mission is in vain.”

Was this a direct refusal before he’d even mentioned the details?

“Sir, I have a letter for you from the commodore that establishes the strategics at back of his request.”

Cochrane laid it on the desk, unopened. “That won’t be necessary.”

Kydd felt a flush rising. “Sir, I do feel—”

“Captain, two weeks ago your reinforcements touched here on their way to the River Plate.”

“Why, that’s—”

“Together with your commodore’s replacement. He is under recall to England to answer for his conduct.”

Kydd was thunderstruck.

“So that disposes of the matter as far as you are concerned, wouldn’t
you say?” the admiral said, toying with his quill.

“Um, yes, it does seem, sir, that—”

“Quite. Then I suppose it would appear that you and your valiant frigate are now without purpose.”

Keyed up for a protracted confrontation, Kydd could think of nothing with which to meet this.

Cochrane leaned forward and said, with a frown, “I presume you realise how vital—how crucial—these islands are to Great Britain? You do? Then you’ll be as distracted as I am, not to say dismayed, when you learn that this humble fleet is all that is left to me in the great purpose of defending the same. After Trafalgar we were stripped—I say stripped, sir—of ships of force and value. Should the French make a descent with serious intent, I have the gravest reservations whether I’m in any kind of a position to deter them.”

“Er, I see, sir.”

“So I have it in mind that, following the stranding of Félicité frigate, I shall be attaching you to my station pending Admiralty approval.”

Kydd caught his breath. As a commander-in-chief, Cochrane was entitled to avail himself of the services of passing vessels, and there was little doubt that the Admiralty would be reluctant to go to the trouble of sending out a replacement when one had so fortuitously presented itself.

“A light frigate, of little consequence to operations in the south, while here I’m in great want of frigates both for the fleet and to go against French cruisers and privateers. Yes, my dear Kydd, consider yourself as of this moment under my command. Flags will find you a copy of my orders and see you entered into the fleet’s signal card and so forth, and I’ve no doubt you’ll wish to water and store while you can. We’re shortly to sail on fleet manoeuvres, which will serve as a capital introduction to our ways.”
There was nothing for it: Kydd had to accept that he and L’Aurore were now taken up and Popham’s brave little expedition was replaced by a full-scale enterprise from England that didn’t need them. Their being was now to be found in the Caribbean.

Cochrane mused for a moment, then rose and extended his hand. “Therefore I do welcome you to the Leeward Islands Squadron, Kydd—you’ll find me strict, but fair.” He rang a silver handbell.

A wary lieutenant entered. “Sir?”

“Flags, this is Captain Kydd of L’Aurore frigate. He’s to join our little band and I leave him in your capable hands to perform the consequentials. Oh, and the residence will need to know that they’ll be having another guest at the levee.”

“Aye aye, sir. Er, it does cross the mind that Captain Kydd’s presence might be considered fortunate at this time . . . ?”

“What’s that, Flags?”

“The court-martial, sir. You now have your five captains.”

“Ah, yes. Like to get this disagreeable business over with before we sail. Er, set it in train, will you? There’s a good fellow.”

Legal proceedings could not begin in a court-martial unless five post captains could be found to sit in judgment and cases had sometimes dragged on for months while waiting for the requisite number.

It was not the most auspicious beginning to his service here.

Back aboard his ship, Kydd cleared lower deck and told her company of developments, mentioning that with powerful reinforcements on their way their shipmates would soon be set at liberty, and announcing the agreeable news that they would be exchanging the winter shoals and lowering darkness of defeat in Buenos Aires for the delights of the Caribbean. It more than made up for the trials of the voyage.

In the time-honoured way, boats had already put off from the shore to the newly arrived ship, laden to the gunwales with
tempting delights for sailors long at sea—hands of bananas, moist soursops, grapefruit-tasting shaddock, fried milk, not to mention bammy bread and live chickens, all dispensed with noisy gusto by laughing black faces.

Even Gilbey, the dour first lieutenant, was borne along on the tide of excitement and, wrinkling his nose at the mauby beer, insisted on picking out half a dozen fresh coconuts for the gunroom.

“That no good for youse, de fine buckra officer!” a stout lady said, snatching them back. “I got toppest kind, verra tender an’ young. You leave others t’ the kooner-men!” She triumphantly produced some smaller ones, still enshrouded with fine coir hair.

Kydd kept a blank expression. He knew very well what was going on from those long-ago times in the Caribbean as a “kooner-man” himself. Deciding not to interfere, he let Gilbey conclude the deal and stood back as seamen quickly moved in to relieve her of the store of bigger, older nuts. Quite soon there would be merriment of a different kind below decks: the L’Aurores would have wasted no time in “sucking the monkey”—quaffing the powerful rum that had taken the place of milk inside their purchases.

Curzon was compounding with Bowden, the third lieutenant, in the subscribing of a sea-turtle—calipash and calipee—and Kydd graciously acceded to joining them, looking forward to the warmth of a dinner with his officers.

Liberty ashore was promised as soon as storing was complete, but for Kydd there was first a stern duty. At the summons of the single court-martial gun booming over the anchorage, he boarded his gig for Northumberland. He noted others making their way over the glittering sea but he had been occupied with the rendering of myriad accounts, reports and the like to his new commander, and a probing survey of fitness of his ship. Today, therefore, was their first face-to-face meeting, and he was looking forward to making
the acquaintance of those with whom he would serve in the future.

This time Kydd was gravely welcomed at the side by the admiral, then went over to join the group of captains standing together on the other side of the deck.

He lifted his cocked hat in greeting. “Kydd, *L’Aurore* frigate, new joined.”

“New snaffled, I’d wager,” one hard-faced captain retorted. “Always was tight with his ships, our Sir Alex. Oh—Sam Pym o’ *Atlas* 74. We’ll know more of you shortly, I’d hazard. Your first time in the Caribbee?” he asked.

Kydd caught himself. It was not, for he had been here as a young seaman—it seemed so very long ago. “Er, in the last war, as a younker only,” he admitted, then went on, “Do we know who’s to be tried at all?”

“Won’t take long, if that’s your meaning. Some foremast jack out o’ *Hannibal* thought to offer his lieutenant violence on being given an order or some such. His Nibs can be relied upon to come down hard on any who—”

A sour-faced captain leaned forward and hissed, “Sssh, gentlemen. There’s to be no discussing the case before it’s heard.”

The court met in the admiral’s spacious day cabin, set out in its full panoply—dark polished mahogany on all sides, flag-draped side tables and the scarlet of marine sentries rigidly to attention. A long table set athwart dominated the scene.

In dignified silence, the captains filed in one by one and sat in order of seniority, the president of the court occupying the largest chair in the centre. On either side were tables for the prosecution and the defence, the clerkly judge-advocate decorously apart from both. The massed dark blue and gold of full dress uniforms filled the space with a powerful impression of the awful majesty of naval discipline.

“Are we settled, then, gentlemen?” Cochrane asked politely,
Caribbee

looking right and left. “I’m sure you know the rules. We’ll take dinner at two but I’m not expecting a protracted session.”

There were nods and murmurs. Kydd eased his neck-cloth, stealing glances at his neighbours, who, he could see, were adopting suitably grave expressions.

Properly sworn, the court was now in session.

“Then we shall begin. Bring in the accused.”

There was a shuffling outside and the prisoner appeared, the clink of manacles loud in the silence.

“Your name and rate?”

“Dan’l Smythe, able seaman, sir.”

Kydd took in the man: his expression was wary and his eyes darted about the cabin. Wiry and well tanned, he must be in his forties; this was no cringing youngster regretting an impulse. The voice was grog-roughened but steady. If the act had been committed while drunk, it would make no difference to the sentence.

“Daniel Smythe, you are charged that on the seventeenth day of September last you did . . .”

Kydd listened grimly. It was much as Pym had said but the twenty-second Article of War was being invoked, a capital charge—and he was sitting in judgment on the man.

“Do you plead guilty, or not guilty?”

“Not guilty.”

There was a pathetic nobility in his manner. He had been brought from days’ confinement below in irons to an abrupt appearance before so many senior naval officers, yet he was clearly going to play it through to the end.

The young officer who had been appointed to act in his defence looked nervous. He dropped his pen and, red-faced, fumbled to pick it up.

Opposite, the prosecuting officer waited with a heavy patience, then rose. “Sir, this is as clear-cut a case as any I have seen and I do
not propose to try the patience of the court with a lengthy submission. I shall be calling but two witnesses, Lieutenant Beale, against whom the offence occurred, and Hannibal’s captain.”

A ripple went about the court: if the captain himself was coming forward as a prosecution witness there could be little hope for the defence.

“Thank you, Mr Biggs. Lieutenant Hubbard?”

The officer got to his feet and addressed the court. “Sir, Able Seaman Smythe denies the charge, saying his actions have been grievously mistaken and—”

“Just so. Your witnesses?”

Hubbard hesitated. “Er, Able Seaman Hogg and Sailmaker’s Mate Martin who were both—”

“Yes. Are they present?” Cochrane enquired.

Kydd frowned. If the only testimony Smythe could muster were fore-mast hands, things were looking bleak for him.

“They are, sir.”

“Then we’ll proceed. Mr Biggs?”

The essence of the case was laid out in dry, neutral tones. The captain had singled out a man in the crew about the main top bowline bitts as laggardly in his duties and had sent for Lieutenant Beale to hale him aft. There had been sharp words, a scuffle and a belaying pin had been drawn. Smythe had been restrained from actual violence by others in the crew. While being escorted to the quarterdeck, the prisoner had continued to struggle and utter threats until taken below and confined in irons. During this time a sizeable number of Hannibal’s company had shown common cause with Smythe and had assembled in a mutinous manner. The marines were turned out and the men dispersed.

“Call Lieutenant Beale.”

“You were the officer on duty at the fore-mast?” Biggs opened.

“I was,” Beale said, with a prim, disapproving air.
“Tell the court in your own words the events leading up to this unfortunate incident.”

“Sir. On being desired by the captain to deal with the prisoner, I went to him and remonstrated with him for his conduct, he hanging back when ordered to sweat off on the slablines. He did then swear in a manner derogatory to the name of the Lord at which I said I would inform the captain of this. In reply he damned myself, the captain, and the ship all to Hell, at which I ordered him seized. He drew a pin from the bitts and would have had at me, were he not restrained.”

“Can you in any way account for this behaviour?”

“Er, I believe the man was fuddled in liquor at the time, sir.”

Kydd looked down. It was all playing out like some tragic play that could have only one ending, and he was powerless to intervene.

“Your witness, Lieutenant Hubbard.”

Throwing a nervous glance at the stern features of the admiral, the young man addressed the witness, who lifted his chin disdainfully. “Lieutenant, this man is in your division?”

“He is.”

“Then you’ll know the prisoner is—how must we say?—famously short-fused. If provoked he may well act in a manner he might later regret.”

“This is no excuse in a man-o’-war, sir.”

“And you will also be aware that, two days before, this man had suffered a dozen lashes for insubordination?”

“Which rather proves the point, wouldn’t you say?”

“That was not my intent,” Hubbard said, with a growing intensity. “Rather, it is to give reason to the act. Smythe was doing his duty as best he could—with savage wounds healing on his back he was being asked to perform strenuous acts occasioning extreme pain. Is it any cause for wonder that he should react with such feeling to being told he was remiss in his duty?”
“This is not for me to say,” Beale said woodenly.
“No further questions, sir.”

It was as clear to Kydd as if he had seen it happening before him. The proud seaman, wanting to take his stripes like a man, had not reported sick and had done his best—until the prissy Beale had intervened. That his messmates had seen to it that he had rum to ease his suffering had only aggravated the situation and he had gone over the edge. What kind of ship was it that did not have the humanity to make allowances?

“Mr Biggs?”
“Call Captain Tyrell!”

At first the name meant nothing. Then into the court came a figure from Kydd’s past. Short but powerfully built, thick eyebrows above deep-set eyes and a restless, dangerous air. Kydd was seeing again the first lieutenant of the ship into which he had been press-ganged so many years before, now post captain of a ship-of-the-line.

He would never forget those eyes, that pugnacious, challenging bearing—and as well how he had single-handedly faced down a gathering mutiny, the lion-like courage he had shown in the hopeless royalist uprising. And the pitiless discipline that had made him an object of hatred.

“You are captain of HMS Hannibal, sir.”
“I am.” That harsh, flat voice from those days before the mast.
“Can you tell the court what you witnessed on the day in question, sir?”

“I saw the prisoner at the slablines with the others and the villain was slacking. Idling, I say. While his party were hauling hearty he was shirking. Not standing for it, I sent L’tenant Beale for’ard to take him in charge and saw there was an argument. I stepped up to see what it was and with my own eyes saw Smythe draw a pin and take a murderous swing at Mr Beale. Then I—”
Hubbard held up a hand tentatively. “A—a point of order, Mr President?”

Cochrane frowned. “What is it, Mr Hubbard?”

“Simply a matter of clarification, if you please, sir. We have Mr Beale’s testimony that the prisoner was restrained from making any blow, yet Captain Tyrell here has stated that an attack was made. May we . . . ?”

“Interrupting a witness is most irregular, sir. Yet I’ll answer you on that—it doesn’t signify one whit. The twenty–second Article of War, of which the prisoner stands charged, specifies clearly—and I quote, ‘. . . who shall strike, or draw or offer to draw, or lift up any weapon against him . . . ’ by which we may understand that the simple act of taking up the belaying pin with the object of injuring this officer in the execution of his duty is sufficient to condemn.

“Carry on, Captain Tyrell.”

“Then I had the rogue taken up. This stirred up his accomplices who made motions to deny me. I must turn out the marines before I could restore order on my own decks, the mutinous rabble! I’m sorry to say that this ship’s company is a scurvy crew, the worst scum it’s been my misfortune to command, and I demand an example be made.”

“Ah, just so, Captain Tyrell. Have you any further questions, Lieutenant?”

“Er, yes. Sir, have you had cause to punish Smythe on any previous occasions?”

“I have! Above half a dozen times, the vile shab!”

Cochrane stirred impatiently. “Captain, I’ll not have such language in my court. Kindly confine yourself to the facts, if you please.”

More mildly, he addressed Hubbard. “I think you can take it that the prisoner has a record of ill behaving. What in my day we called a ‘King’s hard bargain,’ if memory serves.”
There were dutiful smiles but the young officer was not to be deflected. “Sir, I have on hand Hannibal’s punishment book. I beg permission to read from it.”

“What the devil—?”

Tyrell’s objection was cut short by a look from the president of the court, who then replied, “If it’s pertinent to the case, sir.”

Hubbard took the book and began reading. “Twelve lashes for wry talk . . . half a dozen for being slow in stays and another dozen for silent contempt . . . mastheaded for six hours . . .” It went on and on, a revealing litany of suffering that told of a ship in the hellish thrall of a tyrant.

“This is for the last two months. And, additionally, may I be allowed to point out that I find in the eight months of this commission, at least sixty of the ship’s company have been punished beyond that of Smythe and—”

“Hah! All that shows, damn it, is what I said—I’ve a mutinous crew of rascals that need discipline.”

“Captain, you should answer questions as they are put to you, not offer general observations.”

Tyrell smouldered. “Sir, I’ve the strongest objection to being told how to keep discipline in my ship by this—”

“Sir, my intent in this is to show that, far from being a persistent offender and a blaggard, the prisoner is of a one with the majority of the ship’s company, the victim of the most heinous regime that—”

Cochrane slapped the table sharply. “We are here to try the prisoner, Lieutenant, not Captain Tyrell. We have indulged you this far—if you have other evidence, do produce it at the right time.”

Kydd threw a glance of sympathy at Hubbard as the witness was stood down.

Biggs drew himself up importantly. “There really is no point in prolonging the business. You have heard two unimpeachable witnesses swear to this unforgivable act of defiance and I dare to
say the matter is proved. However, if the court wishes I could summon a further fifty.”

“Thank you, no, Mr Biggs.” The admiral took a sip of water and dabbed at his mouth with a lace handkerchief. “Lieutenant Hubbard?”

Laying out the case for the defence was the work of small minutes, a man driven by despair to his own destruction, one to be pitied rather than condemned.

Hubbard then summoned his first witness. “Call Able Seaman Hogg.”

The prosecuting officer was on his feet in an instant. “Objection!”

“Mr Biggs?”

“Those same ship’s books,” he said, with a tinge of sarcasm, “reveal that Hogg is not only in the same watch as Smythe but messes with him. I hardly think his testimony can be considered at all impartial, not to say disinterested. I ask that it be disallowed.”

Cochrane nodded gravely. “This must be so—you can see that, can you not, Mr Hubbard? The word of a gentleman is one thing, that of the lesser sort quite another matter. This witness is excused.”

“Then I call Sailmaker’s Mate Martin,” Hubbard said defiantly, “who does not mess with the prisoner.”

Biggs rose wearily. “But is his tie-mate. Same objection.”

It was the custom for those sailors with pig-tails to choose a trusted friend to plait it for a return of the favour. Biggs had been clever to discover this information, which had essentially completed the destruction of the case for the defence.

“Ah. Then I must disallow this witness too,” Cochrane said uncomfortably.

“Have you any others you may call upon in their stead, Mr Hubbard?” he prompted.

The young officer’s face burned. “None, it seems, that can stand before gentlemen,” he said tightly.
“For God’s sake!” Kydd blurted. “Can’t we just hear what he’s got to say?”

Cochrane looked sideways in astonishment. “Mr Kydd! I find your outburst both ill-timed and impertinent. Your duty is to sit in judgment after hearing the evidence. In silence, sir, not to intervene as you see fit.”

Kydd dropped his gaze. It was not worth creating a scene—in any case, it was unlikely that the sailmaker’s mate could achieve much for his friend now.

To his surprise, Cochrane harrumphed. “On reflection I have decided to allow this witness to speak.”

After a small delay a stooped, apprehensive little man was ushered in. He stood blinking, in his nervousness passing his hat from one hand to the other.

“You are John Martin, sailmaker’s mate?”
He gulped, then whispered, “Aye.”
“And you know the accused, Daniel Smythe?”
Darting a quick look at the prisoner, he nodded hastily, then looked down.

“Come now, Martin, there’s no need to be afraid. Simply answer the questions the way we agreed,” Hubbard said kindly.

Biggs swooped: “Sir, this is insupportable. The witness has been coached in his answer by the defence!”

Cochrane leaned back heavily and sighed. “Mr Hubbard. I’ve given you every possible indulgence but this is—”

“Sir!” the lieutenant came back. “Martin is unused to appearing in public and I sought only to ease his fears in the manner of his speaking.”

“Nevertheless, Mr Biggs’s contention cannot easily be dismissed. I rule that this evidence is tainted. Stand down the witness. I rather think you must look to concluding your case, sir.”

The prosecution’s summing up was brisk, simple and short. The
prisoner had committed the act before witnesses and no extenuating circumstances had been found. There could be no finding other than guilty.

Kydd looked across at Smythe. There was no change in his expression as he heard the damning words—he must have known there was no hope from the outset but he was not giving his accusers the satisfaction of showing fear.

Hubbard performed nobly. Allowed full scope for his speech, he spoke eloquently of the lot of the common seaman, of the harshness of his daily life at sea. He touched on Smythe’s “very good” for conduct when discharged from other ships but when he appeared to veer towards a criticism of the regime of discipline in Hannibal he was stopped and cautioned.

“Thank you, Lieutenant. The court will now consider its verdict.”

The cabin was cleared of all but the president and members of the court.

“A straightforward enough case, I would have thought,” Cochrane said. “Does anyone have any strong views at all?”

This was Kydd’s chance—but what could he do? The man had raised a weapon at a superior officer, an unforgivable crime in the Navy, and before his shipmates. If he were not punished accordingly they themselves would be in breach of the same Articles of War.

“He’s culpable, of course,” he found himself saying, “but in respect to the wounds of his flogging, should we not consider a mort o’ leniency at all?”

“Impossible,” Cochrane snapped. “The relevant article leaves us no leeway. If I have to remind you, the previous article allows ‘. . . upon pain of such punishment as a court-martial shall think fit to inflict, according to the degree of the offence . . .’ but no backing and filling in this one: ‘. . . every such person being convicted of any such offence, by the sentence of a court-martial shall suffer death.’ You see?”
He went around the table, brusquely asking for a verdict from each captain.

“Guilty,” Kydd said dully at his turn.

“So, we are agreed. The court will give its judgment. Bring in the prisoner.”

The man stood tense but with a glassy stare.

“Daniel Smythe. This court finds you guilty as charged of an offence contrary to Article Twenty-Two of the Articles of War. Have you anything to say before sentence is passed upon you?”

He lifted his manacles, then let them drop in a gesture of despair, but no word escaped him.

Even when the dire sentence of execution was pronounced he held his head high, his gaze on an unknowable infinity.

But Cochrane had not finished. “Your offence I note was made before others who seem inclined to sympathise with your act. I can see no alternative other than to follow the example of that great admiral the Earl of St Vincent. Therefore, as a warning to each and every one, in two days hence you shall be hanged at the fore-yard of your ship—by your own shipmates.

“Take him away.”

After the verdict and sentence were recorded and signed by each member of the court, Cochrane declared it dissolved and leaned back, his face looking lined and old.

“A distasteful business to be sure,” he muttered.

On the appointed day, at precisely eleven in the forenoon, a yellow flag mounted the main-masthead of Hannibal. From every ship in the squadron a boat left to take position off the vessel, spectators at the last act in the drama. Other ships warped about to allow their companies, turned up on deck in solemn ranks, to gaze on the scene and learn the fate of those who dared lift a hand against authority.

Kydd, with other captains, stood witness on the ship’s quarterdeck,
aware of his role as a symbol of the authority and majesty of law that was extinguishing the life of a fellow sailor.

“Had to end this way, o’ course.” Pym stood beside him, with a face of stone.

“How’s that?” Kydd asked quietly, grateful for the human contact, his heart full of pity for the man whose life span was now being measured in minutes.

“You don’t know Tyrell. Man’s a martyr to discipline since ’ninety-seven, when he lost his first command to mutineers at Spithead.”

So that was what was riding him, had intensified the driving obsession with rule and punishment.

“That’s not to say he’s shy in battle—he’s the heart of a tiger and shows it. Just been unlucky, never in any fleet engagement worth the name and fears he’s to be overlooked. Like in San Domingo here not six months back. A foul bottom and last into action when it was all but over.”

“Still and all,” Kydd said, in a low voice, “to have the men follow out of fear will never be my way.”

A sharp slap and crash of muskets caused them to wheel round. It was the Royal Marines guard acknowledging the captain emerging from his cabin spaces. With a suspicious look that turned into one of controlled ferocity, Tyrell stomped to the quarterdeck.

“Bring up the prisoner!” he roared.

_Hannibal’s_ ship’s company was assembled aft, massing in a silent press of barely concealed hostility. Their captain mounted the poop ladder and advanced to the rail, standing aloof in a belligerent quarterdeck brace and looking down on the hundreds of men.

No one moved. Tyrell continued to survey them grimly, saying not a word, letting the tension build.

There was a stir at the hatchway and the prisoner came slowly on deck, blinking in the bright sunlight, ahead of him the chaplain in black, behind him the master-at-arms and two corporals. He was
halted at the break of the poop, then turned to face his shipmates.

It was the duty of the captain to muster the hands and pronounce before them why the prisoner’s life was forfeit, all part of the ceremony of death that was intended as a dread spectacle of deterrence. Tyrell read out the relevant Article of War in savage, ringing tones before the ship’s company standing, heads bared. In sharp, harsh sentences he set out why the man must die: the stern code of the sea had been breached and he must be made to pay.

He concluded and descended from the poop, nodding to the Royal Marines officer. A single drum, muffled by black crêpe, sounded a roll, then a measured beat as Smythe began the last journey, forward to the yardarm.

Kydd joined the line of officers who followed, just behind Cochrane’s flag-captain, who was representing him. They assembled at the foredeck, and the grim ritual was ready to be enacted.

“Prepare the prisoner!”

The chaplain moved to Smythe and they knelt together. Kydd could hardly conceive of the despair and anguish that must be rushing through the man’s mind—the boatswain mere paces away waiting with the end of the yardarm whip worked into a halter, on the other side the six-pounder gun-crew with their piece ready charged to signal the moment the prisoner was launched into eternity. And, all around, ships with their silent lines of men looking on.

The seaman rose, deathly pale, a studied blankness his only expression as he moved to the appointed place of execution. The halter was brought and put in place around his neck, followed by a black hood. Smythe had only to step on to the cathead and, at the signal, it would be over.

“Sir,” the boatswain’s voice croaked.

Tyrell took his time, looking up and then along to where the prisoner’s shipmates waited, the long line of the hangman’s rope in their hands.
“Carry on!”

But a loud cry broke into the awful stillness: “Hold!”

Tyrell wheeled about in astonishment. The flag-lieutenant hurried up and held out a paper, sealed and beribboned.

“What’s this, sir?” he snapped.

“Admiral Cochrane desires you should read this publicly at this time, sir.”

Kydd’s heart leaped. Could it be . . . ?

His voice savage, Tyrell was obliged to announce to all the world that, of the commander-in-chief’s mercy, the said prisoner was reprieved at the scaffold’s foot.

“Take him down!” he snarled.

The hood was lifted, the rope removed from his neck—and, with a muffled groan, Smythe crumpled senseless to the deck.