

Sharpe's



TRAFALGAR

**BERNARD
CORNWELL**

Sharpe's Trafalgar

Richard Sharpe and the Battle of
Trafalgar,

21 October 1805

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Sharpe's Trafalgar is for

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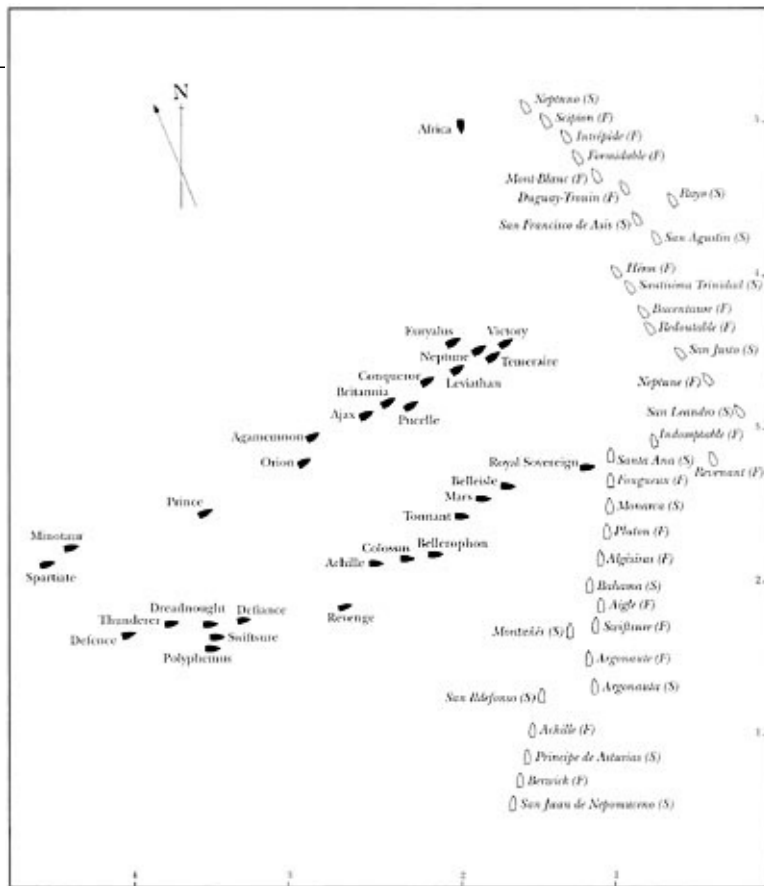
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Battle of Trafalgar, 21 October 1805. The Fleets approach battle.

CHAPTER 1

‘A hundred and fifteen rupees,’ Ensign Richard Sharpe said, counting the money onto the table.

Nana Rao hissed in disapproval, rattled some beads along the wire bars of his abacus and shook his head. ‘A hundred and thirty-eight rupees, sahib.’

‘One hundred and bloody fifteen!’ Sharpe insisted. ‘It were fourteen pounds, seven shillings and threepence ha’penny.’

Nana Rao examined his customer, gauging whether to continue the argument. He saw a young officer, a mere ensign of no importance, but this lowly Englishman had a very hard face, a scar on his right cheek and showed no apprehension of the two hulking bodyguards who protected Nana Rao and his warehouse. ‘A hundred and fifteen, as you say,’ the merchant conceded, scooping the coins into a large black cash box. He offered Sharpe an apologetic shrug. ‘I get older, sahib, and find I cannot count!’

‘You can count, all right,’ Sharpe said, ‘but you reckon I can’t.’

‘But you will be very happy with your purchases,’ Nana Rao said, for Sharpe had just become the possessor of a hanging bed, two blankets, a teak travelling chest, a lantern and a box of candles, a hogshead of arrack, a wooden bucket, a box of soap, another of tobacco, and a brass and elmwood filtering machine which he had been assured would render water from the filthiest barrels stored in the bottom-most part of a ship’s hold into the sweetest and most palatable liquid.

Nana Rao had demonstrated the filtering machine which he claimed had been brought out from London as part of the baggage of a director of the East India Company who had insisted on only the finest equipment. ‘You put the water here, see?’ The merchant had poured a pint or so of turbid water into the brass upper chamber. ‘And then you allow the water to settle, Mister Sharpe. In five minutes it will be as clear as glass. You observe?’ He lifted the upper container to show water dripping from the packed muslin layers of the filter. ‘I have myself cleaned the filter, Mister Sharpe, and I will warrant the item’s efficiency. It would be a miserable pity to die of mud blockage in the bowel because you would not buy this thing.’

So Sharpe had bought it. He had refused to purchase a chair, bookcase, sofa or washstand, all pieces of furniture that had been used by passengers outward bound from London to Bombay, but he had paid for the filtering machine and all the other goods because otherwise his voyage home would be excruciatingly uncomfortable. Passengers on the great merchantmen of the East India Company were expected to supply their own furniture. ‘Unless you would be liking to sleep on the deck, sahib? Very hard! Very hard!’ Nana Rao had laughed. He was a plump and seemingly friendly man with a large black moustache and a quick smile. His business was to purchase the furniture of incoming passengers which he then sold to those folk who were going home. ‘You will leave the goods here,’ he told Sharpe, ‘and on the day of your embarkation my cousin will deliver them to your ship. Which ship is that?’

‘The *Calliope*,’ Sharpe said.

'Ah! The *Calliope*! Captain Cromwell. Alas, the *Calliope* is anchored in the roads, so the goods will need to be carried out by boat, but my cousin charges very little for such a service, Mister Sharpe, very little, and when you are happily arrived in London you can sell the items for much profit!'

Which might or, more probably, might not have been true, but was irrelevant because that same night just two days before Sharpe was to embark, Nana Rao's godown was burned to the ground and all the goods: the beds, bookcases, lanterns, water filters, blankets, boxes, tables and chairs, the arrack, soap tobacco, brandy and wine were supposedly consumed with the warehouse. In the morning there was nothing but ashes, smoke and a group of shrieking mourners who wailed that the kindly Nana Rao had died in the conflagration. Happily another godown, not three hundred yards from Nana Rao's ruined business, was well supplied with all the necessities for the voyage, and that second warehouse did a fine trade as disgruntled passengers replaced their vanished goods at prices that were almost double those that Nana Rao had charged.

Richard Sharpe did not buy anything from the second warehouse. He had been in Bombay for five months, much of that time spent sweating and shivering in the castle hospital, but when the fever had passed, and while he was waiting for the annual convoy to arrive from Britain with the ship that would carry him home, he had explored the city, from the wealthy houses in the Malabar hills to the pestilential alleys by the waterfront. He had found companionship in the alleyways and it was one of those acquaintances who, in return for a golden guinea, gave Sharpe a scrap of information which the ensign reckoned was worth far more than a guinea. It was, indeed, worth a hundred and fifteen rupees which was why, at nightfall, Sharpe was in another alley on the eastern outskirts of the city. He wore his uniform, though over it he had donned a swathing cloak made of cheap sacking which was thickly impregnated with mud and filth. He limped and shuffled, his body bent over with a hand outstretched as though he were begging. He muttered to himself and twitched, and sometimes turned and snarled at some innocent soul for no apparent reason. He went utterly unnoticed.

He found the house he wanted and squatted by its wall. A score of beggars, some horribly maimed, were gathered by the gate along with almost a hundred petitioners who waited for the house's owner, a wealthy merchant, to return from his place of business. The merchant came after nightfall, riding in a curtained palanquin that was carried by eight men, while another dozen men whacked the beggars out of the way with long staves, but, once the merchant's palanquin was safe inside the courtyard, the gates were left open so that the petitioners and beggars could follow. The beggars, Sharpe among them, were pushed to one side of the yard while the petitioners gathered at the foot of the broad steps that climbed to the house door. Lanterns hung from the coconut palms that arched over the yard, while from inside the big house yellow candlelight glimmered behind filigree shutters. Sharpe pushed as close to the house as he could, staying in the shadow of the palm trunks. Under the greasy cloak he hid his cavalry sabre and a loaded pistol, though he hoped he would need neither weapon.

The merchant was called Panjit and he kept the petitioners and beggars waiting until he had eaten his evening meal, but then the house door was thrown open and Panjit, resplendent in a long robe of embroidered yellow silk, appeared on the top step. The petitioners called aloud while the beggars shuffled forward until they were driven back by the staves of the bodyguards. The merchant smiled then rang a small handbell to attract the attention of a brightly painted god who sat in a niche of the courtyard wall. Panjit bowed to the god, and then, in answer to Sharpe's prayers, a second man, this one dressed in a red silk robe, emerged from the house door.

That second man was Nana Rao. He had a wide smile, and no wonder, for he was quite untouched by fire and, as Sharpe's guinea had discovered, he was also first cousin of Panjit who was the merchant who had profited so greatly by owning the second warehouse that had replaced the goods supposedly destroyed in Nana Rao's calamitous fire. It had been a slick deception, enabling the cousins to sell the same goods twice, and tonight, replete with their swollen profits, they were choosing which men would be given the lucrative job of rowing the passengers and their belongings out to the great ships that lay in the anchorage. The chosen men would be required to pay for the privilege, thus enriching Panjit and Nana Rao even more, and the two cousins, aware of their good fortune, planned to propitiate the gods by distributing some petty coins to the beggars. Sharpe was reckoning that he could reach Nana Rao in the guise of a supplicant, then throw off the filthy cloak and shame the man into returning his money. The competent-looking bodyguards at the foot of the steps suggested that his skimpy plan might prove more complicated than he envisaged, but Sharpe guessed Nana Rao would not want his deception revealed and so would probably be happy to pay him off.

Sharpe was close to the house now. He had noticed that the empty palanquin had been carried down a narrow and dark passage that led alongside the building, evidently giving access to a courtyard at the rear of the house, and he was considering going down the passage and coming back through the building to approach Nana Rao from the rear, but any of the beggars who ventured near the passage were beaten back by the bodyguards. The petitioners were being allowed onto the steps in small groups, but the beggars were expected to wait until the main business of the evening was over.

Sharpe suspected it would be a long night, but he was content to wait with his cloak hood pulled over his face. He squatted against the wall, watching for an opportunity to dash into the passageway beside the house, but then a servant who had been guarding the outer gate pushed through the crowd and spoke in Panjit's ear. For an instant the merchant looked alarmed and a silence fell over the courtyard but then he whispered to Nana Rao who just shrugged. Panjit clapped his hands and shouted at the bodyguards who energetically drove the petitioners back to form an open passage between the gate and the steps. Someone was plainly coming to the house and Nana Rao, nervous of their appearance, stepped into the black shadow at the back of the porch.

The way was clear now for Sharpe to go down the passage beside the house, but curiosity held him in place. There was a commotion in the alley, sounding like the jeers and scramble that always accompanied a band of constables marching through the lesser streets of London, then the outer gate was pushed fully open and Sharpe could only stare in astonishment.

A group of British sailors stood in the gate, led by a naval captain, a post captain no less, who was immaculate in cocked hat, blue frock coat, silk breeches and stockings, silver-buckled shoes and slim sword. The lantern light reflected from the heavy gold bullion of his twin epaulettes. He took off his hat, revealing thick blond hair, smiled and bowed. 'Do I have the honour,' he asked, 'of coming to the house of Panjit Lashti?'

Panjit nodded cautiously. 'This is the house,' he said in English.

The naval captain put on his cocked hat. 'I have come,' he announced in a friendly voice that had a distinct Devonshire accent, 'for Nana Rao.'

'He is not here,' Panjit answered.

The captain glanced at the red-robed figure in the porch shadows. 'His ghost will do very well.'

'I have answered you,' Panjit said, defiance now making his voice angry. 'He is not here. He is dead.'

The captain smiled. 'My name is Chase,' he said courteously, 'Captain Joel Chase of His Britannic Majesty's navy, and I would be obliged if Nana Rao would come with me.'

'His body was burned,' Panjit declared fiercely, 'and his ashes have gone to the river. Why do you not seek him there?'

'He's no more dead than you or I,' Chase said, then waved his men forward. He had brought a dozen seamen, all identically dressed in white duck trousers, red and white hooped shirts and straw hats stiffened with pitch and circled with red and white ribbons. They wore long pigtailed and carried thick staves which Sharpe guessed were capstan bars. Their leader was a huge man whose bare forearms were thick with tattoos, while beside him was a Negro, every bit as tall, who carried his capstan bar as though it were a hazel wand. 'Nana Rao' – Chase abandoned the pretence that the merchant was dead – 'you owe me a deal of money and I have come to collect it.'

'What is your authority to be here?' Panjit demanded. The crowd, most of whom did not understand English, watched the sailors nervously, but Panjit's bodyguards, who outnumbered Chase's men and were just as well armed, seemed eager to be loosed on the seamen.

'My authority,' Chase said grandly, 'is my empty purse.' He smiled. 'You surely do not wish me to use force?'

'Use force, Captain Chase,' Panjit answered just as grandly, 'and I shall have you in front of a magistrate by dawn.'

'I shall happily appear in court,' Chase said, 'so long as Nana Rao is beside me.'

Panjit shook his hands as if he was shooing Chase and his men away from his courtyard. 'You will leave, Captain. You will leave my house now.'

'I think not,' Chase said.

'Go! Or I will summon authority!' Panjit insisted.

Chase turned to the huge tattooed man. 'Nana Rao's the bugger with the moustache and the red silk robe, Bosun. Get him.'

The British seamen charged forward, relishing the chance of a scrap, but Panjit's bodyguards were no less eager and the two groups met in the courtyard's centre with a sickening crash of staves, skulls and fists. The seamen had the best of it at first, for they had charged with a ferocity that drove the bodyguards back to the foot of the steps, but Panjit's men were both more numerous and more accustomed to fighting with the long clubs. They rallied at the steps, then used their staves like spears to tangle the sailors' legs and, one by one, the pigtailed men were tripped and beaten down. The bosun and the Negro were the last to fall. They tried to protect their captain who was using his fists handily but the British sailors had woefully underestimated the opposition and were doomed.

Sharpe sidled towards the steps, elbowing the beggars aside. The crowd was jeering at the defeated British seamen, Panjit and Nana Rao were laughing, while the petitioners, emboldened by the success of the bodyguards, jostled each other for a chance to kick the fallen men. Some of the bodyguards were wearing the sailors' tarred hats while another pranced in triumph with Chase's cocked hat on his head. The captain was a prisoner, his arms pinioned by two men.

One of the bodyguards had stayed with Panjit and saw Sharpe edging towards the steps. He came down fast, shouting that Sharpe should go back, and when the cloaked beggar did not obey he aimed a kick at him. Sharpe grabbed the man's foot and kept it swinging upwards so that the bodyguard fell on his back and his head struck the bottom step with a sickening thump that went unnoticed in the noisy celebration of the British defeat. Panjit was shouting for quiet, holding his hands aloft. Nana Rao was laughing, his shoulders heaving with merriment, while Sharpe was in the shadow of the bushes at the side of the steps.

The victorious bodyguards pushed the petitioners and beggars away from the bruised and bloodied sailors who, disarmed, could only watch as their dishevelled captain was ignominiously hustled to the bottom of the steps. Panjit shook his head in mock sadness. 'What am I to do with you, Captain?'

Chase shook his hands free. His fair hair was darkened by blood that trickled down his cheek, but he was still defiant. 'I suggest,' he said, 'that you give me Nana Rao and pray to whatever god you trust that I do not bring you before the magistrates.'

Panjit looked pained. 'It is you, Captain, who will be in court,' he said, 'and how will that look? Captain Chase of His Britannic Majesty's navy, convicted of forcing his way into a private house and there brawling like a drunkard? I think, Captain Chase, that you and I had better discuss what terms we can agree to avoid that fate.' Panjit waited, but Chase said nothing. He was beaten. Panjit frowned at the bodyguard who had the captain's hat and ordered the man to give it back, then smiled. 'I do not want a scandal any more than you, Captain, but I shall survive any scandal that this sad affair starts, and you will not, so I think you had better make me an offer.'

A loud click interrupted Panjit. It was not a single click, but more like a loud metallic scratching that ended in the solid sound of a pistol being cocked, and Panjit turned to see that a red-coated British officer with black hair and a scarred face was standing beside his cousin, holding a blackened pistol muzzle at Nana Rao's temple.

The bodyguards glanced at Panjit, saw his uncertainty, and some of them hefted their staves and moved towards the steps, but Sharpe gripped Nana Rao's hair with his left hand and kicked him in the back of the knees so that the merchant dropped hard down with a cry of hurt surprise. The sudden brutality and Sharpe's evident readiness to pull the trigger checked the bodyguards. 'I think you'd better make me an offer,' Sharpe said to Panjit, 'because this dead cousin of yours owes me fourteen pounds, seven shillings and threepence ha'penny.'

'Put the pistol away,' Panjit said, waving his bodyguards back. He was nervous. Dealing with a courteous naval captain who was an obvious gentleman was one thing, but the red-coated ensign looked wild, and the pistol's muzzle was grinding into Nana Rao's skull so that the merchant whimpered with pain. 'Just put the pistol away,' Panjit said soothingly.

'You think I'm daft?' Sharpe sneered. 'Besides, the magistrates can't do anything to me if I shoot

your cousin. He's already dead! You said so yourself. He's nothing but ashes in the river.' He twisted Nana Rao's hair, making the kneeling man gasp. 'Fourteen pounds,' Sharpe said, 'seven shillings and threepence ha'penny.'

'I'll pay it!' Nana Rao gasped.

'And Captain Chase wants his money too,' Sharpe said.

'Two hundred and sixteen guineas,' Chase said, brushing off his hat, 'though I think we deserve a little more for having worked the miracle of bringing Nana Rao back to life!'

Panjit was no fool. He looked at Chase's seamen who were picking up their capstan bars and readying themselves to continue the fight. 'No magistrates?' he asked Sharpe.

'I hate magistrates,' Sharpe said.

Panjit's face betrayed a flicker of a smile. 'If you were to let go of my cousin's hair,' he suggested, 'then I think we can all talk business.' Sharpe let go of Nana Rao, lowered the flint of the pistol and stepped back. He stood momentarily to attention. 'Ensign Sharpe, sir,' he introduced himself to Chase.

'You are no ensign, Sharpe, but a ministering angel.' Chase climbed the steps with an outstretched hand. Despite the blood on his face he was a good-looking man with a confidence and friendliness that seemed to come from a contented and good-natured character. 'You are the *deus ex machina*, Ensign, as welcome as a whore on a gundeck or a breeze in the horse latitudes.' He spoke lightly, but there was no doubting the fervency of his thanks and, instead of shaking Sharpe's hand, he embraced him. 'Thank you,' he whispered, then stepped back. 'Hopper!'

'Sir?' The huge bosun with the tattooed arms who had been laying enemies left and right before he was overwhelmed stepped forward.

'Clear the decks, Hopper. Our enemies wish to discuss surrender terms.'

'Aye aye, sir.'

'And this is Ensign Sharpe, Hopper, and he is to be treated as a most honoured friend.'

'Aye aye, sir,' Hopper said, grinning.

'Hopper commands my barge crew,' Chase explained to Sharpe, 'and those battered gentlemen are his oarsmen. This night may not go down as one of our greater victories, gentlemen' – Chase was now addressing his bruised and bleeding men – 'but a victory it still is, and I thank you.'

The yard was cleared, chairs were fetched from the house, and terms discussed.

It had been a guinea, Sharpe thought, exceedingly well spent.

'I rather liked the fellows,' Chase said.

‘Panjit and Nana Rao? They’re rogues,’ Sharpe said. ‘I liked them too.’

‘Took their defeat like gentlemen!’

‘They got off light, sir,’ Sharpe said. ‘Must have made a fortune on that fire.’

‘Oldest trick in the bag,’ Captain Chase said. ‘There used to be a fellow on the Isle of Dogs who claimed thieves had cleaned out his chandlery on the night before some foreign ship sailed, and the victims always fell for it.’ Chase chuckled and Sharpe said nothing. He had known the man Chase spoke of, and had even helped him clear the warehouse one night, but he thought it best to be silent. ‘But you and I are all right, Sharpe, other than a scratch and a bruise,’ Chase went on, ‘and that’s all that matters, eh?’

‘We’re all right, sir,’ Sharpe agreed. The two men, followed by Chase’s barge crew, were walking back through the pungent alleys of Bombay and both were carrying money. Chase had originally contracted with Rao to supply his ship with rum, brandy, wine and tobacco, and now, instead of the two hundred and sixteen guineas he had paid the merchant, he was carrying three hundred, while Sharpe had two hundred rupees, so all in all, Sharpe reckoned, it had been a good evening’s work, especially as Panjit had promised to supply Sharpe with the bed, blankets, bucket, lantern, chest, arrack, tobacco, soap and filter machine, all to be delivered to the *Calliope* at dawn and at no cost to Sharpe. The two Indians had been eager to placate the Englishmen once they realized that Chase and Sharpe had no intention of telling the rest of the fleeced victims that Nana Rao still lived, and so the merchants had fed their unwanted guests, plied them with arrack, paid the money, sworn eternal friendship and bid them good night. Now Chase and Sharpe groped their way through the dark city.

‘God, this place stinks!’ Chase said.

‘You’ve not been here before?’ Sharpe asked, surprised.

‘I’ve been five months in India,’ Chase said, ‘but always at sea. Now I’m living ashore for a week, and it stinks. My God, how the place stinks!’

‘No more than London,’ Sharpe said, which was true, but here the smells were different. Instead of coal fumes there was bullock-dung smoke and the rich odours of spices and sewage. It was a sweet smell, ripe even, but not unpleasant, and Sharpe was thinking back to when he had first arrived and how he had recoiled from the smell that he now thought homely and even enticing. ‘I’ll miss it,’ he admitted. ‘I sometimes wish I wasn’t going back to England.’

‘Which ship are you on?’

‘The *Calliope*.’

Chase evidently found that amusing. ‘So what do you make of Peculiar?’

‘Peculiar?’ Sharpe asked.

‘Peculiar Cromwell, of course, the Captain.’ Chase looked at Sharpe. ‘Surely you’ve met him!’

‘I haven’t. Never heard of him.’

‘But the convoy must have arrived two months ago,’ Chase said.

‘It did.’

‘Then you should have made an effort to see Peculiar. That’s his real name, by the way, Peculiar Cromwell. Odd, eh? He was navy once, most of the East Indiamen captains were navy, but Peculiar resigned because he wanted to become rich. He also believed he should have been made admiral without spending tedious years as a mere captain. He’s an odd soul, but he sails a tidy ship, and a fast one. I can’t believe you didn’t make the effort to meet him.’

‘Why should I?’ Sharpe asked.

‘To make sure you get some privileges aboard, of course. Can I assume you’ll be travelling in steerage?’

‘I’m travelling cheap, if that’s what you mean,’ Sharpe said. He spoke bitterly, for though he had paid the lowest possible rate, his passage was still costing him one hundred and seven pounds and fifteen shillings. He had thought the army would pay for the voyage, but the army had refused, saying that Sharpe was accepting an invitation to join the 95th Rifles and if the 95th Rifles refused to pay his passage then damn them, damn their badly coloured coats, and damn Sharpe. So he had cut one of the precious diamonds from the seam of his red coat and paid for the voyage himself. He still had a king ransom in the precious stones that he had taken from the Tippoo Sultan’s body in a dank tunnel at Seringapatam, but he resented using the loot to pay the East India Company. Britain had sent Sharpe to India, and Britain, Sharpe reckoned, should fetch him back.

‘So the clever thing to have done, Sharpe,’ Chase said, ‘would have been to introduce yourself to Peculiar while he was living ashore and given the greedy bugger a present, because then he’d have assigned you to decent quarters. But if you haven’t crossed Peculiar’s palm with silver, Sharpe, he’ll like as not have you down in lower steerage with the rats. Main-deck steerage is much better and doesn’t cost a penny more, but the lower steerage is nothing but farts, vomit and misery all the way home.’ The two men had left the narrow alleys and were leading the barge crew down a street that was edged with sewage-filled ditches. It was a tinsmithing quarter and the forges were already burning bright as the sound of hammers rattled the night. Pale cows watched the sailors pass and dogs barked frantically, waking the homeless poor who huddled between the ditches and the house walls. ‘It’s a pity you’re sailing in convoy,’ Chase said.

‘Why, sir?’

‘Because a convoy goes at the speed of its slowest boat,’ Chase explained. ‘*Calliope* could make England in three months if she was allowed to fly, but she’ll have to limp. I wish I was sailing with you. I’d offer you passage myself as thanks for your rescue tonight, but alas, I am ghost-hunting.’

‘Ghost-hunting, sir?’

‘You’ve heard of the *Revenant*?’

‘No, sir.’

‘The ignorance of you soldiers,’ Chase said, amused. ‘The *Revenant*, my dear Sharpe, is a French seventy-four that is haunting the Indian Ocean. Hides herself in Mauritius, sallies out to snap up prizes, then scuttles back before we can catch her. I’m here to stifle her ardour, only before I can hunt her I have to scrape the bottom. My ship’s too slow after eight months at sea, so we scour off the barnacles to quicken her up.’

‘I wish you good fortune, sir,’ Sharpe said, then frowned. ‘But what’s that to do with ghosts?’ He usually did not like asking such questions. Sharpe had once marched in the ranks of a redcoat battalion, but he had been made into an officer and so found himself in a world where almost every man was educated except himself. He had become accustomed to allowing small mysteries to slide past him, but Sharpe decided he did not mind revealing his ignorance to a man as good-natured as Chase.

‘*Revenant* is the Frog word for ghost,’ Chase said. ‘Noun, masculine. I had a tutor for these things who flogged the language into me and I’d like to flog it out of him now.’ In a nearby yard a cockerel crowed and Chase glanced up at the sky. ‘Almost dawn,’ he said. ‘Perhaps you’ll permit me to give you breakfast? Then my lads will take you out to the *Calliope*. God speed your way home, eh?’

Home. It seemed an odd word to Sharpe, for he did not have a home other than the army and he had not seen England in six years. Six years! Yet he felt no pang of delight at the prospect of sailing to England. He did not think of it as home, indeed he had no idea where home was, but wherever that elusive place lay, he was going there.

Chase was living ashore while his ship was cleaned of the weed. ‘We tip her over, scrape her copper-sheathed bum clean when the tide’s low, and float her off,’ he explained as servants brought coffee, boiled eggs, bread rolls, ham, cold chicken and a basket of mangoes. ‘Bum-scrubbing is a damned nuisance. All the guns have to be shipped and half the contents of the hold dragged out, but she’ll sail like a beauty when it’s done. Have more eggs than that, Sharpe! You must be hungry. I am. Like the house? It belongs to my wife’s first cousin. He’s a trader here, though right now he’s up in the hills doing whatever traders do when they’re making themselves rich. It was his steward who alerted me to Nana Rao’s tricks. Sit down, Sharpe, sit down. Eat.’

They took their breakfast in the shade of a wide verandah that looked out on a small garden, a road and the sea. Chase was gracious, generous and apparently oblivious of the vast gulf that existed between a mere ensign, the lowest of the army’s commissioned ranks, and a post captain who was officially the equivalent of an army colonel, though on board his own ship such a man outranked the very powers of heaven. Sharpe had been conscious of that wide gulf at first, but it had gradually dawned on him that Joel Chase was genuinely good-natured and Sharpe had warmed to the naval officer whose gratitude was unstinting and heartfelt. ‘Do you realize that bugger Panjit really could have had me in front of the magistrates?’ Chase enquired. ‘Dear God, Sharpe, that would have been a pickle! And Nana Rao would have vanished, and who’d have believed me if I said the dead had come back to life? Do have more ham, please. It would have meant an enquiry at the very least, and almost certainly a court martial. I’d have been damned lucky to have survived with my command intact. But how was I to know he had a private army?’

‘We came out of it all right, sir.’

‘Thanks to you, Sharpe, thanks to you.’ Chase shuddered. ‘My father always said I’d be dead before I was thirty, and I’ve beaten that by five years, but one day I’ll jump into trouble and there’ll be no ensign to pull me out.’ He patted the bag which held the money he had taken from Nana Rao and Panjit. ‘And between you and me, Sharpe, this cash is a windfall. A windfall! D’you think we could grow mangoes in England?’

‘I don’t know, sir.’

‘I shall try. Plant a couple in a warm spot of the garden and who knows?’ Chase poured coffee and stretched out his long legs. He was curious why Sharpe, a man in his late twenties, should only be an ensign, but he made the enquiry with an exquisite tact and once he discovered that Sharpe had been promoted from the ranks he was genuine in his admiration. ‘I once had a captain who’d come up through the hawse-hole,’ he told Sharpe, ‘and he was damned good! Knew his business. Understood what went on in the dark places where most captains dare not look. I reckon the army’s lucky in you, Sharpe.’

‘I’m not sure they think so, sir.’

‘I shall whisper in some ears, Sharpe, though if I don’t catch the *Revenant* there’ll be precious few who’ll listen to me.’

‘You’ll catch her, sir.’

‘I pray so, but she’s a fast beast. Fast and slippery. All French ships are. God knows, the buggers can sail them, but they do know how to build ’em. French ships are like French women, Sharpe. Beautiful and fast, but hopelessly manned. Have some mustard.’ Chase pushed the jar across the table, then petted a skinny black kitten as he stared past the palm trees towards the sea. ‘I do like coffee,’ he said, then pointed out to sea. ‘There’s the *Calliope*.’

Sharpe looked, but all he could see was a mass of shipping far out in the harbour beyond the shallow water which was busy with scores of bumboats, launches and fishing craft.

‘She’s the one drying her topsails,’ Chase said, and Sharpe saw that one of the far ships had hung out her topmost sails, but at this distance she looked like the other dozen East Indiamen that would sail home together to protect themselves against the privateers who haunted the Indian Ocean. From the shore they looked like naval ships, for their hulls were banded black and white to suggest that massive broadsides were concealed behind closed gunports, but the ruse would not mislead any privateer. Those ships, their hulls stuffed with the riches of India, were the greatest prizes any corsair or French naval captain could wish to take. If a man wanted to live and die rich then all he needed to do was capture an Indiaman, which is why the great ships sailed in convoy.

‘Where’s your ship, sir?’ Sharpe asked.

‘Can’t see her from here.’ Chase said. ‘She’s careened on a mudbank on the far side of Elephanta Island.’

‘Careened?’

‘Tipped on her side so we can polish her bum.’

‘What’s she called?’

Chase looked abashed. ‘*Pucelle*,’ he said.

‘*Pucelle*? Sounds French.’

‘It is French, Sharpe. It means a virgin.’ Chase pretended to be offended as Sharpe laughed. ‘You’ve heard of *la Pucelle d’Orléans*?’ he asked.

‘No, sir.’

‘The maid of Orleans, Sharpe, was Joan of Arc, and the ship was named for her and I just trust she doesn’t end up like Joan, burned to a crisp.’

‘But why would you name a boat for a Frenchwoman, sir?’ Sharpe asked.

‘We didn’t. The Frogs did. She was a French boat till Nelson took her at the Nile. If you capture a ship, Sharpe, you keep the old name unless it’s really obnoxious. Nelson took the *Franklin* at the Nile, an eighty-gun thing of great beauty, but the navy will be damned if it has a ship named after a traitorous bloody Yankee so we call her the *Canopus* now. But my ship kept her name, and she’s a lovely beast. Lovely and fast. Oh my God, no.’ He sat up straight, staring towards the road. ‘Oh, God no!’ These last words were prompted by the sight of an open carriage that had slowed and now stopped just beyond the garden gate. Chase, who had been genial until this moment, suddenly looked bitter.

A man and a woman were seated in the carriage which was driven by an Indian dressed in yellow and black livery. Two native footmen, arrayed in the same livery, now hurried to open the carriage door and unfold the steps, allowing the man, who was dressed in a white linen jacket, to step down to the pavement. A beggar immediately swung on short crutches and calloused stumps towards the carriage but one of the footmen fended the man off with a sharp kick and the coachman completed the rout with his whip. The white-jacketed man was middle-aged and had a face that reminded Sharpe of Sir Arthur Wellesley. Maybe it was the prominent nose, or perhaps it was the cold and haughty look the man wore. Or perhaps it was just that everything about him, from his carriage to the liveried servants spoke of privilege.

‘Lord William Hale,’ Chase said, investing every syllable with dislike.

‘Never heard of him.’

‘He’s on the Board of Control,’ Chase explained, then saw Sharpe’s raised eyebrow. ‘Six men, Sharpe, who are appointed by the government to make certain that the East India Company doesn’t do anything foolish. Or rather that, if it does, no blame attaches itself to the government.’ He looked sourly at Lord William who had paused to speak with the woman in the carriage. ‘That’s his wife and I’ve just brought the two of them from Calcutta so they could go home on the same convoy as yourself. You should pray they aren’t on the *Calliope*.’

Lord William was grey-haired and Sharpe assumed his wife would also be middle-aged, but when she lowered her white parasol Sharpe had a clear view of her ladyship and the breath was checked in his

throat. She was much younger than Lord William, and her pale, slender face had a haunting beauty, almost a sadness, that struck Sharpe with the force of a bullet. He stared at her, entranced by her.

Chase smiled at Sharpe's smitten expression. 'She was born Grace de Laverre Gould, third daughter of the Earl of Selby. She's twenty years younger than her husband, but just as cold.'

Sharpe could not take his eyes from her ladyship, for she was truly beautiful; breathtakingly, aching, untouchably beautiful. Her face was pale as ivory, sharp-shadowed as she leaned towards her husband and framed by heavy loops of black hair that were pinned to appear artless, but which even Sharpe could tell must have taken her maid an age to arrange. She did not smile, but just gazed solemnly into her husband's face. 'She looks sad rather than cold,' Sharpe said.

Chase mocked the wistfulness in Sharpe's voice. 'What does she have to be sad about? Her beauty is her fortune, Sharpe, and her husband is as rich as he is ambitious as he is clever. She's on her way to being wife of the Prime Minister so long as Lord William doesn't put a foot wrong and, believe me, I take steps as lightly as a cat.'

Lord William concluded the conversation with his wife, then gestured for a footman to open Chase's gate. 'You might have taken a house with a carriage drive,' he admonished the naval captain as he strode up the short path. 'It's devilish annoying being pestered by beggars every time one makes a call.'

'Alas, my lord, we sailors are so inept on land. I cannot entice your wife to take some coffee?'

'Her ladyship is not well.' Lord William ran up the verandah steps, gave Sharpe a careless glance, then held a hand towards Chase as if expecting to be given something. He must have noted the blood that was still crusted in Chase's fair hair, but he made no mention of it. 'Well, Chase, can you settle?'

Chase reluctantly found the big leather bag which held the coins he had taken from Nana Rao and counted out a substantial portion that he gave to Lord William. His lordship shuddered at the thought of handling the grubby currency, but forced himself to take the money and pour it into his coat's tail pockets. 'Your note,' he said, and handed Chase a scrap of paper. 'You haven't received new orders, suppose?'

'Alas no, my lord. We are still ordered to find the *Revenant*.'

'I was hoping you'd be going home instead. It is crucial I reach London quickly.' He frowned, then, without another word, turned away.

'You did not give me a chance, my lord,' Chase said, 'to introduce my particular friend, Mister Sharpe.'

Lord William bestowed a second brief look at Sharpe and his lordship saw nothing to contradict his first opinion that the ensign was penniless and powerless, for he merely looked, calculated and glanced away without offering any acknowledgement, but in that brief meeting of eyes Sharpe had received an impression of force, confidence and arrogance. Lord William was a man who had more than his share of power, he wanted more and he would not waste time on those who had nothing to give him.

'Mister Sharpe served under Sir Arthur Wellesley,' Chase said.

'As did many thousands of others, I believe,' Lord William said carelessly, then frowned. 'There is a service you can do me, Chase.'

'I am, of course, entirely at your lordship's convenience,' Chase said politely.

'You have a barge and a crew?'

'All captains do,' Chase said.

'We must reach the *Calliope*. You could take us there?'

'Alas, my lord, I have promised Mr Sharpe the barge,' Chase said, 'but I am sure he will gladly share it with you. He too is bound for the *Calliope*.'

'I'd be happy to help,' Sharpe said.

Lord William's expression suggested that Sharpe's help was the last thing he would ever require. 'We shall let our present arrangements stand,' he told Chase and, wasting no more time, stalked away.

Chase laughed softly. 'Share a boat with you, Sharpe? He'd rather sprout wings and fly.'

'I wouldn't mind sharing a boat with her,' Sharpe said, staring at the Lady Grace who was gazing fixedly ahead as a score of beggars whimpered a safe distance from the coachman's stinging whip.

'My dear Sharpe,' Chase said, watching the carriage draw away, 'you will be sharing that lady's company for at least four months and I doubt you will even see her. Lord William claims she suffers from delicate nerves and is averse to company. I had her on board the *Pucelle* for near a month and might have seen her twice. She sticks to her cabin, or else walks the poop at night when no one can accost her, and I will wager you a month of your wages to a year of mine that she will not even know your name by the time you reach England.'

Sharpe smiled. 'I don't wager.'

'Good for you,' Chase said. 'Like a fool I played too much whist in the last month. I promised my wife I wouldn't plunge heavily, and God punished me for it. Dear me, what a fool I am! I played almost every night between Calcutta and here and lost a hundred and seventy guineas to that rich bastard. My own fault,' he admitted ruefully, 'and I won't succumb again.' He reached out to touch the wood of the table top as if he did not trust his own resolve. 'But cash is always short, isn't it? I'll just have to capture the *Revenant* and earn myself some decent prize money.'

'You'll manage that,' Sharpe said comfortingly.

Chase smiled. 'I do hope so. I fervently hope so, but once in a while, Sharpe, the damned Frogs throw up a real seaman and the *Revenant* is in the hands of Capitaine Louis Montmorin. He's good, his men are good and his ship is good.'

'But you're British,' Sharpe said, 'so you must be better.'

‘Amen to that,’ Chase said, ‘amen.’ He wrote his English address on a scrap of paper, then insisted on walking Sharpe to the fort where the ensign collected his pack, after which the two men went past the still smoking ruins of Nana Rao’s warehouse to the quay where Chase’s barge waited. The naval captain shook Sharpe’s hand. ‘I remain entirely in your debt, Sharpe.’

‘You’re making too much of it, sir.’

Chase shook his head. ‘I was a fool last night, and if it hadn’t been for you I’d be looking an even greater fool this morning. I am beholden to you, Sharpe, and shall not forget it. We’ll meet again, I’m sure of it.’

‘I hope so, sir,’ Sharpe said, then went down the greasy steps. It was time to go home.

The crew of Captain Chase’s barge were still bruised and bloodied, but in good spirits after their night’s adventure. Hopper, the bosun who had fought so stoutly, helped Sharpe down into the barge which was painted dazzling white with a red stripe around its gunwales to match the red bands painted on the white-shafted oars. ‘You had breakfast, sir?’ Hopper asked.

‘Captain Chase looked after me.’

‘He’s a good man,’ Hopper said warmly. ‘None better.’

‘You’ve known him long?’ Sharpe asked.

‘Since he was as old as Mister Collier,’ the bosun said, jerking his head at a small boy, perhaps twelve years old, who sat beside him in the stern. Mister Collier was a midshipman and, once Sharpe had been safely delivered to the *Calliope*, he had the responsibility of fetching the liquor for Captain Chase’s private stores. ‘Mister Collier,’ the bosun went on, ‘is in charge of this boat, ain’t that so, sir?’

‘I am,’ Collier said in a still unbroken voice. He held a hand to Sharpe. ‘Harry Collier, sir.’ He had no need to call Sharpe ‘sir’, for a midshipman’s rank was the equivalent of an ensign, but Sharpe was much older and, besides, a friend of the captain.

‘Mister Collier is in charge,’ Hopper said again, ‘so if he orders us to attack a ship, sir, attack we shall. Obey him to the death, ain’t that right, Mister Collier, sir?’

‘If you say so, Mister Hopper.’

The crew were grinning. ‘Wipe those smirks off your uglies!’ Hopper shouted, then spat a stream of tobacco juice over the gunwale. His two upper front teeth were missing, which made spitting the juice far easier. ‘Yes, sir,’ he went on, looking at Sharpe, ‘I’ve served with Captain Chase since he was a nipper. I was with him when he captured the *Bouvines*.’

‘The *Bouvines*?’

‘A Frog frigate, sir, thirty-two guns, and we was in the *Spritely*, twenty-eight, and it took us twenty-two minutes first gun to last and there was blood leaking out of her scuppers when we’d finished with

her. And one day, Mister Collier, sir' – he looked sternly down at the small boy whose face was almost entirely hidden by a cocked hat that was much too big for him – 'you'll be in charge of one of His Majesty's ships and it'll be your duty and privilege to knock a Froggy witless.'

'I hope so, Mister Hopper.'

The barge was travelling smoothly through water that was filthy with floating rubbish, palm fronds and the bloated corpses of rats, dogs and cats. A score of other boats, some of them heaped with baggage, were also rowing out to the waiting convoy. The luckiest passengers were those whose ships were moored at the Company's docks, but those docks were not large enough for every merchantman that would leave for home and so most of the travellers were being ferried out to the anchorage. 'I seen your goods loaded on a native boat, sir,' Hopper said, 'and told the bastards there'd be eight kinds of hell to pay if they weren't delivered shipshape. They do like their games, sir, they do.' He squinted ahead and laughed. 'See? One of the buggers is up to no good right now.'

'No good?' Sharpe asked. All he could see were two small boats that were dead in the water. One of the two boats was piled with leather luggage while the other held three passengers.

'Buggers say it'll cost a rupee to reach the ship, sir,' Hopper explained, 'then they get halfway and triple the price, and if they don't get it they'll row back to the quay. Our boys do the same thing when they pick passengers up at Deal to row them out to the Downs.' He tugged on a rudder line to skirt the two boats.

Sharpe saw that Lord William Hale, his wife and a young man were the passengers in the leading boat while two servants and a pile of luggage were crammed into the second. Lord William was speaking angrily with a grinning Indian who seemed unmoved by his lordship's ire.

'His bloody lordship will just have to pay up,' Hopper said, 'or else get rowed ashore.'

'Take us close,' Sharpe said.

Hopper glanced at him, then shrugged as if to suggest that it was none of his business if Sharpe wanted to make a fool of himself. 'Ease oars!' he shouted and the crew lifted their dripping blades from the water to let the barge glide on until it was within a few feet of the stranded boats. 'Back water!' Hopper snapped and the oars dipped again to bring the elegant boat to a stop.

Sharpe stood. 'You have trouble, my lord?'

Lord William frowned at Sharpe, but said nothing, while his wife managed to suggest that an even more noxious stench than the others in the harbour had somehow approached her delicate nostrils. She just stared sternwards, ignoring the Indian crew, her husband and Sharpe. It was the third passenger, the young man who was dressed as soberly as a curate, who stood and explained their trouble. 'They won't move,' he complained.

'Be quiet, Braithwaite, be quiet and sit down,' his lordship snapped, disdaining Sharpe's assistance.

Not that Sharpe wanted to help Lord William, but his wife was another matter and it was for her benefit that Sharpe drew his pistol and cocked the flint. 'Row on!' he ordered the Indian, who

answered by spitting overboard.

‘What in God’s name are you doing?’ Lord William at last acknowledged Sharpe. ‘My wife’s aboard. Have a care with that gun, you fool! Who the devil are you?’

‘We were introduced not an hour ago, my lord,’ Sharpe said. ‘Richard Sharpe is the name.’ He fired and the pistol ball splintered a timber of the boat just on the water line between the recalcitrant skipper and his passengers. Lady Grace put a hand to her mouth in alarm, but the ball had harmed no one, merely holed the boat so that the Indian had to stoop to plug the damage with a thumb. Sharpe began to reload. ‘Row on, you bastard!’ he shouted.

The Indian glanced behind as if judging the distance to the shore, but Hopper ordered his crew to back water and the barge slowly moved behind the two boats, cutting them off from land. Lord William seemed too astonished to speak, but just stared indignantly as Sharpe rammed a second bullet down the short barrel.

The Indian did not want another ball cracking into his boat and so he suddenly sat and shouted at his men who began pulling hard on their oars. Hopper nodded approvingly. ‘Twixt wind and water, sir. Captain Chase would be proud of you.’

‘Between wind and water?’ Sharpe asked.

‘You holed the bastard on the water line, sir. It’ll sink him if he doesn’t keep it stopped up.’

Sharpe gazed at her ladyship who, at last, turned to look at her rescuer. She had huge eyes, and perhaps they were the feature that made her seem so sad, but Sharpe was still astonished by her beauty and he could not resist giving her a wink. She looked quickly away. ‘She’ll remember my name now,’ he said.

‘Is that why you did it?’ Hopper asked, then laughed when Sharpe did not answer.

Lord William’s boat drew up to the *Calliope* first. The servants, who were in the second boat, were expected to scramble up the ship’s side as best they could while seamen hauled the baggage up in nets but Lord William and his wife stepped from their boat onto a floating platform from which they climbed a gangway to the ship’s waist. Sharpe, waiting his turn, could smell bilge water, salt and tar. A stream of dirty water emerged from a hole high up in the hull. ‘Pumping his bottoms, sir,’ Hopper said.

‘You mean she leaks?’

‘All ships leak, sir. Nature of ships, sir.’

Another launch had gone alongside the *Calliope*’s bows and sailors were hoisting nets filled with struggling goats and crates of protesting hens. ‘Milk and eggs,’ Hopper said cheerfully, then barked at his crew to lay to their oars so Sharpe could be put alongside. ‘I wish you a fast, safe voyage, sir,’ the bosun said. ‘Back to old England, eh?’

‘Back to England,’ Sharpe said, and watched as the oars were raised straight up as Hopper used the last of the barge’s momentum to lay her sweetly alongside the floating platform. Sharpe gave Hopper

a coin, touched his hat to Mister Collier, thanked the boat's crew and stepped up onto the platform from where he climbed to the main deck past an open gunport in which a polished cannon muzzle showed.

An officer waited just inside the entry port. 'Your name?' he asked peremptorily.

'Richard Sharpe.'

The officer peered at a list. 'Your baggage is already aboard, Mister Sharpe, and this is for you.' He took a folded sheet of paper from a pocket and gave it to Sharpe. 'Rules of the ship. Read, mark, learn and explicitly obey. Your action station is gun number five.'

'My what?' Sharpe asked.

'Every male passenger is expected to help defend the ship, Mister Sharpe. Gun number five.' The officer waved across the deck which was so heaped with baggage that none of the guns on the farther side could be seen. 'Mister Binns!'

A very young officer hurried through the piled baggage. 'Sir?'

'Show Mister Sharpe to the lower-deck steerage. One of the seven by sixes, Mister Binns, seven by six. Mallet and nails, look lively, now!'

'This way, sir,' Binns said to Sharpe, darting aft. 'I've got the mallet and nails, sir.'

'The what?' Sharpe asked.

'Mallet and nails, sir, so you can nail your furniture to the deck. We don't want it sliding topsy-turvy if we gets rough weather, sir, which we shouldn't, sir, not till we reach the Madagascar Straits and it can be lumpy there, sir, very lumpy.' Binns hurried on, vanishing down a dark companionway like a rabbit down its burrow.

Sharpe followed, but before he reached the companionway he was accosted by Lord William Hale who stepped from behind a pile of boxes. The young man in the sepulchral clothes stood behind his lordship. 'Your name?' Hale demanded.

Sharpe bristled. The sensible course was to knuckle under, for Hale was evidently a formidable man in London, but Sharpe had acquired an acute dislike of his lordship. 'The same as it was ten minutes ago,' he answered curtly.

Lord William looked into Sharpe's face which was sunburned, hard and slashed by the wicked scar. 'You are impertinent,' Lord William said, 'and I do not abide impertinence.' He glanced at the grubby white facings on Sharpe's jacket. 'The 74th? I am acquainted with Colonel Wallace and I shall let him know of your insubordination.' So far Lord William had not raised his voice which was chilling enough anyway, but now a note of indignation did creep in. 'You could have killed me with that pistol!'

'Killed you?' Sharpe asked. 'No, I couldn't. I wasn't aiming at you.'

‘You will write to Colonel Wallace now, Braithwaite,’ Lord William said to the young man in the black clothes, ‘and make sure the letter goes ashore before we sail.’

‘Of course, my lord. At once, my lord,’ Braithwaite said. He was evidently Lord William’s secretary and he shot Sharpe a look of pitying condescension, suggesting that the ensign had come up against forces far too strong for him.

Lord William stepped aside, allowing Sharpe to catch up with the young Binns who had been watching the confrontation from the companionway.

Sharpe was not worried by Lord William’s threat. His lordship could write a thousand letters to Colonel Wallace and much good it would do him for Sharpe was no longer in the 74th. He wore the uniform for he had no other clothes to wear, but once he was back in Britain he would join the 95th with its odd new uniform of a green jacket. He did not like the idea of wearing green. He had always worn red.

Binns waited at the foot of the companionway. ‘Lower deck, sir,’ he said, then pushed through a canvas screen into a dark, humid and foul-smelling space. ‘This is steerage, sir.’

‘Why’s it called steerage?’

‘They used to steer the boats from here, sir, in the old days, before there was wheels. Gangs of men hauling on ropes, sir, must have been hell.’ It still looked hellish. A few lanterns guttered, struggling against the gloom in which a score of sailors were nailing up canvas screens to divide the foetid space into a maze of small rooms. ‘One seven by six,’ Binns shouted, and a sailor gestured to the starboard side where the screens were already in place. ‘Take your pick, sir,’ Binns said, ‘as you’re one of the first gentlemen aboard, but if you wants my advice I’d be as near aft as you can go, and it’s best not to share with a gun, sir.’ He gestured at an eighteen-pounder cannon that half filled one cabin. The weapon was lashed to the deck and pointed at a closed gunport. Binns ushered Sharpe into the empty cubicle next door where he dropped a linen bag on the floor. ‘That’s a mallet and nails, sir, and as soon as your dunnage is delivered you can secure everything shipshape.’ He tied back one side of the canvas box, thus allowing a little dim lantern light to seep into the cabin, then tapped the deck with his foot. ‘All the money’s down below, sir,’ he said cheerfully.

‘The money?’ Sharpe asked.

‘A cargo of indigo, sir, saltpetre, silver bars and silk. Enough to make us all rich a thousand times over.’ He grinned, then left Sharpe to contemplate the tiny space that would be his home for the next four months.

The rear wall of his cabin was the curving side of the ship. The ceiling was low, and crossed by heavy black beams in which some hooks rusted. The floor was the deck, thickly scarred with old nail-holes where previous passengers had hammered down their chests. The remaining three walls were made of dirty canvas, but it was a heaven compared to the accommodation he had been given when he had sailed from Britain to India. Then, a private, he had been content with a hammock and fourteen inches of space in which to swing it.

He squatted in the cabin’s entrance, where a lantern offered some light, and unfolded the ship’s rules

They were printed, though some additions had been inked in afterwards. He was forbidden to go on the quarterdeck unless invited by the ship's captain or the officer of the watch, and to that prohibition someone had added the warning that, even if he was so invited, he was never to come between the captain and the weather rail. Sharpe did not even know what the weather rail was. Upon going on deck he was required to touch his hat to the quarterdeck, even if the captain was not in sight. Gambling was forbidden. The purser would hold divine service, weather permitting, each Sunday and passengers were required to attend unless excused by the ship's surgeon. Breakfast would be supplied at eight o'clock in the morning, dinner at midday, tea would be served at four o'clock and supper at eight. All male passengers were required to acquaint themselves with the quarter bill which allocated their action stations. No unshielded flames were to be lit below decks and all lanterns must be extinguished by nine o'clock at night. Smoking was forbidden because of the danger of fire, and passengers who chewed tobacco were to use the spittoons. Spitting on the deck was strictly forbidden. No passenger was to climb the rigging without permission of a ship's officer. Passengers in steerage, like Sharpe, were prohibited from entering the great cabin or the roundhouse unless invited. There would be no foul language aboard.

'Christ all-bloody-mighty,' a sailor grumbled as he struggled with Sharpe's barrel of arrack. Two other seamen were carrying his bed and another pair were bringing his chest. 'Got any rope, sir?' one of them asked.

'No.'

The sailor produced a length of hemp rope and showed Sharpe how to secure the wooden chest and the heavy hogshead which virtually filled the small space. Sharpe gave the sailor a rupee as thanks, then hammered the nails through the chest's corners into the deck and roped the barrel to one of the beams on the ship's side. The bed was a wooden cot, the size of a coffin, which he hung from the hooks in the beams. He suspended the bucket alongside. 'It's best to piss through the after gunport when it ain't underwater,' the sailor had told him, 'and save your bucket for solids, if you sees my meaning, sir. O go on deck and use the heads which are forrard, but not in heavy seas, sir, for you're likely to go overboard and no one will be any the wiser. Specially at night, sir. Many a good man has gone to see the angels through being caught short on a bad night.'

A woman was protesting loudly at the accommodation on the deck's far side, while her husband was meekly asserting that they could afford no better. Two small children, hot and sweating, were bawling. A dog barked until it was silenced by a kick. Dust sifted from the overhead beam as a passenger in the main-deck steerage hammered in a staple or a nail. Goats bleated. The bilge pump clattered and sucked and gulped and spat filthy water into the sea.

Sharpe sat on the chest. There was just enough light for him to read the paper that Captain Chase had pressed on him. It was a letter of introduction to Chase's wife at the captain's house near Topsham in Devon. 'Lord knows when I'll see Florence and the children again,' Chase had said, 'but if you're in the west country, Sharpe, do go and introduce yourself. The house ain't much. A dozen acres, run-down stable block and a couple of barns, but Florence will make you welcome.'

No one else would, Sharpe thought, for no one waited for him in England; no hearth would blaze for his return and no family would greet him. But it was home. And, like it or not, he was going there.

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