THE WORLDWIDE BESTSELLER

WILBUR SMITH

GOLDEN LION

WITH GILES KRISTIAN

Wilbur Smith
Kristian Kristian
Golden Lion

Аннотация

Worldwide bestselling author Wilbur Smith will take you on an incredible journey on the thrashing seas off the coast of Africa in this glorious return to the series that made him who he is: The Courtney series.East African Coast, 1670.In a time of brave and brutal adventure, one man will journey across land and sea to pursue his greatest enemy …The Golden Bough, captained by Henry 'Hal' Courtney, is running south from Ethiopia to Zanzibar. Below deck, both his crew and his lover, the fearless warrior Judith Nazet, sleep. As the moon glints through clouds, Hal sights a ship passing close by. Although there is an uneasy truce between the warring English and Dutch, Hal scents danger. When the Bough is boarded, the crew must go hand to hand to defend their ship and their lives.But soon Hal will face even graver danger, as he discovers his mortal enemy still lives and is hell-bent on revenge. he must pursue his nemesis across desert savannah, through the seedy underbelly of Zanzibar's slave markets and shark-infested waters, imperilling his own life at every turn. But it will take more than a slave's shackles to hold Hal Courtney…A thrilling blend of extraordinary drama and epic storytelling, Golden

Lion sees Wilbur Smith return in triumphant form to the adventures of his beloved and bestselling Courtney family.

Содержание

GOLDEN LION

Wilbur Smith
with Giles Kristian

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Dedication

I dedicate this book to my wife, Niso.

From the day we first met she has been a constant and powerful inspiration to me, urging me on when I falter and cheering me when I succeed. I truly do not know what I would do if she were not by my side. I hope and pray that day never comes.

I love and adore you, my best girl, words cannot express how much.

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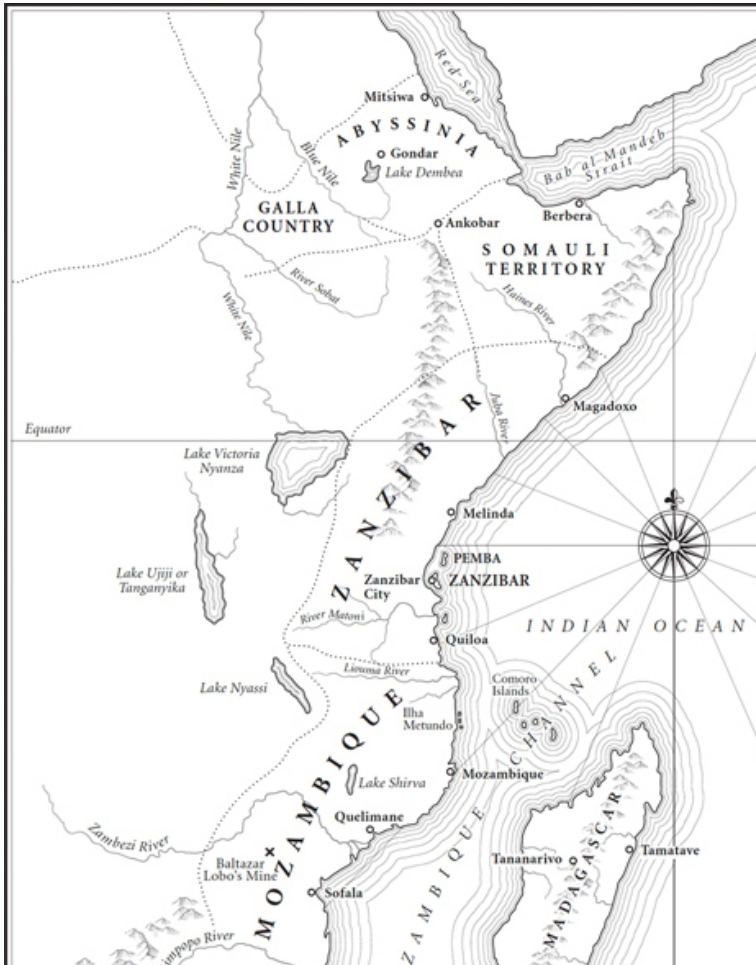
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 They were no longer men. They were the detritus of war cast up by the Indian Ocean upon the red sands of the African continent. Most of their bodies were torn by grape shot or hacked by the keen-edged weapons of their adversaries. Others had drowned and the gas in their swollen bellies as they rotted had lifted them to the surface again like cork bungs. There the carrion-eating seabirds and the sharks had feasted upon them. Finally a very few of them had been washed through the breaking surf onto the beaches, where the human predators waited to pick them over once again.

Two small boys ran ahead of their mother and grandmother along the water's edge, squealing with excitement every time they discovered anything deposited upon it by the sea, no matter how trifling and insignificant.

'There is another one,' cried the eldest in Somali. He pointed ahead to where a ship's wooden spar was washed ashore, trailing a long sheet of torn canvas. It was attached to the body of a white man who had lashed himself to the spar with a twist of hempen rope whilst he still lived. Now the two boys stood over his carcass laughing.

'The birds have pecked out one of his eyes,' shouted the eldest boy.

'And the fish have bitten off one of his arms,' his little brother gloated, not to be outdone. A shred of torn sail canvas, obviously applied by the man while still alive, was knotted around the stump of his amputated arm as a tourniquet, and his clothing had been scorched by fire. It hung off his gaunt frame in tatters.

'Look!' screeched the elder boy. 'Look at the buckle on his sword-belt. It must be made of gold or silver. We will be rich.' He knelt beside the body and tugged at the metal buckle. At which the dead man groaned hollowly and rolled his head to glare at the boys with his one good eye. Both children screamed with horror, and the elder released his grip on the sword-belt and sprang to his feet. They rushed back to their mother and clung to her skirts whimpering and whining with terror.

The mother ran to examine the booty, dragging the children along with her on her skirts. The grandmother hobbled along behind them. Her daughter dropped to her knees beside the body and she slapped the man's face hard. He groaned again.

'Zinky is right. The Ferengi is still alive.' She reached into the pocket of her skirt and pulled out the sickle with which she cut the grass to feed her chickens.

'What are you going to do?' Her mother panted from her run.

'I am going to cut his throat, of course.' The woman took hold of a handful of the man's sodden hair and pulled his head back to expose his throat. 'We don't want to have to argue with him about who owns the belt and buckle.' She laid the curved blade against the side of his neck, and the man coughed weakly but did

not resist.

'Wait!' ordered the grandmother sharply. 'I have seen that buckle before when I was in Djibouti with your father. This man is a great Ferengi Lord. He owns his own ship. He has great wealth. If we save his life he will be grateful and he might give us a gold coin, or even two!'

Her daughter looked dubious, and considered the proposition for a while, still holding the sickle blade to his throat. 'What about his beautiful metal buckle of great value?'

'We will keep it, naturally.' Her mother was exasperated with her daughter's lack of acuity. 'If he ever asks for it we will tell him we have never seen it.' Her daughter removed the sickle blade from the man's throat.

'So what do we do with him now?'

'We take him to the doctor in the village.'

'How?'

'We lay him on his back on this strip of lembu.' She indicated the canvas strip wrapped around the spar. 'And you and I pull him.' She turned to regard her grandchildren sternly. 'The boys will help us, of course.'

In his head the man was screaming. But his vocal cords were so parched and cracked and ravaged by smoke and flame that the only sound that emerged was a reedy, tremulous wheezing, as pitiful as the air escaping from a pair of broken bellows.

There had been a time, barely a month or two ago, when he had set his face to the storm and grinned with savage glee as

the wind and sea-spray hurled themselves against his weather-beaten countenance. Yet now the warm, jasmine-scented breeze that barely wafted into the room through the open windows felt to him like thorns being dragged across the pitiful tatters of his skin. He was consumed by pain, scourged by it, and though the doctor lifting the bandages from his face was doing his best to work with the most consummate delicacy, each additional inch of exposure stabbed him with another needle-sharp stiletto of pure, concentrated agony. And with every infliction came a new, unwanted memory of battle: the searing heat and brightness of the flame; the deafening roar of gunfire and burning wood; the crushing impact of timber against his bones.

'I am sorry, but there is nothing else to be done,' the doctor murmured, though the man to whom he spoke did not understand much Arabic. The doctor's beard was thin and silvery and there were deeply lined, sallow pouches beneath his eyes. He had practised his craft for the best part of fifty years and acquired an air of wisdom and venerability that calmed and reassured most of the patients in his care. But this man was different. His injuries were so severe that he should not be alive at all, let alone sitting virtually upright in bed. His one arm had been amputated, only Allah the merciful knew how. His ribcage on that same side of his body resembled the side of a barrel that had been stove in by a battleaxe. Much of his skin was still scorched and blistered and the scent of the flowers that grew in such profusion beneath the open window was lost in the roast-pork odour of burned flesh

and the sickening stench of pus and putrefaction that his body now exuded.

The fire had claimed his extremities. Two of the fingers on his remaining hand had been reduced to stumps of blackened bone that the doctor had also sawn off, along with six of the man's ten toes. He had lost his left eye, pecked out by sea vultures. The lid of the other eye had all but burnt away so that he now stared out at the world with a cold, unblinking intensity. But vision was not the worst of his losses; the patient's manhood had been reduced to little more than a charred stump of shiny, livid scar tissue. When – or more likely if – he ever rose from his sickbed, he would have to squat like a woman to urinate. If he wished to satisfy a lover, the only means available to him would be his mouth, but the chances of anyone being willing to let this particular maw anywhere near her body, even if being paid to do so, were very remote indeed.

It could only be by the will of God that the man had survived. The doctor sighed to himself and shook his head as he regarded the devastation revealed when the bandages were unwound. No, such an atrocity could not possibly be the work of Allah, the almighty and most merciful. This must be the handiwork of Shaitan, the devil himself, and the monster before him was surely no better than a fiend in human form.

It would be the matter of a moment for the doctor to snuff out this satanic being that had once been a man, and by so doing prevent the horrors that it would surely inflict if left free to roam

the world. His medicine contained a sweet, syrupy tincture that would dull the pain by which the man was plainly wracked before sending him to sleep and then, with the softness of a woman's touch, stopping his heart for ever. But the Maharajah Sadiq Khan Jahan himself had sent word from Ethiopia commanding that this man of all men should be taken to the maharajah's personal residence in Zanzibar and there be treated with particular care.

It was surely, Jahan had observed, an act of divine providence that anyone had survived a burning by fire, the amputation of one arm, the loss of one eye, drowning in water and a roasting by the sun in the hours or days before he had been found by local children, cast up on the beach.

His patient's survival, the doctor was therefore informed, would be rewarded with unbounded generosity, but his death would be punished with correspondingly great severity. There had been many times in his long career when the doctor had discreetly put suffering patients out of their misery, but this was most assuredly not one of them. The man would live. The doctor would make absolutely certain of that.

The man could not so much see as sense a glimmer of light, and with every orbit of the doctor's hand around his head, and every layer of bandage that was removed, the light grew less dim. Now he became aware that the glow seemed to be reaching him through his right eye only. The left one was blind but he could still feel its presence as it fell prey to the most damnable itching sensation. He tried to blink, but only his right eyelid responded.

He raised his left hand to rub his eye, but his hand was not there. He had, for a second, forgotten that his left arm was long gone. Reminded of it, he was conscious that the stump was also itching. He raised his right arm, but his hand was caught in a strong, dry, bony grip and he heard the doctor's voice again. He could not understand a word of what was said, but the general meaning was clear enough: don't even think about it.

He felt a cool compress being held to his eyes, soothing the itching somewhat. As it was removed, slowly, slowly his vision returned to him. He saw a window and beyond it the blue of the sky. An elderly Arab in white robes and a turban was bending over him, unwinding the bandage with one hand and gathering it with the other. Two hands, ten fingers: how strange to look upon them with such envy.

There was someone else in the room, a much younger man standing beyond the doctor. He had the look of the East Indies in the delicacy of his face and the tint of his skin, but his white cotton shirt was cut in a European style and tucked into breeches and hose. There was white blood in there somewhere, too, for the man in the bed could see that the Asiatic brown of the young man's complexion was diluted by a pale pinkish tinge.

Now he looked at him and tried to say, 'Do you speak English?'

His words were not heard. His voice was barely a whisper. The man gestured with his broken claw of a right hand for the young half-caste to come closer. He did so, very clearly having to fight

to keep a look of utter revulsion from breaking out across his face as the sight before him grew ever closer and clearer.

'Do you speak English?' the man in the bed repeated.

'Yes, sir, I do.'

'Then tell that mangy Arab …' He stopped to drag some air into his chest, grimacing as it rasped his smoke- and flame-ravaged lungs. '… Tae stop being so bloody lily-livered wi' my bandages.' Another breath was followed by a short, sharp gasp of pain. '… And just pull the buggers off.'

The words were translated and the pace of removal was greatly increased. The doctor's touch was rougher now as he ceased to bother with any niceties. Evidently the translation had been a literal one.

The pain merely increased, but now the man on the bed was starting to take a perverse pleasure in his own agony. He had determined that this was a force – no different from the wind or the sea – that he could take on and master. He would not be beaten by it. He waited until the last scrap of rank, fetid fabric, sticky with blood and raw skin, had been torn from his head and then said, 'Tell him to fetch me a mirror.'

The young man's eyes widened. He spoke to the doctor who shook his head and started jabbering at a much faster pace and higher pitch. The young man was clearly doing his best to reason with him. Eventually, he shrugged his shoulders, waved his hands in a gesture of exasperated defeat and turned back to the bed. 'He says he will not do it, sir.'

'What's your name, boy?' the wounded man asked.

'Althuda, sir.'

'Well, Althuda, tell that stubborn bastard that I am the personal acquaintance, no, the brother-in-arms of Ahmed El Grang, the King of the Omanis, and also of the Maharajah Sadiq Khan Jahan, younger brother of the Great Mogul himself. Tell him that both men value the service I have done them and would be mightily offended if they knew that some scraggy old sawbones was refusing tae do as I asked. Then tell him, for the second time, tae fetch me a damn mirror.'

The man slumped back on his cushions, exhausted by his diatribe and watched as his words were conveyed to the doctor, whose attitude was now magically transformed. He bowed, he scraped, he grovelled and then he raced across the room with remarkable speed for one so apparently ancient and returned, rather more slowly, with a large oval looking glass in a brightly coloured mosaic frame. It was a heavy piece and the doctor required Althuda's assistance to hold it over the bed at such an angle that the patient could examine his own appearance.

For a moment the man in the bed was shocked by what he saw. The iris of his sightless eye was a dead lifeless blue, surrounded by a ball of raw, bloodshot white. The cheek beneath it had been burned so badly that a hole the size of a woman's fist had been burned in it and his jaw and teeth were clearly visible in a gross display of the skull beneath the skin. His hair had all been scorched off save for one small ginger tuft that sprouted just

above his right ear, and the skin of his scalp was barely visible beneath all the scabs and sores that marred it. He looked like a corpse that had been a good week or two in the ground. But that, he thought to himself, was exactly how he should look, for he wasn't really alive any more. He had once possessed an enormous gusto for life. He plunged into his pleasures, be they drinking, fucking, gambling, fighting or grasping whatever he could get his hands on. All that had been taken from him now. His body was a ruin and his heart was as cold as the grave. Yet all was not lost. There was a force within him that he could feel rising up to replace all his old lusts and impulses. It was as powerful as a mighty river in full spate but it ran with bile rather than water. For this was a flood of anger, bitterness, hatred and, above all, an overwhelming desire for revenge against the man who had reduced him to this ruinous state.

The man fixed Althuda with his one good eye and said, 'I asked you your name, but do you know mine?'

'No, sir.'

A skeletal grimace spread across the man's face in a ghastly parody of a smile. 'Then I will tell you. I am Angus Cochran. I'm a proud Scotsman and my title is Earl of Cumbrae.'

Althuda's eyes widened in horrified recognition. 'You're … You're the one men call the Buzzard,' he gasped.

'Aye, that I am. And if you know that, perhaps you've also heard of the man who did this tae me, a cocky English laddie by the name of Hal Courtney. Oh, yes, I can see that rings a bell all

right, doesn't it, boy?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Well let me tell you this, then. I'm going tae find Courtney, no matter how long it takes me, or how far I have tae go. I'm going to bring him down. And I am going tae wet my beak with his blood.'

The battle had swept back and forth across the Kebassa Plateau of north-east Ethiopia, from soon after dawn until the dying light of day. Now its clamour had died down, replaced with the triumphant whoops of the victors, the desperate pleas for mercy from their defeated enemies and the piteous cries of the wounded begging for water or, if their ends were close at hand, their mothers. An army of Christian Ethiopians had inflicted a third overwhelming defeat on the Muslim host that had been raised at the behest of the Great Mogul himself to invade their land. The first two had proved to be false dawns and any sense of security they had engendered had swiftly proven to be unwarranted. But this victory was so complete as to put the matter beyond dispute. The enemy's forces were routed on land and any ships bearing reinforcements and supplies that had dared to attempt the crossing of the Red Sea from Aden to the Eritrean coast had swiftly been sunk by the vessel that commanded those waters single-handed, an English frigate named the Golden

Bough. The vessel had been commissioned to sail in pursuit of financial gain. Now her captain led her in the service of freedom and the preservation of the most important religious relic in Ethiopia and indeed all Christendom: the Tabernacle itself, in which the Jews had carried the tablets of stone, brought down by Moses from Mount Zion and where the Holy Grail itself was now said to reside.

A large tent had been erected behind the Ethiopian lines. A company of warriors clad in steel helmets and breastplates stood guard at its entrance. Inside it was hung with precious tapestries illustrating scenes from the life of Christ. They were woven from silks whose colours shone like jewels in the flickering light of a dozen burning torches and a myriad candles, while the halos around the Saviour's head gleamed with threads of pure gold.

In the middle of the tent stood a large table on which a model of the battlefield and the surrounding countryside had been built. Hills were shown in exact topographical detail; streams, rivers, lakes were picked out in blue, as was one edge of the model, for that represented the sea itself. Exquisitely carved ivory figurines of foot soldiers, horsemen and cannons represented the units of infantry, cavalry and artillery that had been arrayed on either side. At the start of the day they had been arranged in a perfect copy of the two armies' orders of battle, but now most of the figures representing the Arab forces had been knocked over or removed entirely from the table.

The atmosphere in the tent was subdued. A tall, imposing

figure in ecclesiastical robes was deep in conversation with a knot of senior officers. His grey beard flowed down almost to his knees, and his chest was as bedecked with golden crosses and chains of rosary beads as it was with medals and insignias of rank. The low murmur of the men's voices was in stark contrast to the high-pitched squeals of excitement and delight coming from the vicinity of the table. 'Bang! Bang! Take that!' a small boy was shouting. In his hand he held a model of an Ethiopian cavalry man, mounted on a mighty stallion, and he was sweeping it back and forth across one corner of the table, knocking down any Arab figures that had somehow been left standing after the battle.

Then a guard opened the flap at the tent's entrance and in walked a soldier whose white linen tunic worn over a shirt of chain mail seemed designed more to emphasize the wearer's slim, willowy physique than to offer any serious protection.

'General Nazet!' shouted the little boy, dropping his toy soldier and racing across the carpeted floor to hurl himself at the soldier's steel-clad legs, on which wet, scarlet splashes of enemy blood still glinted. He then hugged them as tightly as if he were snuggling against his mother's soft, yielding bosom.

The general removed a plumed helmet to reveal a bushy head of tightly packed black curls. With a quick shake of the head they sprung to life, forming a circle whose unlikely resemblance to one of the halos on the nearby tapestries was only enhanced by the golden glow of the candles. There was no sign of the sweat and filth of battle on the general's smooth, amber skin,

narrow, almost delicate nose and fine-boned, hairless jawline; no hint of stress or exhaustion in the soft, low voice that said, 'Your Majesty, I have the honour of informing you that your army's victory is complete. The enemy is vanquished and his forces are in retreat.'

His Most Christian Majesty, Iyasu, King of Kings, Ruler of Galla and Amhara, Defender of the Faith of Christ Crucified, let go of the general's legs, took a step backwards and then began jumping up and down, clapping his hands and whooping with glee. The military men approached and congratulated their comrade in a more sober fashion, with shakes of the hand and pats on the shoulder while the priest offered a blessing and a prayer of gratitude.

General Nazet accepted their thanks with calm good grace and then said, 'And now, Your Majesty, I have a favour to ask you. Once before I resigned my commission as the commander of your forces, but circumstances changed. My emperor and my country needed me and my conscience would never have allowed me to turn my back on my duty. So I put on my armour and I took up my sword once more. I was a soldier general and yours to command. But I am also a woman, Your Majesty, and as a woman I belong to another man. He let me go once to return to your service and now, with your permission, I wish to return to him.'

The boy looked at her. He frowned thoughtfully. 'Is the man Captain Courtney?' he asked.

'Yes, Your Majesty,' Judith Nazet replied.

'The Englishman with the funny eyes that are coloured green, like leaves on a tree?'

'Yes, Your Majesty. Do you remember, you welcomed him into the Order of the Golden Lion of Ethiopia as a reward for his bravery and service to our nation?'

'Yes, I remember,' said Iyasu, in an unexpectedly sad little voice. Then he asked, 'Are you going to be a mummy and daddy?' The boy emperor pursed his lips and twisted his mouth from side to side, trying to understand why he suddenly felt very unhappy and then said, 'I wish I had a mummy and daddy. Maybe you and Captain Courtney can come and live in the palace and be like a mummy and daddy to me.'

'Well now, Your Majesty, I really don't think that …' the cleric began. But the boy wasn't listening. His full attention was directed at Judith Nazet who had crouched down on her haunches and was holding out her arms to him.

Iyasu went to her once again, and this time it was like a child to its mother as he laid his head on Judith's shoulder and fell into her embrace. 'There-there,' she said. 'Don't you worry. Would you like to come and see Captain Courtney's ship?'

The little boy nodded, wordlessly.

'Maybe you can fire one of the cannons. That would be fun, wouldn't it?'

There was another nod against Judith's shoulder and then Iyasu lifted his face from the folds of her tunic, looked up at her

and said, in a small voice, 'You're going to sail away with Captain Courtney, aren't you?'

'Yes, I am.'

'Please don't go,' Iyasu asked and then, with desperate determination, cried out, 'I command you not to go! You must obey me! You said you had to!'

Then the dam broke and, sobbing, he collapsed back onto her shoulder. The cleric took a step towards his young master, but Judith held up her hand. 'One moment, Bishop. Let me deal with this.'

She let Iyasu cry a little longer until he was calmer and then dried his eyes and wiped his nose with her tunic. 'Now,' she said, 'you know that I like you very much, don't you, Your Majesty.'

'Yes.'

'And even if I go away, no matter how far, I will always like you and remember you. And just think, if I go to faraway countries like England or France I will be able to write and tell you all about the wonderful extraordinary things I see there.'

'Do you promise to write to me?'

'You have my word, as a soldier, Your Majesty.'

'And if I go on Captain Courtney's ship, will he let me fire a cannon?'

'I will order him to do so. And since I'm a general and he's only a captain he will have to obey me.'

The Emperor Iyasu pondered a moment, gave a thoughtful sigh and then turned away from Judith and said, 'Bishop

Fasilides, please be good enough to tell General Nazet that she has my permission to leave.'

The armed East Indiaman Earl of Cumberland, named after the first governor of the Company of Merchants of London trading with the East Indies, was forty days out of Bombay with a hundred tons of saltpetre on board. She was bound for the Port of London where the saltpetre would be unloaded and taken to the royal armoury at Greenwich Palace, there to be mixed with sulphur and charcoal to provide gunpowder for His Majesty King Charles II of England's army and navy. At the stern of the vessel, where the captain had his quarters, there were a number of other cabins for the ship's senior officers and any important passengers that might be aboard. In one of these cabins a man was on his knees, his hands clasped together in prayer and his eyes closed as he sought permission to kill.

His name was William Pett. He had come aboard with official papers identifying him as a senior official of the East India Company and requiring any person engaged in Company business to provide him with whatever assistance he might require in the furtherance of his duties. Pett had approached Captain Rupert Goddings, master of the Earl of Cumberland, at a dinner hosted by Gerald Aungier, the first Governor of Bombay. He explained that his business in India was completed, hinting

that it had been a delicate matter, involving negotiations with various Portuguese and Indian notables that he was not at liberty to discuss in any detail.

'You understand the need for discretion, I'm sure,' Pett said, in the tone of one man of the world to another.

Goddings was a large, ebullient, cocksure man with a splendidly upturned black moustache, whose years as a merchant captain had made him a considerable fortune. He was a perfectly competent seaman, and, if only because he lacked the imagination to be scared, possessed a degree of bravery. But not even his closest friends would have called him a great intellect. Now he adopted a suitably thoughtful expression and replied, 'Quite so, quite so … Very easily offended, some of these Indians, and the Portuguese aren't much better. It's all that spicy food, in my view. Heats up the blood.'

'I have, of course, sent regular reports home, summarizing the progress of our talks,' Pett continued. 'But now that they're done it's essential that I return home as soon as possible so as to discuss them in detail with my directors.'

'Of course, quite understand. Vital to keep John Company fully informed. You'll be wanting a berth on the Sausage, then, I dare say.'

For a moment, Pett had been caught unawares. 'I'm sorry, Captain, the sausage? I don't quite follow.'

Goddings had laughed. 'By God, sir, I dare say you don't! It's Cumberland, don't you see? They make sausages up there, so I'm

told. I'm a Devonshire man myself. Anyway that's why the Earl of Cumberland has always been known as the Sausage. Surprised you don't know that, come to think of it, being a Company man.'

'Well, I've always been more involved with financial and administrative functions than with nautical affairs. But to return to your kind invitation, yes, I would be very grateful of a berth. Of course, I have funds with which to pay for my passage. Would sixty guineas be sufficient?'

'It certainly would,' said Goddings, thinking to himself that the Company must really value Mr Pett if they were prepared to let him spend that kind of money. 'Come aboard!'

Pett smiled, thinking to himself how easy it was going to be to earn the five hundred guineas he was being paid to kill Goddings. It was apparent, even on this brief encounter, that Goddings was prey to a trait that Pett had observed in many stupid people: a total unawareness of his own stupidity. This blissful ignorance led to a fatal excess of self-confidence. Goddings had, for example, believed that he could cuckold an elderly director of the Company by the brazenly public seduction of the old man's much younger wife, and that he would get away with it. He was about to discover, a very short time before he departed this world, just how wrong he had been.

Upon boarding the Earl of Cumberland Pett had taken his time before making his move against the captain. He needed to find his sea legs and to learn as much as he could about the ship's company and the various friendships, alliances, enmities

and tensions that existed within it, all of which he intended to exploit in the execution of his plan. More than that, however, he was waiting for the signal without which he could not kill, the voice in his head, a messenger from heaven whom Pett knew only as the Saint, who came to assure him that his victim deserved to die and that he, William Pett, would be rewarded in heaven for his efforts to purify the earth of sin.

Pett slept each night in a wooden cot that was suspended from hooks in the timbers that spanned the cabin, so as to keep it stable when the ship rolled. Now he knelt by the cot as the presence of the Saint filled his mind and soul – indeed, his entire being – with the knowledge that he was blessed and that the whole company of angels and archangels was watching over him and protecting him. For as long as the vision lasted, Pett experienced a blissful ecstasy greater than any he had ever known with a woman, and when he rose it was with joy in his heart, for he would be doing God's work tonight.

His chosen weapon was a perfectly ordinary table knife that he had taken from the captain's table, where he ate every night with Goddings and his senior officers. Pett had honed its blade with a whetstone he had discreetly purloined from the ship's stores until it was as sharp as any dagger. Once he had used it to kill Goddings, he planned to take advantage of the confusion that the discovery of the captain's body was bound to cause and leave it amongst the personal effects of a sulky, unpopular young midshipman, whose incompetence and bad character had made

him the target of the captain's wrath on a number of occasions. No one would doubt that the lad had reason to want revenge and he would have no friends to speak in his defence, though Pett was minded to volunteer to act on his behalf as summary justice was meted out. That was for later. Now, however, he placed the knife in the right-hand pocket of his breeches, left his cabin and knocked on the door of the captain's quarters.

'Come in!' Goddings called out, suspecting nothing for it had become the two men's custom to share a glass of brandy every evening, while discussing the day's events aboard ship, ruminating on the ever-growing might and wealth of the East India Company (with particular reference to how a man might get his hands on a larger share of it), and generally setting the world to rights.

The two men talked and drank in their usual companionable fashion, but all the while Pett was waiting for the moment to strike. And then the Saint, as he always did, provided the perfect opportunity. Goddings, by now somewhat befuddled by drink, having consumed much more than Pett who had discreetly kept his consumption to a minimum, got up from his chair to fetch more brandy from a wooden chest whose interior had been divided into six compartments, each of which contained a crystal glass decanter that was filled with a variety of spirits and cordials.

Goddings turned his back as he rummaged through the decanters to find one containing more brandy, quite oblivious to Pett, who had risen silently from his seat, taken the knife from his

pocket and was crossing the cabin towards him. At the very last moment, just as Pett was about to stab the blade into Goddings's right kidney, the captain turned around.

For Pett, moments such as these seemed to stretch out forever. He was aware of every movement his victim made, no matter how tiny; every breath he took; every flicker of expression on his face. Goddings's eyes widened in a look of utter bewilderment, the total surprise of a man who simply could not understand what was happening to him or why. Pett delivered three quick stabs, as sharp and fast as a prizefighter's jabs, into Goddings's fleshy gut. The captain was too shocked to shout out in alarm, or even to scream in pain. Instead he mewled like an infant as he looked down helplessly at the crimson outpour of blood that was drenching his white waistcoat and, for he had wet himself with fear and shock, the stain of urine spreading across his breeches.

With his last iota of strength, Goddings attempted to defend himself. He hurled the decanter, missing Pett who easily swayed out of its way, instead striking the lantern which hung from a low beam above his desk, knocking it off its peg onto the escritoire on which lay his open logbook and a nautical chart. The oil from the lantern and the brandy from the decanter were both highly inflammable, as were the paper documents. The lantern's flame was the final ingredient and soon fire was flickering across the varnished wood of the escritoire and running in streams of burning liquid across the cabin floor.

Pett did not move. He was still glorying in what he had done.

He remained in the cabin, even as the flames crackled and the air filled with smoke, with his pulse racing and his breath coming in ever shorter gasps, as Goddings suffered through the final seconds of his life. Finally there came the moment of death for Goddings and ecstatic release for his killer and now, as if awoken from a trance, the latter began to move.

Pett knew full well that fire was the deadliest of all perils at sea, and a ship whose cargo was saltpetre and whose cannons were fired by gunpowder was little more than a floating bomb. Now the fuse had been lit, he had to escape the Earl of Cumberland as fast as he could. Like him, Goddings slept in a cot. It was made of wood and would serve as an impromptu life raft. Moving swiftly, but without the slightest panic, Pett unhooked the captain's cot from the hooks to which it was attached. Then he carried it across to the windows that ran across the stern end of the cabin, pounded at the glass until it shattered and then hurled the cot out of the opening he had made. A moment later, Pett climbed up onto the window ledge and, heedless of the glass shards scraping against his skin, threw himself out into the warm night air.

As he fell through space, towards the glittering blackness of the sea, Pett had little idea of where he was, other than somewhere between India and the Cape of Good Hope. He was not sure that he could find the cot, or even if it was still floating on the surface of the waves. He had no idea what manner of sea-creatures might be lurking in the depths beneath him, ready to

attack him, kill him and eat him. And quite apart from all of that, he did not know how to swim.

None of that mattered, not in the slightest. William Pett had answered the voice of the Saint. He was doing God's will. And thus no harm could befall him. He was absolutely sure of it.

As the first rays of the dawn sun cast a soft orange glow across the harbour at Mitsiwa, the pride of the Ethiopian fleet sat at anchor, joyfully flying the Union Flag of her native British Isles. The Golden Bough had been built on the orders of George, Viscount Winterton, at the stupendous price of almost two thousand pounds. Winterton already possessed a substantial private fleet of merchantmen and privateers. His intentions for the Bough were to provide his beloved son Vincent with an agreeable vessel on which to follow the family's seafaring traditions, while providing himself with further additions to what was already one of the largest fortunes in England.

The Honourable 'Vinny' Winterton now lay buried on the shore of Elephant Lagoon, beside the waters of the Indian Ocean a short way north of the Cape of Good Hope, killed in a duel that was, in truth, little more than an act of murder. Yet his father's money had been well spent, even if the Golden Bough's recent incarnation, as the flagship and sole fighting vessel of an African navy, was no more part of the viscount's plans than

his boy's demise. She was as slim and pleasing on the eye as a thoroughbred racehorse and could cut through the water with rare speed and grace. On a broad reach, with her sails full and a good breeze blowing, she could escape any warships that outmatched her and catch any that did not. And like a horse with a winning jockey, the Bough rewarded a captain who was strong in skill and nerve, for she could be sailed tight into the wind when other vessels would be left floundering or forced to change their bearing.

In all his months of commanding the Bough in peace and in combat, on windless millponds and storm-tossed maelstroms, Hal Courtney had come to know his ship from bilge and ballast to bowsprit and rudder. He knew precisely how to squeeze every last knot out of her and how best to arm her for the perils she was sure to encounter. Hal knew that every captain had to balance the firepower gained from additional cannons with the weight they added to his ship's displacement. Some chose fewer guns for a faster, more nimble ship, whilst others preferred to rely on firepower. With the Golden Bough Hal had both speed and armament. The pick of the guns with which she had originally been provided had been combined with the finest pieces captured in countless engagements. Now he could call on a deadly assortment of cannons and small arms, from mighty culverins, whose twelve-foot barrels fired cannon balls that weighed almost twenty pounds apiece and could snap a mast in two, to much smaller (but equally deadly) falconets and

murderers, which could be loaded with grapeshot and turned at point-blank range on enemies trying to board the ship. So the Bough's teeth were as sharp as her limbs were swift. And that was why her captain adored her so.

Naturally he wanted one of the great loves of his life to look her best when she was reintroduced to the other. Four months earlier, Judith Nazet had been aboard the Golden Bough when the leisurely voyage she and Hal were making down the east coast of Africa, bound for England, via the bay where his family fortune was hidden, was interrupted by a dhow bringing a desperate plea from her emperor. During the few days Judith had spent on the Bough, however, the crew had come to admire her almost as much as Hal did. They were awestruck by her achievements on the battlefield and lovestruck by the beautiful, utterly feminine woman she became when she laid down her sword and armour. So when Hal had ordered that the ship should be readied for her return, adding that he wanted her looking even more perfect than on the day she had first been launched, his men set to work with a will.

For a full week they had hung over the sides on ropes, scrubbing and tarring the hull and hammering new nails into the planks so that no sign remained of the months of naval service – all the broadsides fired, boarders repelled, timbers burned and blood shed – that the Bough and her crew had given. Every piece of accessible timber received attention, repairing, replacing, scraping, caulking, tarring, greasing and painting. The mastheads

were blacked and the fore and aft staysails along with the mainsail were unbent for repair. They tarred the lines and polished the culverins and put up more awnings on deck to provide shade for their honoured guests. They scraped every scrap of rust or blood off the ship's cutlasses, lances and boarding axes and polished the muskets and swivel-guns until they gleamed fit to dazzle in the burning tropical sun.

One particular bloodstain had been caused by an unfortunate Arab warrior who had been shot at close range in the thigh by a musket ball that had ruptured an artery and sent a crimson fountain spurting across the oak planks from which the deck was made. The blood had soaked deep into the wood, leaving an unsightly discolouration on the quarterdeck, just aft of the mainmast. He had his men sluice down the deck and scrub it until its second washing was with their own sweat, but even when they had finished there were still shadows on the boards where the blood had soaked deep into the grain. Mitsiwa harbour was ringed by a sandy beach, so Hal sent a party ashore to gather up buckets filled with the coarse, rasping sand and then bring it back to scrub into the planks so that their surfaces would be scraped away, and the stain with them.

Hal had stood over the men as they worked deep into the night and had even got down on his hands and knees and started scrubbing alongside them when they flagged, for he believed that no man should ever order another to do something he was unwilling to do himself. Finally he had been forced to admit that

the deck, which was shining a silvery-white in the moonlight, was as flawless as it was ever going to be and such blemishes as did remain would be lost in the shade thrown by the awning with which the whole area would be covered for the day and night that lay ahead.

Hal had decreed that his beloved's return would be marked by a feast befitting such a joyous occasion. The men of the Golden Bough had sailed hard, fought hard and seen a dozen of their mates die in battle before being wrapped in shrouds and committed to the sea. They had earned the chance to eat, drink and generally let their hair down and Hal was going to make sure that they did it in style. Yet for all that this was a happy day, it was also a momentous one. He knew that whether they were married or not – and Hal was determined that when he wed his bride it would be in an English church with a Protestant vicar – he and Judith were committing their lives to one another. He had loved before, and known both the bitterness of being deceived and the pain of great loss, but there was a sense of certainty and permanence to his love for Judith that he had never known before. She was his woman. She would be the mother of his children. That was a lot for a young man to take in, no matter how sure he felt.

Dawn found him leaning against the poop rail, from which he could survey every mast, every spar and every scrap of sail of the ship under his command. Now, though, the sails were all furled and the ship was at rest. Off in the distance Hal could see

the activity on the shoreline as local merchants prepared to fill their boats with the carcasses of goat, mutton and chicken; the baskets of vegetables and fruit; the huge earthenware pots filled with several varieties of wat, the thick, spicy stew of meat or vegetables that was Ethiopia's national dish, and the piled loaves of injera, the sourdough on which wat was customarily served; sacks of green coffee beans (to be roasted, ground, brewed and then served with sugar or salt), barrels of strong, red wine from the vineyards of the Lebanon and flagons of tej, or honey wine, as potent as it was sweet; and finally great garlands of flowers with which to bedeck the ship and provide a suitably beautiful and fragrant setting for the bride.

Hal watched the distant bustle for a few minutes. Though he was barely twenty years old, he had acquired a grown man's strength and an air of absolute command, earned by his seamanship and courage in battle that made men twice his age happy to follow his orders without question. There was not yet the faintest trace of grey in the thick, black hair that Hal tied with a thong behind his head, and the green eyes that had so amazed the Emperor Iyasu were as clear and sharp as ever. Yet the almost feminine beauty that he had possessed just a few years earlier had entirely disappeared. Just as his back still bore the scars of the whippings he had been forced to endure as a prisoner – little more than a slave – of the Dutch, so his experiences had made his face leaner, harder and more weather-beaten. His jaw was more firmly set, his mouth more stern, his gaze more piercing.

Now, though, his eyes dropped to the water lapping against the Bough's hull and he said, 'I wish my parents could be here to meet Judith, though I don't even remember my mother, I was so young when she died. But my father …' Hal sighed. 'I hope he'd think I was doing the right thing … I hope he wouldn't think badly of me.'

'Of course not! He was always so proud of you, Gundwane. Think of the very last words he said to you. Say them now.'

Hal was unable to speak. In his mind's eye, all he could see was his father's rotting, dismembered body hanging from a gibbet in the Cape Colony for all its inhabitants to see and for all the gulls to feast upon. Having falsely accused Sir Francis Courtney of piracy, the Dutch had tortured him to the edge of death, hoping to discover the location of his treasure. Yet Sir Francis had not broken. His enemies had been none the wiser as they hanged him from the gibbet while Hal looked on helpless and heartbroken from the high wall where he was serving a sentence of hard labour.

'Say them, for him.' The voice was gentle, but insistent.

Hal breathed deeply, in and out, before he spoke. 'He said that I was his blood and his promise of eternal life. And then … Then he looked at me and said, "Goodbye, my life."'

'Then there is your answer. Your father sees you now. I who took him to his final resting place can tell you that his eyes face towards the sun and he sees you always, wherever you are.'

'Thank you, Aboli,' said Hal.

Now for the first time he looked at the man who had been his father's closest companion and was now the closest thing he had to a father figure. Aboli was a member of the Amadoda tribe who lived deep in the forests, many days' journey from the coast of East Africa. Every hair had been ceremonially plucked from the polished ebony skin of his scalp, and his face was marked with ridged whorls of scar tissue, caused by cuts inflicted in his early boyhood and intended to awe and terrify his enemies. They were a mark of royalty for he and his twin brother were sons of the Monomatapa, the chosen of heaven, the all-powerful ruler of their tribe. When both boys were still very young, slavers had attacked their village. Aboli's brother had been carried to a place of safety, but Aboli had not been so lucky. Many years had passed before Sir Francis Courtney had freed him and, in so doing, created a bond that had endured beyond the grave, from one generation to another.

The nickname Gundwane by which Aboli referred to Hal meant 'Bush Rat'. Aboli had bestowed it when Hal was just a boy of four and it had stuck ever since. No other man on board the Golden Bough would have dared be so familiar with their skipper, but then, everything about Aboli was exceptional. He stood half a head taller even than Hal, and his lean, muscular body moved with a cobra's menacing, sinuous grace and deadly purpose. Everything that Hal knew about swordfighting – not just the technique or the footwork, but the understanding of an opponent and the warrior spirit needed to defeat him – he had

learned from Aboli. It had been a tough education, with many a bruise inflicted and a quantity of blood spilled along the way. But if Aboli had been tough on his young pupil, it had only been because Sir Francis demanded it.

Thinking of those days, Hal gave a wry chuckle, 'You know, I may be master of this ship, but every time I stand here on the quarterdeck I think of being back on the Lady Edwina, getting a roasting from my father for whatever it was I'd done wrong. There was always something. Do you remember how long it took me to learn how to use the backstaff and the sun to calculate the ship's position? The first times I tried, the backstaff was bigger than I was. I'd stand out on the deck at midday, not a scrap of shade, sweating like a little pig and every time the ship rolled or pitched the damn staff almost knocked me over!'

Aboli gave a deep laugh like the rumble of distant thunder as Hal went on, 'And making me speak to him in Latin, because it was the language of gentlemen! You have no idea how lucky you are never to have had to learn about gerunds and ablative absolutes. Or cuffing me round the ears because I couldn't remember the name of every single sail the ship carried. Even when I got one answer right he would tell me a hundred things I was doing wrong. And it was always right here on the quarterdeck, where every single crewman could see me.' Hal's expression suddenly turned serious. 'You know, there were times when I really, truly hated him for that.'

'Yes, and the fact that he did what he did, knowing that you

would not understand and would hate him for it, was the proof of his love,' Aboli replied. 'Your father prepared you well. He was hard on you, but only because he knew you would be tested time and again.' The African smiled. 'Maybe, if your god wills it, you will have a little Courtney of your own to be hard on soon.'

Hal smiled. He was having a tough enough time imagining himself as a husband, let alone a father. 'I'm not sure that I'm ready to be a father, yet. I sometimes even wonder if I'm ready to be a captain.'

'Ha!' Aboli exclaimed, laying a huge hand on Hal's shoulder. 'You have slain your mortal enemies. You have saved the Tabernacle and the Holy Grail. You have won the heart of a woman who has defeated mighty armies.' Aboli inclined his head slowly. 'Yes I think you are ready to rock a baby to sleep in your arms.'

Hal laughed. 'Well, in that case I think we'd better get ready to meet its mother.'

The captain was the master of a ship crewed by living skeletons. Having spent almost all his money on the cargo stashed in barely a score of wooden cases that took up just a fraction of his ship's hold, he had bought the cheapest provisions he could, and thus been sold biscuit that was riddled with weevils and fungus before he had even left harbour, vegetables that were rotten and dried meats that were so tough as to make for better shoe leather than food. He and his crew were fugitives. They could not put in to any civilized port to buy, work or beg for

more supplies without risking immediate imprisonment, always assuming that they would not be blown out of the water by any of the ships pursuing them long before they sighted land. He was, in short, a man in no need of any further troubles. And yet another was headed his way.

He knew that a bad situation was about to get worse the moment he heard the voice from the crow's nest: 'Captain! There's something floating in the sea, just off the starboard bow! It looks like a piece of wood, or an upturned boat.'

The captain shook his head and muttered to himself, 'Why do I need to be told this?'

His question was immediately answered as the lookout shouted, 'There's something moving! It's a man! He's seen us … And now he's waving!'

The captain was aware of fifty pairs or more of hungry eyes, staring in his direction, willing him to give the order to sail on and leave the man to his fate. The last thing the ship needed was another mouth to feed. And yet the captain could hardly claim to be a man of honour, but he wasn't wicked. A scoundrel, perhaps, but not a villain. And so he ordered the ship to be hove to. Then he had a boat lowered to fetch this man who had appeared out of nowhere, hundreds of leagues from the nearest shore. 'Never mind, lads,' he called out. 'If we don't like the bastard we can always eat him!'

A short while later a bedraggled, sunburned figure of above average height, but almost as thin as the crewmen who

surrounded him, was dragged up the side of the hull and deposited on the deck of the ship. The captain had come down from the poop deck to greet him. He spoke in his native tongue and asked, 'Good day, sir. Whom do I have the pleasure of addressing?'

The man gave a little nod of the head and replied, in the same tongue, 'Good day to you too, Captain. My name is William Pett.'

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.