

CLIVE CUSSLER

with Paul Kemprecos

A Kurt Austin
Adventure



WHITE DEATH

A Novel from THE NUMA® FILES

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DEATH

CLIVE
CUSSLER

with PAUL KEMPRECOS

G. P. PUTNAM'S SONS *

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PROLOGUE I

West of the British Isles, 1515

DIEGO AGUIRREZ AWOKE from his restless sleep thinking that a rat had scurried across his face. His wide forehead was bathed in a cold sweat, his heart hammered in his chest, and a formless panic gnawed hungrily at his innards. He listened to the muffled snores of his sleeping crewmen and the chuckle and swash of wavelets against the wooden hull. Nothing appeared to be amiss. Yet he couldn't shake the uneasy feeling that an unseen threat lurked in the shadows.

Easing from his hammock, Aguirrez wrapped a thick woolen blanket around his brawny shoulders and climbed a companionway to the fog-shrouded deck. In the muted light of the moon, the solidly built caravel glistened as if it were made of spiderwebs. Aguirrez went over to a form huddled next to the yellow glow of an oil lamp.

"Good evening, Captain," the man said at his approach.

Aguirrez was pleased to see that the watch was awake and alert.

“Good evening,” the captain replied. “All goes well?”

“Yes, sir. Still no wind, though.”

Aguirrez glanced up at the ghostly masts and sails. “It will come. I can smell it.”

“Aye, Captain,” the man said, stifling a yawn.

“Go below and get some sleep. I’ll relieve you.”

“It isn’t time yet. My shift’s not over for another turn of the glass.”

The captain picked up the hourglass next to the lamp and turned it over. “There,” he said. “*Now* it’s time.”

The man grunted his thanks and shuffled off to the crew’s quarters while the captain took up a post in the ship’s high, squared-off stern castle. He gazed off to the south, staring into the smoky mists that rose like steam from the mirror-flat sea. He was still at his post when the sun rose. His olive-black eyes were red-rimmed, and they ached with weariness. His blanket was soggy with moisture. With typical stubbornness, he ignored the discomforts and paced back and forth like a caged tiger.

The captain was a Basque, an inhabitant of the rugged mountains between Spain and France, and his instincts, honed by years at sea, were not to be taken lightly. The Basques were the best sailors in the world, and men like Aguirrez routinely voyaged to regions that more timid mariners regarded as the realm of sea serpents and giant whirlpools. Like many Basques, he had eyebrows like bramble thickets, large protruding ears, a long, straight nose and a chin like a mountain ledge. In later years, scientists would suggest that the Basques, with their heavy facial features, were the direct descendants of Cro-Magnon man.

The crew emerged yawning and stretching into the gray predawn light and set about their tasks. The captain refused offers to relieve him. His persistence was rewarded near midmorning. His blood-shot eyes glimpsed a shimmering splinter of light through the thick

curtain of haze. The quick nervous flicker lasted only an instant, but it filled Aguirrez with an odd combination of relief and dread.

Pulse quickening, Aguirrez raised the brass spyglass that hung by a cord around his neck, snapped the sections to their full length and squinted through the eyepiece. At first he saw only a gray monotone circle of magnification where the fog bank blended with the sea. The captain wiped his eyes with his sleeve, blinked to clear his vision and raised the telescope again. Again he saw nothing. A trick of the light, he thought.

Suddenly, he saw movement through the lens. A sharp prow had emerged from the mists like the probing beak of a raptor. Then the full length of the boat came into view. The slim black-hulled craft shot forward, glided a few seconds, then surged forward again. Two other ships followed in quick succession, scudding over the flat surface like giant water insects. Aguirrez swore softly to himself.

War galleys.

Sunlight reflected off the wet oars that dipped into the sea with a mechanical cadence. With each sweep of the oars, the sleek vessels rapidly closed the gap separating them from the sailing ship.

The captain calmly appraised the fast-approaching ships from stem to stern, taking in the clean, functional lines with the appreciation of a skilled shipbuilder. True greyhounds of the sea, capable of short bursts of high speed, the fighting galleys developed by Venice were used by dozens of European countries.

Each galley was propelled by a hundred-and-fifty oars, three ranks of twenty-five on each side. The low, level profile imparted a streamlined look that was ahead of its time, gracefully curving up at the rear where the captain's house overhung the stern. The prow was elongated, although it no longer functioned as a ram as in times past. The bow had been transformed into an artillery platform.

A small three-sided lateen sail hung from a single mast near the

stern, but human muscle power gave the galley its speed and maneuverability. The Spanish penal system provided a steady supply of rowers condemned to die pulling the heavy thirty-foot oars. The *cor-sia*, a narrow gangway that ran fore and aft, was the realm of hard men who urged the rowers on with threats and whip-lashes.

Aguirrez knew that the firepower arrayed against his ship would be formidable. The galleys were nearly twice the eighty-foot length of his tubby caravel. The fighting galley routinely carried fifty of the single-shot muzzle-loaded smoothbore arquebuses. The heaviest gun, a cast-iron, high-angle mortar called a *bombard*, was mounted on the bow artillery platform. Its position on the right-front side was a holdover from the days when naval strategy centered on ramming the enemy head-on.

While the galley was a throwback to the sturdy Greek craft that carried Odysseus from Circe to Cyclops, the caravel was the wave of the future. Fast and maneuverable for its day, the rugged ship could sail anywhere on the watery surface of the earth. The caravel blended its southern rigging with a tough northern hull of flush-built planking and a hinged, axeled rudder. The easily rigged lateen sails, descended from the Arabic *dhow*, made the ship far superior to any contemporary sailing vessel when sailing close to the wind.

Unfortunately for Aguirrez, those sails, so miraculous in their simple efficiency, now hung limply from the twin masts. With no breeze to stir the canvas, the sails were useless sheets of fabric. The becalmed caravel was glued to the surface of the sea like a ship in a bottle.

Aguirrez glanced at the lifeless canvas and cursed the elements conspiring against him. He seethed at the short-sighted arrogance that had led him to defy his instinct to stay far out to sea. With their low freeboard, the galleys were not designed for open waters and would have had difficulty following the caravel. But he had sailed close to land because the route was more direct. With favorable

winds, his ship could outrun any vessel on the sea. He'd never anticipated a dead calm. Nor had he expected the galleys to find him so easily.

He brushed away his self-recriminations and suspicions. Time enough to deal with questions later. Tossing his blanket aside as if it were a matador's cape, he strode the length of the ship bellowing orders. The men came alive as the captain's powerful voice echoed from one end of the ship to the other. Within seconds, the deck resembled a stirred-up anthill.

"Launch the boats!" Aguirrez pointed to the approaching warships. "Look smart, lads, or we'll be keeping the executioners working day and night."

They moved to their tasks with quicksilver speed. Every man on board the caravel knew that the horrors of torture and burning at the stake would be their fate if the galleys captured them. Within minutes, all three of the caravel's boats were in the water, manned by the strongest rowers. The lines attached to the ship went bowstring-taut, but the caravel stubbornly refused to move. Aguirrez yelled at his men to row harder. The air over his head turned blue as he appealed to their Basque manhood with every salty curse he could muster.

"Pull together!" Aguirrez shouted, his dark eyes blazing. "You're rowing like a bunch of Spanish whores."

The oars churned the calm water into a sudsy foam. The ship shuddered and creaked, and finally it began to inch forward. Aguirrez roared his encouragement and dashed back to the stern. He leaned on the rail and put his eye to his spyglass. Through the lens, he saw a tall, thin man in the bow platform of the lead galley looking back at him through a telescope.

"El Brasero," Aguirrez whispered with unveiled contempt.

Ignatius Martinez saw Aguirrez looking at him and curled his thick voluptuary's lips in a snarl of triumph. His pitiless yellow eyes burned with fanaticism in their deep-set sockets. The long aristocratic nose was lifted in the air as if it had encountered a bad smell.

"Captain Blackthorne," he purred to the red-bearded man at his side, "spread the word among the rowers. Tell them they will be free if we catch our prey."

The captain shrugged and carried out the order, knowing that Martinez had no intention of keeping his promise, that it was merely a cruel deception.

El Brasero was Spanish for brazier. Martinez had earned his nickname for his zeal in roasting heretics at the *auto de fé*, as the public spectacles of punishment were called. He was a familiar figure at the *quemardo*, or place of burning, where he used every means, including bribery, to make sure that he had the honor of lighting the pyre. Although his official title was Public Prosecutor and Advisor to the Inquisition, he had persuaded his higher-ups to appoint him as the Inquisitor in charge of prosecuting the Basques. The prosecution of the Basques was extremely profitable. The Inquisition immediately confiscated the property of the accused. The stolen wealth of its victims financed the Inquisition's prisons, secret police, torture chambers, army and bureaucracy, and it made rich men of the Inquisitors.

Basques had brought the arts of navigation and shipbuilding to unheard-of levels of expertise. Aguirrez had sailed to the secret fishing grounds across the Western Sea dozens of times on whaling or cod-fishing trips. Basques were natural capitalists, and many, like Aguirrez, had become rich selling whale products and cod. His busy shipyard on the Nervion River built vessels of every type and size. Aguirrez had been aware of the Inquisition and its excesses, but he was too busy running his various enterprises and enjoying the infre-

quent company of his beautiful wife and two children to give it much thought. It was on his return from one trip that he had learned firsthand that Martinez and the Inquisition were malevolent forces that could not be ignored.

An angry crowd had greeted the fish-laden ships that edged up to the docks to unload their catch. The people had shouted for Aguirrez's attention and pleaded for his help. The Inquisition had arrested a group of local women and charged them with witchcraft. His wife had been among those taken. She and the others had been tried and found guilty and were being moved from prison to the burning place.

Aguirrez calmed the crowd and went directly to the provincial capital. Although he was a man of influence, his pleas to free the prisoners fell on deaf ears. Officials said they could do nothing; this was a church matter, not a civil one. Some whispered that their own lives and property could be placed in jeopardy if they went against the orders of the Holy Office. "*El Brasero*," they whispered in fear.

Aguirrez had taken matters into his own hands and rounded up a hundred of his men. They'd attacked the convoy taking the accused witches to the stake, and freed the women without firing a shot. Even as he took his wife into his arms, Aguirrez knew that *El Brasero* had engineered the witchcraft arrests and trials to bring the Basque and his property within his greedy grasp.

Aguirrez suspected that there was an even more compelling reason he had come to the Inquisition's attention. The year before, a council of elders had given him stewardship of the most sacred relics of Basqueland. One day they would be used to rally the Basques in a fight for independence against Spain. For now, they were contained in a chest hidden in a secret chamber of Aguirrez's luxurious home. Martinez could have heard of the artifacts. The region was rife with informers. Martinez would know how sacred relics could ignite fa-

naticism, in much the same way that the Holy Grail had launched the bloody Crusades. Anything that united the Basques would be a threat to the Inquisition.

Martinez did not respond to the freeing of the women. Aguirrez was no fool. Martinez would strike only after he had collected every scrap of incriminating evidence. Aguirrez used this time to prepare. He put the fastest caravel in his fleet up on the ways at San Sebastián, as if it were undergoing repairs. He spread generous amounts of money around to enlist his own army of spies, including some in the prosecutor's entourage, and made it known that the biggest reward would go to the man who warned of his arrest. Then he went about his business as usual and waited, staying close to home, where he surrounded himself with guards, all veterans of combat.

Several months quietly passed. Then one night, one of his spies, a man who worked in the office of the Inquisition itself, galloped breathlessly up to his villa and pounded on his door. Martinez was leading a group of soldiers to arrest him. Aguirrez paid off the grateful spy and put his well-laid plans into effect. He kissed his wife and children good-bye and promised to meet them in Portugal. While his family escaped in a farm wagon with much of their wealth, a decoy was dispatched to lead the arrest party on a merry chase through the countryside. Accompanied by his armed entourage, Aguirrez made his way to the coast. Under cover of darkness, the caravel slid down the ways, unfurled its sails and headed north.

When the sun rose the next day, a fleet of fighting galleys had emerged from the dawn mists in an attempt to cut the caravel off. Using adroit seamanship, Aguirrez had eluded his pursuers, and a steady breeze had sent the ship winging north along the coast of France. He set a course for Denmark, where he would begin the turn west toward Greenland and Iceland, and the Great Land beyond. But then, off the British Isles, the ship's wake petered out along

with the wind, and Aguirrez and his men found themselves sitting in a pool of dead air . . .

Now, with the trio of galleys closing in for the kill, Aguirrez was determined to fight to the death if need be, but his strongest instinct was survival. He ordered the gun crew to prepare for battle. In arming the caravel, he had sacrificed armament for speed, firepower for flexibility.

The standard arquebus was a cumbersome muzzle-loaded matchlock gun that was hooked onto a portable stand and needed two men to load and fire. The gunners on the caravel were armed with smaller, lighter versions that could be fired by one man. His crewmen were excellent marksmen who would make every shot count. For heavy artillery, Aguirrez had chosen a pair of bronze cannon that could be moved on wheeled carriages. The gun crews had drilled to the point where they could load, aim and fire with clockwork precision unheard of in most ships.

The rowers were visibly tired, and the ship was like a fly crawling across a bucket of molasses. The galleys were almost within firing range. Their snipers could pick off the rowers with ease. He decided that the men would have to stay at their oars. As long as the ship moved, Aguirrez had a modicum of control. He urged his men to keep pulling, and he was turning back to help the gun crew when his fine-tuned senses detected a shift in temperature, usually the harbinger of a breeze. The smaller lateen sail flapped like the wing of an injured bird. Then it was still.

As the captain scanned the sea for the puckering of the surface that would herald a puff of wind, he heard the unmistakable roar of a bombard. The wide-mouthed mortar was carried in a fixed carriage with no means of training or elevation. The cannonball splashed

harmlessly into the sea about a hundred yards off the caravel's stern. Aguirrez laughed, knowing that it was practically impossible to score a direct hit with a bombard, even on a target as slow-moving as the caravel.

The galleys had been moving three-abreast. As a cloud of smoke drifted over the water, the galleys flanking the lead boat shot ahead and came straight in behind the caravel. The maneuver was a feint. Both galleys veered to the left, and one took the lead. Galleys had most of their armament on the right front side. As they passed the slow-moving caravel, they could rake its deck and rigging with small and medium guns.

Anticipating the attack, Aguirrez had placed both cannon close together on the port side and covered their muzzles with a black cloth. The enemy would assume that the caravel also carried the inefficient bombard and that its flanks were virtually unprotected.

The captain scanned the artillery platform through the spyglass and swore as he recognized a former crewman who had sailed with him on many fishing trips. The man knew the route Aguirrez followed to the Western Sea. More than likely, the Inquisition was holding a threat against his family.

Aguirrez checked the elevation of each cannon. He pulled aside the black cloth and sighted through the gun ports on an imaginary circle on the sea. Having encountered no opposition, the first galley came in close to the caravel—and Aguirrez gave the order to fire. Both cannon thundered. One shot was premature and snapped the beak off the galley, but the second cannonball smashed into the artillery platform.

The bow section disintegrated in a burst of fire and smoke. Water poured into the ruptured hull, aided by the galley's forward speed, and the boat slipped below the surface and sank within moments. Aguirrez felt a pang of pity for the rowers, manacled to their oars and

unable to escape, but their death would be quick compared to weeks and months of suffering.

The crew of the second galley saw the lead boat's fate, and in a display of the nimbleness the triremes were famous for, it veered sharply away from the caravel, then looped around to rejoin Martinez, who had prudently held his boat back.

Aguirrez guessed that the galleys would split up, come around both sides of the ship, careful to stay out of cannon range, then circle back and attack the vulnerable rowers. Almost as if Martinez were reading his thoughts, the galleys pulled apart and each began a long swing around the opposite sides of the ship, circling like wary hyenas.

Aguirrez heard a snap above his head, caused by a desultory flap of the mainsail. He held his breath, wondering if it was only an errant puff as before. Then the sail flapped again and filled out, and the masts creaked. He ran to the bow, leaned over the rail and shouted at his deck crew to bring the rowers back on board.

Too late.

The galleys had cut short their long, lazy loop and angled sharply back on a course that brought them directly at the ship. The right-hand galley swung around and presented its long side, and the gunners concentrated their arquebus fire on the defenseless longboat. A withering fusillade raked the rowers.

Emboldened, the second galley tried the same maneuver on the port side. The caravel's marksmen had rallied after being taken by surprise, and they concentrated their fire on the exposed artillery platform where Aguirrez had last seen Martinez. *El Brasero* was undoubtedly hiding behind thick wood, but he would get the message.

The volley hit the platform like a leaden fist. As soon as the marksmen let off one shot, they picked up another weapon and fired again, while crewmen feverishly reloaded the guns. The fusillade was con-

tinuous and deadly. Unable to withstand the prolonged hail of fire, the galley veered off, its hull splintered and its oars in fragments.

The caravel's crew rushed to haul in the long boats. The first boat was bathed in blood and half the rowers were dead. Aguirrez yelled orders to his heavy gunners, raced to the helm and grabbed the wheel. Gun crews swarmed around the cannon and muscled the heavy weapons into the bow gunports. Other deckhands adjusted the rigging to wring the most out of the freshening breeze.

As the caravel picked up speed, leaving a growing wake, the captain steered the ship toward the galley that had been raked by fire from his gunners. The galley tried to elude him, but it had lost rowers and was moving erratically. Aguirrez waited until he was within fifty yards. The galley's gunners fired at their pursuer, but the shots had little effect.

The cannon boomed and the balls scored a direct hit on the roofed captain's house on the stern, blasting it to toothpicks. The cannon were speedily reloaded and aimed at the galley's waterline, where they punched massive holes in the hull. Heavy with men and equipment, the galley quickly slipped under the surface, leaving bubbles, shards of wood and a few hapless swimmers to mark its passing.

The captain turned his attention to the third galley.

Seeing the odds change, Martinez was on the run. His galley sped off to the south like a startled hare. The agile caravel turned from its kill and tried to follow. Aguirrez had blood in his eyes as he savored the prospect of dousing *El Brasero's* fire.

It was not to be. The freshening breeze was still gentle, and the caravel could not match the speed of the fleeing galley, whose rowers were pulling for their lives. Before long, the galley was a dark spot on the ocean.

Aguirrez would have chased Martinez to the ends of the earth, but he saw sails on the horizon and guessed that they might be enemy re-

inforcements. The Inquisition had a long reach. He remembered his promise to his wife and children and his responsibility to the Basque people. Reluctantly, he swung the ship around and set a course north toward Denmark. Aguirrez had no illusions about his enemy. Martinez might be a coward, but he was patient and persistent.

It would be only a matter of time before they met again.