HISTORY SHAPERS

THE STORY OF NELSON

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This edition published 2025
by Living Book Press

ISBN: 978-1-76153-567-3 (hardcover)
978-1-76153-576-5 (softcover)

First published in 1907.

A catalogue record for this
book is available from the
National Library of Australia

The Story of Nelson

by

Edmund F. Sellar

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PLEASE NOTE

In this series, you will read about historical figures who displayed courage, bravery, self-sacrifice, and many other admirable traits. Their stories remind us that many people in history took bold actions and made tough choices. Yet, even those who achieved great things sometimes held ideas or pursued goals that were not beneficial to everyone. History is full of complex individuals—parts of their lives inspire us to be brave and stand up for what is right, while other parts remind us to consider the unintended consequences of our actions.

As you explore these biographies, we invite you to reflect on the qualities that enabled these figures to achieve greatness and the lessons we can learn from their mistakes. Maybe you too can become a History Shaper—someone who learns from the past and helps to make our world a better place for everyone.

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Early Boyhood—Joins His Ship

On the 29th of September 1758, or nearly a hundred and fifty years ago, Horatio Nelson, "the greatest of our heroes and the dearest to ourselves," was born.

His father was a country clergyman, who lived at Burnham Thorpe, in the county of Norfolk.

The boy had many brothers and sisters. There were eleven children in the family, only two of whom, however, lived to grow old.

Horatio as a child was weak and sickly, and all his life he was delicate. Even after his many years afloat, we are told that he never quite got over the feeling of sea-sickness.

Although not a strong boy, there was nothing of the milksop about him and at an early age he showed the spirit of absolute fearlessness which in later years was to stand him in such good stead.

"Fear, grandmamma! I never saw fear; what is it?" he once asked while quite a little child.

His father, in bringing up his children, trusted entirely to their own sense of honour, and in this respect Horatio never failed him.

Once, while riding with his brother to school through deep snow, William, the elder, wanted to turn back, as the drifts were thick, and in parts dangerous. "No we must get there if we possibly can. Remember we are on our honour to do so," was Horatio's reply; and his pony and he struggled on, and after some difficulty reached their journey's end in safety.

On another occasion, while at school, he lowered himself with sheets from a window, and took a quantity of fine ripe pears from the head-master's favourite tree. On his return to the dormitory he laid down the spoil before his companions, who had often coveted the fruit, but had not dared to take it because of the severe flogging which would probably follow. Our hero refused to eat a single pear, for greed had not prompted his daring action.

"He only took them," he explained, "because every other boy was afraid."

Horatio's school days were brief.

At the time when he was twelve years old, Spain suddenly attacked the Falkland Islands, a British colony in the far South Atlantic, and forced our colonists to lower their flag. This act naturally aroused great anger in England, and as a result our ships were immediately made ready for war.

At this time both Spain and France had mighty fleets, manned by skilful and brave seamen, and Britain was not yet the all-conquering power at sea which she afterwards became, thanks to Nelson and his sailors.

The boy himself wished to go to sea, and on his uncle, Captain Maurice Suckling, getting command of the *Raisonable*, he begged hard to be allowed to serve in his uncle's ship.

Mr. Nelson, who had always said that in whatever station his son might be placed he would, if possible, climb to the top of the tree, accordingly wrote to his brother-in-law.

"What has poor Horatio done," came the answer, "who is so weak, that he, above all the rest, should be sent to rough it out at sea?"

Still, his uncle said he might come, though he evidently did not approve of his choice of a profession. And so, at an age when boys nowadays have not yet gone to a public school, Nelson said farewell to lessons, and, no doubt to his great delight, started off alone to join the *Raisonable*, then lying at Chatham, in the Medway.

No boy going to school for the first time ever had more reason to feel unhappy.

On leaving the stage-coach at Chatham, he was at a loss where to go, and how to find his ship. Too shy to ask his way, he was wandering about feeling very forlorn and miserable, when fortunately a kind officer saw him, and spoke to him.

On learning that the unhappy-looking youngster was no lost lad, but a midshipman seeking his ship, the officer, who knew Captain Suckling, showed Horatio every

kindness, and after giving him a good dinner, finally saw him safely up board the Raisonable.

On arrival at the ship another disappointment awaited our hero. His uncle was away, and nobody on board knew anything about young Nelson, nor even expected a boy to arrive at all. However, he had to make the best of it somehow, and with the help of an old sailor, who took pity on his loneliness, he soon settled down to his new life, and from that time till the day of his death, except for a few brief months on shore, his home was on board ship.

These first few hours of misery and loneliness at Chatham Nelson never forgot.

In later years, remembering his own bitter experiences, he always made a point of giving a friendly welcome, and speaking a few words of encouragement and advice, to any young midshipman on first joining his ship; and he took good care that the boy's start in life should not be as trying and forlorn as his own had been.

Nelson's Early Years at Sea—His First Command

Before, however, war had actually begun, Great Britain and Spain agreed to come to terms, so Horatio was not yet to "smell powder."

Very shortly afterwards the *Raisonable* was paid off, and Captain Suckling got the command of the *Triumph*, 74 guns, then the guardship in the Medway. To this ship his nephew followed him, and was on her books for the next two years. During this time, however, the boy, in order to gain experience in his profession, by his uncle's advice went on a cruise to the West Indies on board a merchantman. On this voyage he shipped as a volunteer, and as a common seaman he shared the hard work and rough life of a fore-mast hand.

Life in the forecastle of a merchant ship was, of course, very uncomfortable, but it had its advantages, and he returned after a year's experience, to use his own words, "a practical seaman."

On rejoining the Triumph his uncle took care that his time should not be wasted, and among other duties he was continually employed in the cutter and long-boat. Thus

he not only became a good pilot, "confident of himself among rocks and sands," as he afterwards wrote, but he was at the same time learning the lessons of responsibility and self-reliance.

Shortly after this, an expedition to the North Pole was fitted out, and although an order was given that no boys were wanted, Nelson so earnestly begged Captain Lutwidge, the commander of the expedition, to let him come, that his wish was granted, and he sailed as the captain's coxswain, a position for which his lessons in managing a small boat, learnt in the Medway, quite fitted him, in spite of his youth.

In these Arctic seas our hero came near ending his life. One clear moonlight night, while the ship was lying ice-bound, he and another midshipman, armed with a rusty musket between them, slipped down over the side and started off over the frozen sea to try to shoot a Polar bear.

They had to wait some time before one was sighted, but at length a huge white fellow appeared. The middy took careful aim, pulled the trigger, but the musket missed fire.

"Never mind!" shouted young Horatio; "do but let me get a blow at him with the butt end and we shall have him." So saying, he dashed off with raised gun, determined to come to close quarters. Fortunately at this moment the noise of a gun from the ship broke the stillness of the Arctic night, and so startled the bear that, with a defiant growl, he turned tail and shambled off over the frozen snow.

When the boys got back to the ship, Captain Lutwidge, who had witnessed the scene and been thoroughly alarmed for their safety, spoke somewhat sharply to them for this piece of daring folly. Asked what he meant by it, Horatio, with the pout of his lip peculiar to him, could think of no other excuse than that "he wished to kill the bear that he might carry the skin to his father."

On his return from the Pole, he was as eager as ever for more service, and at his own wish he was transhipped, with scarcely a day on shore, to a small ship, the *Seahorse*, under orders to sail for the East Indies.

From the extremes of cold he was to go direct to the extremes of heat. "Nothing less than such a distant voyage could in the least satisfy my desire of maritime knowledge," he afterwards, explained.

On the *Seahorse* he at first did the work of an ordinary seaman aloft, but in a short time he was finally rated as midshipman and placed on the quarter-deck. We are told that he started from England a thick-set, athletic young man, with a ruddy-brown face and healthy complexion.

The frozen Pole was, however, kinder to him than the sun and heat of India. After two years he was invalided home, his life despaired of, and it was probably owing to the nursing and tender care of Captain Pigot of the *Dolphin*, in which ship he made the return voyage, that our future admiral owed his life.

He arrived in England three years from the time of his departure, no longer stout and strong as he had started,

but a mere living skeleton, for some time scarcely able to use his limbs.

When he had recovered, his next duty was that of acting lieutenant of the *Worcester*, 64 guns, then going out to Gibraltar on convoy duty. Nothing of special interest happened while on this ship, but the young man always after remembered with pride the words of his captain, "that he felt as easy when Nelson was upon deck, as any officer of the ship."

Some six months after joining the *Worcester*, another rung of the ladder was reached, another milestone on the road to fame was left behind, for on the 8th April 1777 he passed his examination for lieutenant.

Two days later he got his commission to the *Lowestoft*, a frigate of 32 guns. Once again he visited the West Indies; but whereas before he had shared the hardships and labour of a common seaman in the merchant service, this time he sailed as a full-fledged ward-room officer in the Royal Navy.

Great Britain was now at war with her revolted American colonies, which were soon to be known as the United States.

Promotion on such a station was always rapid, and a frigate, being both fast-sailing and active, was considered a grand school for a young officer.

But even a frigate was not active enough for Nelson's mind, and he soon managed to be transferred to the schooner which acted as tender to the *Lowestoffe*. Here

he was able to put into practice the lessons in pilotage learned in the Medway. There was much responsibility laid on his shoulders, and his position gave scope for the fearless self-reliance which he already was seen to possess.

Before leaving the *Lowestoffe* he had distinguished himself by an act of skilful seamanship and great bravery.

The frigate had captured a Yankee privateer, and the first lieutenant had been sent to board the prize. There was a heavy sea running at the time, and after one or two attempts the boat was obliged to return, having failed in her object.

"Have I no officer in the ship who can board her?" exclaimed the captain.

"It is my turn now! If I come back, it is yours," said Nelson, stopping another officer who had hurried to the side, and jumping into the boat himself.

Then, as always, he was "the first on every service, whether by day or night," and his zeal and love of duty were bringing their reward, for promotion was coming fast.

Joining the *Bristol*, Sir Peter Parker's flag-ship, as third lieutenant, in July, he had risen to be first by September. The admiral took a great liking to the eager young lieutenant, and, showing the greatest interest in him and in another young officer, afterwards to become famous as Lord Collingwood, did his best to bring the two young men forward. Both more than bore out their chief's sound

judgment, and showed that the fine old sailor had not been mistaken in his men.

At twenty, Nelson was a commander, while a year later he was post-captain of the *Hinchinbrook*.

Great Britain was by this time at war with both France and Spain, and there was a great deal of fighting on shore, in which Nelson had his share and showed great courage.

In the words of an eye-witness, "he did more than his duty; when anything was to be done, he saw no difficulties."

The climate was a trying one, the work hard, and the food often scarce, and there was little wonder that his health gave way. For a long time he refused to leave his post, until finally, almost at death's door, he was carried to the admiral's house in Jamaica. Here he had always been treated almost like a son of the house, and now, thanks to Lady Parker's care and nursing, he partly recovered, and was at length able to return to England.

After some nine months' illness, he began to feel a little better, and the first thing he thought of was to apply for a new ship.

The Admiralty gave him the command of the *Albemarle*, a frigate of 28 guns, and though still an invalid, and often in great pain, Nelson was glad to be employed again, and entered on his new duties with cheerfulness.

He had the power of winning men's hearts, and his new ship's company, both officers and men, soon showed that they would do anything to serve him.

After visiting the Baltic, where he was afterwards to become so famous, the *Albemarle* sailed for Quebec, and while on this station Nelson soon gave a proof of his skill and coolness in the face of danger.

His little frigate was met and chased one day by a whole French squadron. Escape seemed impossible, but holding on under every stitch of canvas, Nelson coolly threaded his way among the shoals and sands of Boston Bay, where the big French vessels were afraid to follow for fear of running aground. One frigate, indeed, tried to do so, but on the *Albemarle* clearing for action, thought better of it, and afraid to attack single-handed, turned back and rejoined the other ships. Well might Lord Hood declare that the young captain "knew as much about naval tactics as any officer in the fleet!"

A midshipman on Lord Hood's flagship, no less a person than our future king, William IV., thus gives his early impressions of our hero, whom he met now for the first time, and with whom he formed a lasting friendship. To him the commander of the *Albemarle* appeared "the merest boy of a captain," but he adds, "there was something irresistibly pleasing in his address and conversation, and an enthusiasm that showed he was no common being."

Peace was soon after declared, and the "boy captain" returned with Hood to England. Of money from the capture of the enemies' vessels he had little, but of honour, which he prized far above riches, he had had his share.

On the *Albemarle* being paid off, his whole ship's com-

pany showed the affection they felt for her captain by offering, if he could get another ship, to enter her immediately. Nelson was much touched by this devotion, but he had earned a rest, and after being presented to his sovereign by Hood, he returned once more to his father's quiet rectory, to wait till the Admiralty should again call on his services. While thus on half pay, and being eager to gain any knowledge likely to help him in his profession, he got leave of absence to visit France, in order to learn the language.

Of this holiday he writes: "I hate their country and their manners;" and this view he never altered. To the day of his death the man who broke and destroyed the power of France "hated a Frenchman like the devil."

Nelson in the West Indies—And in the Mediterranean

Thanks to Lord Hood, very shortly after Nelson's return to England he was appointed to the command of the frigate *Boreas*.

In this ship he again sailed for the West Indies, taking on board Sir Richard Hughes, the commander-in-chief of the Leeward Islands, and Lady Hughes.

There were some thirty midshipmen on board, and Lady Hughes was much struck with Nelson's interest in and kindness to "the young gentlemen who had the happiness of being on his quarter-deck," as she calls them.

"Well, sir," he would say to some midshipman newly come from a life on shore, and naturally rather timid of going aloft, "I am going to race to the mast-head, and beg I may meet you there."

Encouraged by this, the boy would clamber up somehow, to be met at the top by his captain, who would assure him that it was very foolish to imagine that there was any danger in the feat, and very soon the youngster would be as much at home scaling the rigging as if he were climbing a tree bird-nesting.

When Nelson had to attend any big dinner or state banquet on shore a middy always went with him.

"Your Excellency must excuse me for bringing one of my midshipmen," he said to the Governor of Barbados, "as I make it a rule to introduce them to all the good company I can, as they have few to look up to besides myself during the time they are at sea."

Nelson was by this time second in command on the station, so quickly had he risen; and as senior captain he had a great deal of work to do. One of his chief duties was to prevent smuggling between the British colonies and the new United States. This may have been not quite to his liking, and for the first and only time in his life Nelson was to feel that he was unpopular. Bitterly he felt it; but in spite of the cold looks and angry murmurings of those around him—especially of his former friends, the planters—he stuck to his duty, and earned the thanks and gratitude of his king and country.

Some of his West Indian friends remained true to him, especially a Mr. P. Herbert, the President of the island of Nevis, who lived with his niece, Mrs. Nisbet, a young widow of twenty-eight, and her son, a child of three.

The latter soon made great friends with the warm-hearted sailor, who romped and played with him to his heart's content. One day, hearing that Nelson had called, Mr. Herbert hastened to greet him, when, to his astonishment, he found "that great little man, of whom everybody

is so afraid, playing under the dining table with Mrs. Nisbet's child."

Mrs. Nisbet was much touched by the kindness to her boy, and Nelson soon won her heart also.

They were married on 11th March 1787, Prince William adding distinction to his friend's wedding by giving away the bride.

Three months after the *Boreas* sailed for England, and, on arrival there, Nelson went with his wife and stepson to live under his father's roof at Burnham Thorpe.

Mr. Nelson was now an old man, and had long been an invalid, but the sight of his dear son, he declared, had given him new life. The latter had intended to go to France to again study the language, but his father begged him so hard to stay and cheer his old age, that Nelson felt it would be cruel to distress the fond parent he might never see again.

While at the parsonage he spent his time quietly, but on the whole happily enough. Sometimes he would dig for hours at a time in the garden, for the sheer pleasure of feeling weary after hard exercise. At other times his boyish spirit came out, and he would go long bird-nesting excursions with Mrs. Nelson as his companion. But on the whole the idle life of a country gentleman did not suit the man whose real home was on the sea.

He took an interest in greyhounds and coursing. "Shoot I cannot, so I have not taken out a licence," he writes to a friend. His habit of carrying his gun at full cock and letting

it off without even bringing it to his shoulder was scarcely likely to kill much game, though he proudly relates that he once shot a partridge.

The events of the French Revolution were, however, soon to provide him with more exciting work than shooting and bird-nesting.

In 1793 all Europe was horrified by the news that the French had beheaded their king and queen, and had promised "assistance to all peoples and countries wishing to be free."

This was a direct challenge to all forms of law and order, and was a threat at the loyal people of Britain, who were wisely and kindly governed and had no wish for any change.

The country had need of her seamen, and on the 30th January Nelson got what he had always wished for—the command of a battle-ship, the *Agamemnon*, of 64 guns.

Two days later Great Britain and Holland declared war on the French Republic.

Already Nelson had become known as a brave and kind captain to serve under, and a fresh proof of his popularity was given on his taking up his new command. From his native county, Norfolk, seamen flocked in numbers to his flag, and captains whose ships were filled by the aid of the hated pressgang looked on with envy at the ease with which the *Agamemnon* secured a crew. Nor were friends of Nelson's own rank lacking; for, besides his stepson, Josiah Nisbet, who went with him, many of his

neighbours, the Norfolk squires, were glad to let their sons serve under him.

Nelson was a good hater, and his advice to his midshipmen was short and to the point:—

"First," he said, "you must always implicitly obey orders without attempting to form any opinion of your own respecting their propriety; secondly, you must consider every man your enemy who speaks ill of the king; and, thirdly, *you must hate a Frenchman as you do the devil.*"

The French were said to have found a way by which they could throw red-hot shot upon their enemy's ships, and thus set them on fire. This caused some alarm in England, but Nelson only laughingly said, "Then we must get so close to those red-hot gentlemen that their shot may go through both sides, when it will not matter whether they are hot or cold." And in this wish to come to close quarters the captain and crew of the Agamemnon sailed.

Their first duty was the blockade of the towns of Toulon and Marseilles. This was not exciting work, and Nelson longed for actual fighting.

"All we get here," he writes, "is honour and salt beef;" and greatly did he rejoice when, after nineteen weeks, he was sent to the island of Corsica.

Corsica had lately been given up to France by the Republic of Genoa, without asking the wishes of the natives.

Under their brave chief Paoli, who declared that "the rocks which surrounded him should melt away" before

he gave in, they made a brave fight, but the French were too strong. And so the British determined to help these islanders in their struggle for liberty.

To Nelson, in whom Lord Hood had the greatest confidence, was entrusted the siege of Bastia, an important town, to the capture of which he gave his whole heart and mind. But the task was a hard one. The strength of the enemy was much greater than Hood had fancied, and to have failed against such odds would have been no disgrace. Indeed, had Nelson let his commander-in-chief know how greatly outnumbered he was, the risk might never have been taken.

The captain of the *Agamemnon*, however, was not the man to think of difficulty or danger, and in the end he triumphed.

"I always was of the opinion, have ever acted up to it, and never had any reason to repent it, that one Englishman was equal to three Frenchmen," he had declared; and after some sharp fighting the garrison of Bastia, consisting of 4500 men, laid down their arms to less than 1200 British seamen.

Unhurt before Bastia, Nelson was not to be so lucky at his next fight, the siege of Calvi. Here much of his duty lay on shore. The climate was a deadly one; men died around him in scores; he himself was constantly ill, but his pluck and spirits seemed to keep life within him.

"I am the reed among the oaks," he wrote; "I bow before the storm while the sturdy oak is laid low." To

add to his sufferings, a shot struck near him, while in the batteries before the town, and blinded him with sand and gravel.

Though he lost the sight of one eye and suffered great pain, he still stuck to his post. "Nothing but the loss of a limb would have kept me from my duty," he declared.

At length Calvi fell, and the wounded captain got back to the *Agamemnon*, now more like a floating hospital than a ship of war, so filled was she by the sick and wounded.

Though defeated in Corsica, the French were everywhere else successful.

The combined armies of Great Britain, Austria, and Holland had been driven out of France and Belgium, and the Prussians and Austrians had retreated to the right bank of the Rhine. In Spain also France was victorious, and Italy was soon to be crushed.

The fate of Europe hung in the balance; Bonaparte and his conquering armies seemed to have cast a great shadow of fear and oppression over the nations, and all eyes were turned upon England and her sea power as the one means of saving Europe.

With Corsica as a place of shelter for her ships, the influence of Britain had greatly increased in the Mediterranean. The French saw that to make all their conquests secure the British fleet must be destroyed, and on 8th March 1795 they sent out fifteen ships of the line, with six smaller vessels.

Admiral Hotham, who was now in Lord Hood's place,