

The Life of Horatio Lord Nelson

by

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Chapter 1. 1758 – 1783.....	3
Chapter 2. 1784 - 1793.....	17
Chapter 3. 1793 – 1795.....	27
Chapter 4. 1796 – 1797.....	45
Chapter 5. 1798.....	59
Chapter 6. 1798 – 1800.....	74
Chapter 7. 1800 – 1801.....	99
Chapter 8. 1801 – 1805.....	118
Chapter 9. 1805.....	136

Chapter 1. 1758 – 1783

Nelson's Birth and Boyhood--He is entered on Board the RAISONABLE-- Goes to the West Indies in a Merchant-ship; then serves in the TRIUMPH --He sails in Captain Phipps' Voyage of Discovery--Goes to the East Indies in the SEAHORSE, and returns in ill Health--Serves as acting Lieutenant in the WORCESTER, and is made Lieutenant into the LOWESTOFFE, Commander into the BADGER Brig, and Post into the HINCHINBROKE-- Expedition against the Spanish Main--Sent to the North Seas in the ALBERMARLE--Services during the American War.

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HORATIO, son of Edmund and Catherine Nelson, was born September 29, 1758, in the parsonage-house of Burnham Thorpe, a village in the county of Norfolk, of which his father was rector. His mother was a daughter of Dr. Suckling, prebendary of Westminster, whose grandmother was sister of Sir Robert Walpole, and this child was named after his godfather, the first Lord Walpole. Mrs. Nelson died in 1767, leaving eight out of eleven children. Her brother, Captain Maurice Suckling, of the navy visited the widower upon this event, and promised to take care of one of the boys. Three years afterwards, when HORATIO was only twelve years of age, being at home during the Christmas holidays, he read in the county newspaper that his uncle was appointed to the RAISONNABLE, of sixty-four guns. "Do, William," said he to a brother who was a year and a half older than him- self, "write to my father, and tell him that I should like to go to sea with uncle Maurice." Mr.Nelson was then at Bath, whither he had gone for the recovery of his health: his circumstances were straitened, and he had no prospect of ever seeing them bettered: he knew that it was the wish of providing for himself by which Horatio was chiefly actuated, and did not oppose his resolution; he understood also the boy's character, and had always said, that in whatever station he might be placed, he would climb if possible to the very top of the tree. Captain Suckling was written to. "What," said he in his answer,"has poor Horatio done, who is so weak, that he, above all the rest, should be sent to rough it out at sea?--But let him come; and the first time we go into action, a cannon-ball may knock off his head, and provide for him at once."

It is manifest from these words that Horatio was not the boy whom his uncle would have chosen to bring up in his own profession. He was never of a strong body; and the ague, which at that time was one of the most common diseases in England, had greatly reduced his strength; yet he had already given proofs of that resolute heart and nobleness of mind which, during his whole career of labour and of glory, so eminently distinguished him. When a mere child, he strayed a-birds'-nesting from his grandmother's house in company with a cowboy: the dinner-hour elapsed; he was absent, and could not be found; and the alarm of the family became very great, for they apprehended that he might have been carried off by gipsies. At length, after search had been made for him in various directions, he was discovered alone, sitting composedly by the side of a brook which he could not get over. "I wonder, child," said the old lady when she saw him,"that hunger and fear did

not drive you home." "Fear! grandmama:" replied the future hero, "I never saw fear:-- What is it?" Once, after the winter holidays, when he and his brother William had set off on horseback to return to school, they came back, because there had been a fall of snow; and William, who did not much like the journey, said it was too deep for them to venture on. "If that be the case," said the father, "you certainly shall not go; but make another attempt, and I will leave it to your honour. If the road is dangerous you may return: but remember, boys, I leave it to your honour!" The snow was deep enough to have afforded them a reasonable excuse; but Horatio was not to be prevailed upon to turn back. "We must go on," said he: "remember, brother, it was left to our honour!"--There were some fine pears growing in the schoolmaster's garden, which the boys regarded as lawful booty, and in the highest degree tempting; but the boldest among them were afraid to venture for the prize. Horatio volunteered upon this service: he was lowered down at night from the bedroom window by some sheets, plundered the tree, was drawn up with the pears, and then distributed them among his school-fellows without reserving any for himself. "He only took them," he said, "because every other boy was afraid."

Early on a cold and dark spring morning Mr. Nelson's servant arrived at this school, at North Walsham, with the expected summons for Horatio to join his ship. The parting from his brother William, who had been for so many years his playmate and bed-fellow, was a painful effort, and was the beginning of those privations which are the sailor's lot through life. He accompanied his father to London. The *RAISONNABLE* was lying in the Medway. He was put into the Chatham stage, and on its arrival was set down with the rest of the passengers, and left to find his way on board as he could. After wandering about in the cold, without being able to reach the ship, an officer observed the forlorn appearance of the boy, questioned him; and happening to be acquainted with his uncle, took him home and gave him some refreshments. When he got on board, Captain Suckling was not in the ship, nor had any person been apprised of the boy's coming. He paced the deck the whole remainder of the day without being noticed by any one; and it was not till the second day that somebody, as he expressed it, "took compassion on him." The pain which is felt when we are first transplanted from our native soil--when the living branch is cut from the parent tree is one of the most poignant which we have to endure through life. There are after-griefs which wound more deeply, which leave behind them scars never to be effaced, which bruise the spirit, and sometimes break the heart; but never do we feel so keenly the want of love, the necessity of being loved, and the sense of utter desertion, as when we first leave the haven of home, and are, as it were, pushed off upon the stream of life. Added to these feelings, the sea-boy has to endure physical hardships, and the privation of every comfort, even of sleep. Nelson had a feeble body and an affectionate heart, and he remembered through life his first days of wretchedness in the service.

The *RAISONNABLE* having been commissioned on account of the dispute respecting the Falkland Islands, was paid off as soon as the difference with the court of Spain was accommodated, and Captain Suckling was removed to the *TRIUMPH*, seventy-four, then stationed as a guard-ship in the Thames. This was considered as too inactive a life for a boy, and Nelson was therefore sent a voyage to the West Indies in a merchant-ship, commanded by Mr. John Rathbone, an excellent seaman, who had served as master's

mate under Captain Suckling in the Dreadnought. He returned a practical seaman, but with a hatred of the king's service, and a saying then common among the sailors--"Aft the most honour; forward the better man." Rathbone had probably been disappointed and disgusted in the navy; and, with no unfriendly intentions, warned Nelson against a profession which he himself had found hopeless. His uncle received him on board the TRIUMPH on his return, and discovering his dislike to the navy, took the best means of reconciling him to it. He held it out as a reward that, if he attended well to his navigation, he should go in the cutter and decked long-boat, which was attached to the commanding-officer's ship at Chatham. Thus he became a good pilot for vessels of that description from Chatham to the Tower, and down the Swin Channel to the North Foreland, and acquired a confidence among rocks and sands of which he often felt the value.

Nelson had not been many months on board the TRIUMPH, when his love of enterprise was excited by hearing that two ships were fitting out for a voyage of discovery towards the North Pole. In consequence of the difficulties which were expected on such a service, these vessels were to take out effective men instead of the usual number of boys. This, however, did not deter him from soliciting to be received, and, by his uncle's interest, he was admitted as coxswain under Captain Lutwidge, second in command. The voyage was undertaken in compliance with an application from the Royal Society. The Hon. Captain Constantine John Phipps, eldest son of Lord Mulgrave, volunteered his services. The RACEHORSE and CARCASS bombs were selected as the strongest ships, and, therefore, best adapted for such a voyage; and they were taken into dock and strengthened, to render them as secure as possible against the ice. Two masters of Greenlandmen were employed as pilots for each ship. No expedition was ever more carefully fitted out; and the First Lord of the Admiralty, Lord Sandwich, with a laudable solicitude, went on board himself, before their departure, to see that everything had been completed to the wish of the officers. The ships were provided with a simple and excellent apparatus for distilling fresh from salt water, the invention of Dr. Irving, who accompanied the expedition. It consisted merely in fitting a tube to the ship's kettle, and applying a wet mop to the surface as the vapour was passing. By these means, from thirty-four to forty gallons were produced every day.

They sailed from the Nore on the 4th of June. On the 6th of July they were in latitude 79d 56m 39s; longitude 9d 43m 30s E. The next day, about the place where most of the old discoverers had been stopped, the RACEHORSE was beset with ice; but they hove her through with ice-anchors. Captain Phipps continued ranging along the ice, northward and westward, till the 24th; he then tried to the eastward. On the 30th he was in latitude 80d 13m; longitude 18d 48m E. among the islands and in the ice, with no appearance of an opening for the ships. The weather was exceedingly fine, mild, and unusually clear. Here they were becalmed in a large bay, with three apparent openings between the islands which formed it; but everywhere, as far as they could see, surrounded with ice. There was not a breath of air, the water was perfectly smooth, the ice covered with snow, low and even, except a few broken pieces near the edge; and the pools of water in the middle of the ice-fields just crusted over with young ice. On the next day the ice closed upon them, and no opening was to be seen anywhere, except a hole, or lake as it might be called, of about a mile and a half in circumference, where the ships lay fast to the ice with their ice-

anchors. From these ice-fields they filled their casks with water, which was very pure and soft. The men were playing on the ice all day; but the Greenland pilots, who were further than they had ever been before, and considered that the season was far advancing, were alarmed at being thus beset.

The next day there was not the smallest opening; the ships were within less than two lengths of each other, separated by ice, and neither having room to turn. The ice, which the day before had been flat and almost level with the water's edge, was now in many places forced higher than the mainyard by the pieces squeezing together. A day of thick fog followed: it was succeeded by clear weather; but the passage by which the ships had entered from the westward was closed, and no open water was in sight, either in that or any other quarter. By the pilots' advice the men were set to cut a passage, and warp through the small openings to the westward. They sawed through pieces of ice twelve feet thick; and this labour continued the whole day, during which their utmost efforts did not move the ships above three hundred yards; while they were driven, together with the ice, far to the N.E. and E. by the current. Sometimes a field of several acres square would be lifted up between two larger islands, and incorporated with them; and thus these larger pieces continued to grow by aggregation. Another day passed, and there seemed no probability of getting the ships out without a strong E. or N.E. wind. The season was far advanced, and every hour lessened the chance of extricating themselves. Young as he was, Nelson was appointed to command one of the boats which were sent out to explore a passage into the open water. It was the means of saving a boat belonging to the RACEHORSE from a singular but imminent danger. Some of the officers had fired at and wounded a walrus. As no other animal has so human-like an expression in its countenance, so also is there none that seems to possess more of the passions of humanity. The wounded animal dived immediately, and brought up a number of its companions; and they all joined in an attack upon the boat. They wrested an oar from one of the men; and it was with the utmost difficulty that the crew could prevent them from staving or upsetting her, till the CARCASS's boat came up; and the walruses, finding their enemies thus reinforced, dispersed. Young Nelson exposed himself in a more daring manner. One night, during the mid-watch, he stole from the ship with one of his comrades, taking advantage of a rising fog, and set off over the ice in pursuit of a bear. It was not long before they were missed. The fog thickened, and Captain Lutwidge and his officers became exceedingly alarmed for their safety. Between three and four in the morning the weather cleared, and the two adventurers were seen, at a considerable distance from the ship, attacking a huge bear. The signal for them to return was immediately made; Nelson's comrade called upon him to obey it, but in vain; his musket had flashed in the pan; their ammunition was expended; and a chasm in the ice, which divided him from the bear, probably preserved his life. "Never mind," he cried; "do but let me get a blow at this devil with the butt-end of my musket, and we shall have him." Captain Lutwidge, however, seeing his danger, fired a gun, which had the desired effect of frightening the beast; and the boy then returned, somewhat afraid of the consequences of his trespass. The captain reprimanded him sternly for conduct so unworthy of the office which he filled, and desired to know what motive he could have for hunting a bear. "Sir," said he, pouting his lip, as he was wont to do when agitated, "I wished to kill the bear, that I might carry the skin to my father."

A party were now sent to an island, about twelve miles off (named Walden's Island in the charts, from the midshipman who was intrusted with this service), to see where the open water lay. They came back with information that the ice, though close all about them, was open to the westward, round the point by which they came in. They said also, that upon the island they had had a fresh east wind. This intelligence considerably abated the hopes of the crew; for where they lay it had been almost calm, and their main dependence had been upon the effect of an easterly wind in clearing the bay. There was but one alternative: either to wait the event of the weather upon the ships, or to betake themselves to the boats. The likelihood that it might be necessary to sacrifice the ships had been foreseen. The boats accordingly were adapted, both in number and size, to transport, in case of emergency, the whole crew; and there were Dutch whalers upon the coast, in which they could all be conveyed to Europe. As for wintering where they were, that dreadful experiment had been already tried too often. No time was to be lost; the ships had driven into shoal water, having but fourteen fathoms. Should they, or the ice to which they were fast, take the ground, they must inevitably be lost; and at this time they were driving fast toward some rocks on the N.E. Captain Phipps sent for the officers of both ships, and told them his intention of preparing the boats for going away. They were immediately hoisted out, and the fitting begun. Canvas bread-bags were made, in case it should be necessary suddenly to desert the vessels; and men were sent with the lead and line to N. and E., to sound wherever they found cracks in the ice, that they might have notice before the ice took the ground; for in that case the ships must instantly have been crushed or overset.

On the 7th of August they began to haul the boats over the ice, Nelson having command of a four-oared cutter. The men behaved excellently well, like true British seamen: they seemed reconciled to the thought of leaving the ships, and had full confidence in their officers. About noon, the ice appeared rather more open near the vessels; and as the wind was easterly, though there was but little of it, the sails were set, and they got about a mile to the westward. They moved very slowly, and were not now nearly so far to the westward as when they were first beset. However, all sail was kept upon them, to force them through whenever the ice slackened the least. Whatever exertions were made, it could not be possible to get the boats to the water's edge before the 14th; and if the situation of the ships should not alter by that time, it would not be justifiable to stay longer by them. The commander therefore resolved to carry on both attempts together, moving the boats constantly, and taking every opportunity of getting the ships through. A party was sent out next day to the westward to examine the state of the ice: they returned with tidings that it was very heavy and close, consisting chiefly of large fields. The ships, however, moved something, and the ice itself was drifting westward. There was a thick fog, so that it was impossible to ascertain what advantage had been gained. It continued on the 9th; but the ships were moved a little through some very small openings: the mist cleared off in the afternoon, and it was then perceived that they had driven much more than could have been expected to the westward, and that the ice itself had driven still further. In the course of the day they got past the boats, and took them on board again. On the morrow the wind sprang up to the N.N.E. All sail was set, and the ships forced their way through a great deal of very heavy ice. They frequently struck, and with such force that one stroke broke the shank of the RACEHORSE's best bower- anchor, but the vessels made way;

and by noon they had cleared the ice, and were out at sea. The next day they anchored in Smeerenberg Harbour, close to that island of which the westernmost point is called Hakluyt's Headland, in honour of the great promoter and compiler of our English voyages of discovery.

Here they remained a few days, that the men might rest after their fatigue. No insect was to be seen in this dreary country, nor any species of reptile--not even the common earth-worm. Large bodies of ice, called icebergs, filled up the valleys between high mountains, so dark as, when contrasted with the snow, to appear black. The colour of the ice was a lively light green. Opposite to the place where they fixed their observatory was one of these icebergs, above three hundred feet high; its side toward the sea was nearly perpendicular, and a stream of water issued from it. Large pieces frequently broke off and rolled down into the sea. There was no thunder nor lightning during the whole time they were in these latitudes. The sky was generally loaded with hard white clouds, from which it was never entirely free even in the clearest weather. They always knew when they were approaching the ice long before they saw it, by a bright appearance near the horizon, which the Greenlandmen called the blink of the ice. The season was now so far advanced that nothing more could have been attempted, if indeed anything had been left untried; but the summer had been unusually favourable, and they had carefully surveyed the wall of ice, extending for more than twenty degrees between the latitudes of 80d and 81d, without the smallest appearance of any opening.

The ships were paid off shortly after their return to England; and Nelson was then placed by his uncle with Captain Farmer, in the SEAHORSE, of twenty guns, then going out to the East Indies in the squadron under Sir Edward Hughes. He was stationed in the foretop at watch and watch. His good conduct attracted the attention of the master (afterwards Captain Surridge), in whose watch he was; and upon his recommendation the captain rated him as midshipman. At this time his countenance was florid, and his appearance rather stout and athletic; but when he had been about eighteen months in India, he felt the effects of that climate, so perilous to European constitutions. The disease baffled all power of medicine; he was reduced almost to a skeleton; the use of his limbs was for some time entirely lost; and the only hope that remained was from a voyage home. Accordingly he was brought home by Captain Pigot, in the DOLPHIN; and had it not been for the attentive and careful kindness of that officer on the way, Nelson would never have lived to reach his native shores. He had formed an acquaintance with Sir Charles Pole, Sir Thomas Troubridge, and other distinguished officers, then, like himself, beginning their career: he had left them pursuing that career in full enjoyment of health and hope, and was returning, from a country in which all things were to him new and interesting, with a body broken down by sickness, and spirits which had sunk with his strength. Long afterwards, when the name of Nelson was known as widely as that of England itself, he spoke of the feelings which he at this time endured. "I felt impressed," said he, "with a feeling that I should never rise in my profession. My mind was staggered with a view of the difficulties I had to surmount and the little interest I possessed. I could discover no means of reaching the object of my ambition. After a long and gloomy reverie, in which I almost wished myself overboard, a sudden glow of patriotism was

kindled within me, and presented my king and country as my patron. 'Well then,' I exclaimed, 'I will be a hero! and, confiding in Providence, I will brave every danger!'"

Long afterwards Nelson loved to speak of the feelings of that moment; and from that time, he often said, a radiant orb was suspended in his mind's eye, which urged him onward to renown. The state of mind in which these feelings began, is what the mystics mean by their season of darkness and desertion. If the animal spirits fail, they represent it as an actual temptation. The enthusiasm of Nelson's nature had taken a different direction, but its essence was the same. He knew to what the previous state of dejection was to be attributed; that an enfeebled body, and a mind depressed, had cast this shade over his soul; but he always seemed willing to believe that the sunshine which succeeded bore with it a prophetic glory, and that the light which led him on was "light from heaven."

His interest, however, was far better than he imagined, During his absence, Captain Suckling had been made Comptroller of the Navy; his health had materially improved upon the voyage; and as soon as the DOLPHIN was paid off, he was appointed acting lieutenant in the WORCESTER, sixty-four, Captain Mark Robinson, then going out with convoy to Gibraltar. Soon after his return, on the 8th of April 1777, he passed his examination for a lieutenancy. Captain Suckling sat at the head of the board; and when the examination had ended, in a manner highly honourable to Nelson, rose from his seat, and introduced him to the examining captains as his nephew. They expressed their wonder that he had not informed them of this relationship before; he replied that he did not wish the youngster to be favoured; he knew his nephew would pass a good examination, and he had not been deceived. The next day Nelson received his commission as second lieutenant of the LOWESTOFFE frigate, Captain William Locker, then fitting out for Jamaica.

American and French privateers, under American colours, were at that time harassing our trade in the West Indies: even a frigate was not sufficiently active for Nelson, and he repeatedly got appointed to the command of one of the LOWESTOFFE's tenders. During one of their cruises the LOWESTOFFE captured an American letter-of-marque: it was blowing a gale, and a heavy sea running. The first lieutenant being ordered to board the prize, went below to put on his hanger. It happened to be mislaid; and while he was seeking it, Captain Locker came on deck. Perceiving the boat still alongside, and in danger every moment of being swamped, and being extremely anxious that the privateer should be instantly taken in charge, because he feared that it would otherwise founder, he exclaimed, "Have I no officer in the ship who can board the prize?" Nelson did not offer himself immediately, waiting, with his usual sense of propriety, for the first lieutenant's return; but hearing the master volunteer, he jumped into the boat, saying, "It is my turn now; and if I come back, it is yours." The American, who had carried a heavy press of sail in hope of escaping, was so completely water-logged that the LOWESTOFFE's boat went in on deck and out again with the sea

About this time he lost his uncle. Captain Locker, however, who had perceived the excellent qualities of Nelson, and formed a friendship for him which continued during his

life, recommended him warmly to Sir Peter Parker, then commander-in-chief upon that station. In consequence of this recommendation he was removed into the BRISTOL flagship, and Lieutenant Cuthbert Collingwood succeeded him in the LOWESTOFFE. Sir Peter Parker was the friend of both, and thus it happened that whenever Nelson got a step in rank, Collingwood succeeded him. The former soon became first lieutenant, and on the 8th of December 1778 was appointed commander of the BADGER brig; Collingwood taking his place in the BRISTOL. While the BADGER was lying in Montego Bay, Jamaica, the GLASGOW of twenty guns came in and anchored there, and in two hours was in flames, the steward having set fire to her while stealing rum out of the after-hold. Her crew were leaping into the water, when Nelson came up in his boats, made them throw their powder overboard and point their guns upward; and by his presence of mind and personal exertions prevented the loss of life which would otherwise have ensued. On the 11th of June 1779 he was made post into the HINCHINBROOK, of twenty-eight guns, an enemy's merchantman, sheathed with wood, which had been taken into the service. Collingwood was then made commander into the BADGER. A short time after he left the LOWESTOFFE, that ship, with a small squadron, stormed the fort of St. Fernando de Omoa, on the south side of the Bay of Honduras, and captured some register ships which were lying under its guns. Two hundred and fifty quintals of quicksilver and three millions of piastres were the reward of this enterprise; and it is characteristic of Nelson that the chance by which he missed a share in such a prize is never mentioned in any of his letters; nor is it likely that it ever excited even a momentary feeling of vexation.

Nelson was fortunate in possessing good interest at the time when it could be most serviceable to him: his promotion had been almost as rapid as it could be; and before he had attained the age of twenty-one he had gained that rank which brought all the honours of the service within his reach. No opportunity, indeed, had yet been given him of distinguishing himself; but he was thoroughly master of his profession, and his zeal and ability were acknowledged wherever he was known. Count d'Estaing, with a fleet of one hundred and twenty-five sail, men of war and transports, and a reputed force of five-and-twenty thousand men, threatened Jamaica from St. Domingo. Nelson offered his services to the Admiral and to Governor-General Dalling, and was appointed to command the batteries of Fort Charles, at Port Royal. Not more than seven thousand men could be mustered for the defence of the island,--a number wholly inadequate to resist the force which threatened them. Of this Nelson was so well aware, that when he wrote to his friends in England, he told them they must not be surprised to hear of his learning to speak French. D'Estaing, however, was either not aware of his own superiority, or not equal to the command with which he was intrusted: he attempted nothing with his formidable armament; and General Dalling was thus left to execute a project which he had formed against the Spanish colonies.

This project was, to take Fort San Juan on the river of that name, which flows from Lake Nicaragua into the Atlantic; make himself master of the lake itself, and of the cities of Granada and Leon; and thus cut off the communication of the Spaniards between their northern and southern possessions in America. Here it is that a canal between the two seas may most easily be formed--a work more important in its consequences than any

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