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HILARY MANTEL, *SUNDAY TIMES*

'FASCINATING'
MAIL ON SUNDAY

'TRULY EXCELLENT'
GUARDIAN

Barry Unsworth

BOOKER PRIZE-WINNING AUTHOR OF *SACRED HUNGER*

Losing Nelson

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About the Book

As the child of an absent mother and a disapproving father, Charles Cleasby found comfort in solitary games of chess. Many years later, in the house where he grew up and now lives alone, he re-enacts the naval battles of his hero Horatio Nelson, moving model ships as carefully as he once did chess pieces.

Having long been convinced of a link between ‘this great man’s life and mine’, Charles, surrounded by his collection of Nelson memorabilia, begins work on his biography of the Admiral and is unsettled to find that Nelson may not have been the perfect leader he’s always imagined. To doubt his hero’s integrity feels like a terrible betrayal, but if Nelson is not the man Charles thought he was, what does that mean for him?

About the Author

Barry Unsworth was born in 1930 in Durham. He was the author of many novels, including *Pascali's Island*, which was shortlisted for the 1980 Booker Prize; *Stone Virgin* (1985); *Sacred Hunger*, which was joint winner of the 1992 Booker Prize; *Morality Play*, which was short -listed for the 1995 Booker Prize; *Losing Nelson* (1999); *The Songs of the Kings* (2002); *The Ruby in Her Navel* (2006); *Land of Marvels* (2009); and *The Quality of Mercy* (2011), which was shortlisted for The Walter Scott Prize for historical fiction. Barry Unsworth died in 2012.

Also by Barry Unsworth

The Partnership
The Greeks Have a Word for It
The Hide
Mooncranker's Gift
The Big Day
Pascali's Island (published in the United States under the title *The Idol Hunters*)
The Rage of the Vulture
Stone Virgin
Sugar and Rum
Sacred Hunger
Morality Play
After Hannibal
The Songs of the Kings
The Ruby in Her Navel
Land of Marvels
The Quality of Mercy

Losing Nelson

Barry Unsworth

WINDMILL BOOKS

For Aira with my love

1

I HAD A bad fright that morning. I wouldn't have left the house at all on such a special day if the man at Seldon's hadn't phoned to say they had a piece I might be interested in. It was an oval plate, bone china, frilled at the edges, slightly curved at the sides, pale cream in colour, with a central medallion enclosing his profile in dark blue. There was an inscription of the same colour in slightly worn cursive, running round the upper half of the medallion: *Hero of the Nile*. They had used the De Vaere profile made for Wedgwood in the summer of 1798. Nothing very remarkable about it. But of course I agreed to buy it. It bore his image. It was seldom indeed I could resist that.

I was on my way back home with it, back to Belsize Park. It was a raw day and the sky was darkly overcast. Nevertheless, I decided to walk as far as Knightsbridge for the sake of the exercise. I had time to spare – or so I thought. As I was crossing Pont Street it started to rain, not very heavily. The platform in the Underground was crowded and became steadily more so while I waited. There was a silence among the people there, silence of waiting – they were resigned. I began to feel the first twinges of panic. Then an Asian voice on the loudspeaker: a delay on the line due to security checks at Gloucester Road Station.

It was thirteen minutes to twelve. Imagine my feelings. This was the 14th of February, it was the two hundredth anniversary of the Battle of Cape St Vincent, Horatio's first great disobedience, the day he became an angel. On this day, at 12.50 p.m. – just over an hour's time – his ship, the

Captain, went into close action. And here was I, among this mute herd, sweating despite the cold, a good two miles from my table and my models – the ships were not even set out. It mattered so much to get the time right, therein lay the whole meaning, how else could I keep my life parallel with his? Before my father died – he died last April – I fought out this battle wherever I could: on my bed, on the floor, one freezing day in the shed behind the house. We never missed, year after year we broke the line at ten minutes to one. Now I had the basement all to myself. The thought that I might fail the appointment now was unendurable, it made me feel sick.

There was no time to be lost. I struggled back to the surface along with numbers of others who had made the same decision. I was feeling distinctly unwell by now, my breath came with difficulty and there was the usual suffusion of blood at the temples, obscuring my vision, making me feel hemmed-in. It was still raining and there were no free taxis anywhere near the tube, nor outside Harrods. I had to walk some way towards Hyde Park Corner before I found one, and even then I was lucky, the previous fare was alighting as I came up.

I gave the address and sat back and concentrated on keeping my face composed and my breathing inaudible. Closing the eyes has always helped me to cope with anxiety, but now I waited two minutes by my watch before allowing myself the luxury. Timing is the key to control and control is the key to concealment. The driver, if he glanced in his mirror, would think it strange if his passenger were dozing too soon. My father was a master of concealment, he kept it up so well that nobody knew just when he died, nobody registered the precise moment.

We made it with twelve minutes to spare. I was still gasping a little as I went down to the basement. I did not allow myself to be sidetracked by considerations of where among the shelves and cabinets to put my new acquisition;

such a decision would involve extensive rearrangement, it could easily have taken the whole afternoon, in these last months I had got steadily slower. I simply left the plate, still in its damp wrapping, on the floor and went straight through to my operations-room and began setting out the ships, the Spanish first in their two loose groups, 9 in the van, 18 in the rear, these last headed by de Córdoba in his great flagship, the *Santissima Trinidad*, four decks, 136 guns, the most powerful wooden warship ever built. One of the first models I made, I was fourteen, home from school for the summer holidays. Odourless now, the ship in my hands, but still seeming to bear the spirituous, heady scents of its making, glue, paint, freshly cut shavings. The shed had a smell too, dust and hot creosote and the rank weeds that grew against the boards outside. Smells are intenser for solitude and remembered more intensely, as every lonely person knows. Sounds too. But I wasn't lonely, I had him.

Now for the English fleet, under Admiral Sir John Jervis in the *Victory*, Horatio's death-ship at Trafalgar eight years later – eight years, eight months and one week. In contrast to the disorderly Spanish, our ships are sailing in impeccable close order, 15 warships in perfect line-ahead formation, approaching from the south at right angles, making for the fatal gap in the enemy fleet, two feet wide on my table, roughly seven miles in actual fact.

The sight of them now, disposed for battle, gun ports open and cannon run out, quite restored my calm. In full press of sail, with their flags and pennants and painted hulls, their figureheads picked out in gold and vermilion, they made a fine show. How much care and devotion I lavished on those models, those sloops and frigates and ships-of-the-line, what pride I took in them. Before my father died I had to keep them in cardboard boxes in my bedroom, together with all the other Nelson memorabilia I had collected over the years. My room was full of boxes,

you couldn’t get the door more than half open, you had to edge your way in. Now my ships had for their manoeuvres the whole surface of the billiard table that had always been a feature of the basement. My brother Monty and I used to play on it sometimes, before he left. I had covered it with dark blue baize and had a sheet of glass fitted exactly over it. In the light of the lamp overhead – no daylight ever entered that room – the surface glinted like dark water and reflected the colours of the ships.

Eight minutes to go. Since first light these stately, deadly vessels have been slowly drawing closer together, approaching in a fashion apparently leisurely the thunder and carnage of a close encounter. Incongruous, and to me entirely fascinating, this dreamlike slowness. Consider the ferocious firepower of those ships, their capacity for destruction, more devastating than anything known before, on sea or land. Jervis is taking well over a thousand cannon into action with him. Now they are twenty-five miles west of the Portuguese headland of St Vincent, one hundred and fifty miles north-west of Cadiz, for which port the Spanish are running with a fair wind.

They would avoid the engagement if they could but they cannot be allowed to, they must be intercepted. A heavy weight of responsibility lies on Jervis’s shoulders today. The French revolutionary war has reached a crucial phase. The Dutch fleet has joined with the French at Brest. One attempt to invade Ireland has already been made. Admiral Lord Bridport’s Channel Fleet has been driven back to England by bad weather and forced to abandon the blockade of Brest. Only this same bad weather has so far prevented an enemy break-out and an unopposed Irish landing. If the Spanish are allowed to join them, the odds will become impossible. Not only have the English been forced to quit the Mediterranean – a vital sphere of influence – but the whole of Continental Europe is now dominated by the armies of France. Drained by the

subsidies she has been obliged to pay to keep her allies in the field, her trade routes curtailed, her merchantmen harassed by privateers, England is on the verge of bankruptcy. Ireland is simmering with rebellion. There are rumours of mutiny in the ships of the Royal Navy. It is indeed true, what Admiral Jervis is heard to remark as the weather brightens: 'A victory is very essential to England at this moment.'

Words that are remembered, recorded, famous words. But this brightening weather has revealed an awesome discrepancy in the strength of the opposing fleets. Jervis has 15 sail-of-the-line. Six of them are three-deckers, but only the *Victory* and the *Britannia* have as many as 100 guns. All the rest, including Horatio's, are two-deck ships with 74 guns, the standard warship of the Royal Navy at that time. In addition Jervis has 4 frigates, faster than the line-ships, essential for scouting and intelligence, a sloop and a cutter – I set them out now, on a diagonal, to windward of the English line. This is the force with which Jervis is proposing to engage the Spanish Grand Fleet, 27 ships-of-the-line, 10 frigates and a brig. Six of the Spanish three-deckers are carrying 112 guns and there is the mighty *Santissima Trinidad* with 136. Altogether they have twice the firepower of the English. But there are compensating factors. The Spanish have put to sea in haste, they are undermanned, their officers are inexperienced.

Everything is in place. It is fourteen minutes to one. One hour and four minutes previously, while I was panicking at Knightsbridge, Jervis had given a bold and unconventional signal. On this occasion he cannot follow the rigid procedures laid down by the Admiralty in London for the conduct of sea-battles, procedures that have not changed in a hundred years: you lay alongside, preserve strict in-line formation and pound away in a duel of broadsides until the enemy is crippled or surrenders or runs. Jervis cannot do

this because his force is too inferior, he would be overwhelmed. So he has given the order to put on press of sail and break through the gap in the enemy formation. It is the only tactic possible. Once through, the English fleet can attack to windward, concentrating its fire on the 18 ships of the rear, disabling them before the van can make the turn into the wind and come to their aid.

A perfect day for sea-fighting, calm, with a light breeze, no rolling to disturb the calculation of the gunners. I check that the English ships are in correct order of sail as they pass through the enemy, Troubridge leading the van in the *Culloden*, Collingwood bringing up the rear in the *Excellent*. Third from the rear is Horatio in the *Captain*, flying the Broad Pennant; he is a commodore now – since the previous March.

So they pass through. The Spanish spine is severed. But now Jervis blunders. He cannot altogether break from his conditioning, free himself from the rigid code of line-ahead formation. He hoists his signal: once through to the westward of the Spanish, the fleet is to tack in succession and bear down on them. *In succession*. No sir, wrong. It should have been simultaneously. For 15 ships to make the turn, one after the other, each waiting till the one ahead has completed the manoeuvre, and then to reform in line, this will take too long, the advantage will be lost.

But of course they obey, they are bred to obedience. Here they are now, in a wide inverted V on the ocean as they begin to execute the manoeuvre, in perfect formation still, the *Culloden* still leading. But the Spanish have the wind, de Córdoba has understood, he alters course northwards, he means to bear over the wind and unite his fleet. Then he can fight or run as he chooses and he will have time to do it, only the first 6 English ships have so far completed the turn and they have not yet come up with the Spanish, they are still out of range.

One man sees this and that man is Horatio Nelson. It is now 12.50 p.m. Without a second's hesitation, disregarding his commander's signal, he veers the *Captain* away from the wind, *he breaks the line*. The audacity of it, the impetuous logic! To recognize absolute necessity and act on that instant of recognition. Now again, in this silent room, as I send the *Captain* into the attack and her colours glint on the dark surface, I feel a constriction in the throat, and my heart beats faster at the dash and defiance of it. The move has brought us, at a stroke, across the bows of at least 7 Spanish ships, among them the huge *Santissima Trinidad*, the *San Josef*, the *Salvador del Mundo* and the *San Nicolas*, these 4 alone possessing 440 guns against Horatio's 74.

At the moment that he swung away from the wind and broke the line, risking the outcome of the battle and his whole career on this one throw, at that moment, in his thirty-ninth year, Horatio became an angel. He entered a different sphere. I will say what I think angels are. They can be dark or bright, but they all have the gift of spontaneity, of creating themselves anew. This is a pure form of energy, and Horatio was winged with it. All the same, angels are not complete, they need their counterparts, the dark needs the bright, the hidden needs the open, and vice versa. Sometimes they meet and recognize each other. Sometimes, as with Horatio and me, the pairing occurs over spaces of time or distance. He became a bright angel on the 14th of February 1797 during the battle of Cape St Vincent. I became his dark twin on the 9th of September 1997, when I too broke the line.

I had no presentiment of this on that February afternoon, as I moved my model ships about on their glass ocean. Since my father's death I had been experiencing bouts of gloom – not sorrow – and at times a sort of excited restlessness that made it difficult for me to keep still. And I had run into a difficult patch in the book I was writing, *The*

Making of a Hero. I had got bogged down in the events of June 1799 in Naples and Horatio's part in them. This book had been going on for more than five years, ever since December 1991. I started it on Boxing Day – the anniversary of his mother's death. The Naples business was worrying me; I could not leap over it. Progress was slow; lately in fact there hadn't been any. I kept retreating, rewriting pieces of his earlier life. It was for this reason that I began to feel slightly uneasy now, as I went on with the battle. Because at this point I had to bring Troubridge into the action and at the time I did not much care to dwell on Troubridge, Horatio's brother officer and friend, closely associated with him in this battle but also in the treatment, two years later, of the Jacobin rebels in Naples – the business that was holding me up with my book.

Certainly there is no doubt of his fighting spirit. Horatio is not left long to fight alone. He is joined by Troubridge in the *Culloden*, the leading English ship, which has now completed the turn ordered by Jervis and come within range. For nearly an hour these two exchange broadsides with the Dons, superior discipline and gunnery making up for inferiority of armament. Now here is the gallant *Blenheim* coming up to give them a respite, passing between them and the enemy, pouring fire as she goes. The *Culloden* is crippled, she falls astern. Collingwood ranges up in the *Excellent*, last ship of the line. He passes within ten feet of the *San Nicolas*, 80 guns, and blasts her in masterly fashion with two broadsides in succession.

Ten feet. The length of this table. That would be about it. Almost jumping distance. These towering ships, fighting so close, hardly more than the length of a man between them, launching their thunderous fire, shuddering from stem to stern with the repeated recoil of the guns – the English gun-crews could deliver a broadside every seventy-five seconds. Dismemberment and maiming inflicted almost within range of an embrace. Hard even for a landsman of

the time, the notion of such closeness, such promiscuous intimacy of destruction. How much more so for us now, with our concept of war as distant erasure, a button touched, a figure or a thousand figures obliterated on a screen.

The close-quarter fighting gives Horatio his second great triumph of the day. The *San Nicolas*, reeling from Collingwood's fire, falls foul of her compatriot, the huge *San Josef*, three decks, 112 guns. The two Spanish ships, both badly damaged, are inextricably locked together. I set them together here, side by side, to the windward of Horatio. His own ship, by now, is completely disabled. She has lost her fore topmast; her wheel has been shot away; neither sail nor rigging is left. She is incapable of fighting in line, incapable of giving chase.

Again Horatio demonstrates the promptness of genius. The genius of a hero lies in his extreme readiness to action – which is not the same as rashness. He lays his ship aboard the starboard quarter of the *San Nicolas*. His sprit-sail passes over the Spaniard's poop and locks in her mizzen shrouds. Three ships tangled together now, here they are, side by side. Horatio calls for a boarding party. Short of stature – he is only five feet six inches – slight of frame, with one eye more or less useless to him after the wound he suffered in the Corsican campaign two-and-a-half years before, newly fledged angel with bright sword in hand, he leads the way, passing from the fore-chains of his own ship into the quarter gallery of the *San Nicolas*. In the exchange of fire that follows the Spanish commander is mortally wounded. They surrender, but while Horatio is receiving the officers' swords his party is fired upon. Seven English seamen are killed in this fusillade. Where is it coming from? From above and beyond, from the stern gallery of the *San Josef*, still helplessly tangled aloft. Without a flicker of hesitation Horatio orders his mariners to return the enemy fire, stations sentinels at the hatchway

to keep the enemy below decks and charges on. He will board an enemy ship from the deck of another already boarded and taken!

His friend Berry is at hand, helping him into the main-chains, keeping beside him during the headlong scramble from ship to ship. But on board the *San Josef* there is no resistance. A Spanish officer hails from the quarter-deck to say that she surrenders. The flag-captain, on bended knee, presents his sword. The admiral is dying of wounds below. With his own ship disabled, Horatio has captured two enemy ships, both more heavily armed, using one as a stepping-stone to the other. An action without parallel in the annals of naval history.

Luck, some might say – the right man in the right place at the right time. But angels make their own luck. Otherwise how can it be explained that it was always he who broke the mould? Collingwood was equally well placed to veer out of line and throw himself across the bows of the Spanish. Not a question of courage or skill, Collingwood had plenty of both. But he stayed in line.

Late afternoon, the light is failing. Jervis has only 12 ships now that are capable of fighting. The Spanish have been defeated, 4 of their ships have been taken. It is time to disengage. Gradually the fire ceases, the fleets separate, the English stand for Lagos, the Spanish for Cadiz. After this terrible local storm, these hours of thunder and slaughter, peace settles down, the ocean comes to herself again and swallows the corpses and the drifting spars.

I sat on there, after the battle. I have never been at sea, except twice on the cross-Channel ferry. That was a long time ago, before my illness. No, I am his land shadow. I have been abroad only once since then, just once in twenty years. That was when I went with my father to Tenerife to see the place where Horatio lost his right arm.

2

I SAT FOR quite a while without moving, sensing the winter dusk that was falling beyond my shuttered room, muffling the streets outside as it had the blank sea after that ferocious encounter. The short duration of these battles has always stirred my imagination. Fifty or sixty miles those ships could make in a day, not more. They had only recently invented instruments that could tell them where they were. For weeks or months they tracked each other across vast spaces of ocean. Then, one day, the sail on the horizon, the gradual closing of the distance, the routine activity of preparation. Finally the moment that gave this murderous patience its meaning: the twitch on the lanyard, the crash of the guns.

My models sat there, unmarked, immaculate. No decks slippery with blood. The glass showed nothing but the reflection of the hulls. No pools of tar, no wreckage, no swirl of sharks. Silence in the room had been unbroken. No storm of grapeshot, no shrieking tangles of chains and nails and razor-edged splinters of metal and wood, no groans and screams of wounded and dying men, no cheers as the gun-crews saw their shots strike home. Cheers and screams, the two conflicting sounds of eighteenth-century sea-battle.

I was visited by a sense of desolation, something like bereavement. Could one who had never known it in his own person grieve for the din of battle and the confusion and the blood? The question, coming to my mind in such a form, made me feel restless and somehow awed, a sensation difficult to describe, like a brush of wings, quite

unaccustomed at the time though it became more frequent afterwards. Usually when we fought these battles I had a feeling of fulfilment, they brought me closer to him, I shared in his triumphs. I know now that this first taste of mourning was a sign to me. At the time I thought it was no more than delayed reaction to my panic of earlier, my fear of failing him.

The feeling of unrest set me walking back and forth from one end of the room to the other, passing between the table and the wall, from the zone of light and the reflections of the ships into the shadowy area at the far corner of the room. I found in my raincoat pocket – I had forgotten to take the raincoat off, so great had been my haste – a cheese and cress sandwich, still wrapped in its clingfilm, which I had bought the day before at a Safeway's, and then forgotten about. Living alone as I did, and preoccupied with my book, I quite often forgot to eat and was only reminded of the need to do so by onsets of faintness. But I never forgot times and dates. Mrs Watson still came, as she had done in my father's time, only twice a week now, in the mornings. I didn't want her shopping or cooking for me. I used to leave the week's money in an envelope on the kitchen table. Usually I stayed down in the basement, out of her way. She had no key to the basement, naturally; I had changed the lock.

I ate the sandwich as I walked about the room. I was thinking still about the battle and its aftermath. It had not been an overwhelming victory. The Spanish, though severely mauled, had not been put out of the war. But there had been a great boost to national morale and – of crucial importance – the Mediterranean was opened to our sea-power once again. From that moment, and for the rest of the war with revolutionary France, we would never allow these waters to be closed to us, our ships would patrol them freely, enabling us to frustrate French invasion plans and defeat Napoleon's purposes in Egypt.

For Horatio, of course, an important stage in his career, bringing the first taste of the fame he longed for. He was no humble hero, a contradiction in terms in any case, no, he wanted to have his being in glory and he wanted the world to see it, see the beautiful shine of it. That is the nature of heroes, they are nourished by fame.

He was cheered throughout the fleet after the battle, wherever they saw his pennant flying. Crowned with victory, moving through a rain of cheers, how wonderful to be Horatio at that moment. I felt my heart dilate with the pleasure of it. Nightfall, the lamps on the ships, lamplight over the water, cheers raining on him as he passes through in his launch on his way to the *Victory*, to present his respects to the admiral.

We have Horatio's account of the meeting, as given some months later in conversation with his brother-in-law Bolton. He had come straight from the fighting. His shirt and coat were badly torn, he had lost his hat, his face was streaked with gunpowder, he was bleeding from a wound in the back made by a shell-splinter. Jervis, who greeted him with outstretched hands, was immaculate in silver and blue. This was because he had been obliged to change his uniform. During the battle a marine standing close beside him on the poop had had his head blown off and the admiral's face and chest had been splashed with blood and brains and bits of bone and tissue. An officer, believing him to be badly wounded, rushed to his side. No, he was not hurt, he said calmly, and he turned aside and asked a midshipman to fetch him an orange. This in the heat of the action. When the fighting was over and the day was won he went below and washed away the evidence of mortality and changed. *The Admiral received me on the quarter-deck and, having embraced me, said he could not sufficiently thank me*.

This was to be an important friendship for Horatio. He had a gift for friendship. All through his career he won

respect from superiors and subordinates alike; not only respect, affection too, he was always loved. On the 20th of February, in the normal course of seniority, Commodore Nelson became Rear-Admiral Nelson. Later, when news of the victory reached England, the Order of the Bath was conferred upon him by a grateful sovereign. Rear-Admiral Sir Horatio Nelson, KB.

It would have been a baronetcy, almost certainly, but he had hinted in a letter to Sir Gilbert Elliot, viceroy of Corsica, who was returning to England with despatches of the battle, that he would be reluctant to accept a hereditary title as he had not the means to support one. Of course there were some, sneaks and subversives being always with us, who attributed other motives to him. Chief sneak was Sir Gilbert's aide, Colonel Drinkwater, who had a conversation with Horatio on the morning after the battle and afterwards published an account. He suggests that Horatio was really attracted by the very conspicuous nature of the knighthood, which carried with it the right to wear a prominent and glittering star, and that he pleaded poverty in order to obtain this.

According to the colonel, it was he who suggested to Horatio the possibility of a baronetcy, but he was stopped by a hand on his arm: 'No, it must not be in that manner.' 'Oh,' Drinkwater reports himself as saying, 'you wish to be a Knight of the Bath, then?' And Horatio's immediate answer: 'Yes; if my services have been of any value, let them be noticed in a way that the public may know me or them.' Drinkwater is not sure about that final pronoun, but he professes himself to be sure about the rest and pronounces his judgement with confidence: *I could have no doubt of his meaning, that he wished to bear about his person some honorary distinction to attract the public eye …*

I could not take this seriously. It seemed to me, unmistakably, the voice of the cynic. The two men were

alone, Horatio never spoke of this conversation, there is no independent support of it, he was dead when the account was published. Would Drink water, whom he hardly knew, have questioned him with such impertinent directness about his wishes and ambitions? Surely not. A radiant light would have been upon Horatio that morning, the morrow of one of the greatest days of his life. Drinkwater was trying to sully that light, as there will always be people ready to do.

It was not the imputation of vanity that I found offensive. I always knew that he prized the trappings and insignia of fame. His decorations killed him in the end, the stars on his breast made him a sniper's target at Trafalgar. The attainment of public honours is a hero's vocation, he bears them for all those who cannot, just as he bears the nation's dignity. No, it is the hinting at ambivalence, even duplicity, in Horatio's attitude, the suggestion that he lied about his means for the sake of the glittering star.

To hold this smear in mind long enough to repudiate it, let alone defend him from it, made me feel I had betrayed him, stirred a feeling of nausea in me, similar to that I sometimes felt in those days when I tried to understand the events of June 1799 in Naples. I had devoted myself to a study of his life, I had followed him through the succession of his days and the succession of my own, though sometimes the course had run below ground. I was nine when this started. That was in 1964, the year my mother left us. Chess led me to Horatio – chess and my father and my absent mother and the fact that on that day I broke the rule about not showing what you feel.

I thought my mother had gone because she did not love me and Monty enough to stay. I suppose I already knew, in the way that children know such things, that she did not love my father. He, no doubt intent on setting a good example of not showing what you feel, did not succeed then or later in explaining the matter to us. He did not say she

loved us or had been sorry to go. Our mother had gone to India, he said, because she had become besotted with Oriental religions. *Besotted*. I did not know what the word meant, but I knew that my father was expressing his loss through contempt.

My form-master of that year at the private day-school I went to was a chess enthusiast. He explained the rules to us, he encouraged us to play. He was kind to me and I admired him, more than admired: I wanted to be where he was. I suppose I was more than usually responsive to kindness just at that time. To please him I tried hard to be good at chess and I discovered that I was good. I had a natural talent, the master said. Mr Lyle was his name. I don't remember much about him now. He had glasses. I seem to remember that he wore his hair brushed straight back. Blurred remains of a focus once so intense. I joined the school chess club. I took part in tournaments and distinguished myself. Shining at few things, for a brief season I shone at chess. I see it now, the stark arena of the board, the ruthless game that hung so paradoxically on feelings of love.

I studied the game, I read the accounts of historic encounters, the ploys of long-dead masters, and I played them out alone. I would set out the pieces at random, then sweep them off and try to replace them from memory. At night, crying for my mother, I would picture the chess board, go through the moves of some legendary end-game and find consolation.

A colleague of my father was there one Sunday afternoon – my father was a senior official at the Treasury. 'Your father tells me you are quite a chess-player.' On his reddish face an indulgent look. 'At least by his own report,' my father said. He seemed to suggest I had boasted. Perhaps I had. 'Not up to your level, Henry, not yet.' Henry, Harry, Humphrey. A chess-player of note. 'Fancy a game, young man?'

We played and I won. He still had half his pieces on the board when I checkmated him. Pleasure in victory, expectation of praise – face and voice were not yet practised enough, I suppose I showed my feelings too clearly. My father looked at me but uttered no word. He went out, came back with a book from his study, brought it over for me to see. ‘Look here,’ he said, the colleague meanwhile looking on. ‘Look at these people here.’

He had opened the book roughly in the middle. There were two faces, one on either side: William Pitt the Younger and Horatio Nelson. Neither name meant anything to me at the time. Later, of course, I knew them for close contemporaries – Horatio was a year older and died three months earlier.

‘Take a good look,’ my father said. ‘These two men saved our country, they had reason to be pleased with themselves.’

He meant it for my benefit or so I like to think. He did not want me to be jubilant in victory, to overrate small achievements. He wanted to inspire me with worthy ambitions. But in his manner and tone I sensed displeasure; he was not pleased at my success, it had disturbed his sense of the natural order.

Two faces side by side, two lives in parallel. I think I was fascinated by parallel tracks even then. Both plates were in colour, but for some reason the two men were depicted at quite different times in their lives: Pitt, dark-suited, close to his end, ravaged by alcohol and the strain of government, Horatio the twenty-year-old captain, in the dark blue and gilt of his full-dress uniform, his youthful face severe, intrepid. There was no comparison, none at all; I scarcely looked at the statesman, the architect of victory; my eyes were all for the splendid young fighter, so slender and small-boned, so different from me in physical form, even then. I am on the heavy side, with thick wrists and big

hands. Not clumsy, though; I am good with my hands, good at making things.

My interest in chess did not long survive that day, the lesson in humility proved the death-blow to it. I continued to play during what was left of the term, but my heart was not in it, I lost the appetite for victory, my game fell off. In the autumn Monty and I were sent away to boarding school. I never saw Mr Lyle again and I never played chess again.

With Horatio it has been otherwise. My interest in him seemed altogether to disappear, but it had merely gone underground, waiting for another sign. This came when I was thirteen, during a history lesson, when I discovered that Horatio Nelson lost his mother *when he was nine years old*.

It came with the force of revelation, like an assault of light. All the surrounding circumstances were lit up by it, as if by the arc of a flare in the night. The usual darkness descends again, but the print is there for ever. My exact position in the classroom, the desk-top mutilated by generations of idle inscribers, the look of the blackboard, the gestures of the master's hands. These things were as present to me that afternoon last February as they had ever been. Undimmed, untarnished over the years, the lustre of the kinship so casually discovered then.

I felt the need now to look again at the Rigaud portrait, the picture my father had shown me on my last effective day as a chess-player, my first sight of Horatio's face. I got up, went through to the next room. The plate I had bought that morning was still lying there on the floor, but I left it where it was. I crossed to the wall where the portrait hung above a narrow cabinet containing objects commemorating his death: a black silk bookmark with the date of Trafalgar on it, a piece of Staffordshire pottery that showed him dying in the arms of two officers, a model of his funeral car

that I made myself when I got interested in Horatio again, after my illness.

The original portrait of course is in the National Maritime Museum at Greenwich, a three-quarter-length oil by John Francis Rigaud. My picture was a photograph, blown up to poster size, mounted and framed. Horatio was an eighteen-year-old lieutenant when it was begun. It was commissioned by his commanding officer, William Locker, who must have seen his distinction even at that age. Before it was quite finished Horatio had to sail for the West Indies. He didn't return until 1780, three years later, still desperately ill with the Yellow Jack fever that nearly killed him and destroyed his youthful bloom for ever. But Rigaud changed nothing in the face, merely touched in the background and added the insignia of Horatio's new rank – he was a captain by now, one of the youngest in the navy.

I stood before the portrait for a time I did not measure. He had been through the shadow of death, but the painter had allowed no hint of mortality. No sickness, no lines of pain mar the confidence of his face. His sword is planted before him, his hands rest on the hilt. In the background, painted on his return, a view of Fort San Juan in Nicaragua, scene of the ill-starred expedition of the year before.

Disasters, fevers, the great victories and the heroic death, all this was before him, undreamed of, when this impervious face was painted. Twenty years away his crushing defeat of the French at Aboukir Bay, the triumphant entry into Naples, the gratitude of monarchs, the songs and the praise and the abundant love of Emma, Lady Hamilton. Twenty years away his dealings with the Neapolitan Jacobins, which day by day, with oppressed spirits, I was striving to disentangle.

Thoughts of this period in Horatio's life brought the usual vague distress to my mind. I was still standing there, before the portrait, but no longer looking at it. My eyes fell on the papier mâché bust of him standing not far away,

more or less in the middle of the floor. It was larger than life-size, three feet high and crudely painted, the eyes jet-black and wide open, the cheeks rouged, hectic-looking; but there was a curve of power and authority in the mouth that I liked. I had seen it in the jumbled interior of a curio shop in Camden as I was passing by, and I had gone in and bought it and brought it home in a taxi, muffled up in brown paper. Only a month or so before – I would not have done it in my father's time. Now I found myself looking fixedly at him, at the straight line of the cocked hat that shadowed his eyes, the garish stars and medals on his chest, the gilt letters running along the base. I could not read them at this distance but I knew what they said: ENGLAND EXPECTS THAT EVERY MAN WILL DO HIS DUTY.

Sublime message, surely the most famous naval signal ever given. Greeted with cheers by every ship in the fleet. Then came the last message he ever gave, his favourite, number 16, the signal for close action, which remained at the top-gallant masthead of HMS *Victory* until it was shot away …

The trance of admiration that was descending on me was disturbed by the ringing of the front-door bell. I looked at my watch: it was exactly seven o'clock. I knew at once that it must be Avon Secretarial Services in the person of Miss Lily, who came twice a week, Tuesdays and Fridays, to help me with my manuscript, no small task, as I was constantly revising the earlier sections. I could not use a computer myself. My illness had left me with an abiding fear of screens. Twenty years ago, but I had not been able to overcome it. Not mirrors or clear reflecting surfaces, I had no fear of those, but opaque electronic screens from which faces might emerge. Faces with eyes …

I had known of course that she was coming. But what surprised and rather frightened me was the realization that nearly three hours had gone by that could not really be accounted for. Since the dusk of the battle and of this

winter evening in London, since the separation of the fleets, as I sat by my operations-table and stood before the portrait, this mass of time had accumulated and then dissolved away.

As I mounted the basement steps and went along the passage to the front door, I felt some return of the terror of that morning. Twinges, no more. But somehow it was always later than I thought, I was constantly striving to keep abreast. So much, so very much, depended on that, keeping abreast, keeping the lines parallel.

3

MISS LILY WAS always on time. I had taken to calling her that, not to her face, only in my mind, though she had none of the aspects conventionally associated with the flower, she wasn't languorous at all or scented much or markedly virginal, she was a steady person, in her early thirties, and her name was Lilian Butler. She had been coming for three months by then and she had never been late. This punctuality was one of the things I liked best about her; without strict timing our lives are formless. However, Miss Lily was inquisitive and that was a drawback.

There she was, on the doorstep, her little red car parked in the street below. Slung over her shoulder the case that contained computer and printer. 'You've been going up those stairs too quick,' she said to me when I opened the door. Even after such a short acquaintance she allowed herself remarks like that. I must have been breathing rather heavily and she had seen it. How could I explain to her that it was not a question of haste? I could never publicly admit to anxiety, any more than I could show tears or give vent to anger. And how did she know I had been down there, in the basement? Only from my breathing? It didn't seem much to go on. It was as if she had somehow been spying on me. She had never been down there, no one had, I always kept it locked.

We went straight to the room I call my study, which adjoins the sitting-room on the ground floor. The room where I sleep is on this floor too. The house is tall and narrow, late Victorian, like all six houses in this short row