

**EPIISODES FROM
SOUTHEY'S
LIFE OF NELSON**

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Episodes from Southey's Life of Nelson by C. H. Spence

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C. H. SPENCE

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LIFE OF NELSON**

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Edited by

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In freta dum fluvii current, dum montibus umbræ
Lustrabunt convexa, polus dum sidera pascet,
Semper honos nomenque tuum laudesque manebunt.

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INTRODUCTION.

Thine island loves thee well, thou famous man,
The greatest sailor since our world began.

Mighty Seaman, tender and true,
And pure as he from taint of craven guile,
O saviour of the silver-coasted isle,
O shaker of the Baltic and the Nile.

TENNYSON, *Ode on the Death of the Duke of Wellington.*

"THERE is but one Nelson": such are the words of Lord St. Vincent. There have been many brave and patriotic Englishmen, great kings, great admirals, and great generals, but we do not feel about them, as we feel about Nelson. Henry the Fifth, and Edward the First, Hawke and Rodney and Marlborough are names, honoured and famous indeed, but to most of us names only.

The tumult and the shouting dies—
The captains and the kings depart:

but Nelson lives, an abiding memory, for all Englishmen: immortalized by their love and gratitude. Rightly to understand this gratitude and love, we must endeavour to comprehend what Nelson did, and what Nelson was. What Nelson did for England is told us by Tennyson: he is the saviour of this silver-coasted isle. Napoleon at the head of his invincible armies entered every great capital of Europe from Moscow to Madrid. Why did he never enter London? If he had landed 200,000 men

upon our coasts, where was the captain who could have resisted him? Macaulay gives us the answer, when he says: "The influence of the French Conqueror never extended beyond low-water mark. The narrowest strait was to his power what it was of old believed that a running stream was to the sorceries of a witch. While his army entered every metropolis from Moscow to Lisbon, the English fleets blockaded every port from Dantzic to Trieste. Sicily, Sardinia, Majorca, Guernsey, enjoyed security through the whole course of a war which endangered every throne on the continent."¹ The flight of Napoleon's victorious eagles was indeed unchecked from Niemen to Cadiz: but meantime our storm-battered war-ships, which the Grand Army never beheld with their eyes, kept their silent and sleepless watch off Brest and Toulon, and prevented Napoleon from making himself master of the world.

Nelson's great period lasts for little more than twelve years: from the 7th February, 1793, when he hoisted his pennant in the *Agamemnon*, until 21st October, 1805, when he fell wounded to death on the quarter-deck of the *Victory*. During these years he was, to use the phrase of Captain Mahan, "the embodiment of the sea-power of Great Britain." During these years he resisted the aggressive spirit of the French Republic and of Napoleon. Again and again he foiled the schemes of England's enemies, at Cape St. Vincent, at the Nile, Copenhagen, Trafalgar. Even in his death he triumphed over his great antagonist. The Battle of Trafalgar led to the Berlin Decrees, to Napoleon's entanglement in Spain, to Moscow and to Waterloo. Victory came at last after more than twenty weary years of war, and England owed her salvation to Nelson.

And what was Nelson as a fighter, a seaman, and a man? With what justice does Tennyson call him, "The greatest

¹ Macaulay, *Essay on the War of the Succession in Spain*.

sailor since our world began"? In Nelson absolute fearlessness and the most desperate gallantry were allied with marvellous power of thought and scientific knowledge of his profession. He was not only a fighter but a student and a thinker. "That island of England," says one of Shakespeare's Frenchmen, "breeds very valiant creatures; their mastiffs are of unmatchable courage . . . and the men do sympathize with the mastiffs in robustious and rough coming on."¹ England never bred a more valiant creature than Nelson. But something besides valour is needed by a great Admiral or General: although "The English," as Carlyle says, "have a notion that Generalship is not wanted; that War is not an Art, as playing Chess is, as finding the Longitude, and doing the Differential Calculus are (and a much deeper Art than any of these); that War is taught by Nature as eating is; that courageous soldiers, led on by a courageous Wooden Pole with Cocked-hat on it will do very well."² Nelson did not hold this view. All his life he studied his profession; read and pondered on problems of naval strategy and tactics.³ He formed his plans with careful consideration and deep thought; explained them to his officers, and inspired them with his ideas: and then, when the moment of action came, carried them out with unwavering and relentless resolution. "No man," says Captain Mahan, "was ever better served by the inspiration of the moment; no man ever counted on it less." We are apt to forget the intellectual side of Nelson, and remember only such famous orders as "Sink, burn, and destroy," "Engage the enemy more closely," "A captain cannot go far wrong if he lay his ship yard-arm to yard-arm with

¹ *Hen. V.* III. vii. 150.

² *Frederick the Great*, IV. Book XI. c. vi.

³ Strategy deals with the planning of a campaign: tactics with the management of a battle. "The essence of strategy being forethought, the essence of tactics is surprise," is the sage remark of Mr. Emanuel Pycroft in Mr. Kipling's *Traffics and Discoveries*.