

The
Song
of
Trafalgar

1. The Schoolmaster and the Pear Tree

In a corner of England called Norfolk
Once lived a most upstanding man.
Neither riches nor fame did he covet,
And nothing about him was grand.
Just a rector was he, and a husband,
And father, both gentle and kind,
To a gaggle of swift-footed children,
Each willful and healthy in mind.

For this ballad of danger and daring,
Adventure and strife on the sea,
Only one of his sons shall we sing of –
A boy who would change history.
At a time when all Europe was darkened
By billows of gunpowder smoke
Did this vicar's lad grew into manhood
To fill his proud nation with hope.

As a schoolboy, he suffered from ailments
When raindrops fell over his head.
He refused to feel joyless and gloomy,
And chose to be cheerful instead.
All his sniffles and fevers he bore out
While weathering winter's cold snaps.
Like a dandelion trapped under cobbles,
He pushed his way up through the cracks.

There was something that seemed supernatural
About this fair-headed young lad,
With courageousness burning inside him
And belief in himself ironclad.
And the centuries yet have not buried
The many great deeds and acclaim
Attached to our infamous hero:
Horatio Nelson, his name.

In the years of his boyhood he studied
At William Paston's fine school.
In the yard of this school stood a pear tree
With fruits hanging down like fine jewels.
Nelson's schoolmaster made very clear
Those treasures were not to be picked;

That the boy with the nerve to defy him
Would get several whacks with a stick.

Every boy in the place looked with craving
Upon those choice pears, juicy green;
But not one had the courage to pick them
And risk their headmaster's chagrin.
So then Nelson, whose courage was boundless,
Crept down as a thief in the night
To that fruit tree, so rare and forbidden,
And brought back a feast to delight.

Every pear he could stretch to he pilfered
And carried away in a sack;
Al his loot he shared out to his schoolmates,
And watched as they giggled and snacked.
As the feasting went on it was noticed
That Nelson himself would not eat.
He just lay on his bed with a smile
And picked bits of wood from his feet.

When a friend asked: *Horatio, how now?*
I see you aren't hungry tonight.
So then, what was the need for this exploit

If you have no fancy to bite?

To which Nelson replied with a chuckle:

The reason I went on this raid

Is that nobody else would have done so;

You lot – you were all too afraid.

When at twelve years old he decided

To go on adventures at sea,

He asked help from his hardheaded uncle

Who fought in King George's navy.

When the captain observed his young nephew

And witnessed his delicate frame,

In his face came a look of misgiving.

In serious tones he exclaimed:

Now, Horatio, hear my warning:

The life of a seaman is cruel.

You'll be retching your guts in the ocean,

And dining on watery gruel.

Do you know what it means to have scurvy?

Pray tell, have you heard of the cat?

Not the pet, but the one with nine tails?

How are you for sleeping with rats?

*And the roar of the sea in a storm, lad,
When waves rise like mountainous fangs,
And the winds are a-wailing like witches,
And men below deck are unmanned.
Have you seen what a cannon can do, boy,
When shot blasts the hull of a ship?
Arms and legs of your shipmates go flying,
And bodies are blown into bits.*

*If you'd take the advice that I give you,
You'll plant your feet here on dry land
And pursue a nice job in an office,
Composing reports in longhand.
Will you think of the health of your father?
Your mother is dead, need I say?
Could he live to old age after hearing
His son met a watery grave?*

*So I ask you again, said the captain:
Your head: Is it still on askew?
Do you wish to go into the navy?
Horatio nodded: I do.
And he gazed at the face of his uncle
With unblinking eyes, sharp and keen.*

Thus began the career of the greatest
Commander the ocean has seen.

2. Hunting an Arctic Bear

On the decks of the creaky old vessel,
The HMS Raisonnable,
Worked a hot-blooded youngster, a coxswain,
Whose habit was breaking the rules.
With his long golden hair tied behind him
And waistcoat with old-fashioned flaps,
Teenaged Nelson learned sea navigation
With sextants and nautical maps.

He kept watch for belligerent gunships,
And learned how to rig main course sails;
He gave orders to crews of small rowboats
And marveled at monstrous whales.
Captain Suckling, his uncle, made clear
His mouth would taste no silver spoons.

If he wanted good standing he'd labour
Without special favours or boons.

To the sunny West Indies he voyaged,
With seasickness dogging his days,
While the tropical heat dealt him headaches
And fevers that set him ablaze.
Even so, he performed all his duties;
No gripes or complaints did he make.
With the waves and the wind as his tutors,
He learned from his many mistakes.

To his shipmate and friend Thomas Hardy,
Horatio whispered one night:
*In the eye of my mind I see something –
A wonder that gives me delight.
'Tis a radiant orb hung before me
Far up in the limitless sky;
And it beckons me on to my future,
Full-glorious, noble and high.*

He was utterly fearless of danger,
And took to command with great ease.
In his bosom he nurtured affection

For all that belonged to the seas.
But impetuous too was our hero;
Adventure was what he loved most.
It was this that once ushered him into
The jaws of a snow-coloured ghost.

Now I'll tell you the tale of the Arctic
Where ships come to grief in the ice,
And the winds lash the faces of sailors,
And frostbitten toes must be sliced.
On a mission within that great circle
Which sits sixty-six degrees north,
Young Horatio watched passing icebergs
And paced the ship's decks back and forth.

To climb down to the ice was forbidden.
The devil inside him cared not.
He set his whole heart on a trophy:
A polar bear skin full of shot.
So he bided his time for the moment
To venture out into the wild
On a hunt that would test to the fullest
His bravery, mettle and guile.

When the evening came in it turned foggy;
So here was the time to slip off.
Right behind came the doughty young Hardy,
Who carefully stifled his cough.
And they grinned while descending the ladder
That fell to the treacherous ground.
They were armed with an old rusty musket
That shot with an unwholesome sound.

After finding a path around chasms
For what seemed to them like an age,
The two officers spotted their target –
A bear – shaggy white, of old age.
When the bear looked about he saw dinner.
He towered up high on his feet
To descend on the two youthful sailors
And gorge himself fat on their meat.

Unperturbed by the sight of the monster,
Horatio raised up the gun,
Ready powdered and primed for swift service,
To fell the grim beast, or to stun.
Then he squeezed on the clanking black trigger
To fire off the heavy lead shot.

But the musket refused to be fired;
Its muzzle seemed tied in a knot.

As the bear lumbered closer, young Hardy
Exclaimed: *Oh my goodness, let's flee!*
That old musket's too ancient to help us.
It's rusted up tight, can't you see?
But Horatio thought it a pity
To fly before winning his prize.
Never mind that our powder is useless.
A new plan we'll have to devise.

Then, while turning the gun to the butt-end,
He said: *Let me get in a blow*
To the crown of this great shaggy rascal
And batter him into the snow.
Now, by this time the bear was upon them.
They gagged at the whiff of his breath.
Then the beast bared his teeth, long as fingers,
And roared out a rumble of death.

Even so, Nelson stood firm and ready
While Hardy lip-spoke a quick prayer.
There could be no retreat from the battle

Against this enormous white bear.
Gentle Fate, though, had other ideas,
And just as the foes came to grips
Came a loud cracking shot in the distance
From where sat their foggy old ship.

In response to the sound, the bear halted
As nervousness stole his wild heart.
After one more loud crack, like a gunshot,
He bounded away with a start.
Do not run! We have unfinished business!
Cried Nelson in no small dismay.
But the bear had run off to the ice floes
And could not be seen in the grey.

What had happened was not hard to fathom:
The boys had been missing so long
That their captain had noticed their absence
And reckoned that something was wrong.
Having ordered a search of the region,
Young Nelson and Hardy were seen
On the ice with a bear in full fury –
With a few yards of wasteland between.

Captain Suckling had fired his musket
To frighten the bear into flight
And then called his two coxswains to order
For leaving their posts in the night.
In his cabin he chewed off their ears
And yelled till he made himself raw.
What in hell did you think you were doing?
He growled as he laid down the law.

To this, Nelson replied: *I went hunting*
To capture a polar bear's coat
That I wished to present to my father –
A gift from these lands so remote.
Though he did not speak back to his uncle,
But stood to attention upright,
It was plain he felt cheated and angry.
His pelt, at the last, was denied.

So he pouted his lips with annoyance
And took every lash of the tongue
With compliance born out of strict duty
Until the ship's captain was done.
His recalcitrant deeds in the Arctic
Were part of a pattern, we'll hear.

When refusing his orders in Denmark
His actions defined his career.

3. After Clouds, the Sun

Young Horatio flaunted such promise,
Despite all the times he fell sick,
That at twenty he rose to lieutenant
And captained his very own ship.
In the Badger, a brig of twelve cannon,
He showed steady nerve and control
In the New World across the Atlantic
Where rivals of Britain patrolled.

He had orders to hunt privateers –
Those fearsome pirates for hire;
And to ravage American merchants,
Their cargo and gold to acquire.
The American war with Great Britain
Was over, and freedom they'd won.
Yet the two brother nations were angry,
And warfare was not yet quite gone.

In command of the proud Albermarle,
A frigate of twenty-eight guns,
Captain Nelson observed a small schooner
That looked to be making a run.
The pursuit was a trifling matter;
The schooner was caught in good time.
The American captain surrendered,
And joked about sucking a lime.

The young officer took to him warmly,
And told him: *Now look, my good man,
I'll be seizing your vessel for England
And taking her goods off your hands.
As for you, I have need of your knowledge;
These seas contain dangers untold.*

*It is said that Cape Cod is a graveyard
For captains too foolish or bold.*

*I require you to pilot the King's ship
By treacherous coastlines and shores.
Should you lead us to welcoming harbour,
My favour and thanks will be yours.*

The American strode to the wheel.
No say in the matter had he.
And he plotted a course for Nantucket –
The jaws of the northwestern seas.

On the way they encountered a gunship
With colours of France hoisted high.
Such a giant it was that brave Nelson
Had really no choice but to fly.
So the hunter had turned to the hunted.
They raced to the shoals of Cape Cod
With the Gallic ship gaining behind them;
Before them, the mercy of God.

But the pilot knew where he was going
And steered a course safe and true;
The American skirted large sandbanks

And rocks lurking just out of view.
As the French ship unwisely came for them,
And into the shallows advanced,
The full-sailed Albermarle turned circles
And led them a right merry dance.

In a sudden the ocean was shaken
By thunder, or some such great strike.
And when Nelson blinked into his spyglass
The Gauls looked a miserable sight.
On the rocks they had driven their vessel;
Their hull was now filling with brine.
As their skyscraping ship slowly tilted,
It gave out a terrible whine.

Captain Nelson, he took the crew captive
And saved them from watery death.
To the pilot who'd steered his frigate,
He smiled and warmly addressed:
Finer seamanship I have not witnessed.
Good man, Britain owes you a debt.
I'll return your fine schooner and cargo.
What luck that the two of us met!

And a letter of strong commendation
Horatio penned for the man,
Who saluted the gracious young captain,
Then shook his ingenuous hand.
And that skipper would later remember:
*That time when my ship was attacked
By Lord Admiral Nelson, the hero –
And came from it without a scratch!*

Overall, for young Nelson, his placement
Was difficult, lonely and bleak.
There were times when he had no objective,
No glory or triumph to seek.
Oftentimes he was stuck in the harbour,
No mission and nothing to do.
While malaria came in the summer,
The wintertime brought him the flu.

Fanny Nisbet provided some comfort.
They married on tropical shores.
Such a goodhearted woman, that lady.
He met her when widowed and poor.
Fanny's five-year-old son he adopted,
And showed the boy guidance and love.

While he ached to sail homeward, his union
Came down as a gift from above.

But America held for him nothing –
Just meaningless milling around.
Though he scuffled at times with the rebels,
No krakens were there to be found.
There was nothing to threaten his nation,
No giants to grind for their bread
Bones of Englishmen, Scotsmen or Welshmen,
And stain all of Albion red.

It was then that his destiny called him,
For the wheel of the world had been spun;
The great engine of fate was in motion,
And the bells of destruction were wrung.
Far away in the city of Paris,
The king and his family were killed;
For the mob of the land was in frenzy,
Conducted by men cruel and shrill.

Now that France was in full revolution,
That royalest of all royal realms,
Nothing anyone did now could hinder

Those men bent on unleashing hell.
All of Europe was bound in a panic.
Great Britain prepared for the worst;
She assembled her best fighting captains
From every far corner of earth.

For Horatio this was the sunray
That broke through the cloud covered sky.
For his God, king and country, he'd vanquish
His enemies, else he would die.
So to Portsmouth he took his new family
With eyes on a ship-of-the-line:
Agamemnon, her name, a large warship
Aboard which his name came to shine.

4. The Eater of Kings

Revolution in France was a monster
That thirsted for power and blood.
Severed heads filled up big wicker baskets,
And rolled into puddles of mud.

Baying mobs cut down nobles and churchmen,
And anyone who disagreed
With the hate of the men who took over,
Or questioned their manic decrees.

For King Louis's silk slippers had pressed on
The common folk's necks for so long,
While his family ate gold and drank diamonds
The peasantry hadn't a crumb.
And the church and the nobles, between them,
Owned everything else in the land,
Leaving most of the people with nothing
Besides empty stomachs and hands.

But then Marat and Robespierre came up
With wicked and envious eyes,
And a will to the limitless power
Of royalty – whom they despised.
To the people they promised great wonders:
Equality, freedom, fair pay...
If they would but get rid of the Bourbons,
And anyone else in their way.

So the guillotine chopped until sunset;

The terror, they stated, would cease
When the very last king had been strangled
To death the guts of his priests.
When the crown heads of Europe discerned this
They panicked and readied their troops,
Just in case the wild mob came to get them
And cannonballs started to shoot.

So the National Convention claimed power,
And France declared unending war
Upon Holland and Britain, their neighbours,
And smashed up good will and rapport.
Though Prime Minister Pitt of Great Britain
Tried hard to avoid needless ill,
There was no way to reason with zealots
Who had so much blood left to spill.

Captain Nelson, for his part, was sickened.
He couldn't abide what he saw:
Wayward hooligans wrecking great nations
While flouting tradition and law.
King and church, which he valued so highly,
These crackpots had torn into shreds.
And it seemed that all France would spew venom

Till God and his kingdom were dead.

But the man who would rise to such greatness
Not seen since the Caesars of Rome,
Hadn't entered yet into the picture
And made all of Paris his home.
Like a meteor smashing through planets,
And tearing star clusters apart,
He would come to be viewed as a titan:
Napoleone di Buonaparte.

He was notably lean when a young man,
With powerful greyish-blue eyes.
There were those who remarked that his features
Were brimming with charm and surprise.
Born the son of a Corsican lawyer,
He had such a rare force of will,
He was able to mount the French army
By bravery, vigour and skill.

At a time when all France was surrounded,
And maybe would soon be snuffed out,
People called for a strongman to lead them;
And Bonaparte hadn't a doubt.

He believed in himself so completely
He felt all of Europe would fall
At his feet with respect and devotion,
Or suffer his dread cannonballs.

Like a whirlwind, he blasted through kingdoms
And forced every crown head to kneel.
Their gold crowns he gave out to his family,
And dogs who'd lay down at his heel.
Yes, the man who ate monarchs for breakfast
And took their estates for his own
Had his sights upon stalwart Great Britain,
And sought to acquire her throne.

The destruction of England would please me,
He said as he swallowed his clams.
Try to think how Horatio Nelson
Regarded this towering man.
Bonaparte, that great menace to England,
And Nelson, her knight of the waves:
Their collisions would send untold numbers
Of stouthearted men to their graves.

5. Adventures in the Agamemnon

Of the ships that Horatio captained,
The one he loved best was the famed
Agamemnon, which did such great wonders
In proud Copenhagen and Spain.
This small warship of sixty-four cannon
Behaved like a ready right hand,
With a disciplined crew at their stations
And Nelson in total command.

It was then that the tireless young captain
Came into his own as a man
More at home on the rolling blue waters
Than ever he'd been on the land.
And his genius for war on the ocean,
Before only glimpsed in brief spells,
Became clear to his naval commanders,
As well as the Gauls he gave hell.

*You must follow my orders exactly,
He said to his trustworthy crew,
And I'll foster you each into heroes,
Invincible, ready and true.*

*Any man who speaks ill of your nation
Or king is a man to be spurned.
And the friends of the French Revolution:
Against them we'll hold fast and firm.*

At the time, Britain's navy was led by
A man named Lord Admiral Hood,
Who was more of a father to Nelson
Than Nelson or he understood.
The old admiral sent him on missions
To knock every Frenchman he found
Out of Mediterranean waters,
And run hostile warships aground.

With a joy and a passion for duty,
Horatio gave all he had.
Though he often felt dizzy with sickness,
He found that it wasn't too bad.
With his unpowdered hair tied behind him
And uniform beautifully laced,
He would hunt down his enemy's sails;
To them that he caught he laid waste.

Both Lord Hood and the young Captain Nelson

Dealt blows to French finance and trade
When they formed a blockade of the harbours
Of wealthy Toulon and Marseilles.
For a time, Gallic soldiers resisted,
And blasted great guns from the walls.
But the ships of the British moved swiftly,
And kept out of range of the balls.

In the end the French troops were disheartened,
Exhausted by British resolve;
And their stomachs were hungry for foodstuff
That hadn't turned fluffy with mold.
So they waved their white flags at their captors
And marched out with hands in the sky.
They surrendered their cities to Nelson,
Who hoisted King George's flag high.

Then to Corsica Nelson was posted –
Napoleon Bonaparte's home.
He was met with a squadron of frigates
Defending the island of stones.
He was ordered to wear down defenses
And blow rival warships away.
The old admiral said: *Nelson, send them*

Along to the devil your way.

Captain Nelson ran rings round the frigates.
The enemy hadn't a prayer.
He blew open their hulls with his broadsides,
And ended the stirring affair.
But the true task was still there before him:
The island housed garrisoned ports
Well defended by huge rocky ramparts
As tricky to storm as large forts.

First was Bastia with its four thousand
Stern soldiers and battery guns.
*We'll shatter their cannons, said Nelson,
And leave them defenseless and stunned.
We shall blow a large hole in their ramparts,
And send in our soldiers to storm
Through the nighttime until they surrender.
I'd wager they'll fall before dawn.*

But Lord Admiral Hood and the army
Said, no, it could never be done.
You'll do nothing but lead us to slaughter,
Barked one major into his rum.

In reply, Nelson said: *We will triumph,
Or some of our heads will hang low!
With permission, sir, I'll lead the soldiers
And charge to deliver the blow.*

It was hard for Lord Hood to refuse him
When seeing the light in his eyes.
So with several fine battleships, Nelson
Pushed off beneath inky dark skies.
In the nighttime, when Bastia slumbered,
His boats grounded where the waves lapped.
Then with many a blast of his cannons,
He turned Gallic guns into scrap.

In the darkness the sparks of the cannons
Flashed brilliant yellows and reds.
Every bell in the city was clanging
To summon the troops from their beds.
But too late! Captain Nelson had broken
A hole through the citadel's wall.
Dusky clouds floated up from the rubble.
The Frenchmen inside were appalled.

With a passionate war cry, the captain

Led one thousand troops to the breach;
And the musket shots rained down upon them
As wounded men tumbled and shrieked.
But the redcoats poured in like a torrent.
The Corsican city was won.
The Gauls once again had been beaten;
They laid down the last of their guns.

Captain Nelson's success made his critics
Take bites from their big bicorn hats.
With a thirst for more danger and glory,
He planned out his next bold attack.
The other great Corsican port town
Was Calvi, built high with basalt.
It made Bastia look like a dollhouse;
Its ramparts could check great assaults.

An audacious attack would be needed.
Again, he pushed off in the night,
And he sailed to the port under moonlight,
Prepared for the fight of his life.
And he wrote to his Fanny in England:
I wouldn't be anywhere else,
Dear wife, though I think of you often,

And pray you are blessed with good health.

Then, with howitzers, mortars and long guns,
The captain gave orders to fire.
And he pounded the citadel ramparts
With blasts like a terrible choir.
When he judged it was time to go forward
And pluck like a plum his great prize,
He jumped down from his ship with the soldiers
And charged in the glow of sunrise.

But the walls of the town were still standing,
And musket shots came pelting down.
One came skimming past Nelson's right shoulder,
And knocked up the sand from the ground.
In a moment, his eye was ignited
As thousands of grains struck his cheek,
And the razor-like sand left him sightless,
Though never a word did he speak.

He fought on without making a whimper
About the sharp grit in his eye,
Though he couldn't see much of his comrades
In action about his right side.

Only after the skirmish was over –
Only then did he mention his brush
With the hot shot that nearly had killed him,
And how his right eye had been touched.

To Lord Admiral Hood, he spoke lightly:

Don't worry, I'm perfectly well.

I was hurt just a little this morning.

It's nothing, though, as you can tell.

But his eye on that day had been blinded,
And never recovered its sight.

Captain Nelson held off for twelve hours,
Then threw himself back in the fight.

At the end of a long grinding battle,
The Frenchmen at Calvi gave up.
To the rooftops they hoisted white bed sheets,
All ragged and covered with muck.
And they ventured outside to the British
With tiredness aching their bones.
Gallic men looking lost and bewildered,
So far from their families and homes.

And to Nelson it seemed he was flying

Among the great heroes of old;
Noble Perseus, Hector and Jason,
In skies coloured purple and gold.
Agamemnon had served him so surely,
While Admiral Hood saw his worth.
Yes, an eye he had lost, but no matter –
It was but a trifling curse.

Yet the struggles in Europe continued,
And people were stricken with fear.
And when chaos and death come a-knocking,
That's when history's great ones appear.
And the skies all around promised thunder.
A terrible storm was to break;
For Napoleon marched upon nations
And took by the throat every state.

6. Blood on Tenerife Sand

Young Napoleon had not been idle.

By this time a major in rank,

He'd been stomping about on his rivals

As if they were beetles and ants.

When in Toulon, he conquered the British

And booted them out on their ear.

And the citizens who'd stood against him,

He chased from their city in fear.

When the news met the press back in England,

Lord Hood was an admiral no more.

The Prime Minister shook up the navy

And showed the old seadog the door.

When Horatio heard what became of

The father who'd shown him such love,
The news took the wind from his sails.
He scorned the fool statesmen above.

Bonaparte made short work of the British
In France, and on Belgian soil too.
He ejected Dutch regiments with them,
And bid their commanders adieu.
Then the Prussians he shoved from the Rhineland,
And all the great Austrian hosts.
When he marched through the Pyrenees Mountains,
Spain's king turned as white as a ghost.

Rightly so, since the Spanish royal family
Napoleon tossed from their thrones,
And drove all their armies before him,
And starved many people to bones.
The Italians soon had their backsides
Kicked up to the roof of the sky.
Having taken apart the republics,
He rested his heels in Versailles.

But, oh, where was our undaunted hero?
Why, captaining sails on the sea.

The new admiral, good Sir John Jervis,
Saw wondrous potential in he.
Now promoted to Junior Admiral,
Horatio's power had grown.
And his mind was forever in motion:
Oh, how to defeat our great foe?

In the Gulf of Genoa one year,
While chasing a line of French boats,
Nelson spotted a ship on its lonesome.
The sight gave a small spark of hope.
Like a falcon, he swooped on the warship
Ça Ira and captured the craft.
Though his right eye was ever in darkness,
His left scanned the seas fore and aft.

Then came news to the ear of Sir Jervis:
A treasure ship loaded with loot
Rode the currents from distant Manila
With many small islands en route.
The French vessel was anchored in waters
Sky blue and chock-full of sharp reefs.
Santa Cruz was the port town of interest,
On the island of bright Tenerife.

So with ships-of-the-line at his service,
Including three seventy guns,
Several frigates and cutters, he plotted
A course to the deathly doldrums.
On through Hercules' Gates flew his squadron,
And south by Morocco's fair shores,
To the Spanish held Canary Islands –
An unlikely scene for a war.

In the morning the white snowy mountain –
Lush Tenerife's Peak – was in sight.
When the Spaniards saw who was approaching,
They primed themselves ready fight.
Through the day Nelson planned his invasion;
A tough nut to crack, Santa Cruz.
But he thought it a good deal more hateful
To flee than to struggle and lose.

So the captain prepared his lieutenants,
Who ordered the men at his back.
At eleven o'clock in the evening,
His party pushed off to attack.
All my victories and my successes:

*They've made me so bold and so vain,
Said Horatio, but this endeavour,
I can't help but feel will bring pain.*

As they plunged through the surf in their rowboats,
The Spaniards rang every church bell.
While the rowboats were fighting the breakers,
Spain's cannons brought bloodshed and hell.
When the British troops charged they ran into
A tempest of grapeshot and fire.
In the darkness were screams and harsh flashes;
The plight of the British was dire.

As he led the attack on the Spaniards,
Brave Nelson was waist-deep in surf.
As the musket shots cracked all around him,
The fear and confusion grew worse.
Many men lost their way in the water,
And waves tugged their muskets from reach.
Whole battalions yielded to gunshots
Before they had boots on the beach.

The invasion had failed 'fore it started.
The British were forced to retreat.

As for Nelson, he pressed ever onward
With seawater dragging his feet.
Then a powerful blast knocked him sideways;
His arm was a shower of gore.
It hung down far too low to the water.
He said: *Surely now I'm done for.*

Yet he clung to his sword with his good hand –
The sword his good uncle passed down.
Faint and bleeding, he turned from the island.
He knew if he fell he would drown.
As he clambered back on to the rowboat,
He shouted out: *Wait for these men.*
Look, they desperately splash in the water.
We shall not retreat without them.

By some miracle, Nelson found passage
Back safe to the Agamemnon.
Though his forearm was dangling and bloody,
He'd take no-one's help to get on.
As he stood on the quarterdeck heaving,
He called with couple of coughs:
Get your instruments ready, good doctor.
My arm: It must go, take it off.

With the battle tossed into the dustbin
Of naval disasters in war,
It was Nelson's worst time on the ocean.
He came away wounded and sore.
He'd lost his right arm from the elbow,
Though that was a small enough thing.
His defeat on the Tenerife shoreline
Was what gave the nastiest sting.

Furthermore, his good ship Agamemnon
Had seen so much service at sea
That her barnacled hulk was exhausted;
She handled like rotten debris.
For a time she was put out of service,
Which felt like the twist of a knife.
Losing such a fine ship was like losing
A loving and dutiful wife.

First Lord Hood, then his arm, now his vessel:
These years had been hard on the soul.
And each one of these losses had left him
A little less happy and whole.
But the winds of his fortune were changing,

And soon would his heart be enflamed
By the battles that brought him to glory
And made him the man he became.

7. The French Crocodile

With Napoleon still on his rampage,
A general at twenty-six years,
It appeared he was bringing to being
Great Britain's most terrible fears.
With the Austrians knocked from the chessboard
And Belgium absorbed into France,
He had Venice chopped up into pieces.
And Switzerland hadn't a chance.

It was only her wonderful navy
That kept England safe – for the time.
But her allies could help her no longer,
And confidence was in decline.
When the government tried a new tactic
And offered a treaty of peace,
The Directory of France knocked it flying.
The war, they declared, would not cease.

It was then that Napoleon looked to
The lands where the pyramids rose:
Windswept Egypt became a good prospect
For thumping his old Saxon foes.
He assembled a powerful army
Along with a fleet of large ships,
And he chased out the Ottoman rulers
Who had Cairo under their whip.

Now, with Egypt beneath Gallic boot heels,
Great Britain would not be supreme.
If she yielded her footing in Asia,
Her empire would split at the seams.
So it fell to Vice Admiral Nelson
To sail to the land of the Nile

With the British Royal Navy behind him
And battle the French crocodile.

Nelson's flagship, swift-sailing and agile,
His Majesty's Ship the Vanguard,
With its seventy-four gleaming cannons,
Was fresh from proud Deptford's Dockyard.
Captain Hardy, his most loyal comrade,
Gave orders aboard the Mutine,
While the fierce Captain Troubridge commanded
The Culloden – wolf of the sea.

It was Troubridge who spotted their quarry
One blazing hot day in July;
Thirteen ships-of-the-line sitting idle
In waters just north of the Nile.
While Napoleon settled his business
And toured the Valley of Kings,
Nelson came at full sail on his navy,
His heart filled with valorous hymns.

When the Frenchman in charge saw the coming
Of Nelson, he leapt in the air.
The attack was so swift and so sudden

He hadn't had time to prepare.
Every second's delay makes them stronger,
Was Nelson's belief in a fight.
There was never to be an occasion
He granted his rival first bite.

All that Admiral Brueys could do now
Was set all his ships in a line,
Like a cap on the bay of Aboukir –
And gulp down a glass of strong wine.
Then the British hauled sharply to starboard
An inch from the yellow sandbanks.
Captain Troubridge got stuck in the shallows.
Oh, goodness! He cursed and he stamped.

But the Zealous forged on with the Theseus;
The Minotaur and the Defence;
The Bellerophon and the Majestic,
Their riggings pulled taut with suspense.
The Audacious, Goliath, Orion,
All bent on the same daring goal:
To induce the French fleet to surrender,
Or blast it to death on the shoals.

In they flew to assault the French vanguard
And came at the enemy's bow.

When they pulled alongside there was thunder
And billowing gunpowder clouds.

All at once, many ships fired broadsides;

Two enemy vessels were crushed.

Masts and rigging collapsed to the ocean,

And gunwales were pounded to mush.

Placing boats to the port and starboard,

Both sides of the enemy ships,

Nelson caught Brueys' fleet between gun-walls

And rapidly blew it to bits.

Stabbing splinters of wood flew like gunshots,

And maimed fighting men on both sides.

Foaming brine splashed as high as the crow's nests,

And flames blistered many a hide.

The Bellerophon came by the scuppers

Of L'Orient, hulking and vast.

With a hundred and twenty large cannons,

Her power could not be surpassed.

Captain Darby then ordered his vessel

To lay that great battleship low;

But the British boat took such a beating,
She limped from the Orient's blows.

Captain Westcott on board the Majestic,
While standing upon the poop deck,
Took a tumble and fell without warning.
He'd caught a lead ball in the neck.
Shortly after, Vice Admiral Nelson
Was struck by a quick flying shard –
Some stray shrapnel that sliced up his forehead
And left him a permanent scar.

I am killed! he cried out in amazement,
With Lieutenant Berry close by.
*To my wife, do remember my fondness,
For very soon Nelson must die.*
Though the skin on his head was torn open,
It was but an unpleasant scratch.
When he went to the surgeon for treatment,
The wound could be easily patched.

So then, bandaged and bleeding, he stumbled
Back into the combat, half-blind.
He would fight till his final breath left him,

With all of his body and mind.
Through the gun smoke he saw Captain Foley
With hands on Goliath's large wheel;
And he witnessed him steering the warship
Alongside the Orient's keel.

With a broadside timed just to perfection,
Goliath let loose on the ship
A great blast that made every sail tremble
And caused the whole portside to split.
With the hull of the Orient opened,
Small fires inside could be seen,
Red and orange, aglow like wee devils,
Their tongues licking every beam.

One more earth-cracking shot from Goliath:
It signaled the Orient's doom.
As the sunset gave way to dim twilight,
The flames grew intense in the gloom.
Still, the proud Gallic sailors below deck
Toiled on and kept loading their guns
As their ship burned to ashes around them
And smoke wafted into their lungs.

With their soundness of judgment and spirit,
The war fleet of Nelson gained sway.
As a moon crescent shone on the wreckage,
He knew he had won out the day.
Every boat on both sides was enveloped
In billowing black midnight smoke.
Even so, you could see through the chaos
That Brueys was all out of hope.

The French Admiral fell to a round shot,
And lost both his legs overboard.
So he strapped himself into an armchair
And held up his officer's sword.
And that sabre – it would have been offered
To Nelson in courtly respect
Had that gentleman not died in battle –
And not seen his battleship wrecked.

But, alas, in a moment of horror,
The mountainous flagship of Gaul –
With a blast that lit up half the ocean –
Exploded in fiery balls.
Many bodies blew up in the mushroom
Of red that reached up to the stars.

Maybe seventy Gallic survivors
Washed up on Aboukir's sandbars.

There was nothing bloodthirsty in Nelson;
But capturing ships was his joy.
Every French boat but two he took hold of,
Apart from those ones he destroyed.
In the morning, when all had been settled,
Despite his great triumph, he said:
*Mark you well: Those two boats'd be mine now,
If not for the pain in my head.*

Of the captains that fought in the battle,
All shone like those stars in the sky;
But Vice Admiral Nelson winked brightest –
A master of war with one eye.
In a letter to every seaman
Who'd battled in Aboukir Bay,
He expressed his sincere admiration
For how they'd fought on that day:

*Please accept my most cordial thank you
For every fine act that I saw.
For your wonderful courage and valour,*

I owe you my honours and more.

And the men roared out songs in elation
While Nelson sat down at his desk
With a horrible ache in his forehead
And smoke in his dull-wheezing chest.

The applause for his victory was deafening,
With praise from great statesmen and kings.
He was swiftly made into a baron –
Reward for his marvelous win.
The most one-sided battle the navy
Had seen in its whole history,
The great bout on the Nile was hailed
From Plymouth to old Aberdeen.

As for Bonaparte's plans for the region:
They rolled from his hand to the bin.
He abandoned his army in Egypt
And left them to save their own skins.
Now the men of his army were stranded
With no clear means to get home.
What a poor ragged bunch they turned into,
With nothing to show but their bones.

8. How Nelson Was Conquered

Every mortal has weakness within him,
No demigod, Nelson, but a man.
And if love was a wolf prowling round him,
Then he was a tender young lamb.
All his life Nelson hungered for romance;
And romance – it made him quite blind
To the oldest of man’s natural frailties:
His need to impress womankind.

Emma Hamilton lived with her husband
(A statesman far older than she),
In the sumptuous city of Naples,
Where both were good friends with the queen.
She enjoyed a luxurious lifestyle,
Surrounded by silks and fine jewels.
Her endowments she polished so brightly,
They caught the attention of fools.

What a beauty she was, full of laughter.
She charmed like a butterfly’s wing.
A celebrity, born to throw parties,
And stand in the centre and sing.

As a battleship, she would have blasted
Poor Nelson with mighty broadsides.
She'd have scuppered his ship with her smiles,
And conquered with glints in her eye.

When the struggle in Egypt was over,
The admiral took his fleet west.
But the Vanguard was caught in rough waters
And mauled by a frightful tempest.
So he guided his vessel to Naples
And limped into port to repose.
He was welcomed with great celebration,
To cheers and loud trumpet blows.

The Sicilian king came to greet him
Upon plucky Vanguard's foredeck.
When the splendid reception was over,
The whole royal family he'd met.
Ah! But who was this beautiful lady
Who came with her arms open wide
To embrace him with tears of gladness
Welled up in her ocean blue eyes?

Lady Hamilton upstaged the royals

While Nelson beheld this fair nymph,
Feeling like he'd been hit by a yardarm,
And carried up high on white wings.
With his blood vessels full of strange magic,
Surprise and enchantment were mixed.
It was all he could do to stay standing
Before this rare creature transfixed.

Later, Nelson was rowed into harbour
Along with the mademoiselle.
The Italian crowds were ecstatic,
And churches rang victory bells.
Her old husband stood by looking joyful,
And beamed as he bowed to the man
Who had kicked Bonaparte in the kneecaps
And ruined his despotic plans.

Then a great celebration was started,
With bonfires, music and wine.
Lady Hamilton gave out felt headbands
With a *Nelson and Victory* sign.
She arranged a parade through the city,
And pulled weary Nelson all round
Like a trophy she'd won in some contest.

He followed her dazed and spellbound.

I insist you come back to our dwelling

And stay as our most honoured guest.

We have parlours for games and amusement,

And bedchambers where you may rest,

Lady Hamilton said with such sweetness,

While twisting a lock of brown hair.

And this was the way it all started –

This hopeless and sickly affair.

They attended big masquerade parties,

And numerous opulent balls.

Lady Hamilton, yes, had great beauty,

But no moral fibre at all.

She supplied him with praise and attention,

And flattered him blind, dead and dumb.

Very soon she'd brought him to heel,

And twisted him round her long thumb.

Did she love him? Perhaps, but more likely

She valued his glory and fame.

All her life she had sought famous people

And hunted for public acclaim.

They would gamble at cards until sunrise,
When Horatio's gold was all spent.
When the Hamilton's moved to Palermo,
She beckoned him there; and he went.

Lady Hamilton – she is an angel,
He wrote to his wife back at home.
Fanny Nelson, that poor honest woman,
Suspected that grief would be sown.
Leave the boarding to captains, she told him
From one thousand miles away.
But, of course, he could not hear her warning
With Hamilton there in the way.

For a man so devoted to duty,
A servant of Almighty God,
His behaviour was painful to witness,
And set tongues a-wagging abroad.
Captain Troubridge, the boldest of captains,
Beseeched his commander to stop
With the parties that raised every eyebrow
And squandered his fortunes to naught.

In the end it was too much for Fanny.

Their marriage was broken and dead.
For the rest of his life Nelson clung to
Sir Hamilton's woman instead.
Yes, they made a ridiculous couple;
When waltzing beneath chandeliers,
Nelson had to stand up on his tiptoes
To whisper sweet words in her ear.

And with Nelson so lost and besotted,
Carousing around with his girl,
Bonaparte had been busily mopping
His empire with viscounts and earls.
He defeated or else brokered peace with
Most nations with royals and thrones.
He was shoving Great Britain from Europe,
And now she was fighting alone.

Furthermore, he had grown so colossal –
So far had old Boney advanced –
There was no-one around who could stop him
Becoming the master of France.
No more kings would the people endure,
But legates were all well and good;
So he wasn't made king, but First Consul,

As everyone well understood.

9. The Three Crowns of Copenhagen

Something troublesome brewed in the waters
That made up the rolling North Sea.
The two nations of France and of Denmark
Had vessels in each other's quays.
Britain saw this and knew they were trading.
And, worse, Denmark's wartime supplies
Found their way into Bonaparte's keeping,
Despite England's protests and cries.

Then it was that the Swedes and the Russians
Decided that joining the French
Was a better idea on balance
Than trying to straddle the fence.
These events sent a shudder through England,
Now fighting her foe tooth and claw.
For she knew if Napoleon triumphed,

Great Britain would flourish no more.

So a letter she posted to Denmark,

With fiery strokes of her pen.

She demanded to search Danish vessels,

And question her merchant seamen.

But the Danes wrote their own angry letter

That read, simply: *Keep your hands off!*

And the squabble became very ugly.

Hot words then transformed to great wrath.

British ships-of-the-line sought out Danish,

And skirmished wherever they met.

Nelson's view was: *We may not subdue them,*

But let's make them never forget

That this enemy host cannot hurt us.

Our boldness will make them ashamed.

Let us cross the North Sea to remind them,

Britannia is queen of the waves.

In command of the fleet was Sir Parker,

An honest but hesitant man.

He and Nelson agreed upon nothing

When trying to think of a plan.

While Sir Parker was wont to be cautious,
His second attacked in full force.
If the one thought it best to go southward,
The other said: *No, let's go north.*

Though they didn't much like one another,
They put up a workable scheme
To make Denmark think twice about kissing
Napoleon's awful regime.
So they cast off from Yarmouth and sailed
Across the North Sea's frozen waves,
To where Beowulf once battled monsters
In Denmark's chill fenlands and caves.

On the Elephant, Nelson's new gunship,
A seventy-four cannon boat,
The Vice Admiral sat in his cabin,
And many a letter he wrote.
Lady Hamilton – oft she was mentioned;
She lived in the deeps of his heart.
If I die, you shall have all my fortune,
He told his beloved sweetheart.

In March of that year they rounded

The Skaw – that long horn at the head
Of the blustering bleak Danish landmass;
Then southward the King's navy sped.
Some days later they passed by the castle
Named Cronenburg – pride of the Danes.
Then the Sound (that grey strait next to Denmark)
Gave welcome with buckets of rain.

Copenhagen had fearsome defenses:
Great cannons on mastless blockships;
Worn out hulks that were meant to be fired
And sent to bring woe to the Brits.
They had ships-of-the-line at the ready,
And guns behind every seawall.
But the Trekroner, that was the worst thing –
The Scandia's dreadful narwhal.

It was named the Three Crowns, or Trekroner;
A grim island fortress that lay
In the seas to the north of the city,
Beyond Copenhagen's great quay.
When Sir Parker saw what he was fighting,
He flushed and said: *This can't be done.*
We'd do better to take on the devil

Than that massive beast and its guns.

Of course, Nelson, whose way was to pierce
The enemy's breast in a flash,
Was intent upon striking like lightning.
You think them too strong? Balderdash!
In the end it was Nelson who triumphed,
And led the fleet in to land blows
Upon Denmark and all of her cannons,
And set Copenhagen aglow.

In the morning a fair wind was blowing.
The fleet sailed south on the Sound,
Bearing in to engage with the city
And take by the throat those Three Crowns.
The St. George was commanded by Hardy;
The Amazon, by Captain Riou;
Then the Ganges, the Glatton, the Monarch;
All knew just what they were to do.

Many more British ships bared their broadsides
To Denmark's great wall of defense.
There'd be almost no room to maneuver.
The cannon storm would be intense.

When the first of the guns started booming,
All knew that the victory wreath
Would belong to the ones who hit hardest
And stayed up while losing their teeth.

On the Elephant's quarterdeck, Foley
Commanded the crew to attack
The fine Dannebrog, Denmark's big flagship,
And show them a good slugging match.
Cannon thundered across the grey waters
And slammed to the sides of each ship.
On the Dannebrogue, splinters went flying;
The Elephant's capstan was split.

And while Foley commanded the vessel,
So Nelson commanded the fleet,
Sending signals to all of his captains,
Attempting to ward off defeat.
Then a round shot smashed into the mainmast,
So close the heads of the two
That their hats were knocked foolishly crooked;
Their locks were unfurled and askew.

Ah! Such warm work today, remarked Foley.

And Nelson returned with a grin:
But I'd ne'er be elsewhere for thousands.
Here's where I belong – for my sins.
And he looked up the line with his spyglass
And tried to find Captain Riou
As his Amazon blasted the Trecroner
To lands far beyond Timbuktu.

Now the battle was roaring and raging,
With fire and blood in the brine,
It seemed Denmark's defenses were bending
Away from the battle's front line.
Then it happened: In one stunning moment,
The Signal Lieutenant appeared,
Saying: *Sir, I've a signal from Parker,*
Though not to your liking, I fear.

Nelson turned to his officer sternly,
And said: *Spit it out, man; do speak.*
The Lieutenant: *The flag on the London*
Is ordering us to retreat.
To which Nelson paced faster than usual,
And spoke not a word in reply.
Then, extending and raising his eyeglass,

He held it against his blind eye.

Just a note on the facts about warfare:

Retreat with hot shots in the sky

Is perhaps the most hazardous tactic

A sailor or soldier can try.

Breaking fire and attempting to exit

While yielding the whole battleground

Would've been to surrender one's body

To four dozen snapping bloodhounds.

Then the admiral squinted his blind eye

And uttered that infamous line:

I cannot see the signal, Lieutenant.

Fight on, handsome ships-of-the-line.

Then, to Foley, he said: *My brave captain,*

Sometimes being blind is my right.

If I perish, do pass on my pardon

To Parker – in words most polite.

So it was that the saying was started:

'To turn a blind eye' – and not see,

When the seeing of what is so clear

Might end up in catastrophe.

And it's true that obeying your orders,
No matter how cruel or insane,
Is the easier path for the coward
Who seeks to avoid taking blame.

Sometime later, the Danes were in trouble.
The Elephant's steadfast attack
Had by now knocked the Dannebrog sideways
And pushed the entire ship back.
Denmark's flagship lay stuck on a sandbank
With fires ablaze in her hull.
Other sails had been shattered by round shot.
Their flags were all riddled with holes.

Captain Riou gave Trecroner a drubbing,
Though not without terrible loss.
As he stood on the Amazon's foredeck,
The scuppers swilled blood-bubbled froth.
Every part of the ship was in splinters,
And cannonballs kept flying in.
Every officer, gunner and lookout
Was losing his life or his limbs.

Then he said, in the tones of a hero,

While raising his head very tall:

Alright boys, let us die here together.

Today, my salute to you all.

Not three seconds had passed when a hot shot
Came whistling to take him away.

Many other great men battled staunchly
And let go of life on that day.

When the backs of the Danes had been broken
The admiral rushed to his desk;
And he penned out a note to the Crown Prince
Of Denmark, whose forces he pressed.

To the Danes, our most valiant brothers,

In King George's name, I invite

The immediate ceasefire of Denmark,

Or else I must burn her fleet bright.

Shortly after, both sides hushed their cannons
By raising their white flags of truce.

It was clear, though, the Danes were well beaten.

The fires confirmed that plain truth.

Nelson ordered that no-one should shoot on

The Danes as they fled to the quay

From their flame-engulfed vessels and blockships,

Displaying his humanity.

With the Tre Kroner's island in ruins –
Thanks mainly to brave Captain Riou –
Copenhagen was left at the mercy
Of Britain's stout battleship crews.
By an act of defiance had Nelson
Averted defeat and disgrace.
Had he not disobeyed, Britain must've
Been left wiping egg from her face.

Scandinavia groaned at the outcome
Of Denmark and Britain's short war;
All their dallings with the French Consul
They ceased, though their feelings were sore.
So Napoleon's allies departed;
His plans took a sizeable knock.
And he knew that while Britain existed
His pathway to glory was blocked.

Back in London, Horatio Nelson
Was greeted with thunderous applause.
His position was bumped up to viscount.
His surname was spoken with awe.

Lord St. Vincent gave voice to the nation
Regarding the war with the Danes
When declaring: *There is but one Nelson:*
Napoleon Bonaparte's bane.

10. The Battle of Trafalgar

When Napoleon crowned himself Emperor
He had little need of the Pope.
By this point, he viewed monarchs and clergies
As small irritations and jokes.
There was only one king that concerned him:
King George of the Hanover House,
Sovereign ruler of Britain and Ireland –

Who had to be crushed like a louse.

We must either destroy England's monarch,

Or we will in time be destroyed,

Wrote Napoleon, matter-of-factly.

His eye was a fathomless void.

So he gathered his Army of England,

A stone-hearted menacing host;

And their task was to conquer Great Britain

And serve up a tasty crown roast.

He created a medal of honour,

A handcraft of gold, fair and round,

To present to the soldier who captured

Old London and knocked her bridge down.

Then he called on Vice Admiral Villeneuve,

The man who commanded his fleet,

And explained that he needed some vessels

To make his attack plan complete.

He would march his great army to Cadiz,

Which sits on the southernmost tip

Of the Spanish coast, near Gibraltar,

And load his men onto his ships.

Then a breeze would blow them on to Sussex
Where white chalky cliffs towered high.
And his army would yank England's forelocks
Until she screamed mercy and cried.

Now the people of Britain were panicked,
And children were scared of the name
Of Napoleon – sharp-fanged and hungry,
And sporting a lion-ish mane.
So the government turned to the one man
They knew would be firm in a fight,
And would take on Napoleon's navy
With courage, steadfastness and might.

Down in Portsmouth one September morning,
Great crowds came to cheer with joy.
There were builders and bakers and widows,
Young maidens and dirty-faced boys.
Some were weeping with mixed up emotions,
And some gave up prayers to the Lord,
Wishing Godspeed to Admiral Nelson,
Who strode to the quays with his sword.

Now Commander-in-chief of the navy,

Lord Nelson was second to none.
He was mobbed by the mass of well-wishers
While songs of his exploits were sung.
One old lady, her face full of wrinkles,
Said: *Bless you, God bless you, young man!*
As he boarded the HMS Victory,
He carried their hearts in his hand.

With his friend Captain Hardy beside him,
He led the King's glorious fleet
To the Portuguese city of Lisbon
Where John VI still had his seat.
When revealing his plans for the battle,
His captains were visibly stirred.
*We shall give them a bloody good shaking,
Providing we all keep our nerve.*

In the morning, the fleet sailed from Lisbon.
The old Agamemnon had come
Finely patched and refitted for battle,
Her flags flying high in the sun.
The Defense and the Mars were in service;
The great Royal Sovereign was there.
Twenty-seven good vessels, all counted,

Were primed for the coming affair.

The French admiral guided his captains
From Cadiz and headed northwest.
Many Spanish ships followed the Frenchman
Away on the foaming wave crests.
Thirty-three was the number of vessels,
Among them a five thousand ton:
The Santísima Trinidad, armed with...
One hundred and forty big guns.

Whilst the rain pattered down on the Victory,
Lord Nelson sat down at his desk.
With his pen he poured soul upon paper
And wrote: *My beloved dearest:*
Lady Emma, this day it may be that
I perish and fly from this world.
You must know that my love is undying,
For you and our wonderful girl.

I've arranged that you both shall inherit
Enough that you never shall need.
But remember, my darling, remember;
Live easy, sing songs, and succeed.

The last letter he wrote he left unsigned,
Unsealed, just next to his pen.
On his wall hung a portrait of Emma.
He glanced at it now and again.

When the rains cleared off there were gunships
Revealed from behind misty clouds.
Here was Villeneuve's line heading northward
Still hidden in part by damp shrouds.
After noon the warm sun lit the ocean.
The wave crests shone stars blinding bright.
Somewhere close to the Cape of Trafalgar,
The enemy's fleet came in sight.

For a time, Nelson sailed alongside
The Spanish and French in the east.
Try to picture a line of great warships
That stretched five full miles, at least.
Every vessel was crammed full of soldiers
And sharpshooters with but one goal:
To bring terror to Britain, and break her
To Bonaparte's hateful control.

Not while I still draw breath, said Lord Nelson,

Dressed up in his blue navy frock,
High in spirits while pacing the Victory,
And watching his prey like a hawk.
*May the great God I worship grant triumph
Today for my country and king.
May the men in my charge seize their birthright:
This battle – this war may they win.*

Then he ordered his fleet to turn sharply
To skewer the Gauls in their side.
He formed two long columns, like lances,
To drive through the enemy's hide.
At the head of one column, the Victory;
The other, the Royal Sovereign.
Captain Collingwood stood on the foredeck
And spoke rousing words to his men.

With a breeze like the breath of a newborn,
The British were moving too slow.
And the captains felt stuck in a millpond;
As one, they cursed: *Blow, damn you, blow!*
What did Villeneuve do with his warships
While powdering every last gun?
Why, he bent his long line in a crescent

With horns at the back and the front.

With just three miles of ocean between them,
The French and the Spanish began
To bombard every ship that Lord Nelson
Put forward as part of his van.
Many shots simply crashed to the water;
The targets were far out of range.
One or two punched small holes in the sails,
But didn't inflict too much pain.

It was then that the fleets of all nations
(Proud brothers and gentlemen, they)
Hoisted up every standard and colour
To fly in the broad light of day.
Then, to rally the men in his service,
Lord Nelson was suddenly spurred
To call over his signal lieutenant
And speak his most infamous words:

*Tell them, 'Nelson Expects... No, not Nelson...
But, 'England expects every man'
'To do...' what should I say now...? 'his duty'.
And the men on the battleships sang.*

To the sailors there wasn't much difference
Between their lord admiral's name
And the name of the country they came from;
The two, to their ears, were the same.

Now the cannons were roaring in fury,
And many lead shots found their marks.
Many sails were peppered and useless,
While gunports were blown wide apart.
But, alas, though the British were battered
(With Victory taking the brunt),
Old time ships of those days fired sideways,
And couldn't attack from the front.

What this meant was that Villeneuve's warships
Could blast at the British all day,
While the British ploughed on without shooting,
Right into the hellfire rain.
So they sallied straight into the cannons.
So far... Such hot work... So much time.
There were officers killed by the barrage
Before they'd reached the French line.

It appeared that the two British columns

Would run the Gauls through both as one.
At the last, though, Lord Nelson gave orders
For Collingwood's ships to sail on,
Surging past his own column, and starboard,
To catch Villeneuve off his guard;
Like a spearman who feints to the left side,
Then strikes on the right with his barb.

Captain Collingwood manning the Sovereign
Was first, then, to break the French line.
Sailing into the smoke and the thunder,
He skewered his foes in the spine.
At the bow of the Spanish St. Anna,
His gunners unleashed a great blast
That mistreated her figurehead roughly
And threw it right up to the mast.

Very soon would be Victory's moment
To balance the score in lead shots.
Nelson stared into enemy cannons,
Like monstrous eyes burning hot.
Through the smoke loomed the vast Bucentaure,
The flagship of Villeneuve's fleet.
She threw all that she had at the Victory,

With guns like the Devil's heartbeat.

Nelson watched as his booms were demolished.

His wheel was blown into bits.

Victory's forecastle took a good beating,

And gunwales were smashed into sticks.

Five marines on the poop deck fell lifeless,

And some on the quarter were killed.

Flames and splinters streaked every direction,

And men saw their brother's blood spilled.

You must listen now – this is what happened

Upon the Atlantic that day:

Captain Hardy directed the Victory

Astern of the Bucentaure.

Her long yardarm reached out like a needle

And pulled the French rigging apart.

Nelson's eye met with Villeneuve's own eyes

Just as the two battleships passed.

Then the Victory loosed such a broadside,

Napoleon himself felt the knock.

Bucentaure was struck with such fury

That Villeneuve's warship was rocked.

British cannonballs tore through the gun decks,
And gutted the ship stern to bow.
Maybe four hundred soldiers and sailors
Were slain in that murderous cloud.

Bucentaure was dead in the water,
So Hardy gave orders to fight
With the seventy-four cannon vessel,
Redoubtable, bursting with might.
Snipers fired their muskets on both sides,
And sailors were felled by hot lead.
One lieutenant collapsed to the foredeck;
He'd taken a shot in the head.

With this happening, the knights of Great Britain
Were running the enemy through.
The Leviathan, Belleisle and others –
Their broadswords flashed bright in the feud.
Having come between French ships and Spanish,
The men below deck were steadfast,
Manning cannons and cheering with fervour
Each time they delivered a blast.

On the Victory, Nelson was pacing

Between the mad rush of his crew,
Like a chess master viewing the chessboard,
Considering which piece to move.
All those dozens of musket shots whizzing –
It took only one to snuff out
The gallant Lord Admiral Nelson
Amid the explosions and shouts.

It was Hardy, with eyes wide as saucers,
Who witnessed his admiral fall.
He'd been hit from Redoubtable's poop deck
By one lucky musket man's ball.
My commander! My friend! On your feet now!
Cried Hardy in shock and dismay.
We are winning. Look – look; see them folding.
Come, stand; do not perish this day.

As he lay there, the admiral sputtered
A dribble of blood from his lips.
Ach! At last they have done for me, Hardy,
Said he with a voice raw with grit.
Nelson's men quickly took him below deck;
They carried him on a loose sail.
And the Victory herself seemed to cry out

With terrible creaks and loud wails.

Bucentaure was soon to surrender,
Though Villeneuve lived one more year,
Till Napoleon ordered his murder.
(His failure had cost Boney dear).
The Santísima Trinidad scrapped on,
Surrounded by far smaller ships;
Like a bear in a fight with a wolf pack,
At last she was torn into bits.

The Achille, a French Téméraire,
Was trapped between two British foes,
The Defiance as well as the Dreadnought,
Who brought her disaster and woe.
When a cannonball flame found the powder
Amassed in the ship's magazine,
She exploded with fury and violence,
With red-orange flames full of screams.

Now you ask, what became of the other?
The last of the ships Nelson fought?
The Redoubtable? She too was battered
Until her condition was fraught.

With the tricolours flying above her,
She sank to a watery doom.
To the bed of the sea she descended,
Tugged down by the hand of Neptune.

By the end of the day it was over,
And sunset brought peace to the waves.
The invasion of Britain had floundered;
King George and the churchmen were saved.
What was left of Napoleon's war fleet
Was captured or scuttled at sea.
Evermore were sung songs of Trafalgar,
Our proudest of all victories.

11. Drinking Lemonade

Now to Nelson, our stout stricken hero:
So bitter-sweet was his last hour.
He'd been shot near the heart with a lead ball.
His wound was a bloody red flower.
He was brought to the admiral's cabin
And bandaged, for all that could do.
Captain Hardy rushed back to the battle,
To rally the soldiers and crew.

Then came Reverend Scott very gently,
And placed the commander in bed
With his torso raised up very slightly
And pillows supporting his head.
Mister Beatty the surgeon came to him.
What cure? Oh! What treatment to give?
You can do nothing for me, said Nelson.
I have but a short time to live.

The good reverend took a few moments

To murmur a delicate prayer.
Then he smiled at the famous Lord Nelson
While wiping the blood from his hair.
With a handful of papers, he fanned him.
Then over his shoulder he bade:
*Perhaps one of you fellows would fetch me
A tankard of cool lemonade?*

After drinking a sip from the tankard,
Lord Nelson let out a big breath
With a rattle from deep down inside him
That sounded like imminent death.
Then he turned his good eye to the surgeon,
And stated: *You know I am gone.*
Replied Beatty: *Our country is mourning,
For nothing, my lord, can be done.*

Beatty felt his eyes turning to water.
He turned to his surgical tray
And pretended to polish his scalpel
To keep his sad tears away.
Nelson told him: *I know it, God bless you.
I feel in my breast my life's end.
God be praised, I have done my full duty.*

No sorrow, my dear gentlemen.

Little prayers were intoned by the reverend;

More cool lemonade was brought in.

Many times Nelson asked of the battle:

How goes it? Our men – hear them sing!

When the Victory came through the melee,

The Captain had time to stop by

To shake hands with his dying commander

And wish him Godspeed and goodbye.

Well then, Hardy, how goes my last battle?

Asked Nelson with stiff upper lip.

Very well, answered Hardy. We've captured

Eighteen of the enemy's ships.

And Lord Nelson gave back a wry smile.

Fine work, but I'll be satisfied

Only when we have twenty French vessels,

Or Spanish, lined up on our side.

Then he winced as he felt his heart tighten.

His face became solemn and grave.

Do take care of my dear Lady Emma,

And give to her all that I've saved.

*And Horatia, poor dearest child:
Don't leave her adrift in the world.
Truly, Hardy, I'd trade all my riches
For one of her hazelnut curls.*

*As you will it, My Lord, answered Hardy.
Again the two sailors shook hands.
As they did so, the two men remembered
Adventures in faraway lands:
Polar bears in the mists of the Arctic,
And muskets that wouldn't quite fire;
Cannon blasts in the seas of the Pharaohs;
The guns of the Danes, and their ire.*

*Neapolitan bonfires and parties
With overjoyed hosts in bright masks;
Agamemnon, forever beloved,
Who gave more than any could ask.
Mortal perils on tropical beaches,
Where limbs and men's lives were cut short;
The words of Lord Hood, filled with wisdom;
The taking of Corsican forts.*

More than all, Nelson's mind kept returning

To Norfolk, her coastlines and trees;
To the uncluttered love of his father;
The clink of his rectory keys.
With a sensitive breath, sad and earnest:
Oh, friend, kiss me, Hardy, he said.
Captain Hardy leaned over to kiss him
With tenderness on his forehead.

Nelson said to his comrade: *God bless you.*
By now he was blind and confused.
Captain Hardy returned to his duties,
His heart somewhat heavy and bruised.
Nelson's very last words were a whisper,
As light as a baby's first sigh.
To the reverend's ear they ascended
A moment or two 'fore he died.

And his whisper said: *God and my country*,
Those beacons that guided him on
Through the hardships that ever beset him,
And lent him his fabled aplomb.
Nothing fazed him or crushed his composure.
In war he was worth twenty ships.
With his one eye surveying the battle,

He vanquished with only his lips.

He gave pride to his king and his nation;
His sacrifice made him complete.
Though his death was both tragic and bitter,
His triumph in life had been sweet.
Many decades and centuries later,
The children of Britain still gaze
At the statue of Admiral Nelson
Alive in the sun's gentle rays.

Go and see, there he is, on his column,
In London's magnificent square,
Named Trafalgar to honour Lord Nelson,
His monument high in the air.
There've always been those who despise him –
Who seek to destroy Britain's past.
But the lions of England will fight them,
And Britain again will outlast.

Just a word on Napoleon's fortunes:
His loss lined his brow with a crease.
He abandoned his plans to take Britain
And turned his attentions due east.

On to Russia he marched his Grande Armée –
But saw his men freeze in the snow.
It was General Winter who dealt him
The absolute worst of his blows.

Then along came the great Arthur Wellesley,
Who won the Peninsular War.
Proud Napoleon's iron-hard rival
Gave Boney the boot from Spain's door.
With relentless ferocity, Wellesley
Put Bonaparte's thumbs in a screw,
And eventually faced him in person
In Belgium, just by Waterloo.

But the song of Trafalgar is over.
The story of Wellesley must wait
For some other rain-sodden evening.
We're tired and the hour is late.
But forget not the heroes of Britain,
So valiant, gutsy and brave.
First among them Horatio Nelson,
The boy who would master the waves.