



NELSON'S BIRTHPLACE.  
 (From an old print, after a painting by Pocock.)

## THE BOYHOOD OF BRITAIN'S GREATEST ADMIRAL.

BY E. STEPHENSON.

*Illustrated by* RAYMOND POTTER.



O most of us, I suppose, the name of Nelson conjures up a memory-picture, more or less accurate, of Mr. West's painting of his death at Trafalgar, or the cor-

responding fresco at the Houses of Parliament. We see again the quarterdeck crowded with sailors and bristling with the horrors of war, and in the foreground a one-armed man dying, his eye still upon the battle of the ships, his ear still waiting to hear how many of the enemy were taken before he would ask for Hardy's farewell kiss and lay him down for the last time with the quiet parting words, "Now I am satisfied; thank God I have done my duty," and yet again, "Thank God I have done my duty."

That was the end of the story;

amid far other scenes it took its beginning some forty-seven years before.



OLD CHURCH AT BURNHAM THORPE.  
 (Where Nelson's father was rector.)

In the quiet little village of Burnham Thorpe the great sea-hero was born and bred: there he lived out his boy-life just as the other youngsters did, only that now and again flashed forth revelations of a character which even then was not quite ordinary. There too he spent five later years (1787-1793) when for a time he was unemployed. Strangely enough the village possesses no local memorial of him, though (thanks to the energy and patriotism of the



BURNHAM THORPE RECTORY: PRESENT DAY.



SITE WHERE THE RECTORY STOOD IN WHICH NELSON WAS BORN.

present rector, the Rev. J. Lister Knight) funds are now being collected wherewith to build a "Nelson Memorial Village Hall," and also to restore the parish church as a fitting memorial to so great a name. To Nelson himself this home of his childhood was always dear. Said his elder brother William, writing to the Admiralty in 1806: "Could he look out of his grave he would say—Burnham Thorpe."

At Trafalgar, when the *Victory* was going into action, Nelson had a thought for his old home: "This is the happiest day of my life, and it is a happy day too



for Burnham Thorpe, for it is the day of their fair."

And later still, when he lay dying, his plea to Captain Hardy concerning his body was this: "Don't throw me overboard. I wish to be buried by the side of my father and mother at Burnham Thorpe, unless it please the King to order it otherwise." It

which he ministered is described as "a good specimen of the churches of a county unusually rich in mediæval architecture." It has much fallen into decay, but is now in process of repair.

To the uncritical observer it is just a plain village church with nothing in any wise remarkable about it except that strange air



SIGNING THE REGISTER.

did please the King to "order it otherwise." Nelson was buried in St. Paul's Cathedral and Burnham Thorpe lost the honour of containing his sepulchre, but the fame of being his birthplace could not be taken away.

Nelson's family had been for many years connected with the village, and his father held the living there, which had long been, and still is, in the family gift. The old church at

of stillness which seems to invest village churches, with a peculiar sanctity. Visitors to Lowestoft who have walked southward to Pakefield on the way to Kessingland may have seen its counterpart. A low stone wall bounds it on the farther side, a tall tree sways on the east, and the half-recumbent tombstones testify either to the strength of the wind or to their own antiquity.

Only the baptismal register and the marriage book bear silent witness to the fact that the daring restless spirit of a Nelson was wont to harbour there. The former contains the entry of his own baptism—"Horatio, son of Edmund and Catherine Nelson"—the latter his signatures when as a boy of ten or eleven he "witnessed" some of the weddings which his father had conducted.

about to his heart's content, or indulge in occasional fights with his brothers, in which, though the youngest and by no means the strongest of the family, he was tolerably certain to come off victor. "Let them alone," his mother is reported to have said when called upon to interfere between him and one of her other older sons; "little Horace will beat him. Let Horace alone."



TELLING SMUGGLER YARNS.

His home of course was at the parsonage house near by. There he was born on Michaelmas day, 1758. It was a low two-storied, unassuming house with sloping roof, more like a country farm than a modern rectory. It was built with two wings at right angles to each other, and on the enclosed green the young Horatio could tumble

The old parsonage is the parsonage no longer. The present rectory is a much more imposing habitation of white stone with large bay windows and a broad carriage drive leading up to the house. The ghost of Nelson would not find a home at the rectory now; he would want to seek again the site of the old house, with the same fields still sur-



rounding it in which he played in his boyhood, and the old trees still standing in which he was wont to seek birds' nests with his fellows, or which, regardless of torn clothes and risk to life and limb, he would climb at all hazards.

Now the reapers calmly reap under the very shadow of the old trees and are not even moved to hurry on the slow-cutting scythe by the forgotten genius of the bold fearless boy who was "here, there, and everywhere," throwing his whole heart into whatever he did whether work or play.

Not far from Burnham is still pointed out the little brook around



IN QUEST OF THE DOCTOR'S PEARS.



CROSSING THE BROOK.

which centres one of the few authentic stories concerning Nelson's boyhood. One day, when he was about five or six years old, the little Horace went bird-nesting with a cowboy. For many hours he was nowhere to be found; dinner-time passed and still he did not come. At last the family grew so alarmed that messengers on horseback and on foot were despatched to seek him, and he was found sitting quietly all alone beside the piece of water which he could not pass. What had become of his companion is not told; either he had crossed somehow and gone on by himself, or he had returned by some other way, having given up the proposed expedition.

In the latter case we can understand how it was that Horace sat there still; giving up was not in his line; to return baffled was the very last thing he would do. It may be he had tried the wooden paling and found it would not bear, and so was meditating some other way when the





AT NORWICH  
GRAMMAR SCHOOL.

he stayed there, probably until his mother's death in December, 1767, when he himself was nine years old. It may have been on his return to this school after one Christmas holidays that an incident occurred in which he showed once more of what kind of mettle he was made. There had been a heavy fall of snow. He and his brother William were on horseback, and they found the roads, as William thought, impassable. Accordingly they went back home. The father met the boys' relation with the command to "make another attempt." If the roads were really dangerous, he said, they certainly should not go. He "left it to their honour." Again William advised a retreat, but not so Horatio. "We must go on," he urged. "Remember, brother, it was left to our honour." So Southey tells the tale, and though folks now cast discredit upon Southey's veracity, in this instance at least the whole story is so exactly what might have happened in that flat country, where the snow would lie deep or be driven by the strong east wind, and the conduct of the younger brother, so precisely what one would have

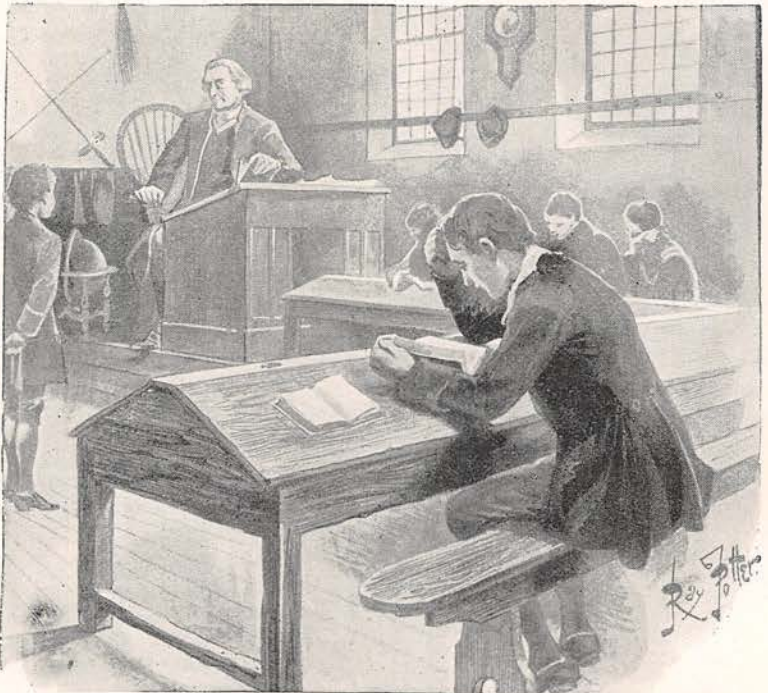
arrival of the search party disturbed his cogitations.

"I wonder, child," said his grandmother on his return, "that hunger and fear did not drive you home."

"Fear," replied the youthful Nelson, "I never saw fear; what is it?"

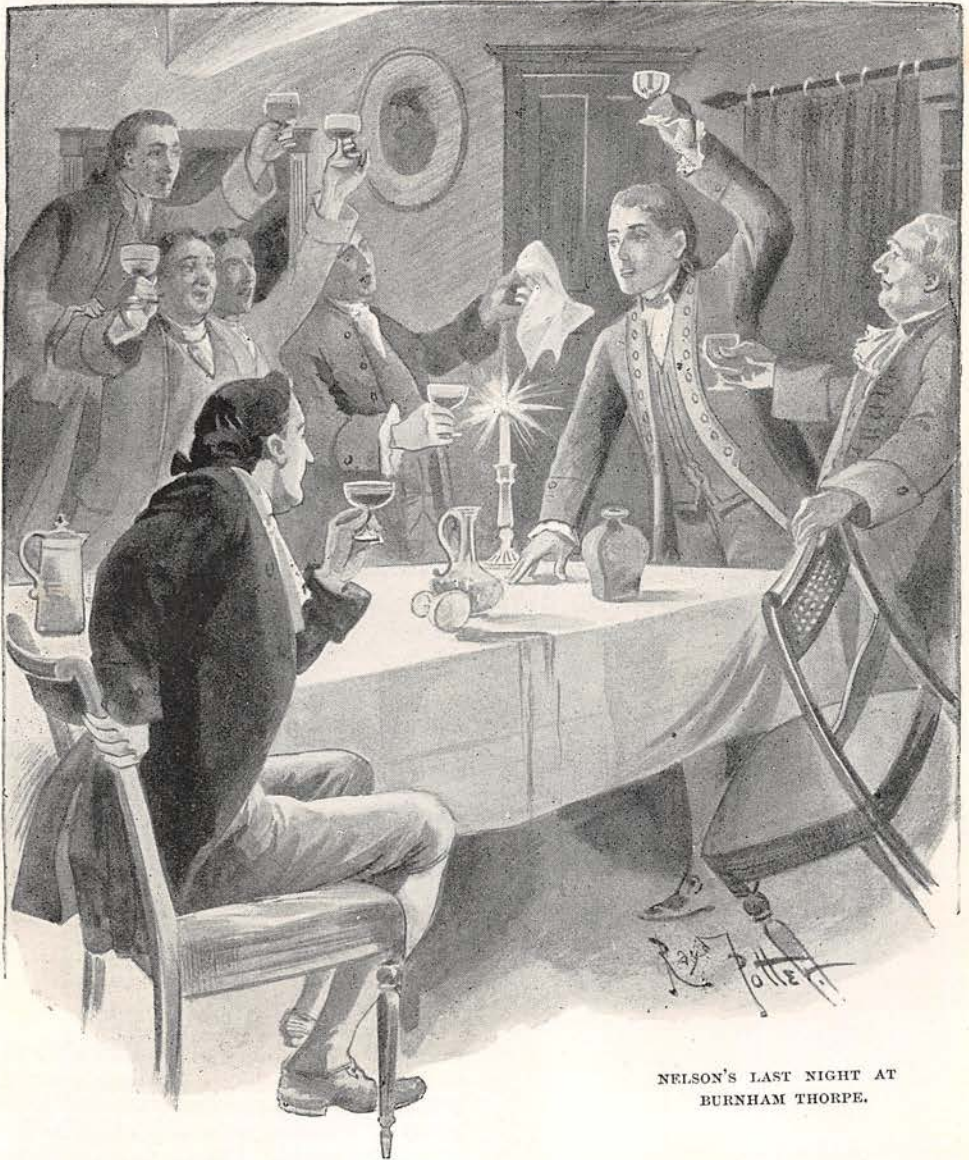
But this delightful life of bird-nesting, tree-climbing and deeds of daring, like all other good things, came to an end before long and Horatio was sent to school.

He went for a time to the High School at Norwich. It is not known exactly how long



THE OLD SCHOOLROOM, NORTH WALSHAM.





NELSON'S LAST NIGHT AT  
BURNHAM THORPE.

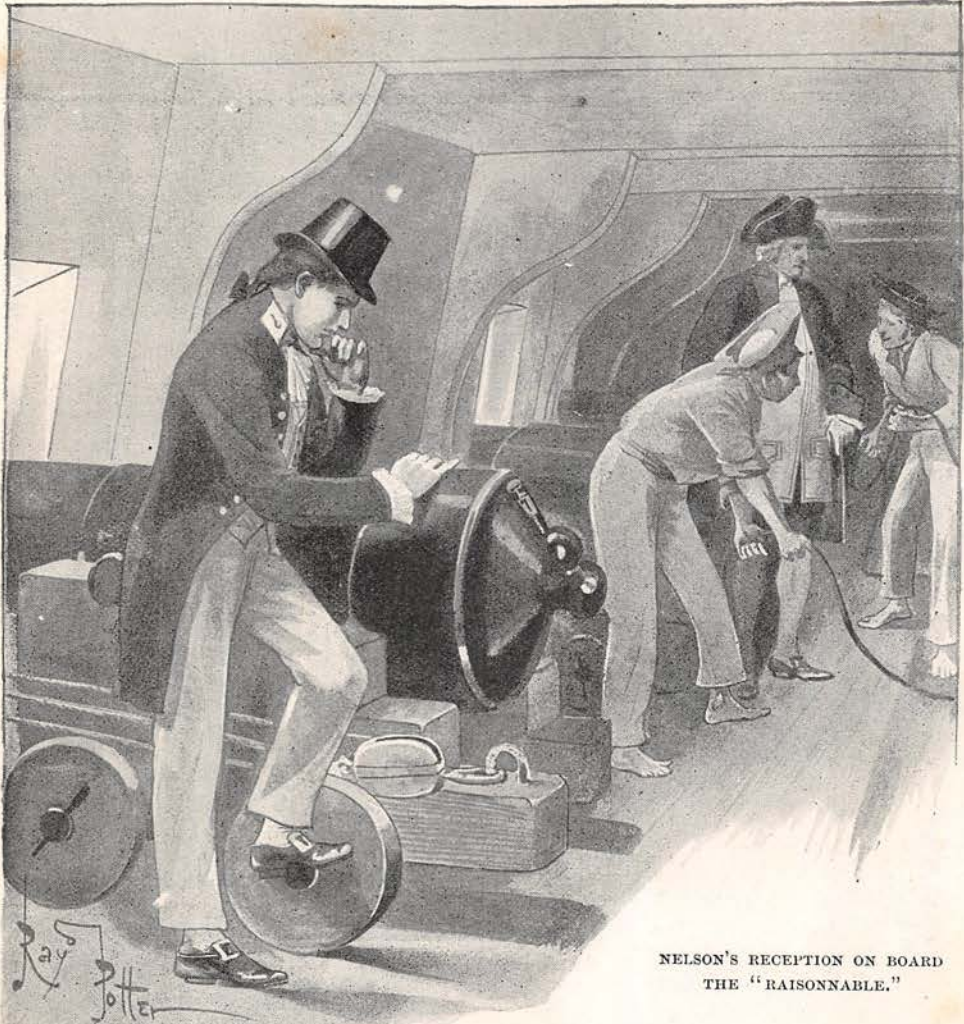
expected that there seems no reason why we should not accept it as true.

At the Paston Grammar School at North Walsham Nelson spent the three years or thereabouts which immediately preceded his going to sea. It was an old school then, for the gateway still stands with a tablet bearing the record, "Founded in 1606," and the building in which the boys now study is the same as of old, only that lately a new wing has been added, with a laboratory and other modern improvements. A brick, on which are cut the initials H. N., was lately discovered in

the school wall, and has been laid up among the treasures of the place. The present master of the Paston Grammar School, the Rev. H. W. Wimble, M.A., takes the greatest pride in the historical associations connected with his school and collects every item of information relating to the distinguished man who, as a boy, inked his fingers and behaved in many ways similar to the lads who now study within the schoolroom.

Mr. Wimble also points out the seat against the door, between the parlour door and the chimney, on which Nelson sat in those far-off





NELSON'S RECEPTION ON BOARD  
THE "RAISONNABLE."

days when old Dr. Parr occupied the school-master's chair and the boys were ranged on forms below, and silently conned their tasks, silently and in fear, for over the chair hung the formidable birch.

In the school-yard was a pear tree which bore fine pears, and the pears were regarded as the boys' lawful booty; but there was no one to take the booty; the boldest feared to venture. So one night Nelson was lowered, by sheets tied together, from the bedroom window, plucked the pears, and was hauled back triumphant. The fruit he distributed among his fellows; he did not want it for himself. He only took them "because every

other boy was afraid." Doubtless after this he was a hero among his fellows; and his popularity must have been increased by the power of spinning yarns with which he is by tradition credited. Out of doors, with flat, wide-spreading, desolate-looking broads before him, he could give vent to his imagination and tell marvellous stories to his own delight and that of his listening comrades. What smuggling yarns and wild tales of the sea were spun in those boyish days there is no one left to tell; they were not written down, and those who heard them have passed away. But imagination can fill in the traditional outline. Some stories may have been his own creation; some were brought up from a memory full of such tales which he had heard from his Uncle Maurice, with whom Horatio had always been a favourite. This



Uncle Maurice, alias Captain Suckling, the brother of Nelson's mother, was a naval commander of no small repute; he seems, when on land, to have been much at the rectory, and to have promised to take Horace under his special protection.

The child was greatly attached to him, and his narrations concerning his sea life had doubtless first inspired the boy with the determination to follow the same profession himself. The determination grew with years. At twelve years old Nelson's heart was already with his brave uncle on the sea, and we find him in the Christmas holidays entreating his brother William, a year and a half older than himself: "Do write to my father and tell him that I should like to go to sea with my Uncle Maurice." The uncle was written to accordingly, but demurred at first on account of the boy's delicate health, for he had never been strong. "What has poor Horatio done, who is so weak, that he above all the rest should be sent to rough it out at sea? But let him come, and the first time we come into action a cannon ball may knock off his head and provide for him at once."

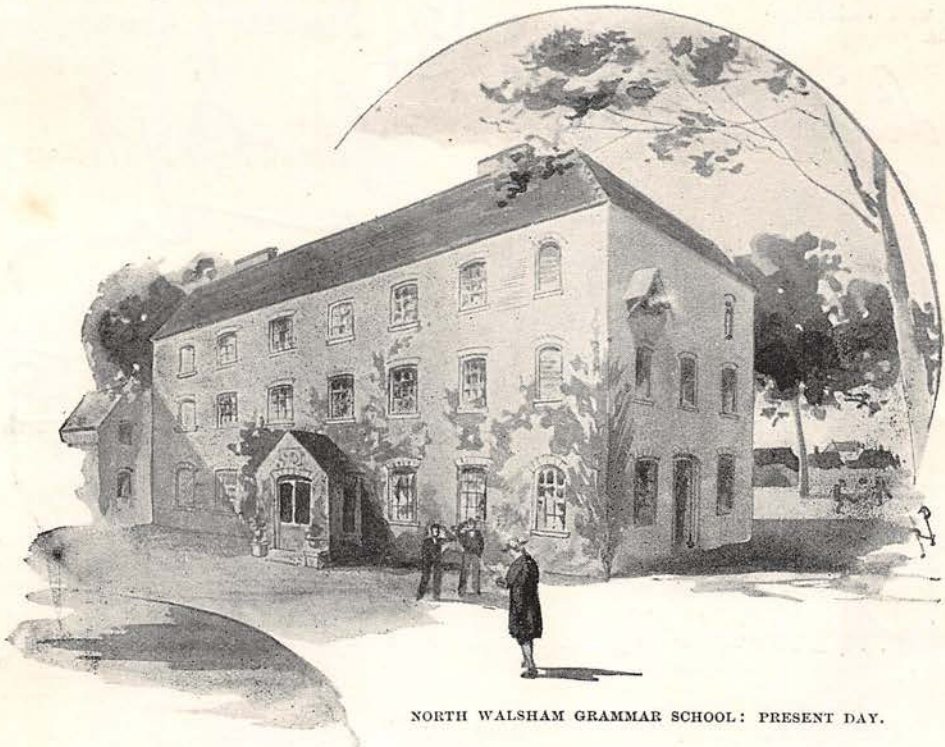
Not a very cheery prospect for an ardent recruit; but Horatio knew his brusque kindly-hearted relative and does not seem to have been in any way moved from his desire by this response. There was a certain

excitement in the thought of being in the fire of the enemy's cannon; one's head would be all the more valuable after the adventure, and Nelson was not afraid of getting his own knocked off.

Nothing was done in those holidays. Horatio went back to school as usual; but one dark spring morning before the term was over Mr. Nelson's servant brought the expected summons for his son to join Captain Suckling's ship. So quite suddenly Nelson's school days came to a close.

To the villagers of Burnham Thorpe Nelson's departure was an event of the very highest importance. The rector's son was going to sea; the least they could do was to meet in the kitchen of the village inn, now known as the "Lord Nelson," drink his health and bid him a hearty, if hilarious, God-speed on his way.

Then came joining the ship at Sheerness and one of the most dismal recollections of Nelson's life. For some reason or other his uncle did not meet him and no one on board knew of his coming, so that on his arrival from Greenwich he paced the deck the whole of the remainder of the day till someone "kindly took compassion on him" and spoke to him. Then of course with the declaration of his identity his troubles came to an end.



NORTH WALSHAM GRAMMAR SCHOOL: PRESENT DAY.