

Chapter XLIX.

This the navy of the Twenty Years' War knew well how to do, and never better than when Lord Nelson had breathed into its soul his own passion of honour and fame. It was a fortunate navy. Its victories were no mere smashing of helpless ships and massacres of cowed men. It was spared that cruel favour, for which no brave heart had ever prayed. It was fortunate in its adversaries. I say adversaries, for on recalling such proud memories we should avoid the word "enemies," whose hostile sound perpetuates the antagonisms and strife of nations, so irremediable perhaps, so fateful--and also so vain. War is one of the gifts of life; but, alas! no war appears so very necessary when time has laid its soothing hand upon the passionate misunderstandings and the passionate desires of great peoples. "Le temps," as a distinguished Frenchman has said, "est un galant homme." He fosters the spirit of concord and justice, in whose work there is as much glory to be reaped as in the deeds of arms.

One of them disorganized by revolutionary changes, the other rusted in the neglect of a decayed monarchy, the two fleets opposed to us entered the contest with odds against them from the first. By the merit of our daring and our faithfulness, and the genius of a great leader, we have in the course of the war augmented our advantage and kept it to the last. But in the exulting illusion of irresistible might a long series of military successes brings to a nation the less obvious aspect of such a fortune may perchance be lost to view. The old navy in its last days earned a fame that no belittling malevolence dare cavil at. And this supreme favour they owe to their adversaries alone.

Deprived by an ill-starred fortune of that self-confidence which strengthens the hands of an armed host, impaired in skill but not in courage, it may safely be said that our adversaries managed yet to make a better fight of it in 1797 than they did in 1793. Later still, the resistance offered at the Nile was all, and more than all, that could be demanded from seamen, who, unless blind or without understanding, must have seen their doom sealed from the moment that the Goliath, bearing up under the bows of the Guerrier, took up an inshore berth. The combined fleets of 1805, just come out of port, and attended by nothing but the disturbing memories of reverses, presented to our approach a determined front, on which Captain Blackwood, in a knightly spirit, congratulated his Admiral. By the exertions of their valour our adversaries have but added a greater lustre to our arms. No friend could have done more, for even in war, which severs for a time all the sentiments of human fellowship, this subtle bond of association remains between brave men--that the final testimony to the value of

victory must be received at the hands of the vanquished.

Those who from the heat of that battle sank together to their repose in the cool depths of the ocean would not understand the watchwords of our day, would gaze with amazed eyes at the engines of our strife. All passes, all changes: the animosity of peoples, the handling of fleets, the forms of ships; and even the sea itself seems to wear a different and diminished aspect from the sea of Lord Nelson's day. In this ceaseless rush of shadows and shades, that, like the fantastic forms of clouds cast darkly upon the waters on a windy day, fly past us to fall headlong below the hard edge of an implacable horizon, we must turn to the national spirit, which, superior in its force and continuity to good and evil fortune, can alone give us the feeling of an enduring existence and of an invincible power against the fates.

Like a subtle and mysterious elixir poured into the perishable clay of successive generations, it grows in truth, splendour, and potency with the march of ages. In its incorruptible flow all round the globe of the earth it preserves from the decay and forgetfulness of death the greatness of our great men, and amongst them the passionate and gentle greatness of Nelson, the nature of whose genius was, on the faith of a brave seaman and distinguished Admiral, such as to "Exalt the glory of our nation."