

The Last Encounter

C. S. Forester

(1966)

v1.0

Admiral of the Fleet Lord Hornblower sat with his glass of port before him alone at his dining-table at Smallbridge, it was a moment of supreme comfort. There was heavy rain beating against the windows; there had been unending rain for days now, as a climax to one of the wettest springs in local memory. Every now and again the noise of the rain would increase in volume as gusts of wind drove the heavy drops against the panes. The farmers and the tenants would be complaining worse than ever, now, in face of the imminent prospect of a harvest ruined before it had begun to ripen, and Hornblower felt distinct satisfaction in the thought that he was not dependent on his rents for his income. As Admiral of the Fleet he could never be on half-pay; rain or shine, peace or war, he would receive his very handsome three thousand a year, and with his further three thousand a year from his investments in the Funds he would never again know the pinch of poverty, nor even the need for care. He could be considerate towards his tenants; he might also contrive to allow Richard a further five hundred a year — as Colonel in the Guards with his frequent need for attendance on the young Queen at court Richard's tailor's bills must be heavy.

Hornblower took a sip of his port and stretched his legs under the table and enjoyed the warmth of the fire at his back. Two glasses of excellent claret were already playing their part inside him in the digestion of a really superb dinner — that was a further cause for self-congratulation, in that at the age of seventy-two he had a digestion that never caused him a moment's disquiet. He was a lucky man; at the head of his profession, at the ultimate, unsurpassable summit (his promotion to Admiral of the Fleet was recent enough to be still a source of unalloyed gratification) and in the enjoyment of his full health, a large income, a loving wife, a fine son, promising grandchildren, and a good cook. He could sip his port and enjoy every drop of it, and when the glass should be empty he would walk through into the drawing-room where Barbara would be sitting reading, and waiting for him, beside another roaring fire. He had a wife who loved him, a wife whom the advancing years had strangely made more beautiful than in youth, the sinking of her cheeks calling attention to the magnificent modelling of the bones of her face, just as her white hair was in strange and lovely contrast with her straight back and effortless carriage. She was so beautiful, so gracious, and so

dignified. It was the perfect final touch that lately she had had to wear spectacles for reading, which modified her dignity profoundly so that she always whipped them off when there was a chance of a stranger seeing her. Hornblower could smile again at the thought of it and take another sip of his port; it was better to love a woman than a goddess.

It was strange that he should be so happy and so secure, he who had known so much unhappiness, so much harassing uncertainty, so much peril, and so much hardship. Cannon ball and musket shot, drowning and disease, professional disgrace, and military execution; he had escaped by a hair's breadth from them all. He had known the deepest private unhappiness, and now he knew the deepest happiness. He had endured poverty, even hunger, and now he had wealth and security. All very gratifying, said Hornblower to himself; even in his old age he could not address himself without a sneer. 'Call no man happy until he is dead,' said someone or other, and it was probably true. He was seventy-two, and yet there was still time for this dream that surrounded him to reveal itself as a dream, to change to a nightmare. Characteristically he had no sooner congratulated himself on his happiness than he began to wonder what would imperil it. Of course: full of good food and before this warm fire he had forgotten the turmoil the world was in. Revolution — anarchy — social upheaval; all Europe, all the world, was in a convulsion of change. Mobs were on the march, and armies too; this year of 1848 would be remembered as a year of destruction — unless its memory should be later overlain by the memory of years to follow more destructive still. In Paris the barricades were up and a red republic proclaimed. Metternich was in flight from Vienna, the Italian tyrants in exile from their capitals. In Ireland famine and disease accompanied economic disaster and rebellion. Even here in England the agitators were rousing the mob, and voicing startling demands for parliamentary reform, for better working conditions, for changes which could not amount to less than a social revolution.

Perhaps, old man though he was, he would yet live to see his happiness and security torn from him by an ungrateful fate that made no allowance for his lifelong and kindly Liberalism. For six years of his life he had warred against bloody and victory-crazed revolution; for the next fourteen he had warred against the grinding and treacherous tyranny that had inevitably supplanted the revolution. For fourteen years he had staked his life in a struggle against Bonaparte — a struggle with an actual personal aspect, growing more and more personal as he gained promotion. He had fought for liberty, for freedom, but that did not make the fight a less personal one. In two hemispheres, on fifty coasts, Hornblower had fought for liberty and Bonaparte for tyranny, and the struggle had ended in Bonaparte's fall. For nearly thirty years Bonaparte had been in his grave, and Hornblower was now sitting with a comfortable fire warming his back and a glass of excellent port warming his interior, but at the same time in typical fashion he was impairing his happiness by wondering whether it might be taken from him.

The wind shook the house again and the rain roared against the windowpanes. The dining-room door opened silently and Brown the butler came in to put more coal on the fire. Like the good servant he was he searched the room with his eyes to see that all was well; his unobtrusive glance took note of Hornblower's bottle and glass — Hornblower knew that Brown had taken in the fact that he had not yet finished his first glass of port; the knowledge would be of help in the exact timing of the bringing in of the coffee into the drawing-room when Hornblower should decide to move.

Faintly through the house came the jangle of the front door bell; now who was there who could possibly be ringing at the door at eight o'clock at night, on a night like this? It could not be a tenant — tenants would go to the side door if by any chance they had business at the house — and no caller was expected. Hornblower felt the urgings of curiosity, especially as the bell jangled a second time almost before its first janglings had died away. The dining-room windows and doors shook a trifle, indicating that the footman had opened the front door. Hornblower pricked up his ears; he imagined that he could hear voices in the outer hall.

"Go and see who that is, Brown," he ordered.

"Yes, my lord."

There had been many years when 'Aye, aye, sir' had been Brown's reply to an order, but Brown never forgot that he was now a butler, and butler to a peer at that. He walked silently across the room — even while wondering who the caller might be Hornblower found himself as usual admiring the cut of Brown's evening clothes. The perfection of cut, and yet with just that something about it to make it plain to the discriminating observer that they were a butler's clothes and not a gentleman's. Brown silently shut the door behind him, and Hornblower wished he had not, for in the interval while the door was open and Brown was passing through there had been a tantalizing moment when conversation could be heard — a loud, rather harsh voice making some sort of demands and the footman responding with unyielding deference.

Even now the door was shut Hornblower believed he could hear that harsh voice, and curiosity completely overcame him. He rose and pulled at the bell cord beside the fire. Brown came in again, and with the opening of the door the harsh voice became distinctly audible.

"What the devil's going on, Brown?" demanded Hornblower.

"I'm afraid it's a lunatic, my lord."

"A lunatic?"

"He says he's Napoleon Bonaparte, my lord."

"God bless my soul! And what does he want here?"

Even at seventy-two there was a little tingle of quickened blood in arteries and veins at the chance of action. A man who thought he was Napoleon Bonaparte might well intend causing trouble

when coming to the house of Admiral of the Fleet Lord Hornblower. But Browns next words were not so promising of trouble.

"He wishes to borrow a carriage and horses, my lord."

"What for?"

"It seems there has been trouble on the railway, my lord. He says he must reach Dover as soon as possible to catch the Calais packet. His business, he says, is of the greatest importance."

"What is he like?"

"He is dressed like a gentleman, my lord."

"H'm."

It was not so very long ago that the railway had made its way round the edge of the park at Smallbridge, sullyng the fair fields of Kent on its way to Dover. From the upper windows of the house the foul smoke of the engines could be seen, and the raucous sound of their whistles could be heard. But the worst prognostications of the pessimists had not been realized. The cows still gave down their milk, the pigs still harrowed, the orchards still bore their fruit, and there had been singularly few accidents.

"Will that be all, my lord?" asked Brown, recalling his master to the fact that there was still an intruder in the outer hall who had to be dealt with.

"No. Bring him in here," said Hornblower.

The life of a country gentleman might be pleasant and secure but sometimes it was damnably dull.

"Very good, my lord."

Hornblower took a glance in the ormolu mirror over the fireplace as Brown withdrew; his cravat and his shirt front were in good order, the sparse white hairs were tidy, and there was something of the old twinkle in the brown eyes under the snow-white eyebrows. Brown returned and held the door as he made his announcement.

"Mr Napoleon Bonaparte."

It was not the figure that the prints had made so familiar that came into the room. No green coat and white breeches, no cocked hat and epaulettes; the man who entered wore a civilian suit of grey, apparent under an unbuttoned cloak with a cape. The grey was nearly black with wet; the man was soaked to the skin, and as high as the knees of his tight strapped trousers he was plastered with mud; but he would have been a dandy had his clothes not been in so deplorable a condition. There was something about his figure that might recall Bonaparte's — the short legs that made his height a little below average — and there might be something about the grey eyes that studied Hornblower so keenly in the candlelight, but the rest of his appearance was unexpectedly not even a parody or a travesty of the Emperor's. He actually wore a heavy moustache and a little tuft of beard — if anyone could imagine the great Napoleon with a moustache! — and instead of the short hair with the lock

drooping on the forehead this man wore his hair fashionably long; it would have been in ringlets over the ears if it had not been so wet that it hung in rats' tails.

"Good evening, sir," said Hornblower.

"Good evening. Lord Hornblower, I understand?"

"That is so."

The newcomer spoke good English, but with a decided accent. But it did not seem to be the accent of a Frenchman.

"I must apologize for intruding upon you at this time."

Mr Bonaparte's gesture towards the polished dining-table showed that he was appreciative of the importance of the period of digestion after dinner.

"Please do not give it another thought, sir," said Hornblower. "And if it should be more convenient for you to speak French pray do so."

"French or English are equally convenient to me, my lord. Or German or Italian, for that matter."

Now once again that was not like the Emperor — Hornblower had read that his Italian was bad and that he spoke no English at all. A strange sort of madman this must be. Yet that gesture had opened the cloak a little further, and within it Hornblower could see a broad red ribbon and the glitter of a star. The man was wearing the Grand Eagle of the Legion of Honour, so he must be insane. One final test —

"How should I address you, sir?" asked Hornblower.

"As Your Highness, if you could be so good, my lord. Or as Monseigneur — that might be more convenient."

"Very well, Your Highness. My butler gave me a not very clear account of how I might be of service to Your Highness. Perhaps Your Highness would be kind enough to command me?"

"The kindness is yours, my lord. I tried to explain to your butler that the railway line beside your park has been blocked. The train I was in was unable to proceed farther."

"Most regrettable, Your Highness. These modern inventions —"

"They have their inconveniences. I understand that as a result of the recent heavy rain the embankment in what they call a cutting has given way, and a large mass of earth, to the amount of some hundreds of tons, has fallen on the rails."

"Indeed, Your Highness?"

"Yes, I was given to understand that it might even be a matter of some days before the line is clear again. And my business is of an importance which will not brook the delay of a single hour."

"Naturally, Your Highness. Affairs of State are invariably pressing."

This madman talked a strange mixture of sanity and nonsense; and he reacted to Hornblower's heavy-handed humour quite convincingly. The heavy eyelids raised themselves a trifle, and the cold grey eyes searched Hornblower's.

"You speak truth, my lord, without, I fear, giving it its full weight. My business is of the greatest importance. Not only does the fate of France hinge upon my arrival in Paris, but the future history of the world — the whole destiny of mankind!"

"The name of Bonaparte implies nothing less, Your Highness," said Hornblower.

"Europe is falling into anarchy. She is a prey to traitors, self-seekers, ideologues, demagogues, of uncounted fools, and of knaves without number. France under strong guidance again can give order back to the world."

"Your Highness says no more than the truth."

"Then you will appreciate the urgency of my business, my lord. The elections are about to be held in Paris, and I must be there — I must be there within forty-eight hours. That is the reason why I waded through mud under a deluge of rain to your house."

The stranger looked down at his mud-daubed clothes and at the trickles of water draining from them.

"I could find your Highness a change of clothing," suggested Hornblower.

"No time for that, even, thank you, my lord. Farther down the railway line, beyond this unfortunate landslide, and beyond the tunnel — I think at a place called Maidstone — I can catch another train which will take me to Dover. From thence the steam packet to Calais — the train to Paris — and my destiny!"

"So Your Highness wishes to be driven to Maidstone?"

"Yes, my lord."

It was eight miles of fairly easy road — not an impossibly extravagant request from a stranger in distress. But the wind was southwesterly — Hornblower pulled himself up with a jerk. These steam packets paid no attention to wind or tide, although it was hard for a man who had all his life commanded sailing vessels to remember it. The madman had a sane enough plan up to a point — as far as Paris. There he would presumably be put away in an asylum where he would be harmless and unharmed. Not even the excitable French would do anything to injure so entertaining an eccentric. But it would be hard on the coachman to have to turn out on a night like this and drive sixteen miles at a madman's whim. Hornblower changed his mind again. He was wondering how to decline the request without hurting the poor soul's feelings when the door from the drawing-room opened to admit Barbara. She was tall and straight and beautiful and dignified; now that the years had made Hornblower stoop-shouldered her eyes were on a level with his.

"Horatio —" she began, and then paused when she saw the stranger; but someone who knew Barbara well — Hornblower, for instance — might guess that perhaps she had not been unaware of

the presence of a stranger in the dining-room before she entered, and that perhaps she had come in like this to find out what was going on. Undoubtedly she had removed her spectacles for this public appearance.

The stranger came to polite attention in the presence of a lady.

"May I have the honour of presenting my wife to Your Highness?" asked Hornblower.

The stranger made a low bow, and, advancing, took Barbara's hand and stooped low over it again to kiss it. Hornblower watched with some little annoyance. Barbara was woman enough to be susceptible to a kiss on the hand — any rascal could find his way into her good graces if he could perform that outlandish ceremony in the right way.

"The beautiful Lady Hornblower," said the stranger. "Wife of the most distinguished sailor in Her Majesty's Navy, sister of the great Duke — but best known as the beautiful Lady Hornblower."

This madman had a way with him, as well as being well informed. But the speech was thoroughly out of character, of course; Napoleon had always been notorious for his brusquerie with women, and had been said to limit his conversation with them to questions about the number of their children. But it would never occur to Barbara to think like that when such a speech had just been made to her. She turned an inquiring blue eye on her husband.

"His Highness —" began Hornblower.

He played the farce out to the end, recounting the stranger's request and laying stress on the importance of his arrival in Paris.

"You have already ordered the carriage, I suppose, Horatio?" asked Barbara.

"As a matter of fact I haven't yet."

"Then of course you will. Every minute is of importance, as His Highness says."

"You are too kind, my dear lady," said His Highness.

"But —" began Hornblower, and he said no more under the gaze of that blue eye. He walked across and pulled at the bell cord, and when Brown appeared he gave the necessary instructions.

"Tell Harris he can have five minutes to put the horses to. Not a second longer," supplemented Barbara.

"Yes, my lady."

"My lady, my lord," said the stranger as Brown withdrew. "All Europe will be in your debt for this act of kindness. The world is notoriously ungrateful, but I hope the gratitude of Bonaparte will be unmistakable."

"Your Highness is too kind," said Hornblower, trying not to be too sarcastic.

"I hope Your Highness has a pleasant journey," said Barbara, "and a successful one."

The fellow had won every bit of Barbara's esteem, obviously. She ignored her husband's indignant glances until Brown announced the carriage and the stranger had rolled away into the deluging rain.

"But my dear —" protested Hornblower at last. "What on earth did you do that for?"

"It'll do Harris no harm to drive to Maidstone and back," said Barbara. "The horses are never exercised enough in any case."

"But the man was mad," said Hornblower. "A raving lunatic. A stark, staring, idiotic impostor, and not a very good impostor at that."

"I think there was something about him," said Barbara, sticking to her guns. "Something —"

"You mean he kissed your hand and made pretty speeches," said Hornblower in a huff.

It was not until six days later that *The Times* published a dispatch from Paris.

Prince Louis Napoleon Bonaparte, the Pretender to the Imperial Throne, was today nominated as a candidate in the elections about to be held for the Presidency of the French Republic.

And it was not until a month after that that a liveried servant delivered a packet and a letter at Smallbridge. The letter was in French, but Hornblower had no difficulty in translating it —

My Lord

I am commanded by Monseigneur His Highness the Prince-President, as one of his first acts on assuming the control of the affairs of his people, to convey to you His Highness's gratitude for the assistance you were kind enough to render him during his journey to Paris. Accompanying this letter Your Lordship will find the insignia of a Chevalier of the Legion of Honour, and I have the pleasure of assuring Your Lordship that at His Highness' command I am requesting of Her Majesty the Queen, through Her Majesty's Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, permission for you to accept them.

I am also commanded by His Highness to beg that you will convey to Her Ladyship your wife his grateful thanks as well, and that you will present for her acceptance the accompanying token of his esteem and regard, which His Highness hopes will be a fitting tribute to the beautiful eyes which His Highness remembers so well.

With the highest expressions of my personal regard,

I am,

Your most humble and obedient servant

Cadore, Minister of Foreign Affairs.

"Humbug!" said Hornblower. "The fellow will be calling himself Emperor before you can say Jack Robinson. Napoleon the Third, I suppose."

"I said there was something about him," said Barbara. "This is a very beautiful sapphire."

It certainly matched the eyes into which Hornblower smiled with tender resignation.