

EXCERPTS FROM
HORNBLOWER AND THE ATROPOS
by C S FORESTER
The Journey by horsedrawn boat
down the Thames & Severn Canal and the Thames,
set in 1805

Of course this is fiction written in 1953 – but I know of no historic text describing how horse drawn boats were towed and managed down weirs – so this passage by C S Forester is particularly valuable.

I have omitted all but the boat, canal and river references which might make for disjointed reading – by all means buy the book and put that right.

Captain Hornblower was in such a rush because he was about to take up the command of HMS Atropos. What he did not know was that he was about to be in charge of the river procession carrying Nelson's coffin ...

Chapter I

Having climbed up through the locks, the canal boat was now winding over the pleasant Cotswold country. Hornblower was bubbling with good spirits, on his way to take up a new command, seeing new sights, travelling in an entirely new way, at a moment when the entirely unpredictable English weather had decided to stage a clear sunny day in the middle of December.

This was a delightful way of travelling, despite the cold. ...

The passage-boat was making her way from Gloucester to London along the Thames and Severn Canal; going far more smoothly than the stage coach, it was very nearly as fast and decidedly cheaper, at a penny a mile, even in the first class. ...

Standing on his sea chest, Hornblower could look over the canal banks, at the grey stone boundary walls and the grey stone farms.

The rhythmic sound of the hoofs of the cantering tow horses accentuated the smoothness of the travel; the boat itself made hardly a sound as it slid along over the surface of the water.

Hornblower noticed that the boatmen had the trick of lifting the bows, by a sudden acceleration, on to the crest of the bow wave raised by her passage, and retaining them there.

This reduced turbulence in the canal to a minimum; it was only when he looked aft that he could see, far back, the reeds at the banks bowing and straightening again long after they had gone by.

It was this trick that made the fantastic speed possible.

The cantering horses maintained their nine miles an hour, being changed every half hour.

There were two towlines, attached to timber heads at bow and stern; one boatman rode as postillion on the rear horse, controlling the lead horse with shouts and the cracking of his whip.

In the stern sat the other boatman, surly and with one hand missing and replaced by a hook; with the other he held the tiller and steered the boat round the curves with a skill that Hornblower admired.

A sudden ringing of the horses' hoofs on stone warned Hornblower just in time.

The horses were dashing, without any slackening of pace, under a low bridge, where the towpath, cramped between the water and the arch, gave them barely room to pass.

The mounted boatman buried his face in his horse's mane to pass under; Hornblower had just time to leap down from his sea chest and seat himself as the bridge hurried over him.

Hornblower heard the helmsman's loud laugh at his momentary discomfiture.

'You learn to move fast in a canal boat, Captain,' the steersman called to him from his place by the tiller.

'Two dozen for the last man off the yard! None o' that here on Cotswold, Captain, but a broken head for you if you don't look lively. ...

'Hornblower chose to risk the jeers of the boatman rather than miss looking round him; this was the best opportunity he had had of watching the working of the canals which in the last thirty years had changed the economic face of England.

And not far ahead was Sapperton Tunnel, the engineering marvel of the age, the greatest achievement of the new science.

He certainly wanted to see that.

Let the steersman laugh his head off if he wanted to.

He must be an old sailor, discharged as disabled by the loss of his hand.

It must be a wonderful experience for him to have a naval captain under his command.

The grey stone tower of a lock-house showed ahead, with the minute figure of the lock-keeper opening the gates. A yell from the postillion-boatman checked the speed of the horses; the boat glided on, its speed diminishing greatly as the bows slid off the bow wave.

As the boat entered the lock the one-handed steersman leaped ashore with a line which he flipped dexterously round a bollard; a smart tug or two took most of the way off the boat, and the boatman, running forward, secured the line to another bollard.

'Heave us that line, Captain,' he cried, and Hornblower obediently threw up the bow-line for him to secure forward.

The law of the sea applied equally in inland waters - the ship first and personal dignity a long way second.

Already the lock-keeper was closing the gates behind them and the lock-keeper's wife was opening the paddles of the upper gate, the water swirling in.

The lower gates closed with a crash with the mounting pressure, and the boat rose with the gurgling water.

The horses were changed in a twinkling; the postillion scrambled into his saddle, and proceeded to tilt a black bottle against his lips during the remaining few seconds while the lock filled.

The steersman was casting off the lines - Hornblower took the bow-line from him - and the lock-keeper's wife was thrusting at one upper gate while the lock-keeper, running up from the lower gate, thrust at the other.

The postillion yelled and cracked his whip, the boat sprang forward while the helmsman leaped to his place astern, and they were off again with not a second wasted.

Assuredly this canal traffic was a miracle of modernity, and it was gratifying to be on board the very fastest of the canal boats, the Queen Charlotte, that took priority over all other traffic.

On her bow she carried a glittering scythe-blade as the proud symbol of her superior importance.

It would sever the towline of any approaching boat which did not drop her line quickly enough to let her through.

...

Here, as they climbed to the summit level, lock succeeded lock at frequent intervals, and at each the postillion held his black bottle to his lips, and his yells to his horses became more raucous and his whip-cracking more continuous.

Hornblower obediently handed the bow-line at each lock, ...

Now they were gliding down the summit level of the canal; the cutting was growing deeper and deeper, so that the echo of the sound of the horses' hoofs came ringing from the rocky banks.

Round the shallow curve must surely be Sapperton Tunnel.

'Hold hard, Charlie!' suddenly yelled the steersman.

A moment later he sprang to the after towline and tried to cast it off from the timber head, and there was wild confusion.

Shouts and yells on the towpath, horses whinnying, hoofs clattering.

Hornblower caught a glimpse of the lead horse leaping frantically up the steep slope of the cutting - just ahead of them was the castellated but gloomy mouth of the tunnel and there was no other way for the horse to turn.

The Queen Charlotte lurched hideously against the bank ... for a moment Hornblower was sure she would capsize. She righted herself and came to a stop as the towlines slackened; the frantic struggles of the second horse, entangled in two towlines, ended as it kicked itself free.

The steersman had scrambled on to the towpath and had dropped the after line over a bollard.

'A pretty kettle o' fish,' he said.

Another man had shown up, running down the bank from the top whence spare horses looked down at them, whinnying.

He held the heads of the Queen Charlotte's horses, and near his feet lay Charlie, the boatman-postillion, his face a mask of blood. ...

He turned and looked at the one-handed steersman, who bent down to examine Charlie; taking a hold of the breast of his coat with his steel hook he hauled up, but Charlie's head only hung back helplessly, the blood running over his cheeks.

'Not much use out of Charlie,' said the steersman, letting him drop with a thump.

As Hornblower stooped to look he could catch the reek of gin three feet from the bleeding mouth.

Half stunned and half drunk--more than half of both for that matter.

'We've the tunnel to leg through,' said the steersman.

'Who's up at the Tunnel House?'

'Ne'er a soul,' replied the man with the horses.

'The trade all went through in the early morning.

'The steersman whistled.

'You'll have to come wi' us,' he said.

'Not I,' said the horseholder.

'I've sixteen horses--eighteen with these two.

I can't leave 'em.

'The steersman swore a couple of astonishing oaths--astonishing even to Hornblower, who had heard many in his time.

'What d'you mean by "legging" through the tunnel?' Hornblower asked.

The steersman pointed with his hook at the black, forbidding tunnel mouth in the castellated entrance.

'No towpath through the tunnel, o' course, Captain,' he said.

'So we leaves our horses here an' we legs through.

We puts a pair o' "wings" on the bows--sort o' catheads, in a way.

Charlie lies on one an' I lies on the other, wi' our heads inboard an' our feet agin the tunnel wall.

Then we sort o' walks, and we gets the boat along that way, and we picks up another pair o' horses at the south end.

'I see,' said Hornblower.

'I'll souse this sot wi' a couple o' buckets o' water,' said the steersman.

'Mebbe it'll bring him round.

'Maybe,' said Hornblower.

But buckets of water made no difference to the unconscious Charlie, who was clearly concussed.

The slow blood flowed again after his battered face had been washed clean.

The steersman produced another couple of oaths.

'The other trade'll be coming up arter you,' said the horseholder.

'Nother couple o' hours, mebbe.

'All he received in reply was a further series of oaths.

'We have to have daylight to run the Thames staunches,' said the steersman.

'Two hours?

We'll only just get there by daylight if we go now.

'He looked round him, at the silent canal cut and tunnel mouth, ...

'Twelve hours late, we'll be,' he concluded, morosely.

A day late in taking up his command, thought Hornblower.

'Damn it,' he said, 'I'll help you leg through.

'Good on ye, sir,' said the steersman, significantly dropping the equalitarian 'captain' for the 'sir' he had carefully eschewed so far.

'D'ye think you can?'

'Likely enough,' said Hornblower.

'Let's fit those wings,' said the steersman, with sudden decision.

They were small platforms, projecting out from either bow. ...

With the wings fitted he and the steersman on board, and the horseholder on the bank, took their places along the side of the Queen Charlotte.

A strong united shove sent the boat gliding into the cut, heading for the tunnel.

'Keep 'er goin', sir,' said the steersman, scrambling forward to the port side wing.

It was obvious that it would be far easier to maintain gentle way on the boat than to progress in fits and starts of alternate stopping and moving.

Hornblower hurried to the starboard side wing and laid himself down on it as the bows of the boat crept into the dark tunnel.

Lying on his right side, with his head inboard, he felt his feet come into contact with the brick lining of the tunnel.

He pressed with his feet, and then by a simple backwards walking motion he urged the boat along.

'Hold hard, sir,' said the steersman--his head was just beside Hornblower's--'there's two miles an' more to go.

'A tunnel two miles long, driven through the solid rock of the Cotswolds!

No wonder it was the marvel of the age.

The Romans with all their aqueducts had achieved nothing to compare with this.

Farther and farther into the tunnel they went, into darkness that increased in intensity, until it was frightfully, astonishingly dark, with the eye recording nothing at all, strain as it might. ...

It was not a very dignified thing he was doing, and not at all comfortable.

After a few minutes he was acutely aware of the hardness of the platform on which he was lying; nor was it long before his legs began to protest against the effort demanded of them.

He tried to shift his position a little, to bring other muscles into play and other areas of himself into contact with the platform, but he learned fast enough that it had to be done with tact and timing, so as not to disturb the smooth rhythm of the propulsion of the boat --the steersman beside him grunted a brief protest as Hornblower missed a thrust with his right leg and the boat baulked a little.

'Keep 'er goin', sir,' he repeated.

So they went on through the darkness, in the strangest sort of mesmeric nightmare, suspended in utter blackness, utterly silent, for their speed was not sufficient to raise a ripple round the Queen Charlotte's bows.

Hornblower went on thrusting with his feet, urging his aching legs into further efforts; he could tell by the sensations conveyed through the soles of his shoes that the tunnel was no longer brick-lined--his feet pressed against naked rock, rough and irregular as the tunnellers' picks and gunpowder had left it.

That made his present employment more difficult.

He became aware of a slight noise in the distance--a low muttering sound, at first so feeble that when he first took note of it he realized that he had been hearing it already for some time.

It gradually increased in volume as the boat crept along, until it was a loud roaring; he had no idea what it could be, but as the steersman beside him seemed unconcerned he decided not to ask about it.

'Easy a minute, sir,' said the steersman, and Hornblower, wondering, rested his aching legs, while the steersman, still recumbent, fumbled and tugged beside him.

Next moment he had dragged a tarpaulin completely over both of them, except for their feet protruding from under the edges.

It was no darker under the tarpaulin than outside it, but it was considerably stuffier.

'Carry on, sir,' said the steersman, and Hornblower recommenced pushing with his feet against the wall, the roaring he had heard before somewhat muffled by the tarpaulin.

A trickle of water volleyed loudly on the tarpaulin, and then another, and he suddenly understood what the roaring was.

'Here it comes,' said the steersman under the tarpaulin.

An underground spring here broke through the roof of the tunnel and tumbled roaring into the canal.

The water fell down on them in deafening cataracts.

It thundered upon the roofs of the cabins, ...

The weight of its impact pressed the tarpaulin upon him.

Then the torrent eased, fell away to trickles, and then they were past it.

'Only one more o' those,' said the steersman in the stuffy darkness beside him.

'It's better arter a dry summer'.

... his feet were wet, but after eleven years at sea that was not a new experience; he was much more concerned with the weariness of his legs.

It seemed an age before the next trickling of water and the steersman's 'Here it comes' heralded the next deluge.

They crawled on beyond it, and the steersman, with a grunt of relief, dragged the tarpaulin from off them.

And with its removal Hornblower, twisting his neck, suddenly saw something far ahead.

His eyes were by now accustomed to the darkness, and in that massive darkness, incredibly far away, there was something to be seen, a minute something, the size apparently of a grain of sand.

It was the farther mouth of the tunnel.

He worked away with his legs with renewed vitality.

The tunnel opening grew in size, from a grain of sand to a pea; it assumed the crescentic shape to be expected of it; it grew larger still, and with its growth the light increased in the tunnel by infinitesimal gradations, until Hornblower could see the dark surface of the water, the irregularities of the tunnel roof.

Now the tunnel was brick-lined again, and progress was easier--and seemed easier still.

'Easy all,' said the steersman with a final thrust.

It seemed unbelievable to Hornblower that he did not have to work his legs any more, that he was emerging into daylight, that no more underground springs would cascade upon him as he lay suffocating under a tarpaulin.

The boat slowly slid out of the tunnel's mouth, and despite its slow progress, and despite the fact that outside the sun shone with only wintry brilliance, he was quite blinded for a while. ...

Hornblower sat up and blinked round him.

There was a horseholder on the towpath with a pair of horses; he caught the line the steersman tossed to him and between them they drew the boat to the bank. ...

[Hornblower] stepped nimbly out on to the towpath, joining himself to the conversation of the steersman and the horseholder.

'Ne'er a man here,' said the latter.

'An' you won't find one before Oxford, that I'll warrant you.

'In reply the steersman said much the same things as he had said to the other horseholder.

'That's how it is, an' all,' said the horseholder philosophically, 'you'll have to wait for the trade.

'No spare men here?' asked Hornblower.

'None, sir,' said the steersman, and then, after a moment's hesitation, 'I suppose, sir, you wouldn't care to drive a pair o' horses?' 'Not I,' answered Hornblower hastily--he was taken sufficiently by surprise by the question to make no attempt to disguise his dismay at the thought of driving two horses in the manner of the injured Charlie; then he saw how to recover his dignity ... 'But I'll take the tiller.

'O' course you could, sir,' answered the steersman.

'Not the first time you've handled a tiller.

Not by a long chalk.

An' I'll drive the nags, me an' my jury fist an' all.

'He glanced down at the steel hook that replaced his missing hand.

'Very well,' said Hornblower.

'I'm grateful to you, sir, that I am,' said the steersman, and to emphasize his sincerity he swore a couple more oaths.

'I've a contract on this here v'yage--that's two chests o' tea for'rard there, first o' the China crop for Lunnon delivery.

You'll save me pounds, sir, an' my good name as well.

Grateful I am, by ----'.

He emphasized his sincerity again.

'That's all right,' said Hornblower.

'The sooner we start the sooner we arrive.

What's your name?'

'Jenkins, sir.

'Tom Jenkins, the steersman--now to be the postillion--tugged at his forelock, 'main topman in the old Superb, Cap'n Keates, sir.

'Very well, Jenkins.

Let's start.'

The horseholder tended to the business of attaching the horses' towlines, and while Jenkins cast off the bow-line, Hornblower cast off the stern one and stood by with a single turn round the bollard; Jenkins climbed nimbly into the saddle and draped the reins about his hook. ...

... the whip cracked and the towlines tightened.

Hornblower had to spring for the stern-sheets, line in hand, and he had to grab for the tiller. ...

It was impressive how quickly the Queen Charlotte picked up speed as the horses, suddenly breaking into a trot, pulled her bows up on to her bow wave.

From a trot they changed to a canter, and the speed seemed fantastic--far faster, to Hornblower's heated imagination, now that he was at the helm instead of being a mere irresponsible passenger.

The banks were flying by; fortunately in this deep cut of the summit level the channel was straight at first, for the steering was not perfectly simple.

The two towlines, one at the bow and one at the stern, held the boat parallel to the bank with the smallest use of the rudder-- an economic employment of force that appealed to Hornblower's mathematical mind, but which made the feel of the boat a little unnatural as he tentatively tried the tiller.

He looked forward at the approaching bend with some apprehension, and as they neared it he darted his eyes from bank to bank to make sure he was holding in mid-channel.

And round the bend, almost upon them, was a bridge--another of these infernal canal bridges, built for economy, with the towpath bulging out under the arch, so that it was hard to sight for the centre of the greatly narrowed channel. ...

He steadied the boat round the bend.

The hoofs of the lead horse were already ringing on the cobbles under the bridge.

God! He was over too far.

He tugged the tiller across.

Too far the other way!

He pushed the tiller back, straightening the boat on her course even as her bows entered the narrows.

She turned, very nearly fast enough--her starboard quarter, just where he stood, hit with a solid thump against the elbow of the brick-faced canal side, but she had a thick rope rubbing strake there--presumably to meet situations of this sort--which cushioned the shock; it was not violent enough to throw the passengers off their benches in the cabin, although it nearly threw Hornblower, crouching low under the arch, on to his face.

No time to think, ... the canal was curving back again and he had to guide the Queen Charlotte round the bend.

Crack-crack-crack-crack--that was Jenkins with his whip--was not the speed already great enough for him?

Round the bend, coming towards them, there was another canal boat, creeping peacefully along towed by a single horse.

Hornblower realized that Jenkins' four whip cracks were a signal, demanding a clear passage.

He hoped most sincerely and fervently that one would be granted, as the canal boat hastened down upon the barge.

The bargee at the tow horse's head brought the beast to a standstill, edging him over into the hedge beside the towpath; the bargee's wife put her tiller over and the barge swerved majestically, with her residual way, towards the reeds that lined the opposite bank; so between horse and barge the tow-rope sank to the ground on the towpath, and into the water in a deep bight.

Over the tow-rope cantered Jenkins' horses, and Hornblower headed the passage boat for the narrow space between the barge and the towpath.

He could guess that the water beside the path was shallow; it was necessary to steer the passage boat to shave the barge as closely as possible, and in any case the bargee's wife, accustomed to encountering skilled steersmen, had only left him the minimum of room.

Hornblower was in a fair way towards panic as the passage boat dashed forward.

Starboard--meet her.

Port--meet her.

He was giving these orders to himself, as he might to his coxswain; like a streak of lightning through the dark confusion of his mind flashed the thought that although he might give the orders he could not trust his clumsy limbs to execute them with the precision of a skilled helmsman.

Into the gap now; the stern was still swinging and at the last moment he got the tiller over to check her.

The barge seemed to flash by; out of the tail of his eye he was dimly aware of the bargee's wife's greeting, changing to surprise as she noted that the Queen Charlotte was being steered by a man quite unknown to her.

Faintly to his ear came the sound of what she said, but he could distinguish no word--he had no attention to spare for compliments.

They were through, in that flash, and he could breathe again, he could smile, he could grin; all was well in a marvellous world, steering a passage boat at nine miles an hour along the Thames and Severn Canal.

But that was another yell from Jenkins; he was checking his horses, and there was the grey tower of a lock-house ahead.

The gates were open, the lock-keeper standing by them.

Hornblower steered for them, greatly helped by the Queen Charlotte's abrupt reduction in speed as her bow wave passed ahead of her.

Hornblower grabbed for the stern rope, leaped for the bank, and miraculously kept his footing.

The bollard was ten feet ahead; he ran forward and dropped a loop over it and took the strain.

The ideal method was to take nearly all the way off the boat, let her creep into the lock, and stop her fully at the next bollard, but it was too much to hope that he could at his first attempt execute all this exactly.

He let the line slip through his hands, watching the boat's progress, and then took too sudden a pull at it.

Line and bollard creaked; the Queen Charlotte swung her bows across the lock to bump them against the further side, and she lay there half in and half out, helpless, so that the lock-keeper's wife had to run along from the farther gates, lean over, shove the bows clear while seizing the bow-line, and, with the line over her sturdy shoulder, haul the boat the final dozen yards into the lock--a clear waste of a couple of minutes.

Nor was this all, for, as they had now passed the summit level, this was a downward lock, and Hornblower had not readied his mind for this transition.

He was taken by surprise when the Queen Charlotte subsided abruptly, with the opening of the gate paddles, along with the emptying water, and he had only just time to slack away the stern-line, or else the boat might have been left hanging on it.

'Ee, man, you know little about boats,' said the lock-keeper's wife, and Hornblower's ears burned with embarrassment.

He thought of the examination he had passed in navigation and seamanship; he thought of how often he had tacked a monstrous ship of the line in heavy weather.

That experience was not of much use to him here in inland Gloucestershire--or perhaps it was Oxfordshire by now-- and in any case the lock was empty, the gates opening, the towlines tightening, and he had to leap down six feet or more in a hurry into the already moving stern, remembering to take the stern-line down with him.

He managed it, clumsily as ever, and he heard the lock-keeper's wife's hearty laugh as he glided on below her; and she said something more, too, but he could pay no attention to it, as he had to grab for the tiller and steer the hurrying boat out under the bridge.

And when he had first paid for their passages he had pictured to himself the leisurely life of the canal boatman! ...

Hornblower took the boat round a bend--he congratulated himself that he was getting the feel of the tiller now. ...

... here was another barge approaching ... Hornblower pulled the tiller over, ... The Queen Charlotte shot neatly down the gap between the barge and the towpath, and Hornblower could actually spare enough attention to acknowledge with a wave of his hand the greeting of the bargee's wife. ...

Chapter II

There was still plenty of daylight when they came out into the Thames valley and Hornblower, looking down to starboard, could see the infant river --not such an infant at its winter level--running below.

Every turn and every lock brought the canal nearer to the stream, and at last they reached Inglesham, with Lechlade church steeple in view ahead, and the junction with the river.

At Inglesham lock Jenkins left his horses and came back to speak to Hornblower.

'There's three staunches on the river next that we have to run, sir,' he said.

Hornblower had no idea what a staunch was, and he very much wanted to know before he had to 'run' them, but at the same time he did not want to admit ignorance.

Jenkins may have been tactful enough to sense his difficulty; at least he gave an explanation.

'They're dams across the river, sir,' he told Hornblower.

'At this time o' year, with plenty of water, some o' the paddles are kept out for good, at the towpath end o' the staunch.

There's a fall o' five or six feet.

'Five or six feet?' repeated Hornblower, startled.

'Yes, sir.

'Bout that much.

But it isn't a real fall, if you know what I mean, sir.

Steep, but no more.

'And we have to run down it?'

'Yes, sir.

It's easy enough, sir--at the top, leastways.

'And at the bottom?'

'There's an eddy there, sir, like as you'd expect.

But if you hold her straight, sir, the nags'll take you through.

'I'll hold her straight,' said Hornblower.

'O' course you will, sir.

'But what the devil do they have these staunches on the river for?' 'They keeps back the water for the mills--an' the navigation, sir.

'But why don't they have locks?'

Jenkins spread his hand and his hook in a gesture of ignorance.

'Dunno, sir.

There's locks from Oxford down.

These 'ere staunches are a plague.

Takes six horses to get the old Queen Charlotte up 'em, sometimes.

'Hornblower's thinking about the subject had not yet progressed as far as thinking about how the staunches were passed up-river; and he was a little annoyed with himself at not having raised the point.

But he managed to nod sagely at the information.

'I daresay,' he said.

'Well, it doesn't concern us this voyage.

'No, sir,' said Jenkins.

He pointed down the canal.

'The first 'un is half a mile below Lechlade Bridge, there.

It's well over on the port side.

You can't miss it, sir.

'Hornblower hoped he was right about that.

He took his place in the stern and seized the tiller with a bold attempt to conceal his misgivings, and he waved to the lock-keeper as the boat moved rapidly out of the lock--he was adept enough by now to be able to spare attention for that even with a gate to negotiate.

They shot out on to the surface of the young river; there was plenty of current running in their direction--Hornblower noted the eddy at the point-- but the speed of the horses gave them plenty of steerage way.

Lechlade Bridge just ahead of them--the staunch was half a mile beyond, Jenkins said.

Although the air was distinctly cold now Hornblower was conscious that his palms, as they rested on the tiller, were distinctly damp.

To him now it appeared a wildly reckless thing to do, to attempt to shoot the staunch inexperienced as he was.

He would prefer--infinitely prefer--not to try.

But he had to steer through the arch of the bridge--the horses splashed fetlock deep there--and then it was too late to do anything about his change of mind.

There was the line of the staunch across the stream, the gap in it plainly visible on the port side.

Beyond the staunch the surface of the river was not visible because of the drop, but above the gap the water headed down in a steep, sleek slope, higher at the sides than in the middle; the fragments which floated on the surface were all hurrying towards it, like people in a public hall all pressing towards a single exit.

Hornblower steered for the centre of the gap, choking a little with excitement; he could feel the altered trim of the boat as her bows sank and her stern rose on the slope.

Now they were flying down, down.

Below, the smooth slope narrowed down to a point, beyond which and on each side was the turbulent water of the

eddy.

He still had steerage way enough to steer down the point; as he felt the boat answer the helm he was momentarily tempted to follow up the mathematical line of thought presented by that situation, but he had neither time nor really the inclination.

The bows hit the turbulent water with a jar and a splash; the boat lurched in the eddy, but next moment the towlines plucked them forward again.

Two seconds' careful steering and they were through the eddy and they were gliding over a smooth surface once more, foam-streaked but smooth, and Hornblower was laughing out loud.

It had been simple, but so exhilarating that it did not occur to him to condemn himself for his earlier misgivings. Jenkins looked back, turning in his saddle, and waved his whip, and Hornblower waved back. ...

The winter evening was closing round them, the light mellowing while it faded over ploughland and meadow, over the pollard willows knee-deep in the stream, over the farmhouses and cottages.

It was all very lovely; Hornblower had the feeling that he did not want this moment ever to end. ...

Hornblower breathed the evening air as though it were divine poetry, and then he noticed Jenkins waving to him from his saddle and pointing with his whip ...

That was the next staunch at which Jenkins was pointing.

Hornblower steered boldly for it, without a moment of nervousness; he steadied the boat on her course above it, felt the heave and sudden acceleration as she topped the slope, and grinned with delight as she shot down it, hit the eddy below, and emerged as before after a brief period of indecision.

Onward, down the river, through the gathering night.

Bridges; another staunch--Hornblower was glad it was the last; there had been much point to what Jenkins had said about needing daylight in which to run them--villages, churches.

Now it was quite dark, and he was cold and weary. ...

Jenkins had lighted candle-lanterns; one hung on the collar of the lead horse and the other from the cantle of the saddle of the horse he rode.

Hornblower, in the stern-sheets of the Queen Charlotte, saw the specks of light dancing on the towpath-- they gave him an indication of the turns the river was making, and just enabled him to steer a safe course, although twice his heart was in his mouth as the side of the boat brushed against the reeds at the river bank.

It was quite dark when Hornblower felt the boat slow up suddenly with the easing of the towlines, and in response to Jenkins' quiet hail he steered the boat towards a lantern-lit landing-stage; ready hands took the lines and moored the boat, and the passengers began to swarm out.

'Captain--sir?' said Jenkins.

That was not the way he had used the word 'captain' at their first acquaintance.

Then it had been with an equalitarian gibe; now he was using the formula and the intonation that would be used by any member of a ship's company addressing his captain.

'Yes?' said Hornblower.

'This is Oxford, sir, and the relief is here.

'In the wavering lantern light Hornblower could see the two men indicated.

'So now I can have my dinner?' he asked, with gentle irony.

'That you can, sir, an' it's sorry I am that you have had to wait for it.

Sir, I'm your debtor.

Sir----' 'Oh, that's all right, Jenkins,' said Hornblower testily.

'I had my own reasons for wishing to get to London.

'Thank'ee, sir, and----' 'How far to London now?' 'A hundred miles to Brentford, sir, by the river.

You'll be there at the first light.

How'll the tide be then, Jem?' 'Just at the flood,' said the member of the relief crew holding the whip.

'You can take water there, sir, an' be at Whitehall Steps in an hour.

'Thank you,' said Hornblower.

'I'll say good-bye to you, then, Jenkins.

'Good-bye, sir, and thank'ee agen for a true gennelman....

...

Chapter III

At Brentford, in the early light of the winter's morning, it was cold and damp and gloomy.

... Hornblower's two sea chests were being hoisted out of the boat. ...

... between Brentford and Deptford lay the whole extent of London and much more besides, while the river on which they were to travel wound sinuously in wide curves, backwards and forwards.

And they had arrived late, and the tide would barely serve.

The wherry men were soliciting for his custom.

'Boat, sir? Sculls, sir? Oars, sir?' 'Oars,' said Hornblower.

It cost twice as much for a wherry rowed by two oarsmen as for one rowed by a single man with sculls, but with the ebbing tide it was worth it. ...

'Right, Bill. Give way,' said stroke-oar, and the wherry shot away from the slip out on to the grey river.

The oars ground in the rowlocks, the boat danced on the choppy water.

The wind was brisk and westerly; had it been easterly the river would have been far more choppy, and their progress would be delayed, so there was something at least to be said in favour of this grey world.

'Easy, 'Arry,' said bow, and the wherry began to round the bend. ...

The houses were getting thicker and thicker; they shot bridge after bridge, and the boat traffic on the river was growing dense, and suddenly Hornblower became aware they were at London's edge.

'Westminster, ... ' said the boatman.

'I used to ply on the ferry here until they built the bridge.

A ha'penny toll took the bread out of the mouths of many an honest boatman then. ...

' 'White'all Steps, ma'am ... and that 'ere's the Strand.

' Hornblower had taken boat to Whitehall Steps often, during those bitter days of half-pay when he was soliciting employment from the Admiralty.

'St Paul's, ...

' Now they were really within the City of London.

Hornblower could smell the smoke of the coal fires.

'Easy, 'Arry,' said bow again, looking back over his shoulder.

Boats, lighters, and barges covered the surface of the river, and there was London Bridge ahead of them.

'Give way, 'ard,' said bow, and the two oarsmen pulled desperately through a gap in the traffic above the bridge.

Through the narrow arches the tide ran fast; the river was piled up above the constriction of the bridge.

They shot down through the narrow opening. ...

And here was the greatest port in the world; ships at anchor, ships discharging cargo, with only the narrowest channel down the centre.

North country collier brigs, Ramsgate trawlers, coasters, grain ships, with the grey Tower looking down on them.

'The Pool's always a rare sight, ... ' said stroke.

'Even wi' the war an' all.

' All this busy shipping was the best proof that Bonaparte across the water was losing his war against England.

England could never be conquered while the Navy dominated the sea, strangling the continental powers while allowing free passage to British commerce.

Below the Pool lay a ship of war, idly at anchor, topmasts sent down, hands at work on stages overside painting.

At her bows was a crude figurehead of a draped female painted in red and white; in her clumsily carved hands she carried a large pair of gilded shears, and it was those which told Hornblower what the ship was, before he could count the eleven gun ports aside, before they passed under her stern and he could read her name, Atropos.

He choked down his excitement as he stared at her, taking note of her trim and her lines, of the petty officer of the anchor watch--of everything that in that piercing moment he could possibly observe.

'Atropos, twenty-two,' said stroke-oar, noting Hornblower's interest. ...

Already the boat was swinging round; there was Deptford Creek and Deptford Hard.

'Easy!' said bow.

'Give way again.

Easy!' The boat rasped against the shore, and the journey from Gloucester was over.