

Episode 1

NARRATOR: A few months ago, a team of historians cataloguing an extraordinary collection of ephemera discovered in the British Museum's Fort William Warehouse Complex, in a neglected room with the yellowing label, 'Tat We Shouldn't Have Bought and Are Now Legally Unable to Get Rid Of', made an extraordinary find – a packet of letters which casts an extraordinary new light on one of the most extraordinary chapters in our island race's extraordinary story. We will let these extraordinary epistles speak for themselves. The year is February 1810.

COPENHAGEN: Dear Marengo brackets Napoleon's horse close brackets,

I've never written a letter like this before. You probably get hundreds of them and this one might never arrive anyway, because of the wars smiley face, but I would never forgive myself if I didn't send it and so here it is. I have seen pictures of you. You are literally an oil painting. I don't know how you could look so amazing with that dumpy Napoleon on your back.

My name is Copenhagen because I am out of Lady Catherine who was in foal with me at the Battle of Copenhagen, which is ironic because I am not a warhorse but you are. I am dark brown and I am by John Bull, out of a mare by the Rutland Arabian, and also by Meteor, who was the son of the mighty Eclipse. You are an Arabian too, aren't you? Maybe we are distant cousins even! That doesn't matter for horses of course. I am only two and you are at least twelve, but that also doesn't matter for horses, as you know. Anyway, people tell me I look older than two.

COPENHAGEN: I am a racehorse. It is so lucky that I didn't become a warhorse, or we'd have been mortal enemies, and that would be a nightmare. The word nightmare always makes me think of lady horses that want to seduce me. Lady horses, or mares, are always trying to seduce me. They don't get very far.

Maybe you are only interested in lady horses brackets mares close brackets, but when I saw the pictures, my equine gaydar pointed due south wink.

I hope you reply.

Love,

Copenhagen, kiss kiss hoofprint

MARENGO:

Dear Copenhagen,

What a rare pleasure to receive a letter from a frisky young thing such as yourself. You are quite mistaken to believe that I am the recipient of many such overtures. The pasture of fame is a lonely one, as very few have the courage to approach an animal of my standing. It is one of the great sadnesses of my position, and I am moved that you have written to break my isolation, and with such rare enthusiasm.

I must, however, correct you on a few misapprehensions.

You speak with generosity of my appearance, but the pictures do flatter. Most importantly, I am not, in fact, a horse. At 14 hands 1 inch only, I am technically a pony, though I am taller with my mane fluffed up. This has put off suitors in the past and I will understand if you are amongst them.

Equally, it is with some pain that I note your reference to my dear Napoleon as "dumpy". He and I are perfectly to scale. Napoleon, I am sure, does not have a fair reputation on the racecourses of Britain — because of the war — but my affection for him could not be greater, indeed I am proudly branded with his initial, and a crown, just above my gaskin. Know that if we are to pursue this correspondence I will never renounce Mr Napoleon. He has too much need of me. I must admit I am concerned about my master. He should be brimming with happiness and pride. He is the greatest military leader the world has ever seen! But ever since he was excommunicated, he has been moping. He and the Pope were involved in a dispute over who owns Rome. Napoleon told the Pope to go to Paris and the Pope told Napoleon to go to Hell. I do not think that Napoleon would mind Hell so very much, he is the bravest of men,

but he needed the Pope to divorce him from that buck-toothed putain Josephine. So he kidnapped the Pope, and the church had a mysterious change of heart and granted the divorce, but now Mr Napoleon does not know what to do with him. It is all a little embarrassing.

MARENGO: Now now, this is all terribly serious, and you a mere lad of two. I do apologise. My dear Copenhagen, I very much hope that none of this causes you to reconsider your regard. I confess I was quite delighted with your letter, and the sentiments within. Your lively manner appeals to me greatly, I cannot say how greatly. And it is with some relief that I note you are a racehorse, as it would be much to my distress were we to meet on opposing sides on the battlefields of Europe.

With warmth and hope,

Marengo

* * *

COPENHAGEN:

Dear Marengo,

When I got your letter I was like oh my horsey god.

You are amazing with words, I had to use a dictionary for excommunicated. Don't worry I am not stupid, it's just I have always had to put book learning second place to my athletic career. Racing is bloody amazing, and it's all I've ever wanted to do, but is a difficult environment to be a gay horse in it is testosterone everywhere you look. Presumably it's even worse for warhorses. Thank the horsey god, again, that I am not one.

Also, don't worry, I am not a size queen, smiley face. In fact my first was a pony, he was called Twinkle. He told me that I have a very strong tail which is something gay horses use to do something it would be impossible to describe how nice it is to humans. Horse heaven only knows what tricks you have learnt in all your years of experience, it makes me excited just to think about it.

Anyway, you were so honest about your size so I must be totally honest too. However hard I train, which is bloody hard quite frankly, I do not have a great turn of speed. Yesterday, I ran the quarter mile in 30 seconds, like some kind of donkey. All the other horses laughed at me. I'm really stressed about it.

I am a stayer though brackets not just in races wink close brackets and I hope that I will break into longer races after this year when I am officially three, even though I am a young three, because you have to remember

that all horses get arbitrarily given the same birthday which is January the first. Oh, wait, you don't have to remember because you are also a horse.

I will not be horrible about Napoleon again. It is not being horrible to him to say that in the pictures of you, he is not the one that makes me have to lie down on cold wet grass or I would have an accident. I hope he is feeling better but I worry that if he is you will have to go to war in the Peninsular. Our top guy there is called Viscount Wellington. My stablemate Thunderclap out of Stormfront by Death to the French - I'm sorry but that's his name - is obsessed with wars. He's totally jealous I am called after a battle, actually. He says it is an insult to the memory of the fallen that I am not more patriotic.

Anyway, I used to think Thunderclap was cool because he's by far the beta horse in our stable, and, as you know, the horse alphabet starts with beta. Thunderclap came second in the 1000 Guineas last year. He finished moments after his half-brother Lightning out of Storm Front by You Canna Change The Laws of Physics, but all he ever does is tease me for being slow. He's not cool, he's a bully.

The thing is, it is hard to ignore him because he is so bloody beta all the time. He says Wellington is amazing and all the French will be inevitably crushed. I'm scared that you will be hurt. That makes me sound silly, doesn't it?

I bet it does. I'm sorry. Anyway, it was amazing to hear from you, and I am literally pawing the ground with impatience dreaming of your reply.

Love,

Copenhagen kiss hoofprint kiss kiss

MARENGO:

Dear Copenhagen,

My heart leapt like a foal in springtime when I received your latest. I confess I was filled with apprehension lest news of my, shall we say, vertical limitations, were to prove insurmountable to you, but it would seem you find them quite mountable indeed, so to speak. I blush to write such a thing. It is not my custom to be so forward, but dare I say that you inspire me?

Thank you for your kind concern regarding Mr Napoleon. I am glad to say that he is in much higher spirits. I am certain that it is because he is spending more time in the saddle. I am working hard to improve Napoleon's riding. He has an almost total lack of - we call it - "elegance". I think it is because his centre of gravity is unusually low. But I would rather be poorly ridden and well understood. Of course best of all is to be well-understood and well-ridden, and thus my thoughts turn to your youthful vigour, dear Copenhagen.

I expect us to join the peninsular war at any moment. I am taking Spanish lessons in anticipation. Do not worry that I will get hurt; it is the risk, and the glory, of combat. Also I have heard of some excellent bio-oils for reducing the appearance of scar tissue. I would not usually believe in such remedies, but these oils are extracted from snakes.

Napoleon is filled with energy, his compact little body leaping about all over the place. Also, he is more constipated than usual, a sure sign that we will soon be going into battle.

Thunderclap out of Stormfront by Death to the French sounds as stupid as his name. In war, there is no prize for coming second. And he is extraordinarily poorly informed. Your British army holds no fears for my Napoleon, who refers to Wellington as "that terrified leopard". We will push the leopard out from the catflap of Spain!

But enough war talk. Do not be concerned about your lack of velocity. Such things mean nothing to me. You describe yourself as a 'stayer' - clearly you are a horse of valour - on the battlefield this would make you a prize indeed. But you are not a warhorse and I can barely imagine the life that you lead, one of sport and play and healthy competition. Pray tell me more of the racecourses of England. To picture your lithe young fetlocks pounding the turf causes me quite the distraction.

Yours, very distracted indeed,

Marengo

COPENHAGEN:

Dear M,

The racecourses of England are muddy and wet, and the racehorses of England are shits. I returned to my stable yesterday to find that Thunderclap out of Stormfront by Death to the French had pinned a picture of you covering (the horse word for having sex with) Napoleon and him smiling. I would have been smiling if it was me but I know that's different.

Thunderclap out of Stormfront by Death to the French says that Napoleon is not fighting in the Peninsular War because he is scared. He says that Napoleon is a show pony, and does not have any bottom, the contemporary word for courage and durability.

My trainer is still disappointed with me, but I am determined that this will change. The other horses like Thunderclap out of etc. think the kind of horse we are – ie gay - is all flash and no bottom, but I am a stayer not a sprinter. I will show them all my bottom in the end ha ha.

I wonder how we will ever meet since I am a race horse and you are a warhorse? Thank god I am not a warhorse though. I can't repeat that often enough.

Impatiently,

Copenhagen

MARENGO: Dear Copenhagen,

So it turns out that those Spanish lessons were a complete waste of time. We are not going to the peninsula. I have written to Castanet, Don Miguel Ricardo de Alvara y Esquivel's reserve saddle horse, cancelling the rest of our sessions. Ay carumba! Which is Spanish for zut alors! I doubt I will ever leave the Tuileries again. Napoleon has sent Andre Massena to fight the war in Spain in his place. He said "keep an eye on things for me" which annoyed Massena greatly, because he only has one eye: Napoleon shot the other one out by mistake. As for Napoleon, on those rare occasions that he gets out of the bath, he comes to my stable and scratches me behind the ears, saying I am a good old boy. Old! I am not ready for dog meat yet. But I suppose you racehorses know all about premature decrepitude. Perhaps you even have certain secret techniques or remedies to extend your vitality. These would be of no relevance to me, of course, but the subject interests me. On an academic level.

You and your bottom should not give Thunderclap another thought. With his doctored pictures and his jibes he is certainly paying you plenty of attention. I believe that he is envious of our correspondence – a sentiment I abhor. What does he look like?

Vigorously,

Marengo

COPENHAGEN:

Dear M,

I thought that your letter was really open, and I was honoured you were able to confide your insecurities in me. I think it is an important moment in our relationship.

My insecurities are about racing. I ran yesterday, for the tenth time this year, and came third from last. If I keep this up, I'll be turned into glue. Thunderclap said it's as if my hooves are made of glue already. Sometimes I feel like he's right. Thunderclap told me I would stay young if I ate rotten turnips, which are the most disgusting taste possible for horses, but it turned out he was joking.

Luckily, you are grey, so no one will ever notice that you are old.

Love,

C

PS Thunderclap is exactly my height, and he is midnight black with a quiff in his mane which he doesn't have to do anything to to keep curly. It's wasted on him.

MARENGO: Esteemed Copenhagen

I was a little confused by your letter as I don't have any insecurities. But I am glad that you feel you can share all of yours with me. Do not listen to Thunderclap. In fact I think it would be better if you never spoke to him again, or looked at him.

I dreamed of you last night. We were racing together - clearly in my dream I flattered myself with unrealistic fleetness of foot - and I knew we were on an English racecourse because of the rain and pervasive smell of haddock. You were just ahead of me. There was, incidentally, no sign of Thunderclap. Your ripe muscles were pulling taut the skin of your hindquarters, your lush tail was swishing, and oh, the movement of your strong, provocative legs... But, at that moment, I awoke, and the sound of your hooves drumming the grass was just the distant drum of drumming. I have not had such a dream since I was a heady colt. It must be because I had rotten turnips just before going to sleep.

In any case it was a rude awakening, although not as rude as I would have liked. Copenhagen, I have the worst possible news. Napoleon has a new mare to ride. I speak figuratively. Napoleon would never ride any horse other than me, aside from his other saddle horses, but I am his favourite.

MARENGO: What I mean is that Napoleon is married. We have not gone to war because he was too busy thinking about flower arrangements and colour schemes and party favours for the bridesmaids. His new wife is a Hapsburg, an 18-year-old filly called Marie Louise who can speak six languages but is too frightened to walk behind a horse in case it kicks. She tried to annex my affections with sugarlumps, but I am not so easily bought.

Be glad that you are a racehorse, you with your most excellent bottom. For as long as races are run, you will be gainfully employed. Do not fear the glue factory. Although we are in different countries and I have never met you and am not entirely clear where you live, I will protect you, I promise it.

For my part, I fear this marriage means that I will be retired to give pony rides to squealing brats on the shingles of Nice. Nice is not nice. Actually it is quite nice but I thought that was funny. You will now be wondering why I did not do the joke "Nice is nice". I am wondering this myself.

Yearningly, yes, yearningly,

Marengo

COPENHAGEN: Dear Marengo,

The Viscount Wellington has bought me. I am to be a warhorse. I will never race again and I will have to go to war, and it's the Napoleonic Wars, basically, and our owners are, well, you know, and oh my horsey God, do we have to be archenemies now? Is this the end? I wish—

NARRATOR: And there the letters abruptly end. We have heard, however, that there might be a further packet in the National Gallery miscatalogued as 'Virginia Woolf: Racist Political Cartoons and Other Juvenilia'. Here's hoping.