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978-1-108-04463-9 - Memoir of the Life of Admiral Sir Edward Codrington: Volume 1

Edited by Jane Bourchier

Excerpt

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MEMOIR
OF
ADMIRAL SIR EDWARD CODRINGTON.

EDWARD CODRINGTON was born April 27, 1770. He was descended from an old and already distinguished family : one of his ancestors was standard-bearer to the Black Prince ; and since that time the family has continued in possession of the estates of Codrington and Dodington, in Gloucestershire. He was the youngest of three brothers, and having been left an orphan in his infancy, his first recollected home was with his uncle, Mr. Bethell, who was very kind to him. He was, however, early sent out into the world ; and, after a period of schooling at Harrow—which cannot have been a long one, for he entered the Navy at thirteen years old—he spent nine years at sea as a midshipman ; and I have repeatedly heard him say, that during those nine years (so important for the formation of character) he never was invited to open a book, nor received a word of advice or instruction, except professional, from any one. More than that, he was thrown among a set in the gun-room mess, older than himself, whose amusement it was—a too customary amusement in those days—to teach the lad to drink, and to lead him into their own habitual practice in that respect. His own strength of character came to his aid ; he found himself growing fond of ‘grog ;’ he felt himself in danger ; he felt that he could not, at that time, take a little without wishing for

more ; and he therefore resolved to save himself by taking *none*. (All this I have heard from his own lips.) He had the firmness, young as he was, to carry out his resolve in spite of his tempters, and through life he continued a very abstemious man, though without refusing the use of wine, and holding no prejudice against it.

He first went to sea in H. M. S. 'Augusta,' in July 1783, for Channel service ; and served as midshipman, mate, and acting lieutenant till 1793, in H. M. ships 'Brisk,' 'Assistance,' 'Leander,' 'Ambuscade,' 'Formidable,' and 'Queen Charlotte,' three of which were the flagships of Admiral Sawyer, Admiral Peyton, and Admiral Lord Howe.

On one occasion, a royal visitor going on board the ship in which he was serving as midshipman, the side-ropes of the companion-ladder were, according to the etiquette on such occasions, manned by youngsters. The royal visitor observed to the captain, 'You have a very handsome boy there—who is he ?' The captain answered, 'His name is Codrington, sir ; yes, indeed, he is a handsome boy ; but his good looks are the least part of him ; he is himself quite as good as his looks, and better too ; and I am proud of him.'

The anecdote may seem trivial, but it has at least the value of showing that, even in very early life, he succeeded in gaining the good opinion of his superiors.

There are not many details to be found now of the early life of naval officers at that distant period ; but one circumstance of considerable interest has been recorded by the subject of this memoir, which occurred while he was a midshipman and sixteen years old. He wrote it down some years afterwards at the request of his wife.

*Adventure of Thoughtlessness : a Warning to Young
Midshipmen, &c.*

During the long and severe winters which prevailed in Nova Scotia whilst the country was yet uncleared of wood, the principal diversion of the officers of such ships as were stationed at Halifax was in skating ; and the string of lakes

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running inland from the side of the harbour opposite that town—which were sometimes frozen over before any fall of snow had taken place, and even after a snowstorm had generally some parts left clear owing to the partial gusts of wind—offered great encouragement to the practice of that exercise. At about eight o'clock one morning in the winter of 1786, a party of us, whose names are undermentioned, set out with our skates as usual for this purpose:—Stafford Palmer, master's mate (now Banks, 1818); Meyrick Holmes, midshipman; Edward Codrington, midshipman; — Bromedge, captain's clerk; — Hicks, writer in the Admiral's office; — Prior, writer in the Admiral's office. Finding no part of either the first or second lake adjoining fit for skating, we all proceeded to the third lake, something less than a mile farther, and connected by a brook. We were equally disappointed in our object here; and a suggestion made by me that it would be well worth our while to explore the fourth lake, which probably was not far off and which none of our shipmates had yet visited, was assented to by all but Prior, who alone had the prudence to resist our importunities that he would accompany us, and to return directly to the ship.

Following the brook as our surest guide, we reached this fourth lake without much difficulty; and we were so absorbed in the wildness and beauty of the scene before us, that we pursued our way to the upper part of it without recollecting how time passed on. Its form was oblong, and its length about three miles; its sides smoothly irregular, occasionally broken by bold rocky projections covered with pine trees, and the whole embosomed in one immense mass of different firs, the contrast of whose dark green with the pure unsullied snow on the lake was very striking. Nature seemed to reign here in all her glory, and to have denied all human intrusion, whilst the wood and the water strove each to encroach on the boundaries she had set them. The trees in some parts were actually growing in the water, and in other parts the water had undermined the fertile banks and exposed the trees to destruction.

Upon reaching the further extremity of this fourth lake, we came in view of the fifth, which nearly adjoined it, and which we had not seen before in consequence of its winding quickly to the left, and being comparatively very narrow. Whilst contemplating the beauty of the scene before us, for the pleasures of which we little thought we should pay so dearly, we were suddenly seized, and each as it were at the same moment, with a fit of hunger so violent that upon

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mutual explanation of the sensations we felt we were all persuaded that we could not survive the pain we endured sufficiently long to reach the village of Dartmouth, from whence we set out, and where we knew we could obtain refreshments.

It was immediately thrown out by Hicks, for our consideration, that there was a settlement called McNab's Bridge somewhere thereabout, which he understood was at the head of the fifth lake then before us. And as this lake did not appear to extend more than three-quarters of a mile, I was induced by the excruciating pain I then felt from hunger to avow my determination to risk my life upon the speedy discovery of that settlement.

Hicks agreed to accompany me.

But Palmer decided on turning back; and advised us to weigh well the certainty of death if we failed in our speculation, and the probability of our strength still enabling us to reach Dartmouth in safety if we called forth all our exertion.

Of the remaining two, who, probably from being more exhausted, did not take so active a part in this critical consultation, Bromedge determined to go back with Palmer, and Holmes on risking his fate with us.

Although the day was still unusually mild and fine, there was no time to be lost, and, therefore, after a short but melancholy 'Good-bye' and friendly shake by the hand, we began our arduous undertaking.

The snow in the lakes was generally up to the calf of the leg, and sometimes nearly as high as the knee; and whether from the slipperiness of the ice underneath, or whatever other cause, we were frequently impressed so strongly with an idea that it was giving way with us, that we involuntarily, and in spite of our better reason, ran back several paces for safety. To avoid these recurrences I picked up a long stick, with which I went forward some yards before my companions in order to sound our way. We were proceeding in this cautious manner, following the winding of the lake over which we had gone about three miles without yet seeing its termination, when the pain of hunger was succeeded by a drowsiness which it was extremely difficult to resist. I was now about a hundred paces before the other two, who, although close together, seemed equally silent with myself, and absorbed in their own thoughts. Their thoughts too were probably like mine, bent on that home to which we had so little prospect of ever returning; and they were possibly, like me, repenting the rash determination we had made, and

lamenting the thoughtlessness which had brought us into so serious a predicament. I was suddenly aroused from my reverie by perceiving something large and black upon the ice near the upper part of the lake by which we were necessarily to pass, which I concluded was a bear. I concealed the fear which came over me so long as I had hopes of the supposed enemy being alarmed by our nearer approach. But when it became expedient to close together for our mutual protection, I found that they also had seen this terror-exciting object from the first, and had fully sympathised in the feelings which I had wished to confine to my own breast. Almost all dangers are greater in imagination than in reality. But taught to expect all sorts of wild beasts in these woods, never perhaps before penetrated by human beings, and sensible that without anything but our skates either for offence or for defence, we were in the power of whatever foe might assail us, our having submitted to the 'slavish yoke of fear' may be somewhat excusable. We were subject to deception, moreover, from our sight being much weakened by weariness and long looking on the snow. However, after coming to a resolution to march up to this obtruding enemy with an imposing front, we were relieved by the discovery that it was the stump of a burnt tree which had been brought down by the brook.

Solemn as had been our previous steps, and little as our minds were disposed to mirth, we could not help laughing heartily on contemplating the cause of our immediate anxiety. Short, however, was the period of our joy on escaping this imaginary danger. For at length arriving at the head of this lake, which could not be less than five miles in extent, not a symptom was there of that settlement upon the discovery of which we had staked our existence. We could not find one single Indian mark of a notch in a tree; and the woods here appeared too trackless even for *their* venturing. In the wildness of our search we traversed the brook several times, often falling into holes amongst the hidden rocks which nearly fractured our limbs. But the farther we advanced the more our hopes diminished; and in despair of success we were again obliged to hold a consultation as to what next should be done. Hicks commenced by observing that all the efforts we could now make must be as useless as they would be painful, and that it would be better to give up the point at once. Holmes, whose strength was nearly exhausted, yielded to his opinion; and yet he seemed to cling to life with considerable anxiety. The pains of hunger were gone

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by. Nor did either of us know a suffering at that moment beyond the conviction—perhaps I may say the hope—that our loss would be a sore affliction to our parents, as well as to our shipmates and other friends; and we were each fully sensible that to die then were merely to indulge in a delightful sleep, almost too attractive to resist.

Seeing that the point rested with me alone, I summoned up all the reasoning I could. I urged still further effort, as we valued our characters for courage and manliness. I dwelt on the probability of some of our messmates being lost in making search after us—the justice of exertion due to their greater virtue, and our filial duty to those who had protected our infancy; and I derived new strength from finding that I did not plead in vain.

The scene which followed is as fresh in my memory as if it had happened in this last winter. The sun was still up; and by the direction in which it was declining, we determined the line on which we hoped to reach the upper end of the sheet of water above Halifax, called Bradford Bason. Hicks slowly led the way, followed by Holmes at some little distance, whilst I once more struck deeper into the wood near the brook for the chance of making some useful discovery. The snow was in many parts of the woods nearly up to our hips; and whilst I was with difficulty forcing myself forward, I heard Holmes cry out to me for help, ‘that he was frost-bitten and could not move.’ I instantly turned towards him, and called to Hicks for God’s sake to assist him immediately. But, declaring his total inability to do so, he sat himself down in the snow.

Although I found that Holmes’s difficulty arose more from the weakness of fatigue than severity of cold, I thought his remaining any time motionless would equally cause his death, and I forced him on with a violence which was little short of beating him. But upon coming up to Hicks I found I had still greater obstacles to overcome; for he was just falling into a doze from which he was unwilling to be disengaged, although he knew it would be fatal; and my repetition of the words used by Doctor Solander on a similar occasion in New Zealand,—‘He that sits will sleep, and he that sleeps will wake no more,’—only served to irritate him. After much ineffectual reasoning upon the subject, in the course of which he urged me to resign myself to death with as much earnestness as I pressed him to struggle for his life, I told him as well as Holmes who took part with him, that no argument they could possibly employ should shake my

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determination to resist to the last moment the weakness to which they had given themselves up ; that I was convinced I had sufficient strength to reach the water-side before dark, where I might possibly get sight of some boat or a fisherman ; that if they would still exert themselves I would never leave them ; but that if they had resolved on resigning themselves without further effort, it was but honest and honourable that they should tell me so at once and let me shift for myself. At last they discontentedly rose from the snow, and still querulously complaining of the force of my expressions, they again put themselves in motion. I was thrown into a sort of wildness of despair on witnessing the desponding tardiness of our progress which precluded all hope of final success ; and I began to regret that I had bound myself to encumbrances but for which I might have insured my own safety, when I suddenly fell flat on my face. For the immediate cause of this, in my then almost bewildered state, I could not readily account ; but the effect I cannot ever forget, since it put me to a greater trial than perhaps I have ever since undergone. I had lost all sense of bodily pain, and I felt that to lie still in the position in which I had fallen, was to make dying a luxurious enjoyment ; and I must confess that my resolution was so far shaken, that nothing but a sense of shame on recollecting the expressions I had used towards my fellow-sufferers during their time of trial, could have excited in me an effort to get up again from the seeming bed of down on which I was reposing.

Once more, however, I regained my self-command. But in my endeavour to rise, I found my steps impeded by a sloping bank ; and after closing my eyes with my hands for a little, in order to recover a better sight, the regularity of the opening in the wood convinced me I was in a carriage road. Such was the effect of this news on my companions, to whom I vociferated it with the utmost power of my lungs, that they stepped forward to the spot with the lightness of harlequins. We were doubting which direction would conduct us most speedily to a habitation, when, at a turning of the road some hundred yards off, there suddenly appeared a man on horseback coming towards us. He, however, galloped away as suddenly ; somewhat alarmed at first, as he afterwards told us, by our very extraordinary wildness of figure and the boisterous mode of our calling after him. Upon examination we found ourselves checkered over, both face and clothes, by the branches of burned trees among which

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we had passed near the spot where we then stood; and neither the man nor his horse would consent to approach us until they had surveyed us more minutely.

After explaining our situation to him, he told us his name was McNab; and that his house, for which we had been searching, was only about a mile off. The self-interest of this man induced him to conceal the true distance, which was not less than three miles, and all *from* Halifax. Had he not reckoned on turning our distress to his pecuniary advantage, he would have directed us at once to Sackville, only five miles farther than it was to his house, on our road home, and where there was an inn with better accommodation.

This man's habitation was a two-roomed log hut, placed on an eminence by the side of a brook which fell into a lake upon which the house looked, no less, as he informed us, than eighteen miles long.

The situation in summer must have been beautiful. But neither the beauty of the prospect nor the comeliness of the daughters, who were busied in preparing for us the boiled eggs and bread and cheese which their store afforded, could reconcile our stomachs to the taste of either. The very attempt which we thought it right to make, created nausea; but after resting a while we contrived to get down a spoonful of very weak rum and water, which aided in raising our spirits to such a pitch that we imagined ourselves equal to walking as far as Halifax by ten o'clock that night, although it was then nearly four. To the disappointment of our mercenary host, we set out immediately.

We had scarcely paced back the three miles which McNab had led us away to his house, when Holmes began to lag behind. I made him rest on a stone whilst I stood by him, and then helped him along until he reached Hicks, who had not got half-a-mile farther when he found it requisite to resort to a similar expedient; and thus they went on alternately, without my daring to trust myself so far as to sit down also, until at nine o'clock we reached the village of Sackville, having been five hours in going eleven miles. Here we had some difficulty in persuading the people of the inn to open the door to us; for there were none but females in the house, and they were not aware of the harmless state of the guests we proposed to them. They at first discredited our story altogether; but upon reconnoitring us by lights from the window, they found we were not impostors, and did their best to make us welcome. Why, being disgusted with

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the sight of food at McNab's Bridge, we should recover our appetites after eleven miles' severe walk farther, I know not; but so it was, and perhaps it is fortunate that the means of the house were limited to one basin of milk and the remainder of a loaf, which allowed us only a moderate slice of bread apiece.

This scanty supply nevertheless gave us a meal of great enjoyment, and we ate it before a fire with our legs in a tub of tepid water which very considerably lessened the pains and the soreness from chafing by which we had all suffered during the latter part of our journey. Of the three small spare beds which the house afforded, one was previously engaged, another fell to Holmes on our drawing lots, and Hicks and I, although the two largest, were obliged to share the third. We had scarcely room to lie down on it, but we nevertheless counted on a good night's rest, and it was probably owing more to our extreme fatigue than to the smallness of the bed, that we courted sleep in vain. We were unable to continue in the same position for one minute together, and neither of us felt a disposition to close our eyelids. And when at length something of forgetfulness had stolen over us, we had so much consciousness of the scenes which had so long occupied our minds, that we should have known no distinction betwixt being asleep and awake, but for a particular circumstance. Haunted by the idea of being frost-bitten, after what appeared to me merely an interval in our conversation, I found myself deprived of all power of movement. Communicating to my bed-fellow my alarm, in which he instantly participated from the same cause, we each made a double effort to move our legs, when lo! a large Newfoundland dog, which, it seems, had unobservedly laid himself across the foot of our bed, went growling off, so discontented by our disturbing him, that he resisted all our efforts to coax him back again that we might again benefit by his warmth as he had done by ours. Further sleep was now out of the question, and we arose at four o'clock in the morning in order to get home as soon as possible. The snow on the road was not much above our ankles, but our feet were so sore and blistered, and our limbs were so weak, that neither of my two friends could go a quarter of a mile without resting: no longer fearing the fatal effects of falling asleep, I also shared in this indulgence; and so altered was the state of our minds that we could joke and laugh at each other's imbecility. Hicks was a stout heavy man, who used to boast of the distance he could go afoot. He was so jealous

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on finding that I got over the snow much lighter than he did, and that I out-walked him throughout our whole journey, that this feeling seemed always to predominate in him.

To the prevalence of this jealousy I attribute that unwilling effort which preceded my discovery of the road to McNab's; and it continued so strong to the last, that when I proposed leaving him at Birch Cove, within five miles of Halifax, that he might rest himself and get some breakfast whilst I went on to report our safety, he almost quarrelled with me; insisted upon it that he was neither tired nor eager for his breakfast, that he had nothing to impede him but the blisters on his feet, and that I should wait a few minutes until he could adjust his boots a little, and accompany me. It was not until near nine o'clock that we reached a tavern abreast of the ship, where we ate a hearty breakfast.

Several parties were preparing to go in search of us, and we were most highly gratified to find that Palmer and Bromedge were coming on board on one side of the ship from Dartmouth at the same moment that we entered on the other from Halifax. Palmer was a strong well-set man, much more able to endure fatigue than either of us; and his anxiety of mind must have diminished at every mile he gained, although the distance he had to go was probably greater than ours from where we parted to the village of Sackville. But Bromedge was so exhausted by hunger and fatigue, that after entreating Palmer to let him go to sleep; remonstrating against his cruelty in making him walk on; claiming ineffectually his right to die, or to dispose of himself as he pleased, and making every excuse that ingenuity could suggest—he would even slip off his shoes whilst his companion was dragging him along, that he might steal a little sleep in the snow during the time Palmer's kindness led him back in search of them.

After shortly talking over the difficulties and disasters we had each been subject to, we all went to our hammocks, where we continued in a state bordering on stupefaction for three days together; and I doubt not the others arose, as I did, with a determination to avoid similar follies thereafter, and to advise other young people to take warning by what we had undergone.

In detailing this adventure of my early life, according to my promise, you will find that I have made myself a more conspicuous figure in the group than I could have wished. And in truth, the feeling it impossible to state the facts ever so simply without doing so, has hitherto deterred me from