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978-1-108-07448-3 - Autobiographical Recollections: With a Prefatory Essay on  
Leslie as an Artist, and Selections from his Correspondence: Volume 1

Charles Robert Leslie Edited by Tom Taylor

Excerpt

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AUTOBIOGRAPHY  
OF  
CHARLES ROBERT LESLIE.

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CHAPTER I.

Voyage to America—Engagement at sea—French ship vanquished—  
Youthful bravery—The Newfoundland dog—Residence at Lisbon—  
Departure from Lisbon—Arrival at Philadelphia.

IN looking back on the opportunities my profession has given me of knowing many persons whose names will outlive the present age, I cannot doubt that much which has interested me will be read with interest by others. Without the hope that I can do justice, in my relation, to what I have seen and heard, I am yet tempted to commit to paper those of my recollections on which I dwell with the most interest, and to connect with them some account of my life.

My father, Robert Leslie, and my mother, Lydia Baker, were Americans, natives of Cecil county in the state of Maryland. Their forefathers had settled in that neighbourhood early in the last century as farmers; my father's ancestors being from Scotland, and my mother's from England.

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My father was a man of extraordinary ingenuity in mechanics. He settled in Philadelphia in the year 1786, as a clock and watchmaker, having previously pursued that business at Elktown. He was a member of the Philosophical Society, and was known and respected by some of the most eminent scientific men in America, among whom I well recollect Latrobe, the architect of the Capitol at Washington. His business having become prosperous, he determined to extend it by taking a partner in Philadelphia, and by going himself to London to purchase the clocks and watches wanted for the establishment. This he did about the year 1793. He was accompanied by his family, which consisted of my mother and three young children (girls), and his sister, Margaret Leslie.

I was born in London on the 19th October, 1794, and my first recollections are of our living in a house in Portman Place, Edgeware Road, two doors from that which I occupied after an interval of thirty years. My brother, the youngest of my father's children, and about two years younger than myself, was also born in London. On the death of my father's partner, Mr. Price, he returned to America with his family.

Our voyage was a remarkable one; and, as my father kept a journal, and as I have been favoured, within these few years, with a sight of another kept by one of our fellow passengers, Mr. Lawrence Greatrakes, I am enabled to give some account of the principal events of it.

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We sailed, on the 18th September, 1799, from Gravesend, in the ship *Washington*, 875 tons burthen, carrying sixteen 24-pounders (carronades), six long twelves, and two 6-pounders. She was an English-built East Indiaman, but when we sailed in her she was in the American merchant service, and armed in consequence of the war between the United States and France. She had a complement of sixty-two men and boys, and was commanded by Captain James Williamson, a Scotchman. Mr. Greatrakes remarks, that “Perhaps few instances ever occurred of a vessel suffering greater difficulties, and not being lost, in endeavouring to beat out of the Channel.” And my father says: “We were only just clear of the land when we had been thirty-four days on board.

“On the 23rd October we passed through an English fleet from the Mediterranean, and were brought to by the largest of the ships—the *Majestic*, 74. The gun she fired as a signal had, by the carelessness of the gunner, a ball in it, which came on board of us, and, passing very near the heads of two of our passengers, sunk into a spar on the deck.

“On Thursday, the 24th,” continues my father, “we were called up by the mate and gunner, who informed us that there was a French ship in sight, and that we must prepare for an engagement. As soon as I got on deck, the captain requested me to get Mrs. Leslie and the children up and dressed, as he wished to have them ready to go below at a minute’s warning.

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We were steering west, with the wind right aft, and the Frenchman following us at the distance of about four miles. It was, no doubt, a ship we had seen the evening before, dogging the fleet we had passed through, probably in the hope of cutting one or two of them off. He did not seem to be gaining on us, so that, at eight, we had breakfast as usual, soon after which we found that our enemy could keep up with us with less sail than we had, by which it was evident he could overtake us if he pleased. Our captain determined, therefore, to slacken sail, and have our fate decided while we had the day before us."

Mr. Greatrakes says: "The orders to clear for action were productive of some droll scenes. Great was the confusion produced among the passengers—some half-asleep, some only half-dressed, running every way but the right one, and carrying their moveables everywhere but where they should; bemoaning their unhappy lot in coming to sea in time of war; rolling up their bedding, and tumbling their trunks down the orlop deck stairs; and some of them tumbling themselves after them; inquiring of every one whom they judged in the least likely to know, whether it would be a hard fight; whether the French would take all the passengers' property; whether they should be put into prison; whether they should ever get home; &c., &c."

To return to my father's journal: "At half-past nine we had everything in readiness, and every man

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to his station: the guns all primed, the matches lit, and all the women and children ordered down into the hold. . . . At a quarter before ten the Frenchman fired one gun, though at too great a distance to reach us. In five minutes more they were near enough, when our captain fired our first gun with his own hand, it being one that stood on the quarter-deck; the men gave three cheers, and the action commenced very briskly on both sides, the two ships being near enough to use muskets and have a distinct view of each other. The French ship appeared new, and in every respect like a frigate, except in size. Their musket-balls for a few minutes were sent so rapidly against the side of our ship, that the noise to us was like a hail-storm against a window, and yet we had not a man killed by them. One grazed our steward's neck, and another went through the fleshy part of a man's arm. No muskets were fired from our ship, except by some of the passengers, as our men were all required to work our heavy guns; in which we were, in one respect, very unfortunate, as almost every one of the 24-pounders that was fired tumbled over. I counted at one time five of them lying on their sides on the gun-deck. The carriages were made on a new patent plan, but so high and narrow that they could not bear the recoil. One of them in falling broke the leg of our carpenter. The two ships were but for a few minutes near enough to use muskets; after which, some of the passengers who had been engaged with

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them went to assist in making wads and handing cartridges, and the rest went below. The action was now continued with the cannon on both sides; ours were pointed at the hull of the enemy, and we saw the effects of them in several places. They generally aimed at our rigging with double-headed shot, grape-shot, large spike nails, bars of iron from six to twelve inches long, and some of them an inch square, which did much damage to our sails and ropes. At eleven o'clock the privateer steered off, to our great joy, as almost all our cartridges were gone, most of our 24-pounders dismantled, and our crew much fatigued. We had lost, however, but one man, who was hit by a grape-shot through the head, and died instantly.

“It was the opinion of our captain, that the enemy had gone only to repair some of her damages, and meant to attack us again. After some grog, therefore, all hands went to work making cartridges, wads, &c., and getting the guns in their places; and rather before all was ready, we saw the Frenchman bearing down on us a second time, though not so fast but that we were enabled to be quite prepared before he came near.

“They began to fire at a great distance; but our captain ordered his men not to fire till they were close to us, and then as fast as possible with the 24-pounders. At a quarter past one we commenced the second action, with more vigour on our part than the first. The men were so eager to despatch the business, that they charged the guns with a 24-pound ball and two double-

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headed shot. The French, as before, aimed at our rigging, and we at their hull, which our 24-pounders damaged very much; four of them were seen to go through her on one side below the wale, and another stove in the whole of her gangway. At a few minutes before two o'clock she sheered off, and did not return, leaving us with our rigging terribly damaged: our mainmast shot through in four places, the mizen top-sail yard in one, and the cross jack-yard cut in two in the middle; one ball through the fore-top mast, and nearly half the shrouds and stays of the ship cut away. Most of the braces were gone; and the mizen stay-sail, the smallest we had up, had thirty holes in it, the main-sail sixty-two, and the others in the same proportion: yet in the last action not a man was either killed or wounded.

“At three o'clock the French ship was so far off that we had no expectation of her return; when the captain told me I might get my family up from where they had been confined for more than five hours, with very little air, and the light of only one lanthorn. At four the privateer was nearly out of sight, and we sat down to dine on a large boiled ham, which the cook had got done for us, notwithstanding all the bustle. The men had at the same time their usual fare, to which the captain added two cheeses and an extra allowance of grog. Thus ended the busy part of the day; and, although we had beaten off our enemy, the evening prospect was but a gloomy one. Our deck

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was as black as the sides of the ship with the quantity of powder that had been burnt on it, and was covered with ropes, blocks, pieces of masts, yards, &c., balls, shot, and spike-nails.\* We had only four rags of sails up, and were not able to manage them for want of braces. Night coming on, put it out of our power to do anything but let the ship drift before the wind, which was east.

“The evening was closed by bringing up on deck the man that had been killed, sewn up in canvas, with a cannon-ball at his feet. He was laid on the deck; the company stood round while one of the passengers read prayers over him, and he was then lowered gently into the sea. The name of this young man was Samuel Reed; he was a good sailor, and had been with Truxton when he took a French frigate, and afterwards in the ship *Planta* when she beat off a French privateer in the Channel in the early part of the summer.”

Mr. Greatrakes says: “During the action a circumstance occurred that showed the character of our captain. A wad from one of the Frenchman’s 32-pound carronades struck the starboard quarter-rail and flew back, spinning round with great velocity. He instantly attempted to jump on it and stop it, almost pushing me down to get it. Then tearing and cutting it to pieces, he charged the larboard 6-pounder several

\* I remember hearing my father say, that he found the iron of an old patten sticking in the side of the ship.

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times, and, stuffing the fragments of the wad into it, fired it back again at the Frenchman, swearing bitterly at the whole nation all the time.\*

“Two boys, from thirteen to fifteen years of age, got a stroke or two from the first officer for dancing horn-pipes on the main-deck during the heaviest part of both ships’ fire. Another boy, in carrying forward a 24-pound cartridge, had it shot away from his hands. ‘There,’ said he, with an oath directed to the Frenchman, ‘you ——, now I must go back for another.’ In the early part of the action our colours were shot down, when our third mate, Mr. Thomas (an Irishman) and our little steward emulously contended for the honour of first mounting the poop, to nail them to the mizen-mast, in the midst of a most heavy fire of musketry. Thomas succeeded in getting the fallen colours and nailing them up, though they were shot through several times while he was doing it, and two geese were killed in the coop on which he stood. A young American gentleman, named Wallraven, distinguished himself by his gallantry, and was publicly thanked by the captain after the action.”

\* Young as I was, I can recall to mind the figure of Captain Williamson. He was a well-formed, strong-made man, of a good height, but not tall. On this occasion he wore a kind of naval uniform, a hanger at his side, and a belt round his waist, in which were stuck a pair of pistols. From what will be related, he seemed (like Dr. Johnson), to consider one Englishman a match for four Frenchmen; and with Englishmen he no doubt classed Americans, as well as Scotchmen.

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Of such of the occurrences of this eventful day as were most calculated to make an impression on the mind of a child of five years of age, I have a tolerable recollection. I had often before looked with awe down the hatches into the gloomy region in which we were confined during the battle, and had seen indistinctly the upright post with notches in it for the feet, by which we children were carried down. My wonder and admiration were now excited by the steward, who seemed to me almost to fly up and down this post, by the help of the hand-rope, his frequent visits having no other object than to see that we were as comfortable as circumstances permitted, to tell us all the best news from the decks, and to bring us reinforcements of gingerbread, oranges, and wine.

All my notions of war were associated with the then popular piece of music, the "Battle of Prague," which I had heard my eldest sister play on the piano; and, accordingly, when I heard the groans of the poor man whose leg was crushed, and who was brought somewhere near us, I exclaimed "There are the *cries of the wounded*." The burial of the man who was killed made a deep impression on me, for I saw his messmates carry him to the bow of the ship, and I could distinctly trace the human form through the white canvass in which it was tightly sewn up; and this—to me, the first—image of death, has never been effaced from my recollection.

Often as children are frightened without cause, they