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CARICATURE OF MAJOR-GENERAL CHARLES LEE.

From a drawing by Kosciusko.

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EXCHANGE

OF

MAJOR-GENERAL CHARLES LEE.

FROM A MANUSCRIPT OF ELIAS BOUDINOT.

WITH NOTES BY

WILLIAM S. BAKER.

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PREFATORY NOTE.

The following story of the exchange of Charles Lee, major-general in the Continental army, who was taken prisoner by the British on the 13th of December, 1776, at the village of Basking Ridge, Somerset County, New Jersey, is taken from a manuscript volume entitled "A Magazine for Miscellaneous Pieces and Publications collected and preserved by Elias Boudinot." The exchange of General Lee for Major-General Richard Prescott of the British army, April 21, 1778, was arranged by Mr. Boudinot, the author of the story, when commissary-general of prisoners, his selection by the commander-in-chief for the office being related by himself: "In the spring of 1777, General Washington wrote me a Letter [dated Morristown, 1 April, 1777], requesting me to accept of a Commission as Commissary-General of Prisoners in the Army of America. I waited on him and politely declined the Task, urging the wants of the Prisoners & having nothing to supply them. He very kindly objected to the conduct of Gentlemen of the Country refusing to join him in his Arduous Struggle. That he had nothing in View but the Salvation of his Country, but it was impossible for him to accomplish it alone: that if men of Character & influence would not come forward & join him in his Exertions, all would be lost. Affected by this address, and Supposing that I could be of some Service to the Prisoners, and at the same time have an Eye on the military Power, & prevent its Incroachments on the Civil authority, I consented to accept the Commission, on the General's assurance that I should be supplied by the secret Committee of Congress with hard money for the relief of Prisoners, and that I should only be subject to his orders, in the Conduct of my department." The story of the exchange, entirely in the handwriting of Mr. Boudinot, contains some new and interesting incidents; the interview with General Lee at New York, in January, 1778, revealing as it does the peculiarities of that officer's mental organization, very far removed, indeed, from the sterling balance of his chief, whom he considered "not fit to command a

sergeant's guard," being especially noteworthy. Although we have conclusive evidence that while in the hands of the enemy Lee indulged in both traitorous thoughts and actions, yet the perusal of the Boudinot narrative would indicate that he was rather the slave of an unbalanced mind and a jealous disposition than a deliberate traitor. From the time of his appointment as major-general, great reliance had been placed on his military knowledge and capacity, which were constantly and everywhere overrated, and the commander-in-chief himself, in the modest estimate of his own abilities, was not behind others in this delusion. This of course soon became apparent to Lee, and such an idea having once entered his mind would naturally increase, and finally overpower all sense and reason, ending in the belief that he alone was the man for the occasion. During General Lee's detention as a prisoner, Washington was extremely desirous for his exchange, deeming his services to be of the utmost importance, and his faith in his ability and usefulness never seemed to waver. A striking evidence of this was exhibited just before the battle of Monmouth Court-House, when, after having given the command of the advance to Lafayette, he on the following day transferred it to Lee, who, being strongly opposed to attacking the enemy, had at first refused to lead it. It is much to the credit of the brave young Frenchman, however, that he cheerfully complied with the wishes of the commander. General Lee was of considerable service in the early part of the war, both in New York City and in the Southern department, but from the time he rejoined the main army at Harlem Heights (October, 1776) the demons of jealousy, pride, and unrest seem to have possessed him, and death alone ended the struggle. Elias Boudinot, LL.D., so closely connected with the story, was born at Philadelphia, of French ancestry, May 2, 1740. After studying law under Richard Stockton, he settled at Elizabethtown, New Jersey, became eminent in his profession, and was an early advocate of independence. Mr. Boudinot was commissary-general of prisoners, 1777-78; member of Congress, 1778, '79 and 1781-84, and president in 1782. He was also a member of Congress 1789-95, and in October, 1795, was appointed director of the United States Mint, which office he resigned in 1805. He was the author of several publications, and was widely known as a philanthropist. Dr. Boudinot died at Burlington, New Jersey, October 24, 1821.

W. S. B.

EXCHANGE

OF

MAJOR-GENERAL CHARLES LEE.

In Dec^r 1776, Gen^l Lee being taken Prisoner at his Quarters at Baskinridge in the County of Somerset (New Jersey) about four miles to the left of his Troops, towards the Enemy, by his own extreme negligence & folly, was removed (after the british Cantonments were beaten up at Trenton & Princeton) to New York & confined to a handsome House, under the Care of 4 or 5 field officers, who lived with him & kept a genteel Table.¹ In this situation he sent to congress, requesting a Committee of their Body, might be sent over to him, as he had something of consequence to communicate to them, and for the purpose, sent Gen^l Howe's safe Conduct, for their Security. This Congress very justly refused & treated the application with deserved Contempt. In January 1778, I was sent by Gen^l Washington over to New York (with consent of Gen^l Howe) to examine into the actual Situation of our Prisoners, and had orders to pay particular attention to Gen^l Lee, and accomplish his Exchange if possible.

The Morning after my Arrival, I waited on Gen^l Lee who

¹ "General Lee was transferred from New Brunswick to New York on the 13th of January, 1777, and was confined in the City Hall, in rooms fitted up for the purpose. On June 7 he was placed for a time on board the 'Centurion' man-of-war, and on the 25th of December was released on parole, to the full liberty of the city and its limits, when he took up his quarters with two of his oldest and warmest friends in the British service."—*Moore's Treason of Charles Lee.*

received me with very great pleasure indeed, and asked me to breakfast with him the next day. This I did in Company with the officers who had the Care of him, and was treated with great politeness & affability. When Breakfast was over, Gen^l Lee asked me up into his Room. He soon began to complain very heavily of the treatment he had rec^d from Congress, in not complying with his request. I told him that I thought they had done perfectly right, not to trust any of their members within the British Lines, on such an Errand. He replied that he had obtained a safe passport for them from Gen^l Howe, and they might have come with the utmost safety. I then asked him what end would have been answered by their coming. Sir said he, I had discovered the whole plan of the summer's Campaign on the part of the British, and would have disclosed the whole to that Committee, by which Congress might have obviated all their Measures, for Mr. Boudinot it is in vain for Congress to expect to withstand british Troops in the Field. I answered that he must now be convinced, that without his Information, they had been withstood and that the Campaign had passed over, and the Enemy had gained no great advantage with all their force & strength. But (I continued) General will you answer me explicitly, did you inform General Howe, that this was your design, he answered by no means! Then Gen^l said I do tell me what reasons did you assign to General Howe for so extraordinary a Measure, as sending for three members of Congress to be permitted, to enter a garrisoned Town & to confer with their own General a Prisoner of War. To this he would give me no answer. But immediately began to urge the Improbability of our Troops under such an ignorant Commander in Chief, ever withstanding British Grenadiers & Light Infantry, and immediately put his hand into his Pockett & pulled out a manuscript of 2 or 3 sheets, and said he charged it on me to hearken to what he would read to me, and as soon as I returned to Jersey, that I would repair to Congress & not leave them till I had prevailed upon them to adopt his Plan.

He then read his manuscript, which was a laboured Argu-

ment to prove the impossibility of making head against the british army, and that therefore we should set it down as certain, that in the next Campaign, we must be compleatly defeated. He therefore urged, that Congress would immediately have a strong fortress built at Pittsburgh, and also several hundred Boats. That they would order all the Riches of the Country to be sent there, with the old Men, Women and Children, and that when they found themselves driven there, that Congress &c &c might take Boat & go down the Ohio to the Spanish Territory for protection.¹

The whole of this plan struck me in so absurd a light, added to the impropriety of reading such a thing to me who he knew was on my parole of Honor, within an Enemy's Lines, (for altho it had not been formally required, yet I considered myself, more firmly bound, if possible, than if it had been expressly given) that I could not but entertain the greatest Jealousy of the Integrity of Gen^l Lee. I answered without hesitation that I could not take any such Message to Congress from him, or any other, without the knowledge of the british general. That I thought he had been very wrong to attempt any such Communication to me knowing my situation, and that I should consider myself as having not heard it. That I wondered at his imprudence, in keeping such a Writing in his pocket, as the discovery

¹ General Lee was a man of plans and devices, and it seems to have been a matter of very little moment, provided he could secure a hearing, whether he exerted his talents for America or its enemies. Besides the Pittsburgh plan, which, if not brilliant, is certainly characteristic, he was the author of several others. At New York, in March, 1777, he drew up a plan of campaign for the enemy which was partly adopted, and, according to Boudinot, was anxious to disclose the secrets he had obtained, which would have thwarted it; at Yorktown, in April, 1778, when a prisoner on parole, pledged on his "faith and sacred honor not to say nor do anything contrary to the interest of his majesty or his government," he submitted to Congress "A plan of an army and thoughts on the mode of conducting operations for the campaign;" and at Valley Forge, after re-joining the army, he laid before the commander-in-chief (June 15) a plan of the probable campaign of the enemy. All of these plans *may* have possessed more or less merit, but *probably* Lee's reputation as a strategist will rest upon the Pittsburgh plan rather than on any of the others.

of it in his Pocket & in his hand writing might cost him his life. He then waived the business & I left him.

I endeavoured to negotiate his Exchange, and it was agreed (hypothetically) that it should take place for Major General Prescott, subject to Gen^l Howe's approbation. Gen^l Howe objected, and ordered Gen^l Lee round by sea to Philadelphia, that he might be exchanged under his own eye. Gen^l Lee (abhorring the sea) applied to me by Letter and most earnestly requested that he might be permitted to go thro New Jersey under the care of a british officer, to which Gen^l Washington consented, and he accordingly went to Philadelphia, but no consent was obtained to the Exchange.¹

In the spring of 1778, a proposition was made by both parties for a partial Exchange of Prisoners, and I was ordered to German Town to meet the british Commissary [Joshua Loring], to attempt the business. When I was setting off from Camp, Gen^l Washington called me into his Room and in the most earnest manner entreated of me, if I wished to gratify him, that I would obtain the Exchange of Gen^l Lee, for he never was more wanted by him, than at the present moment, and desired that I would not suffer trifles to prevent it. I accordingly went, and made a pretty considerable Exchange of Prisoners, but quite new propositions were made for the Exchange of Gen^l Lee, which neither the General or myself had ever thought of. After reducing the Terms to as favourable a scale as I thought right, I agreed to it, on condition, that if General Washington was not pleased with the new plan, and notice was given of his refusal within 24 Hours, the Exchange was to be void, without any charge of failure on my part.

I arrived at head Quarters about 6 o'clock P.M. [April 22] and going into the General began to tell him of my success, when he interrupted me with much Eagerness, and asked

¹ General Lee arrived at Philadelphia March 25, 1778. His parole was enlarged on the 5th of April, and a few days after he visited Congress, then sitting at Yorktown, Pennsylvania. His exchange was arranged while he was at Yorktown.

me if I had exchanged Gen^l Lee. I informed him of what had been done; he replied sit down at this Table, and write a letter informing of my Confirmation of the Exchange and send one of my Horse guards immediately to the Enemies Lines with it. I assured him that next day would be time enough, but he insisted on its being immediately done, and I sent him accordingly, fixing the next day but one for Gen^l Lee's coming out to us [at Valley Forge].¹

When the day arrived, the greatest preparations were made for his reception. All the principal Officers of the Army were drawn up in two lines, advanced of the Camp about 2 miles towards the Enemy. Then the Troops with the inferior officers formed a line quite to head Quarters—all the music of the Army attended. The General with a great number of principal Officers and their Suites, rode about four miles on the road towards Philadelphia, and waited till Gen^l Lee appeared. General Washington dismounted & rec^d. Gen^l Lee as if he had been his Brother. He passed thro the Lines of officers & the Army, who all paid him the highest military Honors to Head Quarters, where M^{rs} Washington was, and here he was entertained with an elegant Dinner, and the Music playing the whole Time. A Room was assigned him back of M^{rs} Washington's sitting room, and all his baggage was stowed in it. The next morning he lay very late, and Breakfast was detained for him.² When he came out, he looked as dirty as if he had

¹ "Valley Forge, 22 April, 1778.—M^r Boudinot, at Commissary Loring's request, met him at Germantown yesterday; from whence he is just returned, after having agreed on a final exchange of yourself and other officers, with that gentleman. That delay may not produce danger, I shall send in a flag tomorrow for your parole; and, when obtained, I shall most cordially and sincerely congratulate you on your restoration to your country and to the army."—*Washington to Lee.*

² From the text it would seem that General Lee arrived at Valley Forge on April 24, three days after his exchange; but, under date of the 28th, he wrote to Washington, in reply to his letter of the 22d, as follows: "By three doses of what Lord Chatham calls the great American Panacea, I find myself so much better [of an attack of the gout] and the indications so much weaker that I hope to set out tomorrow or the

lain in the street all night—soon after I discovered that he had brought a miserable dirty Huzzy with him from Philadelphia (a british Sergeant's wife) and had actually taken her into his Room by a back door, and she had slept with him that night.

Gen^l Washington gave him the Command of the right wing of the Army, but before he took Charge of it, he requested leave to go to Congress at York Town, which was readily granted.

Before he went I had an interview with him. He expressed himself under the greatest obligations to me, and assured me that he never should forget my kindness, but wished exceeding to know if I had made his Communication to Congress & what was their opinion of it. I assured him that I had not, and if he was wise, he would say nothing upon the subject. He said he was going to Congress for that purpose and he never would rest till it was done, as he was now more than ever convinced that nothing else could save us—That he found the Army in a worse situation than he expected, and that General Washington was not fit to command a Sergeant's Guard.

My Jealousy of him was greatly confirmed, and I began to interrogate him, about his reception at Philadelphia, and immediately brought about the question, whether he had seen Gen^l Howe. He told me that he had been closeted by him the Evening but one before he left the City. I urged him to tell me the substance of the Conversation that passed between them. He told me that Gen^l Howe began to talk upon the claim of Independence by the Americans, that he thought it one of the most absurd & hopeless Expectations that could enter into the mind of sensible men—and as for you Lee, says he, what in the Devil could get into you to be so crazy who ought to know better. Lee answered that he thought it a very wise measure and that if it had not been done, the Americans would have been

next day at furthest—but you may be assur'd that I will not defer my departure a single moment." The arrival and reception, as recorded by Mr. Boudinot, could not therefore have taken place until after April 28.

without Excuse. The General replied, why what end can it answer? do you think there is the most distant probability of their succeeding? To which Gen^l Lee replied, they were perfectly right—In case of a treaty what have they to give up, for what they may insist on receiving, had they made no claim to Independence. O Sir said the General, if that is all they mean by it, it may be proper enough, but I supposed they aimed at insisting on a separation from the Mother Country, but in this view it may be well enough. And so he said they parted, but General Howe sent him a store of Wine, Spirits, Porter &c. &c. to take out with him,—but the british soldiers finding out, that it was stored in the cellar of the House where he lodged, broke into it the night before he came away & stole the whole of it. All this increased my suspicions of Gen^l Lee exceedingly, and I watched him with a Jealous Eye.

He went to Congress, and as I was afterwards informed, he applied to Congress for a Committee to meet & confer with him. The President M^r Laurens was directed to this service, to whom Gen^l Lee communicated his Plan, which disgusted M^r Laurens so greatly that he would not even report it to Congress. This lessened the General so greatly in the Eyes of Congress, that they never paid much respect to him afterwards.

He returned to the Army [May 20] & took command of the right wing. He immediately began to cabal against Gen^l Washington & to quarrell with the Marquis La Fayette. He assured me himself, that Gen^l Washington was ruining the whole Cause, that he was looking forward to the British evacuating Philadelphia & going to New York, and of course strengthening his left, while the right was totally unguarded; but Lee said that the Enemy would pass over to Chester & come suddenly on their right wing, and we should be wholly overthrown. He said he had urged this in Council, but that he had been overruled & therefore was no longer accountable.

When the british Army actually passed thro' Jersey & Gen^l Washington by his great precaution, had advanced

two Brigades towards the Delaware, and therefore overtook the British at freehold, Gen^l Lee was greatly mortified & at first refused to take the Command of the advanced party & it was given to the Marquis La Fayette, but on finding that the advanced army was reinforced & raised to a very respectable Command, he insisted on the Command; and to keep Peace it was given to him.

Gen^l Lee accordingly came up with Gen^l Clinton near freehold Court House, and a skirmish took place. Gen^l Lee had considerable military knowledge & did very well on a small scale—but I have no doubt that whenever anything on a very large scale struck him, that a partial Lunacy took place.

His Behaviour this Morning [June 28, 1778] discovered this state of mind, which might have been increased from the peculiarity of his situation, and his exalted Ideas of the prowess of british Troops. In the midst of the Engagement, he rode up to a L^t Coll. of my acquaintance who had a single field piece firing and called to him, “Coll. have you seen any thing improper in my Conduct this morning?” the Coll. (who had been conscious of something wrong in the Gen^l all the morning, yet not choosing to acknowledge it) answered, no by no means—well then said the General, do you remember that. Such an Extraordinary Question from a Commander in Chief of a division, under such Extraordinary Circumstances, is full proof that he must have felt something unusual in himself.

The Issue was that he was beat, and had not Gen^l Washington have come up in a lucky moment & turned the fortune of the day, it might have been fatal to America.



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