



“THE ADVENTURE OF MAJOR LEE.”

The ensuing anecdote concerning “Lighthorse Harry” Lee is found on page 164 of Henry C. Watson’s *Yankee Tea-Party; or, Boston in 1773* (Lindsay & Blakiston, Phil., 1851); which book appeared as part of the “Young American’s Library;” a contemporary advertisement for which series reads “Each of these volumes is well written, in a high, moral tone by responsible authors, and contains numerous anecdotes, illustrative of the early and latter history of our country. The compact style in which these works are written, as well as their low price, make them well adapted for Family, School, or District Libraries.”

The truth of this action-packed escapade (reportedly) involving Henry Lee has yet, by myself at any rate, to be established. Nevertheless, Watson’s *Tea-Party* anecdotes are elsewhere and essentially based on accurately grounded fact; so this bodes well in favor of the story’s historicity. What’s more, the details are both so specific and the circumstances so startling that it would be more strange if it should prove to be a mere yarn. Inasmuch as Generals Moses Hazen and Benjamin Lincoln act key parts in the drama, per chance somewhere in their respective correspondence of the time (evidently 1777) a clue or lead may be present to get to the bottom of this perhaps not insoluble question. In any case, and whether true or no, Watson serves up a most amiable and exciting instance of early American story-telling.

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“If courage and resolution make up the hero, our country didn’t hunger for ’em during the Revolution,” said Davenport.

“Yes, it’s a difficult and nice matter to say who bears away the palm. But I do not believe that Col. M’Lean was surpassed,” said Kinnison. “Col. Henry Lee was a man of the same mould,” added Colson.

“Aye, he was; and that reminds me of an adventure of his which displays his courage and resolution,” replied Kinnison.

#### THE ADVENTURE OF MAJOR LEE.

“In the Revolution, a prison was erected at Lancaster, Pennsylvania, for those red-coats who fell into our hands. The prisoners were confined in barracks, enclosed with a stockade and vigilantly guarded; but in spite of all precautions, they often disappeared in an unaccountable manner, and nothing was heard of them until they resumed their places in the British army. It was presumed that they were aided by American tories, but where suspicion should fall, no one could conjecture. Gen. Hazen had charge of the post. He devised a stratagem for detecting the culprits, and selected Capt. Lee, afterwards Maj. Lee, a

distinguished partisan officer, to carry out his plan. It was given out that Lee had left the post on furlough. He, however, having disguised himself as a British prisoner, was thrown into the prison with the others. So complete was the disguise, that even the intendant, familiar with him from long daily intercourse, did not penetrate it. Had his fellow-prisoners detected him, his history might have been embraced in the proverb, 'Dead men tell no tales.'

"For many days he remained in this situation, making no discoveries whatever. He thought he perceived at times signs of intelligence between the prisoners and an old woman who was allowed to bring fruit for sale within the enclosure: She was known to be deaf and half-witted, and was therefore no object of suspicion. It was known that her son had been disgraced and punished in the American army, but she had never betrayed any malice on that account, and no one dreamed that she could have the power to do injury if she possessed the will. Lee matched her closely, but saw nothing to confirm his suspicions. Her dwelling was about a mile distant, in a wild retreat, where she shared her miserable quarters with a dog and cat.

"One dark stormy night in autumn, Lee was lying awake at midnight. All at once the door was gently opened, and a figure moved silently into the room. It was too dark to observe its motions narrowly, but he could see that it stooped towards one of the sleepers, who immediately rose. Next it approached and touched him on the shoulder. Lee immediately started up. The figure then allowed a slight gleam from a dark lantern to pass over his face, and as it did so whispered, impatiently, 'Not the man -- but come!' It then occurred to Lee that it was the opportunity he desired. The unknown whispered to him to keep his place till another man was called; but just at that moment something disturbed him, and making a signal to Lee to follow, he moved silently out of the room. They found the door of the house unbarred, and a small part of the fence removed, where they passed out without molestation. The sentry had retired to a shelter, where he thought he could guard his post without suffering from the rain; but Lee saw his conductors put themselves in preparation to silence him if he should happen to address them. Just without the fence appeared a stooping figure, wrapped in a red cloak, and supporting itself with a large stick, which Lee at once perceived could be no other than the old fruit-woman. But the most profound silence was observed: a man came out from a thicket at a little distance and joined them, and the whole party moved onward by the guidance of the old woman. At first they frequently stopped to listen, but having heard the sentinel cry, 'All's well!' they seemed reassured, and moved with more confidence than before.

"They soon came to her cottage. A table was spread with some coarse provisions upon it, and a large jug, which one of the soldiers was about to seize, when the man who conducted them withheld him. 'No,' said he, 'we must first proceed to business.'

"The conductor, a middle-aged, harsh-looking man, was here about to require all present, before he could conduct them farther, to swear upon the Scriptures not to make the least attempt at escape, and never to reveal the circumstances or agents in the proceeding, whatever might befall them. But before they had time to take the oath, their practised ears detected the sound of the alarm-gun; and the conductor, directing the party to follow him in close order, immediately left the house, taking with him a dark lantern. Lee's reflections were not now the most agreeable. If he were to be compelled to accompany his party to the British lines in New York, he would be detected and hanged as a spy; and he saw that the conductor had prepared arms for them, which they were to use in taking the life of any one who should attempt to escape. They went on with great despatch, but not without difficulty. Lee might now have deserted, in this hurry and alarm; but he had made no discovery, and he could not bear to confess that he had not nerve enough to carry him through. They went on, and were concealed in a barn the whole of the next day. Provisions were brought, and low whistles and other signs showed that the owner of the barn was in collusion with his secret guests. The barn was attached to a small farm-house. Lee was so near the house that he could overhear the conversation which was carried on about the door. The morning rose clear, and it was evident from the inquiries of horsemen, who occasionally galloped up to the door, that the country was alarmed. The farmer gave short and surly replies, as if unwilling to be taken off from his labour; but the other inmates of the house were eager in their questions; and, from the answers, Lee gathered that the means by which he and his companions had escaped were as mysterious as ever. The next night, when all was quiet, they resumed their march, and explained to Lee that, as he was not with them in their conspiracy, and was accidentally associated with them in their escape, they should take the precaution to keep him before them,

just behind the guide. He submitted without opposition, though the arrangement considerably lessened his chances of escape.

“For several nights they went on in this manner, being delivered over to different persons from time to time; and, as Lee could gather from their whispering conversations, they were regularly employed on occasions like the present, and well rewarded by the British for their services. Their employment was full of danger; and though they seemed like desperate men, he could observe that they never remitted their precautions. They were concealed days in barns, cellars, caves made for the purpose, and similar retreats; and one day was passed in a tomb, the dimensions of which had been enlarged, and the inmates, if there had been any, banished to make room for the living. The burying-grounds were a favourite retreat, and on more occasions than one they were obliged to resort to superstitious alarms to remove intruders upon their path. Their success fully justified the experiment; and unpleasantly situated as he was, in the prospect of soon being a ghost himself, he could not avoid laughing at the expedition with which old and young fled from the fancied apparitions.

“Though the distance of the Delaware was not great, they had now been twelve days on the road, and such was the vigilance and suspicion prevailing throughout the country, that they almost despaired of effecting their object. The conductor grew impatient, and Lee’s companions, at least one of them, became ferocious. There was, as we have said, something unpleasant to him in the glances of this fellow towards him, which became more and more fierce as they went on; but it did not appear whether it was owing to circumstances, or actual suspicion. It so happened that, on the twelfth night, Lee was placed in a barn, while the rest of the party sheltered themselves in the cellar of a little stone church, where they could talk and act with more freedom; both because the solitude of the church was not often disturbed even on the Sabbath, and because even the proprietors did not know that illegal hands had added a cellar to the conveniences of the building.

“Here they were smoking pipes with great diligence, and, at intervals not distant, applying a huge canteen to their mouths, from which they drank with upturned faces, expressive of solemn satisfaction. While they were thus engaged, the short soldier asked them, in a careless way, if they knew whom they had in their party. The others started, and took their pipes from their mouths to ask him what he meant. ‘I mean,’ said he, ‘that we are honoured with the company of Capt. Lee, of the rebel army. The rascal once punished me, and I never mistook my man when I had a debt of that kind to pay.’

“The others expressed their disgust at his ferocity, saying that if, as he said, their companion was an American officer, all they had to do was to watch him closely. As he had come among them uninvited, he must go with them to New York, and take the consequences; but meantime it was their interest not to seem to suspect him, otherwise he might give an alarm—whereas it was evidently his intention to go with them till they were ready to embark for New York. The other person persisted in saying that he would have his revenge with his own hand; upon which the conductor, drawing a pistol, declared to him that if he saw the least attempt to injure Capt. Lee, or any conduct which would lead him to suspect that his disguise was discovered, he would that moment shoot him through the head. The soldier put his hand upon his knife, with an ominous scowl upon his conductor; but he restrained himself.

“The next night they went on as usual, but the manner of their conductor showed that there was more danger than before; in fact, he explained to the party that they were now not far from the Delaware, and hoped to reach it before midnight. They occasionally heard the report of a musket, which seemed to indicate that some movement was going on in the country.

“When they came to the bank there were no traces of a boat on the waters. Their conductor stood still for a moment in dismay; but, recollecting himself, he said it was possible it might have been secured lower down the stream; and forgetting every thing else, he directed the larger soldier to accompany him. Giving a pistol to the other, he whispered, ‘If the rebel officer attempts to betray us, shoot him; if not, you will not, for your own sake, make any noise to show where we are.’ In the same instant they departed, and Lee was left alone with the ruffian.

“He had before suspected that the fellow knew him, and now doubts were changed to certainty at once. Dark as it was, it seemed as if fire flashed from his eye, now he felt that revenge was within his power. Lee was as brave as any officer in the army; but he was unarmed; and though he was strong, his adversary was still more powerful. While he stood, uncertain what to do, the fellow seemed enjoying the prospect of revenge, as he looked on him with a steady eye. Though the officer stood to appearance unmoved, the sweat rolled in heavy drops from his brow. Lee soon took his resolution, and sprang upon his adversary with the intention of wresting the pistol from his hand; but the other was upon his guard, and aimed with such precision that, had the pistol been charged with a bullet, that moment would have been his last. But it seemed that the conductor had trusted to the sight of his weapons to render them unnecessary, and had therefore only loaded them with powder. As it was, the shock threw Lee to the ground; but fortunately, as the fellow dropped the pistol, it fell where Lee reached it; and as his adversary stooped, and was drawing his knife from his bosom, Lee was able to give him a stunning blow. He immediately threw himself upon the assassin, and a long and bloody struggle began. They were so nearly matched in strength and advantage, that neither dared unclench his hold for the sake of grasping the knife. The blood gushed from their mouths, and the combat would have probably ended in favour of the assassin -- when steps and voices were heard advancing, and they found themselves in the hands of a party of countrymen, who were armed for the occasion, and were scouring the banks of the river. They were forcibly torn apart, but so exhausted and breathless that neither could make an explanation; and they submitted quietly to their captors.

“The party of the armed countrymen, though they had succeeded in their attempt, and were sufficiently triumphant on the occasion, were sorely perplexed how to dispose of their prisoners. After some discussion, one of them proposed to throw the decision upon the wisdom of the nearest magistrate. They accordingly proceeded with their prisoners to his mansion, about two miles distant, and called upon him to rise and attend to business. A window was hastily thrown up, and the justice put forth his night-capped head, and with more wrath than became his dignity, ordered them off; and in requital for their calling him out of bed in the cold, generously wished them in the warmest place. However, resistance was vain: he was compelled to rise; and as soon as the prisoners were brought before him, he ordered them to be taken in irons to the prison at Philadelphia. Lee improved the opportunity to take the old gentleman aside, and told him who he was, and why he was thus disguised. The justice only interrupted him with the occasional inquiry, ‘Most done?’ When he had finished, the magistrate told him that his story was very well made, and told in a manner very creditable to his address; and that he should give it all the weight it seemed to require. And Lee’s remonstrances were unavailing.

“As soon as they were fairly lodged in the prison, Lee prevailed on the jailor to carry a note to Gen. Lincoln, informing him of his condition. The general received it as he was dressing in the morning, and immediately sent one of his aids to the jail. That officer could not believe his eyes that he saw Capt. Lee. His uniform, worn-out when he assumed it, was now hanging in rags about him; and he had not been shaved for a fortnight. He wished, very naturally, to improve his appearance before presenting himself before the secretary of war; but the orders were peremptory to bring him as he was. The general loved a joke full well: his laughter was hardly exceeded by the report of his own cannon; and long and loud did he laugh that day.

“When Capt. Lee returned to Lancaster, he immediately attempted to retrace the ground; and so accurate, under all the unfavourable circumstances, had been his investigation, that he brought to justice fifteen persons who had aided the escape of British prisoners. It is hardly necessary to say, to you who know the fate of revolutionary officers, that he received, for his hazardous and effectual service, no reward whatever.”

“A perilous adventure,” observed Warner, as Kinnison concluded his narrative.

“It was,” replied Davenport. “It seems rather strange how Capt. Lee could so disguise himself and impose upon the enemy. But he knew a thing or two more than common men, and I shouldn’t wonder.”

“The British had many useful friends in every part of the country, during the war, and were enabled to do many such deeds,” remarked Colson.

“Fill up, my friends, another glass of ale, and drink the health of Capt. Lee!” added Hand, rising. The company filled their glasses and drank the toast. The veterans were not as deep drinkers as their young and vigorous friends, and therefore they merely sipped their ale and sat it aside.

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For a copy of the full text of Watson’s *Yankee Tea Party*, see:  
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