

James Otis



*With Perry
on Lake Erie:
a tale of 1812*

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CHAPTER I. PRESQUE ISLE.

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Perhaps there is no good reason why I should set down here any especial mention of Presque Isle,^[1] for every boy knows it is located on the shore of Lake Erie, and, because of the peninsula jutting out from the mainland of the State of Pennsylvania, can boast of an exceedingly good harbor.

It is a lame beginning to the story I want to tell, this opening with the admission that there may be no reason for making a certain statement; but I am not quick at tasks of the kind it is proposed this shall be, and one mistake among the many I shall probably make will not be noticed.

Even now I have failed to begin the yarn to my satisfaction; but I have written and rubbed out so much already, that the lines above must stand as they are set down, else I may never arrive at the beginning of such a tale as few lads can tell of their own experience.

That I am making any attempt at doing what nature fitted me for with such a niggardly hand, is due to Alexander Perry, brother of that Oliver H. Perry who proved himself so great a hero here on the waters of Lake Erie, when he gave the King of England a second and much-needed lesson. He, meaning Alec, and I saw much of service in the war so lately ended with honor to the people of the United States. Although he was but thirteen years of age, and I only two years older, we passed through many adventures together, shared many hardships, and ever remained close comrades from the day of our first meeting.

The war having come to an end, and we about to separate after three years of service, he said to me:—

“Dick, it is for you to set down, in such fair script as you can master, the story of what we have done these many months past, so that in the years to come those who live hereabouts may know we were not idle when the British king provoked this nation past endurance.”

I would have insisted, as is true, that he was better able to perform the task than I, who had learned but little in schools, because there were none hereabouts; but the lad declared I was the one above all others to do the work, and here am I, casting about in my mind as to how the tale can best be set down in readable fashion.

Presque Isle, to hark back to the beginning, was the settlement which my father, Captain Daniel Dobbins, decided upon as the proper place in which to build his home, and within a stone’s throw of the blockhouse erected by General Wayne after he had whipped the Indians in Maumee Valley, I was born. Here I lived while my father sailed on the lake, becoming known far and wide as the most skilful navigator of Erie’s waters, until war was declared, and then I had the satisfaction of calling myself the son of the man who, after having been called to Washington to give advice to the high officials there, was appointed a sailing-master in the navy.

It was in September of the year 1812 that my father received a commission from the Government, and straightway he began building two gunboats, each with a fifty-foot keel, seventeen-foot beam, and a five-foot hold,

counting on having them ready for service as soon as the ice should leave the lake.

Ebenezer Crosby was the carpenter in charge of the work, and under him were mustered all the laborers to be found within fifty miles of the settlement. Even boys were hired, I among the number, and all of us youngsters counted on being given a chance to ship as members of the crews when the vessels were launched.

It was on the 27th day of March, in the year 1813, that a young man and a lad drove up to the door of the Erie Hotel in Presque Isle, and we of the village soon came to know that the strangers were brothers, the elder being a captain in the navy, by name Oliver H. Perry, and the other, Alexander, who at once became a dear comrade of mine.

As the only representative of the Government in Presque Isle, my father was summoned to confer with the officer, and quite by chance I was allowed to accompany him to the hotel.

There, while our elders discussed the best means of building such a fleet as might give successful battle to the enemy, who had already made threats as to what would be done when the lake was free from ice, Alec and I made each other's acquaintance.

He told me that his brother, the captain, had been in command of a small fleet of gunboats at the Newport station; but, eager to see more active service, had applied for a command on the lakes. On the first of February, in this same year, he had received orders from the Secretary of the Navy commanding him to report, with one hundred and fifty

men, to Commodore Chauncey, then stationed at Sackett's Harbor.

The force was sent ahead in three detachments, and the captain, with Alec, set out in a sleigh through the wilderness. They arrived at Sackett's Harbor on the third of March, and stayed there a fortnight, expecting each day an attack by the enemy. Then Captain Perry was ordered to Presque Isle to push forward the work my father had begun, and thus were we two lads brought together.

Now the gunboats were not the only vessels building by this time. The keels of two twenty-gun brigs and a clipper schooner were laid down near the mouth of Cascade Creek, and a huge quantity of timber had been felled nearabout ready for the workmen. There was no time in which to season the stuff, and I have seen planking bent on the ribs of a brig within four and twenty hours from the fall of the tree. In fact, my father had a small fleet in process of construction, and Captain Perry was pleased to compliment him for his activity and good judgment.

Sixty men had volunteered under Captain Foster to guard the shipyards against a possible attack by the Britishers, and all the workmen were drilled each evening in the manual of arms, therefore our village presented a very lively and warlike appearance.

While Alec was telling me his story, and I explaining to him all I had done in the work of preparation, our elders had decided as to what further steps should be taken. Captain Perry was to go at once to Pittsburg to send on the necessary supplies, while my father would journey to Buffalo in quest of men and ammunition.

So urgent was the need that no time was spent by either of these officers in repose after once a definite plan was formed; but both set out that same night, and Alexander was left in my charge, a fact which made me feel a certain sense of responsibility and much pride.

It would seem as if I had written over-much in my attempt to give whoever may read these pages a fair idea of how we two—meaning Alec Perry and I—came together, and yet a few more lines of dry detail are necessary for a better understanding of what may follow.

At this time our defences consisted of a small battery and a blockhouse on the bluff at the entrance of the harbor; between them and the town were the old French fort and another small blockhouse. Opposite the town, on the peninsula to the westward of Little Bay, stood a third blockhouse, a storehouse and a hospital, which last buildings were erected after we received word that Captain Perry had been sent to Presque Isle. The gunboats were on the stocks in front of the village; while west of the settlement, at the mouth of Cascade Creek, where was a blockhouse for the protection of the shipyard, the brigs and the schooner were being built.

My home was on the shore of the harbor midway between the old French fort and the first-mentioned shipyard, and there it was Alec Perry lodged, sleeping in the same bed with me on the night after our first meeting.

Before departing on his journey to Buffalo, my father said to me:—

“You and young Perry are not to remain idle while I am away. It is necessary a message be sent the workmen on

the Point, and early to-morrow morning you shall set out with it. You should be able to go and return in two hours, now the ice is in such good condition for skating; but I propose that you remain there three days, going out on the lake a distance of eight or ten miles every night and morning to learn if the enemy are abroad. In other words, you two youngsters are to act as scouts during my absence. Do not run unnecessary risks, and in case of a snow-storm you will remain under cover, for I am not minded to hear on my return that you have come to an untimely end."

It puffed me up with pride to have such a commission as this, and Alec's eyes glistened as my father spoke, for he was a brave lad, as has since been proven more than once when I have come nigh to showing the white feather.

There was more in the mission, as we two lads understood it, than had been put into words; surely if we could be depended upon to keep watch over the harbor at a time when there was every reason to believe the enemy might be making ready at the mouth of the Niagara River for an attack upon Presque Isle, then for a certainty we might count ourselves the same as having been accepted members of whatsoever crew we chose to join.

There was very little sleep for us on this first night of comradeship, and I believe had either proposed to set out that very hour, the other would have gladly acceded to the proposition. We did succeed, however, in curbing ambition until slumber closed our eyelids, and when my mother awakened me next morning the time for action had arrived.

It was not a difficult matter to borrow a pair of skates in Presque Isle, for there was hardly a person in the village

who did not own what, to us on the shore of the lake, was almost indispensable during the winter months.

The ice was in prime condition when we two made ready for the short journey across to the Point, and the preparations consisted of nothing more than buckling on our skates. We wore such clothing as might be needed, and there was no necessity of burdening ourselves with provisions, because the men at the blockhouse would supply us with food as well as lodging.

But for my being unused to this work of writing, and finding it difficult to set down the words in clerkly fashion, I might say much concerning the blockhouse on the Point and its occupants.

There were men of eighty years, and lads younger than Alec, among the party who called themselves the "garrison," and all of them were known to me; therefore it was much like being among kinsfolk to be quartered with them.

During the first two days Alec and I had plenty of company when we glided over the smooth ice, up the lake in the direction of Niagara River, on what we were pleased to call scouting expeditions; and but for the fact that young Perry insisted upon considering himself in the backwoods, we should have gotten on famously with the young members of the garrison.

Alec, however, having just come from Newport, and not yet used to our customs, persisted in speaking of the surroundings as if he believed himself in an uncivilized country, and many of the lads were disgruntled because, as they said, he put on airs.

To this charge Alec is now willing to plead guilty, although at the time I question if he realized how greatly he set himself above us, until after coming to understand that he had much to learn from the people of Presque Isle.

All this may seem trifling matter to set down on the pages of what is intended to be the story of how Oliver Perry made himself famous on Lake Erie; but yet it led us into an adventure which came near costing the country the unfinished vessels that were sadly needed, and us our lives.

Four times had we left the blockhouse, accompanied by a dozen or more lads, and skated ten or fifteen miles up the lake and back. Then our companions, taking offence at some idle words used by Alec, declared they would not set out with us again.

It was a threat which had but little weight with my comrade or myself, since we had a desire to be alone with each other, and on the morning of the third day, when the sky was gray with threatening-looking clouds, we left the blockhouse, counting to return there but once more before going home, for the time set by my father had come to an end.

Whether we should continue this sport of playing at being scouts, we had decided to leave to Noah Brown, a shipwright who came from New York City, and who was in charge of the works at Presque Isle during my father's absence.

"I regret that the lads were offended with my idle words of yesterday; but yet it is pleasant to set out alone with you, Dicky," Alec said, as we skimmed over the smooth ice in such direction as would bring us to the easternmost battery

on the opposite shore. "One might think, to hear those in the garrison talk, that we were surrounded by Britishers, and I have been waiting for an opportunity to ask if you believe the enemy to be near at hand."

"Believe it? I know it to be a fact, Alec. The redcoats are in strong force at the mouth of the Niagara, and certain it is that as soon as the ice breaks up, you will see them in such numbers as to make you alarmed for the safety of our works."

"The Britishers outnumbered our people when the independence of this country was gained, but that did not frighten those who wore the Continental uniform."

"Yet there were many dark days then, Alec, and I have heard my grandfather say that often and again did he believe we should be finally whipped into submission. I am unwilling to declare that there are any here who *fear* the result of this war; but yet I could point out twenty as brave men as might be found, who believe that we as a nation are all too weak to take up arms against so powerful a country as England. It is certain that unless our ships are built, launched, and gotten out of the harbor very soon after the ice breaks up, Presque Isle is in great danger of being captured; and that I have heard my father say a dozen times."

"It is strange that the redcoats fail to show themselves," the lad said musingly, as if ready to doubt my statement regarding the nearness of the Britishers.

"Yet you and your brother, while on the way from Buffalo, heard that the enemy knew what was being done here, and was about to make an attack."

“Yes, and Oliver pressed forward hurriedly, fearing lest we might arrive too late. But now, because no movement has been made, I think he is inclined to doubt the correctness of the statement.”

At the time Alec made this remark we had covered two-thirds of the distance between Presque Isle and Long Point, having gone directly across the lake toward the Canadian side, and then it was that the snow began to fall.

My comrade was heedless of the danger which beset us, because ignorant regarding it, and when I proposed that we turn back at once, making all haste to gain the village or the blockhouse, he said in a tone bordering on that of contempt:

—

“You may go if you please; but I count on keeping straight ahead until a good view of the enemy’s country can be had.”

“We are full twenty miles from home, Alec,” I replied, giving no heed to his tone, which at another time might have aroused me to anger. “It is thirty miles from Little Bay to Long Point, and you who are unaccustomed to skating such long distances cannot cover it and return in a single day.”

“It makes little difference to me if the journey occupies us well into the night, for then we shall be saved the necessity of going back to the blockhouse where those country louts are free to air their supposed wit.”

I saw at once that it was useless for me to make any attempt at dissuading him from his purpose by the argument that he could not endure the fatigue, although knowing full well that such was the case, therefore I tried

another tack which, with a lad who had lived on the shore of the lake, would have been sufficient.

“In a snow-storm neither you nor I can skate or walk in a direct line on the ice, and the bravest man in Pennsylvania would hesitate long before making an attempt to travel ten miles after the storm which now threatens has come in good earnest.”

“Then we may as well keep on as to turn back,” he said, increasing his speed, thus forcing me to renewed exertions, for I was not minded he should run into danger alone.

During ten minutes or more I said all a lad might to dissuade a headstrong comrade from running into such peril as I knew was in store for us, providing we continued straight ahead.

I reminded him that my father’s orders for us to remain under cover in case of a snow-storm were positive, and that they would not have been given without good cause. I also suggested that the brother of a captain in the navy should be more careful than another to render due obedience to those who were in command over him, and referred to my father’s commission as sailing-master in the navy to show that either of us, while acting as scouts, must look upon him as our superior officer.

To all my arguments and entreaties he had but a single reply:—

“We are nearer the Canadian shore than the American, and there is less danger in going ahead than in returning.”

When I urged that by going back we should be among friends, while to continue on was, perchance, to find ourselves in the hands of the Britishers, he accused me of

showing the white feather, and repeated the nursery rhyme of the lad who lived in the woods, and was scared by an owl.

I think it was that bit of doggerel which caused me to forget prudence in order that I might prove myself as brave as he, and yet I did but write myself down a fool, as one certainly is who ventures with no good reason into danger.

The snow did not fall in any great volume. It came gently, and with that steadiness which betokens the beginning of a long, severe storm, and yet I skated on by his side, angry with myself for so doing, but lacking the courage to insist upon his going back.

The ice was as smooth as glass; there was not a breath of wind to impede our progress, and I believe we were covering no less than a mile every four or five minutes.

When, as nearly as I could judge, we had continued this mad chase for half an hour, Alec threw himself upon the ice, declaring he must have a breathing spell.

"I'm not up to this work as you are," he said with a laugh, "and therefore am the more easily winded; but when it comes to endurance, you shall see that I am quite your equal. Ten minutes of a rest now, and I will not ask for a second halt until we stand on his Majesty's soil."

"Ay, and what then?" I asked, speaking sharply, for my patience was well-nigh exhausted, to say nothing of the fact that fear was creeping into my heart rapidly. "What will it avail us to stand on his Majesty's soil?"

"Why, simply this, Dicky Dobbins," Alec replied with a hearty laugh. "We shall go back to Presque Isle, among those who are so valiant while at home, and say we have entered the enemy's country and returned in safety. We can

also report that there are no redcoats nearabout to disturb the faint-hearted Pennsylvanians.”

“It will be a long day before we return, unless this storm clears away very soon, and of that there is no likelihood,” I replied moodily. “We are risking our lives—and it is no less than that, I assure you—for nothing but a whim of yours, which, when gratified, is of no benefit.”

“If you are taking it so much to heart, Dicky, we’ll turn back now,” and in a twinkling, as it were, Alec was the same cheery, honest lad I had believed him to be these two days past; but alas, his cheeriness, and his honesty, and his good comradeship had returned to him too late.

“We must push forward now, for I dare not make the attempt to go back. The Canadian shore should be within four or five miles, and if it please God we’ll gain it before the smother thickens.”

I think my words, and the tone in which they were spoken, gave the lad a sense of fear for the first time since we had set out. He looked about him with the air of one who suddenly discovers something, and then turning to me said softly, but with a manner that went straight to my heart:—

“I am sorry, Dicky, that I was so foolish. I have led you into this trouble, and you must lead me out; but my word upon it, that from this moment so long as we stay in this portion of the country, I will ever take your advice.”

He clasped my hand as if to ask pardon, and at that moment I felt a breath of air from the northeast. The snowflakes were suddenly whirled with that giddy, dancing motion which so bewilders one, telling me how great the danger, and how short a time we had in which to escape.

“Get up,” I said almost roughly. “Keep your wits about you and bend every energy toward going forward in a straight line; for once we become confused, there is little likelihood of our gaining either shore before the cold lulls us to sleep.”

Then, and I can hardly realize now how it occurred, before he could rise to his feet it was as if we were completely surrounded by armed men, and it needed not their speech to tell both of us that we were prisoners.

The Britishers were nearer than even I had imagined, and perchance by this mad trick of Alec’s, Presque Isle would be captured; for the people there were depending upon us to give an alarm in case the enemy appeared upon the lake.

We had been false to the trust my father reposed in us, and who could say how much of harm to our country might result?

Footnote

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[1] Now known as the city of Erie.

CHAPTER II. SNUG QUARTERS.

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It is true that when the enemy came into view from amid the whirling snow, Alec's first thought, as he has since told me, was much the same as mine—that we had brought disaster upon our country.

It is nothing of credit that at the time we gave no heed to the peril which menaced; but I here set it down as some slight plea in our favor, that once the mischief had been done we gave no heed to what might come out of it to us.

The snow was falling in such volume, and being whirled so rapidly by the rising wind, that it was impossible to see very far in either direction, and whether we had been surrounded by a regiment of soldiers, or only a squad of a dozen or more, it was impossible to say.

I knew, however, it had been reported that the Britishers were gathering at Port Rowan, and this fact it was which caused our people to believe a descent upon Presque Isle was contemplated.

Now I knew beyond reasonable doubt that these men had come from the first-named place, and a great hope sprang up in my mind that they might have ventured out for the same purpose as had Alec and I—that our capture was the result of an accident.

All these thoughts ran through my mind during the first two or three seconds after the enemy appeared, and before a single word had been spoken on either side.

The party, fully armed and in uniform, wore storm coats, therefore it was impossible, save by his bearing, to distinguish an officer from a private; but Alec and I quickly understood, or believed we did because of not being immediately questioned, that the men were waiting the arrival of a superior.

It was as if a party of dumb people had come together in this fleecy downpour which whirled and danced until one's eyes ached from the ceaseless swirling.

Alec looked meaningfully at me, and I understood what he would have said. There was in his glance a warning against our holding converse lest we might betray something of importance to the enemy; but had the lad known me better he would not have thought such a caution necessary.

A boy who has lived on the frontier during such troublous times as I had known, is not garrulous in the presence of strangers, and when those strangers are known to be enemies, he would be little less than an idiot who should open his mouth unnecessarily.

Well, we two remained in the centre of this silent group while one might have counted thirty, and then the circle was broken to admit a figure, muffled, like the others, to the eyes in a coat of fur, but approaching with such an air of authority that we knew at once he must be in command.

Now it was I noted the fact that none of the Britishers wore skates, and there came into my mind like a flash the knowledge that we must be close ashore, else these men would not thus have ventured out upon the ice.

I also noted, for one who lives much in the forests is quick to observe every trifling detail in a scene, that the

officer asked no questions of his men as to where we had been found, or how they chanced to come upon us; therefore I understood that our approach had been known before we were thus made prisoners, and the remainder was easy to guess.

While I had supposed we were half a dozen miles from the Canadian shore, we must have been within view of those on the foreland, and this squad had come out for no other reason than to capture us, a fact which took much of the burden from my mind, for I had feared we were met by the advance guard of a force sent to attack Presque Isle.

“Where do you come from?” the officer asked, in that insolent tone which was usually employed by those holding his Majesty’s commission when addressing one from the American border.

There was nothing to be gained by concealing the truth, and I answered the Britisher fairly, save that there was no good reason why I should explain our purpose in being abroad.

“Why have you come on this side of the lake?” he asked, and I replied, yet holding to the truth, but not telling all.

“We were skating, and had ventured so far from home when the snow began to fall, that it seemed safer to continue on than turn back.”

“The question I would have answered is, why did you venture to come so near this side at the beginning? You were well over before the snow began to fall.”

“Of that we were ignorant, sir,” Alec replied, speaking as if in fear; and I observed that his tone gave satisfaction to the valiant Britisher, who was pleased at being able to

frighten two lads. "We must have skated faster than we fancied, and I do assure you, sir, that neither of us had any idea how near we were to an enemy."

Up to this point it appeared as if we were like to come off from the adventure in safety, and I was beginning to believe no more harm would accrue to us than that of being sent back through the storm at risk of losing our way, when one of the men whispered to the officer, after which the latter asked sharply of me:—

"Are you the son of that Daniel Dobbins who has trafficked on the lake?"

It was evident that this soldier, whose face I could not see because of the coat-collar which covered it, had recognized me, and I replied with all the boldness it was possible to assume:—

"I am, sir, and therefore you may know of a certainty from whence we come."

It would have been better had I been less talkative, for now both Alec and I understood that the Britisher's suspicions were aroused.

"Where is your father?" he asked sharply.

I would have given much had I been able to reply promptly; but with his question there came into my mind the thought that I might unwittingly betray an important secret, and for the instant speech was well-nigh impossible. Then, after that unfortunate hesitation, I said:—

"I do not know, sir."

"Is he not at home?"

"I am unable to say, sir."

"Why? Was he not at home when you left?"

Now it was necessary I should explain that Alec and I had been these past three days at the blockhouse, and this statement seemed at variance with the one first made.

The Britisher looked at us searchingly for a moment, and then said, much as though speaking to himself:—

“It is evident you lads have something to conceal. I was inclined to believe the story first told; but now it seems wiser to doubt it. Take off your skates,” he added harshly, and we had no choice but to obey.

When we were thus made helpless, so far as escape was concerned, the officer gave some order in a low tone to one of the men, after which he wheeled about, walking in the direction where I believed lay the shore, and was soon lost to view amid the falling snow.

“Forgive me,” Alec whispered as he pressed my hand, and I understood full well all that was in his mind.

We two were not inclined for conversation; but even though we had been, it was best to remain silent lest yet more suspicions be aroused, and contenting ourselves with a single glance which meant, for my part, that there was no thought of resentment toward my comrade for having led us into these straits, we obeyed the order of our captors to march in advance.

It was not easy to walk on the ice now thickly covered with dry snow, and our progress was by no means rapid; yet in less than fifteen minutes we were arrived at the shore, and I wondered why it was we had failed to note the fact of being so near the enemy’s lines before the storm began.

We pushed on, forced to do so by those in the rear, straight over the outermost end of the Point, where was a

well-defined path showing that it had been frequently travelled, until arriving on the opposite side. Then could be seen a dozen or more log huts, lately constructed, as might be told from the chips and branches which covered the snow in every direction.

Now we knew what I would have given much to have told my father. The reports that a force of Britishers were meditating an attack upon Presque Isle were not without ample foundation, for here beyond a peradventure were the quarters of those soldiers who were to be employed in the manœuvre.

As nearly as I could judge from a hurried glance around, there were quarters for fully two hundred men, and I believed that number had already assembled here.

Many soldiers came out of the huts when we arrived, and because no surprise was exhibited by any of them, we again understood that our approach was observed some time before the capture.

If there had been any hope in our minds that we would be treated mildly because of our youth, it was speedily dispelled.

The soldier in charge of the squad which conducted us, and I judged that he might be a sergeant or a corporal, seized us roughly by the arms, literally thrusting us into a small pen—I can give no other name to that place used as a prison—which was built at one end of the hut nearest the shore.

The door of logs was closed and barred behind us.

It was a regular coffin into which we had been introduced, and save for the light that filtered through the

chinks of the logs, we would have been in darkness. Our prison measured, perhaps, five feet square, and we had the choice of standing in a bent position, or of throwing ourselves upon the frozen ground carpeted with snow.

“Snug quarters these!” Alec cried with an unsuccessful attempt at cheeriness. “I have always heard it said that his Majesty had no love for those who call themselves Americans, but never before knew he would vent his displeasure upon boys.”

Fearing lest he might say that which would betray somewhat of our purpose in coming out on the lake, I added gloomily:—

“If my mother could know where we are thus imprisoned it would seem less hard; but she is like to be anxious concerning us when night falls, and we have not returned.”

Then the dear lad, catching quickly at my reason for thus speaking, added:—

“It cannot be the English soldiers will deem it a crime that we were skating on the lake, and our release must soon come.”

After that we fell silent, not daring to speak lest we reveal what should be kept a secret, and having at heart that fear of the future which quenched all desire for conversation.

As the moments passed and we were forced to remain inactive, crouching in the snow, exposed to the wind which came through every tiny crevice, our limbs became chilled, and I said to myself that we were like to freeze in these snug quarters where exercise was impossible save as one might swing his arms to and fro.