

## MEMOIRS OF MY LIFE.

By JOHN CHARLES FRÉMONT.

### CHAPTER I.

1828-33 School days—1833-36 Cruise on U. S. S. Natchez—1836-37 Appointed Professor of Mathematics in the Navy—Assistant Engineer under Captain Williams—Work in Mountains of North and South Carolina—1837-38 Threatened hostilities with Cherokee Indians, etc., etc.

LOOKING back over the years of the life which I am about to transfer to the blank pages before me, I see in its earlier part but few things worthy of note. The lights and shadows of schoolboy life are like April weather. There is much sunshine and the clouds pass quickly. Farther along the shadows darken and lengthen. But the current events which belong to early life make slight impressions and have no consequences. They do not extend their influence into the time when life begins in earnest. Looking back over the misty road I dwell with mixed feelings upon the pictures that rise up in my memory. Not upon all with pleasure.

Yet they are part of myself and represent pleasant scenes and faces that were dear, now dim in the obscurity of years. But on these pages I recur only to those passages in my early life which had some connection with its after part and were a governing influence in it. Throughout, at different periods it has been my good fortune to be in familiar relations with men who were eminent, each in his own line, all of whom were individualized by character and some distinguished by achievement. Even if insensibly, such associations influence the course of life and give its coloring to it. The early part of mine was desultory. "The path that men are destined to walk" had not been marked out for me. Later events determined this, and meantime I had freedom of choice in preparatory studies.

At sixteen I was a good scholar. My teacher, who became my friend as well, was a Scotch gentleman who had been educated at Edinburgh; he was thoroughly imbued with classic learning, and lived an inner life among the Greeks and Latins. Under his enthusiastic instruction I became fond as

himself of the dead languages, and to me also they became replete with living images. I entered upon the study of Greek with genuine pleasure and excitement. It had a mysterious charm for me as if behind the strange characters belonging to an ancient world I was to find things of wonderful interest. I loved to pore over the volumes of old Greek plays in their beautiful Edinburgh print that were among my teacher's cherished books and the fresh ones that occasionally came to him from Scotland. Filled with the figures of that ancient world into which I had entered they remain stamped as pleasing bits into the recollections of that time, and show how completely my mind was possessed by my work. The years spent in this way gave me habits of study and laid the foundation for a knowledge of modern languages which long afterward became valuable in important events.

Upon the strength of these studies I now entered at once into the junior class at the Charleston college, though far behind it in other branches and especially in mathematics. But this new field interrupted the close relations with my friend and teacher Dr. John Robertson. Many years afterward, in reading the introduction to his translation of Xenophon's *Anabasis* I had the pleasure to find him speaking of me as "his once beloved and favorite pupil—his prodigious memory and enthusiastic application."

I was fond of study, and in what I had been deficient easily caught up with the class. In the new studies I did not forget the old, but at times I neglected both. While present at class I worked hard, but frequently absented myself for days together. This infraction of college discipline brought me frequent reprimands. During a long time the faculty forbore with me because I was always well prepared at recitation, but at length, after a formal warning neglected, their patience gave way and I was expelled from college for continued disregard of discipline. I was then in the senior class. In this act there was no ill-feeling on either side. My fault was such a neglect of the ordinary college usages and rules as the faculty could not overlook and I knew that I was a transgressor.

A few years afterward the faculty voluntarily revised their decision and conferred on me the degree of Bachelor and Master of Arts, so taking me back into the fold. Meantime I had my compensation. The college authorities had wrapped themselves in their dignity and reluctantly but sternly inflicted on me condign punishment. To me this came like summer wind, that breathed over something sweeter than the "bank whereon the wild thyme blows." I smiled to myself while I listened to words about the disappointment of friends—and the broken career. I was living in a charmed atmosphere and their edict only gave me complete freedom. What the poets dwell on as "the rarest flower of life" had bloomed in my path—only seventeen I was passionately in love. This was what had made me regardless of



discipline and careless of consequences. This was the true rebel that carried me off to pleasant days and returned me buoyant at night to hard work in order to catch up with my class next morning. With my memory full of those days, as the recollection rises to the surface I put it down here. This is an autobiography and it would not be true to itself if I left out the bit of sunshine that made the glory of my youth—what Schiller calls "his glorious youth." It is only a few lines, a tribute which as they reappear around me I give to the pleasant companions who made life gay at that time. There will be enough hereafter of grave and hard, conflict and dissension, violence and injury and fraud; but none of these things were known to us, that little circle of sworn friends, who were gathering our spring flowers. We took no thought for the harvest but gathered our cornflowers from the upspringing grain.

I remember, once along the banks of the Des Moines, a botanist with me stooped down and grasped the clustered head of a low flowering plant. Under the broad leaves lay coiled a rattlesnake, close to his hand. Geyer escaped, but it gave him a spasm that made him dig his heels into the ground and jerk his arms nervously about as he threw off the shock.

Always afterward he looked for snakes among his flowers. With ours there were never any. Some thorns perhaps as I had just found, but these go with the sweetest flowers.

Since I was fourteen years old I had been intimate with a creole family who had escaped from the San Domingo massacre. With the mother and grandmother, there were two boys and three girls. The elder of the boys was older than I, the girls all younger. The eldest of the three girls was Cecilia. They were all unusually handsome; clear brunette complexions, large dark eyes, and abundant blue-black hair.

The grandmother was the head of the family and its autocratrice. She was a tall, stern old woman, with iron-gray hair, over seventy years of age, and held absolute rule over us all, from the mother down. Often when the riot was at the highest or we had kept it up late, her sudden appearance would disperse us like a flock of quail. The house-children would scamper off to bed and the visitors make a prompt escape. The house stood on a corner and there was a room at the rear which is daguerreotyped on my memory. This room opened directly on the street and belonged to us by squatters' right. It was by this door that we were accustomed to make a sudden exit when the grandmother made one too many for us.

But her ill-humor of the moment never lasted until the next time came for us to meet. The severe lines imprinted on her face by trials, after repose had not smoothed away. But often when we were in full flight before her I have seen the lurking smiles break into a pleased laugh that cleared

away the sternness. In a manner I grew up with the children. Before and after I left college they, but especially one, were the companions with whom I was always happy to spend what time I could seize upon. The boys and I made a restless trio.

The days went by on wings. In the summer we ranged about in the woods, or on the now historic islands, gunning or picnicking, the girls sometimes with us; sometimes in a sailboat on the bay, oftener going over the bar to seaward and not infrequently when the breeze failed us getting dangerously near the breakers on the bar. I remember as in a picture, seeing the beads of perspiration on the forehead of my friend Henry as he tugged frantically at his oar when we had found ourselves one day in the suck of Drunken Dick, a huge breaker that to our eyes appeared monstrous as he threw his spray close to the boat. For us it really was pull Dick pull Devil.

Those were the splendid outside days; days of unreflecting life when I lived in the glow of a passion that now I know extended its refining influence over my whole life. The recollection of those days has never faded. I am glad that it was not required of me to come back as an enemy among those scenes.

This holiday time could not last, but it was beautiful, although I was conscious that I could not afford it. I had not entirely neglected my studies. Sometimes seized with a temporary remorse for time lost I gathered up my books and overworked myself for awhile, only to relapse with keener zest into the more natural life.

The accidents that lead to events are often hardly noticeable. A single book sometimes enters fruitfully into character or pursuit. I had two such. One was a chronicle of men who had made themselves famous by brave and noble deeds, or infamous by cruel and base acts. With a schoolboy's enthusiasm I read these stories over and over again, with alternate pleasure or indignation. I please myself in thinking they have sometimes exercised a restraining or inspiring influence. Dwelling in the memory they were like the ring of Amasis.

The other was a work on practical astronomy, published in the Dutch. The language made it a closed book but for the beautifully clear maps of the stars and many examples of astronomical calculations. By its aid I became well acquainted with the night skies and familiarized myself with the ordinary observations necessary to determine latitude and longitude. This was the beginning of the astronomical knowledge afterwards so essential to me.

Soon now the day for care and work came. We were only two, my mother and I. We had lost my sister. My brother was away, making his own career, and I had to concern myself for mine. I was unwilling to



leave my mother. Circumstances had more than usually endeared us to each other and I knew that her life would be solitary without me. I was accustomed to be much at home and our separations had been slight. But now it was likely to be for long and the hard part would be for the one left alone. For me it was very different. Going out into the excitement of strange scenes and occurrences I would be forced out of myself and for long intervals could forget what I left behind. For her in the sameness of daily life there would be a blank not easily filled. But my mother had an experience of sacrifice which with her true womanly nature it had been hard to learn. Realizing that now the time had come for another, she, but not cheerfully, sent me forward on my way.

The necessity for exertion was making itself felt and the outlook for my future was vague. But among the few men whom I had come to know as friends there was one whose kindly aid and counsel was often valuable to me, then and afterward.

Mr. Poinsett was one of the distinguished men of the day, of broad and liberal mind, refined by study and much travel. While Minister to Mexico his cultivated taste led him to interest himself in the luxuriant flora of that country. Known in a graver way through his public works and service, it has chanced that his name has been kept familiarly present and most popularly known by the scarlet Poinsettia which he contributed to botany.

I knew him after he returned from Mexico, and before and during the time when he was Secretary of War. By his aid, but not with his approval, I went to the South American coast as teacher on board the U. S. sloop of war *Natchez*, Captain Zantzinger. Admiral Farragut was one of the Lieutenants. The voyage had its advantages. I saw more of the principal cities and people than a traveller usually does on passing through a country, though nothing of the interior. But the time spent was long and had no future bearing. Among the few events that occurred to break the routine of ship life there was one in which I was concerned that I remember with satisfaction. While lying at Rio de Janeiro a duel had taken place between two of the midshipmen in which one lost his life. Both were men of high character and had been friends. The fatal termination of the meeting was deeply regretted, and by no one more than the survivor. A trivial misunderstanding shortly after resulted in another. The principals on this occasion were Mr. Lovell, of South Carolina, and Mr. Parrott, of Massachusetts. Decatur Hurst was Lovell's second, and I Parrott's. Lovell was a nephew of Mr. Poinsett and Hurst a nephew of Commodore Decatur. Hurst and I were friends. He proposed to put only powder in the pistols for the first fire. If then another should be insisted on we would give them lead. In this we incurred some personal risk, but were quite willing to take it for the sake of the persons principally interested in the result.

This being agreed upon, we succeeded in leaving the ship without having attracted any attention to our movements, and crossing the bay quietly landed on the north shore. Leaving the boat, we found a narrow strip of sandy beach about forty yards long between the water and the mountain. In such a place men could hardly miss each other. The few preparations made, we placed our men twelve paces apart and gave the word. Both looked sincerely surprised that they remained standing upright as before. Going up each to his man, we declared the affair over; the cause of quarrel in our opinion not justifying a second shot. There was some demur, but we insisting carried our men triumphantly back to the ship, nobody hurt and nobody wiser. Hurst and I greatly enjoyed our little *ruse de guerre*.

Of the four men three are dead. Just when Lovell died I do not know. Admiral Parrott died in New York about seven years ago. Hurst too is dead. While on the African coast he was badly wounded in a duel, which ultimately caused his death not long afterward.

When the cruise was over I returned to Charleston. In the meantime Congress had created the post of Professor of Mathematics in the Navy. I applied for a commission and was ordered before an examining board, to be convened shortly at Norfolk. Then came for me another pleasant month, for I was back among my old friends, and the strong motive I had now added to the pleasure I always found in study. All day long I was at my books, and the earliest dawn found me at an upper window against which stood a tall poplar, where the rustling of the glossy leaves made a soothing accompaniment. The surroundings go for a great deal in intellectual work.

My examination was successfully over and I had received, and declined, my appointment.

Just then an opportunity was offered me to go under Captain W. G. Williams, of the U. S. Topographical Corps, as one of the assistant engineers on surveys to be made for a projected railway from Charleston to Cincinnati. I gladly accepted the chance that fell to me, and spent a summer in congenial work among the mountains of South Carolina and Tennessee. There were several parties, each under an able engineer. That to which I belonged was under the direction of Lieutenant White, a graduate of West Point, who knew well how to make our work agreeable. We were engaged in running experimental lines, and the plotting of the field notes sometimes kept us up until midnight. Our quarters were sometimes at a village inn and more frequently at some farmer's house, where milk and honey and many good things were welcome to an appetite sharpened by all day labor on foot and a tramp of several miles backward and forward, morning and evening. It was cheery, wholesome work. The summer weather in the mountains was fine, the cool water abundant, and the streams