

The Salute, 1775-1777, a story by John Haigis

"If you're caught, they'll hang ye" "Then I'll just have to make sure I don't get caught, eh?" but I somehow knew it was all for naught.....Colonel Jonathan Grappin, Friend of the King was not long for this earth. Tall and stately he was, quick with a joke or a shilling for a drink.....Men like that are like comets, blazing a bright trail across the sky, leaving only cold cinders in their wakes. He's at rest now, buried in St. James of Kingsessing up the road, but I'm getting ahead of myself. I first met the Colonel in the summer of 1775 when the Committee of Safety started to build up the abandoned British fortifications down on Mud Island....all day long men and material would pass up and down Island Road past the Blue Bell and sometimes the men would stop for a drink or a quick meal....he appeared one day, dressed like a farmer but I could tell he was a man of quality....I didn't know he was a Colonel then, but I knew he was different...he missed very little and I always got the feeling he was on some sort of a mission. He didn't say much but he listened a lot.

As proprietor at the Bell, one of the finest ordinaries on the main stagecoach road between Philadelphia and the Southern Colonies, I kept away from politics. I knew good men on both sides of the question and if a man had cash, paid his tab, and didn't cause trouble, I really didn't care about his political beliefs. Like a man's feelings toward God, I believed the matter was pretty much between him and his maker I served with the militia in the Seven Years War against the French and I wanted no part in killing, dying, or burying the dead ever again. I fervently prayed that a way could be found to avoid further suffering but ever since April when those hotheads up in Boston started a shooting war, we had been in open rebellion against the King. First blood had been spilled and it seemed there was no turning back....the dogs of war were loose and slathering for more blood....every day more men and material were streaming down Island Road to the fort.

He came wandering down the road from Darby one hot summer day, dressed in a broad-brimmed hat and scuffed boots. There was something about the way he sat upon his horse that reminded me of some of the English officers I served under in the militia. We passed the time of day for a while and both commented on how hot it had been. After a while he went wandering toward the south down Island Road and returned that evening just before I closed... we started to talk. Although he wasn't from the area, he seemed surprisingly knowledgeable about local conditions and people. I remember in particular that he wanted to know about John Bartram, the famous botanist and a rumor he had heard that Bartram had been disowned by the Quaker Meeting. I saw Mr. Bartram fairly regularly as he traveled between Darby where he was born and where his relatives still lived and his house on the west bank of the Schuylkill. I explained that for the Quakers, being disowned was not the same as being shunned and Bartram still went to Meeting but was simply relieved of the obligation to attend the monthly meeting for business. As far as I knew, the dispute had something to do with the Trinity and I remember telling the stranger it wasn't really my business but that I thought it was mostly that Mr. Bartram was not going to let the Meeting tell him what he was to think or what he was to believe. We've always been a somewhat independent minded lot

around here, especially in matters of conscience, going back to the time before Penn, when the Swedes were in charge. I think he was angling to find out Bartram's attitude toward the King and the rebellion but I wasn't of much help. On the one hand Bartram actually had been appointed Royal Botanist which was a pretty big deal for a local boy from Darby. On the other hand, as I mentioned, Bartram was of an independent mind and so was his boy, Moses, who had a time of tumbling and tossing about the world. Both father and son were associated with Ben Franklin's Junto Society, but I said Bartram senior was getting on in years in any event so I really didn't know where he stood. The stranger, who said his name was Mr. Younger, also asked me about others in the neighborhood including Hugh Lloyd, Samuel Carpenter, the Garricks, the Bonsalls, the Buntings, the Paschalls, and Mr. William Hamilton who owned the land near the mouth of the Mill Creek overlooking the lower ferry, which some called Gray's Ferry. Here I was on firmer ground and was able to express my opinion that many of the people he mentioned were well off and would have a tendency to favor stability and law and order. Mr. Hamilton in particular, being from a prominent family whose grandfather had helped design the Pennsylvania State House on Chestnut Street, was inspired by English gardens in his designs for his estate, The Woodlands. The stranger eventually bade me a courteous good evening and continued on toward Philadelphia.

I didn't see the stranger for almost two full years and by that time the landscape had greatly changed, at least politically. Independence had been declared the summer before and wars and rumors of war were rife. The American army (American rabble is perhaps a more accurate description at that point) had chosen a Virginian named Washington as their Commander. A little pamphlet called "Common Sense" had been making the rounds and even though I didn't pay much attention to politics, I could hear the conversations among my patrons and knew which way the winds were blowing. I knew that none of the men really knew what war was about, but feared we would all find out. On the British side, Generals Gage in Boston, Burgoyne in New York, and General William Howe on the Chesapeake in Maryland were getting ready to split the colonies like a juicy pie. Howe landed at the Head of Elk early in September and started to move north toward the rebel capital of Philadelphia which appeared to be his target. There was some talk that he was looking for a way to get the rebel leaders to a conference table, as if anyone could talk to the likes of Sam Adams. In any event, Howe was advancing toward Philadelphia and Washington's troops were moving south to meet him.

Torrential rain had swollen the Cobbs Creek making it impossible to cross and a detachment of American dragoons were encamped around the Bell. So far they had not attempted to raid my stock, but to paraphrase an old proverb, "the lion shall lie down with the lamb, but the lamb shall not have a restful night of it." I was just starting to doze off when I was startled by a pounding on the side door. When I opened it, there was the stranger, drenched to the bone. He simply said, "I need your help" and I didn't have the heart to turn him away. I placed him in the rocking chair by the fire in the kitchen and we talked until late into the night. He explained that he was attached to General Howe's staff and was on a mission to find and connect with area loyalists. He said Howe was intending to capture Philadelphia as a rallying place for the loyalists to

take back the government. I told him about the sea change in people's attitudes since we last met, and how the Sons of Liberty made any political position, other than the Patriot cause, untenable and actively dangerous. Even Mr. Hamilton, as politically prominent as he was, felt it prudent to be somewhere else. As soldiers, we both knew what was coming and it made us both sad....Later into the evening he told me of his service at the Siege of Louisburg and I told him of my time in the militia. He also told me about his family in England and of his son who he missed terribly. He said he had been in the colonies for the past four years and was beginning to despair of ever seeing home again. I stated the obvious, that he was in great danger, especially since he was out of uniform. Since the hanging of Nathan Hale as a spy by the British up in Connecticut last year, there was a great desire for revenge. Even though I knew it could be considered treason, I didn't have the heart to turn him in. There had already been too much blood spilled. We sat and rocked, and remembered times and comrades we had known. Just before dawn he said that he did not want to put me or my family in danger, and giving a small, ironic salute quietly slipped out the door, into the rain, and disappeared.

Within a day or so the rains stopped, the Creek went down, and the troops moved south to meet the British. A few days after that they came bucketing back, along with the Great Washington himself and his entire general staff.....Evidently they had met the British along the Brandywine Creek and were soundly defeated. I expected to see columns of British regulars marching up the road any day. Instead I learned later that Howe had moved north and west, through Paoli, and marched into Philadelphia from the north. I was told that when Howe marched into Philadelphia, he was welcomed not as a conqueror but as a liberator because mob rule was finally being put down. We were saddened by the death of Mr. Bartram in September and joined in the funeral procession as he was laid to rest in the Friends Cemetery in Darby.

Partisan activity in the area stepped up, Daniel Morgan's riflemen were active in the neighborhood, and then came October 1. We were awakened by rumbles that sounded like thunder except this thunder never stopped and there was no rain....Day and night the thunder continued...the Brits were clearing the river approaches to Philadelphia. All the rest of that day and far into the night, and the next day, and the next night, the fort they were calling Mifflin on Mud Island and the forts at Red Bank and Billingsport were taking a pounding from the British ships on the Delaware....Boom. Boom, BOOM, boom.... the bombardment continued all through October into November. We heard about an American victory at a place called Saratoga and also heard about a debacle in Germantown....So much death. Howe set up headquarters in the Garrick House behind St. James where at night the muzzle flashes from the British ships could be seen.... Boom, BoomBoom, BOOM One day we heard a tremendous explosion which I later learned was the British Man-Of-War Augusta which had been set afire. I prayed for all the men, on both sides, but mostly I prayed that the infernal noise would STOP!

Occasionally British troops would come on foraging expeditions taking peoples livestock and crops to feed the army because the river forts were preventing supplies from reaching Philadelphia. If people didn't like the Brits before, this sealed the deal, however

I have to say that the rapacious colonial troops were not much better... One day a Colonel Evans of the Chester County Militia under the command of General Porter informed me that the Bell had been commandeered and I was forced to provide lodging to about 28 militiamen whose job it was to harass the British foraging parties. There was no room but there was also no choice in the matter and we all did the best we could. In the middle of November, after a month and a half of continuous noise, suddenly there was silence; Mifflin had fallen. Silence, ominous, blessed silence ensued, and we waited.....That night we heard troops passing by on the road to Chester. Troops under Lord Cornwallis were marching to join General Wilson and clean out Fort Mercer at Red Bank to finally open the river approaches. I held my breath hoping they would pass peacefully but suddenly there was a shot from the upstairs window and the Brits rushed in and bayoneted five militiamen on the stairs and took the remainder prisoners.....There was shouting and blood and confusion and it seemed like thousands of Brits when the door was thrust open and they carried in an officer in uniform and laid him on a table. He had been shot in the chest, just below the crescent-shaped gorget he wore at his throat. The blood was welling from the wound staining his front and I saw flecks of bloody foam on his lips. I then realized, with a shock it was the stranger; he was in uniform now and his boots were highly polished. He was having difficulty breathing and I heard him say, almost with resignation, "I knew I would never leave this accursed place," and with that he died.

A small party was left behind to transport the prisoners to Philadelphia and to bury the Colonel and I was left to clean up the blood. We didn't know it at the time but that month was a turning point in the war. Howe's dalliance in Philadelphia left Burgoyne without support at Saratoga and the American victory there allowed the French to enter the war openly on the American side. Howe's loyalist uprising never happened and Washington's army had a breathing space at Valley Forge, emerging in the spring as a real army. After the sad spectacle of the Meschianza, the Brits abandoned Philadelphia in June of 1778, Rochambeau's army marched by the Bell on route to the final victory at Yorktown in 1781, and the rest, as they say, is history. I often think of the stranger and his last words. Occasionally when strange things happen around the Bell like the rocking chair rocking with no one there or the hired girl feeling a hand stroking her hair when she is all alone, I sometimes wonder, and give the Colonel a small, ironic, salute.