

Deleted Scene from MY DEAR HAMILTON: Catherine Fires the Fields
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Albany, New York

“Mrs. Schuyler!” a man yelled from a wagon that rolled entirely too close to us on the street. “You tell the general to go straight to hell, the damned coward.”

With a gasp, Mama wrenched Peggy and I back from the turning wooden wheels as the man loosened the reins and called his team of horses into a gallop. Dust and gravel kicked up in his wake. Shocked, and mouth agape at both the sentiment and incivility from the very townspeople by whom we were always afforded deference, we all turned to watch the swiftly retreating wagon on the cobblestones. Then it seemed to happen all at once, the way people shuffled in and out of their homes in a manner of contagious panic, thick shutters slamming closed, dogs barking in sudden distress as word passed from house to house.

“What’s happening?” Peggy asked.

A housewife in a nearby window shrieked. “We’ve lost Fort Ticonderoga! Gave it up without a fight. Get home with you, Miss Schuyler. Your father is either a traitor or a fool. Likely to be hanged or in chains by the week’s end. And the rest of us scalped by savages.”

With that, she sneered and yanked her shutters tight.

“Papa?” I said, looking at my mother’s ashen face. The fear I saw there unleashed terror and rage through me in equal parts. Terror because there was no doubt that Papa was in harm’s way. Rage because he had been arguing for months that Ticonderoga was insufficiently staffed and supplied and asking for reinforcements, to no avail. And on top of that, General Gates had complicated the situation by seeking--and on several occasions gaining--command of the fort despite the fact that Papa was commander of the Northern Department. That Papa should now be blamed... “But surely this isn’t his fault,” I cried.

Mama shook her head and waved us back to our waiting carriage. “Come. There’s no time. We must get home, girls.”

At home, we discovered a dispatch from Papa—who had hurried north to shore up our defenses. My mother read our father’s letter aloud to me and Peggy at the table. “With

Ticonderoga in the enemy's power, they may do what they please, as we have lost every piece of cannon we had there. I foresee that all this part of the country will soon be in their power, unless we are speedily and largely reinforced. I shall make every resistance left in my power and nothing shall be left undone to prevent the enemy from penetrating farther in the country."

Mama's throat bobbed in a loud swallow beneath the crucifix she wore round her sweating neck.

It is impossible to overstate the magnitude of the disaster. Or the fear that gripped us in its aftermath. What had happened that the American forces surrendered the fortress that defended us all, under cover of darkness? The whole of our state now lay open and vulnerable to an invasion from the north by the British "Gentleman Johnny" Burgoyne who could boast of an army of ten thousand, in all, and issued a proclamation threatening to allow his Iroquois allies to terrorize the countryside if we did not submit. And, according to Papa's letters, the scalping had already begun.

We would later learn that in England, the king burst into the queen's chambers in jubilation, shouting, "I've beat them! I have beat all the Americans!" But all we knew at the time was that the war was almost assuredly lost and the people held my father to blame.

Papa had not given the order to withdraw from the fortress; indeed, he had only learned of it while he was petitioning for reinforcements and gathering lead to melt down for bullets. But it was said that he should have *been* there at the fortress. And in my secret heart, I feared that he *might* have been there, were it not for Angelica and me...

It was all we could do to quiet the children and the servants—even as Mama prepared the house as if for siege. And we made beds for injured soldiers in our barn and in the hall where my sisters and I helped my mother gently bandage cuts and clean out wounds. She had always had a gift for tending men—she'd cared for my father when he was sick, and more famously, Benjamin Franklin when he was struck ill on a mission to negotiate with the Iroquois. Peggy's stomach wasn't strong enough to endure blood, stink, and bad-tempered boys in pain, but I found that my own nature gave me the advantage.

Meanwhile, we were not the only ones in panic and despair.

Congress—the same Congress that had repeatedly denied my father's pleas for tents, tools, ammunition, and uniforms now stood shocked by the turn of events and denounced my father as a coward, an incompetent, or worse. Amidst these recriminations, Papa's rival, Horatio Gates, helped fan the embers of outrage, spreading rumors that my father had been bribed by the British

to surrender the fort. Perhaps that is what prompted John Adams to write of the situation, “I think we shall never be able to defend a post until we shoot a general.”

My father—the general he wanted to shoot—rode out at once to make a brave stand at Fort Edward with a only a few hundred men, all the while organizing the most bitter resistance: the destruction of our own countryside.

In retreat, with soldiers near mutiny, wading through swamps and hard terrain carrying cargo, and without shelter, Papa felled trees over roads, destroyed bridges, blocked rivers, and burned crops. I know, because he asked it of us, too.

And my mother was determined to see to it personally.

“You *cannot* go to our house at Saratoga,” I pleaded with her, for we had, for several days now, seen the roads clogged with terrified refugees fleeing south. And they ought to have fled, for Jane MacRae, a minister’s daughter who had stayed behind in the hopes of reuniting with her betrothed, was scalped—her body left under an old pine tree. The last thing my mother ought to do was go toward the danger. And the farm of ours she intended to sacrifice was thirty miles closer to the massive, invading army.

“What I cannot do is leave anything of value for the British,” my mother replied, tying the ribbon on her bonnet and readying for her journey with quiet determination.

At first, she insisted she would go with only one-armed servant man to protect her. And I thought it madness--but a contagious kind because I announced, "If you're going, Mama. I'm going, too."

Mother cupped my cheek in a moment that seemed too tender for the disaster raining down all around us. “We need you here, Betsy. What if there should be an Indian raid the house?” My father was well-known—perhaps the most well-known of all the colonists—by our Iroquois friends and foes. If marauding Mohawks made it to Albany, they would come here first. To our home at The Pastures. “Papa always says that this house was built for defense. It has strong walls. Thick shutters, which can be shut against arrows. And if the worst should happen, there’s the secret tunnel to the river behind Papa’s study. Peggy can secret the children out as well as I could.”

For a moment, I was certain Mama was going to refuse to take me with her, but then she gave a tight nod. “A general’s wife should not know fear,” she said, lifting my chin so that I was forced to look into her eyes. “And neither should a general’s daughter.”

The road to Saratoga revealed just how dire the situation was. The proximity of the war's front lines was made more and more clear with every injured, bandaged soldier we passed, with every desperate refugee family that fled by, their belongings thrown haphazardly in carriages and over the backs of their mounts. And there were many. So many that the roads were impassable in places, that the trip which usually took half a day stretched into the mid-afternoon.

The July sun hung unforgivingly hot over us when we finally reached our country house near Saratoga. The great feudal house with our coat of arms where my father managed his tenants and oversaw his empire of saw mills and fur trading. This estate where we'd spent our childhoods running through the rolling waves of golden wheat in the fields. Where Papa had built a swing for us in a tree near the window of his study so that he could hear us laugh and play...

The long Georgian home, with its five bays centered around a grand front door and large triple window above, was our beloved retreat from the business of the farm at the Flatts and the demands of society in Albany. But we'd not come here for leisurely retreat.

"Quickly," my mother said as our coachman and protector, James, helped us down from the carriage. Cannons boomed in the distance, the sound eerie in the destruction it promised to wreak upon us and our cause. We raced into the house to grab up the valuables while James found thick sticks from among a pile of fencing in the barn to wrap with strips of cloth and soak in pitch.

When we emerged from the house clutching silver, artwork, and family heirlooms, James stood at the edge of the golden field of wheat stood not too far from the house, the stalks standing chest-high and waving in the summer breeze. "Set it alight," my mother commanded.

But the servant couldn't seem to do it. Faced with the prospect of destroying months' worth of hard labor, food of which slaves sometimes got too little, he faltered.

"James, now!" Mother cried.

But the enslaved man just stood there, sweat pouring from his dark face, his head shaking, his mouth agape. Maybe he didn't want to be blamed for it later. But whatever the reason, the man was suddenly unmovable. And the enormity of what we were doing finally hit me. These fields could not only feed us and all who depended on us, but our Army as well.

"Must we?" I whispered to my mother.

“It’s your father’s command to keep it from falling into British hands,” she said. “Either way, this wheat will not be filling our bellies this winter.”

One moment passed, and then another, and finally my mother reached for the torch, gently taking it from James’s trembling hand. Then she held it to the wheat herself. The fire took hold, quickly jumping from one plant to the next. Mama rushed down the line, lighting more and more. And when she hurled her torched into the crop and turned back to us. “Help me burn it, Betsy! It’s your father’s orders, and it’s God’s will.”

God wanted this? The conviction in my mother’s made me take up a torch of my own. I held the fire to the wheat, setting it alight, before finally throwing my own torch into the rising blaze.

We stepped back, almost in shock at first, and then because the heat became too much to bear. In the distance, gunfire rang out in a thunderous retort, making us jump back further.

“The Lord only takes what we can bear to give, Betsy, even when it seems too much,” Mama said as she returned to my side, and then she grasped my hand. “We must go. Now. The British are coming, but they won’t find our wheat when they get here.”

There was no going back for any of us. Quickly, the fires reached out to one another, creating a wall of flame and heat that sent a billow of smoke to obscure the bright blue overhead. I felt like we’d pulled the sun down from the sky. And maybe we had.