

An excerpt from
John Treegate's Musket
by Leonard Wibberley

CHAPTER 1

The year was 1769 and the place Boston—Boston, a city of seamen and of merchants, of importers and exporters, of shopkeepers and manufacturers, of prosperous bankers and ragged ne'er-do-wells, of gentlemen dressed in the latest London fashion, and others dressed in the clothing home-designed of materials which were home-woven.

In the streets of this Boston were gentlemen whose wigs were made in England and powdered with chalk from France, and others whose hair fell matted and unkempt to their greasy shoulders. There were ladies in panniered skirts which were too wide for Boston's doorways and women in dresses which were hardly distinguishable from sacks. There were blood horses and draught oxen, aristocrats and beggars, patriots and poltroons, men in the service of the King and men wanted for desertion from the service of the King, in short, every variety and condition of man it is possible to imagine.

And there was, in Boston always, the Mob.

Mr. John Treegate, seated at his dining room table in his house on Edward Street, reflected upon these matters and came to the conclusion that Boston was of all cities the true mirror of the world. He was Boston-born and proud of it; a solid figure of a man, broad in the shoulders, clad in sensible snuff brown worsted, conservative, sensible, prosperous and trusted.

He looked around at his guests, noted that their glasses were full, cleared his throat and rose.

"Gentlemen," he said, "a toast. I give you the glorious thirteenth of September, in the year 1759; the year and the day when we drove the French from this continent and made it forever British."

"The thirteenth of September," chorused his guests and drained their glasses. The men at the table had all been present on that day—members of the continental militia serving under General Wolfe. They had been laughed at by the Redcoats of the regular army, because of their ragged drill and lack of what might be called a uniform. But they had proved their worth in the face of the finest troops of France. And each year, on the anniversary of the battle, they met in John Treegate's house for a reunion dinner.

There were other toasts drunk—"Absent Friends," "The King—God Bless Him," "To Our Immortal Commander, General Wolfe," and "To Our Immortal Enemy, General Montcalm." And with these toasts came memories of that great day when John Treegate had first taken up his musket in defense of his king and his country to drive the French from the North American continent.

The French, at that time, lay around and above the city of Quebec on the Plains of Abraham, and the British Army, in transports, lay upon the river, repelled and daunted by the huge cliffs which they had first to scale before they could engage the enemy. The task seemed impossible, for every approach up those cliffs was guarded and it seemed that the British must withdraw without firing a shot and in withdrawing cede Canada to France.

And then had come the report that further up the river there was a goat track up the cliffs, nothing more than a tiny thread of pathway up which men could advance in single file, and General Wolfe had taken the decision to move his men up this goat track by night.

It was a tremendous gamble. Unless the whole army could move up this narrow lane, scrambling

and groping in the dark, every man for himself, the British forces would be split in two. Half would be below on the river and half on the plains above facing the French and the result would be disaster.

But the gamble had paid off. By dawn John Treegate and thousands of his companions in the American colonial militia, and the British Redcoats and some regiments of Scottish Highlanders were atop the cliffs drawn up for battle, to the amazement of the French. There had been a heavy mist that morning, a mist which had helped in the scaling of the cliffs. When the sun had come up, this mist had turned into a shimmering white sea of silver, so that the men of Wolfe's command had seemed to be wading waist deep in surf. Then the sun rose higher and the mist went with the morning wind and half a mile away could be plainly seen the French in their blue coats—infantry, cavalry and cannon—a deadly harvest of them with the lily banner of France over their heads and bugles ringing with terrifying clarity to call them to arms.

At that moment, John Treegate had never been so glad for the presence of the British Redcoats. They had formed their lines as if all were but a drill and even when the French cannon opened fire, they showed no flurry or excitement but continued deliberately with their movements until they were ready for the battle, scorning either to flinch or seek cover. "I doubt the world will see again such a charge as that of the Scottish Highlanders," said John to Eben Gawling who sat at his left. Gawling, who lived in the village of Concord, where he farmed a hundred acres, had come into Boston especially for this reunion dinner as he always did.

"They did well indeed," said Gawling, his voice booming out over the dining table so that all other conversation stopped. "They did well indeed. They were a noble sight to be sure, storming down upon the French stripped to the waist and their swords flashing over their heads.

"And yet I fancy," he continued, "that a nobler charge was that of the French, delivered against that sector of the British front confined to the care of the American militia. The Redcoats thought we would run and I'll confide to you, Treegate, that I thought we would run ourselves. They were an uncommonly unpleasant sight, the French—a solid line of them coming at us with the bayonet. Yet we turned them, sir. We turned them with musket fire and had we not turned them, I for one say that the day would have been lost"

"It was an opinion shared by many in the British command at that time," said Dr. Peter Wetmore, seated at the far end of the table. "I would be so bold as to say that without the service of the American colonials on the Plains of Abraham, this continent might well have been lost to Britain. We might all have been made subject to the King of France and forced to pay such taxes as would kill all commerce in these parts."

"And pray, sir," demanded a voice, "do you find matters so different today?"

There was a humming and hawing around the table, more of embarrassment than disagreement, and John Treegate turned to look at the speaker, who was seated beside his eleven-year-old son, Peter. Peter had been allowed to attend the reunion dinner for the first time, as a celebration of the fact that he had but that day signed his papers as an apprentice to the trade of barrel stave manufacture. And the man who sat beside him, and had asked the somewhat disagreeable question, was Tom Fielding, to whom Peter was apprenticed.

"I'm not sure, sir," said Mr. Treegate, "that I quite understand your meaning."

Tom Fielding cocked his head to one side, remarkably like a blackbird. He was a small man with long dark hair and reckoned somewhat too progressive for the merchants of Boston. He refused to wear a wig, for one thing, even on so formal an occasion as the present, and he kept up a lively correspondence with such men as John Wilkes, in England, who had been imprisoned for challenging the authority of the throne. Mr. Treegate was not entirely comfortable about having

apprenticed his son to such a man, though undoubtedly the best barrel stave manufacturer in the city. But he was due to leave for England on the morrow and the apprenticeship was the only one he could manage.

"Why," said Mr. Fielding, "my meaning is perfectly clear if you will but face the facts. It is said that had we not beaten the French at Quebec, then we might all be paying heavy taxes to the King of France. And it is common knowledge that we pay heavy taxes—monstrously heavy taxes—to the King of England. Now, sir, what is the difference? Had we lost we would have been taxed and, having won, we are taxed nonetheless.

"Take my own business, sir. I make barrel staves. Barrels I may not make for it would interfere with the profits of the coopers of Bristol and London. So I must be content with making the staves. Now these staves, in the past, I shipped to the French West Indies and exchanged for molasses. And molasses I brought back to New England and sold here to be manufactured into rum. My profit came not from the sale of my barrel staves but from the sale of the molasses for which I exchanged them.

"And now look what has happened.

"I may no longer ship my staves to the French West Indies direct. They must first go to London and be put upon a British ship. Then they are sent to the French West Indies and have already cost me a pretty penny before I ever exchange them for molasses.

"And now comes the news that a tax of threepence a gallon is to be levied upon the rum made from the molasses. And all this done, mark you, by the King's ministers without anyone in these colonies being consulted.

"Well, sir. Is that tyranny or is it not? Would the French have treated us any worse?" Mr. Treegate looked anxiously at his son, Peter. The boy seemed to be very much impressed by what Fielding had said, though he could hardly have been expected to have understood the half of it.

"These matters are too complicated for us to fully comprehend," said Mr. Treegate. "We have representatives in London discussing them and no doubt they will be listened to and what is just will be done. I go myself tomorrow to London on just such a mission. King George, God bless him, is no tyrannical French Louis."

"As to that," said Mr. Fielding, "all that has been done so far is that more Redcoats have been sent here. And the temper of the people around the town is ugly.

"We have more soldiers in Boston than there are in London, I'll warrant, and we have to pay the expense of them."

"The people are in an ill mood with the soldiery," said Mr. Treegate, "because Sam Adams has made it his business to put them into such a mood. That man Adams is a ne'er-do-well and a danger to these colonies.

"He has failed in every business venture he has undertaken. He's a lawyer without a brief and a tax collector without either an office or a set of books. He wins people to his side by failing to collect their taxes. He spends his days in the city taverns consorting with the roughnecks of the streets and every idle apprentice. He is the king of the beggars and the rowdies and if he ever has his way we will not have order in these colonies but disorder.

"We will have not respect for authority but a horrible tyranny. We shall be ruled not by our betters but by our inferiors and all of us at this table will find ourselves taking orders from the drifters of Boston—the mob which is always with us as it is always in every big city of the world. With nothing to lose, this mob would have all others lose everything. We live, gentlemen, in the century of the mob, and it is against the mob that society must defend itself.

"Peter," he continued, turning to his son, "you may excuse yourself and get to your bed. You must be at Mr. Fielding's works at six in the morning, otherwise he will be more angry with you than he appears to be at the moment with the Redcoats."

Everybody turned now to Peter, their faces kindly and smiling. He got carefully down from the table and pushed his chair back in place.

"By your leave, gentlemen," he said as his father had taught him.

"Good night, young man," boomed Colonel Gawling, leading a chorus of good nights from the other guests.

Peter went quietly from the dining room. But he did not go directly to bed. He went instead to his father's study, brightly lit with half a dozen chandeliers. He tiptoed over to the fireplace and stared up at a gun in its bracket over the mantelpiece.

The gun was his father's musket; the same which he had carried at the famous battle of the Plains of Abraham. His father had put it on that bracket ten years before and announced that he would never use it again except to defend King and Country.

Peter loved the musket. It was the very essence of adventure for him. It had been used in battle and had witnessed the blue-coated French driving down on the continental militia, helping to drive them back. He got a footstool, climbed on it and reached up to the musket and touched the satiny polished stock. Beside the musket was a small picture of a man in a white wig. He wore the uniform of the continental militia and written at the bottom of the picture was *To my comrade in arms, John Treegate, with every good wish. George Washington. Colonel.*

Peter stayed several minutes in his father's study looking over the furnishings. It would be a long time before he saw them again for his father, during his absence in London, would close the house down.

When he tiptoed back past the dining room, he heard his father saying, "For rebels, sir, there is but one cure. The hangman's noose."

The boy had a hard time getting to sleep that night. His mind was occupied with his first day's apprenticeship with Mr. Fielding which was to start in the morning, and with the arguments he had heard at the dinner table, and with the discussion of Mr. Sam Adams, whom he thought must be one of the wickedest men in Boston.

And then he wondered about King George III whom he thought of in a red coat like the soldiers in Boston but three times as big as any of them. Plainly if a man were king he must be a giant. And he was busy with trying to picture his mother, who had died in his infancy, and getting her all mixed up with Mistress Polly who kept a sweetmeat shop on the corner, when he fell asleep.

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