

SOPHIA'S WAR

A TALE OF THE REVOLUTION

(A VI)

Dear Reader:

It is a terrible thing to see a man hang. But that is why I did what I did. Was I right to act in such a way? You must decide. If, when you reach my last words, you cannot forgive me, so be it. Just know that although you will not find me in any history book, I shall tell the truth about what happened no matter how painful to me, the authoress of these words. For on these pages I have dared to put my trust in your heart.

Sophia Calderwood

PART ONE

1776

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the momentous year of 1776, on the Twenty Second of September, my mother and I were rushing back to the city of New York. New York was where I was born, and where I had lived peacefully until just a few weeks before, when we had fled in fear for our lives. The war for our country's independence had come to our door.

First, my brother William, along with thousands of other patriot soldiers, ferried across the East River to the village of Brooklyn, to defend the city from a British attack. Alarmed by the danger, my father warned us we might have to leave. And indeed, the Americans lost that battle and retreated through Manhattan as Great Britain gained complete control of the City.

But there was no news of William.

Desperately worried, I could only hope he was still with General Washington's army, and not taken prisoner. At times-- though no one spoke it -- we feared he had he been killed.

Too frightened to wait until we could find out, Father said we must leave our home. It was a wise decision. Soon after British troops occupied New York, a fire erupted and destroyed many buildings. But since we had taken flight, we lacked information about our home's condition. Knowing that everything we had--money and possessions-- might have been consumed in the fire, much of our lives were in awful derangement. After some days passed, Father and Mother decided that we must go home -- if we still had a home -- and try to reclaim our lives.

Not sure how secure the way would be, Father made the decision that Mother and I, being females, should travel first. It was his belief that English soldiers would not harm a mother and child. "Are they not," he said, "our kinsmen and a civilized people?" Moreover, we would travel on a Sunday, Lord's Day. Surely, all would be peaceful. As soon as Father determined that the roads were not dangerous for him, he would follow.

So it was, that before dawn on Sunday morning, Mother and I, full of disquietude, set out to walk the twelve miles to the city. With me clutching Mother's hand tightly and barely looking up, we took the road called Harlem Lane. I may have been willowy for my twelve

years of age, and my name *was* Sophia (the Greek word for *wisdom*), but you could just as well have called me “Frightened” and be done with it. In truth, as we hurried along, all my thoughts were on William. *He must come home!*

It was late morning when we reached the outskirts of New York. By then my wood-soled shoes were soaking wet, my ankle-length linsey-woolsey dress was mud spattered, and the laces of my bonnet – a mobcap – would not stay tied.

As we approached a ripe apple orchard, we observed a group of red-coated British soldiers, armed with muskets and bayonets, marching toward us. By their side, a drummer boy beat slow swinking strokes. An officer, a heavy, sweating man with a nose as bright as his hair and red uniform, strode along in high, black jack-boots. Following him was a Negro. His slave, I supposed.

In the middle of the soldiers was a man whose hands were tied behind his back. Looking to be in his mid-twenties, and some six feet in height, he was considerably taller than the soldiers who surrounded him. Dressed in civilian clothing, he wore no jacket and had a white muslin shirt open at the collar. His light brown hair was arranged pigtail style. In the slanting morning light, I noticed his blue eyes. I will admit, I thought him handsome.

The young man walked with a dignified bearing, but his face was anything but serene. Rather, he bore a look of pale, raw intensity, with a gaze that appeared to be on nothing and everything at the same moment.

“What are they doing with that young man?” I said in a low voice to Mother.

She squeezed my hand, and in as frightened a voice as I had ever heard her utter, she said, “I think they are about to hang him.”

Open-mouthed, I watched as the men approached an apple tree upon which a ladder leaned. From a stout branch, a noose hung. Just beyond gaped an open grave and a gravedigger stood by, shovel in hand. We stopped and, along with a few other citizens, watched.

When the officer shoved the prisoner to the foot of the ladder, I heard the young man say, “May I have a . . . Bible?” His voice, low and steady, broke on the last word.

“No Bibles for damned rebel spies!” the officer shouted as if he wished us onlookers to hear. “Hoist him,” he commanded.

Three redcoats, their faces blank, stepped forward. Two grabbed the young man’s arms as if to restrain him, though I saw no attempt to break free. Would that he had! The third soldier placed the noose round the prisoner’s neck and forced him up the ladder

steps, even as another drew the rope tight under his chin.

As they did these things, each beat of the pulsing drum stabbed my heart.

Mother covered her lips with her fingers.

“Do you wish to confess?” the officer shouted.

I think the youth replied, but I was so appalled, I could not comprehend his words. In fact, such was my distress that I cried, “Have pity, sir. For God’s sake!”

The officer glared at me. “Be still, missy, or you’ll come to the same fate!”

I shrank behind Mother, but peeked round to watch.

The officer turned back to his soldiers and shouted, “Swing the rebel off!”

One of the soldiers kicked the ladder away. The young man dropped. I gasped. His neck must have broken, for he died in an instant. Perhaps *that* was God’s mercy. Sometimes a hanging is nothing but slow strangulation.

Mother, pulling my hand, said, “Sophia! Come!” Sobbing, I stumbled away.

Later we learned that the young man’s name was Nathan Hale. Over time, his death proved of greater consequence than his life.

Without any doubt, it altered the history of my country as it altered mine. Indeed, what I had just witnessed was the beginning of my extraordinary adventures.

I shall tell you what happened.