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A LITTLE
REVENGE

BENJAMIN FRANKLIN
AND
HIS SON

BY

Willard Sterne Randall



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I

MY SON WAS
OF MUCH
USE TO ME





1

WE EXPECT THE ENEMY EVERY HOUR

1755

FOR THE FOURTH ICY JANUARY DAY SINCE THEY HAD LEFT the fortified town of Bethlehem, the Pennsylvania militiamen slogged northwest along the Lehigh River. Hunched under sodden wool coats, they bent into the burning cold wind, their muskets hanging heavily in the hard slanting rain. Aware that the Indians were spying them out, they scanned the thick rocky cover to the left, bushes, boulders and trees to the right. As they trudged along the narrow wagon road, their wet boots slithered and crunched through ice-crusting puddles. They made no more than a mile an hour. Occasionally they glanced up for signals from the officer at the head of the column, then pushed ahead, eager to clear the long gap through Kittatinny Mountain as quickly as they could. If an attack came in this rain, their guns would be useless: they had just learned that eleven of the thirteen militiamen who had left Bethlehem the same day had been killed by Indians when their soaked weapons misfired.¹

Captain William Franklin, the only seasoned officer on the march, rode the lead horse, his scarlet grenadier's uniform a conspicuous target for Indian snipers. Notwithstanding, he had deployed his 172-man force with an eye to avoiding the fatal mistakes made by General Edward Braddock, whose campaign to Fort Duquesne against the French and Indians last July had ended in disaster at the Monongahela River. (In that tangled wilderness

nightmare, British redcoats had paraded in neat ranks into a three-hour cross fire.) Here, the twenty-two cavalymen were strung out behind Franklin to give the appearance of a much larger force, and behind them marched the infantrymen in single file, Indian fashion, ready to take cover quickly. Ahead, a small contingent of scouts shielded the main body against ambush: they probed thickets and ravines and took each hill as the column approached. Bringing up the rear were the heavy Conestoga supply wagons, each pulled by a plodding six-horse team, and the guard of militiamen. Commander of the expedition was Benjamin Franklin, recently elected colonel of the Pennsylvania militia. Clad in a great blue coat, he rode half-way back in the column with politician friends. Every so often he had to urge the supply teams forward while the rest of the expedition, at Captain Franklin's command, waited for them to catch up.

The men themselves needed no urging. Since Braddock's defeat, all too many of them had viewed the mutilated bodies of relatives and friends, victims of Indian raids along the defenseless 150-mile Pennsylvania frontier. In the last six months, more than four hundred settlers had been killed and an even greater number of women and children dragged west into captivity.² At last, on November 25, 1755, the Pennsylvania Assembly had voted the funds to raise a militia for defense. After seven weeks of preparation, the expedition was on its way to build the first of several forts.

The two men leading the grim little column personified the changes sweeping war-torn America as the year 1756 began. Benjamin Franklin, at fifty, had already lived through two wars between the French and the English. His face was puffy and smooth from gout, his body overweight and rounded into the peculiar barrel shape of the once-powerful swimmer too long out of the water. By now his hairline had receded until he considered his brown wig a necessity. His high, convex brow — his most distinctive feature — called attention to his dark, penetrating, unwavering eyes.

Half his age, William Franklin was a smoother, thinner, sharper replica of his father, with the same impressive forehead, the same strong, straight nose apostrophizing the same set jaw and pronounced chin. Both men were tall for their time, Benjamin approaching six feet, William beyond it. Hardened by military service on the frontier, by long canoe trips into the wilderness, William

had been at home on horses since he was ten. Acute, whimsical, he was as affable on the surface as his father, but with more elegant manners, more polish.

The older man had, like many successful men, grown vain as he became rich. The younger was already self-assured. He had assimilated easily all his father's hard-bought acquisitions of knowledge, wealth and position, and was determined to find new ways to shape and civilize the world he and his generation would inherit. Relations between the two were unusually close. Together they attacked vehemently any enemy who threatened either of them — as vehemently as they would later oppose each other in their single-minded Franklin drive to prevail no matter what the cost.

In recent years Benjamin had emerged gradually as the pivot of power in Pennsylvania. Neither proprietary hireling nor Quaker pacifist, he had quietly, inauspiciously, entered politics by simply applying for the uncoveted Assembly clerkship. His highly successful publishing business coupled with his increasingly profitable post as deputy postmaster general for the six northern American colonies, had afforded him more and more leisure for scientific experiments, political activities, and an impressive list of civic benefactions, all publicized in his news columns. While climbing politically, he had adroitly handed over lesser perquisites to William. He made "Billy" (as he insisted on calling him) clerk of the Assembly, then postmaster of Philadelphia, then comptroller general of the British-American postal system. William accepted all these posts with enthusiasm. In addition, he acted as his father's secretary on frequent political and postal travels, and as his assistant in most of the electrical experiments; he also lent his skillful pen to his father's political battles.

William's close collaboration with his famous father for twenty-five years and his contributions to his father's activities — political, military and scientific — have been all but forgotten in the two hundred years since the American Revolution. It may have been Benjamin Franklin himself who obliterated his son. One cause of William's almost total obscurity can be found by studying Benjamin's autobiography. The first, incomplete draft was, in fact, addressed to "Dear Son." It was written in the summer of 1771 while Benjamin was visiting friends in the Sussex countryside. At that

time he was still close to William: their relationship had not yet become clouded by the Revolution. He stated his purpose clearly: "I have ever had a pleasure in obtaining any little anecdotes of my ancestors. You may remember the enquiries I made among the remains of my relations when you were with me in England. . . . Now imagining it may be equally agreeable to you to know the circumstances of my life, many of which you are yet unacquainted with, and expecting a week's uninterrupted leisure in my present country retirement, I sit down to write them to you." If Franklin had any ulterior motive at this time, it was to inspire his son with the story of his frugal, industrious rise "from the poverty and obscurity in which I was born and bred to a state of affluence." Franklin carried the narrative only as far as 1730, the year in which he took Deborah Read as his common-law wife. He had to stop writing when his vacation was over.

Twelve years passed before he returned to his autobiography. He and his son had become enemies at the start of the Revolution. And as Franklin took up the telling of the next twenty years of his life — the portion that covered so many of his son's experiences as his aide, secretary, assistant in scientific experiments, and confidant in politics — he all but excised William from the narrative. Only once, when writing of the fort-building expedition on the Pennsylvania frontier, did he acknowledge that William was "of great use to me."

Again, Franklin interrupted the work on his manuscript. Five years later, in 1788, he finally finished it. By then he had met with William for the one and only time since their estrangement, and had written his last will and testament, disinheriting him.

If Franklin's best-known piece of writing virtually omitted his son, William's records cannot compensate: they were almost entirely destroyed during the Revolution while he languished in an American prison. His letters to friends and family in England and America, his diaries, journals, ledgers, financial records and manuscripts were all lost in a fire that consumed a British army warehouse containing everything he possessed. Much of what remains he wrote when he was an embittered exile in England. Both father's and son's surviving accounts of each other are therefore self-serving documents written after the breach between them.

Fortunately, scattered through archives in Canada, England and America is enough surviving evidence to permit the resurrection of William Franklin.

In view of the muddled state of Pennsylvania politics in the 1750's, it is surprising that the Franklins' fort-building expedition was ever authorized, even in the face of the French and Indian incursions. By 1756, the Quaker party, for seventy-five years all-powerful, represented only orthodox members of the Society of Friends. Outwardly a solid political bloc, the Friends were actually and hopelessly divided into factions; but though a minority, they managed still to control the German and Scotch-Irish majority by cleverly manipulated election laws. The Quaker party had yielded much influence to the proprietary party, which consisted of friends and hangers-on of the Penn family, the feudal proprietors of the privately owned province. The party was led by William Penn's assertive son Thomas, who lived in London and acted through appointed deputy governors in Philadelphia. He and his brothers had long since ceased to be practicing Quakers and were not averse to war, only to bearing its costs. The third party, rising fast, was the antipacifist and antiproprietary party led by the populist Benjamin Franklin; it was well on the way to taking control of the provincial legislature.

All Quakers agreed on one keystone doctrine: fighting was the deadliest sin. Even self-defense brought expulsion from Quaker meeting. Unarmed, facing its first serious military threat from the Indians, the rich province lay defenseless. All along its borders, the Indians were stirring, aroused by Penn land deals they neither understood nor appreciated. Delawares, Shawnees, the Six Nations tribes — all for the first time were listening to promises of the French Canadians who were fomenting war. In March of 1755, after the latest land sale, Chief Logan, the representative of the Six Nations to the Pennsylvania government, had warned the colonists that "whosoever of the white should venture to settle any land belonging hitherto to the Indians will have his creatures killed first, and then if they do not desist, they themselves would be killed, without distinction, let the consequence be what it would."³

While orthodox Quakers opposed war from principle, Quaker

merchants, even if they were willing to be defended, did not want war with the Indians for quite another reason: war would disrupt business. To an increasingly profitable extent, their customers were Indians. In exchange for furs, Quaker merchants sold the Indians English iron kettles and English woolen blankets. They also sold them English-made hatchets, knives and guns.

In the autumn of 1755, the seventy-five-year-long Quaker quandary over self-defense was resolved, at first as silently and stealthily as the fall of maple leaves in the Appalachian forests, then with the ferocity of shrieking, tomahawk-wielding Indian war parties.

When no retaliation came for the defeat of Braddock, the French and their Indian allies sent out small raiding parties to attack solitary targets. Then they became bolder. By October, bands of up to two hundred Delawares were ranging east from Fort Duquesne. On the eighteenth a large party struck the settlement of Penn's Creek on the Susquehanna River within a hundred miles of Philadelphia. The first man in the capital to learn of the attack — from a post rider who galloped in to report the news — was the young postmaster, William Franklin. He, in turn, rushed word to his father, who was chairman of the legislature's committee on defense. The elder Franklin quickly relayed word to London: "Just now arrived in town an express from our frontiers, with the bad news that eight families of Pennsylvanians were cut off last week. . . . Thirteen men and women were found scalped and dead and twelve children are missing."⁴ While Franklin was no doubt worried by the raiders' boldness, privately he evinced scant sympathy for the settlers: the raid was "a natural consequence of the loose manner of settling in these colonies, picking here and there a good piece of land and sitting down at such a distance from each other."⁵

Without waiting for help from far-off Philadelphia politicians, forty-five armed neighbors hurried upriver to bury the dead at Penn's Creek. A friendly Indian interpreter warned them of a general attack, urged them to avoid the usual path home. Suspecting a trick, the whites ignored him. Before they could reach their cabins, they were ambushed. Four were wounded fatally; four drowned as they tried to escape across the thin river ice. One survivor hastily wrote Franklin: "I have not yet moved my family, not caring to dis-

Quaker's
ANTI-
WAR
PHIL.

courage others. We expect the enemy every hour. I have cut holes through my house . . . and am determined to hold out to the last extremity, hoping for protection from the province soon.”⁶

As Quaker leaders rose in meetinghouses and the State House to warn against deviating from pacifist doctrine, Indian raiders razed the cabins of Scotch-Irish settlers within two days' ride of Philadelphia. On October 11, in the first raid east of the Susquehanna, 120 warriors attacked farms just west of Reading. After murdering fifteen men and women, and scalping three children (who survived), they set fire to scores of houses and destroyed large numbers of cattle and horses, quantities of grain and fodder. The terror was intensified when farmers recognized old Indian neighbors among the war parties. One hundred other killings were reported within a hundred miles of Philadelphia. More than forty settlements were burned. Frightened families packed what they could into their wagons and fled east toward Reading. For fifty miles south, the riverfront settlements emptied. Indians once again held dominion over the forests of Pennsylvania.

What William Penn, a political and religious refugee from England, had envisioned as a Holy Experiment, a peaceable kingdom in a new world, by 1755 had become wracked by rigged elections, patronage schemes, land swindles, riots and ethnic prejudice.

The commonwealth of Pennsylvania had taken root well enough: more than a hundred shiploads of immigrants arrived in 1682 alone, lured by Penn's promotion. "The soil is good, air serene from the cedar, pine and sassafras with the wild myrtle of great fragrance," he wrote. "I have had better venison, bigger, more tender, as fat as in England. Turkeys of the wood I had of 50 pounds weight . . . flowers that for color, largeness and beauty excel."⁷

Twice jailed in the Tower of London for his beliefs, Penn spent two decades formulating his plan of government. He consulted John Locke and Algernon Sidney, rewrote his *Frame of Government* seventeen times. The final version embodied a far-reaching expansion of English civil liberties. Not long after Quaker missionaries were hanged in Boston, Penn granted colonists full religious toleration, thereby attracting immigrants of every faith.