

The Witness Tree

He had eaten too many apple duffs.

If his sister hadn't insisted on hoarding them, determined they were only for visitors at tea, maybe he wouldn't have shoveled so many of them into his gullet, fearful of being caught and stopped. But here he was, waddling up Marcus Hill as fast as his chubby legs could carry him, which was not very fast at all.

He listened to himself huffing like an ox at the end of a furrow and cringed at the sweat soaked wool breeches rubbing his thighs raw. He clawed desperately at stalks of the winter hay, trying to use their flimsy bodies as leverage to pull himself upward.

All that was needed to stop the redcoats was a trek up Marcus Hill.

When he finally reached the top, he collapsed to his knees and fell forward on his hands, panting and wailing and inches from retching in the patchy ice-covered grass. His father had booted him out the door, telling him he must run, but the excitement must have clouded his eyes, for no one would think Thomas could run anywhere at all. They should have sent his sister instead. Even hampered by petticoats she could have made it to the militia encampment hours before Thomas would. Four miles was four miles too long.

He coughed on the brittle winter air and sat back on his haunches. His heart gradually slowed until he remembered the sight of the muddy red coats and shiny bayonets marching quickstep through the hollow towards their house. He needed to get a move on.

He jogged down the gentler back side of the hill towards the Scott property, already dreading trying to haul himself over the fence. He braced himself against the interlaced wooden poles, bemoaning that it was too high for him to step over and he was too thick to roll between them. He leaned over to confirm his width and some of the duffs finally came up, splattering his shoes and jacket. Why couldn't his family have stayed safely in England with reasonable people, instead of bringing them all to a country of rabble rousers?

He finally hefted himself high enough to topple over to the other side in a graceless flop of creaking wood and snagged wool. After a few moments of trying to dislodge splinters from his britches, Thomas gave it up as a lost cause and continued trundling towards the Scott homestead. With any luck Rupert Scott would be home and the task of informing the militia could be passed on to him.

As he ran (took a stumbling quick-walk) towards the porch he had planned on a strong, manly holler, signifying the dignity and importance of his mission. His first attempt came out more like the mewl of a drowning cat. The second attempt was even more pitiable. Finally, he lowered his expectations and managed a tortured "Hallo!"

Nettie Scott waddled onto the porch to peer at him.

"Thomas? Is that you? Who's ailing?!"

She swung her very pregnant belly down the two steps to the yard and gingerly crept towards him.

"No." *Wheeze.* "No one's ailing yet. The Brits are marching down the road!" Nettie stared at him blankly.

"...I... I'm supposed to be warning the militia."

Thomas realized Nettie was more frozen in fear than confusion. Her hands were clutching her belly like claws.

"Where... is Mr. Scott?"

"He... He's out in the field out back."

Thomas felt the opportunity to be a man and seized it. "Go inside, lock the door. Tamp down all the lights and the fire and maybe they'll think this stead is abandoned. I'll shout to him as I go by."

"Yes, yes of course." Mrs. Scott turned and scurried back to the house, about as fast as a snail might have escaped the garden trowel. Thomas resumed his jaunty stagger past the homestead and towards the woods. He skirted the tree line a bit to work his way back towards the field. Rupert appeared to be as far away from the tree line as possible. Of course he was. Refusing to spend more effort wandering off course, Thomas stood at the tree line and hooted, trying to get Rupert's attention. Thomas never knew if Rupert heard him.

It felt like a sandbag made of iron had been shoved between his shoulder blades. Thomas toppled forward too fast to catch himself by the hands, winding up with a face full of a dusty abandoned anthill. "Roll 'im over!" The command sounded as though it came from miles away.

Thomas was unceremoniously flipped like a sausage and felt four feet step onto his arms and legs, pinning him down. He blinked rapidly, trying to get the dirt out of his eyes. "And where are you off to, Piggy?"

This was undeniably bad.

Thomas flapped his lips wordlessly as his hands fluttered in helpless confusion. The small band of red jacketed soldiers laughed, except for the flint faced man looming directly over Thomas. "Shut it!" he barked. Apart from the four pinning him down, Thomas would have counted about five other soldiers standing around if he had sense enough to do so. The chuckles died down, leaving behind specters of smiles that were anything but welcoming.

"So piggy. Get yourself together. You seem to be going somewhere in an awful hurry. Where might that be?"

Thomas gulped down frigid air and tried to think. He had to get to the camp and warn the militia. He couldn't tell the British where the militia were. He was supposed to be the hero today...

With a whirl of brass Thomas became vaguely aware of a bayonet knife pressing into his flesh, somewhere below his chins. "Think carefully little piggy, you'll only have one chance."

Panic drove all thoughts of heroism, of everything, from Thomas's mind.

"Warn... militia" he managed to wheeze out. The flinty man raised an eyebrow.

"Well, they can't be far. This bull calf looks like he could barely make it across a kitchen," one of the other soldiers said, eliciting the guffaws of his compatriots.

"I guess you'll be having some company," the flinty man said.

"N-no."

"What did you say?"

“No. I won’t show you where.” Maybe it wasn’t too late for a little heroism after all. A band of soldiers stumbling blindly had to give more warning than a stealthy band with a guide.

“Stick him.”

The reality of the knife gouging into his neck was harsher than he expected. Were these his last minutes? Was he to die, gormlessly in the dirt, half-digested apple staining his breeches and shirt soaked in sweat? Thomas gave up. “Fine!” It came out as a girlish shriek. Who was he kidding? He barely made it up Marcus Hill. He hadn’t leapt the fence with the grace of strapping young men from the village. He couldn’t even get enough air to yell to Rupert across a field. How could anyone expect him to stand up to a roving band of redcoats?

“What’s that?”

“I’ll.” He closed his eyes, as though darkness would make his treachery less true. “I’ll take you.”

The bayonet was whipped away fast enough to nick his cheek and the boots on his body were replaced by snatching hands hauling him painfully to his feet.

“Lead the way.”

Wiping his face, Thomas continued his trudge, this time pointing away from the Scott field and into the woods. Surely he could think of something to warn the militia as they got closer. A shout? What would he shout? Could he lead the soldier astray? They had been all too willing to stab him for withholding information; misleading would result in certain death. The sound of his own exhausted shambling was louder than the careful steps of the band behind him. He heard them murmuring behind him, burbling like his very own traveling stream, sinking him deeper into his own thoughts.

After some time, the wooded path he followed began a long and steady incline. The wheezing came back, loud enough to draw tittering laughs from the band at his back. He stopped looking at his shuffling feet long enough to see the first cardinal of the season perched on a tree branch a few feet in front of him. It chirped encouragingly, and as he drew near, flew a few trees further down the path and chirped again. What a stupid little bird. As he drew near again, it did the same thing, beckoning him forward. He stumbled and looked down, noticing for the first time the dusty imprint of a boot on his thick thigh. It made him angry.

The cardinal whistled a little tune, and Thomas looked up again. As it continued leading him forward, he felt heartened somehow. This bird, this cardinal, was drawing him forward, giving him strength, encouraging his efforts, bright red in the dull ashy grey of winter trees. He had at least a mile left to puzzle together a plan. He felt his lungs expand, like his breath was bringing him new life. His burning thighs had numbed, and he thrust himself up the hill with bizarre new strength. He suddenly felt invincible.

Right over this crest, the militia were encamped half a mile into the gully. If the group started the descent, he could yell something and the scouts could warn the rest of them, hopefully with enough time to put up a decent fight. *Ambush!* That’s what he would yell. It was clear, concise, and with enough luck he could just topple forward and roll down the rest of the hill and out of immediate danger. Thomas’s breath came faster from eager excitement, and he felt as though he was

practically running up the incline, an action that did not go unnoticed by the flint-faced man.

As they crested the gully, Thomas reached out a hand to lean against a slender sapling, thick enough to prove it would someday be a tree, but still in the infancy of its long life. As he surveyed the gully, plotting how far down he would go before calling out, he was surprised by a sudden heat in his back. Was it sweat?

He leaned into the tree to look behind him at the band of soldiers and the sensation returned, this time propelling him into the sapling. He realized it wasn't heat, but a sharp, burning pain. The air left his lungs, and he felt his arms feebly flap around the tree he was pinned to. When the bayonet was withdrawn, the pain blared dazzlingly through his whole body. He sank to his knees, for the last time today, and could barely hear the flint faced man thank him for his service, before the rapid loss of blood caused him to pass out.

The British soldiers skirted his body and crept into the gully, creeping down to assess the encampment they were sure was close. A fortuitously napping scout allowed their unnoticed entrance.

The numerous skirmishes in the area caused historians to preserve these paths, these fences, these encampments. Horrors and atrocities were memorialized in romantic glory for all posterity. Maybe not this skirmish. Maybe not this horror.

As a survivor, the sapling was awarded, in adulthood, a brass plaque with two bold words in a suitable font. Two words that failed to reveal the truth of all it had seen.