

The World Turn'd Upside Down

BY M.D. BLOEMKER

Sunlight poured through a thin crack in the shuttered window, barely scratching the gloom inside the small, spare room. The old man in the rocking chair sat very still, as though spent by the effort it had taken him to nudge the shutters closed over an hour ago. In his left hand, he clutched the Bible he had insisted he wanted to be left alone to read, though he had not even so much as opened the cover; on a small table near his right elbow lay breakfast, untouched and cold. His right hand lingered on the cup he'd set on the table, retrieving it after only a few seconds of moral hesitation. Too early in the day, a memory from his youth chided as his trembling hand guided another gulp of wine to his mouth. Yet no one would begrudge an old man this little comfort, he knew, closing his eyes as the gentle warmth slid down his throat. Least of all young Elizabeth, who had come to him as she had done every morning for the past two years, with a hot breakfast that he more often than not left uneaten, and another bottle of her late uncle's finest elderberry wine. She would be back, he knew, later today, to chide him gently if she found he hadn't eaten, then to disappear into other parts of the house for an hour or more before returning to replace the breakfast dish with dinner. And every Sunday she came to fetch him for church, bearing his grumbling with her usual grace and warm disposition, as though she knew as he did that a few minutes spent on her arm and in her company did more to ease the old aches in his bones than all of the potions in Abington's apothecary.

Yes, Elizabeth was a fine woman, a treasure that any man would be proud to claim for his own. Any man, that is, save for his own son.

Another sip of wine did little to ease the old, familiar pain that grew in his heart. What sins had he committed in his youth to deserve such a wastrel as his son? He'd stormed and thundered to no avail, watching as Jeremy had trifled with Elizabeth's affections, promising nothing in return--and in the end, that is what the poor girl had been left with. Jeremy, who had been prone to prolonged, unexplained disappearances from his small home town of Chester, had finally left for good in the summer of 1779, leaving only a short note that expressed no regret or emotion of any kind. And yet Elizabeth listened with strange patience as an embittered father railed at his son's abandonment of her, and gently resisted the old man's attempts to persuade her to accept the attentions of other eligible young men.

For a time, he thought that she blamed him for driving Jeremy away. It must have been difficult, he had to admit, for the young man to live under the same roof as Robert. Robert, the handsome, accomplished older son; Robert, who had given his father joy and pride instead of embarrassment and humiliation....

Robert, who had died a hero.

That's what he had been assured as he stood at the grave all those years ago, wrapped in a coldness that had refused to let the tears come. Despite his advancing age, John Larkin's memory was still sharp; he could remember very clearly the faces of the mourners, some strangers among them who had praised Robert with a warmth that went beyond simple compassion for an old man's grief. Others might consider the actions that had led to Robert's death to be treason, and at the time the circumstances did indeed have to be kept secret for fear of reprisals from the British occupation forces. But the troops were long gone now, withdrawn from Philadelphia and the surrounding countryside to follow General Washington's ragged army south. The truth about Robert passed from rumor to fact, and as the Chester residents' admiration for Mayor Larkin's eldest son grew, so did their disdain for his youngest.

A few people in Chester remained distant from the rumor and invective, Elizabeth among them. In particular, the blacksmith and apothecary kept their opinions unspoken, which Larkin found unsurprising since they had long been Jeremy's staunchest friends. Both Isak Poole and Henry Abington tended to come around more often than anyone else save Elizabeth, offering assistance which he always refused, and companionship which he often found himself accepting after much resistance. He had the strongest feeling that they felt somehow responsible for him, as if they were trying in some small way to make up for his son's desertion. And he must have tested their patience sorely,

especially when the elderberry wine loosened his tongue of every hateful thing he could think to say about Jeremy. Yet they only listened to him with sadness and sometimes pain in their eyes.

A knock on the front door brought him out of a half-doze with a start and he barely kept the Bible from slipping off his lap. Not Elizabeth, surely--she usually let herself in, and it was no where near time for dinner. And a second rap, as rapid and urgent as the first, led him to suspect that this was not merely a social call from one of his neighbors.

"Mr. Larkin?" A breathless call followed the fifth set of knocks as the old man finally shuffled to the front door. "Mr. Larkin, are y--?"

"Oh, for pity's sake," he grumbled, yanking open the door to reveal the blacksmith, hand raised in mid-knock. "Isak? What's all the fuss?"

The young black man, unusually flustered, broke into a smile upon seeing Larkin's scowling face. "Mr. Larkin, there's someone I want you to meet."

"You do, do you? Well, where is he?"

"He's not here. I mean, he's....I'll have to take you to see him."

"Who is it, then?"

"Someone who has news of Jeremy, sir."

"Jeremy," Larkin repeated weakly. He stared at Isak's anxious face until he could speak again. "What makes you think I'd want such news?"

There it was again, that same shadow of pain that he'd glimpsed in the young man's eyes on more than one occasion. "Sir, please. I think you should come."

"I suggest to you that I'd rather spend my time in more useful pursuits. Perhaps you'll find Miss Elizabeth Coates more receptive to the news. Good day."

"Mr. Larkin, please." The desperate edge in the blacksmith's voice kept him from closing the door. "I...I think you will want to hear what he has to say."

He studied Isak for a long moment, noting only then the strange agitation that he had never before seen the normally placid young man exhibit. Behind it was almost an exhilaration, which banished his first dread fear that Isak was the bearer of bad tidings. And most evident was the silent plea in the blacksmith's eyes that made it nearly impossible to turn away in a prideful huff.

Drawing a long breath, he held it as he kept an eye on Isak's expectant face. "All right," he grumbled on a sigh. "Where are we going?"

"The Wild Boar, sir. This way, he sent a coach for you."

"The Wild Boar?" Closing the door tightly behind him, Larkin reluctantly followed Isak down the steps. "That's a good ten miles west of here! Why couldn't this friend of yours manage a few miles closer?"

"He's a very busy man, sir, and he's just passing through. Mind your step, now."

With Isak's hand on his arm, Larkin finally looked up to see the closed coach he was about to enter. His mouth fell open in astonishment to see the richly lacquered wood gracefully lined in gold, satin curtains and velvet covered seats. "My stars," he breathed. "Who is this man?"

Isak smiled wryly as he helped Larkin into the coach, fastening the door securely. "A friend, sir. Just a friend."

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The journey was a rough one, over a little used western track connecting the two major north-south routes that stretched from Boston to Richmond. Years earlier, British troops had patrolled this area diligently, engaging in frequent skirmishes with small but amazingly well-organized bands of rebels whose exploits were now legend. Robert Larkin had been one of the first rebel leaders; his death had been greeted with open relief by the commander of the British garrison stationed in Chester, who felt that the back of the resistance had been broken. He'd been proven wrong, finding himself beset by an increased wave of rebel activity led by a mysterious man who had taken on Robert's cause as well as his non-de-guerre, Captain Yankee Doodle, and made it uniquely his own. The identity of this rebel leader had never been revealed, not even after the troop withdrawal that had given Yankee Doodle his tacit victory. Some said that he had died during one of the final skirmishes; others said that he had merely moved on with Washington's army

and was even now gaining new notoriety for himself in the backwaters of South Carolina. Others claimed that he had never existed at all, and was merely an imaginary scapegoat upon which to pin the rebel transgressions of many.

Larkin knew, in his heart, that such a man had indeed existed. Someone who had stood with Robert, who had been implicitly trusted by him, had become Captain Yankee Doodle, and to this day, Larkin wished he could have met him and shaken his hand. Through him, Robert's spirit had lived on; through him, he could live with pride, knowing that his son's death had not been in vain.

The coach slowed to a halt, rousing him from a reverie. Isak tossed the reins to a stable-boy, jumping down to open the coach door. Larkin accepted his help descending from the coach, mindful of muscles stiffened by the long, rough ride. The barking of dogs and the raucous shouts of the stablemen as the coach was led away brought the innkeeper to the front door of the Wild Boar, a modest frame building set back from the crossroads in a pleasant, sylvan setting. Both men were welcomed warmly, led to the front room where their host seated them and supplied them mugs of something warm, frothy and strong. Wearied by the journey, Larkin drank deeply, for the moment forgetting his curiosity over his summons to this out-of-the-way place. Isak stayed with him in companionable silence, although he still seemed tense and expectant. At one point, Larkin sighed and closed his eyes, not opening them until the brew had brought some strength back to his old bones. Seeing the subtle change on the old man's face, Isak suddenly smiled and relaxed. Leaning back, he made a quick gesture which the landlord, hovering nearby, understood with a nod before turning to leave the main room.

Larkin kept very still, watching his knuckles whiten around the mug handle. He couldn't deny that part of him was desperate for this promised news of his prodigal son, but stubborn pride kept it firmly at bay. If all was well with the boy, it only stood to reason that he would have wasted no time in making it known to his father. If during the past two years he'd managed to forge a life for himself that included respectability and an unblemished reputation, he wouldn't need friends, albeit rich ones, to cart his father off to a distant tavern to impart tidings of his good fortune. No, the news that John Larkin had been summoned to this place to hear this day would not bring him joy, he was certain of that. The pain in his heart was not for himself, though. He had already suffered his loss, had accepted it as final and irrevocable. No, his sorrow was for poor Elizabeth, for the light of hope in her eyes that had survived undimmed for nearly two years, but that he was sure was now doomed to die.

Isak's hand went to his shoulder as he rose, half-turning towards the door leading to the back rooms of the tavern. From the corner of his eye, Larkin noted the entrance of two men and duly rose, accepting Isak's firm grip on his elbow to steady him.

His eyes, dimmed by age, strained in the lantern-lit gloom to see the face of the gentleman who stepped past the innkeeper, approaching them with a smile of welcome. A gentleman, yes, there could be no mistake about that. His features were fine-boned, aristocratic, his black hair impeccably groomed. But his most remarkable feature was his army uniform, rebel blue and tan, expensively tailored and resplendent with colorful ribbons and medals. Beneath one arm he carried a plumed hat, which he set aside on a nearby table before extending his hand in greeting as Isak said quietly, "Mr. Larkin, sir, I would like to introduce to you General Lafayette."

"My very great honor, monsieur," the young man said, graciously taking Larkin's shock-frozen hand to complete the handshake. "I apologize for the unusual circumstances of this meeting, but I assure you that a certain amount of secrecy is involved in my return to Pennsylvania."

"You certainly needn't explain, nor apologize," Larkin said, recovering his composure with an abrupt clearing of his throat. "Not to me. We have, after all, met once before."

Lafayette's bright eyes softened. "You remember."

"I could not forget. I've forgotten nothing about that day--that terrible day when Robert was laid to his rest. I remember...everything."

Warmth surged up in the smile that flickered on Lafayette's face. "I, too, remember. Especially your splendid eulogy--words from the heart, I believe?"

"Yes," Larkin said reluctantly, pulled by the memory. "He died for a cause that he...that we believed in. In the face of adversity, he followed his conscience. He never faltered, never compromised. No one could have asked for a finer son."

He harrumphed, unsuccessfully covering the break in his hoarsened voice. Lafayette, still smiling quietly, nodded his understanding. "He was one of the bravest men under my command, and to this day, I mourn his loss deeply. But do you know, sir--I believe that one of his greatest gifts to me, besides his loyalty and bravery which countless times proved invaluable to me and to the cause we both served, was his choice of successor."

Confused, Larkin stared at the strange light dancing in the young general's eyes. "Sir?" he managed weakly.

"I know that you are aware of the fact that the legend of Captain Yankee Doodle did not die with your son Robert."

"Yes, of course I'm aware," Larkin said, still numb. "For nearly fifteen months, there was nary a topic of conversation in the market or the church meetings but the exploits of the rebel captain, be he hailed hero or villain."

"Fifteen months," Lafayette repeated reflectively. "In that time, he bedeviled and disrupted British garrisons from Wilmington to Trenton, providing valuable intelligence information to myself and to General Washington while protecting the fortunes and lives of those who would aid and further our cause at the risk of his own life. You must tell me, monsieur--was this brave man's identity ever made known?"

"No." Completely bewildered, Larkin barely managed to shake his head. "Never, sir. But surely, from what you've just said--you must know?"

Lafayette hesitated before nodding, his smile tightening. "A painful, yet necessary confidence it was to keep, monsieur. Only a handful of us knew the name and the face of the man that others knew only as Captain Yankee Doodle. The danger was not just to him, or to the cause he served--but to his friends. And his family."

A chill ran deep through him as he stared at the intense light in the general's eyes. "What are you saying to me, sir?" he demanded without breath.

"That you, Monsieur Larkin, have much of which to be proud," Lafayette said softly. "And that I hope that the revelations of this day will, in some small way, make up for some of the great pain you have suffered these past years."

Half-turning, he raised his hand to the innkeeper, who ducked his head out the main door. "It is," Lafayette said, with a smile and measured diction, "my very great honor, sir, to introduce to you--Captain Yankee Doodle."

Unable to get his breath, Larkin stared at the door as another young soldier emerged, his blue and tan uniform a less elaborately decorated version of Lafayette's own. Removing his tri-corner hat, he hastily smoothed blond hair back into place, then smiled self-consciously.

"Hello, Father," he said quietly.

Larkin barely felt Isak's hand tighten around his arm as he stared into the face he had not seen for nearly two years, and had long ago reconciled himself to the belief that he would never see again.

"Jeremy," he whispered without breath, closing his eyes when his equilibrium wavered. He sagged into the support of Isak's bracing arm around his shoulders. "Jeremy...."

"Father?"

The achingly familiar voice held alarm, and Larkin forced himself to face it, opening his eyes to see that the young man had approached a step, extending a hand towards him. He stood frozen, as though suddenly unsure whether his concern or his touch would be welcome.

In the tense silence, Larkin drew a steadying breath and struggled to regain a measure of composure and dignity. "You look well," he managed with great difficulty. "Very well indeed."

"Thank you, sir," Jeremy responded hesitantly, drawing back. He exchanged an uncertain glance with Lafayette, who nodded silent support.

"You...." Words failed him as he stared at the young man, at the uniform he wore and the medals prominently displayed on his chest. And suddenly he knew. All the years of anguish and pain, wringing his hands as his youngest son wasted his days in foolish pursuits--all of it had been a lie. A carefully conceived and promoted facade, successfully concealing the truth of the man that Jeremy Larkin was, had indeed always been. The truth stood before him now, wearing the uniform of an officer. Captain Yankee Doodle.

His head spun as the pieces, held apart by the deception and his own stubborn pride, finally fell into place. A freedom fighter, a spy, a phantom, a hero, a legend--all the things credited to the infamous Captain, so too was Jeremy Larkin. And all the years he had not known the truth, all those terrible, wasted years meant nothing as he opened his eyes once more to look into the anxious face of his son.

The words came on a wave of emotion, filled with pride and love as he held out his trembling hands. "My son."

With a cry of joy and relief, Jeremy fell into his father's fierce embrace, clinging as though it would break his heart to ever let go again.

Isak scuttled back, making his way around the perimeter of the room to gain the general's side. "You were right," the young black man whispered around his huge smile. "Thank the Lord, you were right."

"Aye," Lafayette nodded reflectively. "This is as it was meant to be. Only would that this moment had come years earlier, and at so much less cost. You made very good time, mon ami--thank you for your efforts."

Isak gave him an amused look. "Now, you know I wouldn't have missed this for anything. But Henry is going to be mighty annoyed that he did."

"Well...." A smile flickering on his face, Lafayette shrugged. "I believe that the news he will bring will more than compensate. Hais non?"

Isak stifled a laugh, nodding his understanding. His attention was drawn back to the other side of the room as they heard Jeremy try to speak in a voice breathless with emotion. "I'm sorry, Father, for everything I've done to you, everything I've put you through...."

"No." Larkin's hand tightened on his son's arm as he shook his head tersely. "I believe that I...I understand many things now, chief among them the very great possibility that it is I who owe you my most heartfelt apologies."

"You owe me nothing, father," Jeremy assured him fervently.

Accepting his forgiveness with a grateful nod, Larkin took a moment to steady himself, blinking the blur of wetness from his eyes. "You must tell me everything," he declared in a voice filled with warmth and pride. "This uniform--you are an officer?"

Jeremy glanced back at Lafayette. "A special commission, sir...."

"In recognition for services rendered both as a civilian and as a special operative assigned to the First Pennsylvania under my command," the general offered at Larkin's inquiring look. "In addition, because he has proven indispensable to myself and to the cause we both serve, I have appointed him my personal aide-de-camp."

Larkin swallowed, nodding. "I owe you thanks, General Lafayette, for bringing my son back to me."

"It is I, Monsieur Larkin, who must express gratitude to you," Lafayette smiled warmly. "For giving to me two of the bravest men it has ever been my honor to know." He extended his hand, which Larkin took hesitantly. "Your pardon, mon ami, I have erred," the general amended as he folded his free hand over their clasped ones. "Three of the bravest men that I will ever know."

"Thank you, sir," Larkin said softly.

"You are my guests tonight." The general made an expansive gesture, and made a short bow to the innkeeper. "Monsieur Carson has been good enough to follow my instructions to the letter and has given his establishment over to me for my exclusive use. You may order food and drink as you like, and quarters are being prepared for you upstairs for a night's lodging." He held up a hand, stilling Larkin's protest. "I insist, sir. Our time here is short, and I believe this is the ideal way to make the most of it."

"You're leaving," Larkin said without strength, less a question than a dread confirmation of what he'd already suspected. "So soon."

"I'm sorry, father," Jeremy said softly. "I must."

He nodded, but the words came with difficulty. "Then I suppose that we should take the general's advice, and be grateful for what little time we do have."

"I'll return as soon as I am able," Jeremy assured him.

"I know you will," he whispered. Drawing a deep breath, he straightened his shoulders and forced a resolute smile. "But before we speak of where you are going, I propose that you explain to me exactly where you have been."

The tone of voice was from the past, a father scolding his profligate son, but Jeremy laughed heartily to see the amused light in Larkin's eyes. "Aye, sir," he declared firmly, throwing his arm around his father's shoulder to lead him to the table where the innkeeper was setting out four brimming mugs. "And I swear to you that, for once, every word will be the solemn truth."

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The story came out piecemeal, interrupted by bickering over whose memory was faultier. Larkin listened, by turns amazed, shocked and impressed at the full extent of the subterfuge that had made Captain Yankee Doodle and his followers both success and enigma. "And you, sir," he turned on Isak at one point, indignant. "So many times I accused you of encouraging my son in his improvidence, and you bore my unfair censures with naught but a smile."

"The censures were fair, for the time," Isak demurred.

"Nevertheless, you must accept my humblest apologies."

"No apology needed, sir. You played your part as did we all."

"Aye," he sighed heavily. "You the part of a hero, and I the part of an old fool."

Three voices cried denials, then disintegrated into laughter that Larkin joined in heartily. The innkeeper returned to fill their mugs, bringing a silence that was not broken until he had left the room.

"I understand many things now," Larkin began hesitantly. "But what I still do not understand.... is why--"

Jeremy dropped his eyes to where his hands gripped both sides of his mug. "Why I left?" he said softly when his father could not finish.

Larkin's quiet sigh was an affirmative answer. Glancing at his friends, whose faces had gone very still, for support, Jeremy drew a deep breath. "I thought it was finished when the British garrison withdrew from Chester. I thought we had won a great victory, and that the time for lies and deceit was over. But I was wrong, father. It wasn't over. There was still so much to be done--so much that I could do. So much that I felt that I had to do."

"He came to me, Monsieur Larkin," Lafayette said in the heavy silence that fell among them. "And though I tried, I could not deny him. I desperately needed a man I could trust, someone who could move with impunity behind enemy lines to gather the intelligence we sorely required."

"A spy," Larkin realized.

Jeremy nodded. "I had hoped to send you news, father, but the circumstances...."

"No, I understand," he said, his voice growing faint with relief. "Yes. I do understand now."

His smile grew as a heavy weight seemed to lift from his shoulders. He was not the reason Jeremy had left, as he'd believed for so long. His harsh words hadn't driven his son away, condemning himself to two years of heartbroken silence because of a rift he himself had created and no longer had any hope of healing. Closing his eyes, he sighed, feeling the warmth spread through him, leaving him lightheaded, almost giddy. "I understand," he whispered, content.

As Lafayette called for another round, Isak straightened, his sharp ears catching a faint noise. Excusing himself, he made his way to the tavern's front door, peering out just as a coach rolled to a halt a few yards from the steps.

Isak covered the distance in several leaping bounds, grabbing the driver's arm as the man dropped to the ground. "What took you so long?" he chided.

"I couldn't find Master Stanley." Grumbling, Henry Abington took a moment to wipe the dust of the road from his round face and adjust his spectacles. "It seems that Martha took it into her head to drop her calf a week and a half early. Heifer, a fine one, too...."

"But you found him, everything's settled?" Isak inquired anxiously.

"Yes, yes, he was quite amenable." Henry shot him a sly look, adding, "Once I explained the circumstances."

Grimacing, Isak slapped his friend's shoulder. "I missed it, didn't I?" Henry said, his face falling abruptly. "How did it go?"

From inside the coach, a voice edged with impatience called, "Henry?"

"I'll tell you later," Isak said, pushing the apothecary forward.

Henry opened the coach door, extending his hand to the dark-haired woman inside. She paused in the doorway, eyes widening in surprise. "Isak?"

"Good day, Miss Elizabeth," he greeted her with a nod.

"Henry...." Her expression grew wary as her gaze went from one man to the other. "What's going on here?"

"Precisely as I've already told you. There's someone here who wants to see you. Now come on...."

She allowed him to steady her descent from the coach, keeping a suspicious eye on them both as she smoothed her dress and hair. "So very mysterious, the two of you," she mocked a grumble. "Now, who....?"

Following the direction that Isak had turned his head, she hesitated, then gasped softly. The general had emerged from the tavern and stood on the steps, inclining his head towards her in greeting.

"General Lafayette," she breathed. "But...why has he come here?"

Isak and Henry exchanged glances, knowing that they both realized the same thing--she already knew the answer to her own question, yet hardly dared hope that it was true. She took a halting step forward, then paused uncertainly as the general moved to one side, away from the door to allow another to pass.

Elizabeth made a breathless sound, not quite a sigh or an exclamation as Jeremy appeared in the open doorway. He descended the stairs, then stopped after a few paces, meeting her widened eyes. For a long moment, they stood frozen, seeing only each other, both fearful that any movement or sound would destroy a wonderful dream.

But then, with an almost girlish squeal, Elizabeth flew into Jeremy's welcoming arms, flinging her arms tightly around his neck.

Henry sighed contentedly as he watched Jeremy swing Elizabeth off her feet in spite of her laughing, breathless protest. "Very satisfactory, very satisfactory indeed. Don't you think so?"

"Oh, I do," Isak agreed fervently. "I most certainly do."

Henry shot him a doleful look. "I take it that your mission also came to a successful conclusion?"

"Well...." With an inclined head, Isak studied the young couple, whose laughter had been silenced by a long, heartfelt kiss. "A bit more restrained, I'd say, but yes--quite successful."

A stableboy appeared, offering to lead off the innkeeper's borrowed coach and horses. By the time Isak and Henry joined the others, Elizabeth had finally disentangled herself from Jeremy and was in the process of effusively greeting an amused General Lafayette. Part of his attention lingering on the young woman, Jeremy spared a moment to grab Henry's hand. "Thank you," he whispered fervently.

"Oh, 'twas nothing," Henry assured him with a twinkle in his eye. "A bit of skulking around the countryside, keeping a confidence in the face of suspicion, and negotiating a few intrigues here and there--just like the old days."

Their attention was diverted by Elizabeth's delighted cry as she embraced the elder Larkin. "I know, I know," the man replied to her whisper near his ear, his voice broken by emotion. "They have told me everything."

"Everything?" she said, turning to give the others a questioning look. But her eyes met Jeremy's and again they went still for a long moment, broken when the young man smiled and reached out for her hand. "Yes," he said softly. "Everything."

They drew together, but Elizabeth's head jerked back suddenly. She glanced around, embarrassed, then gave Jeremy an apologetic smile. Clearing his throat, Henry exaggerated sniffing the air. "My, something certainly smells delicious, doesn't it?"

"It does?" Isak said, puzzled.

Tapping the side of his nose, Henry gave his friend a significant look. "Venison, unless I miss my guess."

"And when it comes to food, I seem to remember that Henry Abington has never missed his guess," the General enjoined, giving Isak a sly wink.

The blacksmith glanced at Jeremy and Elizabeth, who were having a difficult time paying attention to anything except each other. "Now that you mention it, I'm starving," he agreed wholeheartedly. "After you, my friend."

Their hasty disappearance into the tavern, followed by General Lafayette, finally gained Elizabeth's notice. To Jeremy, she said reluctantly, "I suppose we should...."

The elder Larkin intervened, catching Elizabeth's hand to place it gently but firmly back into Jeremy's grasp. "Young Abington may know food, but I'm rather an old hand myself at other, more important things." He clasped both their hands between his for a long moment, looking from one to the other with eyes filled with tears and pride. Then, with a gentle pat, he released them, turning away to enter the tavern and close the door behind him.

Open-mouthed, Elizabeth watched him go, then looked at Jeremy in wonder. He smiled warmly. "I think it means that, after all these years--he approves."

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The conversation during and after dinner had been both spirited and enlightening. More than once, the young general found himself the object of rapt attention as he related his first-hand experiences of battle and intrigue over the past two years. John Larkin hung on to every word as Lafayette spun tale after tale of Jeremy's sojourn as one of his small cadre of personal spies, answerable only to the general and his identity known to no one else on either side. A subterfuge that had been successful until only recently, when an unexpected crisis had compromised Jeremy's position, forcing his 'retirement'.

"Benedict Arnold?" Larkin gasped in disbelief. "Jeremy was involved in that dastardly business?"

"Indeed, sir, he was instrumental in bringing the conspiracy to our attention," Lafayette said grimly, settling back into his chair. "For some time, General Arnold had been quite insistent that I reveal to him the identities of the spies in my personal employ. I found this curious enough to refuse him the information, and unsettling enough to warn Jeremy that there was the possibility that he could be in grave danger. I never dreamt, however, that the danger would be from Arnold himself."

"What happened?" Henry wanted to know, leaning forward intently.

"Jeremy overheard part of a conversation that he scarcely dared believe. But because of my warnings, he did believe and acted accordingly. He was able to send a message that led ultimately to the arrest of General Arnold's contact, Major Andre. But no one heeded his warning about the general himself, with the result that Arnold was informed of Andre's capture, giving him ample time to flee. Jeremy tried, but was unable to prevent Arnold's escape; in the trying, however, Arnold surmised his identity as one of my personal spies."

Isak blinked. "You mean, Jeremy actually confronted him?"

"Aye, mon ami. Across a room, unarmed, both men unable to take action even as they realized the truth about each other."

"Oh, my," Henry murmured, impressed.

Eyes closed, Larkin took a steadying breath. "Dear Lord."

Lafayette nodded sympathetically. "How easy it is for us to realize how very fortunate he was to have escaped with his life from that encounter, for he had described the general as quite desperate. But Jeremy's only distress seemed to be that he was unable to bring Arnold to justice for his treachery. Needless to say, my personal concern was for his continued safety, which is why I insisted that he finally accept the commission that was so long due him."

"And that's how you finally got him into uniform," Isak said with open admiration.

"Aye." Lafayette eyed him and Henry in turn, lifting his glass slightly in their direction.

"I seem to recall also two other commissions left unclaimed for quite some time now."

"Ah." Henry straightened, shooting a strange smile in Isak's direction that the blacksmith obviously understood. "Well, as you know, sir, at the time you made your very generous offer, I--that is, we--were unable to accept because of our responsibilities. To have left Chester bereft of the services of its only apothecary and blacksmith--it simply couldn't be countenanced."

"Of course," Lafayette said with a smile. "Forgive me, mes amis. Too often I forget that this war is fought not only on the field of battle, but in the hearts of those we fight to defend."

"Aye, sir, that was your counsel then as well and we held to it as some small consolation for our inability to follow you as we had done so many times before," Henry replied somberly. "However...."

Isak sat up straight, head turned towards the door before any of the others heard the sounds of voices in the entry hall just beyond. Face lighting, Larkin pushed out of his chair and was halfway across the floor when Jeremy and Elizabeth entered. He cheerfully greeted the young couple as one, ushering them to a place at the long table as he said, "There's still supper left, more than enough if you have an appetite for it...."

As Larkin pulled out a chair for him, Jeremy gently resisted, insisting that his father be seated instead. Across the table, Henry gave Isak a sharp poke, unnecessary since the blacksmith was already alert, leaning forward with the same anticipation evident in Henry's face as well as Lafayette's quiet, watchful eyes.

Larkin finally settled into the chair, looking up at his son in some confusion. His puzzled expression faded as Jeremy, with marked nervousness, claimed Elizabeth's hand to draw her to his side. There was a flush in the woman's face that Larkin knew, with complete certainty, was not merely the result of the chill spring air. Her eyes, unusually bright, never left Jeremy's face as he exchanged a smile with her, then cleared his throat.

"Father," he began hesitantly, "I realize that this may seem, well...a bit precipitous, but...."

He made the mistake of glancing at Elizabeth and words failed him as they lost themselves in each other's eyes. In the silence, Larkin nodded solemnly. "Quite the contrary," he whispered, reaching out to touch his son's arm. "Now--speak without apologies, for I wish to hear what you have to say to me."

Relief lit Jeremy's face, and he tightened his hold on Elizabeth, whose smile grew radiant. Gathering a deep breath and courage with it, he spoke each word as if it was made of fragile glass. "Miss Elizabeth Coates has done me the great honor of agreeing to become my wife, for which I would very much like to receive your blessing, father."

With an exclamation of satisfaction, Henry leaned back in his chair, rubbing his hands together. Isak stifled a laugh, exchanging silent nods of congratulation with his friend and with General Lafayette who once more lifted his glass in silent toast.

Trembling, Larkin gazed up at his son, unable to speak for a moment. Words finally came, and with it a tear of joy. "You have it," he managed with great feeling. "And more. So much more."

Henry leapt from his chair, grabbing Jeremy's hand to shake it exuberantly. "Congratulations, my friend!"

As Elizabeth accepted Henry's light kiss on the cheek, she whispered near his ear a heartfelt, "Thank you, Henry. Thank you."

Larkin finally got his son's attention after Lafayette and Isak had, in turn, offered their best wishes to the young couple in voices exultant enough to bring the landlord on the run with a bottle of his finest wine. "And when shall I see you wed?" the old man wanted to know, tugging lightly on Jeremy's hand in barely suppressed excitement.

"Well..." Jeremy and Elizabeth exchanged uncertain glances. "We've not been able to decide. That is--I must leave here tomorrow with the general and I do not know when I will be able to return."

"Tomorrow," Larkin repeated softly, lowering his eyes as his grip tightened on his son's hand.

"Mon ami." With a strange smile, Lafayette accepted glasses from the innkeeper, placing one near each person present. "I humbly beg your pardon, but I must correct you. It is I who must leave tomorrow morning. However, we are not due in Philadelphia for several days yet and I believe you would find the courtesy calls I plan to make in that time quite tedious. If you would do me the great favor of returning the coach and horses to the gracious lady who so very kindly put them at our disposal, I believe that we may part company until Wednesday?"

Relief washed over Jeremy. "Thank you, sir," he said, drawing Elizabeth to his side in a tight, one-armed embrace.

Henry harrumphed, removing his glasses to wipe at them with a kerchief. "Mr. Larkin, sir, please do correct me if I am in error, but although you no longer hold the office of mayor, I believe that you are still invested with the powers of a justice of the peace?"

In the startled silence, Larkin straightened in his chair. "Why, yes I am," he said slowly, eyes growing wide.

Elizabeth gasped, looking up at Jeremy with eyes that hardly dared hope. The young man looked warily from one face to the other, finally seeing the first hint of conspiracy. "We've no time to make preparations," he protested cautiously. "Really, it would hardly be fair...."

Elizabeth squeezed his arm to silence him. Recognizing that he had gained an unexpected ally, Henry pressed on. "Now, really. What preparations do we need? We have the essentials here--a bride, a groom and someone official to join them in marriage. Not to mention an exquisite blue dress that Mistress Stanley assured me was one that Elizabeth was saving for a very special occasion. If the stableboy followed my instructions, it should be waiting for you upstairs."

She stared at him, open-mouthed. "You...how--?"

Jeremy held up his hands to proclaim his innocence when her suspicious eyes went back to him. "Let's just say," Henry hastened to rescue his friend, "I anticipated a certain turn of events."

"I must confess that I too am guilty of the crime of anticipation," Lafayette said, drawing a tiny box from his pocket. "If you would accept this small gift, my friend Jeremy, I would be most deeply honored."

The box itself was enough to take Jeremy's breath away. A superior artisan had carved an intricate design into the polished rosewood, darkened with age. Gingerly lifting the lid free revealed its contents: a ring of burnished gold, a simple band bearing a delicately incised floral pattern.

"It belonged to my grandmother, given to her by her new husband as a promise that he would return to her after the war," Lafayette explained as Jeremy held the ring up for Elizabeth's silent, stunned inspection. "As he did, bringing with him a much finer ring, encrusted with diamonds and rubies, that I seem to recall she kept in a box on the mantle with other less-favored pieces."

Jeremy seemed about to protest, but one look at Lafayette's face put an end to that idea. He and Elizabeth exchanged glances, a silent communication that seemed to decide more than one question. "Thank you, sir," he said fervently.

"It's beautiful," Elizabeth added in a voice blurred by unshed tears. "Thank you. All of you."

"Ah." Henry clasped his hands together, beaming. "If I'm not mistaken, I think this means that tonight there will be a wedding feast."

Another exchange of glances between the young couple brought Jeremy's answer, with a broad smile: "You're not mistaken."

"Well, then!" Henry brought out his pocket watch for a quick check. "I believe Mistress Carson is waiting for you, Elizabeth."

She gave him a look that made a good attempt at righteous indignation at the full extent of his machinations, but dissolved into laughter as she came forward to embrace him, Isak and the general in turn, accepting their whispered congratulations. The innkeeper's wife had answered her husband's summons by then, taking Elizabeth's arm to usher her out of the main room.

Jeremy watched her go, staring at the doorway until the sound of the two women's voices, shrill with excitement, had faded away in the distance. His wistful look changed to wonder as his gaze went back to the small box in his hand. An attempt to speak failed, and his father placed a supportive hand on his shoulder, squeezing gently.

"We're not rushing things, are we?" Henry asked, half jokingly, half anxiously. "I mean, I wouldn't want you to think that we want this more than you do."

Jeremy managed a laugh. "Henry, believe me when I tell you than no one could want this more than I do. What I don't understand is--how all of you knew that this was what I wanted, when I didn't even know that myself for certain."

"Mon ami, it was you who once said that all of us were of the same mind, that we understood each other so well because we shared the same hopes and dreams," Lafayette reminded him, smiling. "In a way, this is a dream we have also shared with you, and we are...almost as anxious as you to see it come true."

Jeremy stared at the ring nestled in its box, his smile becoming pensive. "I don't know when I will return to fulfill the promise that this represents," he said softly. "But when I do, it will be because another dream has come true. Our dream, the one that all of us have shared these many years."

"That time will come, and soon," John Larkin said with conviction. "And when it does, Elizabeth will be here to welcome you home, as shall I. In the meantime, we shall wait, and we shall pray."

"Thank you, Father," Jeremy whispered gratefully.

"And you have my solemn promise, sir, that Isak and I will keep watch most carefully over him to ensure his safe and prompt return," Henry intoned, executing a short bow.

Jeremy glanced at Lafayette, seeing his own puzzlement mirrored in the general's expression. Isak, on the other hand, seemed smug, heightening the suspicion that there was a secret still waiting to be revealed. "Tell me, then, Henry," Jeremy ventured, "how do you propose to do that?"

Henry shrugged, as though he hadn't given the matter much thought. "In uniform?"

"Mes amis," Lafayette spoke, studying Henry and Isak's grins with a narrowed eye. "You will join us, then?"

"Aye, sir. Isak and I have spent the last several years training very capable apprentices, and Mistress Wilton only yesterday completed two fine uniforms for us. So, if you'll have us...."

"With pleasure, sir." Beaming, Lafayette came forward to give Isak and Henry a hearty handshake in turn. He stepped back to allow Jeremy to indulge in some back-slapping congratulations, and consulted briefly with the innkeeper.

"Gentlemen, I should like to propose a toast." Lafayette gestured to the glasses deftly filled by the landlord, scooping one up to raise above his head. "To the happy couple, and their future happiness. May the joy of this day sustain them until they are re-united to live the rest of their days in a nation unburdened by war and strife. And by the grace of God, that time will come soon--very soon."

They accepted their glasses and the toast with a gentle murmur of assent, and in the silence that followed, John Larkin spoke. "And I should like to propose a toast to a man who was more than just a man. A legend, a myth...an ideal that has touched all of us, and--I believe--has made our lives richer by his existence. He is here among us now, in the heart of every brave soul who acts according to his conscience, who fights for what he believes and who will not rest until that battle is done. Gentlemen--to the man who has brought us to this happy day, and will carry us through the fight to live as free men. To Captain Yankee Doodle--may his spirit live on in the hearts of us all, now, and for all generations to come."

