

# Your Colonel

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A play by  
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"Afflictions from Heaven are angels sent on embassies of love. We must improve, and not abuse them, to obtain the blessing. They are commissioned to stem the tide of impetuous passion; to check inordinate ambition; to show us the insignificance of earthly greatness; to wean our affections from transitory things, and elevate them to those realities which are ever blooming at the right hand of God."

- Aaron Burr's mother, Esther, shortly after his father's death in 1757 and before her death in 1758, when he was 2.

"The passions have too much influence over our sentiments and opinions ... Vicious desires will produce vicious practices ... The passions, then, if properly regulated, are the gentle gales which keep life from stagnating; but, if let loose, the tempests which tear every thing before them.

Do we not frequently behold men of the most sprightly genius, by giving the reins to their passions, lost to society, and reduced to the lowest ebb of misery and despair? ... In such cases, the most charming elocution, the finest fancy, the brightest blaze of genius, and the noblest burst of thoughts, call for louder vengeance, and damn them to lasting infamy and shame."

- Aaron Burr, c. 1771, during his time at Princeton. He was 15.

#### SPECIAL THANKS TO

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#### **Characters**

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ANITA PUTNAM - 10, sister to Ethel, General Putnam's daughter

AARON BURR - 20, chief aide-de-camp of General Putnam

ETHEL PUTNAM - 15, sister to Anita, General Putnam's daughter

GEORGE WASHINGTON - 40s.5

ISRAEL PUTNAM - 60s. Jolly and a literally huge presence.

MARGARET MONCREIFFE - 15. Daughter to British Major Moncrieffe, an old friend of General Putnam.

MARTHA WASHINGTON - 40s.

## PROLOGUE

July 9, 1776.

The sounds of 1776 Manhattan. We're in the second floor sitting room of the home of General Israel Putnam, 1 Broadway at the southernmost tip of the island. Town criers, military marches, a violin being practiced upstairs, peddlars, etc.

A pre-recorded pre-show speech. As it finishes, the distant sounds of thousands of racing feet and yelling voices. They grow closer to us.

The audience lights go out, and the stage dims from day to night. Fire possibly flickers through a window. The men are suddenly present, just outside, thousands of uncontrollable voices hooting and hollering.

A young girl enters, her face masked by the thick shadows of the night. She moves slowly to the window until her face is illuminated by gilded flickers. She is MARGARET MONCRIEFFE, a girl of fifteen but with an air that makes us think her almost a woman despite her clearly juvenile features.

Outside, Spontaneous chanting grows into to a group cry, "Down With the King!", over and over and over, almost deafening even from our position inside, overlaid with the call and response of "heave, ho."

A thunderous impact seems almost to shake the foundations of the space. It's immediately followed by the bright and hair-raising sounds of metal pounding and scraping against metal. The voices are in discord once again, a storm of curses and screaming no less clear for their being entirely unintelligible.

The young girl watches, so thoroughly in shock that she's frozen still and seems almost emotionless.

Another figure enters. A young man, covered in what we can't distinguish to be soot or blood. He hurries to her.

They speak, but their words are lost under the roar from outside. There's a struggle before the young man, whose face never fully leaves the shadows, manages to coax Margaret away from the window and out of the room.

When she's gone, he comes to the window, but stays out of the light. As he watches in stillness, we catch the glimpse of a smile before-

LIGHTS FADE.

#### SCENE 1

The same sitting room. Mid-Afternoon the next day.

ETHEL PUTNAM holds a pair of letters, looking out the window. She isn't finding what she is searching for. She looks at the letters, and out the window again.

ANITA PUTNAM, her younger sister, enters behind her. Ethel notices, hides the letters smoothly behind her, and resumes her half-fished work of cleaning the room.

ANITA

I've never seen a headless statue before.

ETHEL

Yes, it's. Certainly something.

ANITA

Does King George deserve to die?

ETHEL

You should be grateful that you're a lovely young girl and needn't ponder such things.

ANITA

I like to ponder.

Silence.

ANITA

Awfully quiet around here without that English girl.

ETHEL

She has a name, Anita.

ANITA

I know that.

ETHEL

Use it, then. It's rude to refer to people by adjectives.

ANITA

"It's rude to refer to / people by-"

ETHEL

It is.

ANITA

Well "English" isn't an adjective anyway. It's a nationality.

ETHEL

Nationalities are adjectives.

ANITA

No, they're not.

ETHEL

Fine. Speak like a fool if you want, I'm not your tutor.

ANITA

If Daddy were home I'd scream.

ETHEL

Then you should be thankful he's not. He'd tell you I'm right and give you a lashing to make you quiet. It's a wonder I'm so gentle with you.

ANITA

(maybe gently nursing an old bruise)

Oh, yes. You're the gentlest / troll I've ever-

ETHEL

Hush! / I see them...

ANITA

I said you're a troll!

ETHEL

Yes, the world's nastiest. Come, we'll hide under my bridge. I'll feed you some billy goats.

Ethel moves to leave. Anita crosses to the window.

ETHEL

Anita!

ANITA

It isn't fair. She gets treated like a royal lady while we're treated like children. Not even children. Puppies.

ETHEL

Come on, we must leave. Martha asked that they be left alone for their / little-

ANITA

And I hate the way that father looks at her, like she's one of us. She is / not one of-

ETHEL

No. She's not. And she's reminded of it more often than you or I could bear. Would it kill you to offer her a bit of compassion?

ANITA

Yes.

ETHEL

It's a good thing mother didn't live to see the little brat you've become.

ANITA

Ethel! How could / you speak of-

ETHEL

Get out of here!

ANITA

I'll tell / father you-

ETHEL

Anita. Now.

Ethel grabs Anita and tosses her out of the room.

MARTHA WASHINGTON and MARGARET  
MONCRIEFFE enter mid-conversation.

MARGARET

And so I agree that it was quite nicely written, really, but-

They notice Ethel standing there.

MARTHA

Hello, dear... Oh, hell, which one are you again? / Edith?

ETHEL

Ethel, Mrs. / Washington.

MARTHA

Yes, Ethel. That's what I was going to say. Don't mind a foolish / aging lady like-

ETHEL

Oh, please / don't worry-

MARTHA

No, you must forgive me. I can't keep up with all you Putnams. There are so very many of you.

ETHEL

Please, even father can't remember who's who half of the time. Anyway, it is I who must beg your forgiveness for being in the way. It took longer than I expected to get things cleaned up.

MARTHA

Oh, I'd be happy living in a pen with pigs. It's George that needs everything sterilized and sparkling.

ETHEL

Be that as it may, I couldn't live with the shame if the house were in anything but ship shape for you. Good day Mrs. Washington. Miss Moncrieffe.

She's gone.

MARTHA

What a family of characters.

MARGARET

Aren't all families?

MARTHA

Yes, I suppose so. I'm sorry, dear, what were we on about?

MARGARET

I was saying how, while I certainly found it beautifully written I still can't comprehend why all this horrible fighting is really necessary.

MARTHA

I'm sure you can't. To be young...

MARGARET

I mean it, Mrs. Washington. The words are lovely, the ideas lovelier still, but... What was it, "Life, freedom, and..?"

MARTHA

Liberty, my dear. And the pursuit of happiness.

MARGARET

Yes. Beautiful. A society built on the idea of pursuing happiness. But in war there is no happiness, there is no liberty. And far too much "life" gets stolen from young men before their time. Despite your continental congress' lofty moral poetry, it all comes back to this silly hunger you have for "representation." And I assure you, for my family back in England, all "representation" gives them is a local scapegoat to pin their misfortunes upon.

MARTHA

That's because the heart of your system is corrupted. And representation may have tipped the scales, but this struggle is over the basic principles of who we are. Of who we should be. If ultimately achieving those principles means contradicting them from time to time, well, it's a price that must be paid.

MARGARET

But principles are mere ideas, wars are flesh and blood. If we'd all listen reasonably to what the other side had to say, we could accomplish so much more. And at a much lower cost.

MARTHA

Well, despite the fact that you're utterly wrong and more than a little naive, I see that my rhetoric is outmatched in your company. I'll have to sick Colonel Burr on you for a fair fight.

MARGARET

Colonel..?

MARTHA

Burr, yes. Have you not met?

MARGARET

Oh, briefly, perhaps.

MARTHA

You've lived under the same roof for nearly three weeks and met "briefly, perhaps"?

MARGARET

Uncle Izzy has so many young aides living here... And, it may surprise you, but I am not the most popular young woman in New York these days. Is he the brazen young man out riding with your husband?

MARTHA

That's right. Now he has a wit about him that should spar well with your own. I understand he became something of a legend while in Princeton. Entered there at thirteen into the second year. He's quite the impressive figure.

MARGARET

Is he?

MARTHA

Yes. Despite the fact that his calligraphy bears an uncanny resemblance to that of a French schoolgirl.

MARGARET

He certainly sounds a fascinating fellow. Quite different from what I've come to expect from a military man. Even putting aside his delicate penmanship.

MARTHA

And what do you expect?

MARGARET

I don't know, someone quiet. And stern, or rather, stoic, just like / your husband.

MARTHA

Just like an oak tree. And just as stubborn, too.

MARGARET

No, no, like your husband, I mean.

MARTHA

Yes.

MARGARET

Mrs. Washington!

MARTHA

When you've reached my age and lived what I have, you'll earn the privilege of speaking your mind. Certainly in the company of a girl not yet fifteen.

MARGARET

Not yet sixteen. I am fifteen. And a half.

MARTHA

Well, pardon me.

MARGARET

My father once told Uncle Izzy that I was born with the mind of an adolescent, so that by the time I finally learned to speak, my personality had ripened into that of a grown lady.

MARTHA

I still can't believe Israel Putnam allows you to call him "Izzy."

MARGARET

Oh, I've had him wrapped around my little finger since I was a girl of six and chastised him for using perpetrate instead of perpetuate.

MARTHA

Yes, well, he's never been accused of eloquence. How did he and a man like your father ever get to be so close?

MARGARET

The same way all men do, I suppose. Fighting together, ages ago.

MARTHA

What an odd business. Friendships, families, flipped on their heads and pointing rifles at one another.

MARGARET

Believe me, you couldn't craft irony half so good. Father left me in Elizabethtown before the madness at Boston last year, because he trusts his friends on your side so much more than those on our own. I dare say it tore him apart to turn down your congress' offer. Not that he was ever tempted by your cause -- there's no man so loyal to our sceptered isle as is my father -- but he's tortured by the paradox that fighting for his country means fighting against his dearest friends. Wasn't it Richard Montgomery that took up the charge of Brigadier-General in his stead?

MARTHA

Sorrowfully, as fate would have it.

MARGARET

Yes, may he rest in peace. Did you know my father was his uncle?

MARTHA

Are you in earnest?

MARGARET

I am always in earnest. It's one of my finer qualities.

MARTHA

So the Irish nephew takes the post offered to the English uncle in the American Colonial Army.

MARGARET

Smacks of sloppy prose, doesn't it?

MARTHA

My favorite kind. Do you ever hear from him?

MARGARET

Who?

MARTHA

Your father.

MARGARET

Oh. We aren't really allowed to write. But he and Uncle Izzy do, and Izzy's very kind about keeping me informed. It's only due to their correspondence that I'm here, really. My father heard of some. Misfortunes that...

Regardless. He wrote Izzy, pleading with him to bring me here. But these days, from what little I can gather, he just seems awfully distracted.

Doing nothing but staring at the same ships day after day. Boston, Halifax, New York, it makes no difference. It's like one of his extended hunting expeditions, only even sillier.

MARTHA

Sometimes I wonder if they realize that it's men they're hunting now.

MARGARET

They're aware enough when they're hunting women.

MARTHA

Margaret. You're too young and far too pretty to be jaded.

MARGARET

If I learned anything from the men of Elizabethtown, it's that Eve was certainly more foolish to trust Adam than she was to trust the serpent.

MARTHA

Were people there really so awful?

MARGARET

Oh, of course they seemed perfectly kind on the surface. Most of them. But...

(Beat. She's holds something back.

Covers, speaking cheerfully.)

Well, for example, I can count on one hand the number of lunch dates I made where the other girls actually appeared. They constantly conspired to make me think myself mad. Time and again there had been a last minute disaster and "how suspicious, dear Margaret, that you should have not gotten the word. We are simply livid with dismay!"

MARTHA

I believe I've met that young lady.

MARGARET

If you have, I'm sorry for you. But they were angels compared to the men.

MARTHA

Well, I apologize for their behavior.

MARGARET

I don't forgive you. I can't. You did nothing wrong. Why do you Colonists always apologize when fate or other people do someone harm? Odd habit.

I'm under no delusions. Our men are as cruel as yours. And not everyone gets off so easily as I. My dear friend Jane, she... They...