



**ROBERT  
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**A STORY OF THE  
REVOLUTIONARY  
WAR**

# **RABBLE ON A HILL**



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*To Larry Sternig*

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*Military power will never  
awe a sensible American to  
tamely surrender his liberty.*

*Samuel Adams, 1768*



# PROLOGUE

The men who boarded the *Dartmouth* and the *Eleanor* and the *Beaver* looked no more like Mohawk Indians than a clown looks like a prime minister. But it didn't matter because there weren't enough British troops quartered in Boston at the time to do anything about it, and the disguise was only a token disguise—a handful of feathers and some warpaint and even an actual tomahawk or two.

So, with a thousand or more spectators standing mutely on Griffin's Wharf, about a hundred of the "Mohawks" (who wouldn't fool a four-year-old imaginative child) dumped and destroyed 342 chests of tea, valued at £18,-000, because they didn't want any American to have to pay the tax on it—let alone drink it if he didn't feel like it.

That was in the close of 1773, but the news didn't reach England and the King until March of



'74, and when he heard the good tidings he nearly had a fit. What were those fool Americans thinking of? He was the King of England, wasn't he? And America was an English colony, wasn't it? And if he said that his subjects were going to drink the tea and pay a tax on it besides, then by George, that's what they were going to do! Whether they liked tea or not.

He also said (after he'd calmed down a mite) :  
"The line of conduct seems now chalked out . . . the New England Governments are in a state of rebellion. Blows must decide whether they are subject to this country or independent."

Then he decided to slap the naughty Americans on the wrist to teach them a little lesson so that they would know how to behave themselves the next time some loudmouth like Sam Adams or John Hancock or Dr. Warren came up with a harebrained scheme. He appointed General Gage governor of the province of Massachusetts (with 4,000 regulars to back him up), and on June 1 the Port Act went into effect.

Boston Harbor was sealed off from the world

by a tight blockade. No ship could enter, no ship could leave. Everything came to a standstill. Trade rolled over with a groan and died. Merchants closed their shops and tore their wigs. Idle, jobless men roamed the streets and loafed on the docks. And without the lifeline of the sea, Boston was a hungry town.

And an angry one.

The yeast of discontent was beginning to ferment into violence. Secret organizations such as the Committee of Communications, the Committee of Safety, the Sons of Liberty, and the Minutemen sprang up overnight, and all along the eastern coast men began to gather weapons and powder and lead for ammunition, and they formed militia companies and drilled in the commons and in the fields and in the roads.

Farmers and merchants and sailors, dock workers and clerks and backwoodsmen, lawyers and doctors and rowdies were preparing for war.



## H-HERE'S YOURS

Somewhere on Orange Street a crystal crash went *pow!* in the night, as though a glass grenade had exploded. Instantly there was hooting and cat-calling, and a brawling voice rose above the tumult.

“Run, Tory, run!”

Nat Towne turned into the first shadow-locked alley. He wasn't about to get himself involved with a Boston mob. These brawls occurred every day, every night now, all over the city. One moment a street would look like any street minding its own business; the next moment some hapless fellow would come somersaulting through a doorway or

—if no door was handy—crashing through a lead-paned window, with three or four men raging after him, and he would take off down the street, his unfriendly companions pelting after him; and then, and seemingly from nowhere, other men would spring up, and all at once everyone would be shouting ear-covering language, and the sticks and bricks and fists would start to fly, until the crimson smear of redcoats with their bright dazzle of bayonets would appear and put the mob to rout.

*"No thank you,"* Nat said. He would just as soon keep his head uncracked, if it was all the same to everyone concerned. Why Benny Frazer had ever thought it advisable to move his troupe of thespians into this hotbed of anger was more than Nat could understand.

He supposed the fool still clung to the futile hope of being able to straddle the fence, wearing a two-way coat showing a loyal lapel on one side and a rebel lapel on the other. And maybe he was right: maybe Boston was the last town in America where a man could at least attempt to walk the middle of the road.

Nat stayed with the alleys, coming into the open only when he had to cross one of the main streets. Behind him the tumult was increasing like an advancing sea, which meant that the mob was having a real knockdown and dragout tonight.

He was halfway across the lantern-bathed cobbles of Tremont Street when three rowdy-looking individuals came rushing past him strung in a line like geese on the wing. The last man was a scrawny fellow with a stick in his hand, and he paused to glare at Nat belligerently.

“Which side are you, brother?” he demanded.

It was one of those questions to which the answer was too often like “heads I lose, tails you win.” Nat made fists of his hands and leaned slightly forward from the waist.

“That’s my business, brother.”

The scrawny one hesitated, sizing the youth up. Nat was only eighteen, but there was six feet of him and his shoulders were impressively broad.

One of the other men looked back and yelled: “Come on, Jerry! Afore the giddy patrol picks us up!”

It was a good enough excuse for the scrawny man. He wagged his stick at Nat and took off, calling back: “Get you later—Tory!”

Nat watched the three rowdies diminish down the gloom of the street, their driving legs chopping at the greasy-looking cobblestones. Then, as a sudden shrill *ta-weee* of a whistle blew nearby, he got himself off the street, darting into the nearest black mouth of an alleyway.

It was a short passage, and you could see the two-sided opening at the far end like a candle behind an oilpaper window—and the moment he plunged into it he realized he had picked the wrong alley.

Two silhouettes, as sharply defined as though they had been clipped out of black tin, were in a death-grip struggle in the center of the alley. The one, the taller, stumbled on something underfoot and lost his balance and toppled backwards against the brick wall, as the other, shorter, silhouette sprang after him.

Something flashed in the man’s back-swinging hand, paused for a split-second, long enough for

the blade to catch a thin red light from one of the distant streetlamps and for the light to dance along the edge like blood. Then he swung it underhand and forward, and Nat heard the heavy, shocked grunt that jerked from the man against the wall.

The shorter man stepped aside as he watched the other man tilt slowly and stiffly away from the wall and topple past him. Then he looked up, and he couldn't help but see Nat's silhouette looming toward him.

He went into a crouch, and again the blade caught a glint of light and winked, as he sprang over the prostrate man and came at Nat in one quick hunched bound, hissing: "H-had to h-have a look, didn't you? Well, h-here's yours!"

Nat leaped backward, snatching the tricornered felt hat from his head and swung it down and into the passage of the glinting, underswinging knife, and the blade came paring cleanly through the crown and was deflected off course, flashing right on up and almost into Nat's armpit.

Off balance and not certain of his target (the assailant had veered to the left and out of the frame



of lamplight), Nat swung with his left and felt his fist collide with wool-covered flesh and knew his aim was off by a foot. He had connected with the man's shoulder. But it was a good blow and it was enough. It got the man and the knife away from him.

He crouched in the dark, sucked in his breath and held it, listening, waiting for the man to give his position away.

*Ta-weee!* The whistle blew again.

Nat heard a sudden rush of movement swish by him and saw the running silhouette of his enemy appear briefly in the wan light of the Tremont Street entrance. Then he was gone, and Nat was alone in the alley with the prostrate man.

He was on his way out. The sound known as the death rattle was already in his throat as Nat knelt over him.

"Po-powder horn," the man gasped.

"What?"

"Take the—the powder horn. Don—don't let anybody get it. Promise."

What he was talking about Nat had no idea. But it was obvious that the man was dying, and so he

said: “All right. I promise.”

He felt the man’s body in the dark. His clothes had the tactile quality of deerskin. On the man’s left hip Nat found a powder horn.

“Mister, who did this to you? Who was the man with the stutter?”

“To-tor——”

“Tory? Was he a Tory?”

But the man had nothing more to say.

Nat stood up with the horn in his hand. Slowly, reflectively—a little awed by the near proximity of death, actually—he wound the rawhide thong around the horn and shoved it into his jacket pocket. There was nothing more he could do there in the alley. It was time to go.

The whistle went *ta-weee* on Tremont Street, and Nat started to run toward the opposite exit—right smack into a huge, black, up-springing apparition that seemed to loom over and around him like the stern of a Concord coach. He grunted “*Uuh!*” as they collided and rebounded: but not far. The monster caught his right arm in a viselike grip, and Nat opened his mouth to yell—too late.

A hamsized hand slapped around his mouth, and Nat watched a burly head topped with a cocked hat lean down to him and saw two small porcine eyes peering at him with dangerous intensity.

“Brother,” the big man whispered like the rasp of a file, “all I want from you is *one* word. Are you Tory or are you a patriot? Now when I remove my hand, don’t you go to yell. Because even though my mitt is somewhat big I’ll ram it inside your mouth and pluck out your tongue like I was takin’ feathers offn a fry chicken.”

Nat was ready to believe the big man could do it. He felt the hand step off his face, and he treated himself to a fresh breath of air.

“Well, I’m an American,” he said warily.

The big man nodded his head and gave Nat a pat on the shoulder that felt uncomfortably like a near dislocation.

“That suits me. Listen, I’m Shad Holly and I’m from Pennsylvania and I’m in a *lee-tle* bit of trouble with them lobsterbacks.”

“You mean you were in the riot tonight, and

now the regulars are after you.”

“Did I say that, brother?” Shad Holly demanded angrily. “Do I look riotous to you? No, I weren’t in no riot. I was just takin’ my evening stroll down Orange Street when a batch a rily fellas went to belaborin’ each other with sticks and stones and I don’t know whatall, and me just standin’ there watchin’ the show, when all at once this here fat-mouth lobsterback captain comes chargin’ around the corner and starts callin’ me all sorts of blue names.”

Shad Holly blew out his breath gustily.

“Now I don’t mind being called a rebel or even a Boston mobster, but when he went to call me *fat*—well, he went one word too far.”

In spite of his anxiety, Nat found himself fascinated by Shad Holly’s bombastic manner. “What did you do?” he asked.

“*Do!* What did I do? Well, what would you’ve done? I couldn’t have that fool standin’ there talkin’ that way with mebbe some ladyfolks hearing him from their windows. So I reached out my hand to close his mouth—sort a like I just done to you. But

I was so excited I got confused, see? And I somehow forgot to *open* my hand. Anyhow, he lost two, mebbe three front teeth because of my mistake.

“Say, you ever see a lobsterback captain that’s lost a few buck teeth? My goodness, how he carried on! He didn’t even wait to pick hisself up off the street afore he’s yellin’ and slobberin’ and spittin’ all over hisself for his men to put holes in me. I tell you, the only thing that saved me from lookin’ like a porkypine growing baynets was that his men couldn’t quite get the hang of his slobbery words right off, him not used to havin’ no front teeth to bank his tongue offn.

“I was going to tell him that there warn’t no sense in him kickin’ up such a fuss over just a few buck teeth, ’cause I know this fella Washington, and he has some real dandy whalebone teeth and can talk just as good as you or me. But no, this here lobsterback won’t let me get a word in for all the watery noise he’s making. So I lit out.”

Which was what the two of them had better do right about then, Nat figured. “Come with me,” he

said. "I've a place you can hide till morning."

But just then Shad Holly discovered the dead man.

"S-a-y, I don't want to appear nosy, boy, but you mind tellin' me just who it is we're standing on top of?"

"Another fella put a knife in him. I'll tell you about it later. Let's get out of here."

"Brother," Shad said hoarsely, "the next time I don't know I'm standin' over a dead man for ten minutes yammerin' my big mouth, you just hit me over the head with something handy will you? C'mon, let's make fast tracks!"



## “WHAT NEWS?” CRIED ROBIN

The last alley brought them to the stage entrance of Benny Frazer's theater. The door safely closed behind them, Shad blew out his breath and said: "I don't know as how I think too highly of actors, by and large, but I'd certainly rather be here than in Boston's Stone Jail!"

In the lanternlight Nat was able to examine the complete Shad Holly, and there seemed to be no end of him to examine. First off, he was probably the biggest man in America (Nat thought so, anyhow). He was six-four at least, not counting his boots and hat, and he had to weigh over 260. He



was maybe fortyish, and his face was perfectly round and sunset pink and aglow with sweat. His eyes were small, angry, curious, lively eyes, and all in all he looked like a mighty rampant man.

He removed his hat, which anyone could see at a glance had once belonged to a British officer, and wiped at his brow with a great bandana that looked like a soiled French battle flag.

“That’s a fine hat,” Nat said. “How’d you come by it?” Shad seemed a trifle vague about the acquisition of the hat. As best as he could remember he’d stopped at a tavern in Providence on his trip north and there had been a batch of British officers in there raising the old Nick, and when they somehow or other got the impression that Shad was a Loyalist, they filled him up with free ale, and when he left the tavern he went to the table where he’d parked his coonskin cap among all the officers’ hats and—his wits being a mite befuddled—he must have picked up the wrong hat by mistake.

“I often wonder what that major looks like in his dress uniform with my coonskin cap on his

head,” Shad mused, brushing at the silver lacework on the cocked hat.

He was, he told Nat, in the Pennsylvania militia, and the Committee of Communications had sent him up to Boston in February with some vital information for the Boston Committee of Safety.

“How is it you’re still here?” Nat wondered. “I thought they sent you fellas back and forth.”

“Why, any fool knows trouble is comin’ atween the British and the Americans. And most of us knows that when it does come it’ll be started by these here Yankees. And, boy, I aim to be right here handy when it happens!”

Old Elijah Simp, the gnarled, bent-nearly-double property man, came hurriedly by them with his peculiar crab-wise shuffle, shaking his head.

“Best look spry, Nat,” he warned. “Old Benny’s throwing a fit backstage on account you’re late and Ralston hasn’t showed up yet.”

That was bad. Nat and Ralston were supposed to present a new act that night: the Robin Hood and Little John jousting scene. It had already been advertised; and now no Ralston. But it was no

great surprise to Nat. Ralston Morbes was an avowed Loyalist, a Tory. He was probably embroiled in some mischief or other out in the streets.

“Come on, Shad. I’ll tuck you away in one of the dressing rooms.”

But they never made it. With a mighty “Ah-ha!” Benny Frazer descended upon them, his gravy-spotted velvet waistcoat flapping about his narrow concave torso, a curl of his wig loose from its pins bobbing up and down by his right ear. He wigwagged his pipestem arms at Nat melodramatically.

“So. So. We’ve decided to make our appearance, have we? We’ve elected out of the goodness of our heart to give our fellow performers the benefit of our estimable presence! So good of us! So generous we are! And where is our boon companion Master Morbes, pray tell?”

Shad blinked at the scarecrow of a man, and turned to Nat.

“Say, just how many of *you* is he talkin’ about?”

“I don’t know where Ral is, Benny,” Nat said. “There’s trouble in the streets tonight. My friend Mister Holly and I ran into some of it.”

Benny snatched his floppy wig from his bald head and threw it *spamp* against the back wall. Not satisfied with that, he took a running jump at it and landed on the powdery old moth nest with both feet.

“Gads and all the goldfish of Greeves!” he wailed. “Ruin! Utter, undeserved, unappeasable ruin! And a full house out front for once! And no Robin Hood. They’ll tear the stage down! I know they will. I’ve seen it happen before. I——” His voice slammed to a halt and he studied Shad like a beady-eyed bird of prey.

“The *size* of him! Mark you the size of him! The *perfect* Little John!” Benny came hop-hopping over to grab Nat. “Nathaniel—man that I’ve raised from childhood—we will switch parts, sweet lad! *You* will play Robin, and this monster—that is to say, this *gentleman* will play Little John!”

Shad’s eyes were beginning to glimmer and glower. “Now hold on here. What is all this Robin

and Little Johnny talk, anyhow?"

Benny went after the enormous Shad with fluttery, eager fingers.

"Why, you've heard of Robin Hood the famous bandit of Sherwood Forest, surely! Nat here was supposed to play Little John to Ralston's Robin Hood. Ah-ha! But now we will give him Robin's part and *you* will be our Little John!"

Shad's face clamped down like a public house closing for the night.

"Now look here, toothpick! I don't usually mind folks referrin' to my size, but there's one thing I ain't, and that's *little*!"

"But you don't understand, dear sir," Benny hastened to assure him. "Little John is a name meant in jest. Little John was in truth an enormous man. His name was but a joke——"

"And that's something else I ain't is a joke," Shad said dangerously. "Now I don't mind helpin' you fellas out, 'cause Nat here helped me tonight. I'll be this Rob-bandit Hood fella, if you want. But I ain't about to go around pretending I'm some dwarf called Johnny! And that's flat!"

Benny snatched at his head for his wig but found only baldness.

“Benny,” Nat said, “if he’s willing to give us a hand, let’s not argue about it. Besides, I’ve already learned Little John’s part.”

“The part! The part!” Benny looked around in a state of wild distraction. “He must learn the part, and not a moment to spare! The curtain rises! The manuscript! Who in the name of all the foul fiends has pilfered the manuscript? Who——”

Old Elijah nudged his elbow and calmly handed him a few dog-eared sheafs of paper. Benny snatched them up and turned back to Shad.

“Now then, good Master Holly. Listen attentively! The lines are few and simple. Should your memory suffer a lapse, a hesitation, a dislocation, simply cry ‘What news?’ ”

“What news?” Shad echoed blankly.

“Yes. Robin was forever crying ‘What news’ to everyone he encountered in the forest. Don’t ask me why. Now then; Nat’s on stage when the curtain ascends and he says: ‘Here I am Little John the brave! I am the mumble-mumble and so on . . . and

I shall cross me over this instant.’ ” Benny pointed at Shad. “That’s your cue.”

“My who?”

“Cue! Cue! You enter now.” Benny ducked his nose back into the script, reading: “ ‘What news?’ cried Robin. ‘Whence comes this gangling creature I see towering over me? Speak your name, varlet!’ ”

Benny pointed at Nat, still reading: “ ‘Little John is my name, little man,’ spake Little John. ‘And I desire to cross yon log——’ ”

“Hold on here,” Shad cut in. “Is that *spake* kin to a spade or a stake? How does a fella go about spakin’ hisself?”

Benny crumpled the script in despair. “It means spoke! *SPOKE!*”

“Just wanted to know, brother,” Shad said mildly. “That’s all.”

The balky curtain rose slowly before Nat, showing him the glare of the footlights in their tin reflectors. Beyond the blaze of tallow candles the small sea of expectant faces was but an indistinguishable glimmer of dark flesh with here

and there the spark of an eye. He wet his lips apprehensively. He was very dubious about the outcome of the scene. And, to make matters worse, the audience had had to wait twenty minutes while Shad learned his lines, had his grease paint applied, and was helped into costume; now they were turning unruly.

They scoffed rudely at the sight of Nat standing before them in tight green-cloth pants and jerkin and a silly little scotch cap surmounted with a turkey feather. He grounded the butt of his seven-foot “yew” staff and leaned slightly toward the hooting audience.

“Here I am Little John the brave! I am the tallest, broadest, strongest yeoman in all of merry old England! I——”

“Which makes you a dad-gasted Tory!” a disembodied voice yelled from the audience, and a rotten tomato near-missed by Nat’s ear with a hum and went *splamp!* on the painted backdrop behind him. The audience roared with appreciative laughter.

Yes—he was *very* dubious about the outcome.



“I see before me a stream with but a single log for a foot-bridge, and I shall cross me over this instant.” Nat turned to the “stream,” an old dead log about seven feet long chocked on a pair of blocks concealed behind wooden “bushes.” On the upstage side of the log (where the audience couldn’t see it) was a huge, shallow tin pan of water. Literary legend and Benny’s script had it that Little John was supposed to knock Robin off the log and into the water. Which suited Nat. He’d had his bath last Saturday.

Now, having spoken Shad’s cue, he hesitated. No Shad, or Robin.

“I shall cross me over this instant!” he repeated, hopefully.

The audience started to hoot again. “Do you need some help, Tory?” “Which instant was you talkin’ about, Johnny? Next week’s?”

All at once a monstrous parody of Robin Hood was literally propelled upon the stage from the wings by Benny, old Elijah, and three or four other grinning thespians.

Shad Holly, his sausage-tight cloth suit

perceptibly bursting on his massive body (half the buttons having already popped off), his face whitened with grease paint and a thick up-curved paper mustache glued to his upper lip, the feather in his cap gone awry and bobbing down in front of his face, lurched toward his end of the log and promptly dropped his staff on his toes.

Nat figured the people over in Charlestown could hear the roar that issued from the audience. "Hi, Little John! Did you say you was the *tallest* or the *smallest*?" "Say, ain't you two merry men kind of twisted around?" "Why don't you fellas hang signs to yourselves so we'll know which's Robin and which's Little-*tiny* John!"

One look at Shad's stricken face assured Nat that his huge friend's mind was a complete blank. Shad had been struck dumb by that well-known thespian ailment, stage fright. He looked so utterly gargantuan in his ridiculous costume and with that strained expression of baffled bewilderment on his great moony face that the audience continued to greet him with volley upon volley of raucous laughter.

“I shall cross me over this instant?” Nat repeated helpfully.

Shad picked up his staff, sucked in his breath, and cut loose.

“What news, cried Robin!” he bellowed.

“No no!” Nat hissed. “Not *Cried Robin*: just *What news*.”

“What news!” cried Shad. “Fence comes this spaking creature I see towering over me?”

The audience went wild again. Nat “towered over” Shad about the way a toadstool towers over a grizzly bear. And then it got worse.

“Spake your vame, narlet!” Shad roared.

With a sense of impending disaster Nat stepped up on his end of the log, saying: “Little John is my name, little—[he dropped his voice at that word, but the audience caught it with another howl]—man. And I desire to cross yon log!”

Shad, according to direction, hauled himself up on his end of the log and immediately the blame log began to shift in its blocks, and he started wobbling precariously, wig-wagging his staff in both hands to reestablish his center of equilibrium.

“Fffff-fine,” he stammered desperately. “Bbbb-but fff-first let’s joust a bit!”

Joust heck! It was all either of them could do to maintain his balance on the side-rolling log. Purely by accident the left end of Shad’s staff swung around and fetched Nat a good one on the right hip. Shad snatched and grabbed at the pole and the other end came slicing around and caught Nat on the left shoulder. Nat lost his temper and let Shad have one in the stomach with the end of his staff, and Shad said “*Oooff!*” and what little balance he had left went south. Shad started side-running on the log, all in the same spot, his left hand taking mighty grabs at the empty air for support and finding none, and all at once over he went and 260-some pounds landed in the tub of water.

A silvery wave of water sprang up like a tree covered with ice and descended upon Nat with a splashing crash, and then his balance shattered and he went over backward and prat-first into the tub and on top of Shad, and the high end of his staff caught in the backdrop and the whole thing came down over their heads and engulfed them in

splashing, wet, shouting darkness.

By now the audience was half crazy. Some of them had laughed so much they were kicking around on the floor wailing "*My stomach! My stomach! My sides are splitting!*" One man had a heart attack and another laughed himself into a stroke, and still it didn't stop because now part of the backdrop had come into contact with the footlights and the tallow candles started eating it up, and all at once and to his utmost horror Nat heard Benny's muffled voice crying: "Fire! Fire! the giddy backdrop is afire!"

Thrashing, slipping, shoving at the smothering backdrop (which was like fighting a pillow—punch it here, it pops out there), Nat blundered into Shad in the darkness.

"What news?" Shad wanted to know.

"Look out, you fathead! I want out of here!"

"*You* want out! *You* want out!" Shad bellowed.

"What a you think *I* want to do? Cook myself in here like a potato in its jacket?"

Then, on hands and knees, he finally found a triangular opening in the backdrop and heaved it