

CHAPTER IV
SWORDS AND BULLETS

I. THE CALL TO ARMS

ARON BURR was then nineteen, some five feet six inches in height, slight of build, but wiry and capable of prolonged exertions. His year of so-called idleness, coupled with a healthy outdoor existence and the sports he loved, had rebuilt the reserves he had lost in that first year's arduous application at college.

The news of Lexington crashed like a thunderbolt into the placid existence and gallantries of Litchfield. Burr threw his books away forthwith. He was young, ardent, and enamored with the military life — he had been reading history of late, with especial attention to the accounts of battles and sieges and the stratagems of great soldiers. And the "rights of man," the "laws of nature," were phrases that spread their glamour for him equally with others of his age, and made righteous and just a revolt against the alleged tyranny of a far-off England.

He wrote immediately to his friend Ogden, urging him to come at once to Litchfield, so that they might volunteer for service together. Ogden was less impetuous; he wrote back that he must first make certain arrangements. Meanwhile events moved rapidly. The battle of Bunker Hill was fought, and the Americans had stood the test of a pitched battle with British regulars.

In an ecstasy of impatience Burr hurried to Elizabethtown to hasten his slothful friend; with such success, that in July, 1775, the two lads were riding into Cambridge where the hastily summoned American forces were encamped. They had with them a letter from John Hancock addressed to General Washington recommending "Mr. Ogden and Mr. Burr of the Jerseys."¹

But here disillusionment awaited them. Washington had been only recently placed in command, and an almost impossible task presented itself to him. There were some 17,000 raw recruits in the scattered camps investing Boston; without the slightest semblance of discipline, unorganized, poorly armed, without uniforms or supplies. The officers were in little better state. Very few of them had either practical or theoretical knowledge of warfare.

A commissary had to be established, drills performed, powder and shot procured, companies organized — in short, an army had to be forged out of a mere conglomerate mass.

Naturally the harassed Washington had little time to hearken to letters of recommendation. If the eager volunteers ever got to the Commander with an offer of their services, they were evidently put off with vague phrases. In any event, they wandered about the camp, footloose, becoming increasingly disgusted with the wretchedness and disorder of the camp, wondering when the war was to begin. Nowhere in Burr's histories of military campaigns was there precedent for such squalor, ignorance, petty jealousies, inefficiency. Heroic exploits were far removed from the ragged men they met at Cambridge.

Young Aaron's spirits effervesced into a high fever at the disappointment. He betook himself to bed. The others, Matthias Ogden and their mutual friends, were no less disgusted. An expedition was being talked of; a secret whisper of a campaign against Canada. Volunteers were being called for. Ogden and the others were tired of inactivity, and here was adventure beckoning. They decided to join up.

But they tried to keep the news from their ailing friend. He heard their discussions inadvertently, however, and rose at once from his sick bed. He, too, was determined to go along. Ogden argued and expostulated; friends and relatives painted dark pictures of perils and fatigues and certain death; his sister Sally had already written that "if you are sick or wounded I will come and see you and I still assure you that the frightful noise of great guns nor the thoughts of being in a Camp shall prevent my coming if either of those should be the case."²

But nothing could shake him. Fever or no fever, he was joining the expedition forming under Benedict Arnold at Newburyport for the long dash through the Maine wilderness on Quebec. Ogden traveled comfortably by carriage the sixty miles to Newburyport. But Burr would have none of that. They were soldiers, not women. So he, and a few other volunteers whom he persuaded, started out September 14th, muskets and knapsacks on their backs, on foot to the appointed meeting-place.

Timothy Edwards, still legally his guardian, was alarmed for his hot-blooded young nephew. He sent a messenger post-haste to Newburyport with peremptory instructions to bring the fugitive back. Burr read the letter that was thrust into his hand, looked at the sturdy bearer, and inquired coolly: "How do you expect to take me back, if I should refuse to go? If you were to make any

forcible attempt on me, I would have you hung up in ten minutes."

The messenger had been provided, however, against such a contingency. He produced a second letter from the uncle; this one no longer peremptory and harsh, but couched in affectionate and imploring terms. He dwelt exceedingly on the harrowing hardships to be endured on such an expedition, on Burr's present illness and a slightness of frame that would never endure to the end. In earnest accents he begged his ward to reflect and give up the idea.

Still the young volunteer was adamant. He answered the letter with many respectful protestations of regard, and a firm determination to carry on. Whereupon the messenger deposited with him silently a bag of gold that Edwards had sent along, and departed — alone.³

2. ON TO QUEBEC

The invasion of Canada was one of the earliest strategic moves of the Revolution. There were immeasurable advantages to be gained, both military and political, in winning over Canada to the cause. For one thing, there would be a solid and united front in America and a consequent increase in man-power and the resources of warfare; for another, it would eliminate a convenient base for British land operations against the rebellious Colonies.⁴

The idea was correct, the hopes based upon its success plausible, but unfortunately Washington and Congress had been furnished with distorted and misleading information. Certain negotiations had already been conducted with the Canadians, seeking their support. The old French settlers were not wholly unwilling to consider the matter; they were not exactly contented under the rule of England. But they were a prudent race and cautious against untoward commitments. If they could be assured of success, if the Americans could prove conclusively that they were well able to battle the might of England — well, then, Messieurs, we shall see . . . we shall see!

The American emissaries, unversed in these diplomatic murmurings, hastened back to report that all Canada was seething with revolt, that at the mere sight of an expeditionary force, the countryside would rise *en masse* and join in driving the English into the sea. These reports were promptly accepted at face value. Time was short, if the conquest of Canada was to be accomplished at all. General Guy Carleton, the British Governor, was an able

soldier, and he was rushing fortifications with diligence and speed. Reinforcements were already on the way from England.

The capture of Ticonderoga and of Crown Point by the Americans opened a way along Lake Champlain into the heart of Canada. General Schuyler was placed in command of a force that would strike through at Montreal. On his sudden illness the command devolved on General Montgomery.

Simultaneously with this move, Arnold was to march with picked men through the untrodden wilderness of southwestern Maine and surprise and capture Quebec while Carleton was employed at Montreal. It was a desperate venture, but its very boldness and daring was in its favor. At that, the entire scheme missed complete success only by a hair's-breadth. The most important element of weakness, and one which was eventually to prove fatal, was the time equation. The maps of the Maine wilderness were not wholly accurate, and the passage took far longer than the calculated period. The surprise element was lost, Carleton was able to man Quebec adequately, and the wholly lukewarm Canadians, seeing that the fat was in the fire, lifted hardly a finger to aid their supposed allies.

Colonel Arnold's force (he had just received his commission) consisted of two battalions, of about 1100 men in total strength, chiefly mountaineers and frontiersmen from Pennsylvania and Virginia, accustomed to the wilderness. They left Cambridge in two detachments on September 11th and 13th, 1775, and reached Newburyport, the point of embarkation, on the 15th and 16th. Burr and his friends arrived at about the same time. On the 18th they embarked on board eleven transports and headed for Gardinerstown, at the mouth of the Kennebec River, where they put ashore on the 20th. Burr had been accepted as a gentleman volunteer by Arnold and was in high spirits. Along with him were young men whose names were to be linked with his in certain very important crises of his life. Besides Matthias Ogden, there were Samuel Spring and Jonathan Dayton, friends from college days, and — James Wilkinson. Of this worthy, much, much more anon.

From Gardinerstown, what with bateaux and marching, they traversed the six miles to Fort Western, up the river. From there, on September 25th and 26th, they pushed on in two battalions. Burr and his companions were assigned to Colonel Greene's division and started on the 26th.

They had for their perilous water journeying over 224 bateaux, "hastily built in the most slight manner of green pine," laden to the brim with men, provisions, cannon, equipment; two men in

the bow, and two in the stern to handle each unwieldy craft. Thus equipped, they ventured without misgivings, sensing only high adventure ahead, into the unknown tangle of woods and swamps and rapids and mountains.

It was difficult, tedious work, far more so than any had anticipated. The current of the Kennebec, as they penetrated farther along its course, grew rapidly stronger and more shoal. Time and again the crews had to wade in the icy, rushing waters to haul the clumsy, overladen boats against its force. There were falls and rapids, too. The boats were unloaded, placed on the backs of straining men, together with the supplies and guns, and carried through hampering woods and swamps around the impasse. The weather was shifting too; every day it was perceptibly colder. On September 30th, only a few days along, it was already so cold that the soaked uniforms of the shivering men froze and refused to thaw out even near the fires.

The boats were leaking now, the crews were always in water, their clothes always drenched. Precious food supplies swept away in the torrents or grew moldy; ammunition became wet and was rendered useless. Portages increased in number and difficulty. The river became shallower and swifter, and the mountains were beginning. Snow was on their flanks, and continuous cold, penetrating rains set in. The water of the stream was icy. Rations were reduced to moldy pork and flour and a few barrels of unwholesome salt beef.

On October 8th they reached the headwaters of the Kennebec and there was a twelve-mile carry to the Dead River. This was the worst of all, through choked forests, swamps and miry lakes, across the looming flank of a mountain. The men were in a very bad state by now. Dysentery had weakened them, fevers and colds had sapped their strength; they were ill, exhausted, starved, their clothing in rags, drenched by the eternal rains, frozen by the sharp frosts of a Maine autumn. But they made it, and on October 16th set those boats that remained on the Dead River.

Arnold wrote letters to his correspondents in Canada, announcing his imminent arrival. Two Indians were the messengers. They and their letters fell into the hands of the British and gave the first warning of the approach of Arnold's expedition.

The Dead River was a deep, sluggish stream, black and ugly. It was too deep to pole and the bateaux had to be hauled with ropes by men on the banks. The rain fell torrentially. One bitter evening the river rose like a spring freshet and washed boats, provisions, guns and tents to irremediable destruction. The sur-

rounding forest for hundreds of square miles became a vast, choked lake. The men died of hunger and exhaustion; pneumonia took its toll. Food was non-existent; everything was eaten by the desperate soldiers — dogs, moccasins, leather. And, to add to their miseries, it began to snow on October 25th. Winter and all its attendant terrors was at hand.

Finally, however, after indescribable hardships and superhuman efforts, they struggled with their few remaining boats over a terrible portage, surmounted the steep ridge of the Boundary Mountains, toiled down to Seven Mile Stream, and into Chaudière Pond. They were in Canada!

Burr and Ogden were participants in that dreadful march. They helped pole boats, waded in icy streams, struggled through swamps, ate dog meat when available, were ragged and hungry and footsore equally with the tough frontiersmen of Morgan and of Greene. Ogden kept a hurried journal, of which only a portion is preserved. On October 28th, he and Burr and two others, with "about $\frac{3}{4}$ of a pound of pork per man, and five pints, scant measure, of flour, which was to last us to the inhabitants," left the ridge of the Boundary Mountains and made their way by boat down to Chaudière Pond.⁶ On the way they found one of Captain Smith's boats dashed on the rocks and all her lading lost. Because the stream was too swift they abandoned boat, and joining forces, seven all told, proceeded on foot, steering northeast, until they caught up with the rest of their Company. "At 3 o'clock we hailed Capt. Derborn and one more going down stream in a birch canoe. They informed us that Capt. Morgan had his boat split upon a rock, the most of his effects lost, and one man drowned."⁶

The next day they found the wreck of their informants' canoe. It was every man for himself. Discipline and ordered marching had long since vanished. They straggled through as best they might, singly and in couples and in little ragged, always hungry groups. Men died on the way and there was no one to bury them.

Meanwhile the rear division, under Colonel Enos, had held a council of war, and foreseeing only suffering and eventual death ahead in this frightful wilderness, had determined to abandon the expedition. Accordingly they turned back, taking with them the larger share of their scanty food and ammunition; for which Enos was afterward to be tried by court-martial and regrettably acquitted.

Arnold had pushed ahead of the toiling, still faithful detachment to Chaudière Pond. There he met a messenger from French sympathizers with the cheering information that there were "few

or no regulars at Quebec, which may be easily taken." ⁷ He went on down the Chaudière River and on October 30th reached Sartigan, where there were, praise be, supplies to be purchased and sent back to his starving troops.

Ogden records their pathetic emotions at the vision of food. It was "the finest sight my eyes ever beheld . . . Scarce one of us but with tears of joy expressed the gratitude of his heart at seeing five horned cattle and two birch canoes loaded with mutton and flour brought forward by French men." It was November 2, 1775.

The wilderness march was over. From then on they traveled through settled country to their objective. But half the force had deserted, many had died in the terrible passage, and the rest were ill and exhausted.

After a rest at Sartigan, the little band, some 500 effectives, moved on to Point Levis on the St. Lawrence, directly opposite the frowning steep of Quebec. The advance force camped on the ground November 7th; the last faint straggler came up by November 13th.

Meanwhile cheering news had been received from Montgomery. He had advanced into Canada, captured Chambly and St. John's in succession, and was pressing on to Montreal. General Carleton, hearing of the new threat caused by Arnold's sudden appearance, hastily abandoned Montreal to the foe and raced back to Quebec to put it in a state of defense.

Meanwhile there were no boats. The British had burned them all, and a frigate and a sloop patrolled the river. But somehow the Americans were able to purchase a supply from the natives, and secretly, the night of November 13th, 500 men crossed to Wolfe's Cove before the alarm was given. They met no opposition as they climbed in Wolfe's footsteps to the Heights of Abraham and encamped before the walls of Quebec.

A flag of truce to the English with a peremptory, threatening message to surrender was decided on. It was a gesture, nothing more.⁸ Ogden, who carried the message, was, to his vast astonishment, promptly greeted with cannon balls. He tried it again on the following day, and the emphatic salute was repeated. Obviously the English were in no mood to listen to insulting demands.⁹

3. SIEGE AND ASSAULT

The besieging force was a mere handful; nor did it have any artillery with which to batter at the fortifications. The besiegers'

position was far more hazardous than that of the ostensibly besieged. It was necessary, therefore, to wait for reinforcements and guns from Montgomery. Accordingly, the Americans retreated on November 19th to Pointe aux Trembles, on the St. Lawrence, some twenty miles west. Even as they quitted their positions before the city a sloop bearing General Carleton entered Quebec.

On November 20th Arnold heard from Montgomery about the victory at Montreal and the capture of 11 British vessels. He immediately dispatched young Ogden, now a Staff Captain, with a request for ammunition, clothing, and a proposal for a junction of their forces for a grand assault on Quebec. But nothing came. On November 30th Arnold sent another dispatch, expressing anxiety for the delay and for Montgomery's safe arrival. "I have not had the pleasure of hearing from you for ten days," it ran.¹⁰

This express was probably carried by Aaron Burr. For, on the very same day, November 30th, 1775, Arnold wrote another letter to Montgomery. "Dear Sir," it read, "this will be handed you by Mr. Burr, a volunteer in the army, and son to the former President of New Jersey College. He is a young gentleman of much life and activity, and has acted with great spirit and resolution on our fatiguing march. His conduct, I make no doubt, will be sufficient recommendation to your favor."¹¹

Another legend concerning Burr must accordingly be placed in the discard. Notably, the flattering tale that young Burr had been sent by Arnold from Chaudière Pond to Montgomery, disguised as a Catholic priest, with news of Arnold's approach, and that Montgomery, pleased with the perilous task gallantly accomplished, forthwith appointed him to his Staff. Obviously, on November 30th, Montgomery still did not know Burr.¹²

Burr never reached Montreal with these two letters. For Montgomery was already on his way up the river. On November 28th he had started forth and on December 1st he appeared in Arnold's camp. Burr evidently turned back on sighting the flotilla.

The reinforcements, however, consisted of only 300 men. The balance of Montgomery's army had been left with Wooster to hold Montreal. On December 2nd, the combined force, still under 1000, marched back to Quebec. Montgomery had brought artillery, and it was decided now to chance an assault.

Burr, armed with Arnold's strong recommendation, and because of his own personal qualities, had found favor with Montgomery. Immediately upon his arrival the commanding general attached the young volunteer to his own Staff as aide-de-camp. It was now *Captain* Burr, still aged 19!

Several schemes for the assault were proposed. Among them was a plan by Burr to scale the walls at the Cap Diamond bastion. This formidable fortress was supposedly impregnable, but the idea, though desperate, was not as forlorn a hope as it sounded. For the very reason that no attack would be reasonably expected there, the garrison should prove small, and, once at close quarters, the guns mounted in the bastion could not be depressed to inflict any damage on the attacking force.

Montgomery thought sufficiently of the plan to permit Burr to take 50 picked men and drill them in the use of scaling ladders. Which he proceeded diligently to do. But, to the ardent young Captain's great chagrin, the scheme was eventually dropped. It was decided instead to concentrate on a two-column attack on the Lower Town. It was believed that the wealthy citizens of Quebec would not view with equanimity the loss and possible destruction of their valuable warehouses along the riverfront, and would force Carleton to a speedy surrender. But Burr considered it then — and ever after — a fatal delusion.¹³

The attack finally took place on the night of December 31st. It was the last chance. The following morning the enlistment terms of some of the soldiers expired. Three New England companies — patriots all — had determined to quit, war or no war. Smallpox was prevalent, the officers wrangled, and food was giving out.

One detachment, headed by Arnold, was to approach the city from the General Hospital and storm the barrier at Sault au Matelot. The other, under Montgomery's personal leadership, was to make its way from Wolfe's Cove along the beach of the St. Lawrence and attempt to force the barrier and palisades on the opposite side of the Lower Town at Près de Ville. If both maneuvers proved successful, the two divisions were to combine at the foot of Mountain Street, within the Lower Town. A narrow picketed passage led to the Upper Town from there, and perhaps, if luck were with them. . . . These were the main assaults; there were to be three diversions. Arnold's column held 600 men, Montgomery's 300; the diversions 250. A pitiful force to assault a heavily fortified place, defended by every advantage of nature and 2,000 men!

They started in a blinding snowstorm, and the night was a shroud of ink and swirling white. But the English had been apprised of the impending assault, and fire opened almost immediately. Arnold's column withered under a storm of shot. Arnold himself fell, his leg shattered by a musket ball. Captain Daniel

Morgan took command and, with the few remaining men, swept around the precipice upon the first barrier. Here for the moment all seemed surprisingly well. The English guard was drunk with New Year's liquor, and the sound of battle had not penetrated their befuddled senses. Morgan raced over the barrier and on to the battery.

But the miraculous luck broke down. A solitary sailor, on sentry near the cannon — and liquorless — ran to the guns and discharged one of them. The guard tumbled out. Astounded, they beat a hasty retreat with Morgan and his men hot after them. But another battery intervened and the Americans paused for reinforcements. By his own account, Morgan ventured almost to the Upper Town “to see what was going on.” He found everything in confusion, and no one in arms. Yet when he returned, they continued to wait and debate, he and his officers, while precious minutes fled. After all, they were only a handful, and they were clogged with prisoners. So the opportunity passed!

Aaron Burr was of course with General Montgomery's column. The way along the St. Lawrence was so encumbered with piled-up ice and deep snow-drifts that they did not reach the first palisade at Près de Ville until all chance for a surprise assault was over. The guard was alert at the barricade, waiting with lighted matches to the guns. Cautiously the little force crept closer to the great wooden pickets. Burr was at his General's side, so was John McPherson, the other aide-de-camp, and their Canadian guide.

Carpenters were called for. They succeeded in sawing out four of the pickets without giving the alarm to the garrison within. Encouraged by their success, the men crowded through, to repeat the same performance at the second barricade, well up on the precipice. When three of the posts were down, Montgomery and his two aides slipped through, then the Canadian guide, and some others. They were under the last sheltering point of the cliff. Around the bend waited the English at their cannons.

Suddenly the alarm was raised. Montgomery sprang forward unhesitatingly. “Push on, brave boys; Quebec is ours!” he shouted. Burr and McPherson were on his heels, the guide right behind, followed by a ragged column of assault.

A storm of cannister and grape swept the narrow pass. Montgomery went down, shot through the head; so did McPherson, the guide, and nine others. Burr stood almost alone, untouched.

The long column recoiled on itself, aghast at the disaster. Burr shouted to them to follow him, that he would lead them on. But Lieutenant-Colonel Campbell, second in command, and in the

rear of the column, gave hasty orders to retreat. In vain did Burr stand exposed to the guns, exhorting the troops to press to the attack. The demoralized men were only too eager to obey the orders of the superior officer, and they fled, leaving their General dead in the snow.¹⁴

Meanwhile, the British, after that first fatal volley, had succumbed to panic and fled up toward the center of the town. On the field there was only Burr — and the dead! Finding themselves fleeing a phantom pursuit, the English returned sheepishly to their guns. Another opportunity had passed!

It is bootless to speak in "ifs." Yet, *if* Morgan's officers had not prevailed on him to wait for reinforcements; *if* the men had followed Aaron Burr instead of the more prudent Campbell, Quebec might have been captured that night, and the entire course of the War of the Revolution been profoundly changed. But to return to that snow-covered shambles!

According to Dr. Samuel Spring, an eye-witness, "as soon as the General fell, the American army fled in great consternation. . . . Burr returned back alone and attempted, amidst a shower of musquetry, to bring off on his shoulder, the body of Montgomery — but the General being a large man, and Burr small and the snow deep, prevented him."¹⁵

As a result, when, the next morning, the battle over, the British came down, they found the frozen corpse almost where it had fallen, and was carried by them up to the citadel for burial.

4. END OF THE VENTURE

The assault on Quebec had ended in failure. Montgomery was dead, Arnold wounded, and Morgan, who had finally returned with reinforcements — too late — had found his command cut to pieces and himself compelled to surrender. When morning came, the American forces counted their losses. They were staggering. More than half had been killed, wounded, or taken prisoner. Arnold, incapacitated, attempted to retire the command in favor of Colonel Campbell, but he was unacceptable to the other officers. It was he who had ordered the retreat at Près de Ville in the face of Burr's attempt to rally the column and press to the attack, and they felt that his prudence — or timidity — had lost them Quebec. Unanimously they elected Arnold.

The campaign was over, but the siege stubbornly carried on until May. Huddled behind breastworks, themselves fearing attack from the besieged, decimated by smallpox, hampered by

heavy snowstorms and the severe cold, torn by internal dissensions and wrangling, they held on. Arnold quit to go to Montreal in April for treatment of his leg. Wooster took over, then Thomas. Finally, in May, 1776, by which time the British had been overwhelmingly reinforced, the fruitless siege was raised.

Captain Burr's gallantry in this ill-fated action elicited a sheaf of praise and commendation. Arnold declared he had "behaved extremely well" and appointed him Brigade Major.¹⁶ General Wooster lauded him; his friend Bradford exulted that "your praise is now in every man's mouth . . . I make no doubt but your promotion will be taken care of. The gentlemen of the Congress speak highly of you."¹⁷ Judge Reeve wrote with relieved anxiety. "Dear Burr, Amid the lamentations of a country for the loss of a brave, enterprising general, your escape from such imminent danger, to which you have been exposed, has afforded us the greatest satisfaction. The news of the unfortunate attack upon Quebec arrived among us on the 13th of this month. I concealed it from your sister [Sally] until the 18th, when she found it out; but, in less than half an hour, I received letters from Albany, acquainting me that you were in safety, and had gained great honour by your intrepid conduct."¹⁸

Meanwhile Matthias Ogden had left the army while it still huddled hopelessly before Quebec, and returned to New York. There he received an appointment as Lieutenant-Colonel in the 1st Jersey Battalion, and wrote forthwith to his friend that he had heard of a vacancy in General Washington's official family, and was pulling wires to obtain it for him.¹⁹

Burr felt the inactivity of the Canadian campaign keenly. It was dragging out to wretched failure, and he was, he told his sister, "dirty, ragged, moneyless and friendless." Nor had he conceived any particular esteem for his superior, General Arnold. He had thought him a bit more regardful of his own comforts than of the privations of his men during the Wilderness trek, and, while paying tribute to his undoubted bravery, considered him somewhat unprincipled on the moral side.

In April, 1776, Burr accompanied Arnold to Montreal, then on to Camp Sorrel, and by May he was at Fort Chambly, desperately eager to get home, to see his friends and family, to participate in a *war* once more.

So anxious indeed was he that Davis terms it desertion! But a letter from Burr to his sister, dated Fort Chambly, May 26, 1776, seems to put the quietus on this legend also.

"I have this Moment arrived from the Camp at Sorrel all well,"

he tells her. "I rec'd a Letter from you while at that Place — heard of another taken Prisoner in Quebec and several more strolling about the Country for the entertainment of the Army . . . Write me no more till you hear from me again which I hope will be from Albany. I shall if nothing extraordinary intervenes start for the Southward the Beginning of next Week. *As I go on Public Business* I shall not probably have time to see you as I go down. I intend after that to make a week or two and enjoy it at Litchfield with the best of sisters."²⁰

En route through Albany, Burr heard that it would be agreeable for General Washington to see him in New York. Ogden, now a Colonel, had pulled his wires to good effect. Burr arrived in New York about the second week in June. Davis sets the date as May 20, 1776. But this is impossible. On May 26th, he was still at Fort Chambly, and on June 5th he and Ogden, who had been detailed to Fort George, missed each other on the road at Lake George, the one coming down and the other going up.²¹

In any event he saw Washington and was invited to join his staff, pending a satisfactory appointment. Burr accepted, and was promptly installed at Headquarters, in the old Mortier Mansion at Richmond Hill. Richmond Hill, whose history was already at once venerable and glamorous, and that was to become so much more famous and romantic from further association with the name of the young aide-de-camp.

5. MAJOR BURR OF THE STAFF

Of young Burr's association with General Washington during this period — he was only twenty — there has been considerable ado. It is known that Burr wrote to John Hancock expressing a desire to retire from the army, and that on June 22, 1776, Hancock obtained for him an appointment as aide-de-camp to General Putnam instead. Accordingly the presumption has arisen — and has been accepted as true down to the present — that the General and his hot-headed young aide had quarreled, that Burr had become disgusted with Washington, that there had been constant irritation between the two — not to speak of a certain dark and nefarious amour which the General had uncovered.

The time element, hitherto overlooked, however, must effectually dispose of such suppositious imaginings. According to all previous accounts, Burr was with Washington for six weeks, during which period a good many untoward events might have taken place. Actually, with Burr at Lake George on June 5th, it was

impossible for him to have reached New York much before June 12th. Assuming a decent interval before he entered upon his duties, it must have been at least June 14th before he joined Washington's household. And on June 22nd he received his new appointment. Which brings his total service as Washington's aide-de-camp to not over eight days! Eight days — during which time he had already communicated his dissatisfaction to Hancock, who in turn was able to overcome the necessary red tape and furnish Burr with his commission.

On this calculation, Burr had barely been installed in Washington's household a day before he was evincing disgust and Washington was discovering illicit love affairs. Another explanation is much more satisfactory and credible, even though it does violence to hoary tradition. The appointment on Washington's staff had been a temporary one, a mere stopgap until a more satisfactory one could be found. Burr had left Canada because he desired *active* service. Staff Headquarters, with its routine of clerical work, was not to his taste. He came to the Colonies expressly, "by personal interview, to answer purposes which I scarce hoped the cold medium of ink and paper could effect."²² This was undoubtedly an interview with Hancock, then President of the Continental Congress. The meeting must have taken place and the letter have been sent *immediately* on Burr's arrival, and *before* he had any personal acquaintance with Washington, to have achieved such quick results. Whatever ill-feeling or dislike there may have existed between the two necessarily arose at a later date.

Early in July, 1776, Aaron Burr entered upon his new duties with the rank and perquisites of a Major. He was eminently contented with his new post. Israel Putnam was Commander of the American forces in and about New York and, as such, was in a position to permit his warlike young aide to see real service very shortly. They got along very well together. Putnam had a real regard for Burr, and Burr was always to call the indomitable, if somewhat illiterate warrior, "my good old General."

Headquarters were established in the Warren House, at the corner of Broadway and the Battery, where Mrs. Putnam and her daughters presided in happy domesticity and mothered the handsome young aide.

For a while there were only clerical duties, the writing and revision of the General's orders with a due regard for the niceties and spelling of the English language, which Putnam was so often led wholly to disregard. Nor were the social amenities overlooked.

Besides the manifold attractions of New York for a handsome young officer, aged twenty, with a reputation already achieved for bravery in action, there was a new diversion. This was no less than the sudden appearance in General Putnam's household of a young beauty of the tender age of fourteen, cousin to the late General Montgomery and the daughter of a British officer stationed with the enemy forces on Staten Island. She was Margaret Moncrieffe, afterward to achieve a certain reputation in the courts of Europe as Mrs. Margaret Coghlan. Much, much later, she was also to publish her memoirs—an interminable catalogue of amours and escapades.

Friendless and alone at Elizabethtown, the young girl had thrown herself upon Putnam's mercy, and that kindly old man offered her at once shelter and succor in his own home where she "was received, with the greatest tenderness by Mrs. Putnam and her daughters." But, she goes on naively, "I seldom was allowed to be alone, although sometimes, indeed, I found an opportunity to escape to the gallery on the top of the house, where my chief delight was to view, with a telescope, our fleet and army on Staten Island."²³

There was another delight, also. A certain young American officer about whom she rhapsodizes at length with the retrospective glow of later years. Aaron Burr! "Oh!" she cries rather self-consciously, and with due attention to the literary effect, "May these pages one day meet the eye of him who subdued my virgin heart, whom the immutable, unerring laws of nature had pointed out for my husband, but whose sacred decree the barbarous customs of society fatally violated. To him I plighted my virgin vow, and I shall never cease to lament, that obedience to a father left it incomplete. . . . I had communicated, by letter to General Putnam, the proposals of this gentleman, with my determination to accept them, and I was embarrassed by the answer which the general returned; he entreated me to remember that the person in question, from his political principles, was extremely obnoxious to my father, and concluded by observing 'that I surely would not unite myself with a man who, in his zeal for the cause of his country, would not hesitate to drench his sword in the blood of my nearest relation, should he be opposed to him in battle.' Saying this, he lamented the necessity of giving advice contrary to his own sentiments, since in every other respect he considered the match as unexceptionable."²⁴

She does not name this "conqueror of my soul," except that he was an "American colonel." Yet Davis considers it a matter of

common knowledge that Burr was the "gentleman" in question, even though he was only a major at the time. Perhaps he was! In any event Davis, by the deliberate omission of the above pertinent portions of the Memoirs, so garbled the text that it lent itself readily to his outright accusation that Burr had seduced the charming young ward of his General, and placed her errant feet on the path of later and more notorious years.²⁵

There is also another story in connection with the youthful Margaret Moncrieffe. It appears that the young lady's frequent sessions on the roof with a telescope and her passion for painting flower pictures excited Burr's suspicion that the fair charmer might be nothing more or less than a British spy. These suspicions he communicated to his superior, and one day she was quietly removed to closer confinement at Kingsbridge, there to remain until she was sent back to her father within the British lines with a most ingenuous note, composed by the General himself.

"Ginrale Putnam's compliments to Major Moncrieffe," it read, "has made him a present of a fine daughter, if he don't *lick* her he send her back again, and he will provide her with a good *twig* husband."²⁶

6. BURR RESCUES A BRIGADE

It was not all to be a nice balancing of the amenities, however. There was a war in progress. General Howe had landed in August, 1776, an army of 34,000 men on Staten Island, backed by a mighty fleet, all for the purpose of taking the City of New York. With New York as a military base, and with the fleet of His Majesty dominating the sea and the wide stretch of the Hudson River, it would be comparatively simple to cut the rebel Colonies neatly in twain.

To meet this peril Washington determined to hold the city at all costs. Yet he must have known that his position, with the men and armament at his disposal, was militarily indefensible. He was compelled to divide his already scanty forces. Long Island was open to the guns of the fleet and the attack of an overwhelming enemy. Let but Brooklyn Heights be seized, and low-lying Manhattan could be raked at will. With the frigates in possession of all the waterways, a defeat might speedily be converted into overwhelming disaster.

Others, better tacticians than he, saw this clearly. Young Aaron Burr, aide-de-camp to General Putnam, was one of these. Nay, he

was the first to suggest that it would be sound and farseeing tactics to abandon the city to the British; first, however, setting fire to it, so that there would be no shelter or accommodations for their unwieldy host. A drastic measure, it is true, but militarily correct. After the retreat, General Nathanael Greene, and even John Jay, proposed like measures.²⁷ It may be that the enterprising aide pressed his suggestion with more vehemence than discretion, and that the commanding General resented it.

However, the event was to prove the wisdom of Burr's proposal. For Washington persisted in his attempts to hold the city. There were political repercussions and the matter of morale to be considered as well as abstract tactics. He fortified Brooklyn Heights, correctly seeing the strategic value of that rise of land, and there stationed the greater part of his too small forces. General Greene, chosen to command the Heights, took ill, and Generals Putnam and Sullivan were hurried over just as the British were about to attack.

By a clever flanking movement Howe turned the American left, under cover of a feigned frontal attack and the thunder of the ships' guns, and, on August 27th, the Americans were utterly defeated. Stirling and Sullivan were captured together with a thousand men; the rest driven back to an intrenched camp. But Howe, instead of attacking the demoralized troops at once, preferred to commence slow siege tactics, and Washington availed himself of the respite, the darkness, the rain, and a strong northeast gale that kept the British ships out of the East River, to ferry his bedraggled and disheartened army across to Manhattan.

Major Burr had proceeded with General Putnam to Brooklyn, where he had been charged with the inspection of troops and outposts. His reports were caustic and biting; he found the raw levies lacking in morale and wholly innocent of military efficiency — reports that the events of the next few days were thoroughly to justify. He even advised that the Heights be abandoned without a battle. On that dreadful night of terror and confusion he watched with somber eyes the battalions load into the wind-blown boats, so eager to get away that "those in the rear were mounting on the shoulders and clambering over the heads of those before them."²⁸ He had predicted just such a debacle!

With Brooklyn Heights lost, and the fleet commanding all the surrounding waters of Manhattan Island, only Howe's extreme and inexplicable dilatoriness prevented him from easily encompassing the capture of Washington's entire force and the probable conclusion, then and there, of the American Revolution. Nor was

Washington himself without fault here, as in the remainder of this most unmilitary campaign. It is true that he shifted half of his force to Kingsbridge, where the Westchester Hills were open to him for escape, but with the balance of his force he clung stubbornly to Manhattan, until Howe, girding himself at length and after two weeks' delay, landed in Kip's Bay, and drove the American troops before him in disgraceful rout, cutting off whole brigades, and harrying the remainder until they stopped, exhausted and breathless, on Harlem Heights.

It was during this disorderly retreat that Burr, singlehanded, and with the utmost coolness and daring, saved an entire brigade from destruction or capture by the pursuing British. Through some misapprehension, General Silliman's Brigade had been left stranded in the vast and disastrous confusion of that 15th day of September, 1776. General Knox, temporarily in command, without orders and wholly cut off from the fleeing army, moved his troops to Bunker's Hill, a small, crudely constructed fort at the juncture of what is now Grand and Mulberry Streets. There he determined to await the course of events.

While they huddled in increasing bewilderment, hearing the thunder of guns and the crash of musketry, Aaron Burr rode up and asked to know who commanded there. General Knox presented himself, whereupon Burr — a Major, it must be remembered, and twenty years old — demanded of the veteran General what he did there, and why he had not retreated with the rest of the army?

The General replied that retreat was impossible, that the enemy had already thrown a cordon across the upper island, and that he meant to defend himself in the fort. Burr laughed out loud. How can you defend this place, he inquired scornfully? You have no provisions, no water, no bombproof shelters. Why, he went on, with one mortar or a howitzer the British could take you within four hours. It is suicide to stay, General; you *must* retreat, and at once, to Harlem Heights.

Knox, however, was stubborn, and a bit addled by the rush of events. Besides, what did this little snip of an aide-de-camp mean by offering him advice in such assured, scornful tones! He would not attempt it, in spite of Burr's excited urgings.

Whereupon the young aide, seeing all too clearly the consequences of the superior officer's decision, determined on an act of the grossest insubordination. Turning from the obstinate General, he addressed himself directly to the frightened men and officers, who had crowded around, intent on the debate. Why, he ex-

claimed, if you remain here, men, before nightfall you will all be prisoners, crammed into a dungeon, or hung like dogs. Put yourselves under my command, he cried in ringing tones, and I'll engage to lead you off. Better that half of you die fighting, than all be sacrificed in this cowardly manner. And, while Knox puffed and stormed, the men cheered and agreed to follow this young Major who had appeared out of nowhere.

Burr knew the terrain intimately. He led them along devious back roads, galloping up and down their flank, scouting for sight of the enemy. At about four miles from town they ran into some British and were fired upon. Burr pushed his horse recklessly toward the concealment from which the musket shots had come, hallooing to his men to follow him. Fortunately it proved to be only a company on guard, who broke and fled at once before the onslaught. Burr and his two mounted attendants pursued the fleeing men and killed several of them.

Meanwhile the head of his column had taken the wrong road. He galloped back, hurried them to the left, away from the main force of the British, into a wood, and rode continually up and down the straggling column, encouraging the men with cheerful words, until he had led them into the camp of the American forces on Harlem Heights. Only a few men had been lost in the entire exploit.²⁹

It was a gallant deed from inception to conclusion, rendered notable by a coolness and deliberation and envisioning of consequences unusual in a mere lad of twenty. Yet this rescue of an entire brigade was never mentioned in official dispatches. Perhaps the fuming General Knox had something to do with that. Perhaps General Washington still smarted under certain outspoken criticisms from the brash young aide that the event had proved only too overwhelmingly correct. And Burr would have been more than human not to have felt a certain resentment at the seeming slight.

The following day, on September 16, 1776, the panic-stricken troops rallied; defeated the combined British and Hessians in the battle of Harlem Heights, and with the respite thus achieved, were enabled to retire in good order.

7. MILITARY INTELLIGENCE

The campaign now stagnated. Howe again delayed and temporized, when bold moves might have meant the rout of the opposing army. Washington sent 13,000 men to White Plains,

where Howe inflicted another defeat on October 28th, yet failed to follow up his victory. Burr was at White Plains, writing to Sally on the eve of battle. "I was near you tho unwittingly . . . Pray remind Seymour again of my Hat — I want it much. If I have any plain Metal Buttons on any of my old Cloathes I should be glad of them all. I have Cloath but cannot make it up for Want of some. If I have a Pr. of Leather Drawers send them & two Pr of the coarsest of my Winter Stockings."³⁰

Then came disaster. Fort Washington and Fort Lee, the guardian sentinels of the Hudson, were taken; and Washington, who had joined the main body of his army at Hackensack, began his retreat through the Jerseys. Howe pursued with his accustomed leisureliness. Philadelphia seemed in danger of capture and Congress fled in alarm to Baltimore. General Putnam was ordered south to supervise the construction of lines of defense. Burr, still his aide-de-camp, and solidly entrenched in the bluff old man's affections, assisted. Then came the startling news of Trenton and the victory at Princeton. From the latter place Major Burr wrote in some bitterness to an inquiry of his old friend, Ogden, now a Colonel: "As to 'expectations of promotion,' I have not the least, either in the line or the staff. You need not express any surprise at it, as I have never made any application, and, as you know me, you know I never shall. I should have been fond of a berth in a regiment, as we proposed when I last saw you. But, as I am at present happy in the esteem and entire confidence of my good old general, I shall be piqued at no neglect, unless particularly pointed, or where silence would be want of spirit. 'Tis true, indeed, my former equals, and even inferiors in rank, have left me. Assurances from those in power I have had unasked, and in abundance; but of these I shall never remind them. We are not to judge of our own merit, and I am content to contribute my mite in any station."³¹

Burr never, through life, possessed that capacity to push himself and plead his own cause that is characteristic of your typically successful man. His spirit was too proud, too reserved, even at the height of his own political career. But it rankled nevertheless. Rightly or wrongly, he attributed the oversight of his promotion to the Commanding General, George Washington. There was a crying lack of good officers in the Revolutionary Army. And the twenty-one-year-old Major had sufficiently proved himself possessed of military genius and capacity for leadership.

Yet he continued to perform his staff duties with diligence and dispatch. Already he was showing a decided aptitude for the

Military Intelligence Service. He was quickwitted and observant as well as brave. He interviewed deserters from the British camp at Brunswick and prepared a careful account of "the Situation, Strength and Intentions of the Enemy . . . taken at Princeton, Mar. 10, 1777," for Staff use. At that time Putnam's entire division for the defense of Princeton and its environs consisted of some 350 effectives.³²

Shortly after, Putnam was ordered to Peekskill to take command of the American lines across Westchester County. Once again, Burr was set to Intelligence work, a task at which he had proved himself most adept. On July 14, 1777, Putnam ordered him to proceed to the Sound and "transmit . . . without delay the intelligence you shall from time to time receive of the movements of the enemy, or any of their fleets."³³

CHAPTER V

THE WAR GOES ON

1. PROMOTION

IT costs money to raise and equip troops, and money — that is, good hard cash as opposed to the product of the printing-press — was very much lacking in the coffers of the Continental Congress. Yet the war had to be fought, and farmers and mechanics induced to enlist by the dangling of bonuses and the prospect of a regular wage. So a vicious system arose. There were plenty of wealthy men in the Colonies — patriots, it must be understood — who, while unwilling to be taxed for the sinews of warfare, succumbed readily to the lure of self-glory and the luster of a military title.

Whereupon the privilege was accorded those with ample money-bags to raise regiments at their own expense, and in return, the illustrious name of the donor was forthwith attached to the troop, while the donor himself — merchant, trader, land speculator, whatnot — was commissioned a Colonel by a grateful Congress, and placed immediately in command. No wonder a good many of these regiments were slightly less than useful to the harassed commander-in-chief!

William Malcolm — a worthy, and wealthy merchant of the City of New York — was one of these. He raised his regiment, was duly commissioned, and behold, Colonel Malcolm's Regiment, completely accoutered and consisting of some 260 men, was ordered to a station on the Ramapo, in New Jersey. But war, even in an encampment, was not all beer and skittles, as the worthy and rotund Colonel soon discovered. In the first place he had taken as his officers the young sons of wealth and influence, and they were not only without any experience in military matters, but resented any interruptions in their former easy-going civilian life. The men in the ranks were the usual bonus hunters, and similarly averse to discipline and the harshness of the army. So that the regiment rapidly grew unmanageable, much to the alarm and inward quakings of its most unwarlike Colonel.

So it was that Major Aaron Burr was suddenly given an opportunity. He had been almost a year with General Putnam as Staff