



*The
Siege*

*The Revolution
followed him home...*

*Tales From a Revolution
Virginia*

Lars D. H. Hedbor

The Siege

Tales from a Revolution: Virginia

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Chapter I

Nathaniel Wooster never saw which of the advancing Redcoats fired the shot that hit him. The line of enemy horsemen had come close enough to become individual men with distinct features, expressions, and even voices before his commander had given the shouted order to fire.

Just after his musket roared in his ear and kicked back into his shoulder, Nathaniel felt as though he'd been punched hard on the arm that supported the wooden stock. The sensation honestly confused him at first, until he realized that his hand would no longer hold the weight of his weapon. He watched the precious musket tumble to the ground from his suddenly insensate fingers even as his knees began to feel weak.

Before he'd even had time to register the pain of the wound, however, the British line was on them, sabers flashing among the hapless American militiamen who still stood. Though they'd been drilled and trained to regard themselves as soldiers, most of them were hardly more than farmers or tradesmen, and none of them had any sense of how to defend themselves against a yard of brilliant, biting steel, descending to slice and tear flesh.

As he lay on the ground, his musket forgotten in the mud nearby, Nathaniel had just sufficient presence of mind to perceive that he was one of the lucky ones. The man who'd earlier stood to his left now lay on his back, eyes unblinking to the sky, his neck

sliced so deeply that Nathaniel could see the white of bone inside the sagging wound. The man on his right was moaning and clutching at his belly, where the passage of a British saber had sliced through cloth, skin, and guts with equal indifference. Though Nathaniel had seen little action before now, he had no doubt that this would be that man's last day on Earth.

The redcoat footsoldiers who'd followed the cavalry charge were now pushing and shoving amongst the few Americans who still stood, using their muskets as clubs, and the horsemen wheeled about through the massed Americans, swinging their now-befouled sabers in clear menace as they strove with their enemies. Nathaniel heard a grunt behind him, and a British soldier fell facing him, clutching at his chest. The man's eyes locked onto his, and for the space of a few lazy heartbeats—heard as a rush in Nathaniel's ears, and seen as a rhythmic surge of blood between the other man's fingers—they stared at each other.

Then the other man's eyes rolled back into his head, and he was still—aside from the slowing trickle of blood into the bare earth beneath him. Soon enough, even that ceased, and Nathaniel willed himself to look away.

After what seemed like an eternity of slowing, sporadic gunfire in the distance and the screams and moans of men nearby and further strewn about the field, Nathaniel heard the cry passed from voice to voice.

“Quarter! They've asked quarter! The day is ours!”

As he focused on his labored breathing, Nathaniel idly wondered whether the white flag would be honored this time, or whether someone would again violate it and precipitate another round of senseless violence. His thoughts were tending to wander

now, though, and he could not seem to hold onto a single thread for very long.

His thoughts focused on the awful question of whether he would see his Ma again, or watch another sunrise from the top of the bluff back home. He had often enough paused in his morning chores to enjoy the sight that it was graven in his mind. He recalled how the purpling horizon gave way to deeper reds than even that which now seeped through his enemy's fingers, finally punctuated by a sudden gasp of brilliant sunlight as the day began.

How would this day end? Would he sink into a grateful slumber, or would he find a more lengthy rest in an anonymous grave, accompanied by friends and enemies alike? Would he be reunited with his brother, who had been carried off by the pox so many years before, and would they play their favorite games with hoop and stick in some celestial field?

Or would he lay here in this field of carnage, drifting in and out of the world of pain and fear, unrelieved by any sleep, whether eternal or just that of an ordinary night?

His stomach lurched at the thought of his Ma left questioning for month after month about his fate, or worse yet, receiving certain word by an impersonal post that her only remaining son would never return.

He was just picturing this dismal possibility in cruel detail when he heard a squad moving over the field, and a voice calling out, "Here's one that's still breathing, Lieutenant." A boot appeared before his eyes, and Nathaniel wondered at it, struck by the lack of splashed grime on its well-blackened, supple leather.

The man bent and not ungently rolled Nathaniel over to lie on his back. The movement sparked agonies in his arm, and he

cried out as the world closed in around him in gathering darkness. He could see, though, that the man's elegantly appointed jacket was crimson, and his expression disdainful.

“Bring a litter over here. Our orders are to treat all wounded, regardless of whether they be ours or theirs.”

Orders were called out and answered, and Nathaniel was aware of being lifted and moved, the ground falling away beneath him, and the churned earth of the battlefield falling behind him. He noticed the scent of gunpowder, primarily by the fact that it was now fading as they moved away from the scene of the discharges.

As the British soldiers at his head and foot carried him along, they stumbled and jostled him from time to time, each jolt of movement costing him a fresh jolt of pain. He found himself wishing that he could pass into the blessed relief of unconsciousness, so that he might miss the experience of feeling blood cooling and stiffening under his sleeve, as well as the pain. It ranged from a constant ache to the sharp agony of each bit of motion he felt.

Pain became a companion along the way toward whatever destination his saviors—or captors?—bore him, unwelcome but dependable. Beyond the pain of his arm, he could feel a dull ache in his belly, and it occurred to him to worry whether he'd been injured there as well. Had one of the flashing sabers sliced into him unnoticed, leaving him alike with his companion on the line, his guts spilling out onto the field?

Or was it, perhaps, just the old familiar sensation of unrequited hunger, common enough in these past months? His head ached, too, and he was struck by the thought that it might be more profitable to consider what parts of his being were not in pain.

His feet were, for a mercy, not on the ground, not carrying him over mile after weary mile toward an uncertain fate. His toes itched from never having been completely dry for these many months, but he wouldn't call that pain, exactly. His legs were sore from the morning's march, of course, but it was hardly fair to class that as pain, either.

His back—well, that hurt, for certain, but it hadn't stopped hurting since he'd donned a pack in the drill field more than a year ago at his first muster. But that, too, was a comfortable old ache by this time, and was scarcely worth remarking upon.

Nathaniel's process of cataloging his pain was interrupted as he was carried in through the wide front doors of a church. He twisted around to look up into the face of the man at the head of his litter. "Are my wounds truly so dire that all that is left is to make my peace with my Maker?"

The man glanced down at his burden, a sneer on his face. "Nay, 'tis only that there are so many who are sick and hurt that there is no better place to accommodate you all. Every church in the district around has been pressed into service."

He gave a short, harsh bark of laughter and added, "Of course, for those of you who will need the services of a priest, it also has the advantage of putting you all the nearer to his place of work."

He motioned with his chin and called out to the man carrying the foot of Nathaniel's litter, "Just over there, with the other arm injuries. May as well make it easy for the surgeon."

A fresh chill ran down Nathaniel's spine at these words. A meeting with a surgeon usually meant one thing: a meeting with the surgeon's saw—and a lifetime of dependency on the generosity

of family and friends.

As the British soldiers set his litter down, he was about to ask the man whether his arm was really so bad as to require the attentions of a surgeon, but he was interrupted by the shocking pain as they lifted him from the litter onto a bench.

“Need the litter for the next man,” the soldier said by way of answer to Nathaniel’s gasp. “Be still and don’t roll around any, lest you fall to the floor and really hurt yourself.”

With that, the enemy soldiers were gone, and Nathaniel was left alone to contemplate what might happen next.

Turning his head from one side to the other, he saw quickly that he was hardly alone. On narrow benches—pews, actually, pressed into medical service—to either side, there were men whose wounds were more gruesome and obvious than his own.

One man’s case would present little work for the surgeon, as his arm was mostly off at the shoulder already, a saber blow having parted flesh and bone, leaving only the sliced and stained arm of the soldier’s coat holding the inert and severed limb. He was mercifully unconscious, and Nathaniel could see his chest rise but fitfully.

To the other side was a victim of a bayonet strike, among other insults to his being. Nathaniel could see no injury to the arm visible from where he lay, but a distinctive wide tear in the thigh of his pants, soaked through with a heavy fall of blood, told the story of the soldier’s terrible day. This man’s breath came in shuddering gasps, punctuated by little moans of pain.

With a start, Nathaniel realized that the moans of pain were his own. Though observing the hurts of others had distracted him from a full appreciation of how much his arm ailed him, hearing the ragged sounds torn from his throat as he breathed brought him

back to an odd realization that he was hurting more than he ever had before. In the course of transferring him from the litter to the bench, the British soldiers had opened up his wound again, and he could hear the steady drip of blood onto the church floor beneath him.

Mercifully, it did seem to be only his arm that was seriously hurt. At some point, he seemed to have been kicked in the gut and he could feel the stiffening bruises there, but it was only in his arm that he could feel the grating of shattered bones moving loosely within ripped flesh.

He could bear to think about his arm no further, and he closed his eyes, paying no heed to the trickle of tears that welled up beneath his lids.

He awoke to a harsh, British voice. “Rebel boy,” a tall, exhausted-looking man said over his shoulder. “Arm looks to be ruined. Tie it off, and I’ll fetch my saw. Don’t waste any rum on this one—just give him a strap to bite.”

He stepped away, and a stout woman moved toward where Nathaniel lay. She frowned as she looked down at him.

Reaching into her apron, she retrieved a leather strap from her pocket and held it out toward his mouth.

“Put this in between your teeth,” she said, her voice soft and perhaps even pitying. “It’ll help with what’s to come, lad.”

Fresh tears springing to his eyes, and too terrified to feel any shame at the quaver in his voice, he asked, “Just like that, then? I’m to lose my arm?”

She did not answer him directly, but pushed the leather strap toward his lips, her expression turning determined. “You’ll want this before I tie it off, lest you cry out and distress those about

you.”

He opened his mouth and let her slip it past his teeth.

“Mind that you don’t get your tongue in the way, now, and hold onto the bench with your good hand.”

He nodded and gripped the bench as tightly as he could.

She reached again under her apron and brought forth a cord, which she slid under his ruined arm.

If Nathaniel thought he’d been in pain before, now he was brought to the gates of the inferno itself, as she wrapped the cord around the limb and tied a short length of wood into it the loose ends, and then she gave him an apologetic look as she took the stick into her hand.

He felt her turn the wood once, then twice, and then he felt no more as the merciful darkness finally rushed up around him and swallowed him whole.