



## *An Accident*

From her seat in the family carriage, twelve-year-old Annie Henry watched the countryside roll by. The pitted road was in spots little more than two worn wagon tracks through the sun-baked fields. On either side were thick stands of corn, wheat, and tobacco. Houses were few and far between and sat back far from the road.

Mile after boring mile, the coach lurched along on its way from Scotchtown, the Henrys' home, to Williamsburg, the capital of Virginia. It was early September of 1776, and Patrick Henry, the newly elected governor of Virginia, was returning to the capital after a summer of serious illness. The doctors, uncertain of the diagnosis, had used all the tools available to them. First believing the problem was sick blood, they attached leeches to his skin to suck the "sick blood" out. When he did not get better, they gave him doses of awful medicine. Finally, they threw up their hands and did nothing. At that point, he began recovering.

Now her father was strong enough to travel, but as he lay across from Annie in the coach, she could see the toll his illness had taken. He was thin and pale and even now, after all these weeks, a violent cough sometimes shook his thin body, causing his forehead

AN ACCIDENT

to bead with sweat. Then Annie would dip her handkerchief in the jug of water she carried and mop his forehead.

For Annie, this was only her second trip away from Scotchtown, and it was the first time she had ever lived outside rural Hanover County. She left behind an older sister, Patsy, and Patsy's family, as well as three brothers and a younger sister. Thinking about them brought quick tears to her eyes. *It will be lonely in Williamsburg*, she thought.

For the week before leaving, ever since Patsy had decided Annie must go to take care of their father, Annie had felt queasy in her stomach. She knew she wasn't sick, but her stomach felt topsy-turvy, and she had to force herself to eat. Sometimes she woke up at night and could not get back to sleep. It did not help when her older sister tried to comfort her with advice not to worry about tomorrow—today had enough worries of its own.

Now here she was, alone except for a sick father and Phillip, the driver, journeying through this unknown territory. Phillip had assured Patsy that they would stop at an inn to sleep, but Annie still felt uneasy.

She stuck her head outside the carriage window. Still no sign of Richmond, their next stop, and the pink horizon behind them warned that sunset was near. Suddenly the carriage jerked forward as the horses galloped crazily from side to side.

"Whoa," the driver shouted.

Annie clutched the leather edge of her seat. Across from her, Patrick Henry's head bumped the wood-paneled wall of the carriage, jerking him awake.

"Runaway horses," Annie whispered.

"Pray, Annie," he whispered, closing his eyes.

For several desperate minutes the horses ran out of control while the driver struggled to halt them. Then, just as suddenly,

AN ACCIDENT

the carriage stopped, shuddering violently before tilting dangerously to one side.

Inside the coach, the wicker picnic basket slid across the floor. Annie screamed as her father rolled off his seat, hitting his head sharply on the floor. She scrambled to his side, holding her breath as the coach rocked. He appeared dazed but was able to lift himself back onto his seat.

“Are you all right, Father?” she whispered.

He nodded his head, but then closed his eyes and seemed to drift off to sleep. Annie sat there anxiously. Should she stay near him or climb out of the carriage and look after Phillip? She sat still for a moment, thinking through her options, but the deepening shadows told her the sun was setting rapidly, and soon they would be in darkness. At least Annie could light the carriage lanterns before that happened.

Because the carriage was partly on its side, one door was pinned shut by the ground. Slowly she inched her way across the seat until she could reach the handle of the other door. She turned it and pushed the door open. Then, putting her hands on both sides of the opening, she pulled herself through. From her perch on the edge, she leapt to the ground, holding her breath as the carriage rocked and then settled back into its unsafe position.

“Phillip?” she called.

There was no answer, and Annie feared the worst. She circled the carriage and saw, lying against a tree, the shaken but conscious driver. He was rubbing his forehead where she could see a black-and-blue lump already forming.

“What happened?” she asked.

“I don’t know. Those crazy horses . . . I don’t know what spooked them. It almost sounded like a gunshot, but it couldn’t have been. Not way out here. Anyway, they’ve gone and broke the wheel clear in two. Let’s see about the axle.”

AN ACCIDENT

Bending down, he looked under the carriage. Then standing up, he brushed the dirt off his hands. "Axle looks fine," he announced. "That's luck for you."

"Or God's providence," the girl whispered. "Can you fix the wheel?"

"There's a spare on the back," he said. "But I'll need help to raise the carriage. You aren't big enough, and your father isn't strong enough. We may have to wait until daylight, then I can ride for help."

At those words, Annie let the tears flow that she had been trying desperately to hold back. The driver reached out awkwardly to pat her arm. "Don't cry, Miss Annie," he pleaded. "We'll be safe here. Why, we must not be more than an hour from Richmond. There won't be no trouble, and you can sleep comfortably in the carriage. Please don't cry."

Phillip's words shamed the girl into silence. But she trembled when she thought of spending the night out in the dark countryside.

"What about Father?" she asked.

"Was he injured?" Phillip asked, a worried expression on his face.

She bit her lip uncertainly. "He banged his head hard and then drifted off to sleep."

"Sleep is the best thing," Phillip nodded in reply, relieved that his poor driving hadn't injured the governor.

"Couldn't we light the lanterns?" she pleaded as she looked around at the deepening shadows.

"Sure. That's a good idea. Then I'll unharness one of the horses and ride back to those woods and gather some wood. We'll need it for a fire."

"But," Annie protested, "you wouldn't leave me here alone. Why do we need a fire? It's warm out."

"You ask too many questions," Phillip said, annoyed at her chatter. "Let me go to work. Without a fire, who knows what kind of animals we'll have creeping about."

Annie bit back her reply. She wouldn't let him see how frightened she was. "At least leave me the musket," she requested.

After he finished lighting the candle inside one of the carriage lamps, he lowered the glass. The flame flickered, then glowed. Its soft light brightened the area around the carriage, putting Annie a bit at ease. She watched as he unhitched the horse, saddled it, and tied the other lamp to its saddle. "I won't be long," he said.

She carried the musket over to a tree about twenty feet from the road. Its low-hanging branches made it perfect for climbing, and she tied her long skirts out of the way and scampered up. By now it was pitch dark, except near the carriage where the lantern softly glowed. Annie felt fairly safe in her hiding place. She kept her eyes on the road Phillip had taken, wishing he would return.

She must have dozed because the sudden sound of horse hooves jerked her to attention. *Can it be Phillip already?* she wondered. Peering through the gloom, her eyes picked out a heavysset figure on a dark horse. *It can't be Phillip,* she thought. *He's not nearly that big.*

She drew the musket a bit closer to her. "I never loaded it," she groaned. Had Phillip done so? She watched as the rider got off his horse some distance from the carriage. He walked silently toward the disabled carriage, looking about him secretively. *He means no good,* Annie thought, pulling back against the trunk of the tree.

"Please, don't let Father wake up," she begged. "Let him be quiet."

In the light of the lantern Annie thought she saw a glint of silver. Was it a knife? She held her breath, uncertain what to do.

#### AN ACCIDENT

In the dim light she knew she had little chance of hitting the man even if the musket were loaded. It would be better to wait until she knew her father was in danger before even trying to shoot. So she held still.

Closer the man crept toward the carriage until he came to a stop before a dark shape on the ground. Then, as the girl watched, he held out a long dagger and bent down toward the shape. She leaned forward in her branch, trying to see better what he was doing. There was a tearing sound as the man struggled with the dark object. *The trunk*, Annie thought. It had come off the carriage during the accident. She could see now that he had forced open the lid and was rummaging about, throwing clothes this way and that as he searched for anything of value. Several times he paused, looked around, and listened intently before continuing his work. When he had finished at the trunk, he rose and began to walk over to the carriage where Patrick Henry slept.

Annie's finger tightened on the trigger. The heavy weapon trembled in her sweaty hand, and she prayed that she wouldn't have to use it. When the man reached the carriage, he started for the door. Abruptly, though, he turned and pulled the lantern from its hook. Using the light, he returned to the trunk and continued his search. She watched him pocket several small items. Money probably, and maybe her father's silver buttons. When he finished, he once again crept toward the carriage, carrying the lantern in his hand.

The wind blew, and a broken branch fell from Annie's tree. The sound it made as it rustled through the limbs and crashed to the ground startled the girl. The highwayman paused and stared directly at her hiding place. She froze, certain he could see her. As he stared, he held the lantern a little higher so that Annie, for the first time, caught a good glimpse of his face. He was a heavy

man with a fleshy face and thick neck. His small, deep-set eyes were almost swallowed up by his puffy eyelids.

For a minute the two were frozen in silence. The stillness was broken by the sound of Phillip's horse. Louder and louder came the hoofbeats as the horse drew nearer. Silently—and quickly for such a big man—the highwayman rose and ran to his horse. He seemed to melt into the darkness, disappearing without a trace, with only the sound of his retreating animal.

“Who goes there?” Phillip shouted when he heard the other rider. He rode into the circle of light and seemed to hesitate. Should he follow the highwayman?

When Annie saw that it was Phillip, she shimmied down the trunk of the tree, ignoring the pain as the rough trunk scraped her legs. “Phillip,” she screamed as she ran toward him. By this time he had dismounted his horse and was examining the mess before him. There lay the ransacked trunk with the broken lock. Shattered lantern glass glittered on the ground.

“What happened here?” Phillip asked, his face white. “Your father . . . ?”

“It was a highwayman,” Annie whispered in a trembling voice. “I hid in a tree.”

“Let's check on the governor.”

Together they walked to the carriage, and Phillip lifted the slender girl until she could peek through the door. Her father still slept, his chest gently rising and falling.

“Now tell me about this man,” Phillip asked, looking about nervously. “Was it one or a gang?”

“Just one,” Annie said. “He tethered his horse a ways from the carriage and walked over. Then he broke open the lock and took some things from Father's trunk.”

“Did he have a gun?”

AN ACCIDENT

“Not in his hand,” she answered. “Only a dagger. What do you think he would have done if you hadn’t come back?”

“Only God knows,” he replied nervously. “But I wish we could go on tonight. I wouldn’t have expected highwaymen to be operating so close to Richmond. Have we lost all respect for the law?”

“At least let us make a fire,” the frightened girl begged. “I have had enough surprises tonight. I don’t want to meet a bear.”

Immediately Phillip set to work building a fire, and soon the flame burned brightly, sending little sparks drifting up into the sky. Although the night was hot, Annie shivered. Even the hot fire couldn’t seem to warm her.

Looking up from his work, Phillip shouted at the girl. “Get back from there. All we need is for your long skirts to catch fire.”

She drew back and looked at the driver apologetically. She knew he felt extra concern because she was there.

“I want you to get back in the carriage,” he said after he had picked up the scattered contents of the trunk. “Your father will feel better knowing that you are safe inside.”

With his help, she climbed back into the carriage. Her father roused himself momentarily. “Why haven’t we fixed the wheel?” he mumbled.

“It’s too heavy for Phillip to manage alone,” she answered. “We’ll sleep here tonight, and he’ll get help in the morning. Richmond isn’t far.” Annie spoke soothingly, knowing that her father was still dazed from the accident. “Sleep now, and in the morning we’ll be able to continue our journey to Williamsburg.”

Although her father soon slept, Annie could not. She tossed and turned on the uncomfortably tilted seat. Sometimes she felt herself drifting off, but then the howl of a wolf or the hooting of an owl startled her awake. Once she peered out of the carriage



AN ACCIDENT

and saw Phillip on guard, puffing his pipe and holding the musket on his lap.

It was the sound of birds singing that Annie heard first. She opened her eyes sleepily and looked about the cramped carriage. Her father was sitting up on his seat. Although he looked gray and weak, she was glad to see him awake. Before she could speak, though, she heard the sound of horses. Holding her breath, the girl put her finger to her mouth in a warning to her father to be quiet.

“Hello,” a voice called out. “Do you need help there?”

It was a friendly greeting, and Annie relaxed, but her father shook his head. Even highwaymen could pretend to be friendly. Why didn't Phillip answer?

She heard the scuff of a boot on the dry ground and then a hearty laugh. “Startled you, didn't I,” the stranger said. “I saw the smoke from your fire and thought I might get some food. I didn't expect to be put to work this early, but I'm glad to help.”

From Phillip came a groggy response, and Annie guessed that he had been found sleeping.

“I'm Spencer Roane,” the stranger said.

Annie saw her father smile.

“It's okay, daughter,” he assured her. “Mr. Roane is a law student in Williamsburg. We'll be safe now.”