

# FROM “A PASSEL OF HATE”

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## These Terrible Times

3 September 1780

It may have been September already, but Mary Pearson did not know for sure. She had no calendar, but although the leaves had not begun to change, she recognized other signs that summer was almost over. Yet, with no breeze, the air was hot.

She sat on a stool in the shade of her log home, weaving with her calloused hands thin, wooden splints evenly into a basket. Dozens of two-foot-long splints curled on the ground beside her; still more were soaking in the rich brown dye from the bark of a white oak tree. She used the darker strips to add a little decoration to her handiwork.

In the bottomland below the house, her husband, Michael, and her son Patrick were harvesting a field of sorghum to be rendered into molasses. Her baskets would be traded for clay jugs at the mill, where liquid was crushed from sorghum canes and boiled into sweet, thick syrup. Several full jugs would serve their cooking needs until the next harvest.

Paddy, the name she called her son, had developed into a lanky man with a chiseled face like his father and flaming red hair like she once had. He had a gentle disposition and, thank you, Lord, had come home from the war mostly unscathed. He was shirtless in the heat, and both he and his father wore wide-brimmed hats made shapeless by months of use in abusive weather.

Her sixteen-year-old daughter Rachel and eleven-year-old son Sam were off in the woods nearby trying to find the family cow that had again broken through the split-rail fence earlier in the morning and had wandered off. She had three other children, but she had lost two in childbirth and the third had died from snakebite when he was only two.

Guiding the light yellow-tan splints in among each other with her nimble fingers, she barely noticed the dust coming from the south end of the lane leading up to her home until horses and riders were almost upon her. Mary thought it strange for a dozen horsemen to be there, a good two miles from the main road to Gilbert Town. She called to her husband who looked up from his stooped position with the sickle poised to cut another stalk plump with sweet nectar.

Patrick, who was guiding a weary horse pulling a rough-hewed sledge laden with cane stalks, raised his hands to shield his eyes from the late-morning sun and wondered who the armed riders could be and why were they coming to this out-of-the-way farm. Are they Tory or Whig militia? He asked himself.

Both he and his father eyed the rifle leaning against the cabin behind Mary. They had not carried it to the field with them since they were so close by and now regretted that careless decision.

The riders had no uniforms, but most had muskets cradled in their arms. They rode at an easy gait, but with purpose in mind. The Pearson men began walking the one hundred yards back toward the house, keeping a wary eye toward the intruders.

Mary stood, placing her half-finished basket to her side as the horses stopped in front of her. Three of the horses took their riders on past the house by several paces. Although the men held their weapons casually, their hard eyes betrayed peaceful intent. Leading the group was a stout man in his mid-thirties, better dressed than the others, but like the others, he was covered with red dust of the dry Carolina clay.

Despite the dust, she could see that the leader wore a good-quality tricorne hat with a dirty white lace trim and two colorful pheasant feathers. A wide red sash was tied around his middle under a belt carrying a cartage box and knife. A white leather belt, holding a scabbard with saber, was slung diagonally across his chest. His horse was jet black, a Spanish Barb gelding with a shiny coat, a breed not common in these parts. He sat on a dragoon's saddle with matching pistol holsters on the front flanking each side of the saddle. She did not know that the rider had taken the horse and saddle from a dead Continental cavalry soldier at a skirmish near Moncks Corner, just north of Charles Town.

"Mornin', ma'am," he said, doffing his hat in a respectful salute. "I'm looking for one Patrick Pearson. Might he live here?"

"Who wants to know?" she asked, her concern clearly understood in tone and manner. Fear was in her eyes.

"Captain Rance Miller of the Royal South Carolina Provincials, at your service, ma'am."

Without thinking, Mary gasped, "You are Tories! We are in North Carolina. What are South Carolina Tories doing here, and what do you want with my Paddy?"

Patrick walked to join his mother as his father began to sidle toward the rifle leaning against the cabin, a sickle still in the father's hand. Two of Miller's men maneuvered their horses quickly to block the senior Pearson from reaching the rifle; another two rode behind Patrick and dismounted.

“I’m Patrick Pearson,” the son stated, darting his eyes back toward the men who had dismounted behind him. “What can I do for you?”

“Not for me, Master Pearson,” Miller said in a condescending manner, “but for your king.”

“I don’t have a king; I’m my own man.” Patrick responded.

“Did you not swear loyalty to the king when you were captured last spring near Charles Town?” Miller snapped. “Did you not agree to serve your king so that you could be paroled for your sin of rebellion and go free instead of rotting in a prison ship?”

Proud to have been a Liberty Man, Patrick Pearson had volunteered for duty with the Rutherford County Whig militia in February and marched south with Colonel Andrew Hampton’s regiment to participate in the defense of Charles Town when the invading British Army began encircling the city. He was with a small detachment trying to capture some enemy supply wagons when his unit was overpowered by British soldiers. Two of his comrades were killed and four others seriously wounded in the short skirmish.

He and three companions were captured unhurt and were harassed by the British soldiers with threats of hanging or prison ships. By swearing allegiance to the Crown and pledging under penalty of death to never again take up arms against the English government, he was granted a parole.

“Your oath obligated you to serve the king when called upon in time of need. That time is now. You are needed by the loyal militia to help put down this damned rebellion,” Miller declared, his voice rising as he continued.

“But, sir, I’ve seen enough fighting. I want no more of it. I have kept my word and have not taken up arms against England. But I ain’t going to fight my friends,” Patrick replied.

Quiet until now, Michael Pearson shouted angrily, “You have no call to come here. We ain’t in this war. We are neutral. Now get off my land and leave us be!”

Miller stood up in his stirrups, towering over the Pearsons and his men on foot. In a severe and forceful tone, he responded. “First, I do have call to be here because young Master Pearson took an oath. If he reneges on that oath, it means he is a liar, and he is siding again with the rebels. Second, I’m here on order of Lord Cornwallis, the commanding general of His Majesty’s forces in the Carolinas, as well as that of Colonel Ambrose Mills, the commanding officer of Loyalist militia for North Carolina. So, Mister Pearson, I advise you to keep a civil tongue and not interfere with the king’s business. We have every lawful right to be here.”

As Miller spoke, three more of his men dismounted, the one closest to Patrick carrying a length of rope. Another two shifted their muskets to a more ready position.

Miller turned to face Patrick again. “You have two choices. You can come willingly with us and do your duty, or come with us under arrest and face the consequences of aiding the insurrection. Give me your answer now.”

Patrick put his fists on his hips. “I will not go with you, sir! You can’t make me fight my neighbors.”

“Arrest him for treason and violating his oath,” Miller shouted the order to his men and withdrew one of the pistols from a saddle holster.

The man with the rope looped it over Patrick’s shoulders before the young farmer could move. Another militiaman standing behind Patrick put the barrel of his musket against the back of Patrick’s head. “Stand still, rebel.”

Patrick’s father reacted quickly. Raising the sickle, he lunged toward the raider with the musket pointed at his son’s head and sliced the man’s arm to the bone, causing him to drop the musket and howl in pain. Only seven feet away, Miller swung the pistol around and fired into Michael Pearson’s head, splattering blood and brains onto Mary Pearson’s face and dress as she stared in horror.

During the sudden action by his father, Patrick slipped from the rope before it was tightened around him and smashed his fist into the Tory militiaman standing next to the rope man, forcing him to stumble back and drop his musket. Patrick reached for the falling Tory’s weapon and never saw the musket butt that slammed into the back of his head, knocking him unconscious.

Mary screamed and lunged toward Miller’s gun arm, drawing blood as she bit into his hand before he jerked it free. Miller yelled. “Damn you wench!” He swung the heavy pistol barrel down across her forehead. She crumpled next to her husband’s body, blood gushing around her face as she tried to focus and grasp what was happening to her family.

As his raiders began tying Patrick’s arms behind him, the militia captain shouted orders to his men. “Hang that insolent bastard for treason and attacking soldiers of the king! Burn the house! Get what they have of value. Be quick about it!”

Four men wrestled the bound Patrick to his feet as he slowly regained confused consciousness. They hustled him over to a walnut tree as one man stood up on his horse’s back to tie a rope to a limb about ten feet off the ground. Another brought over the stool Mary had been sitting on only a few minutes before. With his arms tied, Patrick was hoisted up on the stool as the hanging rope was looped twice around his neck and secured with two half-hitch knots.

There was no slack remaining in the rope between him and the tree branch overhead. He quieted in shock, not from the rope but from seeing his mother and father bleeding on the

ground. Without ceremony, the stool was kicked out from under him; and Patrick Pearson, eighteen years young, was strangled slowly to death.

The Tory militiamen gathered the white-oak splints and baskets and threw all into a pile inside the house door. Miller's sergeant went behind the house to the shed with an outside cooking fire and ignited a torch that he carried inside the home and began setting fire to the bedstead and highly flammable crushed baskets and splints.

They confiscated Pearson's horse that had been left in the sorghum field still hitched to the sledge. They also took Pearson's rifle, an ammunition pouch containing fifteen lead balls, a horn half-filled with powder, and a block of lead for melting into shot. They missed the second rifle and powder horn hanging inside over the entrance door.

As he reloaded his pistol, Miller watched his men go about their tasks with practiced efficiency gained over the past year from plundering and destroying dozens of homesteads belonging to rebel sympathizers. He didn't look forward to having to explain his actions to his immediate commander, Patrick Ferguson, the British officer in charge of the Loyalists fighting for the king. He felt confident that he could easily justify why he had to kill these rebels and burn their farm.

Two days ago when the British commander had told him to start recruiting paroled rebels in North Carolina, he also warned Miller against using what he called excessive force. "Honey catches more flies than vinegar," Ferguson had said.

Within five minutes, Miller's company completed their work. They didn't bother moving their victims farther away from the fire. Mary was beginning to recover from the concussion Miller had given her, but was inactive with shock as she tried to take in the burning house, her dead husband lying beside her, and her son hanging from the tree just forty feet from her. Her mind could not yet absorb the tragedy that had befallen her family. She did not see the assailants ride away from her shattered life.

Rachel Pearson was thankful that their old cow had run off again. It gave her an opportunity to escape the boring and mundane chores that her mother had for her around the house. At sixteen, a month past fifteen, she cherished the rare moments of freedom. The forest was cool, the ground soft under her bare feet as she mindlessly wandered through the woods. Approaching one of her favorite spots, a pool at the bottom of a small cascade on Mountain Creek, she spotted a man who looked like he was washing himself. While her instinct for self-preservation told her to turn and run away, her curiosity took over, particularly after seeing that he was not an Indian.

Instead of slipping back into the woods, she sneaked closer and kneeled quietly on the ground behind some bushes to watch the stranger. He was young, lean, and had long brown

hair. His shirt was draped over a rock, and his back showed a maze of jagged pink scars. He was sitting with his bare feet in the water and was bending to wet the knife he was using to scrape a scraggly beard off his face. Lying beside him was a long rifle with metal ornaments meshed into the stock of the weapon. A hatchet, shot bag, powder horn, and deerskin possibles bag were only inches from the rifle. A few feet farther back was a blanket roll, tied and ready to carry on his back. She wondered who he was.

Jacob Godley was enjoying the warm sunshine and cool water. After more than three months of serving as a Ranger guarding the frontier from marauding Cherokees, he was tired. He was on his way home by way of a back hunting trail he had heard would get him to the Gilbert Town road when he spotted the pool and decided to clean up and to get rid of the beard he had grown during his wilderness duty. Since the Cherokee began raiding frontier homes years ago, the county's men not off fighting the war were subject to serving three-month tours on the Indian line. They patrolled between a series of small forts, mostly fortified homes or blockhouses five to ten miles apart, stretching along the foot of the eastern edge of the Blue Ridge Mountains. Some, like Jacob, made clandestine trips deep into the mountains to spy on Indian trails and camps.

In the early 1760s, the mountain-ridge boundary had been established by a treaty with the Cherokees, angry because continued excursions by white men into their territory had pushed them out of the piedmont. The British colonial government agreed that white settlers would stay east of the mountains. It was an agreement ignored by both sides. Many settlers did not know about any agreement or, if they did, did not care about it and crossed over to hunt and trap. Some even foolishly tried to homestead. Indians came east of the mountains to trade, hunt, or raid farms they felt were too close for comfort. Murder by both sides was commonplace.

Since 1775, when open rebellion broke out in the American colonies, British sympathizers had been furnishing the Indians with weapons and military advisors. Along the frontier from Virginia down into Georgia, they encouraged Indian attacks on the remote homes. However, most Cherokee had no idea who was Whig or Tory among the whites; all looked alike to them; all were targets.

Over the past four years, since age sixteen, Jacob had served short stints in the militia, defending against Indian raids. He preferred the solitary wilderness duty to getting involved with the war against England.

This current tour completed, he was making a long walk home. Without any further delays, he should be with his parents by nightfall. It would please his mother immensely if he came home with a clean body. So with the inviting pool on a hot day in the waning summer, he stopped to wash his shirt and shave his unkempt beard.

As Jacob scraped the last of the long hairs from his face, he tensed. Through his warrior senses, he felt someone looking at him. He carefully washed the hairs from his knife, dried the

blade on his buckskin trousers, and placed the knife beside his shot bag. With the suddenness of a lightning strike, he lurched into a swift roll, grabbing and cocking the rifle during the maneuver. His Pennsylvania long rifle was always loaded and primed. As he rolled into a little shelter behind a small boulder, he aimed his flintlock and shouted, "Show yourself or die!"

The quickness of the man's movements startled Rachel, as did hearing his warning and the cocking of the rifle. Seeing the weapon pointed straight at her, she pleaded loudly, "Please, sir, don't shoot me! Please. I mean no harm."

The sound of a girl surprised Jacob. He yelled. "Come out so I can see you."

She slowly stood up from behind the bush, her arms outstretched at her sides, and walked a few feet toward Jacob.

"Who's with you? Why are you spying on me?" Jacob asked, still lying in his defensive position, leery of possible danger.

"I'm Rachel Pearson. Nobody's with me. I live just over the hill. I wasn't sneaking up on you; I was looking for my cow." Then feeling bolder, she asked in a demanding tone, "And just who are you, and what are you doing on my family's land?"

Jacob relaxed a little and sat up, but still held his rifle at the ready. "I'm Jacob Godley from up on Second Broad River. Don't mean to trespass. I've done my time on Indian line duty and heading home. This trail leads to the Gilbert Town road. Our place is a half-day walk north of Gilbert Town."

Looking at his scars on his back, she asked, "How did you get your back all cut up?"

"You are a sassy thing, aren't you? If you must know, I got it wrestling a bear."

"Who won?"

"Well, I'm here." Jacob answered jokingly as he placed his belt and knife around him. He began looking at Rachel in a different light. He had not seen a girl so lovely in months. He found himself warming to her and her to him when they heard the faint crack of gunfire. Jacob tensed, but Rachel said, "That's probably my pa or brother shooting a critter for supper."

Jacob sat down and began lacing up his knee-high moccasins. Habit made him always to be ready for anything. Rachel sat beside him in an unladylike position, bunching her dress up between her knees as she put her feet into the creek. She was fascinated by this young Indian fighter and felt a kindred spirit with him.

They fell into conversation like old friends, talking about their families, their likes and dislikes. He amazed her with descriptions of the high, granite cliffs and the soaring waterfall in the foreboding Broad River gorge less than a day's walk west of them and of the vast wilderness he had seen over the mountains.

He became mesmerized by the sparkle in her bright, brown eyes and the freckles that enhanced her smile. Her long, auburn hair had natural curls that flowed down over her shoulders. A free spirit, she was not wearing a mob cap normally worn by women who felt it proper to keep something over their head. She wore a plain, unadorned apron over her dress.

Forgetting his own desires to reach home before dark, Jacob asked if her folks would be worried about her being away so long. “I haven’t heard Mama yell for me yet.” Rachel laughed. “You can hear her screech a mile off when she wants us young’uns.”

She chatted about neighbors living along the creek, Colonel Hampton’s grist mill about four miles upstream, McFadden’s Fort nearby that had been burned last year by Tory night riders, and the farm closest to theirs. She turned to point in the direction of the Foreman place when they saw black smoke billowing above the trees. “That smoke is coming from our house!” she screamed.

Rachel jumped to her feet, keeping her dress and apron bunched in her hands so her legs would be free for the long strides needed to run unencumbered through the woods, and raced up the hill toward boiling, black smoke. Jacob quickly gathered his belongings and sprinted after her, impressed with her swiftness.

When he passed over the crest of the hill, Jacob saw Rachel leap across a rail fence without breaking stride. As he got to the fence that surrounded a long, sloping meadow down to the Pearson home, Jacob stopped and quickly accessed the scene. A log house was engulfed in flames. Only a few feet from the fire, a woman was kneeling over a man’s body, trying to pull it away from the flames. Both were bloody. Beyond the couple, a shirtless body was hanging from a tree.

Jacob paused and took time to carefully scan the area, looking for actual and potential threats. He saw Rachel running across the field toward the couple on the ground, but he could see no one else. Still, he cocked his rifle and ran to the tree line by the meadow before moving quickly, but cautiously at a crouch, down the forest edge, guided by his survival instincts. By the time he had worked his way down to the track that led to the Pearson home, Rachel was already helping her mother drag the man’s body farther away from the fire.

While inspecting the tracks of a dozen or so horses coming and going, movement from the woods beyond the fire caught Jacob’s eye. He dropped to one knee and raised his rifle, aiming at the emerging figure. It was a barefooted boy who ran out of the woods yelling, “Mama! Papa!” Jacob lowered the weapon and uncocked it.

The boy stopped short of his mother and father. Grasping that his parents were all bloody and his father deathly still, he seemed to enter a trance, unable to say or do anything.

Jacob rushed to Rachel, who was trying to comfort her mother by brushing away the blood on her face. Mary Pearson was holding her husband’s bloody head in her arms, close to her

bosom. Rachel stared beyond Jacob, pointed to her brother hanging from the tree and screamed, “Get him down! Get him down, now! Sam, help him.”

Satisfied that there was no imminent threat, Jacob went over to Patrick’s body whose feet dangled less than eighteen inches off the ground. He called to Rachel’s little brother, who was just staring at his sister and parents. “Come here, boy. Help me cut this fellow down.”

Sam ran over as Jacob pulled out his knife. Jacob told the boy to climb on his shoulders while he held Patrick’s body. Looping his arms around the hanging man, Jacob recoiled from the strong fecal odor caused by bowels relaxed in death.

Sam began crying after he stood on Jacob’s shoulders and recognized his brother hanging there. While he sliced through the rope, the boy tried not to look at Patrick’s bulging eyes. The cut made, Sam jumped off Jacob’s back as Jacob lowered the body gently to the ground. Jacob concluded the assailants were not Indians; Cherokee did not waste rope or time with hangings. They would not have left the woman alive and would have collected the victims’ scalps.

As he walked back to Rachel, there was no doubt that her father was dead and her mother hurt badly. He asked about Mary’s condition; Rachel answered that the wound looked worse than it was. “Who could have done this?” he asked.

Both Rachel and her brother shook their head, saying they had no idea, but their mother hissed seemingly to no one. “Damned Tories! They were led by Satan’s disciple... Rance Miller, that’s who!”

Jacob knew many of the Tory names who were active in the region, but not Miller. He walked quickly around the house but could do nothing to stop the fire; it would have to burn itself out.

Since their meeting on the creek, Rachel had transformed from a flirtatious teenager to a serious-minded woman. She took charge of her family’s situation and instructed her young brother to run to John Foreman’s place about two miles away to get help. Foreman was their closest neighbor.

Mary regained some composure and, like Rachel, assumed the practicality essential for backwoods living. Rachel introduced Jacob to her mother and explained that he had taken care of Patrick’s body. Having cried out all her tears, Mary looked at him with sad eyes. She pointed to a tree up in the meadow. “Let’s bury them up there under that big maple. Mick always loved to sit up there under that tree. It’s so peaceful.” Looking at Jacob, she asked, “Will you help us bury them?”

The shadows were getting long, but the heat had not abated much when Jacob completed digging a hole six feet long, four feet wide, and four feet deep. Sweat poured off him as he

climbed up from the grave, hoping that the hole would be large enough for the two victims and that the survivors didn't mind the one grave. He had found a spade and pickax in an outbuilding away from the house which now was nothing but charred, smoky embers. He watched Rachel, her mother, and her brother with another man and woman coming up the hill. The man was leading a saddled horse hitched to the sorghum sleigh on which the two bodies lay.

Jacob put his shirt on and tied his hair back with a bandana that he usually wore tight over his head when walking through the woods. He did not have a hat.

As the assemblage arrived at the grave site, the man introduced himself as John Foreman. Jacob noted he had only one arm. Now wasn't the time to ask why. He would learn later that that Foreman lost it in battle three years before at Monmouth Courthouse in New Jersey while fighting with the North Carolina Continentals.

They gently laid the bodies into the ground. Foreman said a few words about the Pearson men being good people and "struck down in their prime by heathen Tory raiders" at such an unfortunate time. He quoted from memory a biblical passage of Daniel, but added his own interpretation: "Our brethren who sleep in the dust of this earth shall awake and shall live forever. But their killers' lives shall be an everlasting horror and disgrace. God, grant no mercy to them."

Foreman's wife, Rebecca, had her arms around Rachel's mother, trying to comfort her. Mary stood stoic, gazing down into the grave where there was no shroud for her dead husband and son. Looking childlike, weak, and vulnerable, Rachel held her brother's hand as Jacob covered the bodies with earth. She did not notice that the cow had wandered back into the field.

The burial complete, Foreman turned to the women and said, "Mary, you and your children will stay with us as long as you like. Sam, go get that cow. We'll take her with us, but we've got to get going. It will be dark before we get home. We'll come back tomorrow and see if we can salvage anything and finish harvesting the sorghum."

Foreman then looked at Jacob. "You are welcome to stay the night too. In these terrible times, we need a good rifleman around."