

The Plot to Kill Washington

A young girl faced a tormenting question: which was stronger—love for the man bent on assassinating the General, or love for country?

By WILLIAM MITCHELL



ILLUSTRATION BY GIL WALKER

PERHAPS YOU'VE NEVER heard of it—many history books fail to mention the fact—but in the early days of the American Revolution, there was a plot to kill George Washington! The assassination would have succeeded, except for the patriotism of a young girl.

The place was New York City; the time, June, 1776. The battles at Lexington, Concord, Bunker Hill, and Ticonderoga were decided. But still undecided was the question of what the battles were really all about: were the colonies fighting to secure a more enlightened British rule, or were they fighting to become a free and independent nation?

Inspecting the defenses of New York, George Washington was, of course, fully aware of the divided sentiments of the time. He knew, for example, that New York had many citizens who felt loyal to the Crown—even the mayor of the city!

What the General did not realize was that there were Tory sympathizers among those wearing Colonial uniforms and serving close to him in positions of high trust. In short, that there were traitors within the very ranks of his own honor guard!

These soldiers had been hand-picked for their appearance, ability, and supposed devotion to the American cause. Yet, somehow, among them was one Thomas Hickey, a deserter from the British army and a resident of Wethersfield, Conn.

A handsome specimen in his colorful blue-and-white guard's uniform, Hickey could no doubt set a girl's heart fluttering, especially at such an excitingly romantic time. One of the young women he captivated was Washington's housekeeper in

New York, Phoebe Fraunces. In fact, Thomas and Phoebe seem to have been in love. But Hickey made a fatal mistake in believing that Phoebe's love for him exceeded her love for her country!

The renegade soldier confided to her that he planned to destroy the Revolution by killing the military commander. While Washington was being assassinated, other Loyalists planned to spike the colonists' guns, blow up their ammunition, set New York afire, and signal British ships to sail into port and take control.

But shocked and repelled as young Miss Fraunces may have been at her lover's disclosure, she pretended approval of his plan and became his coconspirator—but with a plan of her own.

THE PLOT to kill Washington reached its dramatic climax as Miss Fraunces was serving dinner one evening to Washington and his staff. Entering the kitchen, the disloyal guardsman produced some belladonna and sprinkled the drug on a dish of peas which the housekeeper was about to serve the General. Phoebe had told Hickey that fresh peas were one of the Commander's favorite dishes.

With Hickey watching furtively from the kitchen door, Miss Fraunces entered the dining room and put down the poisoned vegetable. Washington smiled his appreciation. But just as he was about to eat some, Phoebe shouted:

"No, General, you mustn't eat the peas. They've been poisoned!"

The officers sprang from their seats. As the housekeeper revealed the plot, some of Washing-

ton's aides went after Hickey and seized him. One of the men scattered the peas to some chickens in the back yard. "Very quietly, six of them keeled over, dead," says one account.

JUSTICE MOVED quickly for Thomas Hickey. Court-martialed on the charge of "inciting and joining in a mutiny," he was found guilty and sentenced on June 26. At 11 a.m. on the 28th, he was marched to a gallows erected near Bowery Lane.

A witness reported that the treacherous soldier appeared "unaffected and obstinate to the last, except that when the chaplains took him by the hand under the gallows and bid him adieu, a torrent of tears flowed over his face."

Details of the disgraceful plot were purposely kept from the public to avoid hysteria, but the General wrote in his orderly book:

"The unhappy fate of Thomas Hickey, executed this day for mutiny, sedition, and treachery, the General hopes will be a warning to every soldier in the Army to avoid those crimes and all others so disgraceful to the character of a soldier and pernicious to his country, whose pay he receives and bread he eats."

Describing the traitor's plot, one observer commented: "If such a plan had succeeded, the Revolution might have been ended in a night."

But thanks to Phoebe Fraunces, the plot to kill Washington failed. And in a few days, the delegates at Philadelphia declared that "these United Colonies are, and of Right ought to be, Free and Independent States."

COVER:

That's no ordinary gal that photographer Arthur Schatz has captured on our cover; she's an Ashland, N. C., housewife who has joined the craze for karting, a new U.S. fad. For more about go-karts, see p. 17.

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