



*As America fights
for its independence,
a woman discovers
her own...*

The Tory Widow

A NOVEL

"A TALENTED NEW AUTHOR."—BERTRICE SMALL

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The
TORY WIDOW



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St. Paul's at Broad Way and Fulton Street, New York City

THE bright new chapel had yet to be furnished with pews, leaving the floor an uninterrupted chequerboard of gray and white stone tile. Anne Peabody stood centered on a single square—twisting and untwisting a damp handkerchief in her hands—a wretched pawn on this, her wedding day.

The old minister did not spare a glance at the worn book open on his palms. He faced the bride and groom and by rote recited the matrimonial service in a brisk monotone.

“Dearly beloved, we are gathered together here in the sight of God, and in the face of this congregation, to join together this man and this woman in holy matrimony . . .”

The words provoked a thrum in her head, and Anne felt herself go pale. She ached to reach back and loosen the taut knot of chestnut hair laying heavy at the nape of her neck. Blue eyes shiny with restrained tears darted maniacally from the minister, to the man standing at her left and down to her mother's best lace-edged hanky wadded in her fists.

Anne took in a long breath. To regain a modicum of composure, she began to mimic her betrothed. Standing stiffly erect, she focused

beyond the scowling cleric's shoulder, on the dust motes dancing in the sunbeams streaming in through sanctuary windowpanes.

The church door opened on squalling hinges. Without a by-your-leave, two men entered, struggling to carry a bulky section of ornate balustrade between them. The older of the two groaned when he noticed the ceremony taking place.

"Blood and thunder—now we'll catch it."

Anne's groom kept his eyes fixed straight ahead, but the minister paused and glared as the workmen shuffled past the spartan wedding party to drop their burden at the base of one of the columns supporting the vaulted ceiling. The carpenter and his apprentice were quick to swipe the caps from their heads.

"Beg pardon, Vicar." The elder carpenter shoved his apprentice to take up positions behind the bride's father and brother.

"Fine day to tie the knot," the younger carpenter offered.

Satisfied with the comportment of the two unexpected guests, the minister resumed.

"Peter Merrick and Anne Peabody, I require and charge you both, as you will answer at the dreadful day of judgment when the secrets of all hearts shall be disclosed, that if either of you know any impediment why you may not be lawfully joined together in matrimony, you must now confess it . . ."

Any impediment? Anne suffered a sideways peek at her soon-to-be-husband. *He's old. He reeks of cabbage and onion. His wig is in dire need of powder. His cuffs are frayed, his cravat, stained . . . and there is hair growing out of his ears!*

"Mr. Merrick, wilt thou have this woman to thy wedded wife, to live together after God's ordinance in the holy estate of matrimony? Wilt thou love her, comfort her, honor and keep her in sickness and in health; and, forsaking all others, keep thee only unto her, so long as you both shall live?"

Peter Merrick did not hesitate to answer. "I will."

Struck by a sudden notion that her father might yet muster up a shred of paternal love and rescue her from impending doom, Anne cast a desperate glance over her shoulder. Standing beside her brother,

Amos Peabody seemed oblivious to his daughter's plight. He winked and nodded, quite puffed up by the brilliance of the match he'd engineered on her behalf.

"The man's a respected printer, bookseller *and* stationer—can you imagine, Annie?" her father had boasted on the day he'd negotiated the marriage. "A two-press shop with a steady clientele—the carriage trade! Merrick has a fine suite of rooms above his shop to bide in, and servants to tend you when you call. Oh, daughter, you will not want."

On the surface, the match was more than a dowderless eighteen-year-old of her station could expect. Merrick's enterprise in New York City dwarfed the failing Peabody Printshop upriver in tiny Peekskill, where Anne and her brother, David, struggled with their father to produce third-rate work using worn type and a rickety old press that needed repair more oft than not.

Amos Peabody had negotiated a shrewd deal with his old friend, exchanging his only daughter's hand for a complete set of hard-to-come-by Dutch-made type, much needed replacement press parts and ten reams of quality bond. A boon to the Peabody family fortune, Anne's marriage to Peter Merrick put an end to the unsettling talk of sending young David out to be bound as an apprentice and ensured continuance of the family business.

"Anne Peabody, wilt thou have this man to thy wedded husband, to live together after God's ordinance in the holy estate of matrimony? Wilt thou obey him and serve him, love, honor and keep him in sickness and in health; and, forsaking all others, keep thee only unto him, so long as you both shall live?"

"I will."

The moment she uttered the fated words forsaking her happiness, her future and all she'd ever known, a distant church bell tolled. The one bell was soon joined by another, and another, till it seemed every steeple and belfry in the city echoed in an unending, doleful peal.

The minister grew agitated and rushed to finish the service. Erratic bursts of musket fire and the far off boom of a cannon added to the clamor coming from the street. No longer able to withhold curiosity, the two carpenters and David sprinted out the sanctuary door.

Pronouncing bride and groom “man and wife,” the clergyman clapped his book shut and also abandoned the wedded pair.

The father of the bride stepped forward. With a hurried, “Congratulations!” accompanied by an abrupt slap to the groom’s back, he, too was quick on the minister’s heels, out the door.

Peter Merrick turned and faced his new wife. He bent awkwardly at knees and waist to plant a tight, dry kiss on her cheek. Without further ado, he rushed to join the others.

All alone, Anne Merrick gave herself over to all the self-pity, anger, loneliness and fear she’d suppressed for weeks. Sobbing, she wadded her tear-drenched hanky and scrubbed hard at the spot on her cheek where Mr. Merrick had sealed their union with a kiss.

Heaving a ragged sigh, she sniffed and fussed with the lace at her elbows and adjusted the gauzy kerchief at her neckline. Somewhat composed, Anne gathered the beryl blue silk of her best dress, and joined the men congregated near the northernmost stone column supporting the portico roof.

The air was alive with bells clanging and sporadic gunfire. Across Broad Way, a sizable crowd formed on the green of the Commons, and people spilled from shops, houses and narrow alleyways onto the dusty road. Her brother, David, stood at the far end of the chapel stoop in a glum huddle with the two carpenters, the minister, and Peter Merrick.

“What news?” Anne asked.

David shrugged. “Father went to find out. He bade us all stay put.”

The minister lamented, “It takes some time for word to make its way here, to the edge of town.”

“There come the newsboys now,” Peter Merrick nodded, folding his arms across his chest.

Several young men in shirtsleeves and leather aprons ran down Broad Way armed with thick sheaves of paper. Fresh off the press, the broadsides being distributed were greeted with rousing cheers. One of these fresh-faced young men ran up to St. Paul’s, handing his last pages to Merrick and the minister. Breathless he blurted, “Arrived on the express from Boston . . . the Stamp Act’s been repealed!”

“Huzzah!” David and the two carpenters leaped up and punched the air. “We did it! We did it.” The ridiculous trio of instant friends ran out to the crowded street in a tumbled camaraderie of backslapping and jovial shoving. They linked arms and marched onto the Commons to join with the singing and dancing celebrants.

“I-I don’t believe it!” The minister patted his pockets for his spectacles.

Grim-faced Merrick held the paper at arm’s length, squinting at the news. “Our King would never accede to the whim of Whig radicals.” He rattled the sheet at the messenger. “Who is your master? Which Whig press manufactured this flummery?”

Unflinching, the young man squared broad shoulders. “I’m Jack Hampton, sir, apprenticed with Parker’s Press, and that,” Jack tapped the broadside in Merrick’s hand, “is excerpted word for word from the *London Times*, that is.”

“Parker’s Press? A rabid dissenter—he is no friend to the Crown.” Peter Merrick crumpled the broadside into a ball and flung it to the ground. “Your master ought think twice before publishing lies that excite the rabble into disobedience and sedition.”

Dark brows knit, jaw tight, fists clenched, Jack Hampton mounted the stoop. “John Parker is nothing but a true Son of Liberty, sir, and he publishes only the Truth.” The young man turned and noticed Anne and the minister, standing off to the side. He stepped back, took a breath and brushed back a shock of black hair that’d escaped his queue. “But I think this is neither the time nor place for a debate on the rights of freemen and the merits of civil dissent, is it?” A white-toothed grin flashed and with a brash wink he turned to Anne and said, “Cheer up there, lass. We stood toe-to-toe with Parliament and we showed ’em what’s what!”

Jack stepped forward, grasped Anne round the waist with ink-stained hands and swung her up through the air, shouting, “Joy to America! Huzzah the Liberty Boys! Huzzah the king!” Setting her back to her feet, he pulled her close and kissed Anne full on the mouth.

Peter Merrick sputtered, “Why . . . I . . . you—you . . .” but before he could enunciate his outrage, one of Hampton’s likewise apron-clad cohorts called from the street.

“Hoy, Jack! Quit sniffin’ after petticoats—the lads are a-waitin’ on us . . .”

Bold young Jack took Anne by the hand and raised her fingertips to his lips in a gesture so suddenly genteel as to take her breath away. In that moment, Anne’s life seemed in her grasp—the bells rang bright, the world was happy—then Jack Hampton bounded down the stair and out onto the street to join his mates.

“Scoundrel!” Peter Merrick shouted, with fist raised. “I shall make a report to your master!”

Jack turned and thumbed his nose. “Take heart, you ol’ Tory! Meet me at Montagne’s—bring your pretty daughter . . .” He blew Anne a kiss. “We can all toast our good King’s health!”

While Merrick cursed and grumbled, Anne marked Jack and his friend dodging their way across Broad Way onto the Commons. She so wished she could drum up the courage to shed her misspoken vows and forced-upon obligations—the courage to run after the wild lad and take him by the hand. As Jack Hampton disappeared amid the raucous throng, Anne felt her heart spin away and clatter, like a bucket lost down the depths of a deep, deep well.

No. It was never in her nature to own that kind of reckless courage.

Anne flinched when Peter Merrick grasped her by the shoulder.

“Come along, Mrs. Merrick . . . your father assures me you’ve a deft hand at setting type. We’ve work to do today—a special edition at the least.”

Anne took her husband’s proffered arm and he led her beyond the joyous din to begin her new life.