

SCENE VII

(The light comes up on the Narrator, who turns several pages in his big book before he begins speaking.)

NARRATOR

No community in America had given his Lordship a warmer welcome than Mecklenburg. He saluted with fireworks as he arrived, flush with success and confident of early and final victory, and he has been given warm attention throughout the week that he has spent here in little Charlottetown. So much attention has he been given that Liberty Hall, now his Lordship's hospital, is overflowing with wounded men and in the yard behind the building many fresh mounds have appeared. Patrols sent out to forage for food come back with a few scrawny cows and many wounded men, and often several soldiers are brought back dead or left beside some farmer's barn or in his red field. Worse, his Lordship has lost communication with Patrick Ferguson in the west. His couriers are killed before they reach the Catawba River, or Ferguson's are killed as soon as they cross it, and sometimes before. Cornwallis, raging at the strength and heat of the opposition to him, is becoming alarmed. The gate into North Carolina is not opening; it may be that a trap is closing.

(The light fades upon the Narrator, comes up again on the scene in front of the court house and Jack's Tavern. For a moment no one is in sight. The street is deserted. And then, walking on short fat legs and with brisk step, Duncan Ochiltree comes up the street from his store at right. At the same time Lord Cornwallis and Colonel Banastre Tarleton come from the Thomas Polk home and walk toward the court house. Cornwallis is gesticulating emphatically, and it is apparent that he is considerably agitated. At the corner of the tavern the two British officers meet Ochiltree. The fat merchant steps back, bows servilely, almost cringes before the Britishers.)

CORNWALLIS

(Sarcastically.)

On your way to see me, doubtless, Mr. Ochiltree, to sell me more of your very poor supplies?

OCHILTREE

(Cringing and smirking.)

Your Lordship, we are a poor community. We have little to offer, but what we have we are happy to share with Your Lordship.

(He rubs his hands and bows and smirks.)

CORNWALLIS

Yes, for good English pounds you'll share, indeed. For good English pounds, Ochiltree, you'd sell your soul.

(Very sarcastically, and with considerable heat.)

Share, indeed. What sort of a community do you have? Haven't I offered to pay, and pay well, for supplies? Haven't I ordered my men not to pillage? Yet what help do I get? Why, they even burn down their barns to keep me from sharing their corn and wheat. Didn't that McKnitt Alexander have his barns and granary burnt to the ground only yesterday to keep my men from sharing with him? And they are hungry, Ochiltree. Hand me those rolls, Ban.

(He takes a roll of papers from Colonel Tarleton, pulls them open.)

Listen to this, Ochiltree: Look at the cattle we have been consuming.

(He reads.)

"September 27--103 head; September 28--98 head; September 29--107 head."

(He rolls up the sheets, hands them back to Tarleton.)

That's the way it has been going. A hundred head of cattle a day. That shows how lean the cattle are that we are getting. These

damnable rebels are hiding out their fat cattle and leaving us the scrawny stuff. And we're paying a terrific price. The hospital must be full of men, eh, Ban?

TARLETON

It's filling rapidly, sir. These pesky--

(There is the report of a musket in the distance and the whine of a bullet.)

CORNWALLIS

There you are, Ochiltree. Another British soldier hurt, maybe killed. And right under our noses. These people hereabouts are a rebellious, independent-minded lot. I was led to believe that I would be received with respect, as the representative of His Majesty. But it seems that I have run into a veritable hornet's nest.

OCHILTREE

(Apologetically.)

Well, sir, your Lordship, sir, this is a right contrary-like settlement. They do a lot of talking about principles and freedom and such like and it's true they'll burn up their stuff before they'll let your soldiers have it even when you offer to pay 'em good money, like you done me. They're queer that way--

(Ochiltree sees that Cornwallis and Tarleton are looking beyond him, and turning, he sees two British soldiers carrying a third man in a rude stretcher across the street from right toward the improvised hospital.)

Well, sir, you Lordship--

CORNWALLIS

(Interrupting.)

You see, Ban?

TARLETON

If you'll permit me to say it, sir, you're too lenient. I believe you should use tougher methods. You'll never win these damnable

Mecklenburgers to our side. The only thing to do is to kill and burn.

CORNWALLIS

No, Ban, that's not my way. I'll never fight women and children.

OCHILTREE

If'n you'll excuse me, sir, and if'n there's nothin' you'll be wantin' today, I'll jes' step back to the store and see to the tradin'.

(He bows, turns and starts back. As he crosses in front of the tavern old Pat Jack sticks his head out the upstairs window, shakes his fist at Ochiltree.)

PAT JACK

Ye good fer nothin' scoundrelly traitor, a-sellin' out yore own people fer filthy British money. I wish I warn't sick; I'd git out o' this bed and lick you right soundly, Duncan Ochiltree. And I could do it!

(He turns to face Cornwallis and Tarleton, who are watching him.)

And that goes fer you two fancy struttin' sons of---perdition, too!

(Shaking his fist at them.)

What ye doin' over here in our country a-slayin' and a-robbin' us? Ye better be gittin' out whilst ye can, afore we send ye a-kitin'. If'n I could jes' git out o' this bed, I'd come down there right now and give ye two the worst drubbin' ye had in yore blasted no-count lives. There warn't niver an Irishman what couldn't lick a passel o' Britishers--

(Pat Jack's tirade is interrupted by a British sergeant who comes racing up to Cornwallis, salutes.)

CORNWALLIS

What is it now?

SERGEANT

Major Doyle begs to report, sir, that the patrol 'e sent out this morning is back.

CORNWALLIS

Well, what luck had he?

SERGEANT

Major Doyle begs to report, sir, that 'e managed to obtain only a few 'ead of very lean cattle, and little grain. And seven men were lost, sir, including the captain, and thirteen were wounded, six of them, 'e said, sir, seriously. 'Twas at a place called McIntyre's some seven miles north along the road they call the Beatty's Ford Road sir, it 'appened, and 'twere a nasty affair, and most exasperating, sir, said Major Doyle, 'e said, sir.

CORNWALLIS

(Calmly.)

Very well, Sergeant. Thank you.

(The sergeant salutes, turns back to move off left toward the headquarters.)

TARLETON

(Pointing toward old Pat Jack's upper window; Jack has disappeared inside.)

It's just such damned rebels as that old Irishman up there that's causing this opposition, sir. We must do something, sir, to show them that we mean business. I say adopt some stern measures. We are about to be cut off, General. We may be already. We can't hear from Pat Ferguson in the west; they shoot down our couriers. I say that we should get tough with these rebels. And I say that we should start with burning down that hotbed of rebellion there, that veritable nest of hornets. I say put the torch to it.

(He points again to the tavern.)



CORNWALLIS

Ban, I'll have no pillaging for the mere sake of pillaging. I'll have no burning down of homes, even though they do house rebels against His Majesty. I will not countenance the burning of this little court house. It is the symbol of law and justice. It may be law administered in rebellion, but I daresay that what law is administered is good English law. At any rate--

(With emphasis.)

the British army shall not wantonly pillage. I want that understood. I shall enforce that. I shall severely punish pillaging, burning, raping. We shall send out detachments large enough to obtain supplies, if it takes half our army to cover our foragers. Understand, Ban, I abhor action against civilians, even though they insult us and extend our patience greatly. But it may be that the burning down of this tavern, this nest of rebels, would be an example to all rebels hereabouts and thereby could be considered a military measure. At any rate, Ban--

(He smiles quickly, as he looks the cavalry officer full in the face.)

I sleep very soundly at night, and tonight I shall leave orders that I am not to be awakened unless we are attacked. And you will report to me--in the morning.

TARLETON

I understand you, sir. And I shall report--in the morning.

(He smiles broadly, as the light does down, leaving the set in complete darkness.)