

EXCERPT from “The Scarlet Cloak”

a play from *Stages of History*, by Wim Coleman and Pat Perrin

Stages of History is a collection of one-acts based on America’s past (©2005 by Perfection Learning® Corporation). The following excerpt is from “The Scarlet Cloak,” a story of the Revolutionary War. The play relates young Deborah Champion’s daring and dangerous ride through New England to deliver an important military message to George Washington in Cambridge, Massachusetts. In this scene, an exhausted and haggard Deborah finally delivers her message to the redoubtable General Washington himself.

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Scene 10

(George Washington’s study in the same house. GEORGE WASHINGTON is seated behind a desk, poring over correspondence. A decanter of amber-colored wine and some glasses are on the desk. There is an empty chair nearby. A knock at the door is heard.)

GEORGE WASHINGTON. Enter.

(MARTHA WASHINGTON and DEBORAH enter, DEBORAH carrying the packet; GEORGE WASHINGTON barely glances up from his papers.)

MARTHA WASHINGTON. Now, George, I’ve brought you a rather unusual visitor, and no matter how cross and out-of-sorts you may feel, you mustn’t jump down her throat.

GEORGE WASHINGTON *(looking up from his papers at DEBORAH)*. Who is this mud-spattered ragamuffin?

MARTHA WASHINGTON. What did I just tell you? She’s come on important business. And the poor thing is practically at death’s door.

GEORGE WASHINGTON *(turning again to his papers)*. Probably a spy.

DEBORAH. I am not a spy.

GEORGE WASHINGTON *(to MARTHA WASHINGTON)*. A spy posing as a beggar.
The oldest trick in the book.

MARTHA WASHINGTON. She knew the password.

GEORGE WASHINGTON. Is there a Tory spy in all New England who doesn't? You
should have known better than to let her in. Have the sentries put her under arrest.

MARTHA WASHINGTON. She's almost too delirious to talk, poor thing, but her
serving man explained it. You see, the two of them—

GEORGE WASHINGTON. Serving man, indeed. Arrest him, too. They'll both be
interrogated tomorrow.

(DEBORAH tiredly but boldly holds out the packet.)

DEBORAH. I have a package from General Schuyler, Your Excellency. I'm under
orders to deliver it directly to you.

GEORGE WASHINGTON *(looking up at her)*. Eh? From Schuyler? What's it all
about?

DEBORAH. I'm sure I don't know, Your Excellency. It's sealed.

GEORGE WASHINGTON. Bring it here.

(DEBORAH approaches his desk and hands him the packet.)

GEORGE WASHINGTON. It's Schuyler's seal, indeed. *(To MARTHA
WASHINGTON)* Give me a few minutes alone with the ragamuffin.

MARTHA WASHINGTON. Now, George—

GEORGE WASHINGTON. Just a few minutes.

MARTHA WASHINGTON *(to GEORGE WASHINGTON)*. There's no use imploring
you not to torment the poor thing. Just try not to be unnecessarily brutal. *(To
DEBORAH)* He's at his worst, I fear. Try your best not to let him daunt you. He *will*
daunt you, of course. He daunts everyone except me. But don't go down without a
fight.

*(MARTHA WASHINGTON exits; a silence falls. DEBORAH stands before
GEORGE WASHINGTON's desk, swaying from exhaustion and barely able
to keep her eyes open.)*

GEORGE WASHINGTON. Who are you?

DEBORAH. My name is Deborah Champion, Your Excellency.

GEORGE WASHINGTON. Champion? That sounds familiar.

DEBORAH. I'm the daughter of Colonel Henry Champion.

GEORGE WASHINGTON. Oh, yes. Head of the militia in New London. We met only once, when I gave him his commission. Rather distant fellow. Aloof. Hard to draw out. I don't think he said a word to me. A storekeeper, I believe. How's his business these days?

DEBORAH. Not very good.

GEORGE WASHINGTON. No, nor is mine. War takes its toll. But what are *you* doing here?

DEBORAH. He sent me with this package, Your Excellency—my servant and me.

GEORGE WASHINGTON. Why didn't he send a man from his militia?

DEBORAH. That's ... rather hard to explain, Your Excellency.

GEORGE WASHINGTON. Do stop calling me "Your Excellency." It still unsettles me to hear it from soldiers and statesmen, let alone a girl like yourself.

DEBORAH. I'm hardly a girl.

GEORGE WASHINGTON. Young lady, then.

DEBORAH. How should I address you?

GEORGE WASHINGTON. I'll answer to "sir."

DEBORAH. Very well, sir.

GEORGE WASHINGTON (*examining the package*). The seal doesn't appear to be tampered with. That's rare. Dispatches have almost always been opened and read by a meddling somebody-or-other before they reach me.

DEBORAH. I've guarded the seal with my life, sir.

(GEORGE WASHINGTON *breaks the seal, opens the package, and peruses the papers inside; a silence falls.*)

DEBORAH. Begging your pardon, sir ...

GEORGE WASHINGTON. Try not to overdo it with “sir.”

DEBORAH. No, sir. I mean ... no. May I ask a question?

GEORGE WASHINGTON. You may.

DEBORAH. What does the package contain?

(Long silence as GEORGE WASHINGTON continues to peruse the papers.)

DEBORAH. Well?

GEORGE WASHINGTON *(still poring over the papers)*. I said you may ask a question.

You may ask all manner of questions. You may ask the earth’s circumference, the mass of the moon, the distance between Cambridge and the surface of the sun. Dr. Franklin down in Philadelphia could surely answer such questions, for he’s a philosopher and a sage; I cannot, for I’m just an ignorant rustic, a backwoods Virginian. Few and far between are the questions I can readily answer. As for the contents of this package, it’s really not your affair.

DEBORAH. I meant no impertinence.

GEORGE WASHINGTON. Questions are never impertinent; answers almost always are.

DEBORAH. May I ... go now?

GEORGE WASHINGTON. You may.

(DEBORAH turns to go.)

GEORGE WASHINGTON *(reading a document)*. Wait just a moment.

(DEBORAH turns toward him again.)

GEORGE WASHINGTON. Tell your father to send a man the next time he needs a man’s job done.

DEBORAH. Did I not execute my duties properly?

GEORGE WASHINGTON. According to Schuyler’s letter, this packet should have been in my hands yesterday.

DEBORAH. It only reached my father's hands yesterday morning. He sent me and my servant straightaway.

GEORGE WASHINGTON. Good Lord!

DEBORAH (*wearily*). I believe I have your permission to leave.

GEORGE WASHINGTON. You must have ridden the whole of last night through!

DEBORAH (*closing her eyes*). Pretty nearly.

GEORGE WASHINGTON. And all of today! How did you do it? Did you go through Rhode Island? How did you stay clear of British sentries?

(But DEBORAH cannot reply; she is virtually asleep on her feet now, and in danger of falling. GEORGE WASHINGTON rises to his feet, takes her by the hand, and helps her into the chair near the desk.)

GEORGE WASHINGTON. What the devil are you doing still on your feet? Here—have a seat straightaway!

DEBORAH (*muttering deliriously as he seats her*). That word—what was that word?

GEORGE WASHINGTON. I beg your pardon?

DEBORAH (*seated, her eyes still closed*). Oh, yes—Madeira.

GEORGE WASHINGTON. Yes, a glass of Madeira—the very thing!

(GEORGE WASHINGTON pours a glass of the wine from the decanter and holds it toward her.)

GEORGE WASHINGTON. Open your eyes.

DEBORAH (*opening her eyes and looking at the glass, seeming more awake than before*). What's this?

GEORGE WASHINGTON. You asked for it.

DEBORAH. No, I didn't.

GEORGE WASHINGTON. You asked for a glass of Madeira.

DEBORAH. Madeira's the password.

GEORGE WASHINGTON. It is? Oh, yes—of course, it is. Well, as it happens, a glass of Madeira is *also* just what you need.

DEBORAH. Wine will put me to sleep.

GEORGE WASHINGTON. To the contrary. Madeira has astonishing restorative powers. And if it does put you to sleep—no matter. Martha and the ladies will put you safely to bed in a room all to yourself. You can sleep through tomorrow, as long as you like.

DEBORAH. What about Aristarchus?

GEORGE WASHINGTON. Who?

DEBORAH. My servant. He came with me.

GEORGE WASHINGTON. He'll have a bed all his own. Now stop your fretting and drink.

(DEBORAH CHAMPION *takes the glass and drinks.*)

GEORGE WASHINGTON. Feel better?

DEBORAH (*suddenly more awake, and surprised*). Yes. Much.

GEORGE WASHINGTON (*sitting behind his desk again*). I expected so. Dr. Franklin once told me a story about Madeira. A terrible liar, that Dr. Franklin, but I more than half believe this story is true. He once found three drowned houseflies sealed up in a bottle of Madeira. He placed the flies on a sunlit windowsill to dry. One of the flies never revived, but the two others did and shook their wings and flew away. “More important than my discovery of lightning!” Dr. Franklin told me. “For this proves that Madeira contains the secret of immortality!” Before he passes away, he says that he'll have himself drowned and sealed in a vat of Madeira. (*Chuckling*) Death, where is thy sting, eh? Then after a hundred or two hundred years, he's to be taken out of the vat to dry in the sun—and with some luck, to revive. And then he'll see what the distant future has in store. (*Pouring a glass of wine for himself*) I use Madeira somewhat more moderately. A glass or two a day, and perhaps I'll live to see the end of this war.

DEBORAH. May I ask you a question, sir?

GEORGE WASHINGTON. Yes.

DEBORAH. Why don't you attack Boston, take it back from the British? (*Long pause*) I see. It's not my affair.

GEORGE WASHINGTON. No. It's just a difficult question. It might require an—
impertinent answer. *(Pause)* Have you ever heard of a place called Fort Necessity?

DEBORAH. No.

GEORGE WASHINGTON. I wish I hadn't either. *(Pause)* It was April, 1754. I was 22
years old. I'd had just been made a colonel. I'd been given command over some 350
men in Pennsylvania to fight the French. Imagine—a colonel at 22! I thought ... well,
I thought very highly of myself. But at Fort Necessity, I fairly invited a French attack
that cost me fully a third of my men. As I dashed about giving incoherent orders, I
tripped over the bodies of the dead and wounded. Then came a heavy rain, and I
slipped about in mud and water and blood. So many men dead—more than a
hundred—and all because of my own stupidity! *(Shaking his head)* Why did I live?
Why did I live?

*(Long pause; GEORGE WASHINGTON's eyes are lowered; DEBORAH
stares at him raptly.)*

GEORGE WASHINGTON *(holding out his hand toward her)*. Scratch the skin of this
43-year-old hide, and you'll find that same rash 22-year-old fool. Oh, how I yearn to
attack General Howe in Boston with the full might of our Colonial Army! But it's just
what Howe is hoping for. And it would be Fort Necessity all over again—only this
time, in vastly greater numbers. Wiser heads than mine have persuaded me of it.

DEBORAH. Wiser heads than yours?

GEORGE WASHINGTON. Here's my secret. I have a plodding sort of genius for
gazing into the depths of my ignorance. This truly sets me above many more able
men. I know how to listen to every voice around me—and to do so while maintaining
the illusion of command. For all command is merely an illusion.

DEBORAH. I can't believe that.

GEORGE WASHINGTON. Dear young lady, do you really think the fate of these
Colonies rests in my hands? Or the hands of officers like your father? Or the hands of
Congress, or Parliament, or General Howe, or the King of England? Tell me—when
you aren't out riding across the countryside, what work most occupies you at home?

DEBORAH. It's not worth mentioning to Your Excellency.

GEORGE WASHINGTON. I told you not to call me that.

DEBORAH. Well, it's not worth mentioning—*sir*.

GEORGE WASHINGTON. Humor me.

DEBORAH. I spin.

GEORGE WASHINGTON. I expected so. Wool, cotton, or flax?

DEBORAH. Wool, mostly.

GEORGE WASHINGTON. Slow and plodding work, isn't it? I know. I'm a spinner, too. I sit at the wheel of events, spinning all day long, gathering the fabric of people together. But the wearying work of our spinner's hands isn't what really matters, is it? The quality of the fibers—that's what counts. My spinning depends on the readiness and willingness of countless men and women to work wonders—to do things like ride from New London to Cambridge in no time at all. Without such precious fibers as yourself, my hands are worse than empty.

(DEBORAH and GEORGE WASHINGTON look at each other in silence for a moment.)

GEORGE WASHINGTON. But I'm keeping you awake to no good purpose. You must get some sleep. *(Rising to his feet)* I'll go see to some quarters for you and your servant. You stay right here. And drink your Madeira like a good young lady.

(GEORGE WASHINGTON strides toward the door, then turns toward DEBORAH again.)

GEORGE WASHINGTON. And, oh ... this little conversation of ours ...

DEBORAH. Yes, sir?

GEORGE WASHINGTON. We didn't have it.

DEBORAH. Of course not, sir.