

## Baroness von Riedesel Takes Shelter in the Lansing House



“The whole army clamored for a retreat, and my husband promised to make it possible, provided only that no time was lost. But General Burgoyne, to whom an order had been promised if he brought about a junction with the army of General Howe, could not determine upon this course, and lost every thing by his loitering.

“About two o’clock in the afternoon, the firing of cannon and small arms was again heard, and all was alarm and confusion. My husband sent me a message telling me to betake myself forthwith into a house which was not far from there.

“I seated myself in the calash with my children, and had scarcely driven up to the house, when I saw on the opposite side of the Hudson River, five or six men with guns, which were aimed at us. Almost involuntarily I threw the children on the bottom of the calash and myself over them.

“At the same instant the churls fired, and shattered the arm of a poor English soldier behind us who was already wounded, and was also on the point of retreating into the house. Immediately after our arrival a frightful cannonade began, principally directed against the house in which we had sought shelter, probably because the enemy believed, from seeing so many people flocking around it, that all the generals made it their head-quarters.

“Alas! It harbored none but wounded soldiers, or women! We were finally obliged to take refuge in a cellar, in which I laid myself down in a corner not far from the door. My children laid down on the earth with their heads upon my lap, and in this manner we passed the entire night.

“A horrible stench, the cries of the children, and yet more than all this, my own anguish, prevented me from closing my eyes.”

### Taking Refuge in the Cellar

“On the following morning the cannonade again began, but from a different side. I advised all to go out of the cellar for a little while, during which time I would have it cleaned, as otherwise we would all be sick.

“They followed my suggestion, and I at once set many hands to work, which was in the highest degree necessary; for the women and children being afraid to venture forth, had soiled

the whole cellar. After they had all gone out and left me alone, I for the first time surveyed our place of refuge.

“It consisted of three beautiful cellars, splendidly arched. I proposed that the most dangerously wounded of the officers should be brought into one of them ; that the women should remain in another ; and that all the rest should stay in the third, which was nearest the entrance.

“I had just given the cellars a good sweeping, and had fumigated them by sprinkling vinegar on burning coals, and each one had found his place prepared for him — when a fresh and terrible cannonade threw us all once more into alarm. Many persons, who had no right to come in, threw themselves against the door.

“My children were already under the cellar steps, and we would all have been crushed, if God had not given me strength to place myself before the door, and with extended arms prevent all from coming in; otherwise every one of us would have been severely injured.”

### **The Cannonade**

“Eleven cannon balls went through the house, and we could plainly hear them rolling over our heads. One poor soldier, whose leg they were about to amputate, having been laid upon a table for this purpose, had the other leg taken off by another cannon ball, in the very middle of the operation. His comrades all ran off, and when they again came back they found him in one corner of the room, where he had rolled in his anguish, scarcely breathing.

“I was more dead than alive, though not so much on account of our own danger, as for that which enveloped my husband, who, however, frequently sent to see how I was getting along, and to tell me that he was still safe.

“The wife of Major Harnage, a Madame Reynels, the wife of the good lieutenant who the day previous had so kindly shared his broth with me, the wife of the commissary, and myself, were the only ladies who were with the army.

“We sat together bewailing our fate, when one came in, upon which they all began whispering, looking at the same time exceedingly sad. I noticed this, and also that they cast silent glances toward me. This awakened in my mind the dreadful thought that my husband had been killed.

“I shrieked aloud, but they assured me that this was not so, at the same time intimating to me by signs, that it was the lieutenant—the husband of our companion—who had met with misfortune. A moment after she was called out. Her husband was not yet dead, but a cannon ball had taken off his arm close to the shoulder.

“During the whole night we heard his moans, which resounded fearfully through the vaulted cellars. The poor man died toward morning. We spent the remainder of this night in the same way as the former ones. In the meantime my husband came to visit me, which lightened my anxiety and gave me fresh courage.”

### **Anguish in the Cellar**

“On the following morning, however, we got things better regulated. Major Harnage, his wife, and Mrs. Reynels, made a little room in a corner, by hanging curtains from the ceiling.

“They wished to fix up for me another corner in the same manner, but I preferred to remain near the door, so that in case of fire I could rush out from the room. I had some straw

brought in and laid my bed upon it, where I slept with my children—my maids sleeping not far from us.

“Directly opposite us three English officers were quartered—wounded, it is true, but, nevertheless, resolved not to be left behind in case of a retreat. One of these was a Captain Green, aid-de-camp of General Phillips, a very valuable and agreeable man. All three assured me, upon their oaths, that in case of a hasty retreat, they would not leave me, but would each take one of my children upon his horse.

“For myself, one of my husband’s horses constantly stood saddled and in readiness. Often my husband wished to withdraw me from danger by sending me to the Americans; but I remonstrated with him on the ground, that to be with people whom I would be obliged to treat with courtesy, while, perhaps, my husband was being killed by them, would be even yet more painful than all I was now forced to suffer. He promised me, therefore, that I should henceforward follow the army.

“Nevertheless, I was often in the night filled with anxiety lest he should march away. At such times, I have crept out of my cellar to reassure myself, and if I saw the troops lying around the fires (for the nights were already cold), I would return and sleep quietly.

“The articles which had been intrusted to me caused me much uneasiness. I had fastened them inside of my corsets, as I was in constant terror lest I should lose some of them, and I resolved in future never to undertake such a commission again.”

### **Little Frederica is Amused**

“On the third day, I found an opportunity for the first time to change my linen, as my companions had the courtesy to give up to me a little corner—the three wounded officers, meanwhile, standing guard not far off.

“One of these gentlemen could imitate very naturally the bellowing of a cow, and the bleating of a calf; and if my little daughter Frederica, cried during the night, he would mimic these animals, and she would at once become still, at which we all laughed heartily.

“Our cook saw to our meals, but we were in want of water; and in order to quench thirst, I was often obliged to drink wine, and give it, also, to the children.

“It was, moreover, the only thing that my husband could take, which fact so worked upon our faithful Rockel, that he said to me one day, “I fear that the general drinks so much wine, because he dreads falling into captivity, and is therefore weary of life.”

“The continual danger in which my husband was encompassed, was a constant source of anxiety to me. I was the only one of all the women, whose husband had not been killed or wounded, and I often said to myself—especially since my husband was placed in such great danger day and night—“Shall I be the only fortunate one?”

“He never came into the tent at night; but lay outside by the watch-fires. This alone was sufficient to have caused his death, as the nights were damp and cold.

### **The Water Heroine**

“As the great scarcity of water continued, we at last found a soldier’s wife who had the courage to bring water from the river, for no one else would undertake it, as the enemy shot at the head of every man who approached the river. This woman, however, they never molested; and they told us afterward, that they spared her on account of her sex.

“I endeavored to divert my mind from my troubles, by constantly busying myself with the wounded. I made them tea and coffee, and received in return a thousand benedictions. Often, also, I shared my noonday meal with them. One day a Canadian officer came into our cellar, who could scarcely stand up. We at last got it out of him, that he was almost dead with hunger.

“I considered myself very fortunate to have it in my power to offer him my mess. This gave him renewed strength, and gained for me his friendship. Afterward, upon our return to Canada, I learned to know his family.”

## **Fear and Suffering**

“One of our greatest annoyances was the stench of the wounds when they began to suppurate. One day I undertook the care of Major Plumpfield, adjutant of General Phillips, through both of whose cheeks a small musket ball had passed, shattering his teeth and grazing his tongue. He could hold nothing whatever in his mouth. The matter from the wound almost choked him, and he was unable to take any other nourishment, except a little broth, or something liquid. We had Rhine wine.

“I gave him a bottle of it, in hopes that the acidity of the wine would cleanse his wound. He kept some continually in his mouth; and that alone acted so beneficially that he became cured, and I again acquired one more friend. Thus, in the midst of my hours of care and suffering, I derived a joyful satisfaction, which made me very happy.

“On one of these sorrowful days, General Phillips, having expressed a desire to visit me, accompanied my husband, who, at the risk of his own life, came once or twice daily to see me. He saw our situation, and heard me earnestly beg my husband not to leave me behind in case of a hasty retreat.

“Then, as he marked my great reluctance to fall into the hands of the Americans, he spoke in my behalf; and as he was going away he said to my husband, “No! Not for ten thousand guineas would I come here again, for my heart is entirely, entirely broken!”

“Not all of those, however, who were with us deserved our compassion. There were, also, poltroons in our little company, who ought not to have remained in the cellar, and who afterwards, when we became prisoners, took their places in the ranks and could parade perfectly well.”

## **Council of War**

“In this horrible situation we remained six days. Finally, they spoke of capitulating, as by temporizing for so long a time, our retreat had been cut off.

“A cessation of hostilities took place, and my husband, who was thoroughly worn out, was able, for the first time in a long while, to lie down upon a bed. In order that his rest might not be in the least disturbed, I had a good bed made up for him in a little room ; while I, with my children and both my maids, laid down in a little parlor close by.

“But about one o’clock in the night, some one came and asked to speak to him. It was with the greatest reluctance that I found myself obliged to awaken him. I observed that the message did not please him, as he immediately sent the man back to head-quarters, and laid himself down again considerably out of humor.

“Soon after this, General Burgoyne requested the presence of all the generals and staff officers at a council- of- war, which was to be held early the next morning; in which he proposed

to break the capitulation, already made with the enemy, in consequence of some false information just received.

“It was, however, finally decided, that this was neither practicable nor advisable; and this was fortunate for us, as the Americans said to us afterwards, that had the capitulation been broken we all would have been massacred; which they could have done the more easily, as we were not over four or five thousand men strong, and had given them time to bring together more than twenty thousand.”

## **The Capitulation**

“On the morning of the 16th of October, my husband was again obliged to go to his post, and I once more into my cellar. On this day, a large amount of fresh meat was distributed among the officers, who, tip to this time, had received only salted provisions, which had exceedingly aggravated the wounds of the men.

“The good woman who constantly supplied us with water, made us capital soup from the fresh meat. I had lost all appetite, and had the whole time taken nothing but crusts of bread dipped in wine.

“The wounded officers, my companions in misfortune, cut off the best piece of the beef and presented it to me, with a plate of soup. I said to them that I was not able to eat any thing, but as they saw that it was absolutely necessary I should take some nourishment, they declared that they themselves would not touch a morsel until I had given’ them the satisfaction of taking some.

“I could not longer withstand their friendly entreaties, upon which they assured me that it made them very happy to be able to offer me the first good thing which they themselves enjoyed.

“On the 17th of October the capitulation was consummated. The generals waited upon the American general-in-chief, Gates, and the troops laid down their arms, and surrendered themselves prisoners of war. Now the good woman, who had brought us water at the risk of her life, received the reward of her services.

“Every one threw a whole handful of money into her apron, and she received altogether over twenty guineas. At such a moment, the heart seems to be specially susceptible to feelings of gratitude.”

## **Relief**

“At last, my husband sent to me a groom with a message that I should come to him with our children. I, therefore, again seated myself in my dear calash; and, in the passage through the American camp, I observed, with great satisfaction, that no one cast at us scornful glances.

“On the contrary, they all greeted me, even showing compassion on their countenances at seeing a mother with her little children in such a situation.

“I confess that I feared to come into the enemy’s camp, as the thing was so entirely new to me. When I approached the tents, a noble looking man came toward me, took the children out of the wagon, embraced and kissed them, and then with tears in his eyes helped me also to alight.

“‘You tremble’ said he to me, ‘fear nothing.’ ‘No,’ replied I, ‘for you are so kind, and have been so tender toward my children, that it has inspired me with courage.’

He then led me to the tent of General Gates, with whom I found Generals Burgoyne and Phillips, who were upon an extremely friendly footing with him. Burgoyne said to me, ‘You may now dismiss all your apprehensions, for your sufferings are at an end.’ ”

*Letters and Journals Relating to the War of the American Revolution and the Capture of the German Troops at Saratoga* by Mrs. General Riedesel, Translated from the Original German by William L. Stone, Author of the *Life and Times of Sir William Johnson*, Joel Munsell, Albany, 1867