



from
Johnny Tremain

by Esther Forbes

Johnny Tremain is a fictional character in a historical setting, revolutionary Boston. In this part of the story, the British governor has just refused to negotiate with Sam Adams about the Tea Act. Johnny and his friends are ready to carry out the Patriot plan to dress as Mohawk Indians and dump the British tea into Boston Harbor.

And suddenly there was silence. Johnny guessed there were many in that crowd who, like himself, were hanging on those words. Seemingly Mr. Adams was calmly accepting defeat, dismissing the meeting, for now he was saying,

‘This meeting can do nothing more to save the country.’

Johnny gave his first shrill blast on his whistle, and he heard whistles and cries seemingly in all directions, Indian war whoops and ‘Boston Harbor a teapot tonight!’ ‘Hurrah for Griffin’s Wharf!’ ‘Salt-water tea!’ ‘Hi, Mohawks, get your axes and pay no taxes!’

Johnny was only afraid all would be over before Rab and his henchmen could get to the wharf. Still shrilling on the whistle, he fought and floundered against the tide of the crowd. It was sweeping toward Griffin’s Wharf, he struggling to get back to Salt Lane. Now he was afraid the others would have gone on without him. After all, Rab might have decided that Johnny’s legs and ears were better than his hands—and deliberately let him do the work that best suited him. Johnny pushed open the door.

Rab was alone. He had Johnny’s blanket coat, his ridiculous befeathered knitted cap in his hands.

‘Quick!’ he said, and smooched his face with soot, drew a red line across his mouth running from ear to ear. Johnny saw Rab’s eyes through the mask of soot. They were glowing with that dark excitement he had seen but twice before. His lips were parted. His teeth looked sharp and white as an animal’s. In spite of his calm demeanor, calm voice, he was charged and surcharged with a will to

action, a readiness to take and enjoy any desperate chance. Rab had come terrifyingly alive.

They flung themselves out of the shop.

'Roundabout!' cried Rab. He meant they would get to the wharf by back alleys.

'Come, follow me. *Now* we're really going to run.'

He flew up Salt Lane in the opposite direction from the waterfront. Now they were flinging themselves down back alleys (faster and faster). Once they had a glimpse of a blacksmith shop and other 'Indians' clamoring for soot for their faces. Now slipping over a back-yard fence, now at last on the waterfront, Sea Street, Flounder Alley. They were running so fast it seemed more like a dream of flying than reality.

The day had started with rain and then there had been clouds, but as they reached Griffin's Wharf the moon, full and white, broke free of the clouds. The three ships, the silent hundreds gathering upon the wharf, all were dipped in the pure white light. The crowds were becoming thousands, and there was not one there but guessed what was to be done, and all approved.

Rab was grunting out of the side of his mouth to a thick set, active-looking man, whom Johnny would have known anywhere, by his walk and the confident lift of his head, was Mr. Revere. 'Me Know You.'

'Me Know You,' Johnny repeated this countersign and took his place behind Mr. Revere. The other boys, held up by the crowd, began arriving, and more men and boys. But Johnny guessed that many who were now quietly joining one of those three groups were acting on the spur of the moment, seeing what was up. They had blacked their faces, seized axes, and come along. They were behaving as quietly and were as obedient to their leaders as those who had been so carefully picked for this work of destruction.

There was a boatswain's whistle, and in silence one group boarded the *Dartmouth*. The *Eleanor* and the *Beaver* had to be warped in to the wharf. Johnny was close to Mr. Revere's heels. He heard him calling for the captain, promising him, in the jargon everyone talked that night, that not one thing should be damaged on the ship except only the tea, but the captain and all his crew had best stay in the cabin until the work was over.

Captain Hall shrugged and did as he was told, leaving his cabin boy to hand over the keys to the hold. The boy was grinning with pleasure. The 'tea party' was not unexpected.

'I'll show you,' the boy volunteered, 'how to work them hoists. I'll fetch lanterns, mister.'

The winches rattled and the heavy chests began to appear—one hundred and fifty of them. As some men worked in the hold, others broke open the chests and flung the tea into the harbor. But



one thing made them unexpected difficulty. The tea inside the chests was wrapped in heavy canvas. The axes went through the wood easily enough—the canvas made endless trouble. Johnny had never worked so hard in his life.

He had noticed a stout boy with a blackened face working near him. The boy looked familiar, but when he saw his white, fat hands, Johnny knew who he was and kept a sharp eye on him. It was Dove. He was not one of the original ‘Indians,’ but a volunteer. He had on an enormous pair of breeches tied at each knee with rope. Even as Johnny opened a chest and helped get the tea over the rail, he kept an eye on Dove. The boy was secretly scooping tea into his breeches. This theft would come to several hundred dollars in value, but more important it would ruin the high moral tone of the party. Johnny whispered to Rab, who put down the axe he had been wielding with such passion and grabbed Dove. It wasn’t much of a scuffle. Soon Dove was whining and admitting that a little of the tea had happened to ‘splash’ into his breeches. Johnny got them off and kicked them and the many pounds of tea they held into the harbor.

‘He swim good,’ he grunted at Rab, for everyone was talking ‘Indian’ that night.

Rab picked up the fat Dove as though he were a rag baby and flung him into the harbor. The tea was thicker than any seaweed and its fragrance was everywhere.

Not a quarter of a mile away, quite visible in the moonlight, rode the *Active* and the *Kingfisher*. Any moment the tea party might be interrupted by British marines. There was no landing party. Governor Hutchinson had been wise in not sending for their help.

The work on the *Dartmouth* and the *Eleanor* finished about the same time. The *Beaver* took longer, for she had not had time to unload the rest of her cargo, and great care was taken not to injure it. Just as Johnny was about to go over to see if he could help on the *Beaver*, Mr. Revere whispered to him. ‘Go get brooms. Clean um’ deck.’

Johnny and a parcel of boys brushed the deck until it was clean as a parlor floor. Then Mr. Revere called the captain to come up and inspect. The tea was utterly gone, but Captain Hall agreed that beyond that there had not been the slightest damage.

Discussion Questions

1. How do you think Johnny and Rab felt during this event?
2. This book was first published in 1943. How do you think the author got the information needed to write the book?