

The Fighting Ground

WRITTEN BY AVI : ILLUSTRATED BY PETER CATALANOTTO

Chapter Two: 10:45 a.m.

a breakfast serials story

THE STORY SO FAR : *It's April 3, 1778, and thirteen-year-old Jonathan has gone to town to join up and fight in the American Revolution—though his parents don't know it.*

The tavern was the biggest building around. Built of stone, it had glass windows and a high, peaked roof. As Jonathan drew near he saw guns leaning against its wall.

Men had gathered and were talking. One man had climbed a tree to watch the roads. A boy Jonathan's age was heaving the bell cord. The bell was racked to the side of the green where the militia practiced, something Jonathan loved to watch.

"Here comes someone!" cried the man in the tree.

Jonathan felt a tap on his shoulder. A man asked, "Your father coming?"

Someone else said, "His leg's still poor."

At that, they paid no more mind to Jonathan. *They don't know I've come to fight*, he thought.

Jonathan walked over to the bell. "What's going?" he asked the boy.

"Sol-diers," said the boy, fitting the word between strokes of the bell.

"Enemy ones?" asked Jonathan, excited.

The boy nodded.

A man came out of the tavern, someone Jonathan had never seen before. A large man, he had broad shoulders and a red, badly pockmarked face. His shirt, spilling out of his trousers, wasn't very clean, and his dark-green jacket had frayed cuffs. His boots were caked with mud. His hat was small. He stood in front of the tavern door surveying the men who, in turn, kept glancing at him.

"Any more coming?" the stranger called.

"Be some time yet," was the reply.

"We don't have time," the stranger snapped. "If we don't move, they'll get through."

A man Jonathan knew came running. A gun was in his hand. "Where they coming from?" he called.

"Pennington way," someone answered.

"How many?"

"Fifteen or less."

"Who saw them?"

"Corporal."

Heads turned to the stranger.

"Here's more!" cried the man in the tree. "You be patient, Corporal," he called. "You'll have an army yet."

The tavern keeper shook his head. "It's groundbreaking time."

The Corporal approached the men. "How long," he asked, "will it take marching troops to get here from Linvale?"

"That's four miles," came an answer. "An hour and a half." Pennington was seven miles south, Trenton twenty miles away. The British and the Hessians held them both. Ten miles to the northwest lay Alexandria. Fleming was six miles north by east. To the west, on the big river, lay Well's Ferry. Americans held all three. Jonathan had not been to any of those places.

The Corporal rubbed his hands together, then swung around to face the bell, where Jonathan was standing, watching.

"That's enough!" he barked to Jonathan's friend. "They'll either come or not."

The boy dropped the rope.

The Corporal considered the group of men, turning his head, he discovered Jonathan's eyes fixed on him.

"You handle a gun?" he asked.

"Yes . . . sir," Jonathan stammered.

"You?" the Corporal asked the other boy. He shook his head no.

The Corporal glowered, then drifted toward the men. Four more had run in, making thirteen in all. The Corporal appraised them, then turned to the tavern keeper. "You coming?" he asked.

"We'll need to have ourselves a second line in case they get through," said the innkeeper. "I'd best stick here."

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The Corporal frowned and walked over to his horse. He tightened the saddle.

Jonathan wondered where this Corporal had come from, what he had seen, why he'd come to this place.

The Corporal wheeled around to face the waiting men. "We've run out of time," he said. "We need to go."

"Aren't we going to wait for more men?" asked someone.

"It's too late," the Corporal replied.

Someone, Jonathan didn't see who, murmured. Others took it up, a brief swelling sound, not quite a word.

"All right," the Corporal said, choosing to take the sound as "yes." He looked about again, and his eyes came to rest on Jonathan.

"You," he said, pointing. "Get a musket from the tavern. You're needed."

Pride soaring, Jonathan turned toward the tavern keeper, who was standing by the door.

"Going, are you?" the tavern keeper said before Jonathan could speak.

"Yes, sir."

"What's your father to say?"

"Told me to come."

"Did he?"

Jonathan didn't answer.

"And now," said the tavern keeper, "our blessed Corporal asks to borrow a gun."

"I can use it."

"Hope so," said the tavern keeper. "Come on."

Jonathan bounded up the steps into the dark tavern. The rank smell of ale and cider thickened the air.

The tavern keeper emerged from the dark. He held a flintlock musket, almost six feet long, butt and stock of polished wood. Though older than Jonathan's father's gun, it was beautiful. But it was heavier than he expected. He had to thrust out his other hand to keep it up.

Gripping it tightly, Jonathan brought the gun close to his chest, then let it swing down till the butt rested on the floor. The gun reached above his head.

"Manage?" the tavern keeper asked.

"Yes, sir," said Jonathan.

"Twelve pounds of weight."

Jonathan studied the gun, from its topmost ramrod to its shiny hammer lock, to its bottom butt plate. He felt a deep glow inside.

"I got your word of honor you'll bring it back?"

"Yes, sir."

With that the tavern keeper strung a cartridge pouch around the boy's neck. "Thirty cartridges. Wrapped them myself. Here's your powder," he said, adding the powder horn.

"Any extra flint?" Jonathan asked, wanting to show he understood what he was about.

"You've got what I can spare." The tavern keeper kept studying Jonathan. "You don't have to go," he said. "You can leave through the back. No one's going to know, or care. Not that man. Just because he's tapped you doesn't mean you have to go. He likes telling folks what to do."

Jonathan looked down. He fingered the gun nervously.

"You know anything about him?" the tavern keeper asked.

Jonathan shook his head no.

The tavern keeper sighed. "Take care of yourself," he said. Jonathan kept standing there.

"If you're going," the man finally said with a wave of his hand, "Get!"

Jonathan turned, inadvertently smashing the gun butt against the doorframe. The shock nearly made him drop the gun. Recovering, he hastened outside into the light.

The men had begun to move south along the Pennington Road. The Corporal, astride his horse, was rounding past the bend. Jonathan looked about. The tavern keeper was watching.

Grasping the gun tightly in both hands, Jonathan dashed down the steps and ran along the road toward Pennington.

to be continued ...

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