LYDIA DARRAH, PATRIOT

A RADIO PLAY*

by

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Abington High School

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Characters

Narrator; Susannah Darrah, age 9; Ann Darrah, age 21; William Darrah, Jr., age 11; William Darrah, Sr.; John Darrah, age 15; Lydia Darrah; British Officer; Voice; British soldier; Colonel Craig.

SOUND Whistling of Winter Wind.

NARRATOR It was the bitter winter of 1777. While Washington and his men shivered at Valley Forge, the British were comfortable in Philadelphia. They had ordered William Darrah to give them the use of his house, located on Second Street. But Lydia, his wife, objected. She went to General Howe in his headquarters. Her husband and children anxiously awaited her return. (Fade.)

SUSANNAH What will the British do to Mother, Ann?
ANN Nothing, Sue dear. It's just our home they want.
SUSANNAH But we won't have any place to sleep. Will they take our clothes, too, Father?
WILLIAM, SR. Of course not. We'll just have to take what we can and find some other house.
WILLIAM, JR. Maybe they'll send us out to Cousin John's place in the country beyond Rising Sun. I'll bet he'll be surprised when we arrive with a military escort.
WILLIAM, SR. Cousin John has enough troubles of his own without us, William. John, come away from that window and sit quietly over here.
JOHN But father, I want to see mother come out of

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General Howe's house. I know she will walk straight as an Indian between her guards!

I don't think there will be any guards, John. Mother is a very determined person and I have a feeling that even General Howe will not chase her out of her house.

(Excitedly) Wait, everybody. The door is opening. Here comes a soldier and there's Mother!
(disappointed) Oh! She is crossing the street alone.

William, go and open the door for your mother.

She must have made the old General do just as she wanted. (Sound of door)

Oh, mother, are the British going to make us go away?

(Agitatedly) Are we going to be refugees, mother?

(Coming on) Quiet, children, quiet. We are going to keep our house.

I was sure we would have to go away with a military escort. John said we would.

I don't think we will have a military escort. But some of us will have to go away. You children are to go to live with Cousin John. Ann and your father and I may remain here.

Lydia, why send the children? Why don't we all go?

The children only, William. That is the way it is arranged.

A very strange arrangement! Is this another plan that you...

Wait, William. (Pause) Ann, will you take the children to their rooms and help them pack the clothes and other things they will need? Don't take more than necessary.

Can we go today, mother? Hurry, Ann, I know just what I want to take! You help me first.

(Mute)

Mother, can't you make them give us an escort?

Just imagine what Cousin John would...

William! We will do without the escort and we
will do without any nonsense from you. Run and get ready. John, help him.

JOHN  Mother, could I possibly stay here with you? Maybe I could help if . . . if there is something . . .

LYDIA  You can help by taking care of your brother and sister.

JOHN  Yes, mother. But with Charles out there at Whitemarsh with General Washington, I thought that maybe I could help here.

LYDIA  Your brother Charles would think that you can help by doing what I say. Now go and pack and help William. (Door closes faintly)

WILLIAM, SR.  This is not so simple as it sounds, Lydia, I am sure. What plan is in your mind?

LYDIA  I have no plan, yet, William. I persuaded General Howe that we simply could not find any place where all of us could go. I promised to send the children away so that he and his staff could use the large room upstairs for a conference room. We will have our own rooms.

WILLIAM, SR.  But why send the children away? We could have made room for them.

LYDIA  It is better for them this way. The General gave me a pass which I can use to visit them. That was all I asked for.

WILLIAM, SR.  A pass through the lines. Mmmmm. I begin to see what you have in mind. I am afraid I won't allow it, Lydia! You should leave these things to me.

LYDIA  But William, our son Charles is out there with our troops at Whitemarsh. Anything I can do to help him is my duty. You can get bits of news and send them out with messengers as before. That is your duty. But something big is in the making and you are not apt to discover that in the town. It will be decided in the secrecy of the council chamber.

WILLIAM, SR.  A council which will meet in our own house behind closed doors and between four walls.
LYDIA

One wall of which, my dear, adjoins my own bedchamber where there is a closet with a very thin partition. Let's not discuss it any more. When more than one person has a secret it ceases to be a secret.

(Music—Up and Fade.)

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NARRATOR

The British held councils frequently in the upper chamber. Nothing unusual occurred to disturb the Darrah family. The severe winter reduced military operations to a minimum. Then, on Tuesday, December 2, a British officer came to see Lydia. . . . (Fade)

OFFICER

Madam Darrah, tonight we wish to hold a council meeting in the upper room. You will have the fire going and everything in readiness.

LYDIA

Yes, sir. The room is ready at all times.

OFFICER

You will make certain that there are no visitors in the house tonight.

LYDIA

That will be easy. No one visits us since you are using our house.

OFFICER

One thing more. You will see to it that the members of your family retire to their rooms at an early hour and remain there for the night. We will notify you when to lock up the house.

LYDIA

Everything will be as you ask.

OFFICER

If it is not, I can assure you that there will be considerable trouble for everyone. Good day.

(Sound of latch and door closing.)

LYDIA

(almost a whisper) The time has come. This is what I have waited for. Nothing must go wrong.

(Music Bridge-Fade. Knocker at door.)

OFFICER

Good evening, madam. The room is ready?

LYDIA

This way, gentlemen.

(Footsteps and low murmur of voices in background.)

LYDIA

(Continuing) It is warm and there is extra wood. Do you wish anything else?

OFFICER

This seems fine. Has your family retired?

(Pause) Good. Then you will do the same. We
shall waken you when we leave.

(Door closes and lock turns.)

LYDIA They are all in now. The last man locked the door. Now the meeting will begin. I must be in my night clothes in case a check is made. And now the closet, quietly.

(Slight noise of latch and then a low murmur of voices one of which becomes just intelligible...) 

VOICE (Muffled) Gentlemen, the council will be in order. The enemy shows no knowledge of our preparations. . .

(Music Bridge, Fade.)

VOICE And so, gentlemen, the troops will march out in the late evening of December the 4th. The attack will be directly on the forces of Washington at Whitemarsh. With the enemy unprepared, our victory is certain.

LYDIA The conference is over. They’re going now.

(Three knockings at the door with a slight pause between; each louder than the preceding.)

LYDIA (Sleepily) Ye-es? What is it? Just a mi-nute.

OFFICER (Muffled) Sorry to have to wake you, madam. You may lock the outer door now.

LYDIA (Still a little sleepy) Thank you. I shall attend to it at once.

(Music Bridge. Fade)

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NARRATOR Lydia Darrah slept very little that night. She must get word to General Washington at once. But the British would be alert for any strange action. She discarded plan after plan. By the next afternoon she had decided what to do. (Fade)

LYDIA (Fade in) (Arguing) But Ann, it has been a long time since we had any news of the children. General Howe gave me the pass for my own use and tomorrow morning I am going to make the trip.
ANN        Mother, this is sheer nonsense. The weather is horror-ble. You can’t possibly get through the snow on foot, and there is nothing else you can do.

LYDIA      I am no weakling. I have walked through snow many times and many miles before this. I am quite determined to go.

WILLIAM, SR. Activity has been noticed among the British these past two days. I doubt that the sentries will honor your pass.

LYDIA      They just better had honor it. If anything special is going on they will be too busy to think about me. The pass is signed by General Howe himself and I don’t believe he will remember to cancel it.

ANN        Father, can’t you do something to stop her? The children are surely all right. If anything were wrong, Cousin John would have managed to get word to us.

WILLIAM, SR. Ann, my dear, I have been married to your mother for many years. To date I have been unable to think of anything to stop her when she makes up her mind. Frankly, I think it will take the British army to do any stopping that can be done. She will start if she says so.

LYDIA      I will start. I will start early in the morning and you two will stay here and go about your usual work. I will be back before nightfall if it is at all possible. Let us not discuss the matter any further.

(Music Up and fade)

SOLDIER    (Fade in-sound of tramping through snow.)

LYDIA      (Fade in) . . . Madam, it is impossible for anyone to leave the city today.

SOLDIER    I think not. There is no reason why I can’t get out. I have a pass that permits me to visit my children. You have no orders to stop me.

SOLDIER    We have orders to stop everyone, ma’am.

LYDIA      Everyone but me, perhaps. General Howe himself made certain of that. He gave me this pass
and has signed it himself. You have no orders higher than that.

SOLDIER Well, this is the General's signature, so I can't see anything else to do. But don't get off the direct road, ma'am. Today, that would be especially dangerous.

LYDIA I have only one reason to be going out this road. I do not care anything about your patrols. If my pass is not honored, the General himself will know about it.

(Music bridge—indicating a quick walk.)

(Sound—scrambling through snow and bushes. Rapid breathing of exhaustion.)

LYDIA That . . . should be . . . the last patrol. Now . . . through the woods . . . toward Rising Sun . . . and one of our patrols.

(Sound—scrambling through snow and bushes.)

LYDIA There . . . should be . . . some of Colonel Craig's men . . . hereabouts.

(Fade in galloping of horses.)

CRAIG (Off-Mike) . . . A woman ahead of us. (Shouts) Halt!

LYDIA (Startled) Oh!

CRAIG (Off-Mike) Keep alert, men. I'll see what this means.

(Sound—fade in galloping of one horse.)

CRAIG (Fade in) Madam, this is a strange place for a woman to be traveling alone.

LYDIA I am looking for the American . . . Oh! You are Colonel Craig. At last! I thought I would reach you. I am Lydia Darrah.

CRAIG Mrs. Darrah! What brings you into this dangerous territory?

LYDIA Colonel Craig, will you walk with me and listen to the news I have? There is no time to waste, I assure you.

CRAIG I will indeed. (Calls) Spread out, men, and see that we are not interrupted. (More quietly) Now, Mrs. Darrah.
LYDIA You must get word to General Washington at once. The British have planned that tonight they . . . (Fade) *(Music bridge.)*

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NARRATOR Lydia Darrah returned to her home late in the afternoon. She explained nothing to her husband or daughter and they, fully aware that strange things were in the making, did not ask questions. That evening they listened fearfully to the British march away. *(Martial music and the tramping of soldiers in the street.)*

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NARRATOR All night and the next day they waited. There were rumors of a battle. Late that evening, there was a knock at the door and Lydia opened to a British officer.

LYDIA Good evening.

OFFICER Madam, I wish to have a conference with you.

LYDIA *(Scarcely able to speak)* With me?

OFFICER You will precede me to the council room where we can be alone. *(Door closing and footsteps on the stairs. Another door opens—closes.)*

OFFICER Be seated, madam. This is a matter of great import. The news will be over town shortly, so I can tell you that today we fought a battle with Washington at Whitemarsh.

LYDIA You . . . fought . . . a . . . battle?

OFFICER There was not much fighting. The important thing, madam, is that the enemy had notice of our coming. They knew the plans that were, we thought, completely and entirely our own secret.

LYDIA You mean . . . They . . . were . . . ready?

OFFICER They knew and were prepared for us. We marched into a trap and came back again like a parcel of fools. These things do not just happen.

LYDIA *(Frightened)* You must be right.

OFFICER On the night of our last council meeting, were any of your family awake and around the house?
LYDIA  Oh no, I am certain that they were in bed and asleep.

OFFICER  I know that you were. I was the one who knocked on your door and I had trouble enough getting you awake to lock up the house.

LYDIA  I answered after I heard your knock.

OFFICER  I know. But I almost broke my hand before you heard. I just don't understand. . . . Well, it has been a sorry day for His Majesty's troops. What it may mean to Washington's men remains to be seen. There is nothing more I can do about it now. (Stiffly) If we have need of your room again, we will let you know. Good night, madam.

LYDIA  The room is at your disposal. Good night, sir.

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NARRATOR  The story of Lydia Darrah has become one of the legends of the American Revolution. Hers was the strength of character and patriotism that have always been and always will be the texture of American life.