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*John the Painter*

THIS is the tale of an aberrated Scotsman who stepped momentarily into the spotlight of history during the American Revolution, and, for a brief, fantastic space, sent shivers rippling along the spines of Lord North's cabinet, and spread consternation throughout the length and breadth of merry England. He was born plain James Aitken, an unprepossessing infant in the brood of an indigent Edinburgh blacksmith. Dangling from a gibbet in Portsmouth town, he departed this life, in 1777, famous or infamous, as John the Painter. Twice James Aitken's crimes flared red on the British horizon—an incendiary whose distorted mind interpreted the torch of liberty as literal rather than allegoric; who set himself, single-handed, to destroy the might of the king's navy. Boasting himself an agent of the American Congress, this insignificant little Scottish zealot, ere his destructive path ended, had burned to the ground his majesty's rope house in the Portsmouth navy yard, and had started two alarming, if not serious, fires in busy Bristol.

Harken, then, to the tale of James Aitken, *alias* James Hill, otherwise James Hinde, commonly called, as the old court record set forth, John the Painter.

Silas Deane's French servant probably eyed with repugnance the shabby little man, who, for the third time, was insisting upon an

audience with his employer. Twice before the devoted servant, who regarded any Englishman as inimical to his patron's welfare, had dismissed him summarily. This time, however, the persistent fellow had gained the antechamber, and was so clamorous in his demands that the valet, having previously acted without authority in barring this strange visitor, prudently concluded to forego his self-imposed censorship, and consult his master. Deane described the incident in a letter to Edward Bancroft:<sup>1</sup>

One Morning he [the valet] told me that a person of an odd & suspicious look & appearance had twice before called to speak with me, and although I had never given him Orders to deny me to any one, yet he had ventured to do it from his own apprehensions & without consulting me on the subject, and that the same person was now in the Anti Chambre, and peremptorily insisted on seeing me, knowing, as he said, that I was at home; on this I blamed him for having denied me without any directions, & bade him let the Man come in. But (said the honest fellow) you never saw a worse looking fellow in your Life. I am sure he can have no Business with your honor, unless it be to beg something, or to do what is worse, which, indeed, I suspect, for he speaks English so strangely that I can hardly understand him, and I think if he was honest he would speak plain. But I will show him in. Pray, Sir, don't go into another Room with him; stay in this, & then I shall be within hearing if anything happen.

The extraordinary conduct and discourse of his servant prepared Deane for a singular and striking visitor—a giant, or something not much inferior, as he expressed it. But, “on opening the Door,” as Deane explained, “there sneaked in a diminutive looking Man of about 25 by appearance, of near the middle size for height, but thin, his Countenance rather wild, and at the same time somewhat expressive, his hair deeply inclined to the Red, & his Face covered with red Freckles; his dress no way recommended him at Paris, nor would in the lower stations of Life prejudice him any where; so far as the Eye could examine, it was whole & warm, but he had on a Surtout of a brownish Colour rather inclining to the Claret, which hid his under Cloaths; his hair hung loose on his shoulders & down his neck before.”

Overwhelmed by his own temerity in forcing himself upon Mr. Deane, Aitken was too embarrassed for a moment to find voice. When he spoke, it was with such a broad Scottish burr that the French servant's inability to comprehend was easily understood. Aitken said, reported Deane, that he had

<sup>1</sup> Silas Deane wrote a lengthy letter to Edward Bancroft in the late spring of 1783 explaining “without reserve” his transactions with John the Painter. A portion of this letter, covering the first meeting, has been preserved and is published in the “Deane Papers,” II. 6–11, *The Collections of the New York Historical Society* (1887).

. . . made bold to call on me on an affair of a secret nature, and of very great importance to me and my Country, and that he wished we might retire into a more secret apartment, for, said he, I suspect your Valet de Chambre, who is but in the next Room, may overhear what passes, & I have a bad opinion of him, for he has twice refused me an audience, though I knew that you was at home, under pretence that you was not; and besides, I would not on any acct. have him or any other come to the knowledge of one syllable of what passes between you and me.

Surprised and curious, but still on his guard, Deane remarked that there was no necessity to seek another room; requested Aitken to "enter on the subject of his Visit without farther preamble"; and admonishing him to be brief, took out his watch as a hint that he was about to go out.

Aitken understood the gesture and proceeded "in a faltering and tremulous" tone:

I ask your honors pardon; I will only make bold, if your honor has leisure, to ask two or three Questions, and will call at another time, when you may be more at Leisure, on the principal object which I have in view. Pray, Sir, what news have you from America, & how are the affairs of the Congress & Genl. Washington?

To this Deane replied that the American affairs were "Very good," and inquired in his turn what interest Aitken could have therein. After some further conversation in which Aitken declared that although he was not an American he wished the country well, and considering himself to have been ill used by Britain was anxious for revenge, he further inquired:

Pray tell me if the Congress will give rewards and honors to those who serve them Voluntarily, but effectually; have you any Authority to promise any such?

Faced with this uncomfortably direct question Deane hedged; remarked that Congress would reward those who had performed "essential service"; and again asked Aitken to come to the point. This, it seems, the latter was unable to do for he continued to beat about the bush and to make cryptic, incoherent remarks. The most that could be gotten from him was the promise that at another audience he would produce intelligence that would enable such a blow to be struck at England "as will need no repetition." Deane agreed to another meeting: "Wishing to know more fully what the Man aimed at, for, tho' in his looks he appeared wild, his conversation shew'd plainly that his mind laboured with some purpose or project more than common which shook his whole Frame, I wished from curiosity, more

than from any other motive, to know more of the Man and something of his Views, of which he had as yet disclosed nothing; . . . farther than that he was resolved on being revenged, and that in no common or ordinary way, and professing his esteem & zeal for the American Cause, I dismissed him, with leave to see me the next morning at the same hour, and my servt., who apprehended an Assassin in the poor fellow, was much surprised to find the interview end so peaceably, but more so that a second was appointed."<sup>2</sup>

Aitken returned on the morrow. Once closeted with Deane, he came to the point with little circumlocution. Before he divulged his plan, he felt it incumbent to apprise the American agent that he was really a person of consequence, owner of a plantation in Virginia. Fear of its devastation by the British, he explained, was an added motive behind his purpose. Whereupon, he unfolded before his auditor's eyes a series of rather crudely drawn, yet seemingly accurate plans of the dockyards at Portsmouth, Plymouth, Chatham, Woolwich, and Deptford.

Deane was interested; but he must have suffered at least momentary shock when Aitken offered to burn these dockyards if he were countenanced and properly rewarded by the American Congress. The little Scotsman no longer seemed ridiculous, he was eloquent, enthusiastic, a strangely metamorphosed man. Producing a portable infernal machine of his own invention, he explained his scheme. The machine consisted of a wooden box to hold combustibles, with a hole in the top for a candle; a tin canister, no larger than a half-pound tea can and perforated for air, to cover it; the whole to be filled with inflammable materials—hemp, tar, oil and matches. The candle, having been lighted, would burn down until it ignited the inflammable materials, and these exploding would scatter the fire for yards around. Meanwhile the inventor hoped to have put sixty miles more or less between himself and the dockyard before the fire would be discovered. The idea seemed to Deane to be practicable but perilous, and he expressed his amazement that anyone would be willing to engage single-handed in an undertaking so dangerous, and requiring such care and perseverance. However, Aitken made light of the difficulties and promised to do more execution upon the enemies of America than Deane could possibly imagine.

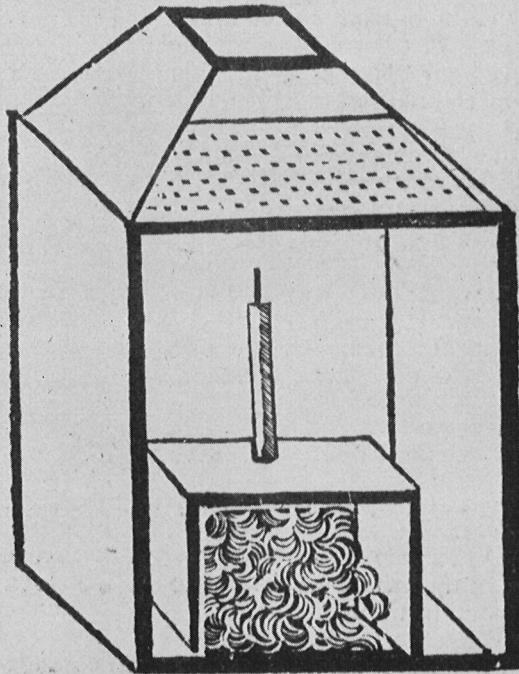
<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, II. 6-11. This and the preceding quotations are from the same letter of Deane to Bancroft.

*A.* Yes, I found a tin case, (*produced in court*) and there is a mark on the inside I know it by; there is a piece of wood hallowed out, for to put a candle in; there was in it hemp, tar, oil, and matches; also a little box of combustibles.

*Q.* Was they separate when you found them?

*A.* No, the box was fixed in the cannister, and a candle in it.

*The figure following represents the tin case, which is made in a long square form. A little wooden box is made to fit the case, which having a hole through the centre, admits the bottom of a candle into it, which when lighted has vent and air by means of some small holes towards*



*the top of the tin case or cannister. The box is filled with combustibles of different kinds, which, when the candle is nearly burnt out, take fire, and by means of the matches placed round, communicate the flames to every thing they touch.*

*Q.* Did



Yankee to the core, Deane bethought himself of the possible expense and asked Aitken how much money he would need. For the present the sum required was modest—twelve French crowns—later, Aitken hoped for a suitable reward and perhaps a commission in the American army. Deane agreed to advance the twelve crowns, and promised an additional £300 sterling if the venture proved successful.<sup>3</sup> By so doing, the American agent became an accessory before the fact to arson on a magnificent scale; but in his own mind at least, his actions were completely justified. He expressed it subsequently:<sup>4</sup>

... supposing me to be the liege subject, not of Great Brittain, but of a foreign independant Nation, at the Time at War with Great Brittain, and that imagining that I had found a favorable opportunity, & met with a proper Agent to destroy, at one blow, the Fleet & armaments preparing to carry, and to spread devastation, and bloodshed in my Country, and that I improved the favorable moment and attempted through this agency, to effect this great object; on this view of the case I am confident that every one of common sense & impartiality must acquit me, nay more though they rejoice at the defeat of the enterprize they must approve of the motives, which influenced me to engage in it, motives no less than a desire to weaken a declared Enemy, and to preserve my Country, by every means in my power, from the horrors, and distress of Fire and desolation.

Deane and Aitken matured their plans rapidly, if sketchily. Portsmouth, largest of the dockyards, should be the first objective. Thereafter, the sequence would depend upon circumstances. Once the work of destruction was ended, Aitken was to strike for London, and seek out Dr. Edward Bancroft, at 4 Downing street, Westminster. The latter, eminent naturalist, chemist and professed sympathizer with the liberties of America, would screen or secrete him until he could cross to France. Deane, in turn, would communicate with Bancroft, and prepare him for the advent of the incendiary. This, however, Deane forgot, or deliberately omitted doing.<sup>5</sup>

Meanwhile, from M. de Vergennes, complacent French minister of foreign affairs, the American agent procured a passport, dated November 13, 1776, and valid for thirty days, to facilitate Aitken's

<sup>3</sup> The Testimony of John Baldwin at the trial of John the Painter. See Howell's *State Trials*, XX. 1365; also *The Trial of James Hill, Commonly Called John the Painter, at the Castle of Winchester, On Thursday the 6th Day of March, 1777, Before the Hon. Sir Beaumont Hotham, Knt.*, printed by John Wilkes, London, 1777; and the Depositions of John the Painter, March 7, 1777, printed in *The Correspondence of George the Third* (Sir John Fortescue, ed.), III. 423-27.

<sup>4</sup> Deane to Bancroft, *loc. cit.*, II. 6-7.

<sup>5</sup> Testimony of John Baldwin, Howell, *op. cit.*, XX. 1365.

passage from and back to France. Perhaps he also secured from the minister a treatise upon *The Art of War and making Fire Works as practised by the Army of the King of France*. That pamphlet, along with an English translation of Justin, and Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, also in English, comprised the limited and unique library in the bundle James Aitken carried with him, when, in mid-November, he set out for Calais, and his pilgrimage of destruction.

While Aitken is on his way to Calais and from thence, by channel packet, to Dover, we can explore a bit into his antecedents. The tale he told Deane was composed of half-truths. He had been in America, but the Virginia plantation and alleged activities with Lord Dunmore were pure figments of the imagination. No high resolves of vengeance brought him to Paris. Charge it rather to a cracked cranium in which were combined shrewdness, unscrupulousness, a desire for notoriety, much vanity, and a penchant for petty thievery, all strangely commingled with insensate folly. What Deane mistook for patriotic fervor was merely insane fever.

A thumb-nail sketch of James Aitken, prior to the visit to France, may explain some of his aberrations. Born September 28, 1752, in Edinburgh, he was consigned, from his ninth to his fifteenth year, to Heriot's hospital, an institution which served both as orphanage and reformatory. Upon his discharge, he was apprenticed to an Edinburgh painter. Having served out his time, and learned his trade, he departed from London, in the spring of 1773, to seek his fortune. By his own admission, the delights of a great city went immediately to his none-too-steady head. A life of dissipation with the town bawds was paid for by minor robberies and shoplifting. When apprehension seemed inevitable, he found a Captain John Robertson about to sail for Virginia, and went with him as an indented servant. What transpired scarcely smacked of the landed gentleman: "I made a verbal agreement with Captain Robertson," Aitken confessed later, "to pay him 24 £. Virginia money for my liberty, but after paying some of it to him, and a little to a Mr. Graham, I left the province without paying the rest of it, and went to North Carolina, from whence I sailed to England."

Landing at Liverpool, on May 5, 1775, the little man worked his way by highway robberies and house-breaking to London, where once



more he embarked upon profligate living. He had become more canny, and kept clear of constables and watch, but, by October, it had grown too hot for him. So he went down to Gravesend and enlisted, as James Boswell, in His Majesty's 32nd Regiment. He was marched to barracks at Chatham, and, when he felt the hue and cry had lessened in London, deserted and returned to his old haunts. But by the spring of 1776, London again had become unsafe for Aitken. This time he journeyed to Cambridge, "having a desire to see that University." From thence he toured East Anglia and the Midlands, his travels punctuated by crimes—a chaise held up near Cambridge, the home of a Mr. Marks robbed in Norwich, a house broken into at Coventry. At Oxford, in August, came inspiration. The American war was the chief topic of conversation, and Aitken heard some taproom tactician expatiating upon England's great bulwark—her fleets and dockyards. Into the cracked brain came delusions of grandeur. He, James Aitken, would destroy the dockyards and gain "immortal honour in the accomplishment" of this design.

Straightway he set off southward, pausing in his journey only long enough to rape a shepherdess near Basingstoke, and hold up a lady and gentleman in a post chaise between Petersfield and Portsmouth. Once at his destination, he sensed the need for caution. To avoid suspicion, he returned to his long-neglected trade, and at Titchfield, a hamlet about ten miles from Portsmouth, hired himself to a painter named Golding. What more plausible than that John, the painter from Titchfield, as he called himself, should spend week ends in Portsmouth, fraternizing with workmen in the taverns, and wandering unquestioned around the dockyard—an insignificant little freckle-faced Scotsman, who had traveled, and who could talk entertainingly on any subject. As conversation continued to be upon the war, it was not long before he learned that an American agent, named Silas Deane, had been received, if not openly, yet cordially, in France. Ale houses and newspapers made much of it. Aitken made much of it, too. Immortality might have a worthwhile worldly reward. He would see.

At Titchfield, Golding bemoaned the sudden departure of his little Scottish painter. Cronies missed him in Portsmouth taverns. Aitken was on his way—to Plymouth, and thence back to London, to Woolwich, Deptford and Chatham. By late October he was at Dover,

hiring a boat for Calais, then off to Paris to present his harebrained plan to the American agent.<sup>6</sup>

Hat smartly cocked, chocolate colored surtout drawn tight to keep out late autumn breezes, James Aitken returned to Dover from France in the last week of November, 1776. His sang-froid was great; improved immeasurably by the crowns jingling in his pocket and the importance of being an agent of the American Congress. Courage was high and he swaggered as he bought an outside seat for Canterbury on the London coach. At Canterbury he would prepare the infernal machines whose design had so intrigued Deane.

In the old Kentish cathedral city, he went about his purpose with more speed than intelligence. A brazier, to whom he applied to make a tin canister, was too stupid to understand verbal instructions. Fortunately, the brazier's apprentice was a smart lad, who set to work where his master had failed, and produced a canister, which, if badly soldered, would suffice. Well pleased with the result, Aitken tucked the canister under the breast of his surtout and repaired for refreshments to the White Horse tavern. A drunken dragoon eyed the little man with disfavor and staggered across to him demanding to know who he was, whether a barber or tailor. This to the agent of the American Congress! Aitken flared, called the dragoon an impudent fellow and announced that he, Aitken, cared neither for him nor his masters. This show of bravado nearly caused Aitken's undoing for the dragoon noticed the bulk of the canister and pulled open the surtout. Another dragoon, soberer than his companion, interposed, while Aitken, pallid with fear of discovery, drew the coat tight across his chest. Nor could he depart until he drank the king's health with his savior.

Considerably shaken by the encounter, his subsequent movements in Canterbury were hasty. To his landlady, he confided he had quarreled with a dragoon, and that he had come from America because of the troubles. From her he inquired as to where he could have a small wooden box made, and was so careless as to let her see him put it under his coat upon delivery. Similarly, the purchase of two ounces of spirits of turpentine and a quarter-pound of salt-petre was made so furtively that the apothecary's suspicions were aroused. Climaxing his stay, he instructed another brazier to make him two canisters; called for

<sup>6</sup> Depositions of John the Painter, *loc. cit.*; also "Further Confession of James Aitken," in *The Public Advertiser* (London), Tuesday, March 18, 1777.

them within a few hours; learned they were not finished, and forsook the city with no further effort to obtain them.<sup>7</sup> Keeping to the byways, Aitken started his hundred-mile trek westward across Kent, Sussex and Hampshire to Portsmouth.

Elizabeth Boxell, who kept a lodginghouse in Portsmouth, had a landlady's natural inquisitiveness about her guests. Particularly was her curiosity piqued by the little man who engaged a room on Friday, December 6, left his bundle, and said he would return in the evening. Temptation could not withstand such opportunity. Open came the bundle under her prying fingers. In it she found a shirt, a pistol, a pair of breeches, several books, and a few nondescript articles. She sniffed at the evidence of poverty, vowing to watch the fellow to be sure he did not skip without paying his keep.

Meanwhile, Aitken, the infernal machine under his surtout, a second pistol in one pocket, a bottle of turpentine in the other, was making his last purchase—a halfpenny's worth of matches at the shop of Elizabeth Gentle, in Havant Street, Portsmouth Common. Elizabeth assured him the matches would catch promptly, even letting him test them in her fireplace. When he emerged from her shop, the gray December afternoon was nearing a close. He hastened his steps to the dockyard. No sentry questioned him at the gate. There was the same laxity he had observed in October. Nor were there workmen on the ground floor of the hemp house—a huge, gloomy structure into which he made his cautious way. Stealthily the little man went about his work. Seeking a remote corner, and pulling off his surtout, he proceeded to loosen a quantity of matted hemp. In the center of the loosened pile, he set his tin canister, loaded now with combustibles in the inner box, a candle above it, and matches propped against the candle. Some of his supply of turpentine he sprinkled on the surrounding hemp, and concluded the machine was well concealed until the morrow. Donning his coat, he brushed away such strands as had clung to it, and emerged again into the yard. No one took note of him as he passed across the open space to the rope house, a new stone building 1,000 feet long. Here, in an obscure recess, with no infernal machine available, he improvised one. The bottle of turpentine was laid on its side with some refuse hemp as a cork, and more hemp

<sup>7</sup> From the testimony of witnesses at the trial. See *The Trial of James Hill, Commonly Called John the Painter . . .*; and Howell, *op. cit.*, XX, 1365 *et seq.*

stretched across the floor to end in a paper of gunpowder. The fuse for this contraption would be made later.

Preparations took longer than expected. To Aitken's consternation, he found the door locked. He sought other egress on the ground floor but without success. Neither was there a way of escape from the second story. Panic overcame him, and he pounded on the door. Presently a voice from outside asked who was there. Aitken replied that he was John, the painter from Titchfield, that curiosity had led him in to look around, and while he was on the second floor the door had been locked. The person on the other side, satisfied by the explanation, called a watchman. That worthy, with neither imagination nor curiosity, directed Aitken to another door, and unbarred it for him. No further questions were raised. Shaky at the knees, the little man slipped off in the darkness to his lodgings.

Mrs. Boxell let him in and sniffed her disapproval. Aitken failed to note her hostile mien. He accepted a candle, and ascended to his room, where, behind closed doors, he sat down to compose himself. Beads of perspiration rolled down his forehead, and his hands shook as he contemplated his narrow escape. Before the night was over, he conquered his fears and set to the manufacture of his fuses. His ingredients consisted of a composition of charcoal ground with water on a color stone, and gunpowder that had been bruised with a knife. When mixed with water, a milky substance resulted. This he applied with a brush to both sides of sheets of heavy paper, which, when dried, were folded into narrow lengths. While sure the fuses would burn, he needs must try them. Burn they did with smoke and fumes that seeped under the door and downstairs. On the lower floor, Mrs. Boxell awoke sniffing and coughing. A hasty search showed the source of the nauseous fumes. Up she went, a figure of righteous indignation, and burst into the room demanding to know whether her lodger designed to burn down her house. Aitken replied sarcastically. His landlady observing soot on the hob, smoke in the fireplace, and pieces of folded paper on the hearth determined to be rid of this odd fellow and ordered him out of her house at once.

To have been locked in the rope house and detected by a landlady would have frightened a normal man from his purpose, but Aitken was not normal. Unaffected by his ejection by Mrs. Boxell, he went blithely on his blundering, yet cunning way. His first port of call was

a public house in Portsmouth Common, where he engaged a room to be occupied later in the day. From thence, he sought another lodging house, and found it at a Mrs. Cole's on North Street. He left his bundle with her, and departed shortly before noon. Mrs. Cole was not inquisitive. Aitken's possessions were undisturbed. But why had he engaged two rooms? Simple, indeed, as he reasoned it out. Once the time fuses were set in the hemp and rope houses, he would return, start a fire in each room, and divert the water engines from assisting at the dockyard.

It was past noon when Aitken gained the hemp house and found his infernal machine as he had left it the day before. Not a soul was in sight. Cautiously he struck a match. It spluttered but did not ignite. Match after match failed him. Anticipating such an eventuality, he had brought along a tinder-box. Nervousness had overtaken him. This, plus haste, caused him to waste the tinder without getting sufficient heat to light a match. In despair, he made his way from the hemp house and across the yard to a shopkeeper outside the gate. Here he procured more matches, but, on his return, found too many workmen around to dare venture inside again. There remained the improvised machine in the rope house. Two workmen accosted him as he stepped inside. One he ignored. The other he engaged in conversation, and played the fool by asking silly questions until the workman moved away. Off sped Aitken to the dark recess, where his now fumbling fingers managed to lay the fuse and ignite it.

This was no timed machine such as the canister. At the most the slow fuse might give him two hours' grace. Aitken paused only long enough to be sure it was burning. To get out of the rope house and dockyard took five or ten precious minutes. Wild with rage over the failure of his first matches, he had an impulse to rush past Elizabeth Gentle's shop and discharge his pistol through her window. Momentary sanity told him the futility of such a gesture. Nor could he have time to start his counterfires. Even the bundle had to be left behind, and in it, he remembered, was his French passport with his true name. Overwhelming panic was on him as he gained the highway beyond Portsmouth, and started northward at a killing dog trot. Out of breath, staggering from exhaustion, he came upon a woman driving a cart home from market in the city. Aitken offered her sixpence for a lift, explaining that he must be in Petersfield by night and

was "in no shape to walk it." The woman whose name was Ann Hopkins proved amiable and obliging. Aitken climbed up beside her, and, despite himself, from time to time looked behind. The snail-pace made him fidgety, and he implored Mrs. Hopkins to drive faster. She complied, and seeing him shiver, followed his backward glance. Down Portsmouth way, a red glare spread high above the horizon.<sup>8</sup>

Fire had broken out in the rope house shortly after four o'clock that Saturday afternoon. Dried hemp, tarry ropes and loose cordage proved ideal fuel once Aitken's improvised fuse burned its length to the bottle of turpentine. Workmen, who discovered the flames, were driven back by intense heat and choking smoke. Most of them fled, crying the alarm as they came tumbling through the doors. One carpenter, remembering his tools, raced to recover them on the second floor. Before dockyard officials could marshal their forces, window panes were cracking, and red tongues were leaping through every ground floor opening. Within a few minutes, the fire had spread upward to the shingled roof. It was apparent the rope house was doomed. Seamen from naval vessels in the harbor, marines from the barracks, and ordnance employes were mustered into fire-fighting crews to save the other buildings. From Portsmouth came the water engines, and soon hoses and buckets were deluging the roofs of the nearby structures. Meanwhile, a ladder had been raised to rescue a man seen clinging by hand and leg to a second-story window frame in the rope house. He was brought to the ground, inarticulate with fear, and arrested on suspicion. Not until he regained speech and senses several hours later was it learned he was the carpenter who had sought to save his tools.

Fortunately, the wind was at northeast, carrying the flames across vacant ground. There was no telling when it might veer, however, so the brig *Albion*, laden with 2,000 barrels of gunpowder, was towed from the harbor. Evening came apace, but the blazing inferno lighted the dockyard as though it were broad daylight. Portsmouth, crowding to its housetops, could see the fire fighters as they crawled ant-like on the roofs of surrounding buildings. Six hours the conflagration raged until everything that could burn had been consumed. By midnight, the flames had faded and darkness had set in. Only the sturdy stone

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

walls remained, within which the smoke billowed and red heat glowed, with occasional sparking splutters. It was Sunday morning before Commissioner of the Navy Gambier could pronounce the fire extinguished. He and his fellow commissioners set to work at once to appraise the damage.<sup>9</sup> Destroyed within the rope house were ten cables spinning for his majesty's ships *Deal Castle* and *Princess Amelia*, twenty tons of hemp, and six tons of cordage, the whole worth £380. This, of course, did not include the value of the building, nor of the tools of the ropemakers and equipment in the rigging section.<sup>10</sup>

Advice had gone to London by express on Saturday evening. By Tuesday several of Sir John Fielding's men from the public office in Bow Street—forerunner of present-day Scotland Yard—were on the scene. They joined the Commissioners of the Navy in a searching investigation. By December 13, the commissioners had reached the conclusion that the fire had been accidental, as had been the case in previous fires in 1760 and 1770.<sup>11</sup> But the Bow Street men were not satisfied, and their inquiries, after weeks of questioning, disclosed that a suspicious character, who went by the name of John the Painter, had been seen lurking in the dockyard the previous October and, again, on the day of the fire.<sup>12</sup>

We left the perpetrator of the Portsmouth fire with Ann Hopkins in a cart bound for Petersfield late that eventful Saturday afternoon. The progress made did not suit him. Mistress Hopkins observed his agitation, but, simple soul, thought nothing of it. Nor was she surprised when, stopping at the village of Cosham to buy a pair of patens, Aitken accompanied her into the shop, and paid half the shilling cost. Beyond Cosham, when he was somewhat rested, he could stand the slow pace no longer. Ann stopped to water her horse, and he jumped out of the cart, with nary a good-bye, and ran off up the London Road.<sup>13</sup> Sentinels were along the way, he knew, but he avoided their occasional boxes. A very great fear was upon him, which kept him pressing through the night at a pace that would have foundered

<sup>9</sup> *Whitehall's Evening Post* (London), Saturday, December 7 to Tuesday, December 10, 1776, No. 4780; and Tuesday, December 10 to Thursday, December 12, 1776, No. 4781.

<sup>10</sup> Indictment of James Aitken. See Howell, *op. cit.*

<sup>11</sup> *Whitehall's Evening Post*, Saturday, December 14 to Tuesday, December 16, 1776, No. 4783.

<sup>12</sup> Lord Sandwich to George III, January 16, 1777. *Correspondence of George the Third*, III. 416-17.

<sup>13</sup> Howell, *op. cit.*

an ordinary man. Once, in passing a lonely house, two dogs barked at him. He fired his pistol and sped on, convinced he had killed one of them.

Between six o'clock Saturday evening, when he forsook the cart, and eleven o'clock Sunday morning, James Aitken alternately walked, trotted and ran a distance of fifty miles. At the latter hour, he arrived exhausted at the town of Kingston, about fifteen miles from London. All that day he lay concealed. Toward dusk, he emerged from hiding, brushed off his surtout, straightened his tangled hair, and resumed some of his lost confidence. Why he had fled toward London, he could not explain to himself, but, as long as he had come that way, he would call upon Dr. Bancroft, who, if Deane was correct, would harbor him willingly until the excitement over the fire subsided. So he boarded the stage at Kingston and rode into London.

Alas for expectations! At No. 4 Downing Street, Westminster, Dr. Edward Bancroft looked coldly upon the shabby individual before him. To Aitken's story that Deane had recommended him, Bancroft answered he had received no word from Deane, and did not care to be further disturbed that night. He did agree to meet the little man at the Salopian Coffee House the following morning. Aitken departed remarking cryptically that the Doctor would "soon see or hear by the Papers of an extraordinary accident."<sup>14</sup>

No doubt Edward Bancroft spent a sleepless night. The visit was most disturbing to this eminent scientist, who was conducting a despicable game of his own, and feared detection. In a nutshell, Bancroft was playing a double game, reporting to the British ministry what he learned from Silas Deane, and to Deane what he learned from the ministry. A James Aitken might well upset the applecart, even though Bancroft then knew naught of the reason for the call. The next day he met Aitken at the coffee house. To the latter, the ensuing conversation was a shock. The doctor opened with a brusque request that he be brief in explaining himself. Aitken began by announcing his intention of doing "all the prejudice he could to this Kingdom." Whereupon the Doctor replied to the effect that "he could not be of opinion with him in that respect for that he got his Bread in this Kingdom & therefore could not be Concerned with him." That stopped Aitken short

<sup>14</sup>*The Life of James Aitken, Commonly Called John the Painter, an Incendiary, Who Was Tried at the Castle of Winchester, On Thursday, the 7th Day of March, 1777 . . . printed by John Wilkes.*



of telling his story. Bewildered and frightened, he implored the other not to inform against him, "to which the Doctor said he did not like to inform against any man." With that Aitken rose, and hastened from the coffee house. Yet, he would not give up hope of Bancroft's help. From Hammersmith that night, he wrote a rather incoherent epistle to the doctor. It stated the latter would shortly be advised from Paris about him, and that, meanwhile, he was going to Bristol, where "you will hear of more of my handy work."<sup>15</sup> With it he sent a letter to Deane, which Bancroft held and delivered in person to the American agent, when in France the following week. Aitken would look in vain for assistance from the crafty gentleman at 4 Downing Street.<sup>16</sup>

Though he had indicated Bristol as his next objective, Aitken took a roundabout, wandering course to that city. His movements were uncertain; upon impulse rather than fixed purpose. All his vicious, vagabondish habits reappeared, and again his way was marked with housebreakings. At High Wycombe, Oxford, Abingdon and Fairford he was more or less successful, securing about fifty shillings and a watch in his Fairford effort. Before Christmas he had reached Bristol, where he pawned the watch, using the name of James Hill, and spurred himself thereafter to more activity. Braziers made him several canisters, and a painter permitted him to grind charcoal for two hours on a color stone.

With no hue and cry raised, and the Portsmouth fire seemingly forgotten, Aitken's courage rose. During the holidays, he decided upon another attempt upon king's property, and chose the dockyard at Plymouth for his exploit. While he had been boastful to Deane of his knowledge of all the dockyards, the truth was he knew only Portsmouth well. His previous Plymouth visit had resulted merely in a cursory inspection. Nor was he filled with his former high spirit of exultation. The Plymouth efforts, twice attempted in early January, 1777, were but half-hearted. The first night, in trying to surmount the wall, he thought he heard voices and desisted. The second night, as he sat atop the wall, he plainly heard the watch, and came to the conclusion his task was hopeless, and the yard too well guarded

<sup>15</sup> Testimony of John Baldwin, *loc. cit.*; and the Depositions of John the Painter, *loc. cit.*

<sup>16</sup> Bancroft to Deane, February 7, 1777; Library of Congress, Stevens' Facsimiles, No. 635.

to permit success. Back toward Bristol he wended his way, with a pause at Taunton for a vain effort to break into a silversmith's shop. His wayward mind had set upon a new plan he was sure would succeed. As the king's dockyards were now too well protected, he would burn the Bristol shipping.<sup>17</sup>

With diabolical intent, but poor execution, the little man started his nefarious work in Bristol on the night of Wednesday, January 15. To keep the water engines occupied within the city—just as he had planned at Portsmouth—he broke into Morgan's warehouse on Cypher Lane and laid a fuse to a box of combustibles in the sail loft. With the fuse ignited, he made his way undetected to the quay and boarded, in turn, the ships *Savannah*, *Fame* and *Hibernia*. In the hold of each he placed and lighted one of his infernal machines. Then instead of fleeing, he remained in hiding in the city to be sure his incendiarism was successful.

Aitken's initial effort proved largely abortive. Two of the machines—in the *Savannah* and *Fame*—ignited the cargoes, but the fires were extinguished Thursday morning with little loss and much excitement. The fact that they had occurred simultaneously on vessels in widely separated berths occasioned a search of other holds, and the canister, with its fuse extinguished for lack of air, was found in the *Hibernia*. Also, Mr. Morgan, on opening his warehouse that morning, could see it had been entered, and discovered the combustibles and paper fuse, which had failed to burn.<sup>18</sup>

While an express sped off to London, Bristol seethed with consternation, and the watch on the quay and ships was doubled. Had he followed the procedure he employed at Plymouth, Aitken would have given up then and there. In Bristol, however, failure made him furious. He abided his time, and on Friday night essayed another effort to burn the shipping. Vigilance was too great, and an attempt to break into a warehouse ended when detection seemed likely. Enraged at these frustrations, he set out to destroy the city. Saturday night he got into two warehouses on Quay Lane, and laid his home-made fuses to piles of gunpowder. As both warehouses were filled with Spanish wool, they were sure to make a capital conflagration. By

<sup>17</sup> The Depositions of John the Painter, *loc. cit.*

<sup>18</sup> *The Public Advertiser*, January 20 & 21, 1777.

dawn of Sunday, he was out of the city, headed northeastward. There were yet no indications of fire, and as the minutes passed, he wondered whether he had failed for the third time. He was retracing his steps when the alarm sounded, and before he resumed his way he noted dense smoke clouds. That night he slept at Sodbury, and in the morning learned that flames had destroyed the warehouses and several homes in Bristol, and had, for a time, threatened the Bell tavern. Altogether, it was a sorry sort of accomplishment.<sup>19</sup>

What motives animated Aitken thereafter are hard to determine. Seemingly, his mind was completely befogged. From Sodbury, he turned southeasterly, in the general direction of Portsmouth. Monday night he found a deserted outhouse along the highway and slept in discomfort. By Wednesday he was near Calne and out of money. That night he broke into a house to replenish his funds. Detected as he left, he fled around the Calne church, dropping a parcel containing a pistol and other articles on the porch, and ran down the road toward Andover.<sup>20</sup>

On the afternoon of January 15—the very day Aitken resumed his incendiarism at Bristol—the canister that had failed him was discovered in the hemp house at Portsmouth. James Russell, clerk of the rope house, was the finder, and Commissioner Gambier sent him off promptly to London with the infernal machine. Lord Sandwich, First Lord of the Admiralty, had just reviewed the most recent Bow Street reports upon the suspicious character seen lurking around Portsmouth prior to the fire, when Russell arrived with his evidence. Thursday, January 16, was a red-letter day in the life of the humble clerk, for upon that memorable occasion he had audience with the king. Lord Sandwich arranged it, satisfied that the tin canister proved the mysterious John the Painter to be a dangerous incendiary at large in the kingdom. George III heard Russell's story, and pondered Sandwich's suggestion that an immediate reward be posted for the apprehension of the suspect.<sup>21</sup> While his majesty considered, another express was on the way from Bristol with word of the attempt to burn the shipping, and of the discovery of a second canister. First news of this

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, January 22, 1777; and the Depositions of John the Painter, *loc. cit.*

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> Lord Sandwich to George III, January 16, 1777, *Correspondence of George the Third*, III. 416-17.

came to Lord Suffolk, a minister of state, who hastened off to see Sandwich.<sup>22</sup>

Lord North's cabinet, in emergency session on January 18, urged upon the king the necessity of exerting major efforts to apprehend the person or persons responsible for both fires. The Admiralty Board redoubled vigilance at every dockyard; the Ordnance Board issued instructions to increase the guards at arsenals and magazines; and Sir John Fielding was desired to put every facility of Bow Street upon the trail of the incendiary.<sup>23</sup> Government was alarmed. Not until January 20 was the first reward published: "His Majesty's most gracious Pardon, and Reward to the Amount of 500 Guineas" for discovering the perpetrators of the Bristol fire.<sup>24</sup> One day later, the Commissioners of the Navy gave the public the first hint of their suspicions against John the Painter—a lengthy notice of their belief that he had fired the rope house, a description of him gleaned at Portsmouth, and a reward of fifty pounds for his capture.<sup>25</sup>

Newspapers published both rewards, and numerous dispatches from London, Bristol and Portsmouth excited public fears. "The City of Bristol seems threatened with Destruction," began one letter describing the second fire.<sup>26</sup> Violent Americans were suspected of incendiarism in revenge for Bristol's recent address of loyalty to the king, according to another.<sup>27</sup> Portsmouth was convinced "that the late dreadful Fires were perpetrated by some diabolical Incendiaries."<sup>28</sup> A fire in a hemp warehouse in Kent Street, London, on January 20, was attributed to these same fiendish enemies. "God knows what would have been the consequences," wrote one paragrapher in congratulating the public upon the failure of the infernal machine in the hemp house at Portsmouth.<sup>29</sup> Amid the welter of fears, one flippant note appeared. A London writer asserted that the good folk of Bristol attributed the late fires to "a Brush from the Tail of some Comet that was observed not long ago by many people at Portsmouth."

On January 20 the cabinet again met in extraordinary session. Some more violent members insisted the act of habeas corpus should be suspended, and the kingdom put under martial law. Wiser heads

<sup>22</sup> Lord Suffolk to George III, January 20, 1777, *Correspondence of George the Third*, III. 417.

<sup>23</sup> *The Public Advertiser*, Thursday, January 23, 1777.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, Monday, January 20, 1777.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, Thursday, January 23, 1777.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, Wednesday, January 22, 1777.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, Saturday, January 25, 1777.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, Saturday, January 18, 1777.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, Wednesday, January 22, 1777.

prevailed, and postponement of drastic action was agreed upon pending further acts "of these desperate Incendiaries."<sup>30</sup> Five days later, the Board of Admiralty jumped the reward for the discovery of the perpetrators of the rope-house fire to £1,000.<sup>31</sup>

False reports of the apprehension of John the Painter began to circulate. One such, on January 29, announced that he had been caught on the Isle of Wight and sent under guard for London.<sup>32</sup> Actually, the first definite clew of the fugitive's whereabouts came to Bow Street on Saturday, February 1. A magistrate from Calne deposited with Fielding the parcel Aitken had dropped on the church porch.<sup>33</sup> But it was not Bow Street which finally made the capture. The honor fell to John Dalby, keeper of Andover Bridewell, in Hampshire, and he was successful only because of Aitken's own stupidity. Dalby, looking for the person who had committed the Calne robbery, happened upon Aitken in an Andover lane at night, and stopped him for questioning. To the keeper's inquiry came an astounding reply. "Are you a king's messenger?" Aitken asked.<sup>34</sup> That was enough for Mr. Dalby. Apparently this man was wanted for some state crime, so he took him into custody. A search of his person revealed a screw-barrel pistol, primed and loaded with shot, a pistol tinderbox, a small horn of powder, a bundle of matches, a bottle of turpentine, and a snuffbox of tinder. Dalby, already spending mentally the vast reward he had read of, wrote at once to London. John the Painter had been taken!<sup>35</sup>

Under heavy guard, James Aitken was brought up to London and confined in the new prison at Clerkenwell. But all the eighteenth-century "third degree" efforts of Fielding and the Bow Street staff failed to gain an admission that he had visited either Portsmouth or Bristol. He was a painter, he said. He had been in America, and since his return, being hard-pressed for money, had committed the Calne robbery. They could have hanged him for that, but government, satisfied he was the odious John the Painter, was resolved to send him to the gallows for his acts of treason against the realm.<sup>36</sup>

Richard Greenville, Lord Temple, who from a Whig had in his

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, Thursday, January 23, 1777.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, Saturday, January 25, 1777.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, Wednesday, January 29, 1777.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, Monday, February 3, 1777.

<sup>34</sup> Bancroft to Deane, February 7, 1777, Library of Congress, Stevens' Facsimiles, No. 635.

<sup>35</sup> Testimony of John Dalby, Howell, *op. cit.* XX.

<sup>36</sup> *The Public Advertiser*, Monday, February 10, 1777; also, Bancroft to Deane, February 13, 1777, Stevens' Facsimiles, No. 640.

later years become an ardent Tory, provided the means for government to prove what was suspected.<sup>37</sup> Among Lord Temple's pensioners was a one-time Philadelphia painter, John Baldwin by name. Perhaps Baldwin might recognize in this other painter an acquaintance of former days in America. They brought them together in Fielding's office, on February 7, but neither had ever laid eyes on the other. Baldwin said so quite emphatically, and was excused to an anteroom. While he waited, Aitken was brought to the same room. He greeted Baldwin with the remark that he appeared to be a gentleman and not like others who had sworn falsely, and continued the conversation by asking whether he had known any printers in America. To this the latter replied that he had known several, particularly David Hall in Philadelphia. Then Aitken asked if he would come to see him in prison, and Baldwin agreed to do so, provided he could get admittance.

James Aitken had sealed his own fate. That very human desire for a confidant, accentuated by his delusions of importance, led him to encourage a man who had no greater desire than to betray him. Baldwin called that afternoon, and, as they paced the courtyard, so enchanted Aitken that the latter, certain his visitor was an American in principle as well as by birth, urged him to return next day. Lord Temple, Lord George Germain and Baldwin laid their heads together that night, and as a result, the ex-Philadelphia painter became a daily caller at the prison. Gradually Aitken's reticence was broken down. First came hints; then comments upon the activities of his friend Silas Deane; and finally, on February 15, the beginning of the whole story with all its details.<sup>38</sup> Baldwin's daily reports sent Bow Street into renewed activity. The bundle left at Portsmouth was recovered from the unsuspecting Mrs. Cole, and with it the French passport. Other agents began to round up witnesses, from the apprentice at Canterbury who soldered the first canister, to the painter at Bristol who loaned Aitken his color stone. Meanwhile, Baldwin, daily learning new items from the unsuspecting prisoner, continued his calls.<sup>39</sup>

The estimable Dr. Bancroft knew every move being made. He had

<sup>37</sup> Bancroft to Deane, February 21, 1777, the "Deane Papers," I. 494-96, *The Collections of the New York Historical Society* (1886).

<sup>38</sup> Testimony of John Baldwin, *loc. cit.*

<sup>39</sup> *Trial of James Hill, Commonly Called John the Painter . . .*, 14.

the opportunity, if not the inclination, to warn the little man of his peril. Instead, upon his one visit to Clerkenwell, he told Aitken merely that he would serve him if he could. To Deane, Bancroft wrote frequent letters, describing the progress of Baldwin's insidious efforts, and reported, on February 26, that John the Painter had divulged "that he did fire the Rope Yard at Portsmouth, &c. *at your instigation.*"<sup>40</sup>

Baldwin's visits to Aitken ended on February 24, and on that day Sir John Fielding put his prisoner through a final examination. "Many Circumstances came out," stated a London newspaper, "that seem to leave scarce a Doubt of his being the Incendiary at Bristol and Portsmouth; he is to be sent to Winchester to take his Trial at the ensuing Assizes."<sup>41</sup> On the following morning, the little Scotsman departed for the last time from London. Peace officers had him in custody, and were none too gentle.<sup>42</sup> Despite brutal treatment, he retained his equanimity for most of the journey. Only once did it desert him. As they neared their destination, he began to tremble. Perspiration ran down his forehead to mat further his tangled locks, and he seemed stupefied. The spell lasted but a few minutes, and, when he was ushered into a gloomy dungeon in the old county gaol at Winchester, he had recovered his intrepidity.<sup>43</sup> For one week they kept him there, heavily ironed and with a constant guard. Daily he was exercised in the courtyard. Curious spectators surrounded him to be greeted by a cheerful countenance, and facetious replies to every question. James Aitken was having his moment of exciting notoriety!<sup>44</sup>

Government business was neglected to further the conviction of John the Painter. The Admiralty Board adjourned for a week to enable its First Lord to attend the trial.<sup>45</sup> Commissioner Gambier came up from Portsmouth; Sir John Fielding and other celebrities from London.<sup>46</sup> When Aitken was ushered into the courtroom of the castle, on March 6, it was to face be-robed luminaries of the English bar, and see a vast concourse of unfriendly faces.

<sup>40</sup> Bancroft to Deane, February 7, 14, 28, 1777, Stevens' Facsimiles, Nos. 635, 640, 646; "The Deane Papers," I. 494-96, II. 3-6.

<sup>41</sup> *The Public Advertiser*, Tuesday, February 25, 1777.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, Tuesday, March 4, 1777.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, Saturday, March 8, 1777.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, Tuesday, March 4, 1777.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, Thursday, March 6, 1777.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, Monday, March 3, 1777.

Tried only on the charge of burning the rope house, the proceedings lasted seven hours. Through it, Aitken conducted himself in a manner that drew admiration from his enemies. Witness after witness took the stand with damning evidence—Mrs. Boxell, righteously indignant over the attempt to burn her house; the two dragoons encountered at Canterbury; Ann Hopkins, whose cart had aided him away from Portsmouth; and many others. Acting as his own counsel, he asked few questions, and those merely to try to shake a witness's identification of himself. He showed, a newspaper reported, "some signs of a clear head, but more of a fixed enthusiasm, begot by ignorance and false zeal." When, as principal witness for the state, Baldwin took the stand, Aitken greeted him with sarcasm. In his own defence, the little man bore down on only one point—the credibility of Baldwin, who having the art to deceive him in prison might well be deceiving the court now. But corroborating evidence was too strong. The jury reached a verdict of guilty without leaving the box, and Baron Hotham, one of the trial judges, imposed sentence "in the most solemn manner." Any doubt as to Aitken's insanity was dispelled at his reception of his doom.

"Oh joyful sentence!" he exclaimed. "I am totally indifferent regarding my fate. I am willing to live or die as the laws and justice require."<sup>47</sup>

That night, yielding to a great yearning for added notoriety, Aitken confessed. He recounted his crimes—with minute details of many, and with all the criminal's relish in reveling in his sins.<sup>48</sup> Nor was that sufficient. Three days later, he wrote a supplemental confession, "for the satisfaction of the world."<sup>49</sup>

On Monday, March 10, lashed in a cart and guarded by an undersheriff and many deputies, Aitken began his last journey. They took him to Portsmouth. The route there lay through the rope house ruins, "that he might himself be a witness to the devastation he had occasioned"—a tribute to his prowess that must have given him a taste of the immortality he craved! From thence, with all Portsmouth in attendance, the cart rumbled to the dock gates. In the late afternoon, in the shadow of a gibbet sixty-five feet high, he delivered a

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, Saturday, March 8, 1777; and *The Trial of James Hill, Commonly Called John the Painter*, 30.

<sup>48</sup> *The Depositions of John the Painter*, *loc. cit.*

<sup>49</sup> *The Public Advertiser*, Tuesday, March 18, 1777.



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6 L-A<sup>th</sup>  
7 Director Gen<sup>l</sup>  
8. Military Secy of G<sup>o</sup> B. H. n

N<sup>o</sup> 9 Silas L. - m  
10 Gen<sup>l</sup> W. - h. - t. n  
11 the Ghost of O'Connell  
12 L. of John's hunter



ORIGINAL AIR BALLOON

It is not much but it is  
by P. M. M. M. M. M.

A UNIQUE PRINT REPRODUCED WITH THE KIND PERMISSION OF ITS OWNER, MR. WILLIAM GERHARD. THE UNNUMBERED FIGURE TO THE RIGHT OF THE BALLOON, HOLDING THE GIBBET, REPRESENTS JOHN THE PAINTER



long harangue. What he said was never recorded, for no one in the great multitude had eyes or ears for aught save the morbid finale. As dusk drew on apace, they swung James Aitken to eternity. By dawn, the corpse, still in its chocolate colored surtout, was hanging in chains from another gibbet near the harbor entrance—a gruesome warning to all traitors, and a mute notice to Silas Deane, that, fortunes of war permitting, he, too, might share a companion gibbet with John the Painter on the beach at Portsmouth town.<sup>50</sup>

*Chicago*

WILLIAM BELL CLARK

<sup>50</sup> Lord Sandwich to George III, *The Correspondence of George the Third*, III. 423; also Towne's *Pennsylvania Evening Post*, June 3, 1777; and Deane to Vergennes, March 22, 1777, Lee Papers, Harvard University.