

## **A Boston Tea Party**

by Carolyn Sherwin Bailey

“Is it, think you, because her father is the President of the Continental Congress that Susan Boudinot behaves so?” Abigail whispered the question across the aisle of the Dame’s school in old Boston to one of the other little old-time lassies.

“Perhaps that is it. Look at her now. She minds it not in the least that she must sit in the dunce’s corner. She is smiling with those red lips and big blue eyes of hers as though she were not in disgrace,” the other little girl whispered back.

From other corners of the schoolroom came whispered comments about the wilful little Susan.

“What did Susan do that she was put in the dunce’s corner?”

“Indeed she did a great deal to try the good Dame’s patience. She tied the braids of Mercy Wentworth and Prudence Talbot together so tightly that when the Dame called upon Mercy to bring her copy book to her to show its pothooks, Prudence was well nigh dragged too. As if this were not enough, Susan put sand in the ink and made it so thick as to spoil the good Dame’s copperplate writing.”

The school was hushed, though, as the Dame who taught it entered and took her seat behind the desk, a quaint figure in her black gown, white apron, great spectacles and smoothly-parted back hair. All the children of these old Colony days, seated in front of her on the hard benches, bent their heads low again over their spellers or slates. Their hair was smoothly cropped or tightly braided. Only the wayward little girl, perched high upon the dunce’s stool, wore her hair in a mass of tangled curls. They gleamed like gold in the sunshine that filtered in through the window. Susan’s hair was like her own wilful little self, impatient of bounds and training.

As the Dame had returned to the room Susan’s lips had drooped a little and lost their smile. She cast her eyes toward the toes of her buckled shoes just above which ruffled the dainty white frills of her pantalettes. She crossed her hands demurely in the lap of her short-waisted, rose-sprigged gown. Presently, though, Susan looked up and glanced out of the school window. There was the green Boston Common, and the white meeting-house, and the brick mansions with their wide white doorways and brass knockers. Susan could see in fancy as far as the sea front, where she knew there were British ships at anchor with the fishing smacks and the merchant vessels of the Colonies.

These were troubled times, as Susan well knew, for the settlers in the new land. She heard her father speak of the growing discontent of the Colonies against the stern rule of the English King, and their disinclination to pay taxes on goods when they were allowed no representation in Parliament.

Only that morning, as Susan had pouted and frowned when her mother tried to comb out her twisting, tangling curls, there had been the sound of loud voices in the next room where her father received his business callers. Susan’s sweet-faced mother had sighed.

“Ah, Susan dear, why do you add to our troubles by being such a wilful little lass. Hear you not the voices in the other room? It is the King’s collector, and your father is trying to explain to him that the Congress feels it especially unjust to be obliged to pay a tax on tea—that pleasant beverage that is

so much drunk at the Boston parties. I know not how it will all come out, and my heart is aching for the trouble that I feel will come. Be good, dear child. This will help us as you can in no other way.”

Susan had thrown her arms about her mother’s neck in a burst of love.

“I will be good, dear mother. I will be good,” she had exclaimed, for at heart there was no kinder child in all Boston than little Mistress Susan Boudinot. The scene came back to her now and she turned toward her teacher, the Dame, reaching out her slim little arms imploringly. What right had she, a little girl, to be naughty when her country was in such dire peril, she thought?

“I will be good,” she said in a burst of penitent tears as the Dame motioned kindly to her to leave the dunce’s corner. “I do not know why I was moved to tie Mercy and Prudence together by their hair except it was what the elder speaks of in meeting as the old Adam coming out of one. And I am sorry indeed about the ink.”

“That will do,” the Dame said, trying not to smile. “Take your seat, Susan, and write at least ten times, ‘Be ye kind to one another,’ in your copy book, and remember to keep it treasured in your mind as well as on the white pages.”

Susan slipped gladly into her place beside Abigail and was soon scratching away with her quill pen as industriously as any of the others.

School was not out until late in the afternoon, and Susan, surrounded by Abigail and Mercy and Prudence and many of the other little Colonial maidens, took their merry way through the narrow, brick-paved streets of old Boston. In their flowered poke bonnets, round silk capes, and full skirts they looked like a host of blossoms of as many different colors—lavender, green, pink, and blue. At the gate of one of the old mansions not far from the Common, Susan, her curls flying and her cheeks rosy from the warm sea air, waved her hand in good-bye.

“I would invite you all to come in for a game of battledore and shuttlecock in the garden, but my mother was not feeling well when I left her this morning and I see her beckoning to me from her window.” She darted through the door and up the wide staircase. She found her mother almost in tears.

“There is to be a party at the Royal Governor’s house,” Madam Boudinot exclaimed, “this very afternoon, and there will be no one to represent your father’s family, for I feel far too ill to put on my best dress and go. Many prominent people will be there representing the Colonists and the King. Oh, what shall I do!”

Susan considered a moment, at the same time capably fetching the lavender salts for her mother, and putting cloths wet with toilet water on her aching head. Then she had an idea, for there was much wisdom packed away in the curl-crowned head of nine-year-old Mistress Susan.

“Do you set your mind and heart at rest, dearest mother,” she said. “I will do my hair up so.” Standing in front of an oval, gilt-framed mirror, Susan caught a few of her curls at the back. She pulled them up to the top of her head, and fastened them there with a band of velvet, while the rest hung in a golden shower over her shell pink ears.

“There,” Susan exclaimed. “I look as old as a miss of fourteen and I can be quite as dignified. I will put on my best silk dress, and my silk hose, and my Sunday shoes with the silver buckles.” As she

spoke, Susan pulled out boxes and opened a chest and drawers. Then she stood in front of her mother, her arms loaded with finery. She made a quaint little curtsy.

“The family of the President of the Continental Congress will be represented at the Royal Governor’s party,” she said. “Mistress Susan Boudinot will take the place of Madam Boudinot.”

A space of a half-hour later a dignified little lady stepped out of the door of the Boudinot mansion and into a waiting chaise. Susan held her head very high. Was not her hair done up for the first time, and its mass of ringlets pinned with one of her mother’s tortoise-shell combs? Her buff brocade dress was made with a lace underbody. A polonaise and deep frills of lace edged the elbow-length, close-fitting sleeves and fell as far as the small white hands. A blue locket on a strip of narrow black velvet ribbon was hung about the little girl’s throat, and over it all was thrown a ruffled cape of her mother’s lined with fur. As the chaise rattled away toward the Governor’s mansion her mother’s parting words to her repeated themselves over and over again in Susan’s mind.

“Be a good child, Susan, and do not forget for a moment that you are representing your father and, through him, the Congress.”

It was a gay scene in which little Mistress Susan soon found herself. The Governor’s parlor was very beautiful with its high-backed mahogany chairs and great bowls of roses. A huge sideboard was loaded with cakes and sweets, and the great round table covered with a lace cloth was set with priceless blue and white china. There was a crowd of people, Whig and Tory. Lovely young ladies of the Colonies in powdered hair and stiff silks, and young men, their hair worn in powdered queues, mingled gaily. After paying her respects to the wife of the Governor, Susan found a corner where she could sit quietly and watch the party. She was not unseen, though. Many eyes had noted the dainty charm of the little maid and the sweetness of her tone as she had said, gracefully, to her hostess:

“My mother, Madame Boudinot, sends her respects to the Governor’s wife and regrets that she can not bring them in person. I am the daughter of Madame Boudinot and my father is the President of the Continental Congress.”

“And a polite little girl, indeed,” the hostess had replied, smiling, as she turned and presented the little girl to her husband, the Royal Governor, and representative of the King.

Many eyes, both Whig and Tory, had been cast at the corner where little Mistress Susan sat demurely.

“The new land has winsome daughters,” said an Englishman.

“And plucky ones,” retorted an American.

But Susan’s eyes were fixed on the goodies that were being brought in now by the servants; great silver trays loaded with confections of all kinds. The blue plates were passed to the guests. Soft glowing candles sent their glimmering light over the tall crystal goblets and bowls of fruits. Then Susan saw a silver urn brought in and set upon the table in front of the Governor’s wife, who poured the fragrant tea into the blue cups.

“Here is your cup of tea, little Mistress Susan,” she said.

Susan took the blue cup in her hand; but, suddenly, its very touch changed her from the prim little maid she had been before to a small creature of rebellion. The amber, steaming tea in the blue cup was, to Susan, one of the marks of her country's lack of independence. Must the Colonies pay a tax on tea to the King across the ocean, and still be allowed no representation in Parliament? How, Susan wondered, could those other girls of the Colonies, years older than she, sit there so placidly sipping their tea and seeming to enjoy it so much? Suddenly she recalled her mother's words:

"Do not forget for a moment that you are representing your father, and through him, the Congress."

Susan had made up her mind what she would do. Her girlish spirit of rebellion that sometimes led her to play such pranks as she had that day in school suddenly turned to the will power that made the Colonists win their fight for freedom in the American Revolution. Susan rose, cup in hand, and took her way across the room, the rustling of her silk skirts calling the attention of the tea drinkers to her. At an open window she stopped and deliberately tipped her cup, throwing the tea, untasted, on the grass outside. Then she set the empty cup down upon the table.

At first there was a hush. Then the gentlemen laughed to see the little girl, flushed now with confusion, seated on the edge of a high chair and tapping upon the floor with one high-heeled slipper.

"The spirit of the Colonies," said the Royal Governor smiling. "I foresee that we shall have to tame it."

But in spite of his mocking words Susan saw that more than one of the guests who claimed the cause of the Colonies their own set down their tea and drank no more of it. The first laughter died away. There was a thoughtful quiet during the remainder of the party.

Years and years ago it was, but the brave rebellion of little Mistress Susan has come down to the children of to-day in story as one of the helps in the winning for America of her independence.

Source:

Bailey, Carolyn Sherwin. "A Boston Tea Party." *Boys and Girls of Colonial Days*. Chicago: A. Flanagan Company, 1925. Electronic.