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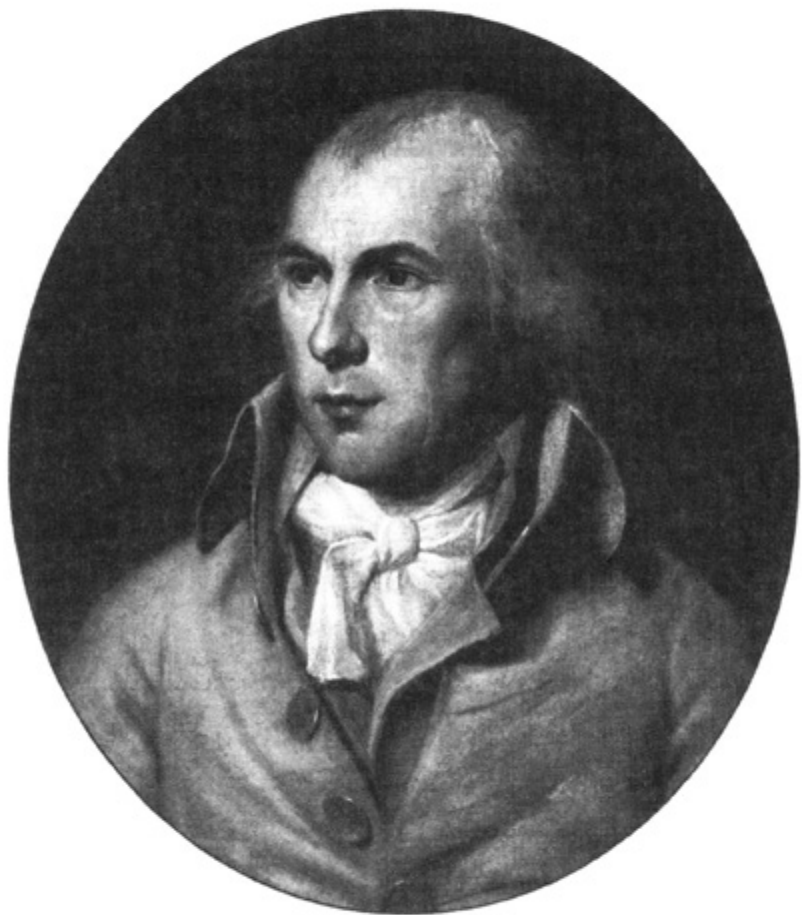
THE GREAT LITTLE
MADISON



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AROUND THE WORLD IN A HUNDRED YEARS:

**FROM HENRY THE NAVIGATOR TO MAGELLAN
BULLY FOR YOU, TEDDY ROOSEVELT!
HARRIET BEECHER STOWE AND THE
BEECHER PREACHERS
MAKE WAY FOR SAM HOUSTON
STONEWALL
TRAITOR: THE CASE OF BENEDICT ARNOLD**





THE GREAT LITTLE
MADISON

Jean Fritz

illustrated with prints and engravings



The Putnam and Grosset Group

With gratitude for the careful
reading that Dr. Ralph Ketcham
gave the manuscript.

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To Gina Maccoby



One

James Madison was a small, pale, sickly boy with a weak voice. If he tried to shout, the shout shriveled up in his throat, but of course he was still young. His voice might grow as he did. Or he might never need a big voice.

So far he got along fine on his father's Virginia plantation where nothing much changed but the weather and the seasons and the coming of babies. There would be twelve babies in the Madison family before they quit coming. (Five died young.) James, or Jemmy, as his father called him, was the oldest and if he was like his father and his grandfather before him, he'd spend his life on this land, bounded in the west by the lovely blue line of mountains that seemed to mark the end of the world. In 1760 when nine-year-old James helped his father move the furniture from their old house to the new

brick one that looked square at the mountains, James understood that this house and the 5000 acres that went with it would one day belong to him. James loved this place. Particularly the trees. The grove of walnuts where he played with his brothers and sisters and the black children who belonged to the plantation. The two tulip trees that were so much alike, they were called "The Twins." And his favorite—the redbuds that turned themselves into pink froth every spring-time.

Still, he knew there was more to the world than his father's 5000 acres, more than was contained in his own Orange County or in Virginia itself. At nine he was reading, and although he had always asked questions of his own (Where do the redbirds fly in winter?), he was discovering in his father's library questions he would never have thought of asking. His father had eighty-five books and by the time he was eleven, James had read them all. They had titles like *The Duty of Man*, *The Employment of the Microscope*. There was one on cold bathing; one on children's diseases. He may have been especially interested in the diseases for he was sick a great deal. All his life he suffered from fever, bilious attacks (liver upsets), and from occasional seizures in which for a few moments he would stiffen and lose control of his mind. A doctor diagnosed this as a form of epilepsy caused by nerves, but James simply called it a "falling sickness." In any case, sickness didn't often keep him from reading. Nothing ever would.

But here he was, eleven years old and there was not another book in the house to read. So Mr. Madison sent him off to a school in a neighboring county where he had all the books he wanted. He learned French so he could read books that were written in French and he learned Latin and Greek so he could find out what men thought hundreds of years



Madison's "universe"

ago. He studied geometry and algebra and the history of other nations, and to show just how much bigger his notion of the world had become, he drew a picture of the universe in his copybook. All the planets were there and the sun, a big round circle in the center. Then in order to give his universe a more friendly look, he gave the sun a face—eyes, nose, and a mouth that was almost ready to smile. Best of all, however, was his teacher, Mr. Robertson, who raised all kinds of questions (Were there people on those planets?) and made his pupils use logic and reason when they spoke. He couldn't make James speak any louder, but he did make sure that when he did speak, he had something to say.

James stayed at Mr. Robertson's school until he was sixteen and would like to have stayed longer, but his father called him home. A new minister (Mr. Martin) was living

with them now, and he could teach James along with the oldest of his brothers and sisters. At the same time he would prepare James to enter college. The College of New Jersey (Princeton) was the place Mr. Madison and Mr. Martin picked. Most young men in Virginia attended the nearby College of William and Mary, but that wouldn't do for James. Too much drinking and partying at that school. Besides, the climate was not healthy.

In the summer of 1769 when James was eighteen years old, he set out on horseback for New Jersey, accompanied by Mr. Martin. He didn't look old enough to be going to college, although actually he was older than most. His face still had that young, unset, waiting look. And he was little. At five feet six, he was not excessively short, but because he was thin with a slight build and narrow shoulders, people were forever remarking on his littleness. His voice was still little too. Moreover, he was shy. Only when he knew a person well did he speak of what was going on inside him.

He did know Mr. Martin, so he would not have been afraid to show his excitement, particularly when they reached Philadelphia. He had known, of course, that Philadelphia was the biggest city in the country, but how could he have guessed that the bigness, the busyness, the importance of the city would give it such a throb of life? This was obviously where things were happening; this is where life was running at full tilt.

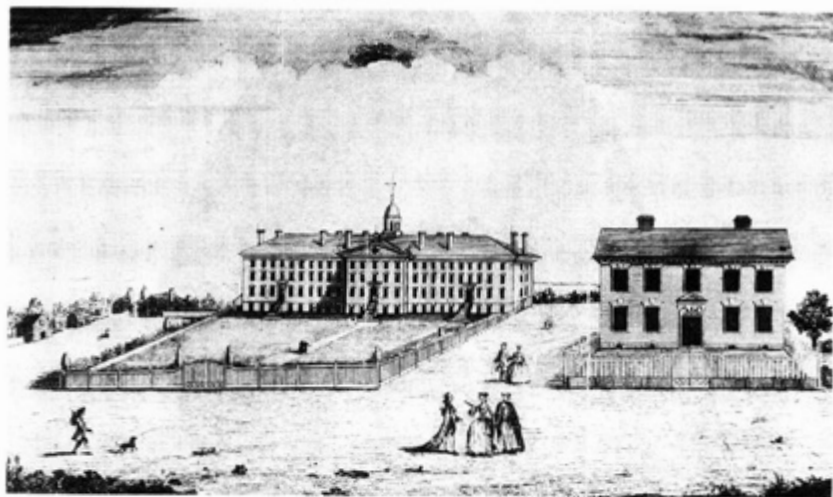
In its own way the college at Princeton was also exciting. People were asking questions that struck at the very core of life. What is government? What is man? Because James was ahead of the freshman class in his studies, he entered as a sophomore and perhaps this was the happiest year of his college life. He made close friends, devoured books as if he couldn't get enough of them, and joined in student fun—



Young Madison

putting greasy feathers on the floor where fellow students would slip on them, setting off firecrackers in newcomers' rooms, and eyeing girls through telescopes.

And for the first time James felt caught up in affairs that were affecting the whole country. Over the last five years he had been concerned, as everyone was, about Great Britain's aggravating policy of slapping down taxes on the colonies. But at Princeton he felt that he was reacting as part of an aroused body, as if he and his friends were the colonies. They approved of the fact that American merchants in protest over taxation had stopped buying goods from England, but in 1770 when the merchants of New York wrote to the merchants of Pennsylvania, suggesting that they break this



College at Princeton

agreement, the students were enraged. James Madison was one of many who marched onto the campus, cheering as a copy of that New York letter was thrown into a bonfire. The college bells tolled throughout the demonstration as if they were grieving for the liberty of the country. Flushed with patriotism, James cheered as loud as he could. His cheer may not have amounted to much, but his whole heart was in it.

James loved his Princeton years, so it is surprising that he wanted to finish them so quickly. He and a friend, Joe Ross, applied for and received permission to take their last two years in one year. What was the hurry? Perhaps James was trying to cut down expenses for his father. Perhaps he was worrying about his future. After all, he was at college to prepare himself for something, but what? He could not bear the idea of simply settling down on his father's plantation, which managed quite well without him. He wished he could find a life for himself that had nothing to do with slaves. He hated slavery, but the South was so deep into it, he didn't see

how it could get out. The only way he could escape was to find a career of his own. He listened to his friends talk of their plans for the future. Most were choosing to be preachers or lawyers, but how could James be either? With his weak voice, how could he stand up in a pulpit and deliver a thundering sermon about the will of God? How could he speak out in a courtroom and convince a jury that he was right? (Besides, he didn't want to.) Perhaps he worked so hard because he needed to prove himself. Or forget himself. Perhaps without realizing it, he was simply trying to overcome his littleness.

It was a terrible schedule that he and Joe Ross set themselves. For the most part James tried to get by with no more than five hours of sleep a night. He must have felt his body breaking under the strain but he didn't give up. He finished his work in time to get his degree but he wasn't at the graduation ceremony with his ten classmates. One of his classmates, Aaron Burr, received a prize for spelling; all in his class gave speeches, but James was too sick to attend. Still, sick or well, would James have tried to deliver a speech in that little voice of his?

He was so sick, he couldn't make the trip home when college was over so he stayed on, studying Hebrew and theology under the guidance of the college president. Perhaps his father suspected that James was simply delaying his homecoming; in any case, in April, 1772, he sent for him. Come home and teach the younger children, he wrote.

James went. It was a hard, tiring, week-long ride from Philadelphia, and when he finally arrived home, he must have been suddenly overwhelmed by what lay ahead. It was as if he'd been trapped into the slow motion of the seasons. Almost as if he'd never gone to college, never been excited by books. As everyone could see, James was not suffering

from his usual sickness; he was going through a physical and emotional breakdown. Not even the flowering redbud trees could raise his spirits. He taught the children, but that only took a few hours a day, and he read. But to what purpose? He tried studying law but found it, like everything else, boring. And then one day a letter came from a college friend with the news that Joe Ross had died.

Now he had grief to add to his depression and he must have asked himself if Joe had been suffering in the way he had. Perhaps this was the inevitable result of two years of grinding overwork. In any case, James became obsessed with the idea that he, too, would die young.

James's father sent him to Warm Springs, a health resort whose mineral waters were supposed to cure all kinds of illness. James drank gallons of water, but still he came home, no better. His doctor advised more exercise. Go out and ride horseback, he said, and actually this did seem to help. In the end, however, it was not anything that happened on the plantation but what was happening in the country itself that brought James back to life.

"I do not meddle in Politicks," he wrote once to a college friend, but when at Christmas, 1773, this friend wrote him about Boston's dumping British tea into Boston harbor rather than paying tax on it, he was as excited as if he'd done the dumping himself. The following year he was strong enough to take his brother William to Princeton, where he was entering school. Of course, he had to go through Philadelphia, and his pulse quickened as it always did in the center of so much life. This time the city was at a pitch of excitement for the Continental Congress was meeting here with delegates from all thirteen colonies, waving questions like flags, challenging the future. How much longer would America put up

with Great Britain? Should the country be preparing for war? James Madison came away moved by the *oneness* of America. Separate colonies they might be, but here they were, acting in union, striving for the right to govern themselves. *Our* right, he would have said, for James counted himself in the struggle.

At about this same time (September 1774) James bought two hundred acres of his father's farm for himself. He needed to own land in his own right if he wanted to vote or hold office. In December he and his father were both elected to the Orange County Committee of Safety, whose job was to see that the county was prepared to fight and to make sure that everyone in the county was loyal to America. Anyone who still stuck up for England was called a Tory and would be punished.



Philadelphia

James entered enthusiastically into the work of the committee. He knew he could never be a regular soldier because of his "falling sickness," but he did become a member of the local militia. He was commissioned a colonel, and although on his first day of drill he fainted on the parade ground, this did not discourage him. In letters to his friends he was soon bragging about his marksmanship. If he had to, he said, he could hit a man full in the face at the distance of one hundred yards. As for Tories or suspected Tories, no penalty was too severe for them. One man who showed disrespect for a committee member was tarred and feathered, and according to James, this was no more than he deserved. If other states didn't know what to do with their traitors, he said, just send them down to Orange County. His committee would take care of them.

Shooting and tar and feathering may have given James an outlet for his passion for independence, but of course what James was best at (and had always been best at) was reasoning. In May 1776, when it was becoming clear that King George III was not going to back down, James Madison was elected to represent Orange County at a state convention in Williamsburg. On May 15 the convention voted unanimously (James along with everyone else) to instruct the Virginia delegates at the Continental Congress in Philadelphia to propose a Declaration of Independence. Six weeks later independence was declared. James Madison was only twenty-five years old and he might have thought that at last he had found his career, but he probably gave his own future little thought. It was only the country that concerned him. America had a chance now to become an independent nation, and it had better turn out to be a good one.

Two

Americans had actually been at war a little more than a year when the Declaration of Independence was signed. The questions now were: Could they win the war? And how were they to govern themselves in the meantime? In Williamsburg the Virginia Convention set to work to draw up a state constitution. James Madison was put on a committee to consider exactly what rights every citizen in Virginia had that could not be taken away by the government or anyone else. Inalienable rights, they were called. At informal gatherings outside the convention, James made friends and felt free to say what he pleased. But never once in the convention itself did he speak out. Still, one of his new friends, Edmund Randolph, reported that James was fantastic at whispering. Indeed, Edmund tried to sit next to him

at meetings because James always had interesting comments to whisper in his ear.

James was not only quiet but apparently tried to be inconspicuous as well. He often wore black with buckles at the knees of his breeches and black silk stockings. (Later he would wear nothing but black.) Following the fashion of his time, he powdered his hair (dark brown under the powder) and wore it pulled back and tied behind. On his head he wore a black hat with a cone-shaped crown that was high but didn't seem to make him look taller. One delegate wrote: "Madison was probably the only small man at the convention."

And of course he was conscious of his small voice. Even if he dared speak out, how would his voice carry before so many men? Just looking at the famous orator Patrick Henry must have made him uneasy. All Mr. Henry had to do was



Patrick Henry

open his mouth and that mighty voice of his would fill the room and set it quivering. When he wasn't talking, Mr. Henry looked down his long nose at the other delegates as if they were common dirt. Even so, sometimes it was hard for James to keep quiet. He had strong ideas about the questions they were discussing. Religion, in particular.

Nothing made James angrier than to see men punished for their religious views. And they often were. Baptists and Presbyterians were the ones most frequently picked on because they were not members of the church of England or established church. Only recently five or six people in his own part of Virginia had been thrown in jail because of religious opinions that they had expressed. Furious, James wrote to a college friend: "I have squabbled and scolded abused and ridiculed so long about it . . . I am without common patience." He would never have patience when it came to religious freedom, which was certainly one of the inalienable rights. He was against anyone "making laws for the human mind," and again and again throughout his life he would fight to see that the state had no hold over a person's religious beliefs or expression.

Now at the Virginia convention James found himself objecting to the way the resolution on religion was worded. It stated that all men should enjoy the fullest toleration in the exercise of religion. Toleration! That wasn't enough for James. He couldn't abide such weak wording, so he wrote out his proposed version. "All men are equally entitled to enjoy the free *exercise* of religion." His revision was approved.

When James went home in December after the session in Williamsburg had adjourned, he had made up his mind that in the spring he would run for election to the Virginia House of Delegates, the new legislative body of the colony. Of

course where he'd really like to be was in Philadelphia where the Continental Congress was working out problems for the whole country. From what he had heard, he thought they could use some help. James read every newspaper he could lay his hands on. He rejoiced over General Washington's victory at Trenton and again at Princeton. He helped his father round up supplies for the army. And he read. He wanted to understand how governments worked, how some had fallen in the past, some succeeded. The whole question, he decided, turned on where the power lay. In Virginia, he suspected, the people had already made mistakes in their new constitution. So afraid of tyranny, they had given the governor too little power and the House of Delegates too much. In any case, he would soon have the chance to study all this at first hand. He more or less took for granted that he would win the election. After all, he was well known in the county and people seemed to be impressed by his book learning. Besides, how could he stand on the sidelines of America? He had to win.

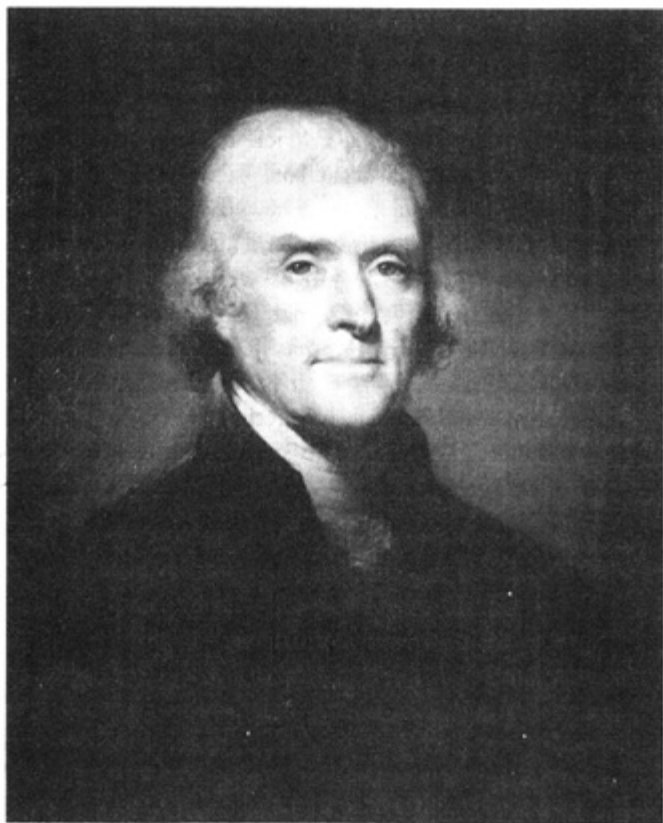
But he didn't. His opponent, an older man, followed the old Virginia custom of setting out a barrel of whisky in front of the courthouse and treating the voters as they came to the polls. James thought this was old-fashioned nonsense. He expected people to vote with their heads, with or without whisky, so he provided no drinks on election day. Perhaps the voters had originally intended to vote for James Madison, but if so, they changed their minds. He was either stingy or proud, they decided, and he ought to take up preaching instead of politics.

James brooded, but not for long. In the fall the House of Delegates voted for James to fill a vacancy in the eight-man Council of State (which, with the governor, made up the executive branch of the government). James served for two

years, and as people came to know him, they discovered his talents. In behind-the-scenes political discussions James was strong and persuasive and, as Patrick Henry, who was governor, soon found out, James wrote easily and clearly. Patrick Henry might be able to send his voice to the rafters, but he disliked descending to a desk and dealing with pen and paper. So he gave James the job of writing up state papers. But the most important thing that happened to James was that he made friends with Thomas Jefferson.

The two men had known each other for some time, but they were thrown more closely together when in June 1779 Jefferson was elected governor to succeed Patrick Henry. As a member of the governor's council, Madison discovered not only how well he and Jefferson worked together but how much they had in common. Tall, red-headed, thirty-six-year-old Jefferson and small, twenty-eight-year-old Madison shared the same vision of a strong, united republican government. They both liked the same things: reading and collecting books, planting trees, experimenting with science, talking about history. And they agreed on what they didn't like: Great Britain, slavery, the lopsided Virginia constitution, and Patrick Henry. Neither man could stand Patrick Henry. "What shall we do with him?" James asked once when Patrick was being obstructive in his usual eloquent way. "What we have to do, I think," Jefferson replied, "is devoutly pray for his death."

It was a lifelong friendship that Madison and Jefferson established, although they would often have to depend on letters for news of each other. In December 1779 they were separated when James was elected a delegate to the Continental Congress in Philadelphia. James went home first and planned to go on from there, but like everyone else in Virginia (and throughout the country) he became snowbound. It



Thomas Jefferson

was the coldest winter of the war. In Morristown, New Jersey, where the army was quartered, the soldiers were running out of food. "The troops, both officers and men," George Washington wrote, "have been almost perishing for want." Of course had they stopped to think, there were things that everyone could be thankful for. Philadelphia, which had been occupied by the British, was back in Amer-

ican hands and had been for more than a year. The French were fighting on America's side. But in Morristown the soldiers' stomachs were too empty for them to think of anything but their next meal. And the British army. It had holed up in nearby New York.

James Madison arrived in Philadelphia on March 18, 1780, soon after his twenty-ninth birthday. As was fitting for a delegate to the Congress, he brought a servant with him (his slave Billey) and settled down in a boardinghouse, ready for life in Philadelphia. Jefferson, who had been a delegate to the Continental Congress, would have told him about the city's social life, but still James may have been surprised at just how lively it was. Indeed the way Philadelphians entertained, one would have hardly known that the country was at war. Women spent entire afternoons dressing their hair into such towering beehives that when they went out in the evening, they had to scrunch down in their carriages to keep their hairdos from scraping the roofs. (Peggy Shippen, the future wife of Benedict Arnold, had to hang her head out of the carriage window.) Of course these stylish hostesses were curious about the young, newly arrived bachelor from Virginia, but one, who invited him to a party, was not impressed. He was a "gloomy, stiff creature," she said, "with nothing engaging or even bearable about his manners."

At first Madison didn't open his mouth in Congress. He served on committees, worked behind the scenes as he had in Virginia, but at the regular meetings he simply listened. And he was sickened by what he heard. Although all wanted to win the war, they could not agree on practical measures for governing. They had a hard time even sending the army all it needed to survive. It would be another year before Congress would ratify the Articles of Confederation, the nearest thing the country had to a constitution or "law of the land."

Not that this would help Madison. In Madison's opinion the Articles were "imbecilic." "A firm league of friendship"—that's what the Articles claimed to be, but where was the friendship among states that showed more interest in maintaining their own rights than in sacrificing for the common good? The Articles gave Congress no power to force the states to do anything for the central government, and in consequence they didn't do much of anything.

James wrote in disgust to Jefferson that nothing was going as it should. Congress needed more power; it needed better statesmen; it needed permanent solutions, not flimsy patchwork measures; and it certainly needed money. James might be a Virginian, but first and foremost he was and always would be an American pushing for a genuine union of the states.

James held his tongue for six months and then, whether he could be heard or not, he spoke out. His voice was as feeble as it had always been and, indeed, he didn't present much of a figure—this small man with a habit of rocking back and forth on his feet as he warmed to his subject. The delegates might smile. "No bigger than a half a piece of soap," one observed. They might strain to hear him, but as time went on, they had to agree that James Madison had sound judgment.

And as time went on, so did the war. When the British Army moved out of New York in the spring, it moved south, and although there were spurts of good news now and then from the American forces, most of the news was bad. The fall of Charleston, South Carolina, in May 1780—that was the worst. Then a month later the British decided they would pounce on members of the Virginia House of Delegates, which was holding an emergency meeting in Charlottesville, Virginia. From there, they would climb the hill to

Monticello, Jefferson's home. Luckily, the delegates were warned in time and most (thirty-three including Patrick Henry) managed to escape. Seven delegates either didn't take the warning seriously or were natural slowpokes; in any case, they were captured. As for Thomas Jefferson, though he sent his family away at the first hint of trouble, he stayed until he had looked through his telescope and had actually seen the redcoats on the streets of Charlottesville. Then he too made his getaway.

All this was taking place not more than thirty miles from James Madison's own home in Orange. (Since all the great homes in Virginia had names, the Madisons called theirs Montpelier now.) Had he known what was happening at the time, James would have been enraged. Already he had heard enough stories of the British Army's cruelty to civilians in Virginia that his hatred of England became so bitter, it stayed with him for life. But news traveled slowly, and by the time it reached Philadelphia, James had heard that Montpelier and his friend Thomas Jefferson were safe, and he had himself escaped from a near accident. But not from the British. A bolt of lightning had struck his boarding house; entering the chimney and conducted by a bell ring, it ran through several rooms. Luckily no one was hurt, but why hadn't they paid attention to Dr. Franklin? they asked themselves. Why hadn't they put up one of his electric rods?

In the fall, the attention of the country was suddenly centered on Yorktown, a small Virginia settlement on Chesapeake Bay. The Americans had managed to maneuver the British under the command of General Cornwallis into a corner where if all went well, the British might be defeated. It might even be a final defeat—that is, if American reinforcements arrived in time to keep the British from escaping by land, and if the French fleet, now in the West Indies, ar-

rived in time to keep the British from escaping by sea. In war, seldom do all "ifs" work out right, yet the people hoped and feared.

In September reinforcements left Philadelphia for Virginia. James Madison stood in front of the State House with General Washington and other delegates of Congress as three thousand Continental troops in all kinds of makeshift uniforms paraded past. Two French divisions followed, smartly dressed, marching with precision. When they reached the State House, they dropped the points of their swords and dipped their colors. In return the delegates took off their hats. It was a solemn send-off.

Six weeks of suspense lay ahead, charged with rumors, both good and bad. In the end, however, all the ifs did fall in place, and on October 19 General Cornwallis surrendered. When the news reached Philadelphia, all the members of Congress walked together to the nearby Dutch Lutheran church to give thanks. That night would have been a perfect time to set off firecrackers, and Americans did love an excuse to make a fireworks display, but the weather was too dry. There would have been danger of fire, so instead the people of Philadelphia set lighted candles in every window in the city. James Madison said he had never been happier.

At last people were beginning to understand James. Yes, he was stiff and awkward, but only when strangers were present. Among those he knew, he was, as one friend observed, "charming." Relaxed after a meal with friends, Madison was frank and lively in his conversation, delighting in telling little jokes on himself. Once in Williamsburg, he said, he left his hat on a window ledge and it was stolen. As everyone knew, no gentleman would appear outdoors with his head uncovered, but try as he might, James could not find another hat. For two days he had to stay away from the



Kitty Floyd

Governor's Palace where the Council was meeting. Finally a Frenchman who sold snuff agreed to sell him something he had. At this point Madison would start laughing, for it was such a queer-looking affair, that hat—huge, wide-brimmed, with a crown no bigger than a pimple poking up from a field of black. No one who heard the story ever forgot the picture of that enormous hat bouncing down the street to the Governor's Palace with little Mr. Madison under it.

James felt particularly at home with the group of people who lodged in the same house as he did. They liked to tease James about being such a confirmed bachelor, but in the spring of 1783 they decided that perhaps he wasn't so confirmed after all. James was thirty-two years old now, and he was obviously smitten by pretty sixteen-year-old Kitty Floyd,

daughter of a New York delegate living in the same house. In the evening when the boarders (including a nineteen-year-old medical student) gathered in the parlor to hear Kitty Floyd play the harp, James (and the medical student) were clearly less interested in the music than in Miss Floyd. The fact that James was so much older than Kitty didn't discourage him. Actually it made him bolder. So he began to court her, then proposed to her, then asked her father for her hand. Since neither Kitty nor her father were against the idea, James and Kitty began planning a November wedding. Joyfully he wrote Jefferson the news in a code they had developed between them to insure secrecy. It was a complicated code, like a dictionary with words arranged alphabetically and numbers beside them that would replace words in their correspondence. Since the vocabulary was related largely to politics and business, it was a little difficult for James to talk about love. In code he said that he had "ascertained her sentiments" and the event would take place in the fall.

At the end of April Kitty and her family went home for the summer, and though he hated the separation, James tried to be patient. He couldn't have imagined that he'd be called on for more than patience, but in July Kitty wrote that she had changed her mind. She felt "indifferent" to him now and had decided to marry that nineteen-year-old medical student. She sealed the letter not with sealing wax but with a piece of rye dough. Maybe this was what was handy, but many have interpreted the rye dough as a deliberate insult.

James wrote to Jefferson and Jefferson, whose wife had died the previous year, sent his sympathy. What James had to do, Jefferson said, was to keep busy. This was the only way to get over such grief.

Well, there would be plenty for James to do. Two months later, in September, the peace treaty with Great Britain was

Three



James had only two more months to serve before his term in the Continental Congress was over and he wanted to do what he could in the time that was left. If only the question of taxation could be resolved! As always, Americans balked at being taxed and the states balked at being required (or requested) to pay the central government a definite sum, even though the government had run up huge debts in the war, even though the government couldn't pay the soldiers all that was owed them. James had tried to add an amendment to the Articles of Confederation to take care of the taxation problem, but one Virginia delegate said he'd crawl to Richmond on his hands and knees before he'd let that go through.

For Jefferson and Madison, of course, there was always the problem of slavery, but they agreed that there was noth-



How did a small man with a small voice become President of the United States?

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