



The Lions of Gardiner's Island

By Ben Amato

THE LIONS OF GARDINER

Chapter 1

GRIEF

“It is not a choice to outlive your children. It is always a tragedy.” – Lord Lion Gardiner
“Some men are alive simply because it is against the law to kill them.” - Edward W. Howe



“Why did we come here? Why is every shred of happiness I have felt these last 20 years gone? Why...”

He was not really talking to anyone. He gripped the balcony rail of their home and spoke to the setting sun. Yet the herdsman working the sheep in the pasture below and the maids hanging the laundry in the back of the manor house both heard from his grief that Elizabeth had passed. Those closest saw the actual tracks of his tears. The men loading the wagons put down their loads. They were shocked to see sorrow, panic and helplessness take over their Lord’s once towering stance. He was hunched over, lost in the terrible thought that his daughter had died before his eyes.



The hunting party at the edge of Bostwich Wood witnessed the moment, but only as small colored figures on the far hillside. They recognized their Lord’s red jacket. He stood on the mansion’s west side, overlooking Gardiner’s Bay. Then they saw several white shapes rush from the house and engulf the lone figure.

“Many women die in childbirth,” Niantic said calmly but sadly. He knelt and busied himself reloading his musket. As he dipped into the powder, he turned his head to hide how he really felt from the rest of the hunting party.

“Yes, but not the way she did,” David said in a voice a bit too loud. His bitterness swept across the rest of the men, bringing all motions to an abrupt halt.

“Let us pray for her soul,” James said, ever the minister’s son. He knelt beside Niantic. It was then David broke into a run towards his home and his dead sister.

“Let’s pray he doesn’t find Stuart,” said Thomas Garlick. He immediately looked at Niantic, wondering the depth of the friendship between the young heathen and the Lord’s heir. Everyone knew they were inseparable since they both were 6, when Chief Wyndance first brought his son to the island. They grew up hunting together like brothers, then working the harvest and whaling with the rest of the tribe and the Lord’s men.

Thomas had hunted with David before. He admired yet feared the way the young man’s mind would lock onto a scent. He would follow it, cross the Bay and the Wood and with each step become more stubborn, determined, obsessed in making the kill, come blood or blindness. He was like his father, Lord Lion Gardiner.

Thomas was at Lion’s side, when the Pequots tried to escape after the first ambush. It was then Thomas first saw that look of determination take over a Gardiner’s face. Thomas never arrived home angry, hungry or sober, whether he hunted with the Lord or David. But he really did not want to go hunting for Stuart. But if Lion was going, he would row the boat to the mainland.

Before Thomas could blink, Niantic was off, chasing David towards Elizabeth. Thomas did not know Niantic helped bring Elizabeth home. Together with David and the nurses, they all cleaned the cuts and bruises on Elizabeth’s arms and the welts on her legs. But no one in the family could restore her once vibrant face. Despite all efforts, a pallor remained the most disturbing scar she carried, from when her loving husband tried to “teach” his bride. With every step towards the manor house, Niantic was planning how they would bring Stuart to the island.

Even hunched over in grief, Lord Lion Gardiner was a full head above the women who gathered around and supported him. Slowly he raised himself up, extending rigid and tall, seemingly more than his 6’3” height. His wife Sarah hugged his right arm tightly, using his strength to straighten herself too. Goody Bostwich was on his left, leaning on her Lord’s shoulder, so weakened by her tears. Lion saw his son David running in from the wood and immediately tried to stand even taller.



“We have seen death too often. It has struck too many, too soon,” Lion was speaking to Sarah yet his eyes locked back on the shoreline. “I am so sorry, my darling, that I ever brought you to this land. First the famine, then the war and now to see our Elizabeth pass.....”

“My Lord, this is our home and you are my husband. Every day has been a blessing, even today. We have a new grand-daughter. And you are still with me to love and raise and protect her.” Sarah squeezed harder on his arm, “Just as you have protected all of us from the first moment we came to the New World.”

“Father,” shouted David. He was out of breath yet seething. “I want the boat!”

“No. There will a time for that later.” Clear thoughts boiled in Lion’s head. “He will be coming to me. And when he arrives to try to collect his daughter, he will answer to me; on my land and where I make The Laws.”

David was on the manor’s patio, directly below his parents, rocking, too upset to stand still. Niantic jogged up and hugged his friend tightly. The other men were still a half mile away, trudging with the game, muskets and firewood.

“David, come up and meet your niece. Let’s deal with an angel who has just arrived rather than the devil. He will have his day.” Lion’s eyes were red and liquid, lacking the usual steel blue that made his every word law. Niantic grabbed at his friend and gently pulled him towards the door.

Back in the bedroom, Goody Garlick was still by Elizabeth’s side. She was washing the young girl’s face and hands, gently. Off in the corner, two other midwives held and cleaned the newborn. A young girl brought in steaming water and towels. The baby was whimpering softly, exhausted by the ordeal her birth had been. When Lord Gardiner entered, all heads turned and sadly bowed, except Garlick, who was slowly closing Elizabeth’s eyes. All her of attention were on these final moments of dignity the living give to those who have just died.

Though he wanted to go to his only grandchild, to celebrate new life, he could only stagger to his daughter’s side. Since he landed in Connecticut, nearly 20 years before, he has seen life pass away from too many souls. He witnessed his men die slowly, slipping away from gaping arrowhead wounds. Others he saw smashed into the next world, beneath heathens’ clubs and mallets. Starvation came that first winter, draining everyone by some small measure each day. When the darkness came for some, it was a welcome escape from their suffering.

That’s the way she passed, he silently realized. She lost a bit of herself daily, with the bickering, the arguments and the beatings. Stuart was her winter. But I let it happen, he admitted to himself. That brute turned my daughter into his possession. I actually thought she was his to mould and break as a husband is entitled to do. I pray he lands one foot on my island, to claim his new daughter. I will not make any wrong choices again.



Sarah and David took the baby from the hands of the two midwives, who slowly bowed and left the room, looking more terrified than exhausted. It wasn’t the long hours of labor they witnessed that had them shaking. Nor was it the loss of the mother. They both had seen many a young girl die delivering their first. But this was their Lord’s daughter, who just died under the hand of Goody Garlick. According to their Lord, the “best” healer they had. Then there were the scars, not to mention the poor girl’s screams. Those were terrifying, as if she were being ripped apart by more than her baby.

David was still near exploding but beside his mother and new niece, not to mention next to his Father. He tried to be stiff and tall but only managed to look very brittle. Sarah hugged her grandchild tightly.

When she felt the newborn relax and drift off, she stepped over and leaned back, resting her weight on her son's chest. She hoped her touch could sooth his spirit too.

"Did she get to see her daughter?" David whispered through clenched teeth.

"Yes," Goody Garlick said, straightening Elizabeth's bedclothes and placing a sheet over her arms. "Lizzy saw her daughter smile, held her to her breast for a few minutes but then..." The midwife could not hold up her demeanor any more, and in the room's silence, stood paralyzed. Her mouth opened but no wail could be heard, only the sounds of several teardrops hitting the sheet below.

"Thank you, my good woman," Lion said. "You were a friend to her when she returned home, just as you have always been there for me and my family since the start." He reached out and placed his hand on the midwife's shoulder. His touch ran through her like an electric shock and with a shudder, she turned away from the bed, sobbing softly.

Niantic stood in the doorway. He felt his place was beside David, but knew he should stay posted outside the room. He may be David's *brother* but the Lord had only one son. This was the first time this young native saw how the white man handled death. Their customs were strange to him, but their love, trust and respect was something he understood.

The whispering of the two other midwives, just down the hall, reminded Niantic of other customs he learned from the white man; ignorance, envy and pride.

"It was witchcraft, I tell you. That poor girl was possessed at the end."

"I heard her scream out Garlick's name, over and over again. Those were the last sounds that poor girl said. She didn't call out for her mother, or the Lord; just Garlick."

"It just was not natural. Something else ripped her apart."

"Garlick did. She reached in and tore the soul out of that poor girl, from the moment she returned to the island. Her and her "native" ways. They are from Satan, I tell you; all her potions and flowers and not one tear did that cold bitch give."

"Witchcraft. We should have been called when Elizabeth returned."

