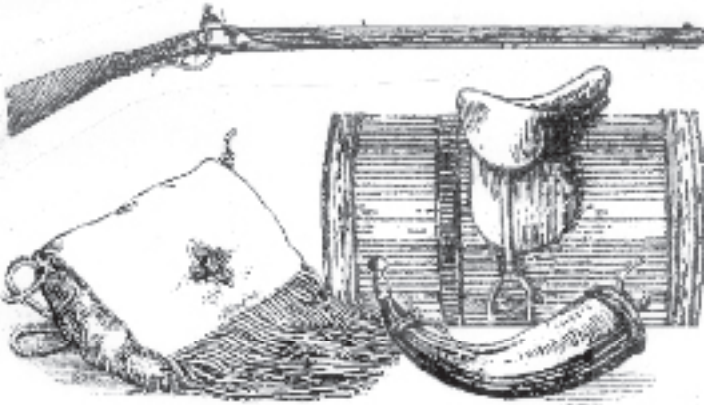

EBEN STROUD



Chapter One

The First Pursuit

In the early summer of 1793, on a day too hot for riding fast, we came pounding down the dusty road, the grime plastering to the lathered flanks of the horses and caking on my sweaty skin so when I blinked, my face felt stiff and swollen, the way it does with a bad case of poison ivy.

Worse, as the youngest, I rode in the dust from six other horses, and I rode the mare I'd broken only that spring, and she knew she could outrun any one of the horses ahead of her, which gave us both cause to resent having to hold back. But worse than the dust, worse than having to constantly check my horse, was not knowing our destination.

Robert Holland

Here we came, galloping south over the Low Road, driven by great and serious purpose, and I would have bet a gold doubloon we should have headed north. Such decisions had set me to wondering about the chances for success of our newly founded Woodstock Theft Detecting Society. Not that I could have complained. At seventeen you don't say anything around adults because you don't know anything. You're good for fetching stuff and blaming things on, and nothing else. The War for Independence may have changed the way folks thought about how they chose to be governed, and about what it meant to be free, but it did nothing to alter their opinions of seventeen-year-olds.

God knows I understood that well enough. All I'd done my whole life was fetch and carry, and it hadn't changed one iota after I'd finished my schooling in the spring. All I heard from my father was, "Stoddard, fetch me that harness! Stoddard, get me that hammer!" always followed by "What in Sam Hill took you so long? Wool gathering. What's got into you, boy."

He was right, of course, but if he'd had any idea what really had got into me and what I was turning over and over in my mind, he'd have danced a fancy devil's jig up and down my back. I knew that sooner or later I'd have to tell him that I'd decided not to be a farmer, but how to do that sloshed in my brain the way greasy eggs swim around in my stomach.

So when the Pursuers showed up, I was saddled and gone as fast as an express rider lugging a hot message for General George W. through the heat of battle. At first I didn't mind the dust. Then we turned the wrong way, and my mind started churning that decision over and over, weighing each side, examining my choice against theirs, and then theirs against

The First Pursuit

mine. But in the end, as always, I was left to go trotting after a coterie of older men, going off in the wrong direction without a second's hesitation.

Another mile later, we turned west onto a road which had no name, topped a low rise, and came boiling into Eben Stroud's dooryard like a pack of demons caught unexpectedly in daylight. And of course, we fairly bristled with horse pistols and muskets, and one rifle, mine, and anyone who had heard even the least desperate rumor about Eben Stroud, knew such a contingent might as likely draw fire as a friendly greeting.

We reined in at the front of his trim cabin as a long, brown rifle of the sixty caliber variety slipped like a fat, stiff snake past the rough muslin screening in the front window. The voice, flat, cold, and uncompromising, and so stout it seemed to hail from the sky above, followed the rifle.

"STATE YOUR BUSINESS!"

I thought it sounded not unlike what, according to the Reverend Coleman, God sounds like when he's grown impatient with the waywardness of ordinary mortals.

The authoritative quality of it put Major Smith off his feed. No one talked to him that way. He'd served in the Revolution, he wore the knee britches, the calfskin boots, and the royal blue greatcoat with its impressive brass buttons. But more to the point, despite the freedom we had fought for and won, he did not suffer equality terribly well. Naturally, he had magnanimously accepted the leadership of our group, though just now, he seemed oddly out of sorts, maybe even a little grumpy, over having turned up heart-high in the sights of that rifle.

I, on the other hand, had discovered that having been consigned to the back of the pack had provided a clear ad-

vantage, because there were six riders and horses between me and the black hole in the end of Mr. Stroud's rifle.

"We are the Pursuers of the Theft Detecting Society of Woodstock!" Major Smith announced.

I don't know why people have to talk that way, even people like Major Smith, who believed without either question or evidence, that he had been born a considerable cut above the rest of us. At any road, it set my teeth on edge, and apparently it affected Mr. Stroud the same way, for the click of the hammer, as he cocked his rifle, seemed especially distinct, even allowing for the still June morning.

"You branding me a thief?" Mr. Stroud called.

"Sir!" Major Smith squared his shoulders. "We are in pursuit of the scalawag who purloined General Samuel McClellan's bay stallion with the star blaze, and have come here seeking only information."

The rifle barrel slid back inside and Eben Stroud stepped out into the narrow shade of his front porch, dressed in long-fringed buckskins and knee-high legging moccasins, and I can tell you, getting a first-hand look made weak tea of the stories and rumors. He stood several marks over six feet, with shoulders wider than any blacksmith, and he shaved his head clean as a new-slaughtered pig. A great, swooping mustache underscored his prominent hawk beak of a nose, and against his tanned face his yellow eyes looked as hot as an eagle that's just made a kill, or the Reverend Coleman a convert.

Elijah Williams, a man with a well-deserved reputation for common sense, spurred his horse forward. "Mr. Stroud. Been anyone gone past this morning?"

"None."

"Been in a gallop most likely," Elijah said.

The First Pursuit

“Been anyone past, I’d have heard him.”

Considering the distance from his cabin to the Low Road, that seemed unlikely, but only Caleb Child had the spine to dispute him. “The tracks came this way,” he said.

Mr. Stroud smiled with only one side of his face and his moustache jumped as he puffed out a short, derogatory laugh, which set my mare to dancing. I drew back hard on the reins, talking softly ‘til her ears swiveled toward me and she began to settle down.

I didn’t settle quite so easily. Here he stood, facing six of the most important and influential men in town and against their conviction he offered only contempt. In that instant, my view of the world and its hierarchies underwent extensive alteration, and what had been dodging through my heated brain for most of the spring began to develop some hard edges.

Mr. Stroud walked to the top step and looked us over slowly, the way you might look over a cow you had thought to buy. “This be your first pursuit, I take it.”

Mr. Williams nodded. “It is.”

“When would this horse have been stolen?”

“Not known for sure,” Mr. Williams said. “Most likely last night, perhaps early this morning.”

“Pastured out?”

“No, Sir!” Major Smith, as usual, had got himself into a state of high dudgeon. “The blackguard broke open the barn in the dead of night and simply led the horse off. I’ve never seen such prodigious gall!”

My mare suddenly grew restless, tossing her head and dancing back on her hind legs, and I swung her out from behind the other horses, loosed the reins, and patted her neck, hoping that would calm her down.

"Getting bold, these thieves," Mr. Stroud said.

Just then my mare decided to have a look at Eben Stroud, and before I could react, she'd carried me to the front of the pack. Assuming I had come forward to speak, everyone waited for me to say what I had on my mind. The only thing I could think to say was what *had* been on my mind. "You're a tracker, Mr. Stroud, and we hoped you could show us which way the thief went."

"We already know that, Stoddard," Major Smith said, his irritation plain. He looked back at Mr. Stroud. "But there's little doubt we could use your assistance, sir."

"You paying expenses?"

That brought Caleb Child right up, standing in his stirrups. "Your neighbors ask help and you seek to profit by it?"

"Sounds fair righteous, coming from a man who's already on the pay list," Mr. Stroud said.

"We were elected as Pursuers," Caleb said.

"Then go pursue something." Mr. Stroud turned away and stepped back toward his door.

"Mr. Stroud," Elijah called. "Perhaps you could explain your reasoning."

Stroud turned, planted the butt of his rifle on the boards of the porch, and wrapped one huge hand around the barrel. "I take up the chase, you can all go home. Cost less in the end. I'll just need this bold lad here," he said as he pointed at me. "Cost you for two instead of seven. Probably even get Sam's horse back. But you go on riding about the countryside like a ragged bunch of vigilantes, you'll get nothing but overheated."

A deer fly could have knocked me out of the saddle. I'd never heard anyone talk to a Deacon like that before, and I

The First Pursuit

expected we might have to abandon the chase and clap the man in irons, though I, for one, would not be the first to go for the manacles.

“You agreeable, Stoddard?” Elijah asked.

I nodded, I think, though my horse had started dancing again, and I’m not at all sure I agreed so easily to deliver myself into the tutelage of Eben Stroud. He looked at least as old as my father, but a lot tougher, and just then I’d no need of yet a more resolute taskmaster. And yet I could feel the eagerness growing inside like a fat-fed fire. It wasn’t that I didn’t like farming, I just didn’t find it interesting, beyond raising and training horses. More to the point, I needed a little space to figure out just how I was going to tell my father what I had planned for my future.

The decision weighed more heavily on the rest of the Pursuers. Here they’d been elected to the position and gone off in hot pursuit, and now they had to decide whether to give up the chase. What’s more, hiring someone to do their job violated the very spirit of the society. There was also the matter of giving up some hard cash. In times like those, few folks gave up easily the chance for money, even if it amounted to no more than a shilling or two.

But one undeniable truth shone clear. As the only pure hunter and trapper left among us, the rest having headed west, Mr. Stroud stood a good chance of getting the General’s horse back. And if the rumors had any substance, he was the best pistol and rifle shot in Northeastern Connecticut. And, of course, it would not cost as much. An important consideration. The Pursuers were paid out of the dues collected from the members of the society. A long, expensive chase might mean either an increase in the dues or an extra assessment. General McClellan was the richest man in the county, and

having poorer folk paying extra to recover his fancy horse would not sit well politically. It would be even worse if they failed.

"How long do you think it will take?" Elijah asked.

Stroud shrugged. "How far the thief has got determines the cost." He smiled again, a very broad smile which displayed too many teeth to leave me much comfort. "Be seven days before it'll cost you more than you'd have spent in two," he said, demonstrating an ability to cipher that few would have suspected.

Elijah nodded, looked around at the other men. "It's going to take longer, I'd appreciate it if you'd come by and let me know," he said.

Mr. Stroud nodded. "You'll get a thorough accounting."

"I'm not so certain of this, Elijah," Major Smith said. "It seems to me we have a greater chance with more men. Run it like a cavalry maneuver."

"Depends on whether you intend to drive them off or get the horse back," Mr. Stroud said.

Elijah turned in his saddle. "Does anyone but the Major disagree with my choice?"

No one did.

"It's settled then. Good luck, Mr. Stroud."

I sat with my hands resting on the pommel of my saddle watching them ride off, wondering just what I had gotten myself into this time, and thinking that whatever it was, it had to be more interesting than farming.