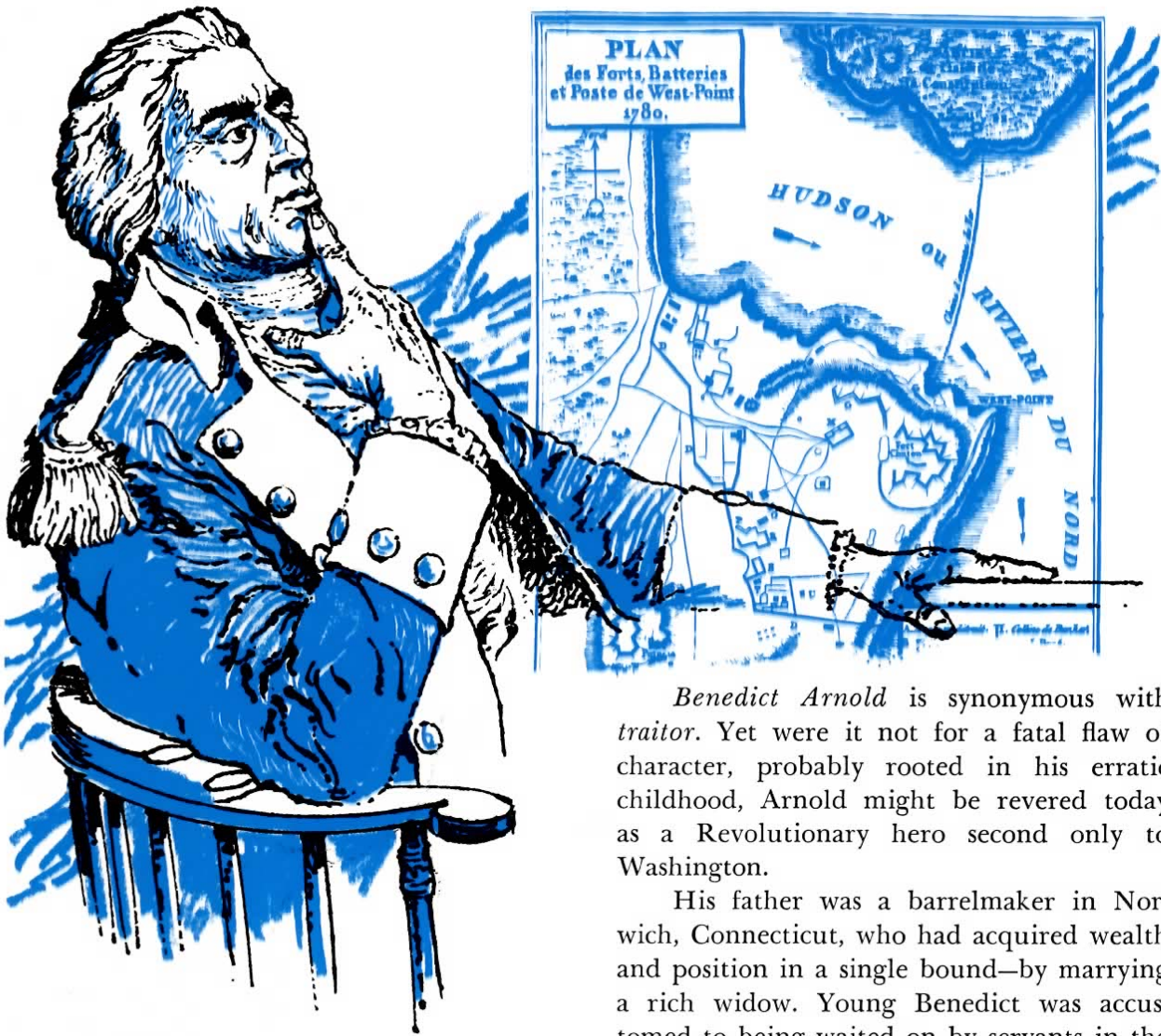


by Joseph L. Schott

THE FATAL FLAW

LEVEL 6 SELECTION 104



Benedict Arnold is synonymous with *traitor*. Yet were it not for a fatal flaw of character, probably rooted in his erratic childhood, Arnold might be revered today as a Revolutionary hero second only to Washington.

His father was a barrelmaker in Norwich, Connecticut, who had acquired wealth and position in a single bound—by marrying a rich widow. Young Benedict was accustomed to being waited on by servants in the family mansion and having townsmen doff their hats as he passed in the family carriage. Unfortunately, all that ended abruptly. The elder Arnold risked his wife's fortune recklessly and lost—overnight—mansion, carriage,

Adapted from *The American Legion Magazine*, copyright 1966. Reprinted by permission of the author and his agents, Scott Meredith Literary Agency, Inc., 580 Fifth Avenue, New York, New York 10036.

© 1976, 1968, Science Research Associates, Inc. All rights reserved.

and servants. Thereafter Benedict attended school as a charity scholar, doing menial tasks for the more affluent students—undoubtedly a galling experience.

When Arnold was twelve, three of his brothers and sisters perished of yellow fever. This loss left Mrs. Arnold obsessed with the fear of death, and for a while her son succumbed to her morbid influence, becoming a timid, fearful boy with a tendency to stammer and tremble uncontrollably. But at thirteen his demeanor changed inexplicably. He became almost annoyingly brave, challenging older boys to fistfights, riding water-wheels at the risk of death, and on one occasion cavorting on the ridgepole of a burning barn.

At fifteen he was apprenticed to a leading Norwich druggist. He lived in his employer's mansion and gradually acquired again a taste for luxury.

On completing his apprenticeship he set up his own shop and quickly became a flamboyant, adventurous businessman. He lived in a fine home, had servants and blooded horses, but was continually being sued by creditors. Once they actually had him thrown into debtors prison for six weeks.

In 1774, as the rebellion against England mounted, Arnold joined an elite military unit and was elected captain of a company. He spent personal funds lavishly on uniforms for his men and reveled in his own, which included a scarlet coat with silver buttons.

On an earlier trading trip to Canada, Arnold had learned that there was a large arsenal at Fort Ticonderoga—weapons the

colonial army needed badly. He persuaded the Massachusetts legislature to appoint him colonel and let him enlist four hundred men to take the fort. But shortly afterward he heard that another force, led by Ethan Allen, was on its way to accomplish the mission. He dashed off to join them, and with colossal audacity forced Allen to recognize him as joint commander. The attack was a resounding success, but in the middle of his exultation came his first "insult." The Massachusetts legislature disowned him as colonel and referred to him as "Captain" Arnold. Arnold, however, protested so violently that they reaffirmed his title.

There soon followed a second "insult," when another man was given a command he himself coveted. Arnold had a violent temper tantrum, kicking a campstool as he threatened to turn back to the British all the arms he had captured at Ticonderoga—a threat that fortunately he did not carry out.

At around this time Arnold met George Washington. It was one of fortune's lightning strokes, for the two men were similar in personality. Both were born leaders, both sensitive about military rank. At Washington's request, Benedict Arnold was commissioned a colonel in the colonial army. He proved himself a field commander of great competence, and in January 1776 was promoted to brigadier general. But almost immediately he was "insulted" again when a general was sent to take over his campaign. Arnold sulked in his tent, muttering threats.

Later, Arnold was appointed by Washington as military commander of Boston. But shortly thereafter five brigadier generals, all

with less service time than he, were promoted to major general over him. Another insult—or persecution, as he began to consider it.

History has not clearly recorded why various authorities kept bypassing Arnold despite his brilliant actions in the field. The best guess is that his ambition, jealousy, temper, and vanity made them distrust him. His violent nature was fanned by the “insults,” but it was probably also the cause of them.

Then, during the Battle of Saratoga, Arnold’s right hip and leg were so badly crushed that the doctors almost amputated. He spent three and a half months in the hospital, and emerged a disgruntled cripple with one leg two inches shorter than the other.

By now he had desperate financial as well as physical troubles, for he had spent a great deal of his own money on his various campaigns. He soon became involved in several dubious, even illegal, deals and speculations. Eventually his activities came to the attention of Congress, causing a great storm. Arnold was furious, for according to his lights he had served heroically the cause of freedom and now his attempts to recoup personal losses were being criticized by cowards who had stayed home. Nevertheless, he was court-martialed and found guilty on two charges. It was the last straw that sent him over to the British.

Apparently not even the court-martial had diminished Washington’s faith in Arnold, for soon afterward he named him commander at West Point—a post Arnold urgently wanted. Washington, however, was to find out too late that West Point was merely

something Arnold wanted to sell to the British.

British officers haggled over the price, offering 6000 pounds instead of the 10,000 Arnold demanded. Finally, at a secret meeting with British Major John André, Arnold displayed detailed plans in his own handwriting of the fortifications of West Point. He had made these for his own use only, but André asked for the documents to show his superiors, suggesting that this might persuade them to pay the 10,000 pounds. Reluctantly Arnold turned the papers over, a mistake that was to prove fatal—for André. John André was captured on the morning of September 23, 1780, the papers were found on him, and he was hanged as a spy.

Arnold was having breakfast on Sunday, September 24, when he received word of André’s capture. Immediately he saddled his horse, galloped to the dock, and fled down the river to where a British sloop was at anchor.

Benedict Arnold was never brought to justice by the Americans. He received a colonel’s commission in the British army, led several attacks against colonial forces, and after the war returned to England and engaged in business. He died in London on June 3, 1801.

An assessment of Arnold’s career was made by an American prisoner of war whom Arnold asked, “What would happen to me if the rebels captured me?”

The prisoner replied, “They would cut off that leg of yours wounded at Saratoga and bury it with honors of war. Then they would hang the rest of you on a gibbet.”

CHECK YOUR READING

- 1. Benedict Arnold's father acquired his fortune by**
 - A** inheriting property from his father
 - B** marrying a wealthy woman
 - C** winning one tremendous gamble
- 2. He lost this fortune**
 - A** by investing unwisely in cotton
 - B** by buying worthless stock
 - C** in some way not mentioned in the story
- 3. As a charity scholar, Benedict Arnold paid for his education by**
 - A** tutoring slower pupils
 - B** working in a store
 - C** doing lowly chores
- 4. At thirteen Arnold suddenly became**
 - A** conspicuously brave
 - B** obsessed with fear of death
 - C** fascinated by machines
- 5. The American attack on Fort Ticonderoga was**
 - A** an outstanding victory
 - B** a disastrous mistake
 - C** a fortunate failure
- 6. Arnold seems to have had an exaggerated regard for**
 - A** luxuries and fine dress
 - B** military rank and prestige
 - C** Both A and B
- 7. The author suggests that the "insults" Arnold received were the result of**
 - A** the jealousy of lesser men
 - B** flaws in his personality
 - C** his incompetence in the field
- 8. According to the story, the event that drove Arnold to treason was his**
 - A** injury at Saratoga
 - B** conviction at the court-martial
 - C** commitment to debtors prison
- 9. Arnold gave the West Point plans to André hoping this would persuade the British to**
 - A** pay him more money
 - B** attack without delay
 - C** withdraw from Canada
- 10. After the war the Americans punished Arnold by**
 - A** imprisoning him
 - B** hanging him
 - C** Neither A nor B

© 1976, 1968, Science Research Associates, Inc. All rights reserved.