

Otis James

The Minute Boys of Boston



James Otis

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CHAPTER I

WHY WE WERE ENROLLED

Archie Hemming is as straight-headed a boy as was ever raised in Boston town, and he insists that, while we are seemingly idling our time away here in the Cambridge camp, I ought to set down what small share we lads of Boston have had in beating the lobster backs, for certain it is we have done our share, and no less a man than General Israel Putnam has told us plainly that we have already been of great aid to the Cause.

After such praise as that it would not be strange if we allowed ourselves to be puffed up with pride, more especially because we can recall many a time since a baker's dozen of us took the high sounding name of "Minute Boys of Boston," when we have come off best in a tussle with the king's soldiers or the rascally Tories.

It may seem a matter of surprise to those who have not had a hand in teaching his majesty a long-needed lesson, that there should be in this colony of ours, men, and boys too, who could be so evil minded as to do all they might against those who were shedding their blood, or imperilling their lives, to release them from the oppressive yoke of English misrule, but such was, and is, the fact.

During my short life, for I am not yet turned fifteen years, I have been in more danger, and suffered more of hardships from and through Tories, our own neighbors and alleged friends, than ever came my way by the efforts of the red-coated soldiers who allowed to whip us off-hand, before getting a taste of our metal at Breed's hill – I can never bring myself to speak of that battle as having taken place at Bunker hill, for the simple reason that we did not fight there.

Archie, who is sitting nearby with Silas Brownrigg, looking over my shoulder to make certain I keep steadily and correctly at the task he has assigned me, says that he did not count on my beginning the story in such a roundabout way, for he wants to see in black and white, as soon as may be, an account of what we Boston Minute Boys have done thus far in the war against the king.

Now it seems to me that I ought to begin this tale with the reason why some of us Boston lads decided it might be possible for us to work in behalf of the Cause, and in order to do that I must hark back to what has been done these two years past to us of Boston by the king, and those hangers on of his who counted on grinding us into the dust as if we were made of baser stuff than they.

We lads, being young, did not realize all the iniquity of which General Gage was capable, when his acts were purely political, and, perhaps, gave but little heed to our elders when we heard them predicting that he would ruin the colony if it should not be possible to check his unlawful career; but when on the first day of June, in the year of grace 1774, he closed our port of Boston to all vessels save those of the king's, shutting us up like mice in a trap to starve, or leave the colony as fugitives, then did we realize that the moment had come for something more than talk.

General Gage had brought soldiers from Halifax, Quebec, New York and even Ireland, to keep us of Boston in subjection to him, until the lobster backs out-numbered our people two to one, or so it seemed to me, and when he had us cooped up, through having set his hirelings to guard the Neck, thereby preventing us from going out, or our friends of the country from coming in, then did he crown the height of his oppression by making declaration that the port was closed to all.

He had under his command ships of the king enough to enforce this unrighteous act, and there we were, much the same as tied hand and foot. The poor people became beggars because there was no work by which they could earn money to buy food, while the rich found that with all their wealth

it was impossible to purchase what was not for sale because of the scarcity, and meanwhile the king's lobster backs fed on the fat of the land, devouring us and our substance as did the locusts that were sent to aid the children of Israel.

Had it not been for the people in the other colonies who sent us rice, wheat and even money, there were many in our town of Boston who would have died of starvation. Why even the charitable men of London, who must have understood that we were being wronged, subscribed one hundred and fifty thousand dollars for the poor among us.

I have heard it said that even the most cowardly animal will fight when he is cornered and his life threatened, and so it was with us. The men banded themselves together as if for war, and made ready for the struggle which all knew must be near at hand, unless his majesty should succeed in gaining better sense than he had shown since our people built up for him a nation in this New World.

We lads did not believe it possible we could do anything at such a time; but looked forward to the day when, having come to man's estate, we might enlist as soldiers to drive out General Gage, and such as he, from among us.

Then the fortifications on the Neck were strengthened, the better to hold us prisoners; all the gunpowder belonging to the province that had been stored at Charlestown and Cambridge was seized by the man who had made of himself our jailor, and we were terrified by rumors that the king's ships were about to open fire on the town because our people were arming themselves.

The true men of New York, Connecticut, Vermont, and from all the country roundabout Boston, rose up in their might, marching at their best pace to our assistance, and General Gage must have understood that he was stirring up a hornet's nest, for the rumors were denied, and those who would have begun the war then and there, returned to their homes.

If you will believe it, there were, at the close of the year 1774, eleven regiments of British soldiers in Boston, to say nothing of all the artillery, and yet more were coming. Five hundred marines were landed from the Asia Man-of-War, and thousands of lobster backs were voyaging from the Jerseys, New York, and Quebec!

Was it any wonder that we of Boston were the same as eaten out of our homes? These men wearing red-coats were not suffered to lack for the best of food; but it mattered little what we colonists had, and yet there were those among us, born and bred in Boston town, who claimed that General Gage was acting the part of an honest man!

At the beginning of the year 1775 no less than an hundred and fifty soldiers were on duty at the Neck night and day, and yet our people were able to send past them secretly such of weapons and ammunition as were to provide us, at a later date, with what might be needed to uphold our rights. Even the youngest among us understood that the day was not far distant when we must stand face to face with the lobster backs in battle array, if we would preserve our own rights, and every article which might be used in the coming struggle was smuggled under the noses of the guards.

Our fathers sent out muskets in loads of manure, cartridges in candle boxes, pistols and swords in the baskets of such market women as were permitted to enter the town that they might bring provisions for the king's soldiers, and the loyal men of Boston had collected at Cambridge quite a store of what would be needed when the time came that blood must be shed. Then, suddenly, the thick-headed lobster backs discovered what was being done, and scores upon scores of firearms were captured by them.

Many of our people had fled the town by this time; but a large number yet remained. My father, Samuel Wright, had lately gone to Cambridge on business. We were then living on Lyn street, close by the old ship-yard near Hudson's point, and not far away, that is to say, on Hull street opposite the burying place, was the home of Archie Hemming, the lad who sits near me at this moment watching every motion of mine lest I falter in the task he has set me. Silas Brownrigg lived on Salem street nearby the corner of Charter, and we three were close friends in those dark days when the king's

men swaggered through the town, cuffing or kicking any of us lads who chanced to be in their high and mighty way.

Now it was on a certain evening near the middle of June that we three lads chanced to come upon Amos Nelson near the city dock. He, like all his father's brood, was that miserable thing known as a Tory, and we had no idea of bandying words with him, believing it beneath us to talk with such scum; but he was minded to pick a quarrel, believing that General Gage would soon drive us, who claimed to be true to the colony, from our homes.

Because of what happened shortly afterward, I believe the Tory cur had heard at home some inkling of what was to be done by the lobster backs, for never had I seen him so bold, who was ever somewhat of a coward.

I was the one he pitched upon to vent his spite, and when we would have passed him, he shouted in that squeaky voice of his which ever set my nerves on edge:

"Hi! there, Luke Wright, has that scurvy father of yours mended his ways yet, or does he think the king's officers will wait awhile before sending him to the gallows where he belongs?"

Now while I hold that no lad should take part in a street brawl, I ask what would any boy have done whose father had been thus assailed by one who was not fit to speak his name? I set upon the miserable Tory so suddenly that he, taken unawares, so to speak, went down beneath me, and then I pummelled him as he deserved, until the cur howled for mercy, Silas and Archie standing by with hands in their coat pockets lest Amos Nelson should say afterward that the three of us had attacked him.

"You'll hear from me one day, in a way that won't be to your liking," Amos cried threateningly after I had allowed him to get up, and he had taken to his heels until having gotten a safe distance away. "We'll see what General Gage has to say when he knows how the king's friends are treated by you, who would be rebels if you had stomach enough to use your hands as well as you do your tongues!"

"You one of the king's friends!" Archie cried derisively. "If he picks his intimates from such spawn as you there's good reason why he has allowed these colonies of his to come to open rebellion against injustice."

"You've said it! You've said it!" the Tory cur cried as if in delight. "You've admitted that you are rebels, and the king's officers shall hear of what you say, for the time has come when they are marking such as you for future punishment."

"And what have they marked you for?" Silas asked with a laugh. "Are you counted on being able to act the part of a half-way decent scarecrow, or are you ranked as a lickspittle to some lobster back who hasn't yet learned to speak English?"

"Before we're many days older you shall come to understand some of the marks, and I'll be the one to explain them in a way that won't be to your liking," Amos shouted, and just then he was bowled over by a clod of earth that Archie flung with an aim which would have done your heart good to see.

"There's what you call a rebel mark," the dear lad cried with a laugh at his own success, "and I'm counting you'll carry it longer than shall we that which the tyrant Gage puts upon us."

At that instant Archie was seized by the collar from behind, and I was near to letting out a cry of fear, for I counted as a certainty that some lobster backs, having overheard our words, were come to lend the Tory lad a hand.

Luckily the cry was choked before it escaped my lips, else I should have been bowed with shame, for on the moment I saw that it was none other than Doctor Warren who had seized Archie, and we lads knew him for one who would cut off his right hand rather than take the part of a Tory against a so-called rebel.

"Is it well to spend your time brawling on the streets with such as that lad, when there is work you might do in behalf of the Cause?" the doctor asked sharply, and, twisting himself round that he might look the good man squarely in the face, Archie cried:

"What is there that lads like us might do at such a time, sir? We are willing enough; but lack opportunity."

"I came out in search of one who can be trusted to carry a message into the country; but fail to find him. It strikes me that lads like you could be employed in such tasks, and thus give men full grown the opportunity of doing braver work though nothing could be more important than my business of this night. Think you it would be possible to leave Boston within the hour, and without attracting the attention of the guards?" the doctor added after a brief time of thought.

"Ay, we can go out of Boston a dozen times over, 'twixt now and sunrise, without any lobster back being the wiser," I cried, determined if there was aught to be done in behalf of the Cause that night, I would have a hand in it.

"Are you the son of that Samuel Wright who lately left home to go to Cambridge, and has not yet returned?" the doctor asked, releasing his hold on Archie's collar that he might wheel about to face me.

"Ay, that I am, sir," was my reply, "and that he has left Boston on honest business Master Hancock himself can testify."

"There is no need of testimony as to his character so far as I am concerned," the gentleman said with a kindly smile. "I can trust his son, surely, knowing the father as I do. Now how might it be possible for you to leave this town secretly?"

"I have a boat hidden at the old ship-yard where the lobster backs will never be able to find her, and we three have been to Roxbury in her half a dozen times since the guard at the Neck have had their eyes opened, without any one's being the wiser. If so be you would send a message, we three can carry it, sir," and so eager was I for him to accept my services that I trembled like one in an ague.

"And who may this young gentleman be?" the doctor asked as he pointed at Silas Brownrigg, who was striving to make himself look as large as possible to the end that he might attract attention.

"My father is Robert Brownrigg, who has been enrolled among the Minute Men these many days, and has called himself a Son of Liberty since I can remember."

"I know him well, and now believe that one or all of you can serve me well and faithfully, meaning that you will be serving the Cause. I desire to send a message with all speed to Colonel James Barrett, who can be found about a mile this side the town of Lexington, at Samuel Hadley's home."

"We will carry your message, sir, and bind ourselves to deliver it before sunrise," I cried, burning with the desire to have a finger in this pie of rebellion against the king and General Gage.

"It is a written message I would send, and it will not be necessary for all three of you lads to undertake the journey – one can perform the task as well as a dozen."

"We three have always been close comrades, sir," Archie interrupted, "and while it may not be necessary that all should aid in carrying the message itself, two more hands in the skiff will shorten the journey to the Penny ferry, for there it would be well to take to the shore, rather than striving to work entirely around this town in order to gain the Cambridge river."

"The three shall have a part in the work," Doctor Warren cried, as if he had but just understood how eager we were to be of service to the Cause. "It is important that Colonel Barrett receive the missive before sunrise, and you are to set about the task as seems best to you, with the understanding that all are of equal rank in this matter. I will call you Minute Boys, and pledge my word that by seeking out the colonel at the earliest possible moment, you will be doing as valuable work as any Minute Men in the colony."

There was little need for him to say more. We were literally burning with desire to be off on our first task that had to do with the Cause, and he could not have worked us up to greater enthusiasm had he preached all night.

"You have first to make your parents acquainted with what you are about to do," the doctor said with a smile because of our eagerness. "I have the message with me; but there is no good reason

why you should carry it while making arrangements for departure, lest it be lost or seized, therefore do what may be necessary, and meet me at this place in half an hour."

We could hardly have moved more quickly if each had been provided with wings. In a twinkling the three of us were off, every lad headed toward his own home, and for my part, I know that it seemed as if I hardly gave myself time to breathe, so eager was I to return to the rendezvous in the shortest possible space of time.

As I look at the matter now, I can understand why my mother cried out against the venture, declaring it was work that should be undertaken by men, when I repeated to her what the doctor had said, and the tears came very near my eyelids as I pleaded with her, for it seemed just then as if I should never again have such an opportunity of serving the Cause. I urged that we had given our word to Doctor Warren; that we would be shamed, and he have reason to set us down as cowards, if we failed to do as had been promised, winding up my entreaties with the assertion that if father was at home he would insist most strongly upon my doing whatsoever little I might in behalf of that effort to teach the king a lesson which seemed so near at hand.

I believe it was this last part of my argument which had most weight, for no sooner had I spoken of what my father would have me do, than she gave way, setting about making ready for me a small parcel of food before having said that she gave her permission.

Wild with delight, I gave little heed to the loving kiss she bestowed upon me, hardly returning it so eager was I to be again at the rendezvous, and taking the parcel without a word of thanks for her loving thoughtfulness, I hurried away at full speed, coming up with Archie in Salem street.

He also carried a parcel under his arm, and without slackening speed I ranged alongside him, asking, with difficulty because of my heavy breathing, if his mother had made any protest against his acting the part of messenger.

"At first she cried out that I should not risk my neck in a tom-fool matter; but when I made her understand that it was no less a man than Doctor Warren who required our services, she held her peace; yet I took note that the tears came into her eyes, as if she believed the business might be of danger."

"And so it is until we are ashore beyond Charlestown," I said with no little of satisfaction, for it pleased me to believe we were staking our lives, perhaps, on this venture which had to do with the Cause. "If our skiff is overhauled by the guards – "

"There isn't a king's boat, no matter of how many oars, that can overhaul us this night if we get well away from the ship-yard," the dear lad interrupted sharply. "Give us three minutes the start, and I'll agree that the whole boiling of his majesty's navy may come full cry after us."

It would have pleased me better if he had allowed that there was much of danger in the enterprise; but I would not speak further of such possibility lest he believe I had grown faint hearted with thinking of what might be, and in silence we continued on our way, arriving at the appointed meeting place only to find Silas there awaiting us. He had been even more eager than we, if that could be possible, and was returned a full five minutes in advance, despite all our efforts to move swiftly.

Doctor Warren did not show himself until after what seemed like a very long time of waiting, and we had grown impatient, fearing lest he had found some other who might be more to his liking, to carry the message. Had we been shut out from the enterprise just then, I know for my part it would have seemed as if all the world had gone wrong, therefore it was that I could have cried aloud with joy when he came toward us as if having walked down Union street.

"Are you lads ready for the journey?" he asked, speaking softly and looking around cautiously like one who fears his words may be overheard.

"We will set off in one minute after receiving your directions, sir," I made haste to say, speaking hurriedly because I was in haste to have him commit the message to us at once so we might know none other could get in ahead of us.

"It is only that you deliver this into the hands of Colonel James Barrett, who may be found 'twixt now and sunrise at the home of Samuel Hadley, near Lexington," he said, taking a folded paper from the inner pocket of his coat. "In case you arrive at whatsoever point you have decided upon, in safety, it will be well for one to procure a horse and rush on in advance, otherwise you may arrive too late –"

"We can trust our legs for getting us there as quickly as any farmer's nag could carry us," Archie interrupted with a laugh, and I was puffed up with pride when the doctor gave the paper into my keeping as he said gravely:

"It would work ill to the Cause if this was read by our enemies, therefore it must be destroyed in case you are like to be taken by any of the king's mercenaries."

"We won't be taken, sir," Archie said, speaking as if he was one who could read the future, like the witches they hanged at Salem. "Once we are under way in the skiff there is nothing in Boston harbor that can overtake us."

"Do not be over-confident, young gentleman," the doctor said in a tone of mild reproof. "While I do not admit that you will be in any serious danger, it is the part of a wise man to count all the cost, and give due heed to every possibility. Come to an end of your journey at the earliest moment, and until the message has been delivered, put no trust in strangers however fair they may speak you."

He stood looking at us as if everything necessary had been said, and, fortunately, I had wit enough to motion that my comrades follow me as I went toward the ship-yard without any other word to Doctor Warren, for at such times he who shows himself too ready to spend time in talking, gives proof that he may not be depended upon to work quickly.

The doctor made no effort to detain us; but, looking back over my shoulder, I saw that he remained as we had left him until the gloom shut him out from my view.

"I would we had been asked for a service of more importance than simply carrying a written message," Silas said in a tone that was almost one of discontent, as we made our way toward the place where my skiff was hidden, and Archie, ever cautious and wise, added in reproof:

"It is not well we say anything which might show that we are bent on an errand of importance, for no one can tell how many Tory ears may be hidden hereabout. We are going out for a sail, pleasing ourselves by showing that we three can leave this town of lobster backs whenever it is our pleasure to do so, and of more than that it is not necessary to speak."

I understood by the lad's tone that he looked upon this mission of ours as something which might be of vital importance to the Cause, and the fact that he deemed it dangerous for us even to discuss the business in the streets, went farther toward rendering me cautious than any words of the doctor's might have done.

Citizens of Boston, save they were rank Tories, were not given to roaming the streets of the town after nightfall, therefore we met but few while making our way to the ship-yard, and those few gave no heed to us. At this time the so-called rebels were so small in numbers as compared with our oppressors, that, save to make us the object of their sport, as Amos Nelson had attempted to do, little attention was given to us, most like because it was believed we could not break through the net General Gage had thrown around us.

We arrived at the ship-yard without interruption, and then it behooved us to move with more of caution, for if so be the guards saw three lads embarking in a skiff, there would be little delay in halting them by means of a bullet.

Under what remained of a small wharf which had fallen into decay long before I could remember, we kept the craft, so securely hidden that he who would seek her out must needs have sharp eyes, and we had pulled away the timbers in such manner that it was possible to get on board and make ready for hoisting the mast and sail before hauling her out into view of any passer-by.

After making certain that we had not been observed, the three of us let ourselves down between the rotten timbers into the skiff, and while Archie and Silas took up the oars, I made ready for hoisting the spar, which was of no great weight or size.

"Now then!" Archie whispered. "It is not so dark but that we can be seen a long distance away, and until we are sheltered by the shore of Charlestown, it will not be well that we indulge in much speaking."

He gave way on the oar at the same moment; Silas did the same, and we were no more than well out from under the old timbers than I saw, even while raising the short spar, one of the guard-boats within less than an hundred feet.

It was the only time we had ever come upon the king's men in the dozen or more voyages we had made from Boston town simply through a spirit of bravado, and my heart leaped into my mouth, so to speak, for it seemed certain we were about to be called to an accounting before having gotten well started on our first mission in behalf of the Cause.

Fortunately Archie was a quick-witted lad, as I have said before, otherwise we should have been made prisoners in a twinkling; but he backed water with his oar before we were well out from the shadow of the old dock, thus forcing the skiff among the timbers instantly, and we three sat like statues, our hearts thumping loudly as trip hammers, waiting to learn whether the enemy had seen us.

There were no less than ten men in the guard-boat, and they were so busily engaged trying to explain one to the other exactly what General Gage ought to do in order to put a speedy end to the rebellion, as to have given no heed to anything near them.

They passed so near the head of the ruined wharf that I could have tossed my hat aboard their craft, and the only screen we had was the shadows cast by the timbers; but they saw us not. Going on their way in ignorance, and happy in the belief that at the first overt show of rebellion we of Boston would be crushed out of existence, the king's men continued their round, and verily it seemed as if the good God had interposed to render it possible for us lads to carry the message which had been entrusted to our keeping by Doctor Warren.

Not until they were so far in the distance that it was no longer possible to hear the sound of their oars, did we venture to draw a long breath, and then it was that Archie said in a whisper:

"Now then, Silas, pull well out into the current, and the sooner Luke gets the mast into place, the quicker we'll be heading toward Charlestown. Put a hand over your oar to prevent any creaking, and don't open your mouth save when it is necessary to breathe."

Both Silas and I understood that Archie was the one who should act as commander of our small expedition, and we obeyed in silence, the skiff darting ahead once she felt the weight of the wind, as if understanding full well the need of speed.

Not until we were well off Morton's point did either of us venture to break the silence, and then Silas asked suddenly, as if he had been stewing over the matter for some time:

"Why shouldn't there be Minute Boys as well as Minute Men, and why, since we have begun to work for the Cause in good earnest, shouldn't we raise a company?"

CHAPTER II

RAISING A COMPANY

That which Silas proposed startled and at the same time surprised me. Of course there was no good reason why we lads should not be banded together in the service of the colony, and yet it seemed a forward thing to do, thus to ape our elders.

Archie, however, was greatly taken with the idea from the start, and Silas had hardly more than finished speaking when he cried, incautiously loud as it appeared to me:

"Well, and why shouldn't we raise a company of Minute Boys? What is there to prevent, if so be we are minded to stake our lives for the Cause, even as our fathers are doing?"

"It is for them to say whether we be permitted to bind ourselves together," I replied, having a doubt as to the wisdom of Silas's scheme, and yet wishing most fervently that it might be carried out.

"Think you your father or mine, Luke Wright, would set their faces against our raising a company of Minute Boys after Doctor Joseph Warren has seen fit to intrust to us a mission of importance? If we are capable of doing Master Warren's work, then of a verity have we proven our ability, if not our right, to serve the Cause as Minute Boys."

There was much of truth in what Archie said, and yet I could not bring myself on the moment to believe we might do what seemed a most venturesome thing. Since, however, I could not well answer the arguments he brought up, I set about as if to throw cold water on the scheme, by saying with the air of a lad who knows it all:

"I fear it would be a small company we could raise, if, peradventure, we were forced to find all our recruits in Boston town. I believe truly that I can count on the fingers of one hand, all whom we could trust. Of course you would reckon on keeping the matter a secret if it so chanced that we set about enrolling lads?"

"Why?" Archie asked hotly. "What reason might we have for striving to keep secret the fact of having bound ourselves to aid the Cause as far as lays in our power?"

Again had the lad put forth an argument which I could not answer, and yet it seemed to me then as if we might better be able to aid our elders in the coming struggle if we hid our purpose from the enemy, and by the enemy, I mean such scurvy rascals as Amos Nelson, of whom we could find many in Boston town without straining ourselves overmuch in the search.

"It makes very little difference whether you keep the matter a secret or not," Silas interrupted, "if so be we can find lads who have sufficient of courage to join us. We will choose only those who are to be trusted, and, after consulting our elders, may, if so be they approve of the enterprise, hold the matter private or make it public as they advise."

I was not minded to continue the discussion just at that time, for it seemed to me we might better bring our mission to a successful end if we held our peace. Water, as one well knows, will carry sound a long distance, and we were now so near the Charlestown shore that there could have been an hundred Tories or lobster backs hiding within the shadow of the foliage without our being the wiser. It was, therefore, with some petulance, mayhap, that I said:

"Whether we are to raise a company of Minute Boys or no, there is little possibility of getting very far in the scheme until after having returned to our homes. My idea is that, instead of speaking loudly of what we would do, it is best first to finish the business upon which we are embarked."

Then it was that Archie laughed heartily, and with great good humor, as he said cheerily, but without intending to throw anything of irony into his tone:

"There are times, Luke Wright, when you speak with much of good sense. Silas is at fault, and I also, because of raising our voices when it would have been better our tongues had remained quiet;

but that which he proposed was at the same time so surprising and so satisfying that I forgot we were bound to carry out Master Warren's work before doing, or even thinking of, anything else."

"I will say no more about it," Silas added with a laugh; "but at the same time am bound to maintain that we can do as I have stated, if so be the matter is gone about in proper fashion, and when we are at the ship-yard once more I will lay before you lads the plan in something approaching due order."

It was then we ceased speaking and gave all our attention to the task in hand, as indeed we had need to, for no one could say how soon we might come upon those who, mistrusting somewhat of our purpose and being enemies to the Cause, would put an end to our share of the night's work.

My comrades, as well as I, understood that we had need to gain the landing place as quickly as might be, for once on shore there remained a dozen or fourteen miles to be traveled before we were come to Lexington.

It is not needed that I should make a very long story of what ought to be told in few words, and therefore it is that instead of setting down all which we said and did from the time of beginning the journey afoot until we were come to our destination, I will content myself with saying that Doctor Warren's message was delivered before sunrise, and we lads, leg-weary and hungry, threw ourselves down upon the straw in Master Hadley's barn to wait until Colonel Barrett should say we were at liberty to depart.

Now all this had been plain sailing, and we should have found no reason to plume ourselves upon having done anything deserving of credit, for from the time we screened ourselves when the guard boat appeared, until having come to Master Hadley's house, no man had placed aught in our way. Yet I did feel somewhat of pride, thinking that we had done our first work in behalf of the Cause, all of which was folly as you may see, for surely three hulking lads need not carry their heads very high because of simply having sailed a skiff two or three miles and then walked a dozen more over a smooth highway.

I venture to say that Colonel Barrett did not hold us very high in his esteem because we had succeeded in delivering the message. He acted, as most like he felt, as if it was nothing of consequence which we had done, save for the fact that he had received the information, and a single lad a dozen years of age might have accomplished the same end.

I would have been well content to remain stretched out at full length on the straw in Master Hadley's barn until another night had come, so weary was I from walking and worn with lack of sleep; but when Colonel Barrett summoned us to the house, evidently for the purpose of sending us back, we could not well make protest.

He had prepared a written reply to Doctor Warren's message, and this he handed to me as he said:

"You may return as soon as is your pleasure; it matters little whether Master Warren receives my reply early or late."

"It will not be safe for us to make a try at getting into Boston until after nightfall, therefore we may go our way leisurely," I said to the gentleman, addressing him as I believed it was proper a soldier should address his superior officer, which shows that Silas's idea of enrolling a company of Minute Boys had found speedy lodgment in my mind.

"Set off when you will, and see to it that the paper is delivered safely, although that which it contains is so worded as to convey little of importance to an enemy," he added carelessly, and turned from us as if to say that he was done with speaking, therefore we might go when it pleased us best.

Now I had had in mind when we left Boston, that having once arrived at this house of Master Hadley's as messengers from Doctor Warren, we would be received with open arms and greatly praised because of the valuable service rendered; but we were not even asked to stay our hunger, and at that time I believe of a verity I could have eaten anything less hard than a flint.

However, not for all the food in Massachusetts colony would I have admitted that we stood in need of refreshments after so long a delay had been made in offering us any, and without further words I led the way down the lane to the road, Archie and Silas following close at my heels.

It was not until we had traveled a full mile that either of us ventured to speak, and then Archie said as if there was much which was comical in the situation:

"It seems that however highly we value ourselves, and whatsoever of importance we may attach to carrying a message from Doctor Warren to Colonel Barrett, no one else appears to be of our opinion. I had not thought they would kill a fatted calf for us as if we were Prodigal Sons; but surely some one might have asked, knowing we had traveled all night, whether or no a bit of corn bread would go amiss."

When he thus spoke we were come opposite a small, rude dwelling situate in one corner of a pasture wherein even a sheep would have found it difficult to satisfy its hunger, and in the door of this building stood a motherly looking old woman, her hands on her hips, and her eyes fixed on us in curiosity, as I fancied.

"You children are looking weary," she cried, and mayhap I bridled somewhat because she had called us who counted on soon being a portion of the Colonial army, "children." "Will you not wait and rest a while?"

I would have kept on, punishing my own body because Master Hadley's people had failed to show hospitality; but Silas accepted the invitation without ado, and threw himself down upon the moss nearby the door as if too weary to advance any further.

After this had been done Archie and I could do no less than follow his example, at least so far as coming to a halt was concerned, and I soon forgot the vexation in my heart because of what I counted as neglect, for the old woman ministered to us in as kindly, generous a fashion as our own mothers would have done.

That she was not well off in this world's goods might readily have been told by her surroundings, yet did she give of what she had freely, buttering the coarse food with so many kindly words that I believe of a verity I shall never partake again of so appetizing a meal.

As a matter of course she asked many questions as to why we were in the neighborhood, and perhaps there was no reason why we might not have satisfied her curiosity without explaining everything; yet it did not seem to me well that we should make any one acquainted with our mission. Even after we were told that she had a son who was then in Cambridge ready and eager to serve the colony as a soldier, we held our peace, save in so far as we told her that we were bound on getting into Boston, where were our homes.

It was natural she should ask many questions as to what the British were doing; whether we were so shut in by the lobster backs that it was impossible for any to get out save with a written pass, and equally reasonable, since her son counted on becoming a soldier, that she wanted to know if those who favored the Cause were ready to strike a speedy blow against the king's officers.

On all these points we gratified her curiosity in so far as lay in our power, meanwhile devouring her corn bread and fried pork without a thought as to whether we might not be depriving the poor soul of that which she absolutely needed to keep life in her shrivelled body.

We remained there an hour, and on taking our departure promised the good woman that we would on the first opportunity seek out her son, in order to tell him we had lately seen his mother.

Hiram Griffin was his name, so she told us, and I fixed it in my memory with little thought that the day would soon come when, because of keeping our promise to this old woman, we should be making the acquaintance of one who would befriend us in our time of sorest need.

Mistress Griffin bade us adieu as if we were her own kith and kin, and I for one felt the better for having come in touch with so kindly a soul after the neglect, as it seemed to me, of Samuel Hadley's people to minister to our needs.

During the remainder of the journey afoot we met, mayhap, a dozen farmers who lived on our line of march, and it seemed to me much as if they knew more concerning what the colonists would do in their own behalf than did we, who were so lately come from town. I noted, as also did Archie, so he told me later, that there was an air of anxious expectancy about all these people when, judging from our dress that we had come from Charlestown, or even Boston itself, they questioned us concerning the doings of the Sons of Liberty, the enrollment of Minute Men, and the smuggling of weapons across the Neck.

I said to myself that there was some movement afoot among these men concerning which I had not heard, and then straightway reproved myself for being such a simple as to believe they knew more regarding the purpose of our friends than did I, who heard discussed every day measures which would soon be taken to relieve ourselves of the burdens which the king had put upon us.

As a matter of course we had no means of knowing, except through their own speech, whether those we met were Tories, or true sons of the colony, therefore it behooved us to be guarded in our words, putting trust in no man however fairly he spoke us, and verily some of those big-hearted farmers, who shortly afterward shed their blood so freely in the defence of the colony, must have set us down as being woefully churlish.

Now and then as we walked Silas would come back to the subject of enrolling a company of Minute Boys, persisting in discussing the matter whenever we were in the open country where it was possible to make certain there were none lurking nearby who might hear us, and so eager was he on the scheme, that before we were come to where the skiff had been left, just below the ferry, it was already settled in our minds that we would make the attempt on the following day, if so be we arrived at our homes in safety.

We had even decided among ourselves as to which of our acquaintances should be invited to share the glory that all felt certain would come to us, once we had been allowed to join those who were to stand against the king in defense of their homes, and there yet remains as vividly in my mind as though it were yesterday that we walked from Master Hadley's to the ferry above Charlestown, all the details of the conversation we had concerning Seth Jepson.

We three knew the lad fairly well. He lived in Crooked lane, nearby Dock square, and was seemingly a kindly hearted youth, ready to do a favor for another even at his own expense; but yet I set my face against admitting him into the ranks of our Minute Boys, for no other reason than that I had often seen him in the company of Amos Nelson and two other young Tories.

Archie said my suspicions were idle because they had no other foundation than what I have set down, and that he might laugh me out of them he said with a grin:

"I have seen Baker's old gray goose paddling around among the chickens; but I never suspected him of being a rooster."

"Your wit is poor," I replied, nettled somewhat, "for there exists no likeness between a lad who may plot, and a goose that simply flocks with chickens to gain his food. I hold to it that we should have no association with those who traffic among the Tories."

Unfortunately, however, as we afterward came to realize, my companions over-rode my misgivings as to making him a comrade. Silas claimed that he had known the lad in fair weather and in foul, finding him true, with never a taint of Toryism, whoever his associates, and Archie declared stoutly that Seth was as loyal to the Cause as either of us. What more could I say? There were two opinions against mine, and I was not so stiff-necked as to hold out against these lads who had as much right as I to say who should or should not be allowed to join our company, if so be we formed one. As a matter of fact, the scheme being Silas's, he was the one who had the best right to decide any vexed question, and I felt at the time that it was no more than my duty to set in the background all the suspicions which I had formed against Seth Jepson, accepting the word of these my comrades that he was a lad true to the best interests of our colony.

We had so far decided upon this company of Minute Boys as to have set down in our own minds the names of fourteen lads, including Seth Jepson, whom we believed would be glad of an opportunity to join us, and it was agreed, by the time we were come to the end of the land journey, that on the following day, after having asked advice of Doctor Warren and if the scheme met with his approval, to raise a company of Minute Boys, calling upon those whom we had selected.

Then we were come to where the skiff had been hauled up on the shore. It was long past sunset, for we had walked leisurely giving no heed to making speed because of our desire not to arrive until after night had shut down, and the gathering clouds in the heavens stood our friends, inasmuch as they would serve to hide us from the view of General Gage's men who guarded the waterways. As a matter of fact, now was the moment above all others when we stood in danger, and I was more than willing to fancy the peril greater than it really was, to the end that the work we had performed might seem to be of some importance.

However, despite all my desire to make the service rendered appear perilous, I did not neglect any precautions for our safety, although I must confess to having been somewhat disappointed when, about midnight, we pulled in under the tumble-down wharf without having so much as seen the glint of a lobster back's belt buckle.

There is little need to say with what warmth mother welcomed me, after much pounding on the door I succeeded in making her understand that I was come home.

I fear that at the time I gave but slight heed to her loving words because of being so weary that it seemed almost impossible to keep my eyes open while standing, and tumbling, rather than laying down, upon the bed, I was soon gone into the land of dreams. Until eight of the clock I slept as only a tired boy can, and would not then have wakened but for the fact that Archie and Silas were standing by my bedside, both doing their best to arouse me into wakefulness.

I understood without being told that they were come to accompany me to Master Warren's house so we might deliver the reply to the message sent to Colonel Barrett, and promising my mother that I would speedily come back to breakfast, I hurried away with the lads, wondering how it was I could have slept so long when such an important question was to be settled; for, if you remember, we had agreed to leave the matter of raising a company of Minute Boys to Doctor Warren himself.

If at the home of Samuel Hadley we were treated with scant courtesy, and if Colonel Barrett had seemed to believe that which we had done was nothing remarkable when performed by three lusty lads, we surely had no reason to complain when we met the doctor, for on the instant we presented ourselves before him he exclaimed in surprise that we had been able to return so speedily. It almost seemed as if he never would have done with praising us for our industry in behalf of the Cause.

"It turned out a simple matter, which anyone might have worked out," I said, striving to belittle our work even when believing it should be praised. "We had no opportunity of coming to grief on the way, however careless might have been our movements, for, except at the outset, when the guard-boat passed just as we were getting under way, we have met none who appeared friendly to the king."

"I shall remember the service rendered, and it may be that sometime in the future I can repay you," the doctor said with one of his kindly smiles which always went deep into my heart when bestowed upon me.

"You may repay us now in full, if it so pleases you," Archie made bold to say.

"In what way, young master?"

"By deciding whether or no ten or twenty lads of this city by binding themselves together under, perhaps, the high-sounding name of Minute Boys, could be of service to the Cause?"

"And why might they not be of service?" the doctor asked quickly. "Think you that if such a company was enrolled, composed of boys who were to be trusted in every way, they could not do much in aid of the Cause? Even though called upon to perform only such work as you have just finished, they would be of valuable assistance, for now when Boston is in the hands of the enemy,

and, as I hope, may soon be besieged by our friends, lads could come and go where men would be unable to move without exciting suspicion."

"Then you would advise that we raise a company?" I asked eagerly, and he replied "yes," so emphatically that there could be no doubt as to his approval.

"And think you it would sound simple to call ourselves Minute Boys?"

"By no means, lads, for that is what you count on being, and I venture to predict that in the days to come, when you are men grown old, such a title will bring to your hearts more of pride than any which could be bestowed by a king. The time is not far distant when this colony shall be freed from British rule, and all those who have had a part in the work may well give thanks because God allowed them such abundant opportunity of serving their country."

Now after that think you we loitered in the work of enrolling the Minute Boys? So eager were we to set about it that I believe we left the kindly doctor with but scant ceremony, running into the open air like so many sheep set free.

Chance, or some evil fortune, decreed that the first lad we should meet after having left Master Warren's house, was that same Seth Jepson whom I was opposed to counting as a comrade, and Silas, eager to gain the first recruit for our company of Minute Boys, hailed him in a friendly fashion.

"Should we not wait until deciding more fully whether it will be well to let him come among us?" I asked, hoping even then that it might be possible to shut him out; but Archie said with somewhat of impatience:

"If we are to quibble over the name of each fellow who is likely to join our company, and strive to find in him ever so slight a leaning toward the king, then we may as well give over the effort at once, for certain it is we haven't enough time to raise recruits in such manner."

What could I have said after such a remark, which savored more of irritation than I am able to make appear by words? Even though I had had proof that Seth Jepson was not the kind of a lad we should take on as comrade, that which Archie said would have silenced me.

Silas did not wait many seconds before plunging into the business he was so eager to carry out, and in a twinkling Seth knew as much about the scheme as did we who had hatched it. Search his face with my eyes as I might, it was impossible to tell by any expression there whether the plan seemed to him good or ill; but when Silas was come to an end of his brief explanation the lad said, as if asking a question:

"And would you enroll me among your Minute Boys?"

"Ay, else why should I spend my breath in recounting the plan," Silas cried impatiently. "Are you of the mind to join us, or is it more to your liking to follow Amos Nelson and act as lickspittle to any lobster back you chance to come upon?"

"I have never done so yet," Seth replied, and I waited in vain to hear him declare that his greatest desire was the success of the colonies in the coming struggle. "In case I set myself down as a member of your company, what may be expected of me?"

Now according to my belief, a lad of Boston town who had such a proposition made to him should, if he had been of the right metal, have jumped at it eagerly instead of waiting to learn whether he would have much or little work to perform, and I looked meaningly at Archie, believing he would detect in this hesitation of Seth's, as I did, a leaning toward Toryism; but he, thinking only of enrolling a sufficient number of names to make our company of decent size, apparently gave no heed to that which caused me so much of uneasiness.

Silas was at a loss to answer the question asked by Seth, for we had not gone so far in our speculations as to say what our duties might be before we could, and with truth, call ourselves Minute Boys; but finally he made reply stammeringly:

"You will be expected to do whatsoever you may in behalf of the Cause. Now we three lads have ourselves been sent to Lexington by Doctor Warren to carry a message, and most likely similar work will fall to the share of the Minute Boys."

"You have just come from Lexington?" Seth cried, looking up sharply, and even Silas must have understood that he had been indiscreet, to say the least, in thus divulging what should have been kept a secret.

"I only spoke of that to show you what the Minute Boys may be called upon to do. As a matter of course, we will be under the command of others, and bound to set our hands to whatsoever work is found for us."

Seth did not appear very eager to take advantage of this opportunity to serve the colony. He stood there as if chewing it over in his mind until I said with somewhat of impatience, and no little hope that he might finally refuse:

"If the idea does not seem good to you there is no reason why you may not refuse to join us. We want only those lads who are eager to aid the Cause in so far as in them lies."

"I was only asking myself whether you might depend upon me to answer any call promptly, for my parents do not leave me as free as are some of you. However, I think you can reckon it a bargain, and I will do my best to obey orders."

"We are to have a meeting to-night at the old ship-yard, near to Luke Wright's home," Archie said, evidently thinking we had spent too much time over the gaining of this one recruit, and as we hurried away Seth cried, in what sounded to me like an odd tone:

"Don't fear but that I will be there."

I was so irritated because Seth had become our first recruit, and owing to the fact that Silas had publicly spoken of our journey to Lexington, that I could make no comment on what had been done, and as we walked on with our faces set toward my home, where I counted on breaking fast, Archie said laughingly:

"You are disgruntled because we chanced to run upon Seth."

"Whether I am or no makes little difference now, since he has agreed to join us," I replied, and the lad, to win me out of what was very like a sulky mood, continued:

"I am certain you wrong Seth, and you yourself can only give as a reason for suspecting him that he has often been seen with Tory lads. Now it is in my mind that if you and I had as our neighbors half a dozen of those foolish boys who had rather serve the king than the colony, we would often be seen in their company."

"There is no good reason why we should discuss the matter now that the mischief, if any comes of it, has been done," I replied, and then eager to be alone for the moment, suggested that I go home for something to eat, meeting my comrades an hour later near the city dock.

To this Silas agreed quickly, for he was eager to continue the work of gaining recruits, and had no stomach for idling the time away at my home.

Therefore it was that we three parted company, and when at somewhere near the time agreed upon I went to the rendezvous, neither Silas nor Archie were to be seen.

Their absence gave me no uneasiness, for it was possible to guess exactly why they had not come, and I loitered idly about, watching now a squad of General Gage's lobster backs as they marched upon some duty which was likely to be unpleasant to those who loved the Cause, and again listening to snatches of conversation when two or three whom I knew to be Tories passed in earnest converse. Without being able to give any reason, I became impressed, as while returning from Master Hadley's home, with the idea that something of moment was on foot – something of which I remained in ignorance, – and that it was important such as Doctor Warren should know of my suspicions.

It was not until the day had grown near to noon that I saw either of my comrades, and then it was Archie who came up, looking thoroughly well pleased as he said in a tone of triumph:

"What think you, Luke Wright, of our having enrolled fourteen lads as Minute Boys, and without having spent half a day at the task?"

Archie gave me the names, and, except in the case of the first recruit, I could find no fault with any.

Then the lad set about telling me how he and Silas had accomplished the work, making of it so long a story, and with so much of detail, that I gave little heed to anything he said, until from the opposite side of the dock that Tory cur, Amos Nelson, shouted in a tone of derision, speaking to one of his kindred spirits who was yet quite a distance away:

"There are two who count on raising a mob of rebels to drive the king's soldiers from Boston!"

CHAPTER III

THE WAR BEGUN

There could be no question, after this cry from Amos Nelson, but that he and his Tory friends had in some way come to learn of what we lads would do toward aiding the Cause.

It was natural that I, suspecting Seth Jepson, should set down to his door the crime of having betrayed us to our enemies; but when I put that thought into words Archie would have none of it. He declared that however much Seth might be inclined toward Toryism, he was not such a knave as to join us with traitorous intentions in his heart.

We had made no reply to Amos Nelson, and it appeared much as if his only desire was to let us understand that he was in possession of our secret, for immediately after having taunted us he went off in the direction of Corn hill, taking his friend with him, therefore Archie and I had nothing to do except discuss the possibility of our having been betrayed, with not a little warmth but no result.

Silas was still engaged in the work of enrolling recruits, and failed to come to the rendezvous, most like believing he could be doing better service in seeking out those who would become Minute Boys, than by wagging his tongue at the city dock with us.

Because of knowing that that which we would keep private was a secret no longer, I grew disheartened, and instead of agreeing to Archie's proposition that the remainder of the day be spent in gaining yet more recruits, I turned my face homeward once more, agreeing crustily to meet those who had promised to become Minute Boys at the old ship-yard that evening.

A blind man might have seen that Archie was not well pleased with my sudden lukewarmness in the matter of raising a company. He believed he knew there had been no betrayal by Seth, and therefore set down my behavior to ill nature, rather than disappointment because the plan had gone awry even before it was well begun.

During the remainder of the day I kept closely housed, doing whatsoever came to hand in the way of helping my mother, therefore it was, perhaps, that I failed of hearing much which might have startled, and even frightened me.

When the night was come I went according to agreement to the ship-yard, and there found assembled those whom Archie and Silas had enrolled. A goodly company it was, for all told we numbered sixteen, and surely if that many lads, eager to do whatsoever they might in aid of the Cause, could be found in Boston town within twelve hours, the time must be near at hand when we could boast of sufficient recruits to make a showing before our elders.

Seth Jepson was among the number, and I must confess at being surprised. So firmly did I believe him to be the one who had betrayed us, that I fancied the fellow would not dare show his head, yet there he was with no token of guilt, so far as I could see, but appearing to be on most friendly terms with every one.

He was so outspoken in behalf of the Minute Boys; so confident they might in time to come make for themselves an enviable name, that my belief in his treachery was almost shaken for the moment.

Then came that which I least expected. It had been decided that we would have two officers, one a captain, and the other a lieutenant. Archie Hemming spoke up boldly, declaring that I was his choice as leader; but before it was possible for me to make any protest, the others had backed him up with so many noisy words that the matter was settled without my permission, and decidedly against my inclination. It was Archie who should have been the commander of the Minute Boys, because his head was clearer than mine. He was more ready of wit; but when I would have said as much to my comrades, Silas shut me off with a sharp turn, declaring laughingly that Archie should be the lieutenant, and thus hold a position where he could counter-balance all my shortcomings.

This also was decided in a twinkling, and thus was our company of Minute Boys officered despite the better judgment of him who had been selected as captain.

There was much to discuss on this first night of meeting if we were to become, as we claimed, a company of soldiers. Plans should be laid concerning how we best might set about making ourselves recognized by the Sons of Liberty, or by the officers of the militia. Then we had to decide upon some regular rendezvous, where at the first summons we might all assemble, and this last we agreed should be where we then were, at the old ship-yard, on the tumble-down dock beneath which my skiff was hidden.

Every fellow had some plan to suggest which would work to the benefit of our company, and while nothing was actually decided upon save the place where we should meet at the first summons, the time passed so rapidly that it was midnight before the last of us had freed his mind. Then, as a matter of course, we scurried home, going singly or in couples that we might the better evade the red-coated watch, which patrolled every street, and fearful lest we be chided by our parents, even though we called ourselves by the high sounding name of "Minute Boys," for having remained out so late.

Thus it was that we lads, who prided ourselves on being keenly on the alert for any movement of the lobster backs, and much the same as imprisoned in our own city where it all happened, failed of knowing that shortly before the meeting of the Minute Boys was broken up, eight hundred of the king's men were embarked in boats at the Common, bound, as we afterward knew, and as many of our elders were then aware, for Lexington and Concord.

Before nightfall of the next day the Minute Boys of Boston assembled at the rendezvous without having been summoned, for word had been brought into town of the bloody work at Lexington and Concord, and we lads, who counted on taking such active part in the struggle against the king, had lost the first opportunity of showing what it might be possible for us to do.

Sixty-five of the king's soldiers had been killed, one hundred and eighty wounded, and twenty-eight taken prisoners; while of our people fifty-nine were killed, thirty-nine wounded, and five failed to answer to the roll call, having, most like, crawled away, as do the lower animals, to die alone.

All this had been done within and around that town we had so lately visited, and yet Archie, Silas and I, who counted ourselves as being keen-witted, had failed to have the slightest inkling of what was so near at hand.

While we had been making simple plans for the future, loitering in Boston when we might have been of service elsewhere, our people were being shot down by the lobster backs, and as these thoughts came into my mind I felt as if I had committed some grievous sin in laying up against Samuel Hadley the charge of being inhospitable, for he was among the first to yield his life in behalf of the Cause.

Doctor Warren was there, and also my father, while most like the old woman's son, Hiram Griffin, helped to do that which proclaimed to the king our readiness to give our lives rather than submit to injustice. As I counted over those whom I knew and guessed had taken part in that battle, it seemed to me as if of all who would serve the Cause, our Minute Boys were the only ones absent.

It is needless for me to set down all the unavailing words of regret which were spoken among us that night after having heard the news, for it can readily be fancied how we reproached ourselves, and how bitter was our disappointment. In our shortsightedness and inability to realize that the work at Lexington and Concord was but the beginning of the struggle against the king, we failed to understand that we would again and again have ample opportunity of showing what it might be possible for us lads of Boston to do.

What at this day seems to me strangest, was that in our grief and vexation we failed to make any plans for future work. It was as if we had come to believe that the butchery at Lexington ended it all, and we Minute Boys would no longer be needed.

Perhaps our dullness may be accounted for by the fact that there was so much of excitement on this night and the next day, that we hardly had time to think of ourselves. Those yet remaining in Boston, who were devoted to the Cause, gathered here and there to talk over what at the same

time brought us sorrow and rejoicing – sorrow that so many of our people had been slaughtered, and rejoicing that the struggle against British misrule had finally begun.

The Tories made a big show of themselves, taking good care to appear in public and boast that this first lesson was but the beginning of a series which the king would teach us. They talked so loudly and gave themselves so wholly over to rejoicing that one would have believed a great victory had been won, whereas, as a matter of fact, our people, all unused to the art of war and but poorly armed, had, as it were, sent the king's trained men home like whipped curs.

If the battle of Lexington was a victory for the lobster backs, then of a verity when the king's men had won a dozen of a similar kind, we of the colony were come off conquerors.

Archie's father was at home during the battle, but on the evening of that day he was summoned to Cambridge, where, so it was stated, our people were gathering in great numbers. His last command to my comrade, and also advice to others of the company who called themselves Minute Boys, was that he and we remain under cover as much as possible during the next three or four days, for it was reasonable to suppose the Britishers would be more severe in their rule than they had been; that only the slightest provocation would be needed to lodge in jail those who favored the Cause.

It was not in my mind that we lads would be allowed to go to Cambridge where an army was gathering under the command of the Committee of Safety, until we had in some way proven ourselves, and therefore, much to my disappointment, I had made up my mind that by not having been in Lexington at the time of the battle we had lost all opportunity for taking part in active work.

Luckily, however, I had sufficient sense to give warning that all those who had been enrolled as Minute Boys should stay near to their own homes until it might be possible to know what our people intended to do, and at the same time hold themselves in readiness for any summons which might come.

It was on the second night after the Lexington butchery that Archie came to my home, having the permission of his mother to sleep with me. We had been earnestly trying to hit upon some way of showing what could be done by lads such as us, and this visit of his to my home was planned that we might have more time in which to discuss matters.

From noon until perhaps three hours after we had gone to bed, we lads talked, suggesting one scheme after another only to discard each as being impossible of execution, when there came a summons at the outer door which brought both of us to our feet trembling with apprehension, although we could not have said why.

Visitors did not often come at such a time, and there were so few among our neighbors friendly to the Cause, who yet remained in Boston town, that it did not seem probable any of them would be abroad so late while the Tories were given over to rejoicing because of what had been done at Lexington.

I could hear my mother as she went to the barred door and asked as to who might be there, after which came the answer, so distinct that I could catch every word:

"I would see Luke Wright, having a message from his father."

"And who may you be?" mother asked.

"Hiram Griffin," came the reply.

"It is the son of the old woman who fed us when we were hungry," I cried joyfully to Archie as I ran down the stairs, taking three or four steps at a bound, for I knew this Hiram Griffin had been loitering in Cambridge until he might be of service to the Cause, and his coming could not betoken ill for me or mine.

As soon as might be I unbarred the door, while my mother was striving with trembling fingers to get a flame to the candle, and then there entered a young fellow who could hardly have been one and twenty, stout of frame, with a face betokening rarest good nature, but yet at the same time giving one to believe that he might be dull and heavy in his movements.

"Where did you come from?" I asked, forgetting that it was my duty, in the absence of my father, to welcome this visitor.

"I am from Cambridge where our people are gathering as flies gather around molasses, so that in time we may have men enough to meet all the forces General Gage can send against us."

"How did you get here?"

"Partly by walking, partly by pulling in a skiff, and partly by swimming, for one of his majesty's guard-boats ran me down half a mile or more from the shore, and had I not played the muskrat, being able to stay under water as long as that animal, I had been in the city jail by this time."

Now it was I saw his clothes were sodden; the water which dripped from every fold of his garments made a puddle upon the floor, whereat I quickened the embers on the hearth into a blaze that he might dry himself, and, understanding what I would do, this Hiram Griffin said with a laugh:

"A little more or less of water won't do me any harm, and I can well afford to take the wetting because of shutting the eyes of the lobster backs so finely. They counted that I must have drowned, since one of the lubbers aimed a blow at my head and shattered the gunwale of the boat. Most like he thought my skull was stove in, and consequently they did not spend much time looking for a dead man that was believed to be at the bottom of the harbor."

"But you came with a message," Archie interrupted as he descended the stairs, looking curiously at the stranger.

"Ay, and won't be long in the giving of it, seeing as it's no written word. Your father, if so be your name is Luke Wright," he added turning to me, "would have you and a lad named Archie Hemming come to Cambridge as soon as may be."

"But what for?" Archie asked sharply, and Griffin, looking at him in surprise because he thus interrupted the conversation, said curtly:

"It was not for me to ask why Luke was wanted. My part was to bring the message, if so be I could get into this town, and I allow General Gage would need more lobster backs than he has now to keep me out if once I was set on entering."

"When are we to start?" Archie asked again, and Griffin cried:

"And who may you be, young sir?"

"I am Archie Hemming."

"Oho! so it seems I have killed my two birds with one stone, eh? Well, that may turn out luckily, for I am little acquainted with the streets of Boston, and was counting on having somewhat of trouble to find your home."

"How did you know where we lived?" I asked.

"Your father put it in words so plainly that I could not have missed my aim after once coming upon the ship-yard. Now if you have done with questioning, suppose we set off?"

"Do you mean that the lads are to go to Cambridge at once?" my mother asked in mingled surprise and anxiety, whereupon Hiram Griffin said with a clumsy bow:

"Those were the orders. Master Wright claimed that it would not be safe for us to make any try at leaving Boston save at night, and unless we set off at once four and twenty hours will be wasted just when time is most precious."

It can well be imagined that I was in the highest state of excitement at thus being summoned to where the friends of the Cause were gathering to continue the rebellion against the king which had been begun at Lexington. It seemed that although our Minute Boys had failed to take advantage of their first opportunity, it might yet be possible to do something which would bring them among those who were devoting themselves to the colony.

"You are to understand that the lobster backs wrecked my boat, therefore another will be needed, unless you count on leaving town by way of the Neck," Hiram said while Archie and I were hurriedly dressing, and then, if never before, did I bless the inclination to buy, a short twelve months since, out of my slender purse, the skiff which was hidden under the dock at the ship-yard.

"We have all we may need in that line," Archie said cheerily, and I could well understand how glad was his heart because this summons had come to us. "But for that which was done at Lexington, Luke Wright and I would have sought you in Cambridge long ere this."

"Sought me?" Griffin repeated in perplexity.

"Ay, so we promised your mother," Archie replied, and then he went on to tell of our halt on the road from Master Hadley's, and when he was done Hiram said fervently:

"God bless her, her heart was ever as large as that of an ox, and she could no more see man or boy pass by hungry without trying to make amends for it, than she could fly. Some day, please God, the three of us will go to the home which isn't much to look at; but no lad ever had a better one so far as a mother's love and care counts."

It seemed as if the visitor was recalled by this outburst of devotion, to his immediate duty, for on the instant he changed his tune by crying gruffly:

"Are we to stand here until the sun is so near to rising that we will find it a ticklish job to slip by the guard-boats?"

"Archie and I have never had any trouble in leaving Boston, or of coming into it when we were so minded, and we will set you on the road to Cambridge without turning a hair."

"I am told that the lobster backs are keeping sharper watch since Lexington, than ever before, and for a certainty around this end of the town the guard-boats are as thick as fleas on a dog, therefore I'm thinking it is best we set off before the night gets old."

By this time both Archie and I were ready; that is, we were fully clothed, and since the journey, in case it was not interrupted, would be short, there were no further preparations to be made, except that we first go to warn my comrade's mother of his intended departure.

I proposed that Hiram Griffin should remain at my home until we were done with this part of the business; but he, having found us so readily, was not willing we should give him the slip even for a moment, and therefore it was we doubled the danger of being brought to an accounting by the patrol, in taking him across to Hull street.

All might have gone well if we had contented ourselves with this much, leaving to my mother and Archie's the task of notifying the other Minute Boys of our whereabouts; but I must needs attend to more than was necessary, thinking my position as captain demanded it, and after leaving Hull street, instead of embarking without delay as we should have done, I insisted that we pay a visit to Silas Browrigg's for the purpose of explaining to him what ought to be done with the company during our absence.

Now up to this time we had been so fortunate as not to have come in contact with the patrol or any straggling lobster back, and it would have been possible, had we gone directly there, for us to have gained the ship-yard unobserved.

Hiram Griffin grumbled not a little because I deemed it necessary to pay so many visits, but, unfortunately, I gave no heed to his words, being speedily brought to repent of my heedlessness, for no sooner did we turn the corner into Salem street than we came upon two of the watch, and with them a squad of six lobster backs.

Now, as of course you know, we had no lawful right to be abroad in the streets at that hour without a pass; but it would have been useless for us who called ourselves rebels to have applied for any such permission to wander about for, as a rule, none save Tories were so favored. Since General Gage had begun to hold us the same as prisoners, I and all my friends had taken the chances of venturing out even after nine of the clock, and because thus far we had not gotten ourselves into trouble, I was grown bolder than a prudent lad should have been.

When we came upon the watch, reinforced by the lobster backs, however, I realized on the instant how dangerous was the situation. Without passes, and known to be sons of those who favored the Cause, there was no question but what we would be committed to prison, and at some time, meaning when Governor Gage or his understrappers saw fit, brought up for examination.

Therefore it was that my thoughts turned to flight, and stepping back a pace to check Hiram Griffin's advance, I whispered hurriedly:

"Get over to the ship-yard and hide under the old wharf!"

However dull and heavy Hiram may have appeared, he surely was quick-witted, needing not a kick to emphasize a hint, for the words were no sooner out of my mouth than he was off like a deer, taking the precaution to run in a zig-zag course lest the lobster backs should send a shower of bullets after him.

I followed his example, so far as taking refuge in flight was concerned; but instead of continuing on by the street, I leaped the fence of Parson Reed's yard, making my way across his garden with but little heed to the damage that might be done the young plants.

On the instant came shouts from the watch and from the soldiers for us to halt, and a few seconds later the crackle of musketry telling that they had opened fire, most like on Hiram Griffin, for by this time I was well hidden from view.

I listened with painful intentness for a cry from Hiram which would betoken that one of the British bullets had found its billet, because he would be like to cry out in case of being wounded.

Happily no such dismal warning came to my ears, and believing I was safe from pursuit because of knowing my way through the gardens hereabout, and having close at hand many a safe hiding place, I asked myself for the first time what might have been Archie's fate.

I had not seen the lad escaping; he was two or three paces in advance of me when we turned the corner, and the chances were that the poor fellow had been made prisoner before having had time to realize the danger which we had come upon so suddenly. While one might have counted ten I stood irresolute, wondering whether it was not my duty to learn his fate even at the expense of being captured, in order that I might do something toward aiding him; but then I come to understand that such a course would be sheer folly. I could do nothing toward effecting his release, and it seemed necessary, at whatever hazard, that I make my way to Cambridge according to orders.

Yet even when I would have continued the flight came the thought that it was cowardly to thus desert a comrade; that as captain of the Minute Boys duty demanded that I stand by every member of the company, however great their peril, yet of what avail would it be?

Even while these thoughts were in my mind I was running as does the hare when the dogs are close on his scent, and at the same time that I reproached myself I strained every effort to gain the goal, which was the ship-yard, where I believed Hiram Griffin would sooner or later make his way.

Behind me I could still hear the cries of the watch and the crackle of musketry as the lobster backs fired at random, for it was not possible that Hiram yet remained in view, and with this noise were mingled the shouts of citizens who had been awakened from their slumbers, until there was a perfect bedlam at that corner of Hull and Salem streets.

To my relief I came to understand that the noise grew fainter and fainter as I advanced, and, therefore, was it certain that the Britishers were not on my trail; but with such pleasing knowledge came the thought that Hiram might have been shot down, or, failing to continue a true course, was doubling here and there with the pursuers close upon his heels.

I ran as never before, straining every nerve and muscle in the race as one will when he knows that a prison awaits him if he be overtaken, and it was well the road was no longer, for when finally I dashed in under the broken timbers of the old wharf my breath was coming so short and thick that I question if I had been able to advance twenty paces further. I was hidden from view, but had any come in search of me they must have heard my heavy breathing, or the beating of my heart, which was thumping like a trip-hammer.

Lying upon the wet mud and seaweed, for the tide was luckily at about half-ebb, I strove desperately to regain my breath and my strength so that I might have both at command if by some chance the lobster backs got an inkling of my whereabouts.

How long I remained there it is impossible to say, for at such times a minute seems a whole hour. I only know that I had recovered in a great measure from the fatigue of the race when there came to my ears the sound of footsteps approaching the hiding place, and in a twinkling I was on my knees ready to spring out in either direction if the red-coated pursuer showed himself, for at that time I had no doubt but what he who thus advanced was in search of me. You see I had for the instant almost the same as forgotten that Hiram Griffin, if not a prisoner, or Archie, if by some lucky chance he had escaped, would strive to meet me at that place.

During the merest fraction of time I gave myself up to fear, and then, my mind clearing and common sense returning, I crept softly out, still keeping within the shadow of the timbers, until I could see against the sky the form of him who was coming toward the hiding place.

One glance was sufficient to show that it was Hiram Griffin, and even then when my mind was in such a whirl, I said to myself that he must be a keen lad who could find his way thus deftly across a strange town.

Standing up that he might see me and know in what direction to advance, I held out both hands, welcoming him when he was come near, as we welcome those who have literally escaped from the jaws of death.

"I'm thinking that we best not do much in the way of tongue wagging while standing here in the open," he said, speaking with difficulty because of his heavy breathing, and straightway I led him under the timbers where I had been hiding, asking meanwhile how he had succeeded in getting away from the red coats.

"It was only a case of using my legs," he cried grimly. "When a fellow knows that he is being chased by bullets he is able to move right fast. If you had skipped that last visit, thinking more of duty to those who sent me than to your comrades in the company of Minute Boys, we had gotten off without turning a hair."

"Ay, it is my fault and mine only that Archie has been made prisoner," I cried bitterly, and Hiram asked in surprise, for until this moment he believed the lad to be with me:

"Has he been taken?"

"It must be so, since he has not come up. He most like ran into the very arms of the watch before realizing the danger," I replied.

"Well, here's a pretty kettle of fish," and Hiram spoke much as if the capture of Archie would be fatal to all the plans of those who had sent him.

"Think you we should go back and try to find the lad?" I asked helplessly, and he cried as if in anger:

"To what end? Have you an idea that two might take him by force from such a gang as made him prisoner?"

"We could at least go to prison with him, and not have it said we deserted a comrade."

"Lad," Hiram began, laying his hand impressively on my arm, "before this 'ere squabble with the king has come to an end there will be many a good lad clapped into prison, and many another sent into the next world by means of British bullets. If we of the colonies count on gaining our freedom we must not let the life or liberty of one person stand in our way, however dear to our hearts that one may be."

"Then you believe we should leave the poor lad to his fate?" I asked.

"Ay, what else can be done? I came for two lads, and if so be it is possible I will carry back at least one with me. In case that can't be accomplished, I'll do my best to save my own skin in order to make report. Where's your skiff?"

"Just yonder," and I pointed to a dark mass twenty feet or more away.

"'Tis time we were setting off, for no one can say how much more of danger we may strike before crossing the water."

Hiram was making of what seemed to me a most exciting adventure, nothing more than business, and his matter-of-fact way of looking at the situation did more toward bringing me to my senses than any line of argument he could have used.

I ran to the skiff, and when we had dragged her down the shore until she was waterborne, both of us stopped as with one accord to listen lest an enemy might have been creeping up on us.

Nothing came to our ears save the splash of oars in the distance nearby where the king's ships were at anchor, and a distant hum as of people moving about in the town a long way off.

"I reckon this is as good a time as we'll find for making the start," Hiram said as he clambered into the skiff. "I don't count myself as much of a sailor, and therefore you will have to take a hand in this until we have landed somewhere near to Willis creek, which is our best course on the road to Cambridge."

"Why not go by Cambridge river?" I asked, eager to save myself a long tramp on land.

"If you are willing to take the risk, I'm agreed; but it strikes me that if the guard-boats are very thick hereabouts we'll have a better show of getting off scot free by going up the creek, than if we sailed entirely around the town, as we must in order to gain the river."

There was some good sense in what he said, which I understood even before he ceased speaking, and I made reply while pushing the skiff out from amid the rotten timbers:

"It would seem as if you were sailor enough to understand what dangers lie in our course, and perhaps I had best give over the command to you, for verily I showed myself a simple by thinking it possible to go by the river."

"I have been around Cambridge a few days, an' seein's how there was a chance my mother's son might get himself into a scrape while these 'ere Britishers are so careless with their guns, I made it my business to pick up a pretty good idee of the situation," Hiram said with a chuckle of mirth at his own precautions. "I figured quite a spell ago that if a man wanted to get across to the other shore, he'd best make the water part of the journey as short as might be."

By this time we were well out from beneath the wharf. I had taken up the oars, since there was not wind enough to fill the sail, and was counting on stretching across from Hudson's point to Charlestown, when Hiram whispered softly:

"Turn about lad; head exactly opposite to where you count on going, for yonder, coming this way if I'm not mistaken, is a craft of some kind."

Fortunately I acted on his suggestion without delaying to ask the reason for such a move, and it was well that I did, since we were no sooner headed toward Noddle island than I could make out, even in the gloom, a boat filled with men which seemingly had come from the direction of the water mill.

It is needless to say that I put every ounce of strength on the oars; but in the other craft there were no less than four men pulling vigorously, and our chances of escaping unobserved would have been slight indeed had not Hiram lent his aid.

Seizing the second pair of oars he swung himself around on the after thwart, and although he made no claim to being a sailor, I never saw one who worked to better advantage. It seemed as if he had the strength of a dozen men in his arms, and the skiff shot forward into the gloom as if hardly touching the water, until we were come so near the shore of Noddle island as to be in the denser shadows, where we could afford to wait until learning what course our pursuers might be taking.

I was not able to distinguish objects clearly because of the gloom, yet I fancied it was possible to make out that a certain number of the eight or ten men occupying the oncoming boat were armed – they surely had the bearing of soldiers, and I said to myself, that suspecting Hiram and I might take to the water, they were come in search of us.

The same thought was evidently in my companion's mind, for he turned his head to whisper ever so softly:

"I'm thinking we had best make a landing near here, where we can haul the skiff out of the water, for yonder crew will make a close search if I am not mistaken."

There was a chance that by circling the shore of Noddle island until we were come off Morton's point, it might be possible to give these fellows the slip; but then we would be a long distance from our destination, in addition to running the risk of being captured, and it seemed to me I was warranted in acting upon Hiram's suggestion.

We worked the oars softly, as can well be imagined, and having come to the land went waist-deep into the water lest the grounding of the skiff's bow upon the sand might be heard.

It was no great task to lift the small craft so that she could be carried without scraping against the rocks, and we lugged her into a clump of bushes which grew near the water's edge, where so well was she hidden that she could not have been seen even in the daylight, after which we set ourselves to listen in order to gain some idea of what those in the other boat might be doing.

Before half an hour had passed there was no longer any doubt in my mind but that they were in search of us, having a pretty good idea, from the direction of our flight, that we were bent on gaining the water-front, and also, most like, that we could not pass Hudson's point without being seen by them.

The boat was pulled to and fro between the island and the ship-yard as if they were standing guard, and when she had set across, mayhap, three or four times, Hiram asked of me in a whisper:

"Think you your comrade might have told them what we would try to do?"

"Of course not!" I replied with somewhat of anger in my tone that he should suspect Archie of any such vileness. "The lad is true to his friends, and would never betray them no matter how much silence might cost him."

"Then it looks as if some one had got an amazingly good idee of what we would do, and from what part of the town we'd set off," Hiram said thoughtfully. "Those fellows couldn't have set about their work better if we'd told them in advance that we'd leave the ship-yard and try to go to Cambridge."

Like a flash came into my mind the thought that Seth Jepson might have succeeded in doing us this mischief, if mischief had really been done; but I dismissed it on the instant, saying to myself that surely the lad could not have known what we were likely to do, even were it probable he had had opportunity of speaking to those we had stumbled against.

"It is neither more nor less than blind chance," I said in reply to my companion's words. "Because we headed for the ship-yard they supposed we had a boat nearby, and because our people were gathering at Cambridge they would naturally say it was our purpose to go there."

"Whichever way you put it, it's going to be mighty tough on us, for unless those fellows get tired of pulling that heavy boat 'twixt now and sunrise, we are like to be held here until to-morrow night."

CHAPTER IV

THE PRISONER

Whether it was that those who were the same as holding us prisoners on the island had an inkling we were somewhere in the vicinity, or if it was by pure chance that they happened to patrol that particular part of the harbor just then, I am unable to say; but certain it was that they remained continually on the move throughout the entire night, never going so far away that we had half an opportunity of slipping out unobserved, and now and then coming so near that it was possible for us to hear their conversation.

As the moments passed and it became almost certain we must remain in hiding during the coming day, I fell into a perfect fever of impatience. Now blaming myself most bitterly for having attempted to warn Silas of what we were to do, and again saying that I was showing myself a coward by thus leaving Archie to his fate, although what I might have done just then in his behalf I could not have said.

As a matter of course we had brought with us neither food nor water, thinking the voyage to Cambridge would be accomplished in a few hours at the most, and therefore it was that Hiram and I faced hunger and thirst, knowing that both must be endured by us before the sun had set again.

"It's a case of bearing whatever comes, and looking pleasant," my companion said when the grey light of a new day appeared in the eastern sky. "I allow that the hours will seem precious long before we dare poke our noses out of this clump of bushes again, but what can't be cured must be endured, and seein's how we haven't had any sleep, I'm proposing to bottle up as much as I may while those blooming lobster backs hold us here like rats in a trap."

Having said this Hiram looked about for a level place in which to stretch out at full length; but failing to find it he curled himself up as if trying to hug the twigs, and almost immediately appeared to fall into profound slumber.

I was so uncomfortable in mind that it would not be possible for me to settle down to sleep however much I might need repose. We were not so well hidden from view but what in the broad glare of day any who chanced to pass near at hand might see us, and although unarmed and therefore unable to make any defence, it seemed absolutely necessary one of us should remain on watch.

When the day had fully dawned it was possible for me to see the guard-boats which had been on duty all night, pulling here and there like spiders which have been disappointed in their prey; but until about an hour after sunrise there were no small boats 'twixt Noddle island and the town. However, a dozen or more could be seen going from one to another of the king's ships, for the *Lively*, the *Somerset* and the *Falcon* were anchored off the shore, stretching from the South to the North battery.

At one time I was on the point of awakening Hiram and proposing that he and I make the venture of rowing up the coast of the island till opposite Morton's point, and from there to the Penny ferry; but I stayed my hand even while it was outstretched to seize his arm, realizing that I was not warranted in taking the chance for two very good and sufficient reasons. The first, that it was necessary I obey the summons to present myself at Cambridge, and again, that I must preserve my liberty if I would do anything toward aiding the dear lad whom I doubted not was lodged in the prison on Queen street.

How it might be possible for me to succor him had not come to my mind, yet I believed that with all our company of Minute Boys to aid, something might be done even while he was held by the king's men, who would rather shoot him down than allow a rebel to escape from their clutches.

Then it was I began to cast about for some plan which would promise at least a shadow of success, and I had ample time before me for such effort, unless, perchance, some inquisitive lobster back or marine came upon our hiding place.

It was not possible for me to make much headway in laying plans. I worked out one in my mind only to abandon it; then another to find it was impossible of execution, and again a third which proved yet wilder than the others, until the heat of the sun, which beat down upon me in full fervor, and the low murmur of the water on the shingly beach, lulled me to drowsiness. Even while saying to myself that I must remain awake and on guard, I fell asleep, being conscious of nothing more until, without apparent cause, I opened my eyes to find that the sun was in the western sky and Hiram sitting with his elbows on his knees and his chin in his hands, regarding me fixedly.

"What's the matter?" I cried incautiously loud as I rose to a sitting posture.

"The matter is that we are tied here all these hours instead of being in Cambridge where, mayhap, there is plenty for us to do."

"How long have you been awake?"

"Nigh about three days, as it seems to me, though I reckon it can't be more than a couple of hours."

"Have you seen or heard anything of the Britishers?"

"As much as you may see now by looking out from among the bushes. No one has come our way, and if they had I believe I'd eaten them, for since yesterday morning no bite of food has passed my lips."

It would have been better for me if he had refrained from speaking of food, because the mere words made me hungry, and on the instant I realized, or fancied I did, that my mouth was parched with thirst. The knowledge that I could minister to neither one desire nor the other, until we were come to Cambridge, only served to make them all the more intense.

It would be worse than childish to complain when no good could come from uttering peevish words, and I strove to put from my mind all that I desired, by speaking of Archie, idly wondering where he might be.

"Unless he is snug at home, I'm allowing the Britishers have got him penned up in such shape that neither you nor I can do much toward aiding him," Hiram said emphatically, and then to my distress of mind he set about telling of an acquaintance of his who had had the ill fortune to displease some of General Gage's following, thereby bringing himself to a sojourn in Boston prison.

After that we talked of this thing and of another, it makes little difference what, I meanwhile watching the sun until my eyes ran water, coming to believe now and then it was standing still in the heavens, so slowly did it move.

Finally, however, the night came, as all nights will while we remain in this world, whether they be for our good or for our evil. The shadows had hardly more than begun to gather when Hiram, shaking himself as does a dog, said in a business-like tone:

"I'm allowing, lad, that we can't start any too soon. The guard-boats will be out as thick as flies around a molasses jug within the next half hour, and even though there's a chance of being seen, by skirting along the shore of this island we have reason to believe it'll be possible to keep out of sight. According to my way of thinking the risk will be less now, than if we waited for the lobster backs to begin their night's work."

As Hiram suggested so we did, working rapidly in launching the skiff, and when she was waterborne we pulled as fellows will who believe death is pursuing them, meanwhile realizing keenly that once chase should be made we could not hope to escape.

Fortune favored us this time, however scurvy a trick she had played the night before, and we gained Morton's point on the Charlestown shore without apparently having been seen by friend or foe.

Night had so nearly shut in now that we were hidden by the gloom, and had every reason to believe we were come out from amid our enemies without other harm than suffering with hunger and thirst.

If Archie had been with me, I could have cried aloud with joy as we aimed a straight course for the Penny ferry.

There is no need that I go into details of that tramp from the Medford river to Cambridge, nor for me to set down all which was said between us. It is enough if I write that we were come in the early morning to where were gathered those brave hearts who counted on making a great army which was to be raised against the king, and in defence of the colonies.

Already had the place begun to look like a military encampment, except that instead of glistening white canvas tents such as the king's men had, our people were housed as best they might be in shelters of brush, tents formed of blankets, and even many with nothing 'twixt their illy-clad bodies and God's sky.

Hiram, who appeared to be thoroughly familiar with this poor imitation of an encampment, passed rapidly along until we were come to a building in front of which stood a man without a uniform, but with a musket over his shoulder, who was acting as sentinel.

There were no military salutes exchanged between my companion and this man on duty; but they greeted each other as old friends, the sentinel saying in a querulous tone as if he was well acquainted with the mission on which Hiram had been sent:

"I had come to think you counted on staying with the blooming Britishers, instead of coming back here to do your share of playing at soldiering."

"I hope I may never run the same risk among the lobster backs again. It was too tight a squeeze to suit me," Hiram replied grimly, and added, "Are the gentlemen in?"

"They were when I came on duty, and I reckon none of 'em have slipped away since."

"Then we'll go in," and without further ceremony Hiram entered the building as if it was his own home, I following close at his heels as a matter of course, never dreaming that we were to meet an officer, owing to the lack of military show. I began to believe I had simply been brought there to speak with one of the citizens.

I came speedily to know, however, that we were at the headquarters of the Committee of Safety, that body of men which stood at the head of what you might call the "rebellion", and they all unguarded except for that farmer-sentinel at the door, who was seemingly ready to admit any that might desire to enter.

Telling me to await his return in a room which looked not unlike one that might have been fitted up for a merchant's use, Hiram disappeared, his heavy footsteps betokening that he had ascended to the floor above, and ten minutes later a cry of joy burst from my lips when none other than Doctor Warren himself entered the room.

"So it was you who sent for me, sir?" I asked, and he replied:

"Remembering what you said about raising a company of Minute Boys, and believing you would do so, I fancied it might please you to know that there was come so soon an opportunity to aid the Cause. I counted on seeing two, however," he added as if in disappointment.

In the fewest possible words I told him of our misadventure the night previous, and asked if he believed it might be possible for us boys to do aught toward effecting the poor lad's release.

"I question if an equal number of men could do anything," the doctor replied, speaking as if he was sorrowful because of not being able to hold out hope. "His father is known as a Son of Liberty, and it will most like be charged against him that he was attempting to carry information to us rebels here in Cambridge, therefore he will be guarded more closely than if he had been guilty of some grievous crime."

I strove unsuccessfully to choke back the sob which finally escaped my lips, and then, thinking that if I was to have any opportunity to serve the Cause it ill became me to play the part of a baby, asked with as much firmness as I could muster:

"What work have you for us Minute Boys to do, sir?"

"The Committee of Safety believes that you lads can be of great service in bringing to us news from the town, and it was to discuss with you how best one of your company might make his way to us here, when you had learned that which it would advantage us to know."

"I do not believe it would be possible to lay out any one route by which we would be able come at all times." I made bold to reply. "On certain nights we might perchance set off from Fox hill, and come across without difficulty. Again we could, perhaps, make Barton's point our place of departure. In fact it would depend upon where the red-coats had been stationed, and what they were about."

"Yes, yes, lad, I understand that full well. What we had in mind was to settle how you might hide skiffs at these various places in order to take sudden advantage of any favorable opportunity. Your father is in camp; have speech with him, and come back to me here an hour later."

If Hiram Griffin had been standing near the door listening to our conversation he could not have entered the room at a better moment, for the doctor had but just spoken those words which were the same as token of my dismissal, when he came in, and I asked if he could tell me where my father might be found.

It seems no more than right I should set down here the fact that Hiram Griffin, during all the time I knew him, seemed ever to be in possession of such information as a curiously inclined person might pick up. I believe of a verity he spent all his spare moments gathering that which seemed at the time useless knowledge, for, leave him four and twenty hours in town or camp, and he had become acquainted with all the minor personages and details of the place.

In answer to my question he motioned for me to follow, and so I did with such good avail that within a quarter-hour I was in my father's arms, he pressing me to his heart as if I had just come out from some terrible danger.

It goes without saying that I soon made him acquainted with all which had taken place from the time Hiram Griffin entered our home, and when I spoke of the possibility that we Minute Boys might succeed in releasing Archie from his imprisonment, he said emphatically, as if the matter admitted of no argument:

"You must not for a moment think of any such desperate venture. Even if the lad was not guarded as he surely is, what could any number of you boys do toward releasing him? It would be opposing yourselves to all the king's forces that are at present in Boston, and that is the same as if I had said you would come to certain death."

Then, as if to dismiss the matter without question, he began to speak with me of what the Committee of Safety believed our Minute Boys might be able to do in aid of the Cause, and explained where we could lay our hands on at least three skiffs which he knew had been secreted by those who loved the colonies.

"You will be told, before leaving here, how to get possession of the boats; but as to disposing of them in such places as may best suit your conveniences and opportunity in leaving the town, I can offer no advice. That is a matter which you lads must settle among yourselves later."

"Do you believe we will be aiding the Cause?" I asked, still doubtful as to whether these true men here in Cambridge were minded to lean upon us Minute Boys to any great degree.

"If you are prudent, close-mouthed, and energetic, there is no question but that you may serve the army which is to be raised, by bringing information of what goes on in Boston, better than could an equal number of men."

Then my father gave me much advice regarding the future, urging, which was unnecessary, that I should ever hold the good of the Cause above discomfort, above suffering, above even my own life. It mattered little, he declared, if we who had begun the struggle should go down into the Valley of Death, so that we left behind, for those who were to come, a land free from misrule and the oppression of tyrants.

Now, strange as it may seem, having once arrived in Cambridge I forgot how bitterly hunger and thirst had assailed me during the four and twenty hours just past, until my father was come to an end of his loving converse, when suddenly my desire for food and water returned like a flood, and I cried as if in pain.

One would have thought the dear man had done me some grievous wrong by not remembering that I might stand in need of refreshment, so many were the words of reproach which he addressed to himself while leading me to where I speedily found all that could be desired.

In going through this encampment it seemed that already had we of the colonies gathered a vast army, yet my father told me there were less than five thousand men then in Cambridge; but promised that they would be speedily increased in numbers as the days went by.

"It is but the beginning," he said, "already are those who favor the Cause marching toward this place as rapidly as may be, though as yet we have no real military head. The Provincial Congress has voted to raise an army of thirteen thousand six hundred men. Word has been sent out both by the Congress and Committee of Safety to other colonies, asking them to send all the troops they can spare, and Doctor Warren has written a stirring appeal, as you shall read, for I have made of it a copy."

Having said this he took from his pocket a folded paper which he gave to me, and I can set down exactly what was written upon it, for I have the document before me even to this day. It is as follows:

"In Congress at Watertown, April 30th, 1775.

"Gentlemen, – The barbarous Murders of our innocent Brethren on Wednesday the 19th Instant, has made it absolutely necessary that we immediately raise an army to defend our Wives and our Children from the butchering Hands of an inhuman Soldiery, who, incensed at the obstacles they meet with in their bloody progress, and enraged at being repulsed from the Field of Slaughter, will, without the least doubt take the first Opportunity in their Power to ravage this devoted Country with Fire and Sword. We conjure you, therefore, that you give all Assistance possible in raising an Army. Our all is at Stake. Death and Devastation are the certain Consequences of Delay. Every Moment is infinitely precious; an Hour lost may deluge your Country in Blood, and entail perpetual Slavery upon the few of your Posterity who may survive the Carnage. We beg and entreat you, as you will answer it to your Country, to your own Conscience, and, above all, as you will answer to God himself, that you will hasten and encourage, by all possible Means, the Enlistment of Men to form the Army, and send them forward to Headquarters at Cambridge, with that expedition which the vast Importance and instant Urgency of the affair demands.

"Joseph Warren, President."

I would I might set down all I heard and saw during that day in Cambridge; but it cannot be if I am to tell the story of what we Minute Boys succeeded in doing during a certain portion of the year of Grace 1775.

It is enough to say that before nightfall I had received all the instructions and advice that could be given, and was ready to make an attempt at getting into town once more, mourning meanwhile because of having left the skiff so far away that a long tramp would be necessary in order to come at her.

Even amid his duties, and they were many, Doctor Warren had time to think of me and my well-being, for when, near to sunset, I was standing with my father in front of the building occupied by the Committee of Safety, already taking leave of him, the doctor came up smiling as if seeing in me an old and valued friend, and said:

"I am not minded, lad, that you should tramp from here to the ferry in order to regain your skiff. Leave her where she is, and she may serve you a good turn at another time. Hiram Griffin has made ready a boat on the river, and you can embark in her, if so be it is prudent to land on either shore of the town."

"I will take the chance, sir, at one place or another," I said, feeling wondrously relieved at thus being spared the many miles of travel, and for a moment thinking it might be the doctor's purpose to send Hiram with me.

After I found the boat which had been made ready, I could not repress an exclamation of disappointment at seeing that she was a large craft, far too heavy to be handled by a single person.

"I have the long tramp before me even now," I said in a tone of dismay to my father, who had accompanied me to the river. "With a craft like that I would have no hope of escape if peradventure the lobster backs gave chase."

"I reckon the two of us can manage to make a decent show of speed," Hiram said with a laugh, and then it was I learned that he counted on going with me into the town, taking his chances of getting back later, rather than allow me to go alone.

"You had better join us Minute Boys and have done with it, Hiram," I said gleefully, taking my seat in the boat after having bidden my father good by. "It seems to me you are like to meet with more of adventure in our company, than loitering behind here at Cambridge where all are much like a flock of sheep without a leader."

"Faith, and I begin to believe that myself," Hiram replied as he took up the oars, and a moment later we were gliding down the river in the twilight which would be deepened to darkness before we were come within sight of Boston.

No sooner were we well under way than there came to me again the same hope I had had during a portion of the time we lay hidden on Noddle island, regarding the possibility of being able to free Archie from prison, and I asked in what I intended should be a careless tone:

"Hiram, if it so chanced while you were in Boston town that there was the shadow of a hope of getting Archie out of prison, would you lend a hand?"

"Give me half a show to do aught toward thwarting the lobster backs, and I'll stay with you till the crack of doom, if so be I live that long and the job is not finished before."

"Then we'll find the way," I said as if believing the words were true, even though at the same moment I deemed it little less than the fancy of a madman to think anything could be done to aid the dear lad while he was held so closely by the enemy.

After we were arrived at the mouth of the river, came the question as to what part of Boston we would aim to strike. There was much of danger that we might be overhauled by the guard-boats if so be we attempted to pull around Hudson's point, and yet perchance greater peril in striving to land anywhere between West and Fox hill.

"I favor the shortest voyage by water," Hiram said when I had laid before him that which was in my mind. "If so be you can hide the boat as well on this side as at your ship-yard, then let's make the venture, for I'm thinking we'll meet no more lobster backs ashore than afloat."

And so it was we headed for the nearest point, taking all the chances, and that night's work caused me to believe that he who goes boldly about a matter, is in no more danger than the timorous one who strives to make certain the way be clear before he sets out.

We came straight across from the river, landing well to the south of the Powder House, where were scrub oaks enough to afford a partial hiding place for the boat, although I doubted not that she would be come upon by the Britishers before another day had passed.

"It will be better she is taken by the lobster backs empty, than with us in her," Hiram said grimly when we drew her up on land, and it can well be fancied that I was of the same opinion.

Now was come the most hazardous portion of the journey, for if we ran against the watch, or a red-coated squad, we were come to grief and like to join Archie instead of aiding him.

There was little sense in standing on the shore discussing the danger, therefore we set off at once across the Common as if headed for the Bridewell, until we were come to within an hundred yards of it, when we left the Alms house on our right, going over Beacon hill and thence across to the mill pond. It was a roundabout way to gain Salem street, where Silas Brownrigg lived; but it seemed to

me the safest, although even by such a course we twice narrowly escaped the patrol, saving ourselves by taking refuge first in a garden, and then by sneaking behind Master Mountford's house.

So that we escaped the danger I did not count fatigue, and felt very well satisfied with fortune when we finally stood at the door of Silas Brownrigg's home, knocking cautiously lest we arouse other than him whom we desired to see.

It was not such a difficult matter to waken the lad, even though it was past midnight, for in those troublous times the people in Boston who favored the Cause slept lightly, young or old, never knowing how soon a red-coated squad of men might demand admission in the name of the king, having come through some whim of General Gage's, or of his understrappers.

Silas was not greatly surprised at seeing us. During the day while Hiram and I lay in hiding on Noddle island, he had gone to my home in search of me, and there learned from my mother that I had set out for Cambridge.

Before nightfall Seth Jepson gave him information that Archie was lodged in prison on the charge of attempting to carry news to the "rebels," and he would have been dull indeed could he not have guessed the whole story from that on.

While Hiram and I gave him an account of our doings from the time of that unfortunate stumbling upon the watch, he fed us royally, his mother even dressing herself that she might be certain we had food in plenty, and before we were done with eating and talking we had discussed a dozen impractical plans for freeing our comrade.

It was decided that we would call the Minute Boys together at the ship-yard, and there lay before them what had been asked of us by our people at Cambridge, after which we might, if possible, find some means of aiding Archie.

Not until it was broad day did I venture to go home, for only in the light might a "rebel" walk the streets of his own town without fear of being molested by the Britishers, and once there it can well be fancied how warm was my welcome. My mother had heard from Silas of Archie's imprisonment, and it was only natural she should feel even more anxious for me than otherwise would have been the case, knowing that already was one of our number come to grief through striving to aid the Cause.

But for the fact that my father was in full accord with all I strove to do as a Minute Boy, and had even mapped out the work for our company, I believe of a verity the good woman would have insisted then and there that I give over any attempt to play the soldier.

However, she did no more than urge me to be cautious, never running my head in danger when there was no real need for it, and seemed to have the idea that such information as we lads could pick up concerning the movements of the Britishers in Boston, would be of but little value to those brave men at Cambridge.

I had left Hiram behind me at Silas's home, for there was no reason why he should show himself, a stranger in the town, more than might be necessary; but at about nine of the clock he came to tell me that the Minute Boys were assembling at the rendezvous, and I set off to meet my future comrades.

CHAPTER V

SUSPICIOUS INFORMATION

When Hiram and I came out at Lyn street, where it was possible to have a view of the ship-yard, we saw only two lads, one well over toward the point, and the other south of the pier, who were loitering about aimlessly as if they had nothing of importance with which to occupy themselves.

It was on the tip of my tongue to ask Hiram if he had made a mistake in regard to the gathering of the Minute Boys, and then I realized that Silas had taken the precaution to keep all the company out of sight except these two, who appeared to be standing watch.

At that time, when the Britishers were suspicious of the "rebels," and General Gage eager to find some cause of complaint whereby he might put in prison those who loved the colony, even a gathering of sixteen lads would not have escaped rigid scrutiny by those who misruled in Boston, and the most imprudent thing we could have done, would have been to come together in the open air where any who passed might see us.

"They are under the wharf?" I said questioningly to Hiram, and he replied curtly:

"Ay, your friend Silas told me they were to meet there," and then it seemed as if he was on the point of saying something more; but if such had been his intention he checked himself right suddenly, walking silently by my side until we were come to that point on the shore from whence we could look under the wharf.

Silas stepped out as I came into view, and said in a whisper:

"I have kept the lads out of sight lest some meddling lobster back should report a dangerous gathering. Every fellow is present, and eager to hear what you learned at Cambridge."

"Have you not told them?" I asked in surprise.

"I was not certain how far you cared to make public what had been said at the encampment, and therefore held my peace regardless of their questions, promising that you would tell them the story in due time."

As I look back now to that moment when was first assembled the company of which I had been chosen captain, it seems passing strange I should have made a blunder which was near akin to a crime, before having been with them five minutes. After the advice, repeated so many times by my father and Doctor Warren, that I be prudent, it seems as if I showed myself the thickest-headed lad in all the colony, else would I have begun the business by keeping a closer tongue.

Even while I was greeting the lads they cried out impatiently to know what I had heard and seen in Cambridge, and I, like a simple, must needs repeat parrot fashion all the instructions which had been given me, when common prudence would have dictated that I set the boys about gathering information, without making known that we were much the same as detailed as spies.

In my folly I even went so far as to lay plans how and when we might best leave the town to make report, and even gave a list of those to whom we should apply for skiffs.

While my tongue ran loose I fancied Hiram moved uneasily about, as if he would say something to me privately; but I, puffed up with pride because of taking upon myself for the first time command of the Minute Boys, gave no heed to him until I had stripped myself bare of information, so that if, peradventure, there was a traitor among us he could go direct to General Gage with a story of all that we proposed to do.

Having finished the recital I asked if there were any who could give information concerning Archie which had not already been made public, and one of the lads spoke up promptly, saying:

"He is not so badly treated in prison, when you remember his father's standing among the Sons of Liberty, for instead of occupying a cell, he is locked in one of the small rooms near the end of the building."

"Who told you that?" I asked, wondering how so much of information could have been come at by our lads, and he answered, pointing with his finger:

"It was Seth Jepson told me."

Wheeling about suddenly to face the lad whom I had suspected when it was first proposed he be allowed to join the Minute Boys, I fancied there was a look of uneasiness, almost of fear, upon his face, as if he had just realized the danger of having imparted too much information. Then, like a flash, there came upon me a great wave of self-reproach because I had spoken so freely concerning our plans. If Seth Jepson was inclined to be a traitor, verily he had it now in his power to do us gravest injury.

"How did you learn so much regarding Archie?" I asked sharply. "Have you been allowed to visit the prison?"

"It was Amos Nelson told me," Seth replied, and again I fancied I saw a troubled look come over his face.

Because of blaming myself for having told all I knew, it was much as if I strove at this time to make a scape-goat of some other.

"Do you think it well," I asked sharply, "now that you have been enrolled as a Minute Boy, promising to do whatsoever you may in behalf of the Cause, to hold converse with as rank a Tory lad as Amos Nelson?"

"And why should I not?" he cried boldly. "Would you have me advertise the fact that I am a member of this company by refusing to speak with a neighbor? For some reason, I know not what, Amos was taken into the prison, most like to work for the soldiers on duty there, and he saw Archie Hemming, or heard that the lad was locked up in the small room. It was no more than natural he should tell me the news, and I did not shut my ears to his words, believing it would be to the advantage of all here if I learned as much as he knew."

The lad spoke fairly, although, as I fancied, with too much of boldness, and just a spice of anger in his tones.

I could find no fault, for of a verity he had learned that which might be of importance to us, and yet all the old suspicions that had been in my heart came back with redoubled force, the stronger, perhaps, because I had put myself and my comrades so wholly in his power.

The mischief was worked now, however, and the only course was for me to do what I might toward keeping, or having kept, a close watch on Seth Jepson, in the future holding my tongue in his presence as to what we would do.

To this end, and in the hope that it might be possible to take advantage of the information he had given, I proposed that a certain number of lads should loiter about the town to learn if there was anything new going on among the Britishers; afterward whispering to Silas that he send with Seth one whom he could trust thoroughly well, in order to make certain the lad held no communication with Amos Nelson.

"I will do it," Silas replied; "but to what purpose? You have suspected him from the first, and yet allowed that he should hear what our people want us to do."

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