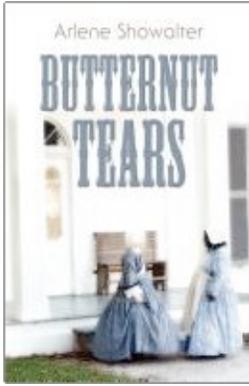


CROSSING THE RIVER



Harold Titus



Clara Maxwell fights the Civil War at home, knitting socks for the army and feeding Yankee prisoners alongside her compassionate aunt. Her mother, Mrs. Maxwell, conquers her own bitterness of war by tending to wounded soldiers and sewing uniforms. Jimmy, Clara's brother, transfers the wounded to local hospitals and becomes a prison guard. These three tell the story of many actual events of that war, but particularly those affecting Salisbury, North Carolina.

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Crossing the River

Harold Titus

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This is a work of historical fiction, based on actual persons. The author has taken a certain amount of creative liberty with details to enhance the reader's experience without sacrificing the accuracy of historical events.

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First Edition

“A Valuable Service”

He had not been chased. Apparently no soldier had seen him. Hiding behind pine trees off the Concord road, Elijah Patterson had begun to believe he was safe.

Minutes earlier, standing behind Parker’s line, Elijah had watched the redcoat column split, half to rush onto the Common, the other half to stretch down the Concord road. Elijah had left the line because his brother Samuel had not brought back his musket. “What can I do without my *musket*? Samuel’s got my musket!” he had shouted.

Hours earlier, leaving his musket, powder bag, and shot bag for his brother to watch, Elijah had left Buckman’s with Loring and Browner to scout the British patrol. Captured, then released, he had reported to Captain Parker at the Meeting House. Afterward, finding Samuel not in the tavern, inquiring, he had been told his brother had left to carry his wife and children to his in-law’s house. Believing Samuel would return, Elijah had entertained his tavern mates with details of his capture. Later, he had dozed by the fire. The toll of the tower bell and the tattoo of William Diamond’s drum had awakened him. Finding that Samuel had not returned, believing he would find him at the Meeting House, Elijah had hurried out the tavern door.

The first volley had sent him sprinting toward the Concord road. Hearing shouts, explosions, snapping branches, aggressive feet, he had cringed in his thick-branched sanctuary.

His fear gradually receding, he had lauded his good fortune.

He had been damned lucky the redcoat patrol had released him! Damned lucky he had been standing behind Parker’s line when the redcoats had volleyed! Damned fortunate he had gotten to these pines so quickly! Luck had a habit of staying with a man, if that man didn’t go lose his mind and do something stupid!

More sounds of thrashing, of branches breaking! A disheveled figure burst through waist-high thicket fifty feet from where Elijah stood. Holding his musket high above his right shoulder, the militiaman

dashed across the road. Grasping a large rock with his left hand, he vaulted the bordering stone wall.

“Solomon Browner,” Elijah muttered.

Goddamn Browner to eternal hell! *Browner* had *seen* him leave the Common! *Seen* where he had gone! Not finding his own hiding place, he had led his pursuers *here*!

Not thirty yards away! In that little clearing! *Five* redcoats were eyeballing the road!

One of them, the farthest away, pointed at the wall. Without speaking, they formed an evenly spaced line. Answering the nod of the one that had pointed, they aimed.

A different one shouted, “Guess ‘ee’s scampered down some ‘ole! Best we find another bloke!”

Squirrel-like, Browner’s head bobbed above the wall. The soldiers fired.

Chunks of stone splayed.

Elijah watched Browner stand, take deliberate aim. Widening their spacing, the soldiers presented their bodies in profile.

Browner fired.

All five remained standing.

Browner bolted. Elijah watched him dash across a cow yard, saw him disappear behind a shed.

The soldiers laughed.

“Now, let’s go find that other bloke!” said the one that had last spoken.

God in heaven!

Thirty seconds later Elijah looked. They had disappeared into the bramble.

Having settled his backside in his carriage seat, having acknowledged a final time the widow’s tedious handkerchief waving, Sam Adams nodded his assent. He had persuaded Hancock to quit the widow’s house to travel to a safer, more distant residence. If the vain merchant had regretted his decision to put away his polished sword, he

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had the past half-hour failed to demonstrate it. Adams's unctuous flattery and the possibility of Hancock stopping a musket ball had filed a greater claim.

Ten rods down the road they heard a distant, staccato-renting explosion. After the second explosion, they listened attentively to what resembled dissonantly ignited fireworks.

"Oh! What a glorious morning this is!" Adams exclaimed.

Looking at the sky, Hancock nodded.

The three militiamen had been inside the Meeting House filling their powder bags when the redcoat soldiers, rushing past Buckman tavern, had taken possession of the Concord road. They had hurried downstairs. Peering through the north and west facing windows, they had heard the two musket volleys and witnessed the pell mell assault.

Rage replaced stupefaction.

"We have t'get out there!" Caleb Harrington roared.

"Bloody cuckolds!" Joseph Comee shouted. His left hand struck the brim of his hat.

"We'll make a run for it!" Harrington stared at his companion. "You?"

"I'm going first!" Comee answered.

Harrington turned to the third man, Joshua Simonds. "You follow!"

No, he wouldn't! Not now, not later, not maybe 'til tomorrow! Harrington and Comee were *roosters*, scratching to fight! *Think*, why don't you?! Take two minutes, for God's sake!

He had needed all of five seconds!

"Best we bide our time," he wanted to say.

"Coward!" they would answer. Why start a useless argument?

Being sensible didn't mark him, or any man, a coward! Simonds reasoned. Harrington and Comee, being younger, stood a better chance of succeeding. Leaving first, they would have the advantage of surprise, which, Simonds calculated, would get them -- lobsterbacks swarming and criss-crossing -- what, twenty extra feet?

Comee opened the door an inch. He peered past the doorjamb.

Close the damn door!

Swinging it open, Comee began his sprint toward the bell tower and the Concord road.

Simonds watched him race against the grain of scurrying soldiers, his destination, seemingly, Marret Munroe's gable-roofed house. One soldier, then a second, shouted. A third soldier swung at Comee with his bayonet. Simonds heard three reports. Comee bounded, like a stag deer. Dropping his musket, grabbing his left arm, he continued his dash. It looked to Simonds that Comee might actually reach the house!

Simonds watched Caleb Harrington's athletic sprint toward the road, toward Munroe's house. Harrington had left the building before the soldiers had begun firing. Because some of the redcoats would now be priming, Simonds hoped that Harrington might escape as well.

He was wrong. Knees buckling, Harrington tumbled. Arms splayed, legs angled, Caleb lay like cut, rain-drenched hay.

Four soldiers were staring in Simonds's direction!

One of them pointed at his window!

He thought to make a dash in the opposite direction, toward the tavern. He was unable to approach the door. Three redcoats striding toward him persuaded him to lower the bolt.

Vainly, he sought a hiding place.

Five minutes. He estimated he had at best five minutes!

Sobbing, cursing, he vowed he would make his murderers pay.

Simonds returned to the magazine room. He removed the lid of the half empty powder barrel. He placed the firing pan of his musket directly above the exposed powder. Very soon they would be breaking through the front door. Not finding him below, they would climb the stairs. The second they entered the room ... he would burn powder!

Before he had made his dash through brushwood for the safety of the stone wall, maybe back when the redcoat line had let loose its second volley, a ball had ripped through the right side of his coat. Leaving the security of the cow shed, alternately hiding and sprinting,

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Solomon Browner had moved in a wide arc behind the Munroe house and horse barns. He had dashed across Malt Lane. The split-tailed coat backs of two soldiers but forty feet away, he had sprinted across the Menotomy road to reach the back door of Buckman's tavern. Inside, he had *not* found the five or six minutemen he had hoped to join. He had found, instead, hiding under a bed in a second story chamber the dirty-nailed, stubble-faced, one-armed peddler.

Emotion overriding judgment, looking through the partially opened front doorway, he saw newly arrived soldiers standing in tight formation!

Aiming at a British officer passing by on horseback, Solomon fired his musket. The officer continued along the ranks. Solomon swiftly reloaded. Stepping again to the doorjamb, ever so carefully he peered.

The column had moved. Different soldiers presented their backs to him. He sighted on a muscular grenadier who was tugging at the back of his leggings.

Colonel Smith had ridden as fast as his horse could carry him, all the while believing he was risking both a brutal fall and a fatal musket ball.

Such were the requirements of command.

If he had not been at the rear of the column when he had heard the first volley, he would surely have outdistanced his lead company. Seeing where the road forked, seeing a plethora of red uniforms scouring the landscape, he welcomed the sound of the footfalls of the 10th Grenadiers behind him. Closing upon a tall building just beyond the fork, he pulled his horse to a sudden stop. His chest heaving, he scanned the diverging roads and the intervening field.

As many as 150 men were irregularly mustered near the northernmost extremity of what appeared to be a parade ground. An equal number were running about Bob's-a-shouting, *disobeying* their officers' commands!

“Get o'r ‘ere!” he heard one soldier, near the tall building, holler. “One of 'em’s in there!” Smith stared at the building’s door. Five seconds later seven soldiers were attacking it with their musket stocks. “Go fetch a log!” one of them shouted.

Christ’s blood!

His instructions had been to seize military stores at Concord, not massacre there or any place in between the populace! *What* had happened here?! Somebody had given the wine bottle a shake and pulled the cork!

“Where’s a drummer?!” he shouted at an officer riding toward him. Lieutenant William Sutherland, 38th Regiment -- what was *he* doing here? -- turned his horse about. Smith watched him force his way through red-faced, cursing infantrymen.

Smith fidgeted. A minute passed before he heard the drummer’s tattoo. Eventually, reluctantly, the most aberrant of the soldiers faced about; those at the door of the building stepped away; segments of Pitcairn’s regulars began to drift toward the center of the expansive field.

Major Pitcairn’s explanation was brief. Smith recognized in his demeanor both chagrin and anger. Smith lashed out at his soldiers after they had performed smartly their parade address. They had disobeyed their superiors’ orders, the worst of sins.

He recognized, while he lectured, that he was not entirely displeased. They had removed an impediment not of their making. They had done His Majesty a valuable service. What he had first thought to be a massive bloodletting had been an indelible lesson of the consequence of pertinacious disobedience. The schooling had not been costly. But one regular had been wounded -- not seriously, he had been told. Of the rebels, only a handful had been killed. Had these peasants had any doubt beforehand about the fighting prowess of His Majesty’s foot, they had this day been enlightened. As would, upon hearing the news of this farce of a skirmish, traitors elsewhere. Thinking to reward his soldiers, thinking to bolster their morale after he had scolded them, Smith ordered the traditional victory salute, a volley of musketry followed by three huzzahs.

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Minutes later, after his brief exchange with three junior officers, urging of all things a return to Boston, the purpose of the mission having been made “impracticable,” to the strains of fife and the tattoo of drum, Colonel Smith directed his expeditionary force, in fine formation, westward.

2

Safe in the wood lot next to the burying grounds, Sylvanus Wood had tried to attach meaning to particular sounds. The beating of a drum had preceded the shouts of individual officers. Later, he had heard the strident voice of one officer. A colossal musket volley had made him start. Three massive, deep-throated shouts had quickened his pulse. Hoarse commands had followed. Finally, he had heard the marching sound of hundreds of feet.

The trill of fifes and the tattoo of drums told Sylvanus of the column’s fading proximity. Leaving the grove of pine, catching sight of trailing militiamen on the Concord road, Sylvanus felt the strong tug of obligation. His compulsion to return to where he had stood, to where comrades had died, was stronger.

Sylvanus Wood walked abashedly across the Common’s sparse grass. From different edges of the field other men were converging, six contorted bodies their lodestone. *Three*, Sylvanus saw, had fallen where Captain Parker had stood!

A militiaman who had hurried across the grass from the northeast side of the field was staring at them. He was John Munroe. Staring back at his nephew, arms out, hands open as if to embrace him, old Robert Munroe was as indifferent to life and death as the hat that lay next to him. Blood stained the leather coat below the neck, where the ball had penetrated.

Sylvanus walked past them. Several feet away lay the twisted corpse of Jonas Parker, his coat and the grass beside him recipient of the esteemed veteran’s blood. His hat lay open to the sky. Sylvanus

saw inside it the musket balls, wadding, and flints that Jonas had intended to use. He recalled how the man had touched the brim of his hat when Sylvanus had been introduced. Jonas Parker had said that he would not run from the British. Because he had fled, Sylvanus had lived.

"I saw what happened. He got hit and dropped t'his knees." Someone behind Sylvanus had spoken. Sylvanus did not recognize the man. Tolerating Sylvanus's stare, the militiaman nodded. "He fired his musket just the same! Lobsterback *stuck* him." The stranger stared at the Concord road. "Old Jonas never had a chance."

Sylvanus grimaced agreement. He walked, morosely, toward the Meeting House. Halfway there, he paused to watch two wounded men being tended. He recalled the beating of the drum, the cordiality of strangers, the talk of old veterans. Like an excited child he had courted Captain Parker's favor. How easily he had been chased away!

Striving to rid himself of shame, he loitered beside the large oak stump near the back of the Meeting House. Close by, Jonas Parker had asked, "What's it t'be, John? Hide or go out on the Common?" *Live or take a musket ball or the blade of a bayonet!*

Sylvanus walked past the southwest corner of the building. Two men were carrying a wounded man to the front door. The man's face was the color of slate.

"The Captain was wounded in the leg," a tall, dark-haired man exiting the building said to someone behind Wood. For a moment Sylvanus thought the man was speaking to him.

"Where's he at?"

"Over at the Reverend's house, I figure."

The two men were silent a moment, each staring northward.

"Does ... Captain Parker know his cousin's *dead*?" Sylvanus asked. His tone of voice surprised him.

The taller of the two looked at Sylvanus. After a moment, he nodded.

"Probably the *first* thing he knew, I'd say," the older man answered.

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“So you were there?” Sylvanus responded. He grimaced. Needing to say something, he had misspoken.

The taller man stared at him an entire five seconds. “We don't know you,” he said.

“I'm Sylvanus Wood; no, you wouldn't.” He paused. “I live in Woburn. I stood near the Captain, 'til after the first volley, when he said t'take care of ourselves.” Looking down, he saw a gash mark across the top of his right shoe.

“So you ran.”

He had made an enemy of this man.

“It's all right. We all ran. Except those that got shot.” The older man likewise stared at his shoes.

The taller man walked away. After glancing at Wood, the older man strode after him.

The two men who had carried the wounded man inside the building, having exited, stamped their feet. One of them, a stout man with graying temples, glanced sideways at Sylvanus. “Need your help carryin' in the wounded,” he said.

Sylvanus walked over to them.

A third man, who had come around the far corner of the building, joined them. “Some were wounded on the Bedford side,” he said, without introduction. Sylvanus felt even more the outsider.

“That's taken care of, Winsett,” the second man, his mouth twisted, said. “They're bein' takin' t' the Reverend's house.”

They began their walk toward the middle of the Common.

“After we get all the wounded, we'll take in the dead,” the gray-haired man said, neither looking to his left nor right.

“How many?”

The man gave Sylvanus a peculiar look.

“I seen three or four,” Sylvanus said. He had meant the dead. Had he made this man think he didn't want to carry in the wounded?!

“More'n that,” the second man said. “John Brown died near the swamp north of the Common, I was told. We'll have t'get him. An' Robert Harrison told me Samuel Hadley's behind a wall in John Buckman's garden.”

“Asahel Porter, he didn't make it neither.” His lips compressed, the third man, Winsett, shook his head. “He was caught scouting. When the shooting started, he tried t'run down the Bedford road.”

“How d'y'know that?!”

“I was with him. They caught me after they did him.”

“But you didn't try t' run, did you?” the second militiaman responded.

“No.” Winsett looked off across the field.

“Too bad.”

“Asahel Porter's from Woburn,” Sylvanus said, softly. Hard-working Asahel Porter, close to his own age, father of a year old son. Always keen to help somebody. Because of it he was dead.

“They just rushed away from me. Left me. *Then* I ran.”

I would have done that, Sylvanus thought. I wouldn't have tried right away to escape, either.

“I hid behind a tree just off the road,” Winsett said. “I saw Jonathan Harrington *drag* himself off the Common to that house o' his; I was thinkin' a redcoat was gonna see him and bayonet him, but that didn't happen.”

The man that had been captured and that had escaped brought his left shirtsleeve across his mouth. Having everybody's attention, he hesitated, inhaled, afterward blinked. “Must have been fifty feet or so,” he said. “He got t'his doorstep. Ruth came screamin' out the door and flung herself down.” His voice quavered. “Went over there as soon as they left. Jonathan died right there on his doorstep. His nine year old boy ... saw it all from upstairs.”

“Caleb Harrington was shot down, too. Just outside the Meeting House,” the second man said. “Him and some other men were inside gettin' powder.” He, too, blinked. “They tried t'run for it, so I heard.”

When they reached the two wounded men that Sylvanus had seen being tended, three men stood up.

“Can they be moved into the Meeting House?” the leader of Wood's group asked.

“They walked out of the trees just awhile ago. Collapsed right here. S'pect so. We'll take them there right now.”

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“Then we’ll be movin’ on.”

The third man, Winsett, the one that had witnessed Jonathan Harrington's death, hesitated. He looked at Sylvanus's companions, briefly, then stooped to grasp a leg of one of the wounded.

“Least he’s helpin’,” the second militiaman said, after they had walked a distance.

“That’s so.”

They reached the bodies of Robert Munroe, Jonas Parker, and, five yards away, a militiaman that Sylvanus didn’t know. Sylvanus stared at the pine trees into which he had fled. “We’d best get started,” he heard the gray-haired man say. Sylvanus sensed they were not yet ready.

“Guess we’ll take Isaac Muzzy first,” the gray-templed man said, grimacing. “Someone will have t’tell old John. Maybe he already knows.”

“He does.” The other man pulled his hat down about his head. “I seen him go off down the road after the redcoats.”

“All right then.”

Having stared a bit longer at Muzzy, they took each of the dead man's arms. Sylvanus lifted the legs.

“I didn't think this would happen,” the second man said when they had stopped half way to the Meeting House.

“I guess them that did weren’t out here,” the other one said, with restrained malice.

“Maybe next time they will.”

“I expect not,” the gray-haired man said.

They completed the trip in silence.

Inside the Meeting House the two Lexington men started a conversation with a man tearing cloth. Feeling ill, Sylvanus exited. For a short while he stood at the southwest corner, facing the Concord road. “*Shame’s* squeezing my heart,” he said.

Jonas Parker. Asahel Porter. Other men he’d never met. *For what?!* Angrily, he gripped the barrel of his musket, which minutes earlier he had propped against the building’s wall.

They’d marched to Concord. They’d be marching back!

Harold Titus

This time he would not run and hide. Nor would he stand in the open. From a secure place off the road he would burn every ounce of powder, fire every musket ball he possessed!

“Deeds of Valor”

Seventeen-year-old William Thornton had left his Lincoln home before dawn a happy young man. That he was about to win the adoration of at least one of his sister Mary’s vivacious friends had seemed to him as certain as June wildflowers.

William -- thin-faced, big-eared, slight of build -- was the second oldest of the five Thornton offspring. His brother John -- aloof, sarcastic, insufferably opinionated -- was nineteen. Meddlesome, nearly always faultfinding, Mary, the third oldest, was fifteen. Over the years she and her two copy-cat sisters had damaged repeatedly William’s self-esteem. How he had loathed her! How in his imagination he had made her suffer!

The onslaught of puberty -- wet dreams, visualized trysts, furtive self-pleasuring -- and the frequent proximity of Mary’s maturing friends had altered William’s viewpoint. Now he valued her existence. Her friends had remained indifferent to him, but he had a plan to change that. How better to excite the female heart than to recount one’s deeds of daring-do! Not until he had walked half the distance to the town common, totting his musket, powder bag, shot bag, and powder horn, had it occurred to him that to be heroic a man had to risk his life!

Outside the Meeting House door Sergeant Hartwell had conducted a quick inspection. Captain Smith had followed this with a brief speech ending with the exhortation, “Every one of you must fight like demons.” During the march to Concord, trying to manufacture courage, William had asked his brother about wounds and bleeding. John had deigned not to answer. William had persisted, prompting John finally to declare, “Go ask Captain Smith, why don’t yah?!”

Managing a laugh, William had asked, “What d’y’think Cap would say, John, if I said, ‘Can y’see a musket ball acomin’ at yah?’”

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John had replied, "You'll not be askin' that, so stop pesterin' me." Then, insultingly, "Don't go botherin' Capt'n Smith, neither. We're off t'do men's business. Maybe you ought t'go back home!"

William knew well enough the older-brother faultfinding his friends also received. Believing such behavior an inherent privilege, William had mostly tolerated John's disparagements; but recently John had been especially nasty. This particular slur, that William was a child, that he was not virile enough to brave death -- the insult being close to the truth -- had been a deep cut.

As in the past when his brother had been especially vicious, William had ministered the hurt with lubricous self-pity. *John*, who thought he knew everything, didn't know a thing about him! John hadn't known that he, William, had been afraid for *both*, and he had talked strangely to hide it! Instead, John had *insulted* him, and gone off strutting full of *smug*!

Later, when John had spoken to him, William had retaliated. Ignoring his brother's banal observation, he had talked exclusively to two of John's friends. Unperturbed, John had followed William's remarks with a stupid joke, about how the redcoats were cowards and how everybody in the company, except William, would make them run like geese. William had been too angry thereafter to speak.

Advised by a high-ranking Concord officer, Captain Smith had positioned the company in a cemetery on a little hill. Here they had waited close to thirty minutes. Struck by the perceived coincidence of where they were standing and what might soon happen, William made a joke to a family friend, James Nichols, the transplanted Englishman widely appreciated for his wit.

"James. Guess they won't have t'be cartin' us away, after they be done with us," he said, pointing at the head stones.

"Necrophilic merriment that, my boy," Nichols responded, wagging a forefinger. "Phallic representation, not to put too fine a point on it," he added, indicating with his finger the curvature of the head stones. "Do have a caution, young lad. Amid the shooting, amid the excitement, pray *govern* yourself. It would not do to be firing off your bolt, so to speak!" Of the more than a dozen men that were listening

several guffawed. William's face colored. A second or two later he grasped the reference. He was embarrassed, yes; but he was not offended. Nichols' witticism had not been derogatory. It had been an extension of his own quip.

James Nichols was an entertainer, a spinner of yarns, not the sort to top himself off at a dullard's expense. (He, William, was certainly not a dullard!) Being in James's company made a person feel good. William's father had said once that Nichols was "a fine, droll fellow." If you were that rare person who didn't like the man for his wit, the fault was yours; you weren't smart enough. But then you could be dumb as an anvil and still enjoy his singing, providing your ear wasn't made of tin!

Listening to the heavy banter, the coarse jokes that Nichols's remark had inspired, William realized that his observation about tombstones and fighting had benefited him.

He no longer was fighting himself.

He felt ... included.

The news of the killing of Lexington militiamen, delivered by a distraught express rider, destroyed the feeling. Anxiety reasserted itself. He repositioned his powder horn. He fingered his hat. He fidgeted. Nobody noticed.

Minutes later, four Concord militia companies marched past the burying grounds, their fife and drum corps at the rear eerily silent. William heard Sergeant Hartwell comment that Captain Smith wanted their company to stay put. "To await developments," John announced, as if *he* had advised it. Remembering John's words, "You ought t'go back home," William, wanting to ridicule John, said nothing.

Later, they heard the startup shrill of fifes and the cadence of drums. Several minutes thereafter, an old man, lowering a spyglass, shouted, "Here they come! Our boys with the Regulars sniffin' their behinds!" A smattering of ancient men and teenage boys had joined William's company at the top of the hill. The anguished behavior of one boy drew William's attention.

The boy's arms and legs were trembling. "Oh God! Oh God!" he exclaimed.

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Hearing and seeing the boy made William angry.

A dark-coated Concord man, a bit younger than William's father, strode toward the boy. "Stop it!" the man ordered. "God hears you! You needn't call out!" Gripping the boy's left arm, the man engaged him. "Stand your ground, Harry!"

"I can't!" wailed the boy. "Reverend, I want to but I can't!"

"You *can*! You *will*!" The preacher seized the boy's other arm. "Harry. Believe what I say. Your cause is just! You needn't be afraid! *God* will bless you!"

For perhaps thirty seconds the preacher maintained his grip, his will transforming the youth's deportment. He then stepped away. The boy smiled wanly, passed a coat sleeve across his face.

"Buck up, Harry," somebody next to him said. "We're all feeling a bit that way."

Blinking rapidly, the boy examined his musket's firing pan.

Witnessing the reappearance of the Concord men, seeing the redcoats' bayonets catching the sun, William recited silently the preacher's last few words.

Very soon a line of redcoats started up William's hill. He wanted to cry out; he wanted to flee. Captain Smith's timely order to withdraw quashed the need. Falling in behind the Concord militia, the Lincoln men hurried through and beyond the town, William and two militiamen nearby twisting their necks repeatedly to look back. "What they want's in the town," John *sagely* observed, the Concord companies ahead of them crossing the North Bridge.

Now they were waiting near the top of Punkatasset Hill.

Gone for good was William's sense of inclusion. To his brother, his acquaintances, and everybody else standing nearby his presence was irrelevant. *I offer nothing!* he thought. He recalled his narcissistic reason for mustering, in his mind the imagined quarry as dangerous as happily feeding geese!

William looked for external distraction. He noticed far below, close to the river, a group of women and children, five or six

militiamen commingled, crossing a meadow. With them pranced dogs, barking, yelping dogs. One had a stick in its mouth.

“Let us hope they hurl a stick at *them*,” James Nichols remarked. The Englishman pointed toward the appearance out of a wood of a column of soldiers headed for the bridge. “A capital spectacle, I would conjecture. The King’s foot, defenders of the Crown, the *scourge* of the French, *sporting* with canines.”

“Oh, James. I don’t think so!” William responded. The image of redcoat infantrymen playing fetch-the-stick with dancing bowwows caused him to giggle.

“A pity. We and they do need a stout sniggle!”

Because James Nichols had chosen to stand beside William, other Lincoln men, including John, gathered about.

Subsequent talk coalesced upon what they, the Lincoln company, might be ordered to do. Two sober-faced merchants questioned the need to attack; three men angrily supported it; two men known for trusting their own counsel declared it prudent to wait.

“You’re too quiet,” John said, sensing what William was thinking. “Where’s all the enthusiasm you had for seein’ musket balls?”

“Maybe we won’t have t’see any,” William answered.

John opened his mouth. Lips pressed against his teeth, he nodded.

When the front of the redcoat column advanced across the bridge, all conversation ceased. Talk resumed after the soldiers, taking the road that paralleled the river, disappeared. Minutes later the men were silenced when fifty or sixty redcoats, leaving the body of soldiers located at the bridge, positioned themselves on two secondary knolls half way up the hill.

“They’re lookin’ for a fight,” a man behind William declared. Others nodded. “Otherwise, why’re they temptin’ us, bein’ we outnumber ‘em?”

“What d’ya think the Captain an’ the rest o’ those officers up there are sayin’ right now?” Noah Parkhurst asked.

“I say we go down there an’ send them high-tailin’!”

“All the way back t’Boston, by Jove!”

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“It don’t matter what you think!” Joshua Brooks declared. “Or any o’ the rest of us! We’ll be doin’ what we’re told!”

“Look at them! What right d’they think they’ve got t’be down there threatenin’ us?!”

“Captain knows what t’ do.”

“Whoremongers,” James Nichols responded.

“How’s that?”

“Black-poxed trollop chasers.”

“That’s a pretty way o’puttin’ it.”

“Count yerself lucky you ain’t one of ‘em!” the town blacksmith declared.

All regarded the emigrant Englishman.

“To think *I* was once them!” His voice was caustic, raw. “They are as abhorrent to me now as are the French!”

“*Was*’! Not a damn sight are y’one of ‘em!” the blacksmith answered.

“Those in government, those in high counsel, *repeat* the same addle-brained mistake! Imperious. They believe themselves *imperious!* *Inviolate* in their *boundless* wisdom! *Sanguine* to leave the nasty *administration* of their policy to the poked simpletons we see below, who, I conjecture, have had nary a *say!*” Folding his arms, Nichols exhaled.

“No say? No *say*?! Those lobsterbacks down there shot Lexington men, without their blinkin’ an eye!” The burly cider man, Thomas Lampson, had pushed his way through the semi-circle of on-lookers. “For doin’ nothin’! For just lookin’ and standin’! ‘No say,’ my ass!”

Nichols looked at him. “I wasn’t referring to that.”

“You weren’t, huh? Then what were y’talkin’ about?!” His hands gripping his sides, Lampson expanded his chest.

A vertical line formed above the bridge of the Englishman’s nose. “It merits no explanation,” he said tonelessly. “What I am feeling signifies nothing.”

“Nothing?! We’ve got murderers down there! I got the feelin’ you don’t think so! What the hell’s the matter with you?!”

Several men, standing behind the two, exchanged glances.

Nichols made a peculiar gesture. "Trust me. Pray dismiss it. Entirely. You don't understand."

Scratching his two-day stubble, the hot-tempered militiaman, who operated the cider mill adjacent to Aaron Brooks's property, pondered. "What are y'tryin' t'do, Englishman, insult me?!"

"Enough. Thomas. Enough, I say. Mind your tongue." Having thrust his way past crowding onlookers, Samuel Hartwell stepped between them. "Let's not go lightin' fires where they don't belong! Thomas, ... friend, he's not insultin' you. Nor anybody else. He's not that sort. Be careful what you say."

"Never in life!" James Nichols looked from Lampson to Samuel Hartwell to Elijah Foster, standing beside him. "That is not my wish! You do not understand! I do *not* expect any of you to comprehend that despite my abhorrence of tyranny part of me remains, detrimentally, English!"

Mindful of Hartwell's authority, not having been insulted after all, he supposed, attempting to understand Nichols' statement, the cider man did not respond. Two men edged in front of him.

William asked, "What if someone down there is somebody you know?"

Brother John snorted. Two of John's friends cackled. Throughout the group, though, William's question kindled interest.

"You'd do a fine business reading tea leaves, young lad," James Nichols said, his face and voice suddenly frolicsome. Just as quickly, his fanciful expression vanished. Rubbing his chin much like Lampson had done, the Englishman deliberated. "I thank you for the suggestion," he said, soberly. "Be so kind, William, as to mind my musket. It would not answer, my trundling down there to have a blather *caressing* this firearm."

Their astonishment ebbing, the Lincoln men watched their strange friend, right hand raised, descend the hill.

"He's got guts," one man said.

"I don't like much what I'm seein'!" Lampson said.

"What if they don't let him back?" Elijah Foster asked.

"Then we'll go get'm."

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“He might’n want t’come back!” Lampson answered.

“You’re crazy,” John Thornton said.

Fifteen minutes later James Nichols did return.

“Thank you, young lad. You are very good,” he said to William. He took his musket. Sighing, he positioned it on his right shoulder. To no one in particular he said, “I’m going home.”

“Bloody bastard! I had you *reckoned*, didn’t I?” Lampson shouted, ending the company’s stunned silence.

Nichols, pretending not to hear, continued down the side of the hill headed toward the Great Meadow.

“You’re stupid, Thomas. Mule-brained stupid! Keep that heave hole of yours shut for once!” Samuel Hartwell ordered.

“Oh! Don’t be tellin’ *me* what t’do, *Mister Sergeant!* I *know* what I know!”

“That’s exactly been your problem!”

Laughter. Lampson’s face darkened. Because he was not a despised man, because allowances were granted him, two companions thumped him heartily on the back. Opening his mouth to speak, Lampson thought better of it.

Thinking hard about why Nichols had marched with his Lincoln friends to do battle only to return home, William reached two conclusions. Neither libeled James a coward. Anticipating what they would say about his own sudden departure, William rejected the impulse to follow.

Thus he was a part of the second company of militiamen to descend the hill, one of the approximately five hundred citizen soldiers intent upon driving the outnumbered professionals from the North Bridge, their vented anger, the explosions, the whirl of musket balls, and the gruesome aftermath demolishing his meager resolve.

Traumatized, he refused to view the body of the felled Acton officer, whom at least twenty men had quickly stood about. Bad enough that he stared, pole-axed, at the other dead man, identified as “Hosmer,” saw where the crimson blood had issued out of the side of the man’s chalk-white head. Joshua Brooks had also been shot. A musket ball had grazed the Lincoln man’s forehead. “What’re they

doin', firin' jack-knives?!" Brooks had protested. Two of Brooks's friends had laughed.

William, needing space, walked away.

The press of agitated bodies and his lack of specific direction separated him from his brother. Having entered an adjacent field, William sat despondently on a large boulder. From the very beginning John had had it right, hadn't he? Not once had he fired his musket! Hours ago, before he had left the house, he had primed it, dreaming he would soon be a hero. "Maybe you ought t'go back home," John had said, speaking the truth.

Other men, of the same mind, were leaving. Six had skulked past him headed for the Great Meadow. One of them had said to a companion, who had decided to stay, "I cannot abide this! Samuel, I cannot!"

Neither could he. *Saying* he wasn't a coward because he had taken fire was a lie. He had stayed only because he had been too afraid to leave.

Having crossed the boundary line that marked Lincoln Township, suffering intense guilt, William loitered at the top of Brooks Hill. That he had been the last man to leave the river -- nobody had followed after him -- shamed him. He was amongst strangers now, Sudbury men. Two asked him, separately, the same embarrassing question. "Yes, I was there. We drove 'em from the North Bridge. I want another crack at 'em here, when they march back." Because it mattered to him what these strangers thought, he stayed with them ten minutes before he excused himself, because he was thirsty, he said, because he wanted to find a well.

For a time he considered going inside Brooks Tavern. He *was* thirsty, very thirsty. He decided not to, realizing that his appearance in the taproom long before the redcoats' return would probably be remarked upon, and passed along, to be heard eventually by neighbors.

Abandoning the road, he traveled across Holt's Pasture, across newly plowed earth, to a stand of pine opposite Ephraim Hartwell's tavern. Seated on a soft layer of needles, hidden by two low branches, he rested the back of his head against a resin trunk. Slanted beams of

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sunlight filtered spots of clarity upon the branches and needled earth. The coolness of the air bathed his perspiration.

He sighed. He closed his eyes. He felt a peacefulness akin to that generated by a father's protective arms, a mother's soothing hands. His mind stirred, wavered, succumbed. Arms across his body, chin upon his chest, he dozed.

The stopping and starting movements of a squirrel roused him. Tail flat to the ground, head angled, the creature studied William from a spot of sunlight five feet beyond his left shoe. William watched the animal flick its tail, raise and lower its head, its whiskers and nose vibrant. The squirrel, detecting change, scurried underneath pine boughs; William heard the sound of its ascent against bark.

William's left calf pained him. Bending forward, he rubbed it. Senses awakened, he heard a distant, recurrent popping.

Vexing thoughts wrenched him from his cocoon.

Men wearing cowhide, buckled shoes, vests and loose fitting coats were invading the wood. But not as deeply as where William listened, knees to chest, back against tree trunk as if bounded by rope. He heard their excitement, their anxiety, their explosions, their cathartic anger. He heard more distressing sounds: bodies thrust against branches, cries of terrified discovery, screams, the fearsome explosions of ignited powder. A figure clutching a powder horn crashed beyond William's sanctuary. Twisting about, his back pressed against two joined tree branches, the horrified being stared at his pursuer. The soldier's powder detonated; blood leaped from the militiaman's left thigh. Slouched against sagging boughs, eyes dilated upon the sliver of metal pointed at his throat, the militiaman, but a boy, emitted a terrified screech.

William crossed the road just west of the swamp and Folly Pond. He had crouched behind scrubby pines for what had seemed five minutes before bisecting a large gap in the lengthy red and white column. Sprinting past the Allen house, he was amazed that he had not drawn fire. Traversing rocky land north of the Lampson and Foster

properties, William sought the protection of woods west of the Granite Field. To the east lay the rough farmland of Josiah Nelson.

Who from Lincoln would fight these assassins as they marched past Captain Smith's house, Samuel Hartwell's house, the house of Samuel's father? Who specifically would defend Josiah Nelson's house and barn? He supposed that several miles west of where he stood the brave men of his company were hurrying, too late to do here what William had not done anywhere. If the need for redemption could will the body to perform what the soul had prohibited, he would make his mark *here*, a *Lincoln* man defending *Lincoln* property!

Crouched in one of the hollows of Josiah Nelson's west pasture, he heeded the loudening sounds of combat. Like vomit, enervating panic ascended.

No! You've decided! Eight Lexington men, murdered, bayoneted! Two Acton militiamen felled at the bridge! God in heaven, the defenseless boy in the wood!

William rose to a kneeling position. He aimed at a tall officer riding a roan horse.

Despite the scattered musket fire, despite the need to direct the men about him, despite his agitated state, and despite the fact that when he had been here much earlier it had been in moonlight, Major Edward Mitchell had recognized the section of road, and then the space in the rail fence through which he and his officers had harried Paul Revere.

The countryside had indeed been alarmed! Revere had predicted a mustering of 500; it seemed to Mitchell that the number was 5,000! That these devious villains had fought had been a revelation to him. Scoundrels they remained; cowards, devoid of honor, discharging their malevolence fraudulently behind trees, outcroppings of rock, stone walls, and barns.

For this they would pay! This army, this column of 700 professionals, was but a detachment, a finger of His Majesty's bludgeoning fist!

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A musket ball whirred past his right ear. Wrathfully, Mitchell faced Josiah Nelson's west pasture.

The land had a pockmarked look: grassy knolls, shallow furrows. Whoever had chosen to fire at him was hidden, *hidden* in a depression.

"Prepare to fire on that pasture!" he ordered the grenadiers nearest him. He felt so exposed, high on his horse. Several officers had dismounted, were using their horses as walking shields. He would not! "A provincial hides himself in a hole!" he shouted. "*Shoot* him when you see him!"

This time he saw the flash. The soldiers' muskets answered. Six or seven explosions. Waiting, his horse stamping, Mitchell estimated the approximate moment when the rebel would fire back. The time came and passed. One less rebel to exterminate!

Musket balls pelted the earth close by his head.

The hollow was too shallow.

William decided to wait a full three minutes, believing the soldiers that had shot at him would not remain that long to fire again. He counted. As the numbers increased so did his rate of counting. Stopping at one hundred fifty, rising to his knees, he looked. The horse and rider and the attending soldiers had left. Bending low, he ran toward the wood at the back end of the pasture.

Out of the wood, to his dismay, stepped three, four, a dozen soldiers! William veered left, sprinted toward a stand of pine closer by the road. Their first musket report caused him to break stride. Into the heavy, low branches, bear-like, he plunged. Cut, smeared with resin, panting, fifty feet within the pines he listened.

Against the backdrop of combat he heard his labored breathing.

The flanking party had been headed for Josiah Nelson's house. They had been but 100 feet in front of him, faced away diagonally. Belatedly, they had seen him. Had they pursued him?!

His musket's firing mechanism was pressing against his right knee. His musket wasn't primed. It didn't matter. If they came after him, he would fight his way deeper into the trees.

He marveled that he wasn't frightened. He felt, instead, ... excited!

Listening, he heard, again, his respiration. He counted, this time more deliberately. Warding off interfering branches, he reached the perimeter of the wood. He saw the flanking party, beyond the Nelson house, close to the distant road.

Josiah Nelson's rocky pasture east of the house abutted the road. Priming his musket, he remembered the huge, weather-scarred boulder fifty feet from the highway. Crossing the meadow, he sprinted to it. Tightening himself, he peered around the boulder's right edge.

Here he could hit his mark, but he would have to be extremely vigilant. Each time he reloaded they could easily be upon him. He would have to delay each charging until he was certain he was safe. If they came after him, he judged he could outrun them being they were extremely fatigued.

His first shot dropped a grenadier to his knees, thenceforth heavily upon his chest and face. Crouching behind the boulder, he thought, I have shot a man!

What he felt defied definition.

He peered over the top of the boulder. Fired at from other directions, the column was both lengthening and contracting.

Having reloaded, he aimed rapidly and fired.

He cursed his inaccuracy.

Waiting, he was not challenged.

He looked inside his shot pouch. He saw three musket balls. He had placed *twenty* in his pouch that morning. How many had he fired, two? Three?

John! Before they had left the house, while William had been in the kitchen looking for something to eat, *John* had *taken*, supposing, William concluded, that he would be too much the coward to notice!

All right, he had three musket balls.

What did it matter how many he had, not having fired the one that had mattered most?!



Clara Maxwell fights the Civil War at home, knitting socks for the army and feeding Yankee prisoners alongside her compassionate aunt. Her mother, Mrs. Maxwell, conquers her own bitterness of war by tending to wounded soldiers and sewing uniforms. Jimmy, Clara's brother, transfers the wounded to local hospitals and becomes a prison guard. These three tell the story of many actual events of that war, but particularly those affecting Salisbury, North Carolina.

Butternut Tears

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