

The Minutemen's Witch

by Charles Coleman Finlay

Charlie Finlay has written about the American Revolution before (in fact, you'll find his story "We Come Not to Praise Washington" on our Website this month), but his latest project is his most ambitious. Since he wrote "The Minutemen's Witch," he has gone on to write three novels that continue the story begun here. He calls the series "Traitor to the Crown" and book one in the series, *The Patriot Witch*, is due out in April under the byline of "C. C. Finlay."

Proctor dreamed he heard a gunshot and it woke him, or else a gunshot had stirred him from his dreams; either way, the full moon was well past its apex, so it was a few hours before the break of dawn and he lay only half-asleep in bed. As he tugged up the wool blankets and rolled over, a horse galloped down the Concord Road and a voice shouted across the spring fields that the Redcoats were coming.

Sleep sloughed off him. The twenty-year-old jumped from bed and dressed in a minute, tugging suspenders over his shoulders as the door creaked open below. He ducked his head when he came to the narrow steps and ran downstairs. Outside, the chickens cackled in their coop.

A candle flickered in the kitchen. His father sat shut-eyed in the corner, propped in a highback chair, wrapped in blankets. Light snagged on the pale scar across his forehead where he'd been scalped and left for dead during the war against the French and their Indian allies.

There'd be no chance of anything like that tonight. The regular army and the colonial militia, they were all Englishmen at root. A show of force would remind the royal governor of that, just as it had in February at Salem.

Proctor retrieved his father's old doglock musket and tin canteen from the cupboard. Powder horn and hunting bag went over his left shoulder, hatchet in his belt, hat in hand. He reached for the door, but it swung open in his face.

His mother barged in with a lantern in her hand and unloaded two eggs from her dress pocket into a bowl on the table. "Where're you off to in such a hurry?" she asked.

"To muster—the Redcoats are marching on the armory."

"Not without a scrying first, you aren't."

“Mother, there isn’t time.”

“I’ve been awake all night with worry, because I knew something was coming. Now that I know what it is, I’ll not risk you dying from the guns of the Redcoats without a glimpse of the future first.” She blew on her hands and rubbed them together for warmth.

Nothing could dissuade her once she had a notion to do something. Truth was, Proctor wanted to see what was coming too. He propped his musket against the door and put down his hat. “Let’s be quick.”

She fetched another bowl, a pitcher of water, and moved the candle to the center of the table. Proctor held the chair for her. Wooden legs scuffed across the floor as he pulled his own seat catty-corner to hers.

She nudged the broad shallow bowl to the middle of the table and poured water into it. Drops splashed cold and sharp on the back of Proctor’s hand.

One by one, she retrieved five small candle stubs from her pocket and handed them to Proctor, who arranged them in a circle around the bowl. She frowned, made minor adjustments in their position, then lit them with the candle. A honeyed scent spread across the table.

Proctor tapped his shoe impatiently, forced his foot to still. The other minutemen would be marching without him, and scrying didn’t require any candles or rituals.

His own talent had appeared by accident, no rituals required. He’d been carrying in the eggs and dropped one—it’d practically leapt out of his hands, an egg near to hatching that left the tiny chick inside sprawled dead, wet in the dirt. Without knowing why he said it, Proctor announced that his friend Samuel was dead. The next day they heard that Samuel had been shot by Redcoats during a riot in Boston. That’s when Elizabeth Brown told her son about the family talent for witchcraft, passed down generation to generation from their roots in Salem.

His mother turned the two brown eggs over in her hands, squinting at the specks.

“I’m surprised you could find any eggs this time of night,” he said.

“The hens lay more at the full moon.” She pursed her lips, selecting

one of them, and had it poised to crack on the edge of the bowl. Over in the corner, Proctor's father moaned and rocked so hard his chair banged against the wall. Proctor winced—his father hadn't been the same since his apoplexy.

His mother switched the eggs. She tapped it on the edge of the bowl, letting the white drain from the cracked shell into the water.

Her free hand sought Proctor's, gave it a squeeze. "Holy Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name," she prayed.

Proctor leaned forward to study the picture formed by the egg white.

"If I have found grace in Thy sight, then show me a sign that Thou speakest with me. Be Thou a light in the darkness of days, showing us the way forward, that we might know the path Thou wishest us to take."

A shudder ran through her arm. The eggshell crunched in her palm and the yolk splashed out into the middle of the bowl.

They both flinched. Proctor didn't know if it meant anything or was just an accidental spasm. She didn't say.

The yolk floated in the center like the sun reflected in a pond. Candle-

light slicked off its thick bulge as egg white filmed over the surface, forming ghosts in the water. A streak of red blood trailed off the yolk into the white.

Hairs went up on Proctor's neck. He could feel a vision gathering in the back of his head like bees to a hive, but he wasn't ready for it yet.

His mother flicked the eggshell pieces onto the table and wiped her hand on her apron. She licked her right forefinger and traced the name of the angel Gabriel across the circle of water. Gabriel, the messenger, revealer of the future.

The yolk swirled round, off-center, as reflections from the candles danced with one another. A sharp intake of breath and his mother pulled her hand back to the edge of the bowl.

She swallowed, and then tugged Proctor's finger up to the bowl. "Take a moment to sweep your mind clean," she said.

He nodded acquiescence, but the broom in his head chased futilely after the stray thoughts. The other minutemen would already be on their way, and he didn't want to look like a Johnny-come-lately. Then a tightness formed in his chest, the way it always did when the sight was coming on.

"Heavenly Father," he said. "If it pleases Thee, give me a sign, so that I may better know Thy will."

His eyes drifted shut.

This vision was clearer, more vivid than any Proctor had ever scryed. A militia man, an officer, marched across the green in the pale before dawn. A horse stamped through the grass—its flanks, the rider's boots, blocked Proctor's view of the militia officer, but the mounted Redcoat's face flushed with anger. A golden coin of fire burned at the Redcoat's throat. The Redcoat leaned over and aimed a pistol at the militia man's back. He was going to shoot—

A sudden bang made Proctor's eyes blink open, but it was only his father's chair cracking into the wall. The old man moaned as if he'd been wounded.

Proctor breathed deeply and fell back into the vision. At first everything was white, like fog, only dry and sharp—the smoke from musket fire. The bitter taste of black powder ran across his lips. A single line of red bled through the white haze. Then more lines of red, slashing across the back of his lids until they resolved into shapes of men, marching—no, running—away. The backs of the Redcoats. A sense of their fear, of his own elation, flushed through him.

His eyes opened.

"And what did you see?" his mother asked quietly.

Pulling his hands away from the bowl, he said, "I saw the Redcoats, Mother. Marching back to Boston, in a fine hurry."

"Is that all?"

He nodded firmly.

Her mouth tightened and she jabbed a finger into the yolk, breaking it. She whipped the egg into the water, mixing it all together.

“I thought I heard gunfire,” she said. “And I think I saw men shot, dying.”

“That last part is your fear talking. I didn’t see anything like that, only the Redcoats marching off.”

“It would gratify me deeply if you were not to muster,” she said. “Let other mothers with children to spare send one of theirs, and not risk my only son.”

Proctor couldn’t blame her, not with his father all but gone. But he had to do his duty. “I’m on the roster, Mother, so I have to muster. Don’t worry, we just need to show the governor our resolve to stand up for our rights. It won’t come to shooting.”

Maybe a single round of warning fire, just for show, like in his vision, and the Redcoats would march back to Boston. If only he knew what the golden coin at the Redcoat officer’s throat meant.

He rose to go. His mother leaned over and blew out the five candles in one breath. “Be cautious,” she said. “The future is a blank road to me like it has never been before.”

“I won’t do anything to put myself in harm’s way,” he said, picking up his hat and musket. “Besides, you know what Miss Emily would do to me if I got myself hurt.”

His mother smiled, just like he hoped. She was almost as fond of Emily Rucke as Proctor was. The two of them were a bit young to be getting married yet, at just twenty and nineteen. But in truth, he expected to rightfully take over the farm soon if his father’s health continued to fade, and he and Emily could live there with his mother.

“You best hurry on then,” his mother said, resigned. She wrapped an end of bread and a slice of cheese in cloth, and tucked it in his pocket. “You wouldn’t want them to muster without you.”

“No, ma’am,” he answered. He paused at the door and looked back to see his mother fussing with the blankets around his father’s shoulders. He tipped his hat to her and ran out into the night.

The wind gusted—the air was chillier than he expected. He stopped at the well to fill his canteen. When he was done, he pulled Emily’s yellow ribbon from his pocket and tied it to the buckle. Smoothing the silk through

his fingers made him eager to see her again, but that would likely have to wait for another day.

He crossed the pasture to the road, his path broken by boulders; lights flickered like stars in distant windows, forming a constellation of his neighbors. Shadows moved through the moonlight on the road ahead.

“Hold up,” he shouted.

Someone called back and the shadows paused. Proctor ran over the field, the horn, bag, and canteen banging against his sides. He climbed the stone wall that lined the road; the moon was bright enough to see their faces. There was old Robert Munroe—carrying the same heavy Queen’s Arm musket that he carried during the last war when he fought beside Proctor’s father—with square-jawed Everett Simes and his nephew Arthur.

“Good morning, Proctor,” Munroe said, tugging at his beard. “Your father not coming?”

“No, sir,” Proctor answered.

“No, didn’t think so. He was a good ‘un in the thick of it, though. Sure hope you take after him some.”

“I could do without seeing the sharp end of an Indian tomahawk,” Proctor said, and the other men chuckled. He started one way and they turned the other. “Shouldn’t we be headed into Lincoln to muster?”

“Cap’n Smith says a few of us ought to fetch back a firsthand report of the situation from Lexington,” Arthur explained. He’d turned fifteen back in January but was small enough to pass for twelve. Although not on the militia rosters, he showed up to every muster.

“Well, all right then,” Proctor said quickly and fell in.

“Say, Proctor, we’ll march right past the Rucke place, won’t we?” Everett asked.

“Reckon so,” Proctor said, trying to sound as if he was talking about the weather. He was eager to change the subject before they started teasing him about Emily; Arthur carried a long fowling piece for his weapon, so Proctor said, “You going bird hunting there, Arthur?”

“Sure,” Arthur answered back, deadpan. “Plan to shoot some

redbirds if I see 'em.”

Proctor chuckled with the others but the remark made him uncomfortable. Sure, there'd been some conflict between the soldiers and the colonists, but they were all Englishmen. They might squabble with each other, like a large family did; in the end they'd set aside their differences and make things right. It wouldn't come to shooting.

The other three began to chatter about how many Redcoats might be marching out of Boston, and how many militia men would show up to fight them. Proctor walked in silence, slowly drawing ahead, not wanting to be part of their discussion. It didn't help. As they passed through the swampy land west of Lexington, the wind did odd tricks with sounds, bringing snatches of voices from homes too far away to see. Every farmhouse between Cambridge and Salem was awake by now, having the same conversation.

When Proctor rounded Concord Hill and came in sight of the rooftops of Lexington, the large, familiar house ahead was lit up bright as day. Even from a distance, he recognized the feminine silhouette in the main window.

As he ran ahead and up to the porch, the silhouette disappeared. He was reaching for the brass knocker when the door flew open. A round-faced brown woman stood there in a dress thrown hastily over her shift.

“Sorry to come calling so early, Bess,” Proctor said, addressing a house slave Thomas Rucke had brought with him on a voyage from the West Indies. “I wondered, if Miss Emily were awake, if I might have a brief word with her.”

“She right here, be out in a second.” Sleep filled Bess's eyes, and she frowned as somebody behind her nudged her gently aside. It was Emily, in one of her best dresses, despite the hour. She was slender, with a heart-shaped face and big brown eyes. Dark curls tumbled out from under the edges of her cap.

“Well, this is certainly an unexpected visit,” she said; but she glanced at his weapons and her face turned cool. “I can't imagine what're you're grinning at.”

Proctor dropped his gaze and his smile. “Might be because I'm looking at the sweetest woman I know.”

“You only say that because my father is in the sugar trade.”

“I’d think you were the sweetest woman in the colonies if your father traded lemon rinds.”

Bess snorted and pushed past them, a drowsy-eyed chaperone, shawl over shift, carrying a basket of darning. She grunted as she eased herself into the porch rocker and spread the work on her lap. The wood creaked rhythmically. A faint voice down the road called, “Brown?”

“Emily,” Proctor said, in a rush. “Please believe me, there’s nothing to fear.”

“Oh, Proctor!” She wrung her hands. “Father says those rebels—that mob behind the tea party and everything since—they want to start a war!”

He shook his head. “No, no one wants to start a war.”

“Brown!” The voice was stronger as the other three militia men marched around the bend.

“I have to go, Emily.”

She stared meaningfully at the yellow ribbon tied to his canteen. “If my affections mean anything to you at all, Proctor Brown, you will not be part of any mob tonight.”

The creaking on the porch had stopped. Bess sat with her chin on her chest, the darning egg naked in her lap. Impulsively, Proctor took Emily’s hand and leaned close to whisper. “You know the secret I told you, about the ... the things I see?”

“Yes,” she said. “But what has that to do with—”

“Sometimes I can see a short ways into the future. You might call it scrying.”

“It sounds like you mean witchcraft.” She tried to pull her hand away but he held on tight.

“It’s not like that,” he said. “It’s like ... like the parable of the talents. God gave me this talent, and He meant me to use it, not bury it. I used it tonight, and I saw the Redcoats marching back to Boston. There won’t be any war.”

Emily yanked her hand away and covered her mouth.

“You done courting there, Brown?” Everett Simes’s voice said, right behind him.

“Yes, sir, I am,” Proctor said. He straightened up, slid his thumb under his powder horn strap to readjust it, and gave Emily a firm nod. “I was just telling Miss Rucke here there’s nothing for her to worry about.”

“Good eve, Miss Rucke,” Everett said, squinting toward the east to see if dawn had poked its nose over the horizon. “Or maybe it’s good day. It’d be best if your father didn’t come out to visit you. With his support of the governor and all, he might find a welcome made of tar and feathers.”

“It’s so pleasant to be threatened on my own front porch. I see the kind of company you’ve decided to keep, Mister Brown. Be so good as to call on me again when you can come alone.” She went over to the rocker and shook the slave awake. “Come, Bess, we should go inside. It’s dangerous to be out here. Good day, gentlemen.”

“It won’t come to shooting,” Proctor assured her.

He stood watching the closed door for a moment before he rejoined the others. As they marched toward Lexington Green, he thought about whether he needed to go back to repair the situation with her. She was high-spirited—he loved that trait in her, though it meant she upset easily. She’d be fine once the current commotion had passed.

The air grew colder and the men’s breath frosted as they chatted. When the conversation came back around to the British, it shoved Proctor’s thoughts back to that golden coin in his vision. He was sure God meant him to see it, but he didn’t know what it meant.

Lexington was close. They passed the burying ground, with grave markers thrust up from the darkness like tripstones. The four men went more quietly.

Cattle lowed uneasily in the common pen as they came to the green. Lexington Green was a triangle where the country roads joined together headed for Boston. They passed the schoolhouse at the wide end and crossed the open grass toward the meeting house that sat at the point. Small groups of militia men moved like shadows across the green; maybe a dozen others, their faces lit by lanterns, gathered around a cask of ale

outside one of the houses that faced the green.

“Don’t look like they’re ready for the Redcoats,” Munroe muttered. “If’n they’re comin’.”

“Don’t look like there’s more’n fifty men here total,” Everett said.

“But a thousand Redcoats are marching from Boston!” Arthur said. “How will we fight ‘em?”

“There won’t be any fighting—”

Proctor’s opinion was interrupted by a ragged volley of musketfire east of the green. He fumbled for his powder horn.

Old Munroe laughed at him, planted the butt-end of his weapon in the ground and leaned on it. “I think that’s thens as made up their minds to enter Buckman’s tavern.”

That’s when Proctor heard casual whoops and laughter from the same direction. But of course—you couldn’t carry a loaded weapon into a tavern. He relaxed, chuckling at himself.

“We could go to the tavern,” Arthur suggested hopefully, and his uncle glared at him.

“That’ll be the best place to find Cap’n Parker,” Munroe said. “He uses it as his headquarters when the militia drills.”

As they headed toward the tavern, a man came out and crossed the road toward the green. Proctor would’ve walked past him, but Monroe stopped and lifted his chin in greeting.

“Good evening to you, Cap’n.”

The man stopped. Parker was a tall man in his mid-forties, with a large head and high brow. He coughed into his hand, sick with consumption—both his eyes and his cheeks were sunken—but too stubborn to give in to it. “Good evening, Robert. Who’re your friends?”

“These are the Simes, cousins from up by Lincoln,” Munroe answered. “And this is Brown. We picked him up on the road in.”

“We’re grateful for your hike, but it doesn’t ‘pear as though we’ll see

any Redcoats tonight after all,” he told them, his voice stronger than Proctor expected. “I’m giving men permission to disperse to their homes.”

Everett sighed loudly. “But if I go home now I’ll have to plow and my ox in’t fit for it.”

Parker smiled and excused himself to take the same message over to the men gathered at Munroe’s house. Arthur yawned and stared down the road toward Boston. “Guess we wasted our time.”

“Not Proctor,” Munroe said. “At least he had the chance to visit his sweetheart.”

“And next time I see her, I can tell her I was right, that nothing happened,” Proctor said.

He was shifting the bag and horn on his shoulder for the march back home when a man ran onto the green shouting, “The Regulars have passed the Rocks—they’re half a mile away!”

Arthur’s young face vacillated between thrill and terror. “What do we do?”

“Keep a cool head,” Proctor said. “This’ll be peaceful.”

Captain Parker headed back toward the tavern, pausing only long enough to send a man sprinting to the belfry outside the meeting house. In a second, the bells were clanging.

Munroe chased Parker across the green. “Hey, cap’n!”

Parker paused at the sound of his name. “Seems I spoke too hastily,” he said. “Would you parade with my company?”

“That’s why we came,” Munroe said firmly.

Young Arthur pushed past his uncle. “I can stand in line too.”

Everett grumbled, “And do exactly as he’s told.”

“Thank you all,” Parker said, and hurried off, calling for his drummer to beat to arms. The other three men moved to join the rest of Parker’s company, but Proctor stood still.

He had seen the Redcoats marching back to Boston. Nothing was going to happen.

“You coming, Brown?” Everett said sharply.

Proctor nodded, a bit numb, and followed them.

For the next few moments, Lexington Green looked like an ant hill stirred up with a stick. A small boy beat his drum while the bells continued to ring their alarm overhead. Captain Parker shouted at the men to form a line at the wide end of the green. Men from the tavern reloaded their weapons as they ran to obey. Proctor and the other three took a spot on the far right end of the line. Anxious families gathered by the schoolhouse.

One of the Lexington militia men left the line to go speak to his wife over by the schoolhouse. Parker ran him down, and shoved him back in line. “The time for second thoughts is done! Form up!”

Old Munroe loaded his musket, fitted the ramrod in place under the barrel. He nudged Proctor. “You might want to feed that weapon if you plan to empty its guts.”

“I’ll wait,” Proctor said. He looked down the line of men and made a quick count. “If it’s sixty of us against a thousand Redcoats, there won’t be any shooting.”

Arthur finished loading his fowling piece. “Here they come,” he said, his voice shaking. “Here they come now.”

The Lexington drum was drowned out by the sound of other drummers, and the first Redcoats marched around the bend beyond the meeting house. To judge by the brogue, an Irishman set the pace—his accent carried across the green as he yelled the soldiers on. They came fast, for all their delay in getting this far, and once they started, they seemed to keep on coming, a long line of red uniforms stretching as far as the eye could see. Proctor tried to count them too, but the dawn twilight blurred their numbers. His heart began to pound—there were hundreds, maybe even a thousand of them. They formed a line with startling alacrity, several ranks deep, as wide as the green, not more than seventy yards away.

But they would march back to Boston—he was sure of it.

Three British officers on horses rode onto the green and galloped at the center of the colonial line. One waved a sword and yelled, “Throw down

your arms! You rebels, throw down your arms, damn you!”

A light flashed at the throat of the officer who shouted, and a sharp pain stabbed Proctor’s eyes.

“Did you see that light?” he asked.

“No,” Munroe said. He was staring at the same officer. “Wouldn’t mind a little light to aim by.”

Uncertainty fluttered in Proctor’s throat. It was the light, the same one from his vision, but he had no idea what it meant. He reached into his hunting bag for a ball to load his musket. They might have to make one volley, just so the Redcoats could save face when they retreated.

He had his ramrod in the barrel when Captain Parker approached the British officers. Parker met them eye to eye, speaking quietly; they blustered back, shouting orders at him to disarm his men.

A cry came down the line. “Don’t fire unless fired upon.” Everett took up the order and repeated it to Arthur. “Hold your fire—we’re not to start any war.”

“But if they start it, we’ll give it back to them,” Munroe said. He put his flints and lead balls into his hat and set it on the ground before him for quicker reloading. After a second, Everett copied him.

Proctor finished loading his weapon and looked up to see the situation had quickly deteriorated. Two mounted officers cantered across the green, while the third one, the one with the golden light, shouted at Captain Parker.

“Who is that?” he asked.

“Sounds like Major Pitcairn,” Munroe said. “According to those who know him down in Boston, he’s a real firebrand. Fearless in battle. The men go wherever he leads.”

That made Proctor even less easy of heart. The mass of Redcoats had grown so deep it was impossible to see if more were coming. Meanwhile, flashes of brown and russet showed behind the stone walls surrounding the green, where men too cowardly to join the line of the militia took cover. Women and children bunched by the cattle pen and between the houses that lined the commons, straining for a view.

The Redcoats took up their battle cry, shouting, "Huzzah! Huzzah! Huzzah!" The roar made Proctor's skin goose pimple. He saw Arthur pale, and Everett swallowed nervously.

"There won't be any shooting," Proctor whispered.

Captain Parker finally turned away from Pitcairn, who was left mouth open in mid-rage, and walked back toward his company of militia.

"They won't listen to reason and mean to disarm us," he shouted down the line. "And we'll have none of that. Take your arms and disperse, go home at once."

"What do we do?" Arthur asked his uncle, looking more like twelve than fifteen.

"We'll disperse, that's the order," Everett said.

Proctor breathed a sigh of relief; maybe he could stop by and talk to Emily on the way home, make things better there.

As the other men in the line started to break away in groups of two and three, Munroe pointed across the road behind them. "Let's stay off the main road. We'll circle the burying ground and cut back through the trees."

"That sounds good," Everett said, and he bent to pick up his hat and flints.

But Pitcairn chased after Captain Parker, circling his horse and shouting. "Order them to lay down their arms, or by God every man on this field will end the day dead! Surrender, or you will die!"

He pulled his pistol, as if sixty or more armed men at point blank range were nothing to fear, and aimed it at the Lexington militia captain. The golden coin of light at his throat was blindingly bright. Proctor squinted, realizing that he was the only one who saw it.

And then time slowed down, just like a fish swimming beneath the frozen surface of a winter pond. Pitcairn's horse stamped and whinnied. Pitcairn leaned over and aimed his pistol at Captain Parker's back, clearly intending to shoot.

Proctor felt a knot of tightness in his chest, the same as when he

scryed. The other militia men had all turned away, or left. No one else could save Lexington's captain.

"Hey!" Proctor raised his musket and aimed it at the shining circle of light.

He heard a bang, like a chair slamming into the wall. When the smoke cleared from the end of his muzzle, Pitcairn stared at him. Untouched. He lowered his gun quickly before anyone could see what he'd done.

"Boy, what did you just do?" Munroe asked.

Scattered popping already echoed around the green and a second later the Redcoats' line erupted in a wall of smoke shot with flame. Proctor turned to answer Munroe just in time to see the old man's head split open by a lead ball, flinging him backward in a spray of blood.

What *had* he done? It wasn't supposed to happen this way. This wasn't what he'd seen.

While these thoughts roiled through his head, his training kicked in and he started to reload. The jumbled Lexington militia responded to the Redcoats with ragged shots, but when the second British rank fired, men all around Proctor threw themselves to the ground.

Some of them went down for a different reason. Everett had taken a ball through his leg and was trying to staunch the flow of blood. Arthur stared at his uncle; his shaking hand spilled gunpowder everywhere but into his barrel. Behind them women screamed and children shrieked, some running forward through the gunfire to check on their husbands and fathers, others scattering to their homes.

Across the green, British officers shouted for the next rank of soldiers to step forward while the first finished reloading. Proctor tugged on Arthur's sleeve. "We best be on our way."

"I'm staying! I'm—"

"You take him," Everett said through gritted teeth.

Proctor didn't need permission. He grabbed the back of the boy's coat and dragged him across the road toward the cemetery. They ran with their heads down as the guns cracked and another round of lead buzzed over their heads. Behind them, a Redcoat shouted "Fix bayonets!" Proctor

held on to Arthur, running past the smithy and into the graveyard, among the crosses and headstones.

“We aren’t going to take that,” Arthur said, twisting to get free. “We aren’t just going to let them march in and tell us what to do and shoot us. We have to get my uncle!”

Proctor tightened his fist on the boy’s jacket and kept running. He glanced at his musket—the firing pan was empty, the hammer down—he’d shot a second time but he couldn’t recall aiming or pulling the trigger.

What he did recall was the way the Redcoats concentrated their fire around him, because he’d been the first to shoot. And Robert Munroe, who had survived the Indian wars alongside Proctor’s father, was dead.

How was he going to explain himself to his father?

Or to Emily?

Shouts behind them were followed by random shots. Proctor pushed Arthur’s head down as they ran into the cover of the trees. “Left,” he said, guiding the boy with a shove—they’d have to get back to the road before they ran into the swamp.

Proctor’s vision from the scrying came back to him again. He hadn’t just lied to his mother, he’d lied to himself.

The smoke of muskets.

The taste of black powder.

The Redcoats running.

Why had he assumed they were marching back to Boston? They were chasing the militia. And why in God’s name had he felt compelled to shoot at Pitcairn, the officer with the golden coin at his throat?

“We need to find our company and report,” he told Arthur, who was too stunned to respond. The real battle was only beginning.

They clambered over the stone wall when they came to the road. There was a light on in Emily’s house. He couldn’t stop to speak to her now, but he’d come back later to set things right.

Meanwhile, signs of the country rising were all around them. Warning beacons on hilltops to the west alerted other towns, and the fitful wind carried snatches of church bells ringing the same message north and south.

They lost those signs when they rounded Fiske's Hill and passed under the high bluff that sheltered the road. Arthur stumbled, and Proctor hooked an arm under his shoulder and hauled him along. The poor kid was probably exhausted. Before Proctor could say anything encouraging to him, hoofbeats sounded on the road behind them.

"Let's hide," he whispered. The road was lined with boulders and loose stones, topped with logs. Proctor banged his knee on a stump end as they vaulted a low spot and crouched behind cover. Arthur tried again to reload his fowling piece.

Proctor reached out, stopped him, and stood. The rider was a boy, a colonial, galloping hard toward Concord.

"Hey! Hey, what's the news?"

The boy reined in, kicking up dirt as he turned around. "The Redcoats shot the militia at Lexington. They're marching for Concord!"

"We were at the green when they started shooting," Proctor said. "They shot Robert Munroe in the head."

Arthur pushed forward. "Do you have any word about Everett Simes? He was injured—we had to leave him behind."

"I don't know the names," the boy replied, "but they bayoneted some of the injured men, speared them like they were fish."

Proctor's jaw dropped open. Arthur started back for Lexington but Proctor grabbed him.

"I need to carry the warning ahead," the boy explained as his anxious horse spun in circles. Proctor said, "God speed."

As the hoofbeats faded down the road, Arthur tried to pull free of Proctor's grip. "We've got to go back."

"There's no help for your uncle now." His own voice sounded hard to him despite the evenness of his words. "There'll be plenty of shooting

ahead.”

Arthur’s lips rolled into a grim frown, and he set off for Concord at twice the pace he’d had before. Proctor jogged after him, but his thoughts trailed behind. How could his gift have been so wrong? Why hadn’t he seen the Redcoats firing at the militia?

The fields and farmyards along the road were empty. At Hartwell’s farm, a trunk full of valuables had been left beside the barn. When Proctor and Arthur crossed the bridge at Tanner’s Brook, even the tavern was empty. Closer to Concord, at Merriam’s Corner, three generations of Merriams had gathered to barricade the road.

“The British killed men at Lexington,” the youngest Merriam shouted. Proctor tensed, waiting to hear how he’d started the shooting, but the other man continued without mentioning it. “They shot Robert Munroe’s head off and stabbed Everett Simes—Oh, hey, there Arthur.”

“We were there,” Arthur said. Proctor’s glance shifted from face to face. Maybe fifteen men, all brave and angry. What would they say if they knew he’d been the first to shoot?

The youngest Merriam, outside without a hat, brought them cups of fresh water. “They shot Jonathon Harrington in front of his own home,” Michael Merriam told them. “He bled to death on the doorstep in front of his wife and children.”

“They’ll do the same to you,” Proctor said, wiping water from his chin. “There’s no way you’ll stand against them.”

“We don’t mean to. We’re just watching the road until they come, then we’ll fall back and join the militia in Concord.”

“We’ll see you there then,” Proctor said. “We have to muster, and report what we saw.”

They said their good-byes and continued on toward Concord. The last stretch of road ran beneath the shadow of Arrowhead Ridge. “We could pick them off from up there,” Arthur said. “While they were marching below.”

“Reckon we could,” Proctor replied. Picking off a few of them wouldn’t make any difference to Robert Munroe or Everett Simes, but it might make the Redcoats slower to shoot the next time. Or quicker. That

Major Pitcairn meant business.

Drums and fifes played in the distance, coming toward them—several companies of militia marching toward Lexington. He and Arthur stepped to the side of the road. He only saw young faces like their own—the minutemen. His company from Lincoln was among them.

A sense of relief flooded Proctor.

“It took you long enough,” he said. He fell in with the column, saluting Captain Smith, a competent and usually taciturn man just a few years older than himself.

“Brown,” Smith said. “We marked you down for absent.”

“I went into Lexington with Munroe and Everett Simes, saw the shooting there.”

“Was it as bad as we heard?”

Proctor swallowed hard, wondering how much of it was his fault. “Worse. There must be close to a thousand Redcoats, and the major of the marines is fearless.”

“We’re bound to see more fighting today, now that they started it,” Smith said. “Captains Barrett and Minott of the Lexington minutemen are leading this group, so we’re just here to provide support. Is that clear?”

“Yes, sir.” Firmly.

“Then fall in.”

“Sir, can I keep Arthur with me?”

Smith looked back at Arthur, saw the intensity in his eyes, and said, “You can. But Arthur?”

“Yes, sir?” His voice trembled.

“You’re not to put yourself in the way of any exceptional danger. Your mother would have my hide if you did.”

“It’s a bit late for that,” Arthur said angrily, but Proctor had taken his arm and let the column pass. They exchanged greetings with the rest of the

men as they went by, until Proctor saw a familiar face—sandy hair and an open smile above a cleft chin—and fell in beside him.

“Amos Lathrop,” he said. “Good to see you.”

“I understand you already heard the British guns.” He pushed his cheek out with his tongue, then said. “Do you always have to be so impatient to do *everything*?”

Proctor smiled from habit, though he didn't feel it inside. But Amos was his best friend. Being the only one to work their farm, and not having much family on either side, he didn't have many close friends. What time he did have for socializing this past year, he'd spent pursuing Emily. “Where's the rest of the militia?”

“Their captains voted to guard the town center,” Amos said. “The minutemen companies voted to meet the Redcoats on the road. So here we are.”

Proctor made a quick count of the line. There were only a hundred minutemen present. “You know how many Redcoats there are?”

“I've heard,” Amos said. “But somebody's got to go out to meet 'em.”

The beat of the drum steadied Proctor's nerves and marching gave him a moment to think. If he was the only one who could see the golden medallion shining at Pitcairn's throat, then it must be some kind of witchcraft. But what was it for and what could he do about it?

The companies left the road, threading their way among the rocks to take up a position along the hilltop overlooking Tanner's Creek. A dozen or so Merriams, retreating from their homestead, joined the line. Proctor reloaded his musket. All around him, men arranged their balls and flints and horns in the manner they preferred for fast reloading. Proctor kept his ready for another quick retreat.

The sun was up now and he was thirsty, so he took a sip from his canteen. He curled the yellow ribbon around his finger while he took a second sip, thinking of the curls in Emily's hair. Around him, men whispered to their neighbors about the coming battle.

Proctor—and Arthur, he reminded himself—were the only men in these companies who had ever been in battle before, and that had only been a few hours previous. But here their line stood, ready to face the most

efficient and deadly military in the world. The “deadly” aspect was chief in his mind.

“Let’s bow our heads in prayer,” Captain Barrett, in charge of the Concord minutemen, called out. Proctor put both hands around the barrel of his musket, propped butt-end in the soil, and bowed his head.

“Heavenly Father,” Barrett said. “You bring these tribulations upon us as a chastisement because we fall away from Your Holy Word. Use Your rod to guide us back into Your safe pastures. And beat off the English wolves. Amen.”

“Amen,” Proctor said, echoed by a hundred other voices. He knew what some of the men would say, that talents like his, skills they’d call witchcraft, were part of any falling away from the Holy Word.

Were they right? If he knew how to fashion a charm like Pitcairn’s, would he make it for himself? Was it a Christian gift, made with God-given skill, like his mother insisted their talents were? Or was it made with some other kind of magic?

Sunlight glinted sharp off movement in the road at the far edge of the horizon, and the wind carried the faint sound of drums rattling out a quick march. A double line of British regulars came into view. The sun behind them reflected on their arms and turned their coats as red as blood.

“Them’s the ones who stabbed my uncle,” Arthur told Amos and a few other men near by.

Amos didn’t change his expression, but he let off a low, skeptical whistle.

A British officer rode ahead on his horse, twisting in his saddle to shout orders. Proctor wondered if it was Pitcairn, and then felt certain that it was. The drummers changed their cadence and the Redcoats spread out over the fields, forming a skirmish line opposite the minutemen. Men around Proctor began to speak up.

“Cap’n, there’re too many of them.”

“We could hold this hill for one or two rounds, but they’ll flank us.”

“Don’t care for the looks of that, sir.”

Proctor agreed with them, and his first resolve to do something to even the score melted away like dew.

“We’ll stay here until they get within a hundred rods,” Barrett said finally. “Delay them that long, give more men time to rally in town. Then we’ll make an orderly retreat.”

Proctor tightened his fist on his weapon, and he saw Amos and a few other men nodding. They could do that much.

If they had the chance. The Redcoats skirmish line came fast, looking eager to engage and expecting to win any contest of arms. They were less than a quarter mile away when Barrett signaled to the drummer and the colonials began their retreat. Proctor was frustrated at his powerlessness, but also quietly relieved. He checked over his shoulders once or twice to see if the British were gaining on them. But the militia drummers matched the rhythm of the British drummers, beat for beat, with the fifers playing similar tunes. It would have felt like one of the parades he’d seen in Boston were it not for the deadly circumstances of that morning.

They marched into Concord with the British still a quarter mile behind them. The rest of the militia companies were lined up in formation on the high hill across the road from the meeting house. The liberty pole stood behind them, a thin reed stark against the pale sky, next to a pole flying the town flag. The minutemen hurried up the hill to join them.

As the officers shouted the retreating into the new formation, Proctor looked below. Even with all their forces together, the Redcoats still outnumbered them two to one. And they swept down the road like a scythe at reaping.

Along the hilltop, townswomen were bringing food out to the men. Proctor snatched a warm piece of buttered bread from a pale, determined girl he’d never met. She glanced down at the Redcoats and hurried away with her basket before he could thank her. Arthur started after her, but Proctor put a hand on his shoulder and handed him the bread. While Arthur devoured that, Proctor reached in his pocket, crumbled off a piece of the cheese his mother had given him, and slipped it in his mouth, savoring the sharp taste.

The British drums pounded and a thousand pairs of boots thumped in unison. Behind Proctor, the Concord militia officers debated a course of action.

“What are we waiting for?” Arthur said. “Let’s go and meet them.”

Eleazar Brooks, an old gray-haired veteran from Lincoln and a friend of Proctor’s father, stood nearby them in the line. “No, not yet. It will not do for us to begin the war.”

“The war’s already begun,” Proctor said, and told him what happened to Munroe and Everett.

Brooks sucked his teeth. “That’s unfortunate, especially for Munroe. He was a good man. Still, we must make sure the regulars are the ones as start the war.”

Up and down the line, it was the same thing. The older men were cautious and wanted to wait, while the young men were all for meeting the British and giving them a whipping.

Would the young men feel different if they knew what Proctor knew? He doubted it.

Captain Smith came running down the line, mopping sweat from his forehead. “More militia are coming in,” he said. “We’re going to retreat across the North Bridge to Punkatasset Hill, until our strength is equal to theirs.”

“Another retreat?” Arthur asked, his voice cracking. “Why so far?”

“The hill’s a good choice,” the veteran Brooks said as Smith moved on, repeating the order. “It’ll give us a clear view to see them coming. And it’s a bigger field for us to make formation.”

Proctor was torn. If enough militia showed up, the British would have to back off, the way they should have done in Lexington—just like in his vision. But he wanted one more chance at Pitcairn too, and he wouldn’t get that without more shooting.

Once again the drums and fifes played, and once again Proctor retreated another mile, this time through the town and north. Their double file stomped on the wooden planks as they ran across the North Bridge, drowning out the sound of the drums.

Punkatasset Hill was a broad field that looked over the Concord River and across the great meadows on the other side. You could see the center of town, so it was the perfect place to watch the Redcoats march in to

occupy their homes.

The sun climbed higher in the sky and the air grew warm. Men who had worn both vests and coats out the night before began to open or remove them. Proctor took another sip of tepid water from his canteen while British forces ran to take the bridge below. Half the group split off and continued up the road toward the mill where the Concord militia had hidden their munitions.

“There must be Tory spies around,” old Brooks said, “if they know exactly where to go.”

Proctor found himself nodding agreement. One of the other Lincoln men nearby said, “I hear that Rucke up from Lexington is one of them. He moved out here with his daughter just so’s he could spy on the militias.”

“That’s a damned lie,” Proctor blurted out.

“Says who?” The man who demanded to know was a few years older and a few inches taller than Proctor. He had a lopsided mouth that made it look like he was ready to bite someone.

“Says me.” Proctor balled his fist and stepped right up into the slanderous fool’s ugly face.

Eleazar Brooks shoved between them, holding up his hand for peace. “Save it for the Redcoats, boys. We’ll be needing both of you afore the day is out.”

Proctor pushed harder, but the other man backed away. “That’ll be fine,” he said. “There’ll be time to deal with Tory spies and any other sinners the way God wills after this day is over.”

At the other man’s words, a cold knot tightened in Proctor’s chest, different from the one he had when scrying. The only thing worse than a spy was a witch. In his mother’s family, there’d been some killed in Salem for the sin of witchcraft. There was no way he could tell these men what he knew about Pitcairn, not without revealing himself, and putting him and his mother at risk.

He turned back to his place in line, tightened his grip on his musket, and watched the Redcoats enter Concord.

“I haven’t ever heard anything like that about Miss Emily’s father,”

Arthur said quietly.

“Because it’s a damned lie,” Proctor snapped under his breath. Immediately, he regretted it. “Forgive my intemperance, Arthur. It wasn’t meant to be directed at you.”

“We’ll show those damned scoundrels,” Arthur replied. “And we’ll give them something back for what they did to my uncle. If I see any of them lying there injured, I’ll bayonet them myself.”

Proctor swallowed his first real laugh since sunrise. “But you don’t have a bayonet.”

“Then I’ll use a hatchet,” the boy said, deadly earnest, eyeing the one in Proctor’s belt.

A barking dog slammed into Proctor’s leg, knocking him off-balance, before it chased another dog up the hill and into the mass of confusion there. Men’s dogs had followed them from their homes and farms and, not knowing that a battle had taken place miles away this beautiful morning, frolicked as if it were a picnic.

In some ways the scene did resemble a church picnic. Laundry hung from the lines outside the house atop the hill. Women and children ran back and forth from town with food and news. Old faces mixed with young, the black faces of slaves and former slaves mixed with the white. The officers were dressed in ordinary clothes; the colonel in charge wore an old coat, a flapped hat, and a leather apron. Reverend Emerson, Concord’s minister, was present in his dark coat, moving among the crowd, offering words of encouragement and prayers. Only the musket he carried gave sign that anything was out of the ordinary.

Arthur tugged on his sleeve. “Look!”

A column of smoke rose from the town below. “That appears like it’s from the town hall,” Proctor said.

Many of the militia men, including Proctor, were poised to charge down the hill, but the drums started beating, calling them to order. As they fell into a double line, he realized there were at least two full regiments gathered—more than enough to take the bridge. With other volunteers coming in from the outlying towns, they had maybe as many men as the entire British force.

He braced his feet as they went down the slope. The colonel, in his leather apron, stomped along the length of the line. "Do not fire first," he reminded the men every few steps. "Don't be the first to open fire."

Proctor looked away, unable to meet his eyes.

Down the line someone called out, "But what do we do once they fire on us?"

The colonel paused to answer him. "Then you remember your training and fire as fast as you can. Aim low for their bodies." That elicited murmurs of respect.

At the bottom of the hill, the badly outnumbered British soldiers beat a quick retreat across the bridge. As the colonials continued their steady march down the long slope, a few Redcoats ran back onto the bridge and began to rip up the wooden planks, rendering it impassable.

With the sound of the splitting wood still in the air, the colonel left the colonial line and ran ahead, leather apron flapping against his legs. "Stop that! Stop! That's our bridge, to our homes—you leave it be!"

"Cap'n, can we shoot 'em?" asked a man near Proctor, and a fellow just beyond him yelled, "That's our bridge!"

Proctor clenched his jaw and gripped his musket tighter. All around him, the Concord men beseeched their commanders to attack. The sound of another plank ripped loose was followed, over the rooftops in town, by sparks shooting into the air and the doubling of the column of smoke.

No single man gave an order, but a consensus was reached, just as in a town meeting, and the deliberate march downhill began to move as fast as a Nor'easter, sweeping Proctor along with it.

The Acton fifer, a little blond boy about Arthur's age, played "The White Cockade," a quick little Jacobite song the British thought seditious, and the minutemen from Acton ran to the front. The Concord minutemen jumped in behind them, and Proctor's Lincoln company came next, all forming the first line of attack. Most of the casualties would be in the front rows; everyone knew it, including Proctor.

He glanced over his shoulder. The ordinary militia companies filled out the middle ranks, followed at the rear by the unorganized volunteers who answered the alarms.

The Redcoats saw the minutemen sweeping toward them like a storm front, and they turned to run for shelter. At the same moment, a second company was running from town to provide support. The two units collided with each other just beyond the bridge, and in an instant, the western shore of the river became a jumbled mass of confused Redcoats, with frantic officers trying to sort them out.

In sharp contrast, the front line of the minutemen spread along the causeway on the eastern side of the river. Proctor remembered the British order to fix bayonets on Lexington Green and was glad; with the river between them, the British had no way to make a similar charge.

Across the river, concentrated at the bridge, the Redcoats made a hasty three-deep firing formation. Seeing their guns aimed at him, Proctor pulled up his musket and aimed back.

“Hold your fire!” Captain Smith bellowed. “We’re not to start it.”

But I already did start it, Proctor thought. And then he pushed that thought aside. Pitcairn had been ready to shoot Captain Parker in the back, knowing that witchcraft protected him from any retribution. Proctor had to act.

“Once they do start it,” Smith ordered, “aim for the brightest coats first—that’ll be their officers.”

Proctor’s heart pounded. Waiting was harder, now that he knew what was coming.

A gun cracked—a puff of smoke went up from the front of the British line. Proctor swallowed, kept his own finger frozen, waiting for the order. The Acton fifer began another round of “The White Cockade.”

Two more British shots went off, and then the front row of Redcoats let go with a ragged, unordered volley. One of the Acton minutemen went down, his chest burst open, spurting blood. The fifer dropped, his tune cut off in mid-note. A second volley came from the British line and a few more minutemen fell. Proctor’s heart was drumming in his ear.

And his captain was shouting.

“Fire! For God’s sake, fire!”

Proctor aimed for the reddest coat and squeezed the trigger. For the next few moments, all he was aware of were the men beside him, the men he aimed at, and the mechanical process of reloading his musket. Dense clouds of bitter smoke obscured both sides of the river. Before the third ball left his musket he realized he no longer heard lead whizzing past.

The British lines had broken.

Men were down around him. Some of the militia retreated from the carnage to regroup; others ran toward the bridge to secure it. Proctor stood frozen, glad, for the second time that day, to find himself still standing.

The musket fog began to clear; the harsh taste of gunpowder filled his mouth. Across the river, the Redcoats were in full retreat toward Concord Green.

Just like in his scrying.

The British dead sprawled awkwardly in the road, while the wounded cried out in pain. One Redcoat clutched his belly and crawled on hands and knees after the retreating column until he fell on his face and lay there moaning, gut shot, bleeding to death. A Concord man crossed the bridge, pulled out his hatchet, and calmly split the Redcoat's skull. Proctor was not sure if it was cruelty or mercy. You killed a chicken in the yard that way, but not a man. And yet didn't he want the British dead? Hadn't they done the same to Everett Simes?

While he stood there unsure of his own feelings or next action, men began to carry the colonial dead and injured toward the farmhouse on the hill.

"Proctor," a small voice said beside him. "Proctor?"

He looked over and saw Arthur standing there, pale and trembling. His chin was slick with vomit. "Arthur!" Proctor asked. His heart lurched. "Have you been shot?"

"No. But I don't feel so good."

Proctor grabbed Arthur's shoulder, turned him side to side to make sure he wasn't hurt. "Maybe you should go home and check on your mother and your sisters."

"You sure that's proper?"

“I’m sure. The bridge is ours now. But don’t go through the center of town. Cut through the pasture and go around behind the ridge, until you come to the Bedford Road, and if that’s clear, then take the road on home.”

“All right.” He continued to stand there.

“If you have to tell them about your Uncle Everett, you do it straight out, without the details or embellishment,” Proctor said. “You don’t want to upset them more than need be.” He reached out and used his sleeve to wipe the spit off Arthur’s chin.

Arthur jerked his head away and scowled, wiping his own chin. “I know what to do.”

He ran off, leaving his hat on the ground with shot in it. Proctor didn’t have the heart to call after him, so he put the lead in his hunting bag and tucked the cap in his belt. Arthur crossed the bridge, sprinting past the Redcoat who’d had his skull split open. Proctor watched Arthur until he climbed up over the far hill and headed off through the woods behind town.

He wasn’t the only one to leave. Here and there, other men headed off in other directions, ignoring calls to return.

Proctor didn’t understand. A boy like Arthur was one thing, but the work here wasn’t done yet—you didn’t plow a field without planting it too. There were still Redcoats on both sides of the bridge.

He found Captain Smith making sure the last of their injured were removed up hill. “What’re we to do next, sir?” Proctor asked. “The Redcoats haven’t exactly packed their kit for home yet.”

Smith looked past the bridge to the center of town. “No, they haven’t. Gather as many men as you can before they scatter more. We’re caught between four British companies still on this side of the bridge, and the rest in Concord. Could be a hammer and an anvil if we’re not careful.”

“I’ll do what I can,” Proctor said.

He hurried along the causeway and up the hillside, calling the men from his company and telling them to report to Captain Smith. He grew bolder as he went and started commanding other men to report to their officers too. “The fighting’s not done,” he said again and again. “The Redcoats’re coming back for another try at us.”

He wasn't sure if it was true, but he had to do something, anything, to make up for his decision on Lexington Green.

The companies hadn't even reformed when the order came to split their force, with the minutemen holding the eastern side of the bridge. Proctor ran across it with the others, skipping over the gap where planks had been pried up. They took up a position behind the stone wall on the hillside. Proctor double-shotted his musket when he reloaded. He wanted to do as much damage with that first volley as possible.

Smoke still rose from the center of town, but it was a smaller column now, more like a bonfire than a housefire. "What do you think they're burning?" he asked.

Amos Lathrop crouched next to him behind the wall. "The carriages for the cannons, that's what one of the girls said. At least the cannons are safely hidden."

"We can build new carriages in pretty short order," Proctor replied. "But the cannon would be harder to replace."

"The Redcoat officers have to be thinking the same thing."

It appeared they were thinking of retaking the bridge first. The Redcoats who had been routed reformed with the rest of the troops and marched back in fighting formation. When they saw the militia lined up behind the wall, they halted just outside the range of the muskets. Their officers rode forward of the troops for a better look.

One officer rode out farther than the others, well within range of their guns. Major Pitcairn. Proctor again saw the spark at his chest, even though he had the sun behind him.

Almost against his own will, he sighted his musket at the officer, just as he had on the green. The urge to shoot was almost overwhelming. He fought the urge until his finger cramped, then eased it off the trigger and lowered his weapon. It would be wasted lead.

The captain, coming down the line, rapped him on the shoulder. "I saw that—hold your fire! We won't shoot until they shoot first."

As he went down the line repeating that message to other men, Amos shook his head. "Shooting's already started. We held our fire at the bridge

and lost good men.”

Proctor rolled his tongue through his cheek and spit. “It’s not like he’s telling us to let them shoot first, then turn the other cheek.”

Amos laughed. “There is that.”

The mounted officers retreated behind their troops again, Pitcairn last. At the same moment, a shout rose from the militia units on the western bank holding their position on the hill above the road. When the shout died down, Proctor heard drums. The other four companies of Redcoats were returning from the colonial armory at a quick march. When they saw they were surrounded by colonials, the front ranks broke into a run.

The militia units had their muskets trained on them, but every man held his trigger. Nor did the British shoot first.

How four companies of Redcoats marched under the guns of the militia without either side firing a shot, Proctor couldn’t say. He brought his own weapon to shoulder and winced; the four quick volleys at the bridge left him bruised.

Still no one fired.

At Lexington, and again at the bridge, it had taken only one stray shot to set off volleys of fire. This time, the Redcoats crossed the bridge, quietly gathered up their dead and wounded, and continued their tense march under the guns of the minutemen until they rejoined their main force.

Amos lowered his musket and took a deep breath. “Why’d we let them by like that?”

“When they’re all bunched up together they make a bigger target,” Proctor said. “Some of those old men in the militia, their eyesight’s going bad, and they need that advantage.”

Now that they’d been stung, the British moved slowly. They milled around town, forming their march, stealing carriages for their wounded, and sending skirmishers out along Arrowhead Ridge to protect their retreat. It was noon before the drums beat the call to arms and the Redcoats started back toward Boston.

As soon as the British column began moving, Captain Smith came down the line. “It’s been decided that we mean to teach them a lesson.

They're not to make it back to Boston, not one of them if we can help it."

There were somber murmurs at this, including Proctor's own. He thought about Munroe, and Everett, and that fifer from Acton. "That's more like it."

"The militia's been raised from all over," Barrett went on. "We're setting up along the road to harry the Redcoats. Our job is to get to the curve at the Bedford Road just past Tanner's Creek before they do."

"That's more than three miles cross-country," one of the men said. And another answered, "That's right—so what're we waiting for?"

Proctor pushed his way to the front. "I can take the lead. That's out towards my father's farm, and I know the paths between there and town as well as any man."

Smith nodded and let him go to the front.

They ran the whole way, single file on narrow trails over rocky pastures and through the open woods. Fierce gunfire sounded south of them as they crossed the old road above Merriams's Corner, and Proctor turned to go join it. But Captain Smith stopped him.

"There're other companies down there, that's their work, leave it to them," he told Proctor. "We've got to be at our station on the curve to do ours."

"Yes, sir," Proctor said. He led the file of men through the little Mill Brook valley, where they splashed across the creek, and up over the hills, down into the swampy lowlands around Tanner's Creek.

Again gunfire echoed down the valley from the direction of Brooks Hill. This time when the men tried to change their path to join it, it was Proctor who grabbed them and aimed them over the water and up the hills on the other side.

"To the curve," he told them. "We'll get our chance—go to the hill above the curve."

Proctor reached the top of the hill to find the Concord men taking positions among the trees, and the Lincoln men joined them. He crouched behind an elm and caught his breath. The Reading militia were strung out low on the hillsides, near the start of the curve. Brown and russet jackets

shifted from tree to tree on the far side of the road. Probably men from Woburn, Proctor thought. He almost felt sorry for the Redcoats. Drawn out in a narrow line, penned in by stone walls, with tree-covered hills on both sides—they didn't stand a chance.

They came marching around the bend in a line that was much more ragged than it had been, leaving Concord.

Across the road, the Woburn men fired first, followed by the Reading militia in their positions at the bottom of the hill. The Redcoats were caught in a vicious cross-fire. One or two of the men around Proctor let off a shot, but Smith shouted, "Hold your fire!"

Captain Barrett, of the Concord minutemen, shouted the same thing. "Wait till they're closer, and stagger your shots. We won't get them all with that first volley."

Down below, some of the British were trying to fight back, but those who left the road and tried to climb over the wall to reach the men from Woburn and Reading only made themselves easier targets. The smarter Redcoats ran forward to escape the fire.

"Here's our chance now," Smith said.

Proctor took aim at the Redcoat in the lead, waiting until he'd almost reached the second bend and then fired. A dozen muskets went off around him at the same instant. There was no way to tell who shot the man, or how many times he'd been shot, but several Redcoats in the front fell.

Proctor stepped behind the tree to reload and heard bark splinter as the Redcoats returned fire. When he stepped out to shoot again, he saw that the Redcoats kept pushing forward. They had to—they were being attacked from either side, and from behind, and a man could only load and shoot so fast. As long as the Redcoats kept moving, most of them would get through. Through a second and third volley, they kept marching and their carriages kept rolling, until only their dead and wounded were left.

He had looked for Pitcairn and missed him, probably one of the times he was behind the tree reloading. He doubted that the British major had fallen.

"Where to now, captain?" Proctor asked.

"We've got to skip ahead of them again," Smith said.

This was Proctor's land, figuratively if not literally. He lived within a mile and knew every road and trail, every farm and pasture. "The south side of the road is too low and swampy, you get much beyond here. But we could make our way to the Bluffs outside Lexington."

"I was thinking the same thing," Smith said.

Proctor was off and running again without waiting for an order. Looking back, he saw they didn't have a full company anymore. Men who were wounded, or who had family wounded, stayed behind, as did men tired of the fight. But the Redcoats had been thinned as well.

They crossed the Bedford Road and passed through Mason's pastures. This time when they heard gunfire down around Hartwell's farm, not a man turned aside. In truth, there was no place where they did not hear gunfire now, and nowhere they went that they did not glimpse other groups of militia running through the fields and woods. Proctor took a twisting path over pastures strewn with granite boulders. He was panting, and several of the others were drenched with sweat, but they came to a hill above the road, once again ahead of the British troops.

There were only two or three dozen of them now, mixed men from Concord and Lincoln, but others hid among the boulders and in the ditches, waiting for the Redcoats. Proctor started to lead the men down there, thinking it would be his best chance to get at Pitcairn.

"Not there," Smith said between breaths. "Further up, on the hill."

It had a steep slope, covered with rocks, and would be harder for the Redcoats to assault. He didn't have the strength left to explain all that, but the men saw it, understood, and followed. Proctor was the last to go.

Smith chose a position on the next curve in the road. Proctor walked among the company of men already waiting on the hillside, until he recognized Captain Parker and the other Lexington men. A few wore bandages over wounds they'd taken that morning; many more had faces black with powder.

Parker stood tall, out in the open, listening to the stuttering beat of the British drums and the distant crack of muskets, waiting for the Redcoats to appear. He coughed quietly into his palm, eyes widening in his gaunt face at the sight of Proctor.

“You look familiar,” he said, his voice hoarse.

Proctor’s throat tightened. Was he going to be blamed for starting the shooting this morning? “Proctor Brown, sir. Stood on the green with you this morning.”

“That’d be it,” Parker said, and stifled another consumptive cough. He was going to die soon, whether a British officer shot him in the back or not. “You look like you’ve been far today, son.”

“All the way to Concord and back,” Proctor said.

“That’s a long way to go on a day like this,” Captain Parker said. “God bless you for coming back to help us a second time.”

“I’m sorry for the way things happened—”

Parker interrupted him with a shake of his head that might have been general or specific. “Don’t think about it. The situation was bound to come to shooting sooner or later. Either way, the Redcoats owe us a debt for what they did once the shooting started, and we plan to make them pay back every cent with interest.”

Amos sidled between them. “Being that’s how you are with loans, I guess I shouldn’t ask to borrow lead from you, though I don’t have more than three shot left.”

Captain Parker laughed at that, and his laugh turned into a cough. Once his coughing stopped, he signaled for one of his men to come over. “We won’t loan you shot, but we’ll give it to you, how’s that?”

“That’ll suit just fine,” Amos said.

Proctor put his hand into his hunting bag and counted the lead balls—he could fire nine more times if he didn’t double-shot. Then he checked his powder-horn and saw that he didn’t have nine measures left.

Gunfire peppered the road just west of them and smoke from muskets marked the imminent arrival of British troops. Proctor scooted downslope and took cover behind a tree that none of the Lexington men had claimed yet.

The Redcoats rounded the bend.

A mounted officer led them, untouched by the hail of bullets. Even before Proctor saw the golden spark flashing near the officer's throat, he recognized Pitcairn. The major was holding the Redcoats' retreat together by the example of his courage and the force of his will.

"Fire!" Captain Parker ordered.

Proctor aimed but didn't pull his trigger. As the smoke thinned, he saw Pitcairn still untouched, though men around him had fallen.

While the militia reloaded, Pitcairn shouted an order to his marines to take the hill. Militia men in the ditch screamed out as they were bayoneted and a thin red line moved up through the trees.

Proctor grabbed Amos by the shoulder. "Pretend you're an ax-cutter and clear a lane for me through the trees. I mean to cut the head off that long red snake."

Without waiting for Amos's answer, he started down the steep slope.

A marine, hatless, wild-haired, raging, charged up the hillside with his bloody bayonet. Amos's musket cracked behind Proctor and the Redcoat dropped, shot through the leg.

A second marine lunged at him from the right, bayonet extended, and Proctor discharged his own musket point-blank. The other man fell, clutching his eyes, blinded by the discharge. Proctor dropped his weapon and leapt into the road.

He fell short of Pitcairn's horse, stumbling and falling. A marine with a broken bayonet swung the butt of his musket at him; Proctor rolled out of the way, freeing his hatchet from his belt. When the musket butt came at him a second time, he knocked it aside and rose to his feet.

The horse snorted, stamping, twisting to kick Proctor, pushing between himself and the marine. Proctor grabbed the bridle with his free hand and swung the hatchet at Pitcairn; his eyes were blurry, wet from the sting of musket smoke.

Pitcairn caught Proctor's wrist on the downstroke.

Grappling face-to-face, there was nothing extraordinary about Pitcairn—he smelled of sweat and dust and powder, like anyone else. Proctor dragged him half out of his saddle, tearing at his collar. There,

beneath the shirt—a gold coin, hanging from a gold chain. It burned with an unnatural light.

Proctor tried to rip it free, keeping his feet as the horse spun in a panic. Pitcairn let go of the hatchet and grabbed Proctor's other hand with both his own.

Fire flowed through Proctor's palm, and he felt the heat race up his arm with every pulse of his blood. He tried one last time to wrench the charm away, and glimpsed the underside of the coin—an angel with a shield, and letters, though he didn't recognize them, just like those his mother wrote on the bowl of water.

Light flared in the coin, and fire speared up his arm, and then it went dull the same moment that his arm went numb.

Pitcairn pried the coin from Proctor's hand. The coin was an ordinary coin, with no light at all. "God damn you, what have you done?" Pitcairn snarled.

A musket fired at close range, striking the horse, which whinnied in fear and stumbled sideways, tearing Pitcairn away from Proctor.

A fist grabbed Proctor's jacket, yanking him back toward the ditch, and Amos was there, one arm under his elbow, yanking him up the hillside. Someone shoved his musket back into his numb hands. Turning, Proctor saw that Pitcairn's horse was down. The British major was trying to rally his men, but their resolve had shattered. There was no cohesion to their assault up the hillside, only desperation and the roar of fear. Lead whistled overhead, tearing through bark and leaves, and then it was bayonets, and Proctor ran through the trees, from cover to cover, until he was alone, unsure where he was, pausing, back against a boulder, to reload his musket. He stopped in mid-action to wipe his bloody hands—where had that come from?—across his breeches.

When he peered over the boulder again, he saw that he'd become separated from the other men in his company and the last British stragglers were fleeing toward Lexington. Still numb from breaking Pitcairn's magic charm, he staggered to his feet and back to the road, where, amid the abandoned cases, clothes, and weapons, he found two wounded Redcoats left behind by the routed army. One patched the other's bloody leg, while the second was binding the first one's arm. Seeing Proctor, they flinched, raising their hands.

“We surrender,” they said.

“Good for you,” he rasped as he passed them. Thirst sandpapered his throat. He fumbled for his father’s tin canteen, and lifted it in unsteady hands, uncapping it.

Nothing came out. The metal felt cool on his lips but it was dry. He shook it, but nothing. A jagged edge snagged his sleeve. He turned it over—shot had smashed through the bottom of it. He had no idea when.

And where did that yellow ribbon come from?

Emily!

He ran.

There was Emily’s house. His feet pounded across the porch and he beat on the door, calling her name, asking if she was all right. When there was no answer, he ran to the windows and saw sheets tossed hurriedly over the furniture inside. It was shut up tight. Bess and the rest of the household had no doubt packed up and headed for Boston first thing that morning.

He felt as empty as the house.

Militia from a dozen towns passed down the road, following the Redcoats’ retreat into Lexington. Proctor mechanically fell in with them. As he marched past the burying ground, he thought that the battle would end where it began, on Lexington Green. The Redcoats could expect no mercy there, not after what they’d done this morning. He glimpsed splashes of red running in the distance.

This, he told himself, was the scene he’d scryed. His mother had been right in seeing men dead; and he’d been right in seeing a retreat to Boston. With his last reserves, he hurried forward onto the green. The oak tree and belltower and meeting house were framed against the blue sky. Cheers rose ahead, the cheers of the militia assured of victory.

A cannon shot blasted through the meeting house, busting it to splinters.

He was halfway across the green when he saw that a full British brigade had come out of Boston to rescue the other soldiers. The retreating Redcoats ran past the defensive lines. They were cheering their

salvation.

The cannons boomed again, raking the pursuing militia. Something hot sheered the edge of Proctor's neck, knocking him off his feet.

He rolled over, rose, fell down, finally pushed himself to his feet. Blood streamed over his shoulder. He staggered, lost, until a woman in a green dress came and guided him away out of range of the British guns. She tried to bind up his wounds, but he shoved her away and staggered off, saying things incoherent even to himself. He needed to go home. He wanted to talk to his mother about the scrying. He needed to talk to her about the gold medallion. About the way his talent revealed their magic. In a daze, he stumbled in the right direction.

Somehow his mother knew he was coming. She met him halfway across the fields and guided him inside. His father was propped up in a chair in the corner. There was something Proctor meant to tell him. "Robert Munroe," he said.

His father continued to rock, eyes unfocused.

"He's—" The words choked off in his throat. "What he said, what Munroe said was, he said you were a good man in a fight."

His mother gently guided him into one of the other chairs. He saw a fresh bowl of water on the table, an empty pitcher, five puddles of wax, and a pile of broken eggshells. "I had to go over to the Ames's," their neighbors, "for more eggs," she said, dropping her eyes.

Proctor stared at the broken shells, thinking if he hadn't scryed, maybe he wouldn't have shot at Pitcairn. Maybe the Redcoats would've held their fire, the way both sides did at the North Bridge in Concord. Maybe the day would've ended peacefully.

"Mother," he mumbled. "I did something bad, terrible bad."

"Hush." Her voice was as soft and trembling as her hands.

"I think I've ruined my prospects with Miss Emily."

She sighed as she wrung out the rag and dipped it in the bowl of fresh water. She wiped the cool cloth over his throat. "Oh, Proctor, if that shot had been two inches the other direction, it would have killed you for certain."

He folded his hand around hers and pulled it away from his wound. No, there was no undoing what had already been done. “Come now. If it had been two inches the other direction it would have missed me completely.”