

Boston: 9 PM, Monday March 5, 1770

THE MOON just lit the length of King St. between the buildings as Private Matthew Kilroy advanced with six other grenadiers and two officers, bayonets fixed and muskets at port arms. His face betrayed just a trace of a bitter smile. They were on their way from their Main Guard barracks to rescue the lone sentry standing down the street in front of the Custom House. A Loyalist shop owner had breathlessly reported to their captain, Thomas Preston, that the crowd of boys and stout men with clubs and cutlasses surrounding the guard were intent on murder. The noise was deafening as church bells rang to summon more townspeople, not for a fire as was normal, but to swell the angry crowd who shouted and stuck their clubs against the buildings and pounded them on the crushed oyster shells beneath their feet.

As they forced their way through the crowd, their bayonets pricked and prodded the coats and sleeves of anyone remaining too close. Kilroy dreamed of following through with a full thrust and watching one of the Boston toughs fall before him, his blood forming a pool on the ground beneath him. For nearly two years, they had reduced his life to a string of miserable days filled with physical pain and deprivation on top of the shame from of their disrespect.

When he and his fellow grenadiers of the 29th Regiment had

marched off the ship in October of '68 amid Loyalist fireworks and the strains of "Yankee Doodle" that mocked the Sons of Liberty, their brilliant red coats and white sashes, gleaming buttons and bayonets, and towering bearskin hats on top of the tallest troops in the British Army were enough to cow most of the street crowd. Back then, they fearfully kept their distance. But not now. Sweat burned the oozing scrape on Kilroy's cheek and he tried not to limp from the great purple bruise on his thigh and the ache in his knee caused by the cudgel blows of one of the rope workers just two days before. His anger boiled hotter with each step as the crowds reluctantly gave way, cursing and taunting him from all sides. This could be it, he thought grimly, the night we finally get our satisfaction. Maybe we'll be allowed to act like an army instead of Punch and Judy puppets with their arms tied behind.

A FEW MINUTES EARLIER and a few hundred yards north and west, Samuel Gray pounded his thick cudgel on the ground in Dock Square in front of the Faneuil Hall Market, his face red and voice hoarse from shouting. He'd spent most of the day making the rounds of the taverns near the docks where he'd told his stories of the battles at the rope walk over and over, how he and Johnson and Ferriter and the others had sent the redcoats off to lick their wounds even after they'd come back twice, each time with more men and better arms, bringing an assortment of sticks, shovels, and heavy iron tongs. He'd also seen the letters, explained by some who could read, that were written by soldiers of the Irish 29th, vowing that they were ready to make an attack on the people of Boston this very day. Today they would use their muskets to finally silence the crowd, even if they were unarmed.

He'd been with a group at the smaller Murray's Barracks just before and seen a group of the bloodybacks attack some boys who taunted them, then retreat behind the locked barracks door. Gray and the crowd had grown tired of pounding at the building and shouting challenges. They had turned away and moved toward the

square when a lone redcoat dashed through the doors, kneeling to aim at the crowd with his musket and shouting "Damn your bloods! I'll make a lane through you all." An officer wrestled the musket away before he could fire and forced him back into the barracks. When the same scene was repeated a few moments later with a different soldier, Gray was sure of two things: some of the soldiers were ready to fire on the crowd, but their officers would prevent them. Everyone in Boston thought that it illegal for soldiers to fire their muskets without a civil judge's order, and most weren't willing to pay with a score of lashes or more from a drummer.

When more "town born" filled the square, Gray helped them break the lock at the market so they could take wood from the stalls to arm themselves. Twice, the crowd made to rush Murray's Barracks down Boylston's Alley, but the covered lane was too narrow for enough to fit altogether, and each time they returned to the square. Some seemed to lose interest as they milled about, and the crowd began to thin as some left to return home or to a favorite tavern. But others, like Gray and the giant mulatto called Michael Johnson, weren't ready to retire for the evening. Both bore marks and pains from the brawls of the previous days, and weren't about to let them heal in peace. They'd come for the action, like so many in the months before, but this time they promised themselves a bit more. Tonight, they would have a measure of vengeance.

Some were still shouting and cursing when a tall man in a red cloak and white wig made his way into their midst. Gray thought he recognized him as one who stood at the edges when Adams or Otis or one of the Loyal Nine made a speech or entered the Town House. He thought he could see some blond hair beneath the wig at the back but paid it no mind once the man raised his arm to speak. Some shouted to gain a bit of quiet, but with the bells and the shouts from down the street and the edges of the crowd, it was only the nearest that could hear him at first.

"Tonight is the end!" he shouted out with a clenched fist.

Gray and a few others cheered in response, an extended "Huzza," and banged their sticks, the noise echoing off the buildings surrounding the square. "They are cowards who've attacked us at every turn, taken honest jobs from the worthy, forced us to walk in the gutters, assaulted our ladies." With each pause in his voice, more of the crowd cheered and clattered their sticks. "They even slaughter our innocent children. You saw young Seider buried not a month ago, while the soldiers laughed and made sport." Curses rained from the crowd, damning the redcoats to hell and beyond. The noise from the crowd nearby drew more toward the center, and some turned in their tracks to rejoin the mob. "Then they hide behind their muskets and lock the barracks door, afraid to meet the brave Boston men who fight for their freedom!" Some in the crowd began to raise their fists and sticks in the air to punctuate each sentence.

Now the speaker lowered his voice just a bit to take on a tone of threat and menace. "But tonight their bloody reign ends. We'll have them tonight. We're too many and too strong!" A pause to let the cheers echo. "When they come out of hiding, we'll fight them on a fair field. Their guns are no more than decoration, they can't fire without orders, and if they do, God help them. We'll turn their bayonets and teach them that none are stronger than those fighting for liberty. One blow deserves another and we owe each of them a score or more!" Gray's voice nearly gave out as he shouted with the others. "All cowards should leave so they can drink milk with their mothers and leave the streets for the brave. Who'll stand and fight for our honor?" A great roar rose from the growing crowd the leaders raised their sticks in the air.

A strong cry from the back turned heads people's heads. "To the Custom House! We'll take the guard and sample the King's treasure!" As a few began to move down Royal Exchange Lane, Gray shouldered his way to the front, and urged others to follow. He joined Johnson near the front, their clubs like thunderous walking sticks beating time to their march.

KILROY AND THE OTHER PRIVATES finally forced their way through the crowd on King Street to the Custom House, swinging and thrusting their bayonets to clear the way. They found the lone guard out of the sentry box and backed up to the building. The crowd was thick and menacing, hurling snowballs, chunks of ice, oyster shells, threats and curses toward him from just a few feet away. Captain Preston had been caught in the crowd but Corporal Wemms ordered them into a half-circle with their backs to the building. When Wemms called out "Double shot! Double shot!" most rammed home more than a single ball.

Keeping the fearsome crowd at bay, Kilroy and a few others saw their enemies from the rope walk brawls dancing before their eyes. If the cuts, bruises, and cracked ribs weren't enough to keep their blood boiling, Gray and Johnson and the others taunted them while hard objects rained down from the back of the crowd. "Fire, you cowards." "Fire and be damned!" "Fire or fight!" shouted Johnson as he knocked his stick against the bayonet before him.

Kilroy focused on Samuel Gray who stood back just a bit, stick down at his front, their eyes locked as Gray shouted insults. It had been Gray who'd nearly broken his leg with a swing of a wouldering stick used at the rope walk and then laughed and cursed them as they backed up the street. Capt. Preston had rejoined the vulnerable group, surrounded on three sides with the Custom House at their back. He stood between two of the grenadiers with their bayonets extended before them. Kilroy caught a movement from the corner of his eye as a heavy piece of birch firewood flew above the crowd and struck Montgomery at the far end of the line. Kilroy was as surprised as any when he heard the musket report a few moments later. His finger twitched and ached inside the guard of his Brown Bess musket