

CHAPTER VIII.

THE BATTLE OF BUNKER HILL.

In the year 1775 war was rife in New Eng-land. The King's laws were felt to be more for slaves than for free-men, and all made up their minds to throw off the yoke. They could not bear the sight of the red-coats; and the King's troops were just as fierce in their hate of our men.

Ships-of-war brought a large force of troops to New Eng-land, led by men of rank and fame. They filled the streets of Bos-ton, and it was thought they might bring the A-mer-i-cans to terms, and not a drop of blood be shed. But this was not to be.

A large force of our men were in camp on the hills and fields near Bos-ton, the sight of whom might well cause the well-clad Brit-ish to smile. They had left their farms in great haste at the cry of "To arms!" had seized their guns, and come in the home-spun clothes it was their pride to wear. Those from Mas-sa-chu-setts were led by Gen-er-al Ar-te-mas Ward; those from New Hamp-shire by Col-o-nel John Stark; those from Rhode Isl-and by Gen-er-al Na-than-i-el Greene; and those from Con-nect-i-cut by Gen-er-al Is-ra-el Put-nam; all brave and true men, and full of fight.

But the troops had need to be well armed; and all the guns and such

things as there was need of in war times were in Bos-ton, where the red-coats were on guard. But though sharp eyes were on the watch, sly deeds were done by those who knew the ways in and out of each store-house. Carts went out of town heaped high with dirt in which guns and balls were hid; and all sorts of tricks were used to get such things past the red-coats.

At length it came to the ears of Gen-er-al Gage, that some field guns were at Sa-lem, and he sent troops there to seize them. But when they reached Sa-lem they found no guns there.

Then word came to Gen-er-al Gage that there was a large stock of arms and war-stores at Con-cord, which was less than a score of miles from Bos-ton.

In the night of A-pril 18, the red-coats set out for Con-cord.

Gen-er-al Gage had said that no one but the troops should leave the town, but the news was borne to Lex-ing-ton--a town on the road to Con-cord--by those who were as swift as the hare, and as sly as the fox.

The folks there met in groups, with hearts on fire. Bells were rung and guns were fired. Men who heard these sounds ran as fast as they could to Lex-ing-ton, to hold the bridge, and keep back the foe.

At five o'clock, on the morn of A-pril 19, the red-coats came in sight, and at once three-score and ten men stood out on the green near

the wall to meet them.

Ma-jor Pit-cairn who was at the head of the King's troops called out to these brave men to lay down their arms and leave the place. But they paid no heed to his words. Then he sprang from the ranks, shot off a small gun, swung his sword in air, and told his men to fire. The troops ran up, with loud cheers, and poured a storm of shot on our men, some of whom were killed. Then they pushed on to Con-cord, and did all the harm they could at that place: spiked guns, threw pounds and pounds of shot down the wells, and spoiled a large lot of flour and food that had been stored there for use in time of need.

When the King's troops turned back to Lex-ing-ton, they were quite worn out with what they had done, and would have been cut down by our men if Gage had not sent a force to their aid.

For the blue-coats had flown to arms, and poured in-to Lex-ing-ton by all the roads that led there-to. The red-coats might laugh at their clothes, and the way in which they tried to keep step, but they found out that they knew how to use guns, and that each man was a dead-shot.

The fresh troops Gage sent up from Bos-ton had to form a square, so that the worn out men who had had a long march and hard work might have a chance to rest. Then they all set out to march back to Bos-ton, with two field guns in the rear to keep off the "flock of Yan-kees," who dogged their steps, and kept up a fire in front and rear, and from

each stone-wall and hedge that lined the road.

There was loss on both sides, but what hurt the King's troops the most was to be put to flight by such a lot of scare crows, as they thought our troops were.

A close watch was kept on Bos-ton by our men, who were soon in such force that it would not have been safe for the red-coats to try to leave the town. The Kings troops did not like to be shut in, in this way, and lost no chance to mock at and taunt those who kept them at bay.

On the north side of Bos-ton lay a long strip of land, from the heights of which one could see the town and all the ships at or near the wharves. Put-nam thought it would be a good plan to seize these heights and place troops there; but Ward and War-ner thought it was not safe to risk it. It might bring on a fierce fight and cause much blood to be shed.

Put-nam had no fear of his own men. He knew how brave they were, and how well they could fight back of a screen. "They have no fear of their heads," he said, "their chief thought is their legs. Shield them, and they'll fight on till doom's-day."

Two or three of those who had led troops in the French war, were of the same mind as Put-nam, and their words had weight. The chief man was Col-o-nel Pres-cott, who was just the style of man, in port and in

dress, that a lot of raw troops would look up to. He wore a fine hat, a top-wig, and a blue coat faced and lapped up at the skirts.

He it was whom Gen-er-al Ward chose to lead the troops which were to seize the heights, build the earth-works there, and guard them from the foe. There were 1200 in all, and they set out on the night of June 16, 1775. Not a light was shown. Not a sound was heard, but the tramp--tramp--tramp of these men on their way to face death.

A small neck of land joined Charles-town to the main-land, and as they drew near this the troops hushed their steps, and moved with great care. For on this the red-coats kept a close watch. Five of their ships-of-war stood so that their guns would sweep this neck of land, and earth-works were on Copp's Hill, which faced Charles-town.

On the blue-coats went, past the guards, past the guns, past the Neck, and up to the heights of Bunk-er's Hill. Here they were to make their stand, but it was found that Breed's Hill, which was half a mile off, was not quite so steep, and would give them more of a chance at the red-coats, while Bunk-er's Hill would shield them in the rear.

Put-nam thought Breed's Hill was the right place and was in haste for the work to go on. There was no time to lose. So pick and spade were brought out, and the earth dug out so as to serve as a wall to screen them from the fire of the foe.

The night was warm and still. Now and then Pres-cott would steal down

to the edge of the stream, to see and hear if the red-coats had made a stir. There was not a sound save the cry of "All's well! All's well!" from the watch-man on guard in the town, and on the ships-of-war.

All night the work on the heights went on. At dawn of day the men there were seen by the sea-men on the ships-of-war, and at once their guns were brought up and turned on the hill. Their shot did not harm the works, but one man who went out-side was killed, and this threw the rest in-to a great fright. They were not used to scenes of war, and the sight of a man shot down in their midst was more than their nerves could stand.

Some took to their heels at once, and did not come back, and had Pres-cott not been a brave man him-self he could not have held his troops as he did. He stood up on top of the earth-works in full view of the red-coats, and talked with his men, and his words of cheer put new strength in their hearts, so that they were in less dread of the balls that whizzed near them.

The noise of the guns roused the red-coats in Bos-ton, and Gen-er-al Gage gazed at Breed's Hill like one in a dream. A fort full of men had sprung up in the night! How had it been done? What kind of men were these he had to meet? As he stood on Copp's Hill and looked through his field glass, he spied the tall form of Pres-cott, in his blue coat, on the wall of the fort.

"Will he fight?" asked Gage, "Yes, sir," said one who stood near,

and who knew Pres-cott. "He will fight to the last drop of blood; but I can't say as much for his men."

"We must seize the works!" cried Gage, and at once called up his chiefs for a talk, and to plan the best way to do this deed.

The noise in the streets of Bos-ton, the roll of the drum, the sound of the trump that calls to war, the sharp click of hoofs, and the deep roll of wheels that bore the field guns, were heard on the heights, and let the troops there know that war was at hand.

The men were worn out with their hard task, and their loss of sleep. They had not brought much food with them, and their thirst was great. The heat made them feel weak and dull. There was need of more men, and a lot of raw New Hamp-shire troops, led by Col-o-nel Stark came to their aid. In the mean time those on the height had to bear the fire of the guns from the ships and from Copp's Hill, which broke on them at ten o'clock.

At noon the blue-coats saw more than a score of boats full of troops cross from Bos-ton in straight lines. The sun shone on their red-coats, and flashed from the tips of the guns they bore, and from the brass field guns that stood on the deck. It was a gay scene. They made their way to a point north of Breed's Hill, where Gen-er-al Howe, who led them, could see the full strength of the blue-coats. They had more troops than he thought, and he caught sight of fresh ones on their way to Breed's Hill.

Howe at once sent to Gage for more troops, and more balls for the field guns, and as it would take some time for them to be sent round, the red-coats in the mean-time were served with food and drink. The "grog" was passed round in pails, and the men sat round on the grass, and ate and drank their fill, while the poor men on the heights looked down and longed to share their feast.

But while the red-coats took their ease, the blue-coats had a chance to add to the strength of their fort, and to push out the breast-works to a point known as the Slough.

Near this was a pass where the foe might turn the left-flank of the troops or seize Bunk-er's Hill.

Put-nam chose one of his men, a Cap-tain Knowl-ton, to hold this pass with his Con-nect-i-cut troops. He at once set to work to build a sort of fort, back of which his men could fight with more ease than if they stood out in the field. Not a long way off was a post-and-rail fence set in a low foot-wall of stone, and this fence ran down to the Mys-tic Riv-er. The posts and rails of a fence, near this, were torn up in haste, and set a few feet at the rear of it, and the space 'twixt the two was filled with new-mown hay brought from the fields near at hand.

While Knowl-ton and his men were at work on this fence, Put-nam and his troops threw up the work on Bunk-er's Hill.

In the mean time Stark had set out from Med-ford on a six mile march. He was a cool, calm man, and had been through the French war, of which I have told you. He led his men at a slow pace, so that they would be fresh and strong to take part in the fight. As they came up to the Neck, which they had to cross, and which was lined with guns on both sides, one of the aides urged him to let the men take a quick step.

The old man shook his head, and said, "One fresh man in a fight is worth ten tired ones," and kept on at the same pace; and did good work that day back of the post-and-rail screen.

War-ren, who had been made a Ma-jor Gen-er-al, came to serve in the ranks. Put-nam said he might lead the troops at the fence. He said he did not care to lead; he was there to fight. "Where will the fire be the hot-test?" he asked. He was told that the fort on Breed's Hill was the point the foe sought to gain. "If we can hold that," said Put-nam, "the day is ours."

War-ren at once made his way there, and the troops gave a round of cheers when he stepped in-to the fort. Pres-cott, who was not so high in rank, sought to have War-ren take charge of the troops. But he would not. "I have come to serve in the ranks," he said, "and shall be glad to learn from one so well-skilled as your-self."

The red-coats thought to take the works with ease, and win the day. Gen-er-al Pig-ot, with the left wing, was to mount the hill and seize

the earth-works, while Gen-er-al Howe came up with the right wing to turn the left-flank of our men and stop all flight at the rear.

Pig-ot and his men came up the height, and not a gun was fired by our troops till the red-coats were in range. Then, as they were all good marks-men each shot told, and some of the best men fell at the first fire. The foe fell back in haste, but were brought up once more by those who stood at their head with drawn swords.

They were met by a fire more fierce than the first, and vexed by the guns that bore on their flank from the band of men in Charles-town. So much blood had been shed, and the men were in such a state of fright, that Pig-ot was forced to give the word to fall back.

We will now see what sort of luck Gen-er-al Howe had. He led his troops up the bank of the stream, and thought to take the slight breast-work with ease, and so get in the rear of the fort. But he did not know the ground, and could not bring his large guns through the swamp he met with. In the pause some of his men were hurt and some killed by the guns that were set by the post-and-rail fence.

Howe's men kept up a fire as they came on, but as they did not take good aim the balls flew o'er the heads of our troops, who had been told to hold their fire till the red-coats were quite near.

Some few did not do as they were told, and Put-nam rode up and swore he would cut down the next man that fired ere he had the word to do

so. When the red-coats were in the right range, such a storm of lead poured on them from guns in the hands of men who did not miss a mark that the place was like a field of blood.

Such a host were slain that the red-coats lost heart, and fell back in great haste. Some of them ran back as far as the boats, and got on board of them that they might be safe from the fire of the marks-men.

Once more the red-coats charged the fort, which it was their aim to get in-to their own hands. In the mean time the shells from Copp's Hill and the ships-of-war had set Charles-town on fire. The town was built of wood, and was soon a mass of flames. The dense smoke put out the light of the sun. On all sides was heard the din of war. The big guns kept up their great roar. Bomb-shells burst in the air. The sharp hiss of the small balls, and the shouts and yells of the men made a scene to strike the heart with awe.

Our men stood firm, and with eyes fixed on the foe, who, as soon as they were close at hand, were shot down by the guns whose aim was so sure.

The red-coats stood the first shock, and then kept on, but were met by such a stream of fire that they were soon brought to a halt. In vain did the men who led them urge them on with drawn swords. Whole ranks were mowed down. Some of Gen-er-al Howe's staff were slain, and the troops, wild with fear, broke ranks and fled down the hill.

For a third time Gen-er-al Howe brought up his men, some of whom threw off their knap-sacks and some their coats that they might not be weighed down by them.

The red-coats made a feint as if they would take the fort at the fence, and did much harm there to our men. While some of his troops were at work at that point, Howe brought the rest of his force to the front and rear of the main fort, which was then stormed on three sides at once.

Pres-cott told some of his men to stand at the back part of the fort and fire at the red-coats that showed them-selves on the wall. Soon one leaped up and cried out "The day is ours!" and was shot down at once, as were all those who had joined him.

[Illustration: WASHINGTON CHOSEN FOR COMMANDER-IN-CHIEF--P. 62.]

But our men had fired their last round, and there was nought for them to do but to meet the foe in a hand-to-hand fight. With stones and the butt-ends of their guns they sought to drive back the red-coats, but the tide was too strong for them, and they had to give way.

War-ren, who had done brave work that day, was the last to leave the fort. He scarce had done so ere he was struck by a ball and fell dead on the spot.

As our troops fled by way of Bunk-er Hill, Put-nam ran to the rear and

cried, "Halt! make a stand here! We can check them yet! In God's name form, and give them one shot more!"

But the troops could not be brought to a stand, and the red-coats won the day, but with the loss of more than half of their men. And it hurt their pride to think that it had cost them so dear to take these earth-works that had been thrown up in one night by a mere hand-ful of raw troops.

Their loss was 1,054.

Our loss was 450.