

**THE BOSTON MASSACRE,****MARCH 5, 1770.****BY SAMUEL A. GREEN.**

THE Boston Massacre of March 5, 1770, has different meanings to different persons, varying as seen from individual standpoints. To some minds the resistance then made to British authority was the outcropping of a thoroughly lawless and riotous spirit of a mob, utterly beyond all excuse; while to others it was the last expression of a deep hostility to the mother country, which was not only justifiable but praiseworthy. For some years before the massacre a feeling of strong animosity against England was growing rapidly among the Colonists, though there was no one then so wild as to expect or even to favor independence. During this period the gulf between the two parties was gradually widening, and the general trend of public affairs was against reconciliation. Under such conditions it is hardly to be supposed that the surface would remain smooth and unruffled; but, on the contrary, it is natural that it should have been disturbed more or less by sympathy and prejudice.

Various causes had been at work to sow the seeds of political discontent. Among the earliest was the passage of the Stamp Act by the English Parliament in 1765, which was repealed, however, during the next year, as the crown authorities found it impossible to enforce the law. Another cause, the next in point of time, was the arrival of a British fleet in October, 1768, bringing to Boston from Halifax two regiments of soldiers. The town had made no provision for the accommodation of these troops,

and the inhabitants protested vigorously that the government had no right to quarter soldiers on them in time of peace, without the consent of the General Court. For the first night after their arrival, some of the troops found shelter in Faneuil Hall, while others bivouacked on the Common; and it was several weeks before the needed barracks were obtained. The arrival of these two regiments, sent in order to suppress popular movements, was considered by the sober-minded people of the town, if not as an insult and a threat, then surely as an impolitic step on the part of the English government. Ever since the passage of the Stamp Act, mutterings of continued discontent were heard; and for some years the political atmosphere was hazy, and the outlook threatening. The elements of a general explosion were all present, and it required only a certain combination of circumstances to produce the spark that would fire the train. It is difficult now in these piping times of domestic peace fully to appreciate the deep feeling of hostility to the Crown which then existed in the town of Boston. The population was a homogeneous one, made up of 12,000 or 15,000 inhabitants, God-fearing and law-abiding people, who saw a small army quartered in their midst. They had made protest after protest, but all of no avail. The popular leaders claimed that troops thus quartered, in time of peace, without the consent of the Legislature, was as much a violation of their chartered rights, as the posting of an army on the banks of the Thames, without the consent of Parliament, would be contrary to the English Constitution.

There were two classes in the community: one class comprising a great majority of the population, who later became known as patriots; and the other made up largely of office-holders, and men of a conservative turn of mind, who became known as tories. The line of demarcation separating these two sets of persons each year was becom-

ing more and more distinct, and the gap between them was gradually growing wider and wider. The young men, as they came upon the stage of action, sided with their sires, and helped to mould public sentiment. The feeling of the town and neighborhood was in favor of large and broad liberty in all matters concerning the province or the person, but the idea of separation from the mother country had not as yet entered their minds. To them the ubiquitous presence of armed men in the streets was a continual menace and threat, though they were there to keep order and to enforce law; and the sight of a scarlet uniform was as irritating to them, as a red flag is supposed to be to a mad bull. For two years this irritation had been increasing, and it soon became an inflamed spot on the body politic. What at the outset was little more than a deep feeling, in time developed into bitter and rampant hostility, engendered by the sight of uniformed men. The conditions were all favorable for a clash between the civil and military authorities; and from time to time disputes and disagreements arose, but fortunately they subsided without open rupture. A flint and a piece of steel, brought into sudden contact with each other, will produce a spark, but not more surely than an irresponsible crowd will break the peace, when the individual members are pushed to extremities, and their patience is exhausted. Oftentimes they are smarting from half-forgotten injuries and insults which in the excitement of the moment rise up and add fuel to the flames, and thus unconsciously intensify the hatred. Under such conditions rebellions arise, and revolutions begin. If the uprisings are put down, they are called rebellions; but if they are successful, they become revolutions and are so recorded in history. Success is the touchstone by which they are judged.

In derogation of the massacre, it has been said that the crowd which opposed the soldiers on that memorable

occasion was a mob, and that the victims of that evening met their just fate and died "as a fool dieth." Perhaps it was a mob; but if so, the line separating them from the men who fell on Lexington green is both indistinct and undefined. If the American Revolution had not proved successful, the minute-men of that period would have figured in history as rioters and law-breakers. No monuments would have been raised to their memory, and no words spoken in praise of their deeds. In street brawls both sides are apt to be in the wrong, though not necessarily to the same degree. The cause of this lies far down in the frailties of poor human nature, and some allowance must be made for individual imperfections. The various crises in the world's history are in obedience to natural forces which break out at one time or another. They are part of an unknown plan which governs human action, and the power behind them is irresistible.

As a rule people are never moral or virtuous who are not happy; and in the interest of morality and religion, it is the duty of communities to cultivate cheerfulness and happiness. The framers of the Constitution of Massachusetts recognized this truth when they were performing their labors. In one of the chapters of the Constitution, they laid down the general proposition that wisdom and knowledge as well as virtue, diffused generally among the mass of the people, were necessary for the preservation of their rights and liberties; and that wisdom and knowledge and virtue were dependent on many conditions, among which were good humor and all social affections. In other words, contentment lies at the foundation of character.

The active participants in the massacre, on the part of the town, were men of humble origin and of no particular social standing in the community, but they had the sympathy of their neighbors; and the victims of that eventful evening received every mark of sincere sorrow when they

were laid away in their silent graves. *The Massachusetts Gazette: and the Boston Weekly News-Letter*, March 15, 1770, says:—

“It is supposed their must have been a greater Number of People from Town and Country at the Funeral of those who were massacred by the Soldiers, than were ever together on this Continent on any Occasion.”

This short paragraph shows the feeling of public sentiment at the time of the event better than statements made in recent years that the whole affair was a mob, and that it was not upheld by the good sense of the community.

If you please to call it so, the participants may have been a mob, a tumultuous crowd incited to violent deeds. Human action cannot always be measured by rule, but it is governed by individual feeling. Each one of us is conscious of his own frailties, and we all know our own short-comings. Whether a man belongs to the upper-ten of society, or the lower-ninety, the motives of action are similar, if not the same, for there is a good deal of human nature in mankind. Theoretically the massacre—whether viewed from the side of the aggressor or the aggrieved—was a lawless act, but it found a place in the evolution of events which brought about great results. Such popular convulsions sometimes bring forth fruit that in the long run ripens and mellows: “first the blade, then the ear; after that, the full corn in the ear.” The participants, on the part of the people, were the pioneers who blazed the way to be travelled by others; and they marked the trail that led to the separation of the Colonies from England. They had their rough duties in the community, and while, perhaps, they were not models of propriety in daily life, they each were parts needed in the grand make-up of the whole. Men of their class helped to form public opinion which supported independence, and hastened the day when it was declared. In connection with other actions deemed

riotous by conservative persons, the massacre was as essential to the final and complete result as some of the more orderly and parliamentary proceedings.

*Finis coronat opus.* "The end crowns all," says Shakespeare; and we have to judge the whole by the result. The action of that evening, lawless though it were, was a step in the stairway that a few years later led up to the Declaration of Independence. The Boston Tea-Party also was a rung in the ladder leading up to the same plane, — which was equally lawless, but productive of great and good results. That, too, constituted a phase in evolution. No great deed in history is ever all right or wholly wrong, but it is more or less composite, and must be judged by the general effect. The motives actuating different persons are not always clear, sometimes they are good, and sometimes bad, but generally they are complex in the same person.

The immediate victims of the massacre were Crispus Attucks, Samuel Gray, and James Caldwell, who were killed outright; and two others, Samuel Maverick and Robert Carr, who died soon afterward from their injuries. Six others were badly wounded, of whom one, Christopher Monk, a lad of seventeen years, for a long time after the affair dragged out a miserable existence, and more than once is mentioned by John Hancock, in his oration on the fifth of March, 1774.

Owing to a combination of circumstances, the first man here named, Crispus Attucks, has acquired a local notoriety throughout the limits of this Commonwealth, and by reason of his racial origin he has gained a much wider reputation among his colored brethren throughout the country. According to universal testimony, in his day and generation he had not made himself a very useful member of society. And why should he have done so, as he belonged to an abused and enslaved race, deprived of all those rights which he valued the most? He was neither a freeman nor

a resident of Boston, but a bird of passage in the town, who chanced to take part in the affray and was shot down in the street. It is said that he was identical with the man advertised in *The Boston Gazette, or Weekly Journal*, November 20, 1750, as a "runaway" from his master William Browne, of Framingham. He is there described as a "Molatto Fellow, about 27 years of Age, named Crispus, well set, 6 Feet 2 Inches high, short curl'd hair,"<sup>1</sup> etc. His name "Attucks" would suggest that he was of Indian origin; and the probability is that he was a descendant of the Natick tribe. Undoubtedly, he represented in his own person a mixture of three races, the red, white and black. Twenty years later, on his way to North Carolina, he turns up in Boston as a transient visitor.

Like many in his position, he was reckless in his conduct, and had been brought up to fear nothing in the line of danger; and he was itching for a fight. It was the most natural thing in the world that he should take part in the affray, and with his large frame that he was the first to get hit. He was the leader of the mob, and the crowd took their pace from him. On such occasions a leader only is needed to kindle a fire which water will not quench. Some of the victims of that evening were not active participants in the affray, but simply bystanders and onlookers. Such is apt always to be the case with those who are present in a street brawl out of curiosity. The innocent are as likely to suffer as the guilty; and when they do suffer, they get less sympathy. Attucks little thought that in future generations a monument of granite and bronze on a public site would be erected in honor of himself and his comrades for the part they took in the State-Street fight; and that his own name, cut in

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<sup>1</sup>The New England Historical and Genealogical Register (XIII. 300) for October, 1859.

stone, would lead the list of those who fell on that eventful evening. "Thus the whirligig of Time brings in his revenges," and verifies the Gospel saying: "But many that are first shall be last; and the last shall be first."

In justice to Captain Preston, the officer in charge of the soldiers, it should be said, that he was tried for murder and acquitted, though at a later trial two of his men, for the part they took in the sad affair, were found guilty of manslaughter and branded in the hand. The trial of Captain Preston began on October 23, and lasted until October 30, and that of the men on November 27, and lasted until December 5; and it is said that these trials were the first in the Province that took up in time more than a day each. The verdict of acquittal on the more serious charge did not satisfy the people, and among them there were many expressions of dissent. At the trial of the accused it seems somewhat odd that John Adams and Josiah Quincy, Jr., should have appeared for the soldiers, and that Samuel Quincy, the elder brother of Josiah, should have appeared for the people in opposition to the soldiers. A few years later the position of these distinguished advocates was greatly changed, when Josiah Quincy, Jr., had finished a young life which he had devoted to the defence of the rights of the colonies; and when John Adams stood up in the Continental Congress, and together with other patriots advocated the principles embodied in the Declaration of Independence; and when Samuel Quincy, the elder brother, had fled as a tory from his native land, and ended his days under the British flag.

Twelve years ago the Commonwealth of Massachusetts saw fit to erect a monument to the memory of the unfortunate victims who fell in State Street. Memorial stones and tablets had been set up in various quarters of the State commemorating deeds of danger and heroism done in the interest of liberty and freedom; and the question was often asked why no monument had been raised to the



memory of those who took part in the Boston Massacre. The answer was simple; that these men had placed themselves in an attitude of defiance of the law, and as law-breakers they should not be honored. Further reflection, on the part of the public, showed that the actors in this affair were no more real rioters than those who a few years later threw the tea overboard at Griffin's wharf. In a limited sense they were rioters, and so were many others of that period, who are now considered patriots of the highest type. On great occasions men often act from their feelings or from impulse, and not from their reason; and their action is to be judged by the result. It is rare that any action, however good and pure, is wholly so; but it is mixed or mingled more or less, with what is otherwise. It is impossible to square it with a plumb or to measure it by a rule. "The web of our life is of a mingled yarn, good and ill together."

Out of deference to public sentiment, on May 17, 1887, the General Court of Massachusetts made an appropriation for the purpose of erecting a monument, in some public place in the city of Boston, in memory of the men who were killed by British soldiers at the time of the massacre. It is but fair to add that a protest to the appropriation was made by very respectable bodies and by eminent men, who saw in this action an attempt, as they thought, to perpetuate an error in history. There is a tendency nowadays, on the part of some writers, to palliate or readjust the views commonly held by the Tories of the Revolutionary period, and otherwise to defend their political opinions. If this attitude springs from a desire to find out historic truth, it is both just and right; but if it comes from an *Anglomania*,—as in some cases, I fear, it does,—then it is both unjust and wrong. The great end of historical investigation should be the truth, and this should be sought without fear or favor, and without bias or prejudice. It was no discredit to the early instigators of the

Revolution that, in the main, they belonged to the yeomanry of the country,—the plain people, as Abraham Lincoln liked to call them,—and for the most part they were not cultivated in the arts and graces of life, as they were too busy in other matters to give much time to the frills and furbelows of society. Their accomplishments were of the home-spun order, and sprang from their feelings rather than from their training. Certainly they did not belong to the ruling classes, but they applauded and upheld the men who took part in the massacre. Their sympathies were with them, and when the victims of that evening were taken to their last resting place, the patriotic inhabitants of Boston and neighborhood in many ways testified to the love and regard they bore them. So deeply did they sympathize with these "rioters" that they met each year thereafter in the Old South meeting-house and listened to the oft-told story of the massacre, as related by some distinguished speaker. These various addresses were known as Fifth of March Orations, and for a time they entered into the literary and intellectual life of the town of Boston; nor was the custom of commemorating the day given up until the year 1783, when it was superseded by the celebration of the Fourth of July, which has continued even to the present time.

On the anniversary of the massacre, six years after the event, the great Washington in camp at Cambridge recalled it to the remembrance of his troops "as a day never to be forgotten."

On March 2, 1786, John Adams, in writing an official communication from London, said:—"The 5th of March, 1770, ought to be an eternal warning to this nation [England]. On that night the foundation of American independence was laid." Mr. Adams, probably, was as familiar with the train of circumstances leading up to independence, as any other man; and he knew, more-

over, the trend of public sentiment following the event. If the foundation of American independence was laid then and there, the superstructure which has since been erected bears witness that it was a solid foundation, and such a one as never was laid by a mob.

Again, in a letter to Dr. Jedidiah Morse, written from Quincy, January 5, 1816, John Adams said:—"How slightly soever historians may have passed over this event [the massacre] the blood of the martyrs, right or wrong, proved to be the seeds of the congregation. Not the battle of Lexington or Bunker's Hill, not the surrender of Burgoyne or Cornwallis were more important events in American history than the battle of King Street, on the 5th of March, 1770."

Coming down to a later period, Daniel Webster expressed the same sentiment as Mr. Adams, when he said: "From that moment we may date the severance of the British Empire." The late George Livermore, a member of this Society, said: "The Boston Massacre, March 5, 1770, may be regarded as the first act in the drama of the American Revolution." And in very recent times that distinguished writer and our associate, John Fiske, in speaking of the massacre, has said:—"It is, therefore, historically correct to regard them [the victims] as the first martyrs to the cause of American independence; as such they have long deserved a monument in the most honorable place that Boston could give for the purpose; and such a place is Boston Common."

It may be worth the while here to record the fact that a manuscript plan of King Street (now known as State Street) at the time of the massacre is preserved in the Boston Public Library. It was drawn by Paul Revere, probably by order of the court, and was used at the trial of Captain Preston and his soldiers. It shows the exact place where fell Attucks and Gray, who were the first victims; and in the year 1886 the spot was marked by

circles in the pavement of the street, near the corner of Exchange Street, which represent a wheel eight or nine feet in diameter, with its spokes and hub.

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Measured by human life, a century is a long period of time, so long, indeed, that the memory of man runneth not to the beginning. Such round periods have a certain fascination for the average person, who always takes a delight in anniversaries; and these periods offer a good opportunity for a review of the progress in public achievements. Standing, as we now do, on the dividing line between two centuries of the Christian era,—the one that is nearly passed, and the other about to begin,—it may be in keeping with this occasion to change the subject and very briefly to consider the inheritance which the Nineteenth century received from former civilization, and the gifts which it is about to make to the Twentieth. Among the more important ones it received from preceding centuries may be mentioned alphabetical writing, Arabic numerals, the printing press, the mariner's compass, the telescope, the barometer and the steam engine; and among the important ones it soon will give to the coming century may be mentioned the application of electricity, not only for the transmission of thought, but also of sound, and for purposes of locomotion and of lighting streets and dwellings. It may be proper to allude here to the fact that the application of electricity for the transmission of sound and the distant reproduction of the voice was first put to a practical use by a distinguished member of this Society. Besides these gifts to the next century may be mentioned the application of steam to locomotion, whether on land or water, which has shortened in time the distance between continents as well as between far-away cities, photography, spectrum analysis, and various institutions for the amelioration of suffering and for the remedy of evils. The greatest boon to the human race since

the invention of printing, assuredly in the minds of the medical profession, has been the discovery of the anæsthetic properties of sulphuric ether, by means of which to a vast extent human life has been saved and physical pain prevented. It is difficult to overestimate the value of this discovery; and if a judgment were rendered by those who have enjoyed its blessed benefits, the decision would be overwhelming in its favor. Closely akin to anæsthetics in importance is the introduction of antiseptic surgery with its allied science of bacteriology, by which myriads of lives have been saved, to the great joy of parents and friends. These are some of the larger inventions and discoveries; and then there are others so inconspicuous and apparently so trifling that there is danger of overlooking them, though they belong to the great achievements of the century. A case in point is the common friction match, which is so cheap that no hovel or hamlet throughout Christendom is ever without it, and yet so useful that it is found in every house or mansion, no matter how palatial, and in every vessel that sails the sea. Bunches of matches are made by the millions and millions, and broad acres of forests are cut down each year to supply the wood; and in every home they are used without regard to waste or economy. Perhaps no other invention of the century comes so closely in touch with the household and the family in all parts of the world as this necessity of domestic life.

The inheritance of the Nineteenth century was large and generous, but its own bequests to the Twentieth are larger and more generous. It is always dangerous to play the part of a prophet, but I predict that the next century will give to its successor even greater inventions and discoveries than those we are about to give, which have been made during the last hundred years. The next century will lay more stress on the duties and obligations of moral philosophy in the treatment of evils, political and social,

which will inure to the benefit of mankind ; and in many ways it will strengthen the weak and raise up the down-trodden. It will smooth the rough places and soften the hard spots that lie in the path of the weary traveller on his journey through life. It will put into practice those great principles of ethics which underlie the whole system of Christianity, and will make the conditions of daily life easier, and therefore better and pleasanter for humanity.

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