

“HANUKKAH AT VALLEY FORGE, (A Tale of the Might-Have-Been)

1777

IN TWO days it would be Hanukkah. It was the second year without Father. Father had joined the Continentals as soon as the first shot was fired. But now he was near. Near enough to come home . . . only the Redcoats were in the city ... all over it... and a furlough would be of no use. But to be so near and not even have a lamp . . . Judah was grieved!

And he was to be bar-mitzvah too! On Sabbath Hanukkah. How he would miss Father. Luckily they had begun to study long, long ago before the fighting began. So Father knew that he would read well. And he had been reading daily to grandfather. It was fine at least once in a man's life to read the sefer ... the haftarah too. That wouldn't be new. He had read one, once, when he was a little boy, about nine. It would be fun celebrating Hanukkah and reading while the Redcoats were here. Almost like throwing defiance right in their teeth . . . and in the teeth of the tyrant, George too. No matter if King George wasn't just like Antiochus — forbidding them to read Torah, and killing swine on the altar. He was a tyrant anyhow! As Patrick Henry had said, “He'd better profit by example.”

And if the War wasn't soon won King George would have him, Judah, to reckon with. His name wasn't Judah for nothing. When he was a mere baby and didn't know what it was all about, Father held him up to look at the Lights, and Mother took his little fingers and drew them around the lion on the base of the lamp. “Lion! Judah! Lion! Judah!” they'd say. They kept it up, over and over, even when he was old enough to know what they meant.

His chest swelled. He was indeed a Lion — and a Maccabee! Too bad he couldn't be a drummer boy. Some of the lads had run away to the Army,

but he wouldn't. His mother needed him. He was all she had. The man of the house now . . .

Suddenly, a strange thought. Maybe he could do it. It would only take a day. Valley Forge wasn't so very far from Philadelphia. But then Hanukkah fell this year the same day as Christmas. It would not be well to reach camp then. He would wait until the latter days of the Hanukkah week. He would leave a note so Mother wouldn't worry too much. Tell her he had an important errand to do. It was important, even if it was his own errand. To take a lamp to Father ... so all the Jewish soldiers could enjoy Hanukkah. Some were farther from home than Father, too. It might be hard getting by the British soldiers, but he'd slip through where they weren't looking. If he carried the lamp right out boldly, in full sight, they'd think he was going visiting somewhere. The soldiers were all right. They didn't bother people for nothing.

He'd get up early Monday and start off. He'd be there in time for the fifth light.

But now he must read his haftarah, practice it again and again.

Strange, that feeling that Father was in the room, reading with him!

In the encampment at Valley Forge, Judah's father was on sentry duty. It had been bitter cold ever since they had arrived. The British were warm and snug in Philadelphia. But not for long . . . They'd be driven out!

He paced his post; the rags around his feet hardly kept them dry. Under his breath he was chanting Judah's *haftarah*. How he had missed being there. Two days since the bar-mitzvah. They would be lighting the fifth candle tonight. "These lights we light because of the miracles, mighty deeds ..."

Miracles and mighty deeds. They needed them now! His mind went back to the service that Sabbath. He had been there in his dream — watching the

few of the congregation left in the city as they assembled for service. Hardly a *minyan*. Then his wife and Judah came. He mounted the steps back of them. She had turned and spoken to her son. “Just remember, dear, Father will be with us ... in spirit.”

He had followed the boy in ... and stood back of the Reader ... against the wall. No one saw him, unless Judah. The boy looked over as if he were watching his lips form the hardest of the words ... as he used to when they studied together.

Suddenly he was startled out of his reverie. Shadows of men approaching. Feet crunching on the snow. Halt! It was their own men, carrying a bundle, wrapped in one of their torn coats.

“A boy, sentry. Found him on a snow drift. Taking him to the nearest cabin.”

As they were about to pass, the lips of the child stirred, ‘The lamp. Where is my lamp?’

Judah’s voice! The father’s heart skipped a beat. Was aught wrong with the boy’s mother? He heard the little voice again, “Lamp. Lamp.” He smiled. Just like Judah! He must have come all the way to bring his father the menorah.

He explained to the men. One said that he’d see if the officer of the day would allow an exchange of sentries. If so he’d come back, and the father could be released. If not he’d find his boy safe enough when his watch was over.

The soldiers moved off. They were not so far away when they halted again. Officers! General Washington himself making the rounds. They told the General of finding the small boy, pressed deep in a snow drift. . . told of the father on sentry duty... told of the lamp — of Hanukkah — Hanukkah —

Washington nodded. "It's not good practice, but I will order the exchange. The officer will understand. So it's here — , the Feast of the Maccabees."

Washington nodded to the officers and they followed him into the cabin.

Before long Judah was sitting up. Not much later his father came in with the Lamp which had been found, one branch sticking out of a snow drift.

Judah threw himself in his father's arms, and in one breath told him that he wanted all the Jews in the camp to celebrate Hanukkah. And so he had brought his lamp, the one grandfather had given him for bar-mitzvah. Mother's was still at home ... Maybe father would have time to hear him read his *haftarah*. He had read it without a mistake.

The father glanced at General Washington, as if to apologize for his son, but the General nodded comprehendingly. "Stay and hear him read, man. We are all Maccabees here. This boy too."

Judah was not abashed. He addressed the General, "So you know about it, sir? How Judah drove the tyrant from the land and cleansed the Temple. And how the Maccabees threw down the idol."

Washington interrupted, "'Who is for the Lord—to me!' cried Mattathias, the priest. Yes, my boy, we have a Temple to cleanse also — the Temple of Liberty. Some day we shall rekindle its lamp — the light of Freedom ... You wish to read to your father, and we must be about our duty." The Commander-in-Chief withdrew. Judah and his father were alone ...

The War had been won. Independence was attained. The Temple of Liberty had been cleansed, and the Thirteen States had built a new Roof. That's what folks were calling the Constitution. General Washington had refused a crown. He had been elected President. He was now in Philadelphia...

. . .

His Excellency, the President, was receiving a delegation from the Hebrew Congregation. They were come to present him with an Address on behalf of the Congregations in the Republic.

Manuel Josephson began to read:

Sir:

It is reserved for you to unite in affection for your Character and Person, every political and religious denomination of men; and in this will the Hebrew Congregations yield to no class of their fellow Citizens.

The wonders which the Lord of Hosts hath worked in the days of our Forefathers, have taught us to observe the greatness of His wisdom and His might throughout the events of the late glorious revolution, and while we humble ourselves at His footstool in thanksgiving and praise for the blessing of His deliverance, we acknowledge you the leader of the American Armies as His chosen and beloved servant.

But not to your sword alone is our present happiness to be ascribed, that indeed opened the way to the reign of Freedom, but never was it perfectly secure, till your hand gave birth to the Federal Constitution, and you renounced the joys of retirement to seal by your administration in Peace, what you had achieved in war. . .

Something stirred in Washington's memory. He glanced at a tall lad standing at attention beside the reader. Now he remembered. Valley Forge! He smiled at the youth. Judah smiled back. No need for speech. Each read the other's thoughts.