

# THE BOY AND THE LANTERN

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**Y**EARS ago there lived in the southern part of Russia, in the Ukraine, a small family by name Polinsky. An old man, his daughter-in-law and grandson, Aaron, made the circle. The old man, Reb Polinsky, had built up a lucrative clothing business and was the support of the family.

One evening in late April Aaron sat in the kitchen of his grandfather's home reading. He was about 10, well grown, with a strong face and sensitive lips. His mother's voice aroused him, calling him from a far land.

"Aaron, thy grandfather awaits thee at Beth Hamadrash.\* Take thy lantern and go."

The boy looked up slowly from his book. His eyes of hazel shade burned beneath his straight, fair hair. He did not seem pleased to be interrupted. The story was mastering, the lonely trudge down the long lane to the temple of learning very uninteresting. Impatiently then he closed his book and with a muttered word took down the lantern from its hook near the door.

His mother spoke crisply. "Regardest it not an honor to fetch thy grandfather, the most learned in the Talmud?"

The boy with the lantern set his jaw.

"I shall go now, mother, but because my grandfather is learned makes my book no less interesting."

Pride for the reasoning of her son struggled with resentment at his disrespect. So her tongue was tied, and the boy lit the lantern and started out in silence. He was already sorry that he had spoken so impulsively to his mother. And he liked to call for his grandfather, but to go when ready, not to be ordered.

Outside the smell of rich earth filled his nostrils. He liked the heavy draught full of the sensuousness of spring. Across the lane a straggling length of shadows trailed their way. The boy lifted the lantern and its dim light cut the gray forms with a sharpness that made his heart stand still. Here was vivid proof of his grandfather's words: "The light of civilization, my son, may lift the fog of prejudice and cruelty."

The light of civilization! Strange new thoughts formed themselves in the boy's mind; strange understandings. This was not the first time the lantern had shown him truths. He had early learned that to hold it above his head at a certain angle caused a greater light to shine than when he held it close to his side. To hold it straight before him gave birth to grotesque shadows. Once he had stumbled and fallen with the light behind him, and the lantern itself had sustained a broken glass. Yes, the lantern had been a good teacher!

Then of a sudden the lantern went out. It was filled with oil, he knew. He fumbled and drew the slide. He carried no matches—strange, ridiculous oversight. How, then, to light the lantern? Instead of a depression, he felt exhilara-

tion. Struggling in darkness, he himself would have to find the torch. He would find nothing ready to his hand. Always he would have to plow his way.

But the time was passing, and he must be going. He

ing-room table and was resting. Her father-in-law sat near the window, a big book unopened on his knee. He was gazing at his grandson. The boy, now 18, gazed back at his grandfather. Something of import vibrated between the two. The old man spoke.

"What troublest thee, Aaron?"

**T**HE boy, feeling the injustice to his race, attempts to overcome it and rouses the enmity of his own people, but this he speedily subdues.



"I shall relight her lamp!"

Mrs. Polinsky shifted in her chair. She gazed uneasily at her son, for she knew his high spirit. He heeded neither gaze nor its meaning, but spoke directly to his grandfather.

"Hast noticed my studying, reading here nights, grandfather, every moment I can?"

The old man nodded gravely. "Thou hast applied thyself since the gymnasium was made impossible for the Jew."

The boy rose, went and stood close to his grandfather.

"Grandfather, I wish to enter the university to study the law. I can go now and pass the necessary examinations."

His grandfather spoke quietly. "Thou must then have forgot, Aaron, that it has been made desperately hard for the Jew to enter the university in order to become a lawyer. Thou knowest the restrictions?"

**T**HE boy nodded. "Yes. I have heard of persecution, petty injustices that have set my blood to boiling." Some flame was suddenly lit, and he cried out: "Grandfather, the Gentile believes we are not to be trusted with any superior knowledge or education. That we would misuse such knowledge. Therefore, they bar us from their universities, or make it so hard for us there that our spirit breaks! Our old rabbis were allowed more freedom of thought, and recollect what wonders they accomplished! The

Talmud is their monument. Grandfather! I want to be rabbi to my world. I want to understand from every side!"

The old man spoke quickly, for the fire of the boy burned into him.

"Then go! I have the money for three. We shall miss thee, my son, but our prayers go with thee. And for all thou shalt have to bear our hearts will ache."

The boy hesitated, then he flung back his shoulders. "Grandfather, you of all know me best. Remember when the people about me threw stones at me on Shabbas for carrying home my school books? 'Twas against the law. To me it was a holy pursuit on any day, that of learning. They could not understand that. There is much they must learn; look sometimes deeper than custom."

His grandfather started forward, his mother's eyes grew wide. They sensed that something difficult for the boy to say was in his heart.

"I go to the university for a twofold reason—to study law and to find why my people are hated by these who can think. So, grandfather, I go as a non-Jew!"

The old man did not move. The mother beat her hands together.

"Listen! 'Tis written that when a Gentile lights a candle for his own use, an Israelite is permitted to avail himself of that light. I say this for you, that you may not feel so bad at what I am about to do."

"Thou hast put upon that saying thine own meaning, to use for thine own purposes!" cried the mother.

Aaron turned to her. "And 'tis also

written, my mother, that it is the interpretation and not the dream that comes true."

Again she beat her hands and lifted up her voice. "Woe is this day! Mine own son uses the great Talmud to aid him in his apostasy!"

The old man, rising to his feet and standing straight and tall, spoke sharply.

"Silence, woman!" he cried. "Thy scheital\* is not upon thine head straight as might be. Thou art but the mother of this child, and he a man!"

She subsided. She folded her arms upon the table and let her face fall upon them.

"Grandfather," said the boy, "I am still of thine own, shall always be, as thou well knowest. I may speak to thee as thou usest words to me as though we were equal. Then I have purpose in my heart. Nothing shall change me, not even your anger or my mother's woe. I shall go to the university where men's opinions are formed. I shall be a man admitted everywhere; no restrictions placed upon me because of my race. I shall listen, seek, find their justification for our persecution. I shall attend their church to see why it is thought right to put one man's scorn upon another!"

"'Tis an inborn thing, this prejudice; 'tis neither taught nor perhaps greatly fostered. It is there, that's all," said the grandfather sadly.

But the boy went on. "Five years, too, I shall be in another environment. I shall learn to see many ways. Sure'y I shall be able to see clearer than if I stayed here, or went with my fellows at the university, moved apart from the Gentile. We have always clung together—without curiosity."

"There where you would go you will find prejudice with no reason; just as

\*Wig.

\*House of learning.