

PART FOUR

Birth And Heritage

Chapter I

The Mystery of the Talmudic Tomes

Inherency in us is part of kinship that exists between us and everything around us; even what's in heaven; what's rubbed off the stars. Star dust: cosmic dust from which stars and the dust of the earth are born. It's the same root, which is to say kinship. And the consequence, or the final end result is the same. But in the meanwhile each of us here, alone or in little groups, with fancied fences around, try to bespatter and conquer the earth that is bearing us. Until another day, until the end of time. When another earth is born.

The kinship between Solomon and George, the more so because of the circumstance ^{of} birth and heritage they received from their Fathers - the trail they left of the moral philosophy, the code of spirituality!

The circumstance that brought George's father to the Lithuanian little ^{town},

where lived Solomon's father, the famed Rabbi Nechemiah, to gain some understanding of the mysteries of the great Talmudic tomes! And the inheritance he left to his son of that understanding. And that which Solomon, a ten-year old then, had learned from him of that fabled thin tall man of the goatee and waiscoat and stars and stripes; and what he stood for. It was the finger of God no less. In the spring of 1894 it was. A sad spring, and God had sent him to teach His people how to live and not how to die. A Gospel from America, the land of phantasy. Land of shining glamour.

Autumn 1893. It was an altogether eventful year for Dr. Sheraton, Minister of the Trinitarian Church, Spring Hill Street, Portgrave. In the spring, that year, he had receive^d his doctorate on his thesis, Influence of Hebraic Law On Our Generations, and soon after had been offered a pulpit in metropolitan Boston. He had refused the bid as well as the bishopric in his own Portgrave diocese, now vacant over a year. Having been granted Sabbatical leave, after strenuous objection from the opponent side, he didn't intend to "waste" it on a higher position in the church. It was "free time" he wanted, time that belonged only to him and no one else. At first it was just a thought, a wish, with no particular aim in mind, as if the idea were an end in itself. But now that the wish was to be realized the goal had become clear to him.

An ardent student of the Old Testament in the original Hebrew, the obscure field of Talmudic literature, its pilpulistic trends, had always held a challenge as well as a fascination for him ever since his theological days in the university. Why indeed should a future minister of the Gospel be exposed to the intricacies and attritions of mind-wearin^g discussions and argumentations, such as he understood the pages of those

old and mellowed tones to hold, except for the exploration ^{of the} mystery they represent? He was aware that it was the voice of his rebellious youth - when the quick young mind flitted from one flowering thought to another, to suck its innermost essence; the curiosity conflict (the curiosity complex of a later day), that often brought him in conflict with his teachers; that brought him unhappiness and despair - that still called to him, that was still shaping his destiny, that it would always be with him! That he was glad that it'll always be with him.

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Dr. Sheraton was walking in the purple-gold of approaching evening with his friend Dr. Capen. It was a friendship between the two men that wasn't quite two years old, but events often move swiftly to a culmination in a short space of time.-----

They moved at a rapid pace for Dr. Capen since the bleak days of his first months in the practice of medicine, after Bob the Hobo had visited him. In one year his office, which had the smell of cold and an empty ⁱ mustiness, had the feel and warmth of human habitation. The office was alive with people - not just people, but patients. His patients; and they inhabited his office, as well as his very being. The fees, the money that jingled in his pockets, had nothing to do with it. It was the current of human warmth, though undefineable, that flowed from them to him that specified itself and clung to his soul., Like an aura, a feeling of well being in the sunlight of a spring day, that invested him. It transposed itself into a physical sense of a new office and new furnishings.

His practice had reached the edge of success, at least to the point where his name had become known not only on the main street where his office was located, but in the side streets where people talked about MD's, good or bad. His name ^{had become} ^{enough} familiar ^{to} be called into an emergency when no other physician was to be had.

Of the great catalogue of human illnesses the emergency is the

plague of the medical man, especially the initiate. An emergency might be anything: from a cut throat, a fractured skull to an innocuous nose-bleed. How was one to cope with it? And people were either stupid, or stupified to give detail over the telephone. The MD could only pray that he be equal to the occasion. Although Dr. Capen was a sensitive man, his response to the many and diverse demands of his profession, his reactions in the day (or minutes) of judgment, when things were in delicate balance, when the interval between life and death was very short, were calm and deliberate, and his services trigger swift. He knew the rules of the ~~and the~~ game - and he must play his hand skilfully, or the yawning pit would be waiting. And the path is dark and slippery.

Rev. Sheraton's young wife had lost much blood. She was still bleeding profusely when Dr. Capen had arrived. Pulse thready, air hunger: all the concomitant and tragic symptoms of a serious hemorrhage through a miscarriage. If he had been asked what had happened in the first moments he would have been hard put to it to explain. It were as if someone else was presiding and directing things, and that he subconsciously had responded to commands. The whole thing was illusory, unreal; and no different than a nightmare that one has in his sleep. After it was over and he knew she would live, he recognized the smile of gratitude on the minister's face, and he realized that he was not dreaming; that she had been on the verge.

He was doubly thankful. He knew Myra before she was married, when she was the pretty sister of Mrs. Dervin, with whom she had lived. He had seen her on the streets of Portgrave; a striking young lady; slender, long limbed, black hair, and dark-brown eyes to match, which lighted up with mirth at the slightest provocation. Yet there was a dreamy wistfulness, an expression of longing in those eyes as one approached closer. But on the first awareness of someone's presence her face broke ~~out~~ into

a placid smile of cheerfulness, as if nothing mattered at all. But always that quizzical look, like a question mark, remained lingering on her face to the discriminating eye. And it had always been a puzzling wonder to the doctor how far it reached to the depths of her soul.

She had come from a small town in the state of New Hampshire, to live with her sister, Mrs. Dervin. Myra was a great help to her older sister, who, in addition to bringing up her infant son (who had died soon after his third birthday), and her household chores, had to help out in the store her husband had recently opened. But her abilities had soon gained Myra the enviable position of private secretary to Mr. Barton, editor of the Eventide. It was in Mr. Barton's office she had met Mr. Sheraton, who ^{had} often come there to consult with his friend, the editor, on communal affairs, and whom she married after a brief courtship.

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"But my dear Doctor," Dr. Capen was saying, "you could have your bishopric and your Sabbatical leave too."

"I wasn't ^{made} to be an administrator. Besides, the duties of such a position would take too much of my time. I am not what you might call a dedicated man, devoted to the loneliness of my study, but I do cherish my free time, and don't want to be burdened with details I could never be interested in. Not even in the future."

"But why refuse a pulpit in a great metropolis? I am sure it'd still be open on your return if given half a chance. Not that it wouldn't be a sore loss to me if you had accepted."

"Oh, well, in that case I'd take you with me," Dr. Sheraton laughed. "Seriously, though, I am not the pulpiteer I am reputed to be. I might be a complete failure, with so many divergent currents in the church community of a big city to contend with. I am neither afraid nor cowardly, just that I am not ready yet for the big city. A big pulpit has big demands, and I am still in the making, and I want time for myself ^{to find myself} - much time."

They walked on in the silence of the after-glow of the autumn sunset. Staring ahead before him, as if in a reminiscing mood, Dr. Sheraton went on: "Plenty of sharp corners to smooth out in this community. Take my Sabbatical leave, what an embroilment of temp^eraments; the shrieks of the zealot, the sanctimonious cry of hatred under cover of piety! The Forrests and their ilk! I don't bear them any animosity, because they can't help themselves; but they have to be shown and handled - and not with silk gloves. Oh, I like it here, at least for another few years, and I welcome the fight,--yes the fight, not the struggle - that'll be on my hands during my stay here, or I should be derelict in my duties as a minister, as I saw them when first I had decided to become one."

"You weren't lacking in courage, certainly, when in your sermon, The Fallacies of Interracial Prejudice," Dr. Capen said, "you condemned Forrest's action banishing his son for marrying that Jewish girl."

"Good reason for not holding it against him when he opposed my Sabbatical leave. It's Forrest's guiding principle, and that's all right. I don't mind open enemies. But when vituperations and connivings are going on behind a false facade, that's of a different category. I shall never shirk a fight there."

"There will ^{always} be a vociferous minority who'll give ^{you} that opportunity on your return," Dr. Capen said. "They never forget. The defeat suffered by Forrest and his cohorts will rankle and prod them on."

"Oh, I'll take them on. A good keen fight will be good for me on my return." Facing Dr. Capen directly Dr. Sheraton went on: "What worries me is poor Myra. Leave her in her state! Had I known... I lie awake nights contemplating the thought of letting the Sabbatical go, but --"

"But you wouldn't get another chance," Dr. Capen finished for him. "But you needn't worry on Mrs. Sheraton's account. She is in fine mettle mentally and physically. The miscarriage has nothing to do with it. She was too young and careless. With proper ^{guidance} advice she'll come through all

right. Your refusing to go would be very painful to her. You know how happy she was when you were granted it - for your sake."

"Yes, I know," Dr. Sheraton mused. "I know her devotion and love - the cause of my sleepless nights. What after all is more precious than the love of one like Myra? 'A woman of worth who can find. For her price is above rubies.'" And after a pause: "I believe you are right. She would be unhappy if I didn't take advantage of the opportunity." They walked on in silence when they came to a turn of the road which led directly to the bay of the Eastern Promontory. They were leaning against the iron-grilled fence gazing into the shimmer of blue dusk hovering over the water as the evening deepened. "It's like a dream - all this unreality. Like a new world. And I don't know whether I like it." Dr. Sheraton meditated for a while, then spoke again. "But maybe it's the newness of the new world. Newness sometimes frighten^s us, especially when you leave all that's dear to you behind and embark on a strange journey. But perhaps it's all ministerial talk, one who had been cloistered all his life and is afraid of the open and sharp glitter of the sun and the wide open spaces and the ~~the~~ free air that god's world may spare for us. I talk like a neophyte, a school-boy..." he laughed as he turned and looked to Dr. Capen, "Not the PhD... All right, my dear doctor, maybe at heart I am still the little boy - but no apron strings dangling. . . . One thing is sure, and I am going to hang by it: My Itinerary. It's set, and is beckoning to me. And there I follow, white lipped or no. And may god be my guardian."

"Your itinerary," Dr. Capen repeated, an enigmatic grin on his face. "The great universities, the capitals of Europe...!"

"Mostly I shall by-pass them, I fear. I shall be on my way to a little town in old Lithuania, there where resides the source of Talmudic scholarship I am seeking."

"Ye shall seek and ye shall find," Dr. Capen blandly quoted.

"An obscure figure of a little man, hidden in the hinterland of Russia."

"Communication must have been difficult. And interesting. Hebrew, of course, was the language of interchange."

"Well, not entirely. It was true on my side, who wrote in the pure Hebrew of the Bible, but not so on the other side. Their writing has the style and flavor of the Talmud, intricate and involved, with an admixture of Aramaic. But to me it had the delicate essence of the roses of Sharon and the olives of Mount Carmel, so powerful was its nostalgic quality. Every word was a challenge which I accepted cheerfully. The letters were a study in themselves, causing me to spend hour upon hour in my study solving the riddle. When accomplished, or nearly so, it was indeed a source of great joy. The joy of the archeologist discovering the treasures long buried in the earth's tomb. Crowning like a halo all other communications was the last one from that little town in Lithuania. It had taken months before I received an answer to my inquiry, but it was worth all the time of uncertainty and waiting. The little fashioned letters, with their curlicues - like dotted sailboats on the far horizon of an uncharted sea. The first page was something like a page from the Talmud, with no way of knowing where one sentence began or ended. The phrasing had the same peculiarities. Like time, vast and unlimited, no breaks and no interruptions. As if he resented my intrusion on his precious time of meditation and study of the sacred tomes. Then in the second page, as if he regretted his resentment, he tried to atone for his attitude. His thoughts ran clear and fresh. But it was not until the third page when he finally condescended to indicate the rhythmic stops of phrases, sentences and paragraphs. He pleaded to be let remain inoninate. And expressed surprise that his name had been mentioned by the greats and illustrious ones mentioned in my letter. At the end he said that of course he couldn't forbid my coming, that he would gladly see me, to the best of his ability, and guide me

that the grace of god was upon me, that I was a Goy Chasid. A good Gentile, I took it. But it was more than that, more than living in obscurity in an ancient land across the sea; his is the world of David and the ~~other~~ prophets, and what the great academies of Sora and Pumbeditha had to say about them, and the Five Books of Moses. While mine is the world mostly of the present, he lives in the past. The world most palpable and liveable to him. He defies the problems of the mundane, of the everyday crisis. He had never answered my second letter. But in truth I never expected an answer from him. It wouldn't have been in character."

"Why not?" Dr. Capen asked uncertainly, as if anticipating his friend's answer.

"Because he is one of those mythical figures, men of great piety who prefer to remain anonymous and of little contact with the outside world. I am of that strange and outside world that has most always been hostile to him. He was glad to put me in a place of honor in his world, because I am a Goy Chasid, but he would have nothing of my world. He sought the obscurity of the little town Zabel, in Eastern Europe, which hardly deserves mention on any map, in order to hide away in his ~~little~~ study. And he would have succeeded hadn't his pronouncements on the Law, and his written comments on it, attracted attention. Those who have personal knowledge of him tell me that he is a fleshless little man, with more spirit than body. On many a day there had been little bread in the house, especially during those famous Russian famines. A more mythical, illusory figure is hard to imagine."

"Nevertheless," Dr. Capen said, "from your very apt description of the man, an artist could very well reconstruct an authentic likeness of him. I can almost see him myself."

"I took great pains to follow in detail the pattern of life of these unique men, apostles of the faith in their generation, for its background is molded on the lines of the great heritage bequeathed them

through the ages -- through the days of Abraham, Moses, and the ^{Ten} Commandments spoken in thunder and lightning on smoking Sinai in the voice of Jehovah. To know and understand the Child, one must know the parent!"

CHAPTER II

The Wisdom of the Stars

The year 1883

It has been written that man's destiny - from birth to death, and thereafter - had been traced in words of fire in the record of the stars by the Hand of the Creator. What was is and will be has been set in the mind of man - to ^{be} read in the record of the stars. For man's mind had been set also by the Hand of the Creator. The mind in which the soul resides is part of the all prevailing Mind which is the Creator.

To know what's on Earth, put there where it is, in the exact spot in the orbit of the Sun - guide and mentor set by the Hand of God - is the stars' business: The wisdom of the stars.

Dr. Sheraton who took great pains to follow in detail the pattern of life of Rabbi Nechemiah, whom he had ^{come} to see in another world after a long and painful journey, conceived the lines of the story of Kinships in his own mind as related to the first-born son of his host, and the life the Rabbi himself led. The story of the wisdom of the stars as the followers of Nechemiah in his little community saw it, and what he saw himself while he lived with them! The story he was anxious to impart to his son ^{later} during his polio days. A strange story he wished to bequeath to