

The Fighting Ground

WRITTEN BY AVI : ILLUSTRATED BY PETER CATALANOTTO

Chapter One: 9:58 a.m.

a breakfast serials story

April 3, 1778. It was in the morning when Jonathan heard the bell. He was standing in the open field feeling hot, dirty, and bored. His father, not far off, limped as he worked newly turned rows of corn.

Jonathan had been daydreaming about being a soldier. His older brother was with General Washington in Pennsylvania and his cousin had joined a county regiment. Jonathan kept waiting for his father to say that he could join, too. Though he *was* thirteen his father put him off.

Jonathan dreamed of taking up a gun and fighting the enemy. He'd heard his father and his father's friends talk about the tyrannical British; their cruel mercenary allies, the German-speaking Hessians and the hated Tories, American traitors who had sided with the brutal English king.

During the past winter Jonathan's father had fought near Philadelphia and been wounded in the leg. It was painful for him to walk.

Though Jonathan kept asking questions about the battle, his father, eyes clouded, shook his head and would not speak of it. Still, Jonathan could dream. So it was that, at the sound of the bell, they both stood still and listened.

The bell, at the tavern a mile and a half away, was used to call men to arms. This time it tolled only once. Puzzled, Jonathan and his father stood alert, wondering if more would come.

Jonathan glanced over to the edge of the field where his father's flintlock musket leaned against a stump. The cartridge box and powder horn were there, the gun primed, ready to be used. Jonathan knew how to use them. Hadn't his father taught him, drilled him, told him that *everyone* had to be prepared? Hadn't he said, "We must all be soldiers

now?" Hadn't Jonathan talked with his friends of war, of strategies fit for major generals? And having fought their battles, hadn't they *always* won their glory?

When the bell stayed silent, Jonathan sighed with disappointment. His father turned back to work.

As Jonathan worked, he pictured himself wearing the New Jersey uniform: fancy blue jacket with red facings, white leggings, a beautiful new gun snug against his cheek.

The bell began to ring again.

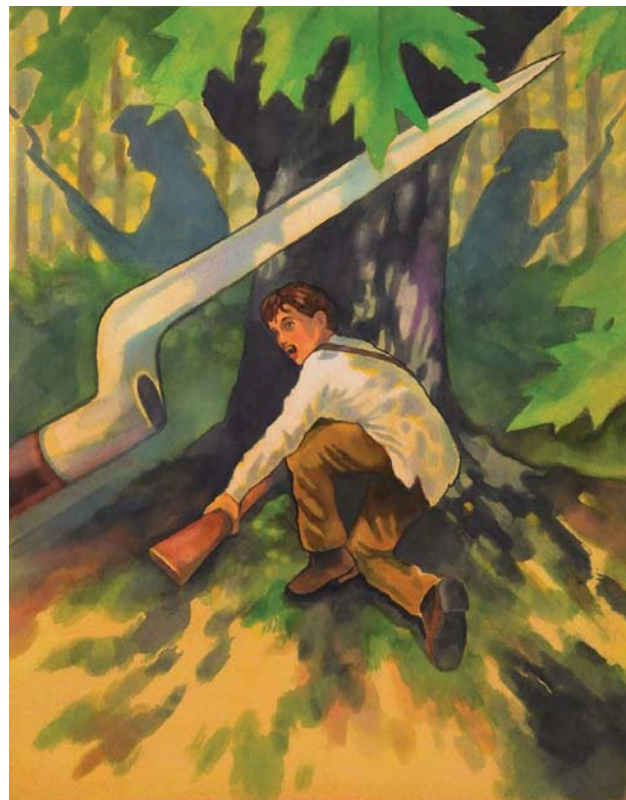
"What do you think?" called Jonathan.

His father pulled off his black felt hat and mopped his brow with the back of his hand. He looked south, worry on his face. Absentmindedly, he rubbed his wounded leg.

Jonathan walked to the edge of the field to get a drink of water from a clay jar that sat by the gun. Cool water trickled over his chest and made him shiver.

The bell tolled on. Stealing glances at his father, Jonathan touched his fingers to the glossy butt of the gun.

"Maybe you'd best get back to the house," his father



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said. "Could be someone's come through with news."

Jonathan sprang up.

"Jonathan!" his father cried. The boy froze.

"Don't you – by God – don't you go beyond!"

They looked at one another. Jonathan felt his stomach turn all queer, for in that moment his father's eyes became unveiled. They were full of fear.

Jonathan ran through the copse of trees that separated the field from their house. Behind him, the sound of his father's work resumed, an echo to the call of the bell.

As Jonathan approached their house his mother appeared at the door. His young brother and sister poked their heads from behind her skirts.

"What is it?" his mother called, her voice full of worry. Each distant bell stroke seemed to make her wince. She hated the war, even talk of war, and was worried sick about his brother, who had gone off and never sent a word, not one.

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Jonathan stopped. His bare toes curled into the soft earth. "Don't know," he said, answering her question. "Pa told me to see if anyone came through with news."

"Not here," she said.

"Maybe they're going to take back Trenton," said Jonathan. Two years before and twenty miles away, General Washington had beaten the Hessians there. "Think they might?" he asked, looking about for his shoes. She didn't reply.

The ringing of the bell stopped, leaving an empty silence. "Want me to go to the tavern to find out things?" he asked. Coming closer he spied his shoes which lay on the bench by the door.

"Your father tell you to?"

When Jonathan gave no reply, his mother pushed a slip of hair beneath her cap and slapped away a tugging child's hand. "Maybe you'd best," she said. "Your father can't. We don't want to be surprised."

Jonathan leaped forward, pulled on his shoes, then bolted up and began to run.

"Just find out!" she called after him. "Then come on right back! You hear?"

Pretending he had not heard, Jonathan kept running.

He ran harder, turned a sharp angle, and beat his way to the creek. He passed the cooling house, then sped along the path that edged the old woods where the warm, soft smell of rotting wood filled the air.

Maybe it's going to be a battle, a big one. Maybe I can take part. Oh Lord, make it a battle. With armies, cannons, flags, drums and dress parades! Oh, I can, will fight. Good as my older brother. Maybe good as pa. Better, maybe. Oh Lord, make it something grand!

Jonathan broke from the path on to the Alexandria Road and passed a place where a boy he knew used to live. He'd gone off and gotten killed. Jonathan didn't like to think of that. Besides, the boy's folks said it was an awful war, cursed it, spat on it when they could. Hearing them, people said they might be Tories. There were lots of Tories like that around, spies and turncoats all. Such folks were warned to keep their thoughts to themselves. Tories got what they deserved.

Jonathan moved up a small hill and paused to catch his breath. A swirl of red-breasted pigeons coursed the air. A squirrel scolded. A crow cackled. It was spring, and warm, and wonderfully ripe for war. Jonathan felt sure he could try anything, be anything, do anything.

Even as he stood there, the bell resumed its call. He could go home . . . or to the tavern.

If he went to the tavern, he knew it wouldn't be just to get the news. His father was afraid, but he wasn't. He began to pelt toward the sound of the bell, his blood as warm as the swollen, spring-rich earth.

"Do it!" he told himself. "Go and fight!"

to be continued . . .

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