

SAMUEL THE PROPHET

by

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CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

ENDOR AND GILBOA

(I Samuel 28; I Chronicles 10:13)

“Earth fades! Heaven breaks on me; I shall stand next
Before God’s throne; the moment’s close at hand
When man the first, last time, has leave to lay
His whole heart bare before his Maker . . .”

- R. B.

YEARS had passed since David’s sling had brought Goliath to the ground, and the Philistines had fled headlong at Ephes-dammim before the onset of the men of Israel. A new invasion was now planned to revenge that disgrace, and re-establish the Philistine supremacy over the plain of Esdraelon, which was the necessary link between the wealthy cities of the Euphrates Valley and the vast market for their wares and produce, furnished by the cities of the Nile Valley.

To hold that great trade-route involved the right to impose very valuable taxation on the merchandise transported to and fro hence the desire to hold its keys. The tides of Philistine invasion, therefore, poured up by the sea-coast route, which was favourable for the evolutions of the Philistine chariots and cavalry, and a strongly-fortified camp was formed at Shunem, about three and a half miles north of Jezreel, and celebrated in after time as the abode of the rich woman who so hospitably entertained the prophet Elisha.

Hastily gathering what forces he could collect, Saul marched northwards, and pitched his camp on the slopes of Mount Gilboa, four miles distant from the invading army, and on the south of the Great Plain.

“Green plains rising from the level of the Kishon lead to the slopes of Gilboa, swelling after a time into low heights, which rise bare and stony. Behind these, the many summits of the hills shoot up abruptly some five hundred or six hundred feet bleak, white, and barren their only growths, spots of scrub oak and mountain thorns and flowers, which, in spring at least, are never wanting in Palestine.”

The sight of the great force which was arrayed against him seems to have completely paralyzed Saul’s courage.

He contrasted the complete accoutrements of the Philistines with the spears and slings of Israel, and “**his heart trembled greatly.**”

The heroic courage which faith might have brought him, was not now possible, since the sense of God's presence was withdrawn. There was no rift in the black canopy of despair that overshadowed his terror-stricken soul.

He could say with another, **“Behold I go forward, but He is not there; and backward, but I cannot perceive Him; on the left hand, where He doth work, but I cannot behold Him; He hideth Himself on the right hand, that I cannot see Him”** (Job 23:8).

It was to this that the terrible series of tragedies, which we are now about to narrate, must be attributed. The restraining grace of God, which he had so long despised and resisted, no longer strove with him, and he was left to follow the promptings of those evil spirits **“the rulers of the darkness of this world”** who, for mysterious purposes, are permitted to assail the sons of men.

It is true that he inquired of the Lord, for probably the first time, after the lapse of many years; but there was no repentance or confession of sin, no submission of will, no patient waiting for his direction only abject terror and frantic despair. It is hardly surprising to read that **“the Lord answered him not, neither by dreams, nor by Urim, nor by prophets.”** **“If I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear me.”**

I. ENDOR

At some previous period, as we have seen, **“Saul had put away those that had familiar spirits, and the wizards, out of the land.”**

He may have done this in one of those strange lucid moments, when he became conscious of the strivings of God's good Spirit, or as a set-off to the wild strivings of passion of which he was guiltily conscious so often men seek to atone for the sins into which they have been betrayed, by some strong outward act, intended as a make-weight in the other scale, or a sop to an uneasy conscience. It became clear, however, that he had no heartfelt abhorrence of the crimes he thus punished, seeing that in his own dire extremity he had recourse to the very arts he had striven to abolish, and sought from the mouth of hell the help for which he had appealed to Heaven in vain!

About two miles north from Shunem in the rear, therefore, of the Philistine army lay the little village of Endor.

It was one of those spots from which Manasseh had failed to expel the old population; and amongst these, the descendants of the ancient Canaanites, was an old woman who professed to be able to bring up the souls of the dead. It is likely enough that her claims were baseless. By ventriloquism and sleight of hand she no doubt simulated the voice and appearance of those who seemed to come from the other world at her bidding.

If there was more than that, we do not hesitate to affirm our belief that in all ages demons have been in collusion with necromancers and spiritualists, and have answered to their call. This is at the root and heart of the phenomena of modern spiritualism.

Heavily cloaked and disguised, accompanied by two trusty companions whom tradition has identified as Abner and Amasa, Saul set forth in the early hours of the night, crossed the plain, made a detour round the eastern shoulder of Little Hermon, and arrived safely at the witch's dwelling.

The door opened to admit them to the house, and amid the dark weirdness of the interior, revealed by the glimmering light of a brazier, choked with smoke, the woman was quite unable to recognize the features of the haggard man who accosted her with the request that she should bring up whomsoever he should name.

At first she hesitated, reminding him how perilous her profession was, and suggesting that to give him satisfaction might cost her life; "**Behold, thou knowest what Saul hath done, how he hath cut off those that have familiar spirits and wizards out of the land; wherefore then layest thou a snare for my life, to cause me to die?**"

With an oath, which strangely implicated the God whom he was at that moment denying, and with a touch of his kingly prerogative, the king assured her that no punishment should befall her for doing what he requested. "**As the Lord liveth, there shall no punishment happen to thee for this thing.**"

Thus reassured, the woman asked whom she should bring up; but she must have been not a little startled, when in a hoarse whisper, as of one paralyzed and awestruck by his weird surroundings, the king said, "**Bring me up Samuel.**"

Retiring from him to a distance, the wretched woman began her incantations, perhaps dropping a powder on the coals of the brazier, muttering incantations in a low voice, making passes and adjurations. But before she had completed her preparations, the Almighty seems to have interfered, sending back his faithful servant from the world beyond the article of death, so that the witch might not even appear to have the credit of securing so wonderful a visitation. "**The woman saw Samuel.**"

At the same moment that she recognized Samuel, she seems to have recognized Saul also. Startled and frightened for her life, she cried with a loud voice, and spake unto Saul, saying, "**Why hast thou deceived me?**"

Perhaps in her excited condition of soul, she was endowed with that supernatural insight which we call clairvoyance; or perhaps there was something in Samuel's appearance so startlingly vivid and real, that she was led in that dread hour to connect prophet and king as in years gone by; or perhaps the king in his eagerness had drawn near, and had dropped the mantle which veiled his face and figure. But however it befell, she saw through his disguise, and in horror-stricken tones cried, "**Thou art Saul!**"

Again he reassured her, and asked her what she had seen.

"**I saw,**" she replied, "**gods [A majestic being, august and God-like] ascending out of the earth.**"

Pressed by Saul to describe his appearance more minutely, for she was beholding a mysterious form, which, though present in the same chamber as himself, was veiled from him, she said, "**An old man cometh up; and he is covered with a mantle.**" "**And Saul perceived that it was Samuel, and he stooped with his face to the ground, and bowed himself.**"

Very touching and thrilling was the conversation that followed.

I am disposed to think that it was held without the medium of the witch, and that God permitted the prophet to speak with Saul, as afterwards Moses and Elijah to speak with our Lord of the deace to be presently accomplished at Jerusalem. It is likely that these sentences were actually interchanged between the king and his former friend and confidant, to whom he turned remorsefully in his awful agony.

Do you not think that if, even then, Saul had turned to the Lord with tears of confession and the simplicity of faith, he would have been answered according to the multitude of the Divine compassions? Assuredly he would; but there was no sign of such a change of temper.

Samuel did not wait to be questioned, but sadly told the awestruck king that even in the other life his misdoings had filled his spirit with unrest, so much so that he could not forbear returning to speak to him once more. "**Why hast thou disquieted me to bring me up?**"

Saul's answer was that of despair. "**I am sore distressed; for the Philistines make war against me, and God is departed from me, and answereth me no more, neither by prophets, nor by dreams; therefore I have called thee, that thou mayest make known unto me what I shall do.**"

But from the lips of the prophet came no words of comfort or hope. It was useless to ask of the servant the help which was denied by the Master.

There was no gain in evading the fact that God Himself was on the side of David, and against the king, whose reign had begun with such fair promise. The multiplied misfortunes which had befallen him and his realm were due to his disobedience to the direct instructions issued with respect to Amalek.

The sin which he had now perpetrated had put the last touch on all his transgressions.

Nothing, at this hour, could stay or avert the descending avalanche. As he had sown, he must reap; as he had fallen, so he must lie. It was, therefore, revealed that the Lord would deliver Israel also with him into the hand of the Philistines, and on the morrow Saul and his sons should have also passed into the world of spirits; the Hebrew host would be annihilated, the camp sacked, and the land left to the fate which the conquered of those days knew well to expect.

Little wonder was it that the king fell straightway his full length upon the earth, and was sore afraid.

He was already weak with watching and fasting through the previous day; the events of the night had completely unnerved him; and his nervous system collapsed under the terrible strain. Even the callous nature of the witch was smitten with compunction and pity. Her woman's nature was thoroughly aroused by the awful horror that lay on the king's soul. She besought him to eat. By the trust she had reposed in him she pleaded that she had some claim on his mercy, to be expended not for her, but for him. **"Let me set a morsel of bread,"** she pleaded, **"before thee; and eat, that thou mayest have strength when thou goest on thy way."**

At first he refused. It seemed as though he would never rise again from the mud-floor on which all the glory of his manhood lay stretched. **"But his servants, together with the woman, constrained him; and he hearkened unto their voice. So he arose from the earth, and sat upon the bed."**

What memories must have passed before his mind, as he sat on that divan, whilst the woman hastened to prepare the meal! Did he not remember the first happy days of his reign; Jabesh-gilead; the overthrow of the Philistines, not once or twice; and the love of his people? But, step by step, he saw how he had gone down from the sun-lit summits to the dark valley, where the black torrent ran and the overhanging rocks met overhead. As with a drowning man, the whole of his previous career passes before him in a moment of time, so the whole panorama of his past must have stood in clear outline before the mental vision of the king.

Then, after hastily partaking of the calf and the unleavened cakes, the three figures stole through the darkness, back to the camp.

II. GILBOA

On the morrow there was some slight alteration in the disposition of the respective hosts. The Philistines moved towards Aphek, a little to the west of their camp; while the Israelites descended from the heights of Gilboa, and took up a position near the spring or fountain of Jezreel (29:1).

Presently the battle was joined. In spite of the most desperate efforts to withstand the onset of the heavily-mailed troops that were opposed to them, the Hebrews were routed, and fled from before the Philistines. It is expressly noted by the historian that the lower slopes of Gilboa were covered by the wounded, whose hearts blood bedewed the mountain pastures (31:1).

Saul and Jonathan made the most desperate efforts to retrieve the day;

**"From the Blood of the slain, from the fat of the mighty,
The bow of Jonathan turned not back,
And the sword of Saul returned not empty."**

But it was in vain. **"The battle went sore against Saul."**

"The Philistines slew Jonathan and Abinadab, and Melchishua, the sons of Saul."

The flower of his army lay strewn around him; the chivalry of Israel was quenched in rivers of blood. Then, leaving all others, the Philistines concentrated their attack on that lordly figure which towered amid the fugitives the royal crown on his helmet, the royal bracelet flashing on his arm. **“The Philistines followed hard upon Saul.”**

He knew what fate awaited him if he was captured whilst his life was yet in him. Exposed to ignominy, tortured to death, it seemed to him that immediate death were far preferable to such a fate.

“Then said Saul to his armour-bearer; Draw thy sword and thrust me through therewith; lest these uncircumcised come and thrust me through and make a abuse [mock] me.”

The armour-bearer dared not lift up his hand against the sacred person of his king; so Saul, placing his sword-hilt firmly in the earth, fell upon the point, which pierced his heart.

The narrative which the Amalekite gave afterwards to David suggests that the effort to take his life was not at once successful; and he seems to have asked this child of a race which he was once bidden utterly to destroy, to give him the last finishing stroke.

“He said unto me again, Stand, I pray thee, upon me, and slay me: for anguish is come upon me, because my life *is* yet whole in me.”

It may be, however, that all this was a fabrication intended to win David’s favour; for we are told that when the armour-bearer saw that Saul was dead, he likewise fell upon his sword, and died with him.

The day of Gilboa was a veritable Chevy Chase.

“Saul died, and his three sons, and his armour-bearer, and all his men, that same day together.”

The next day the Philistines set to work to strip the dead, and finding the bodies of Saul and his sons, they dispatched their heads, armour, and decapitated corpses, to be carried in triumph through the streets of their principal cities, and finally to be affixed to the walls of Beth-shan.

As the tidings spread, the people left the towns and villages in the neighborhood, and fled across the Jordan. Roving bands followed up the victory, and carried fire and sword into all parts of the land. It was the tidings of their approach to Gibeah that caused the accident to Mephibosheth which crippled him for life.

“He was five years old when the tidings came of Saul and Jonathan out of Jezreel, and his nurse took him up and fled; and it came to pass, as she made haste to flee, that he fell, and he became lame “ (II Samuel 4: 4).

One brave deed relieved the somber hues of that terrible catastrophe.

The men of Jabesh-gilead could not forget how nobly Saul had come to their aid in the early days of his reign; and they resolved, at least, to retrieve the royal body from the ignominy to which Philistine malice had exposed it. The valiant men therefore arose, and went all night, took down the body of Saul, and the bodies of his sons from the temple walls, bore them reverently back to Jabesh, burnt them to conceal the hideous mutilation to which they had been subjected, buried them under “**the tamarisk tree in Jabesh,**” and lamented with unfeigned grief this tragic close to a reign which had been once as a morning without clouds.

It is an awful thing when a man persists, as Saul and as Judas, to the end striving against God. We feel that it was a dreadful thing to do as he did; we are horrified at his temerity; we marvel at his infatuation; yet we may fall into his wicked ways, and be overcome of evil as he was. We, too, may have resort to things, habits, and people which we had once religiously tabooed. We too, are liable to step back to our undoing.

If a man, having felt the evil of covetousness, and set himself against the love of money, after awhile allows it to again invade his soul; if a man has been a slave of his appetites, and having realized their degrading tendencies, has acted, for awhile, on a vow of temperance, but has gradually allowed them to resume their former sway; if after years of irreligion he has begun to be in earnest about his soul, but has again relapsed into moral apathy is not this like Saul seeking help in the cave of the enchantress, whose class he had proscribed?

Such men are wells without water; clouds carried before the blast of the tempest, for whom, in the words of the Apostle, is reserved the worst of darkness for ever; “**For if after they have escaped the pollutions of the world through the knowledge of the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, they are again entangled therein and overcome, the latter end is worse with them than the beginning; for it had been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than, after they have known it, to turn back from the holy commandment delivered unto them.**”

~ end of chapter 24 ~

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