

DAVID:

SHEPHERD, PSALMIST, KING

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CHAPTER SIXTEEN

A COOL HAND ON A HOT HEAD

(I Samuel 25)

“Calm me, my God, and keep me calm;
Let thine outstretched wing
Be like the shade of Elim’s palm,
Beside her desert spring.
Calm in the sufferance of wrong,
Like Him who bore my shame;
Calm, mid the threatening, taunting throng,
Who hate thy holy name.”

- H. Bonar

THE tidings passed throughout the land, like fire in prairie-grass, that Samuel was dead; and Israel, recognizing its unity in the common loss, gathered to lament the prophet and saint, and perform the last honoring rites. To his worth and service was accorded the unusual tribute of interment within the precincts of his own house at Ramah, on the heights of Benjamin. In all likelihood an amnesty was proclaimed, and David came to take part in the obsequies of his master and friend. He did not, however, dare to trust himself in such near proximity to Saul a moment longer than was absolutely essential; and as soon as all was over, he started again for the sparsely-populated region of Paran, at the extreme south of Judah.

To those borderlands, so long desolated by border warfare through the incursions of the Philistines and Amalekites, his advent brought tranquility and safety. The sheep-masters had every reason to be grateful for his protection; and, as one well put it, **“But the men were very good unto us, and we were not hurt, neither missed we any thing, as long as we were conversant with them, when we were in the fields: They were a wall unto us both by night and day, all the while we were with them keeping the sheep”**

Where such services were accepted and counted upon, it was obviously fair, and indeed according to the custom of the time, that some recompense in kind should be made. It was a tacit understanding, an unwritten law; and David was perfectly justified in sending ten young men to greet the opulent sheep-master, Nabal, in the day of prosperity, to which the exertions of himself and his men had so largely contributed, to remind him of his obligations, and ask whatsoever might come readily to his hand to give.

Nabal's churlish treatment of this request touched David to the quick, and led up to an incident which, as recorded by the sacred historian, is one of the most charming idylls of Scripture, fragrant as the flowers of Alpine pastures, and fresh as a summer morn.

The story centers in Nabal, David, and Abigail.

I. NABAL, THE CHURL

His character is drawn, after the manner of Scripture, in three or four bold outline strokes, and need not detain us. In every society men of this type are to be encountered, overbearing to their inferiors, intolerable in prosperity, drunken in carouse, abject in misfortune; who fly out with flout and sneer when they think themselves secure, but whose heart cringes before reverse.

What an apt thumb-nail sketch is given of the whole race of Nabals in the confidential remark passed between his servant and his wife, "**He is such a son of Belial that a man cannot speak to him**"!

He was very great, the historian says. But it was the meanest kind of greatness, consisting not in what he was in character, or had achieved in valiant deed, but in the number of sheep and goats that bore his brand over the pasture lands of the south. There are four kinds of greatness; young men, choose the best for your life aim!

It is little to be great in possessing; better to be great in doing; better still to conceive and promulgate great thoughts; but best to be great in character. Aim at the greatness of which Heaven takes account. It was where Self-mastery, Holy Ghost Fulness, and Service to mankind met, that the angel said, "**He shall be great in the sight of the Lord.**"

He was a fool, his wife said. "**As his name is, so is he; Nabal is his name, and folly is with him.**" Poor woman! She had had every reason for speaking thus bitterly of him; and she was a sweet woman too, not likely to speak in these terms of her husband unless his rude, cruel hands had wantonly broken down the last remnant of wifely respect and love.

He surely must have sat for the full-length portrait of the fool in our Lord's parable, who thought his soul could take its ease and be merry because a few big barns were full. There are appetites and longings in the soul which good dinners cannot satisfy; there are cravings which will not be appeased merely because we can see our way to three meals a day as long as we live.

He was a man of Belial, his servant said; and indeed his treatment of David's modest request well bore out the character. It was rude, uncourteous, uncivil. He could not have been ignorant of the causes which had forced David into his wandering, arduous life; but he ignored them, and chose to put forward the most cruel and harsh construction. He as good as said that David was raising a revolt against his master Saul; virtuously covered his refusal beneath a show of loyal devotion to law and government, which was intended to suggest an extremely unpleasant alternative for David; and finally asserted his preference to give his bread and flesh to those who, like his shearers, had worked for them, rather than to a lot of vain fellows, who were hanging idly about to live on the ripe fruit that might fall into their mouths.

He seems to have had no compunction for his churlish speeches: no idea of the consequences they might involve. As soon as the words were spoken, they were forgotten; and in the evening of the day on which they were spoken we find him in his house, holding a feast, like the feast of a king, his heart merry with wine, and altogether so stupid that his wife told him nothing less or more till the morning light.

II. DAVID, PRECIPITATE AND PASSIONATE

One of the most characteristic features in David's temper and behavior through all these weary years was his self-control. He waited patiently for the Lord. Year after year he stayed himself on God's promise, and left Him to fulfil the word on which He had caused him to hope. When summoned to relieve Ziklag, or warned to leave it, as well as on other occasions, he showed the utmost deliberation, calling for prophet or priest, and seeking to ascertain the Divine will before stirring a step.

On two occasions he had controlled himself, when Saul lay in his power, and refused to take his life. But the rampart of self-restraint built by long habit went down, like a neglected sea wall, before the sudden paroxysm of passion which Nabal's insulting words aroused. In hot fury he said to his men, "**Gird ye on every man his sword.**" And they girded on every man his sword, and David also girded on his sword, and there went up after David about four hundred men. He doubtless argued with himself as they marched rapidly through the silent woods, "I am justified in this act; there is no reason why this man should treat me thus; he has returned evil for good, and added reviling and reproach; it is intolerable; I must assert my self-respect, and let this neighborhood see that I am not going to be trifled with. I will bear from the king what I will suffer from no living man else."

At this hour David was on the brink of committing a crime, which would have cast a dark shadow on all his after years. In calmer, quieter, holier hours it would have been a grief to him, and an offence of heart, to have shed blood causelessly, and avenged himself, instead of leaving it to the Lord to sling out the souls of his enemies, as from the hollow of a sling. From this shame, sorrow, and disgrace he was saved by that sweet and noble woman, Abigail.

III. ABIGAIL, THE BEAUTIFUL INTERCESSOR

She was a woman of good understanding and of a beautiful countenance - a fit combination. Her character had written its legend on her face. The two things do not always go together. There are many beautiful women wholly destitute of good understanding; just as birds of rarest plumage are commonly deficient in the power of song. But a good understanding, which is moral rather than intellectual, casts a glow of beauty over the plainest features.

It is remarkable how many Abigails get married to Nabals.

God-fearing women, tender and gentle in their sensibilities, high-minded and noble in their ideals, become tied in an indissoluble union with men for whom they can have no true affinity, even if they have not an unconquerable repugnance.

In Abigail's case, this relationship was in all probability not of her choosing; but the product of the Oriental custom, which compelled a girl to take her father's choice in the matter of marriage. As a mere child she may have come into Nabal's home, and become bound to him by an apparently inevitable fate. In other ways, which involve equally little personal choice, compelled by the pressure of inexorable circumstances, misled by the deceitful tongue of flattery, her instinctive hesitancy overcome by the urgency of friends, a woman may still find herself in Abigail's pitiful plight.

To such an one there is but one advice You must stay where you are.

The dissimilarity in taste and temperament does not constitute a sufficient reason for leaving your husband to drift. You must believe that God has permitted you to enter on this awful heritage, partly because this fiery ordeal was required by your character, and partly that you might act as a counteractive influence. You must stay as you are. It may be that someday your opportunity will come, as it came to Abigail. In the meantime do not allow your purer nature to be bespotted or besmeared.

You can always keep the soul clean and pure. Bide your time; and amid the weltering waste of inky water, be like a pure fountain, rising from the ocean depths.

But if any young girl of good sense and earnest aspirations who reads these lines, secretly knows that, if she had the chance, she would wed a carriage and pair, a good position, or broad acres, irrespective of character, let her remember that to enter the marriage bond with a man, deliberately and advisedly, for such a purpose, is a profanation of the Divine ideal, and can end only in one way. She will not raise him to her level, but sink to his; her marble will not change his clay, but coarsen to it.

Nabal's servants knew the quality of their mistress, and could trust her to act wisely in the emergency which was upon them; so they told her all. She immediately grasped the situation, dispatched a small procession of provision-bearers along the way that David must come, and followed them immediately on her ass.

She met the avenging warriors by the covert of the mountain, and the interview was as creditable to her woman's wit as to her grace of heart.

- The lowly obeisance of the beautiful woman at the young soldier's feet;
- The frank confession of the wrong that had been done;
- The expression of thankfulness that so far he had been kept from blood-guiltiness and from avenging his own wrongs;
- The depreciation of the generous present she brought as only fit for his servants;
- The chivalrous appreciation of his desire to fight only the battles of the Lord and to keep an unblemished name;
- The sure anticipation of the time when his fortunes would be secured and his enemies silenced;
- The suggestion that in those coming days he would be glad to have no shadow on the sunlit hills of his life, no haunting memory.

All this was as beautiful, and wise, and womanly as it could be, and brought David back to his better self. Frank and noble as he always was, he did not hesitate to acknowledge his deep indebtedness to this lovely woman, and to see in her intercession the gracious arrest of God.

“And David said to Abigail, Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel, which sent thee this day to meet me; and blessed be thy wisdom, and blessed be thou, which hast kept me this day from blood-guiltiness, and from avenging myself with my own hand.”

What a revelation this is of the ministries with which God seeks to avert us from our evil ways!

They are sometimes very subtle and slender, very small and still. Sometimes a gentle woman's hand laid on our wrist, the mother reminding us of her maternity, the wife of early vows, the child with its pitiful beseeching look; sometimes a thought, holy, pleading, remonstrating. Ah! many a time, we had been saved actions which have caused lasting regret, had we only heeded. And above all these voices and influences, there has been the gracious arresting influences of the Holy Spirit, striving with passion and selfishness, calling us to a nobler better life. Blessed Spirit, come down more often by the covert of the hill, and stay us in our mad career; and let us not press past Thee to take our own wild way, and we shall have reason for ceaseless gratitude.

The idyll ended happily. Nabal died in an apoplectic fit, caused by his debauch, or his anger at his wife's treatment of David and his men; and David made proposals of marriage to the woman, to whom he owed so much, which she gracefully and humbly accepted, not thinking herself meet for such high honour. **“Behold,”** she said, **“thy handmaid is a servant to wash the feet of the servants of my lord.”** I suppose, that in this life, or the next, all God's idylls end happily. That, at least, is one cherished article of my creed.

~ end of chapter 16 ~

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