

DAVID:

SHEPHERD, PSALMIST, KING

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CHAPTER THREE

SUMMONED TO THE PALACE

(I Samuel 16:18, 19)

“He bowed himself
With all obedience to the king, and wrought
All kind of service with a noble ease,
That graced the lowliest act in doing of it.”

- Tennyson

IT has been supposed that the incident we are now to consider belongs to a subsequent page in David's history, following the narrative of the slaying of Goliath, so as to make that the occasion of the young shepherd's first introduction to Saul. This transposition seems to be called for by Saul's slowness to recognize his former minstrel in the young warrior that stood before him with the head of the Philistines champion in his hand.

But, after all, this may be accounted for by David's manly growth between the period of his minstrelsy and his first great exploit in the battlefield. How long that interval lasted we cannot tell; but during its course David had grown from youth to manhood, his figure becoming stalwart and robust, his face molded by the growing soul within. If we reject this explanation, and do not allow the incident to remain where we find it, we have to face the further difficulty of how Saul's courtiers could dare to introduce to their master one whose successes had already stirred his jealousy (18:9); or why it was necessary to employ so much circumlocution to describe the personality of the young singer (16:18). Surely it would have been sufficient to recall what David had done in the vale of Elah to identify him at once.

We hold, therefore, that this story should stand in the place it has held ever since this narrative was penned.

After his anointing, David returned to his sheep. When Saul, advised by his courtiers, sent for him to charm away his melancholy, this was the specific indication he gave to Jesse, his father, **“Send me David, thy son, which is with the sheep.”**

It says much for the simplicity and ingenuousness of the boy's character that he should have returned to the fold, to lead and guard his helpless charge, faithfully fulfilling the routine of daily duty, and waiting for God to do what Samuel had spoken to him of.

So Jesus left the temple, where to his boyish eyes a radiant glimpse had been afforded of doing his Father's business, to be subject to his parents, and engage in the humble toils of the carpenter's shop. A contemporary hand has given a brief portraiture of his character as it presented itself at this period to casual observers. One of Saul's young men said, "**Behold, I have seen a son of Jesse the Bethlehemite, that is cunning in playing, and a mighty man of valor, and a man of war, and prudent in speech, and a comely person, and the Lord is with him.**"

These five characteristics enable us to form a graphic conception of the young hero who was making the countryside ring with his renown.

I. THE MINSTREL

He had the poetic temperament, sensitive to nature, open to every impression from mountain and vale, from dawn and eve; and he had beside the power of translating his impressions into speech and song. His psalms commemorate to the present day, and will as long as man shall live, the story of the green strips of meadow-land where his flocks grazed at noon; the little stream somewhere near Bethlehem of whose limpid waters they drank; the smooth paths which he selected for their feet; the rocky defiles where they were in danger of lion and bear. A great modern poet imagines him reciting, as he sang to his harp, his call to his sheep, the song of the autumn vintage, the joyous marriage lay, the solemn funeral dirge, the chant of the Levites, as they performed their sacred duties, the marching music of the men of Bethlehem when they repelled some border foray.

And we might add to these his marvellous power in depicting the sacred hush of dawn, where there is neither speech nor language, just before the sun leaps up as a bridegroom to run his race, and the solemn pomp of night, where worlds beyond worlds open to the wondering gaze. And to these we might add the marvellous description of the thunderstorms that broke over Palestine, rolling peal after peal, from the great waters of the Mediterranean, over the cedars of Lebanon to the far-distant wilderness of Kadesh, until the sevenfold thunders are followed by torrents of rain, and these by the clear shining in which the Lord blesses his people with peace (Psalm 23, 19, 8, 29).

The psalm began with David.

- Its lyric beauty and tender grace;
- Its rhythmic measure;
- Its exuberant hallelujahs and plaintive lamentations;
- Its inimitable expression of the changeful play of light and shade over the soul;
- Its blending of nature and godliness;
- Its references to the life of men and the world.

As regarded from the standpoint of God these elements in the Psalter which have endeared it to holy souls in every age owe their origin to the poetic, heaven-touched soul of the sweet singer of Israel.

What wonder that Saul's young man said that he was cunning in playing! The psalms which he composed in those early days and which are so delightfully free from the darker elements which persecution, and unkindness, and consciousness of sin introduced into the later creation of his genius were destined to go singing through the world, working on men effects like those wrought on the king, of whom it is said that when David took the harp and played with his hand, Saul was refreshed.

II. THE YOUNG WARRIOR

There was abundant opportunity for the education of his prowess. The Philistines frontier was not far away from his native town; and probably there were many repetitions of the incident of after years, when the sons of the alien held it, and placed a guard demanding toll of the water of the well of Bethlehem that was by the gate.

Many a skirmish had the men of Bethlehem with the border warriors, who would sweep down upon the produce of their vineyards and cornfields when the harvest was ripe. In these David acquired the character of being a man of valor and a mighty man of war. It may be that sometimes he had to stand alone against a handful of sheep-stealers intent on plundering the fold.

He tells us how he needed to be on the alert against the wild beasts that prowled amongst the hills of Judah the lion with his hungry teeth, the bear with his deadly hug. For these he had no fear. He smote them, and delivered the trembling lambs from their mouth.

He caught them by their beard and slew them. He could break a bow of steel with those strong young arms, and wield Goliath's sword with ease; or club a wild beast with his staff, and hurl a stone with unerring aim. A proud young Samson, laughing in the fulness of his manly strength.

But he would have been the last to attribute his exploits to his sinewy strength.

By faith he had learnt to avail himself of the might of God. Was he not His servant, designated for a great mission, summoned to wage uncompromising war with the uncircumcised? He might be a babe; yet out of his mouth God had established strength, in order to still the enemy and the avenger! He might be a suckling; yet he was made to have dominion over the works of God's hands! Listen to his buoyant challenge:

**“For by Thee have I run through a troop,
And by my God have I leaped over a wall . . .
It is God that girdeth me with strength.
He maketh my feet like hind's feet . . .
He teacheth my hands to war . . .
Thou hast subdued under me those that rose up against me.”**

Through faith he subdued kingdoms, stopped the mouths of lions, escaped the edge of the sword, waxed mighty in war, turned to flight armies of aliens.

III. PRUDENT IN SPEECH

The sagacity of David will appear as our story proceeds. He was as prudent to advise and scheme as he was swift to execute. He had understanding of the times, of human hearts, of wise policy; and he knew just how and when to act. Frank to his friends, generous to his foes, constant in his attachments, calm in danger, patient in trouble, chivalrous and knightly, he had every element of a born leader of men, and was equally at home in the counsels of the state and the decisions of the battle-field.

Whatever emergency threatened, he seemed to know just how to meet it. And this was no doubt due to the repose of his spirit in God. The sad mistakes he made may be traced to his yielding to the sway of impulse and passion, to his forgetfulness of his habit of drawing near unto God, and inquiring of Him before taking any important step. The attitude of his soul is sweetly mirrored in one of his earliest psalms:

**“Because of His strength will I wait upon Thee . . .
Unto Thee, O my Strength, will I sing.”**

When men live like that, they cannot fail to be prudent in speech, sagacious in counsel.

IV. THE CHARM OF HIS PRESENCE

He was David the beloved. Wherever he moved, he cast the spell of his personal magnetism.

- Saul yielded to it, and thawed;
- The servants of the royal household loved him;
- Michal, Saul's daughter, loved him;
- The soul of Jonathan was knit with his soul;
- The women of Israel forgot their loyalty to Saul, as they sounded the praises of the young hero who was so goodly to look upon;
- The wild, rough soldiers were willing to risk their lives, in order to gratify his wish for a draught from Bethlehem's well.

So he passed through life, swaying the sceptre of irresistible potency over men and women.

- The beautiful Abigail is glad to wash the feet of his servants;
- Achish says that he is as an angel of the Lord;
- Ittai the Gittite clings to him in his exile;
- The people slink into the city because he is weeping over Absalom;
- When he speaks, the hearts of the men of Judah, conscious of treachery, and backward to welcome him, are moved even as the heart of one man.

Beloved of God and man, with a heart tremulous to the touch of love, the soil of his soul was capable of bearing crops to enrich the world; but it was also capable of the keenest suffering possible to man.

V. GOD WAS WITH HIM

He had no hesitation in describing himself as “**thy servant**,” liable to hidden and presumptuous faults, from which he desired above all things to be delivered.

He thought of God as his Rock, Redeemer, Shepherd, and Host in the house of life, his Comforter in every darksome glen.

- In weariness he found green pastures;
- In thirst, still waters;
- In perplexity, righteous guidance;
- In danger, sure defence in what the Lord was to his soul.

God’s Word, though he knew but a part of it, was perfect, right, and pure; and as he recited it to himself, under great Nature’s tent, it restored his soul, rejoiced his heart, enlightened his eyes, and seemed better than the honey that dripped from the rock.

He set the Lord always before him; because He was at his right hand, he could not be moved; and therefore his heart was glad.

~ end of chapter 3 ~

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