

ELIJAH, THE PROPHET OF FIRE

By

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Chapter 10

THE FLIGHT TO THE WILDERNESS

"And Ahab told Jezebel all that Elijah had done, and withal how he had slain all the prophets with the sword. Then Jezebel sent a messenger unto Elijah, saying, So let the gods do to me, and more also, if I make not thy life as the life of one of them by to-morrow about this time. And when he saw that, he arose, and went for his life, and came to Beer-sheba, which belongeth to Judah, and left his servant there. But he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a juniper-tree: and he requested for himself that he might die; and said, It is enough: now, O Lord, take away my life; for I am not better than my fathers." (I Kings 19:1-4)

"ELIAS WAS A MAN SUBJECT TO LIKE PASSIONS AS WE ARE," (James 5:17) [142]

WE left Elijah in last chapter a hero,- accomplishing deeds of unparalleled prowess and faith.

The words employed at a future time by the Redeemer regarding his great follower, seem equally applicable to him,- "**Among those born of women there is none greater.**"

As the stars in their courses, nigh this same river Kishon, had fought against Sisera, so were the very elements of nature made subservient to the Prophet's will "**fire and hail,**" and "**stormy wind**" authenticating his divine mission. After such remarkable and encouraging tokens of the Divine presence and power, we expect to find him more the champion of truth than ever; in his undaunted career, going "**from strength to strength;**" - the torch kindled on the altar of Carmel, burning with increasing brightness as he bears its radiance among the homes and cities of Israel.

As we see the bold, lion-hearted man, running amid the rain-torrents along the Esdraelon highway, in front of the royal chariot, his mind filled with the day's wonders,- we almost fancy we can hear him exultingly exclaiming, "**It is God that girdeth me with strength, and maketh my way perfect. He maketh my feet like hinds' feet, and setteth me upon my high places . . . The Lord liveth; and blessed be my rock; and [143] let the God of my salvation be exalted,**" (Psalm 18:32, 33, 46).

As he halts at the gate of Jezreel, we doubt not it is with a noble resolution to follow up his triumph on the morrow. We expect to see the leader of GOD's armies rush, like another Jonah, through the metropolis of revolt, with the message of Divine rebuke and mercy,- "**O Israel, thou hast destroyed thyself, but in me is thy help found,**" - confirming the capricious monarch and the wavering people; and if there be frowns still lingering on brows, which yesterday's defeat has

clouded and humbled, what of that?

Will not his answer be ready, "**The Lord [the living Jehovah] is on my side; I will not fear what man can do unto me!**" "**Now know I that the Lord saveth his anointed; he will hear him from his holy Heaven with the saving strength of his right hand**" (Psalm 20:6).

Alas! a new dramatic, we may rather call it a new tragic, turn, unexpectedly occurs.

This Asahel - swift of foot, and mighty of soul - degenerates into a craven and coward. We almost fail to recognise the Elijah of yesterday in the unworthy renegade of to-day.

On Carmel, he had willingly and without one misgiving or hesitation, staked his life on the answer by fire. These knives and lancets, which his bold irony had whetted, would, in the event of failure, have inflicted on his person a terrible retaliation. Yet, with all this certainty before him, he went fearless, in the strength of the Lord, against the mighty.

Now, how different! Poor human nature reveals itself: "**The tower of David, builded for an armoury, whereon there hang a thousand bucklers and all manner of weapons of mighty men,**" becomes in a moment a humiliating ruin.

Come and see what the best and bravest [144] of GOD's saints are when left to themselves. "**O Lucifer, son of the morning. how art thou fallen!**"

Let us briefly rehearse the narrative.

Ahab, on reaching Jezreel, without delay conveys to his queen the astounding intelligence of the day's conflict and victory: that Elijah, by the most irrefragable proof, has vindicated his authority and established the supremacy of JEHOVAH; that her idol-god is dethroned,- her priests massacred,- and that the solemn amen and shout of the people had ratified the proceedings.

The monarch's own fickle spirit, as we have remarked in last chapter, could not fail to have been impressed by all he had witnessed; and doubtless he would cherish the hope that Jezebel, if she did not acquiesce in the popular enthusiasm, would, at all events, deem it a matter of political expediency, to waive her own prejudices and prepossessions for the public weal. He had mistaken the temper and will of his supercilious consort. The storm that had burst over Carmel gathered afresh over her brow. Her rage is irrepressible.

'What! to have the cherished dream of years dissolved thus rudely in a moment! To have her ancestral faith dishonoured and degraded; her priestly confessors stript of their sacred garments, and their blood spilt like water. To have her husband and his whole subjects duped and hoodwinked, and all this by a half Hebrew, half Arab fanatic - the upholder of a worn-out effete system of old world belief! No! it cannot be endured!'

And if Ahab venture to interpose in this fit of frenzy, and speak of the double miraculous attestation; she has her reply ready. The so-called fire-answer was only the crowning successful trick of the wily old impostor; the rain falling at his prayer was [145] the merest accident of weather - a freak of capricious nature.

No, no! the shouts and vows of Carmel - so far as her influence is concerned - shall never be ratified within the palace of Jezreel; the heavens may again be shut up; the famine may drain the life of the nation - but on no account shall Baal's altars be overthrown. By all the gods of Tyre, the insult perpetrated by this Gilead Prophet shall not pass with impunity.

The blood of her priests shall not be borne unavenged to the shores of Phoenicia!

That hour a messenger is sent to Elijah to confirm the threat - that ere the shades of to-morrow's evening gather over the hills of Samaria, his life should be as the life of the ghastly corpses strewing the banks of the Kishon.

And though not precisely stated, we are left too plainly to infer from the sequel, the effect which this outburst produced on the mind of wavering, pusillanimous Ahab. By the time the whirlwind of his consort's passion had expended itself - alas! his goodness, too, had become that of the morning cloud and early dew.

The deep impression of the Fire and Rain answers, was already obliterated from his abject soul: his voice is now loud as that of Jezebel in denouncing the whole day of miracle and triumph as a gigantic imposture; and Elijah more than ever, "**a troubler in Israel**" - a fanatic homicide,- whose deed of recent blood can only be expiated by his life.

What was the result of this threatening message and sudden reverse of feeling on the conduct of the Prophet?

We might well have expected, from his antecedents, that he would maintain either a dignified silence, or send to the haughty idolatress a dignified answer and reproof, worthy of [146] the ambassador of the living Jehovah: a message, in the spirit of that sent by a later champion of the faith, to the Jezebel of her age,- "Go," said Chrysostom to the person sent by the Empress Eudoxia, with a threat of vengeance, "Go, tell her I fear nothing but sin."

Or if this base appeal to natural fears and to induce an unworthy flight, were for a moment entertained by him, that he would straightway exorcise the coward thought with worthier resolves.

He who had not winced or quailed, when he stood, in single-handed combat, against six hundred antagonists;- who had braved, for years, summer's drought and winter's cold - could it be supposed that for a moment, he would stagger under the impotent threat of a woman? Impossible!

And yet so it is. Paralysed with terror,- overpowered and overmastered as if by some sudden temptation,- Elijah resolves on escape. "**He arose and went for his life.**" Mournful transition!

We look in vain for the proud vessel which, a few hours before, we beheld holding on its triumphant course amid buffeting storms. All we can now discern is a forlorn castaway, in the midst of a dark sea, without sails or oars or rudder,- drifting on, he knows not where,- with no star to guide him, and no voice to cheer him in the waste wilderness of waters!

Accompanied by his servant, and probably under the cover of night, he hurries across the mountains of Samaria; onwards. Thence, to the extreme south of Judah in the direction of the Arabian desert.

We can follow him in thought, "far away from the hills of Judea - in the wide upland valley, or rather undulating plain, sprinkled with shrubs and with the wild flowers which indicate the transition from the pastures of Palestine to the desert, marked also by the ancient wells dug [147] far into the rocky soil, and bearing on their stone or marble margins the traces of the long ages during which the water has been drawn up from their deep recesses. At last he seeks shelter in the town of Beersheba - 'the well of the oath' - the last point reached by the patriarchs - the last centre of their wandering flocks and herds, where Abraham planted the grove of light feathery tamarisk, and called on '**the name of the Lord, the everlasting God.**'" ¹

How the memories of the great Father of his nation - so fragrant around that sacred spot - must have rebuked his coward flight!

He must have read on every crumbling altar-stone the record of the patriarch's faith, and the reproof of his own degenerate spirit. Nor is he satisfied with the refuge which the walls of Beersheba afford him. One of the best kings of Judah (Jehoshaphat) then swayed the sceptre of David's house; and as Beersheba was situated within his territory, the fugitive Prophet- with such a guarantee for his security and safety-might well have been contented there to remain. But his whole nature seems demoralized and panic-stricken. [148]

He had lost, alike all confidence in GOD and trust in man. He cannot brook even the company of his servant, or suffer him to share his heavy secret. Leaving his attendant to his fate in the city, he himself plunges into the depths of the wilderness;- the wild arid waste terminated in the far south by the tremendous gorges and precipices of Sinai.

On, on, on, he plods, during a long weary day, till the sun sets over the burning sands.

No ravens of Cherith are there to minister to him;- no sympathizing voices of Sarepta to cheer him. The journey, even for his iron bodily frame, seems too [148] much. Footsore, travel-worn;- with aching head and fevered brain,- he casts himself at the foot of a bush of desert broom,- one of those shrubs with white blossoms, familiar to travellers in these cheerless wadys, and under which the Arabian to this day shelters himself, alike from the sun's heat and the night winds. ²

There, on a hard pillow lies the forlorn pilgrim;- muttering, with faint lips, a prayer, (how different from the recent one of Carmel!) "He requested for himself that he might die, and said; It is enough, now, O Lord, take away my life, for I am not better than my fathers." "**It is enough!**"- that is, 'I need go no farther; I feel I can get no comfort;- my life is embittered with cruel failure; what can I hope for, if the trumpet-tongued miracles of Carmel fail to convince? My sun has set behind these distant waves of the great sea. I had hoped to have a grave in Israel,- But ,It is enough. 'Let me die, uncoffined, unsepulchred! Let the desert sand be my winding-sheet;- let the desert winds sigh and chant my requiem!'

In the deep, [149] awful silence of that night-season, what visions must have clustered around

his pillow, as he laid down his weary head to sleep. The crowd and the shouts of Carmel - the descending fire - the blackening heavens - the refreshing rain - the impressed king - the exulting people - his own prayer!

And then, these phantoms, as they troop before him, chasing one another in succession through his fevered brain, leave, in this chaos of thought, the altar and sacrifice on which the fire descended, standing by itself, lonely, desolate, forsaken - the monument of his triumph - the memorial of his guilt and shame; ³ and, worse than all,- would not the reflection goad him like a scorpion-sting, the thought of the joyful thousands of penitent Israel who had woke up at his bidding to hope and faith - deserted all at once by their leader; some relapsing into the old idolatrous worship; others, if true to their convictions, given over unshielded to the fiendish vengeance of Jezebel,- their blood flowing like water in the streets of Jezreel,- calling, in vain, for aid and Succour from the crouching coward of the wilderness;- the creed of the palace, "Baal he is the Lord!" effacing the nobler confession of Carmel, like the writing on the sand obliterated by the rising tide!

Oh, who would covet that uneasy head in the Beersheba desert?

Every star in the sky used at Cherith to look down upon him like an angel of light. But now these heavens are a dark inky scroll, written in letters of lamentation, and mourning, and woe;- sorrow, anguish of spirit, wounded pride - were that night his bitter portion. The torch of "The Prophet of Fire" lay quenched and blackened at his feet. A prince and a great man in Israel had [150] ignominiously fallen. **"Put not your trust in princes, nor in the son of man in whom there is no help. His breath goeth forth: he returneth to his earth: in that very day his thoughts perish!"**

We may well learn, from this sad crisis in Elijah's history, the lesson of our own weakness, and our dependence on GOD's grace. In the divine life, often the most dangerous and perilous time for the believer, is after a season of great enlargement; when he is saying to himself, **"My mountain standeth strong."**

The spiritual armour is loosely worn; he gets supine after the flush of victory: the bold, bounding river, that we have just witnessed taking leap after leap in successive cataracts, loses itself in the low, marshy swamps of self-confidence.

In prosperity, moreover, whether that prosperity be outward or inward, worldly prosperity or soul prosperity, or both combined,- the Lord often puts His favoured servants at such seasons to the proof, to test the strength and reality of their faith.

- He did so with Abraham. After a season of signal and unexampled blessing, **"God did tempt Abraham;"** - the death of an only son and covenant-heir was the fiery ordeal. But the patriarch stood the trial. He came forth purified from the furnace, the possessor of a richer heritage of covenanted promises!

- He did so with Paul. Lest he should be exalted above measure, He brought him from the third heavens to endure the smarting of some earthly thorn. But he also came forth unscathed. His **"buffeting"** led him to prayer. He leaves the furnace, glorying in his infirmities; exulting in the

power of CHRIST, and in a deeper personal interest in the blessings of His grace.

Elijah had been thus [151] "**exalted.**" In his elation, he had too confidently calculated on success. His naturally impetuous spirit, in the hour of triumph, would be in no mood to brook courtly opposition or to receive the threat and affront of an insulting message.

His strength gives way just where we would have least expected,- under an appeal to the lowest emotion of a man's nature, -fear.

We are often exhorted to "**beware of besetting sins;**" but a different lesson is brought home to us from Elijah's experience. It is rather to beware of sins that are least besetting;- loopholes in the citadel of the heart through which we have least dread of being successfully assailed.

If there was one sin, judging from the Prophet's previous history, by which he was less likely to be overtaken than another, it was the sin of weakness or a craven spirit.

GOD often suffers His people thus to lapse, in order to shew what broken, bruised, fragile reeds in themselves they are. Ah! "**when thou thinkest thou standest, take heed lest thou fall.**" "**Be not high minded, but fear.**" When even an Elijah,- like Samson, when shorn of his locks,- becomes weak as other men;- what need is there for those of inferior moral and spiritual stature - the "Feeble Minds," and "Little Faiths," and "Ready to Halts" to remember, that it is by grace they stand!

When a mighty denizen of the forest succumbs to the blast of temptation; what need is there for the saplings to tremble in grappling with the storm! - "**Howl fir-tree, for the cedar has fallen.**"

Beware of taking any step without the Divine sanction.

If Elijah, on hearing of Jezebel's rage, had made prayer still his resort; and asked in simple faith, "**Lord, what wouldst [152] thou have me to do?**" it would have saved him many a bitter hour and tear.

But he constituted himself judge of what was right, took his own resolution, and abandoned himself to flight.

"**He fled for his life;**" but, in doing so, he lost sight of this golden thread of comfort and joy - that life is in the hand of GOD. He ignored, for the time, his glorious old watchword,- flung aside the glowing lamp which had hitherto guided his path- "**The Lord liveth, before whom I stand!**"

Hitherto, with the docility and confidence of a child, he had followed GOD's leadings alone. Cherith, Zarephath, Carmel, were like so many finger-posts on life's journey, bearing the inscription, "**This is the way, walk ye in it.**" But now, he followed the dictate of his own cowardly fears, and wounded, fretted pride. Dearly did he pay the penalty of his folly! "**There is a way which seemeth right unto a man, but the end thereof are the ways of death.**"

Let us be careful not to follow our own paths; not to take any solemn and important step unless it

be divinely owned and recognized. **"In all thy ways acknowledge Him, and He shall direct thy paths."** **"Blessed is the man whose strength is in Thee, in whose heart are Thy ways."**

Lot followed his own way;- it was to the well-watered plain - the luxurious capital in the vale of Siddim. He rushed blindfold into evil. Carnal reasons alone lured him thither. It was the result of no prayer,- no divine impulse.

Jonah followed his own way; but not with impunity, did the fugitive rush, in blind madness, from GOD and from duty. He was tossed into a raging sea;- left an outcast on a desert shore; carrying, moreover, the brand of a wounded conscience,- a fostered spirit of peevishness and discontent with him [153] through life,- we fear to the grave.

So long as Elijah did his GOD - appointed work earnestly, unflinchingly, all went well with him.

When he paused, hesitated, faltered,- or rather, when, in an impetuous moment, he cast away the noblest opportunity ever prophet had;- shut himself up in a wilderness;- settled down into inaction,- shedding ignoble tears under a bush in the desert;- then the great soul and its magnanimous purposes is gone.

He has become a fretful, petulant child, morbidly brooding over his disappointed hopes. He flings away the oars of duty and obedience; his strong brawny arms have ceased to pull the bark in which his GOD had bid him struggle,- and now he is at the mercy of winds and waves.

Beware of murmuring under trial. Elijah's desert prayer was one of pride, presumption, irritability, impatience, peevishness,- **"It is enough, take away my life."**

Even had his success on Carmel been marred and counteracted by the evil influences at work in Ahab's court, and a new era of persecution had in consequence been initiated in Israel;- his duty was patient submission to the Divine will, cherishing the humble confidence and assurance that light would sooner or later arise out of darkness.

Instead of this, he breathes the prayer, of all others least warrantable for any creature of GOD to utter,- **"Let me die."**

There are circumstances, indeed, when such a prayer is permissible; - when it becomes a noble expression of believing faith and hope. Such was the case when the great Apostle, in subordination to the Higher will which was ever his guiding principle, made the avowal of **"a desire to depart and be with Christ, which was [154] far better;"** - making, however, the reservation, that so long as his Lord had work for him in the Church on earth, he would cheerfully remain.

Elijah's prayer was altogether different. It was the feverish outbreak of a moment of passion.

How forbearing and gracious was GOD in not taking him at his word! Had he done so, the Prophet would have died under a cloud,- his name would have been associated with cowardice;- his character would have been a mournful example of greatness ending in ignominy. He would have lost the glorious closing scene of all - the chariot of fire, and the deathless victory.

Each of us has, or may yet have, his day of trial;- sickness, bereavement, crushed hopes, bitter disappointments, crossed wishes, stings and arrows from quarters least expected. How are we to meet them? Are we to give way to peevish, fretful repining? Are we to say, 'I am wearied of life. I would I were done with all this wretchedness. What pleasure is existence to this wounded, harassed, smitten spirit? Nay, take courage. It is not "**enough.**"

The Lord has work for you still to do. It is not for you, but for Him, to say, at His own appointed time, as He said to Hezekiah, "**Thou shalt die, and not live.**"

If we have ever been guilty of uttering such a rash prayer as that of Elijah,- "**Take away my life,**" let us be thankful GOD has not given us the fulfilment of our own wish,- the ratification of our own desire,- and allowed us to die, unmeet and unprepared!

But we must not close this chapter, picturing the Prophet in his desert denuded of all hope or faith,- with no relic remaining of his own former self.

His spiritual life for the moment may have been reduced to a spark; but the spark [155] was there, and his GOD will yet fan it into a flame.

Even in his peevish, querulous utterance, as he lies under that juniper tree, he prays. Even in the far desert he has not forgotten (oh, how could he forget!) the ONE who, for years, had been his almighty Protector, Guide, Friend!

"**It is enough, O Lord**" - "**O Lord!**" "**My flesh,**" he seems to say, "**longeth for Thee in a dry and thirsty land where no water is.**" "**As the hart panteth after the water-brooks, so panteth my soul for Thee, O God.**" "**It is enough!**",- Man has deceived me;- earthly hopes and expectations have proved like this desert's mirage;- "**It is enough, O Lord, I turn to Thee.**"

Yes, let us leave Elijah on that prostrate couch of unworthy exile,- yet still, mingling accents of fretfulness with accents of prayer. This poor, battered-down flower seems, in the moment of its humiliation, to turn towards the Great Sun. Arise, Prophet of the desert! thy GOD has still for thee a noble, unfulfilled destiny.

Thy future is in His hands.

Say not, in thy blind, disappointed pride, "**It is enough!**" Let Him work out His own plan of infinite wisdom. Arise! thou hast much yet to do and dare and suffer for His sake. He will yet turn thy mourning into dancing, take off thy sackcloth, and gird thee with gladness. Arise! take thy torch with its expiring flame: The GOD who gave it thee, is yet to revive it, and make thousands bless both Him and thee for its undying radiance. The day is coming when thou shalt say, "**It is enough,**" - but not, until, thy work finished, the chariot and horses of fire are waiting ready to bear thee to thy eternal reward! [156] [page 157 left blank]

¹ *Stanley's Jewish Church, pp. 35, 36*

² *See Rob., vol. i., p. 136. "The desert-broom or rithm ('genista') is in leaf, stalk, stem, colour,*

and everything but flower, like our own broom. The flower is smaller, and is white, with a slight tinge of lilac. The 'brooms' of the desert are the same flexile plant-shrubs as elsewhere." Dr Bonar's Desert of Sinai, p. 389. Dr Stanley notes that "the 'retem,' with its high canopy and white blossoms, gives its name to one of the stations of the Israelites, (Rethmah.)" - Sinai and Palestine, p. 20. "Buckhardt found the Bedaloin of Sinai burning the roots of the juniper into coal; and says that they make the best charcoal, and throw out the most intense heat. The same thing seems to be implied in Psalm 120:4, when David threatens the false tongue with 'sharp arrows of the mighty, with coals of juniper.'" - The Land and the Book, p. 611. It has been suggested, with probability, that these were the coals on which, as we shall presently find, Elijah's cake was baken - the same desert shrub affording him alike shade and fuel.

³ See this well described by Krummacher.

~ end of chapter 10 ~
