**THE EXPOSITION OF HOLY SCRIPTURE BY ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

**1 SAMUEL-012. A SOUL'S TRAGEDY by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"5. And David went out whithersoever Saul sent him, and behaved himself wisely: and Saul set him over the men of war; and he was accepted in the sight of all the people, and also in the sight of Saul's servants. 6. And it came to pass as they came, when David was returned from the slaughter of the Philistine, that the women came out of all cities of Israel, singing and dancing, to meet King Saul, with tabrets, with joy, and with instruments of musick. 7. And the women answered one another as they played, and said, Saul hath slain his thousands, and David his ten thousands. 8. And Saul was very wroth, and the saying displeased him; and he said, They have ascribed unto David ten thousands, and to me they have ascribed but thousands: and what can he have more but the kingdom? 9. And Saul eyed David from that day and forward. 10. And it came to pass on the morrow, that the evil spirit from God came upon Saul, and he prophesied in the midst of the house: and David played with his hand, as at other times: and there was a javelin in Saul's hand. 11. And Saul cast the javelin; for he said, I will smite David even to the wall with it. And David avoided out of his presence twice. 12. And Saul was afraid of David, because the Lord was with him, and was departed from Saul. 13. Therefore Saul removed him from him, and made him his captain over a thousand; and he went out and came in before the people. 14. And David behaved himself wisely in all his ways; and the Lord was with him. 15. Wherefore, when Saul saw that he behaved himself very wisely, he was afraid of him. 16. But all Israel and Judah loved David, because he went out and came in before them."*

*1 Samuel 18:5-16*

Verse 5 anticipates verses 13-16. It is the last verse of a section which interrupts the even flow of the story, and which is absent from the Septuagint. Verse 6 follows immediately on xvii. 54 in that version. Taking that verse as our starting-point, we have three stages in Saul's growing hatred and awe of the young champion, and of David's growing influence and reputation. It is deeply tragic to watch the gradual darkening of the once bright light, side by side with the irresistible increase in brilliance of the new star. He must increase, but I must decrease, became Saul's bitter conviction; but instead of meekly accepting the necessity, his gloomy spirit struggled against it, like stormy waves against a breakwater, and, like them, was shivered into foam in the vain effort.

**I.** The first stage was Saul's jealousy of David's fame as a warrior. The returning victorious army was met, in Oriental fashion, by a triumphal chorus of women, with their shrill songs, accompanied by the dissonant noises which do duty for music to Eastern ears. The words of their chant were startlingly and ominously plain-spoken, and became more emphatic and insulting in Saul's ears, because they were sung by two answering bands, one of which rang out, Saul hath slain his thousands, while the other overtopped them by pealing out still more loudly and exultantly, And David his ten thousands. To be brought into comparison with this unknown stripling was bitter enough, but to be used as a foil to set off his superiority was too much to be borne. There are few men, holding high places in any walk of life, who could have stood such a comparison without wincing. Suppose a great soldier in our day, coming home from a successful campaign, and having his prowess dimmed in every newspaper by the praises lavished on a young lieutenant who had done some brave feat that caught the public fancy-- would he be likely to be in a very amiable mood towards either the singers or the object of their triumphal songs? Do great authors rejoice in the rising of young reputations that dim theirs? or do great orators smile when some boy takes the public ear more than they do? Poor Saul had to drink the bitter cup, which all who love the sweet draught of popular applause have sooner or later to taste; and we need not think him a monster of badness because he found it bitter.

It will be more to the purpose that we take care lest we do the very same thing in our little lives and humble spheres; for envy and jealousy of those who threaten to out-shine, or in any way to out-do, us is not confined to people in high places or with great reputations. The roots of them are in us all, and the only way to keep them from growing up rank is to think less of our reputation and more of our duty, to count it a very small matter what men think of us, and the all-important matter what God thinks.

Saul was moved, too, by the consciousness that he had been really deposed by Jehovah, and was only a phantom king, and, as his angry soliloquy shows, what troubled him most in the women's song was that it pointed to David as likely to come in and rob him, not only of glory, but of the kingdom. Ever since Samuel had pronounced his rejection, his uneasy eyes had been furtively scanning men for his possible supplanter, and no wonder that his gloomy suspicions focussed themselves on the gallant youth, who conquered men's hearts and made women's tongues eloquent in his praise. Stormy and dark as Saul's nature had become, and grave as had been his failure to be worthy of the monarchy, one cannot but feel the infinite pathos and pity of his life.

**II.** The second stage was the attempt on David's life. Verses 10 and 11, which record it, are not in the Septuagint, and the narrative does run more smoothly without them. But if they are retained, they show how the moody suspicion with which Saul eyed David came to a swift, murderous climax. He stands as a terrible example of how suspicion and jealousy, working in a nature utterly without self-control, transport it into the wildest excesses. In the strange phraseology of verse 9, an evil spirit from God laid hold of him, dominating his personality. The writer of this book felt that God was the ultimate cause of all things, and that all beings were under His control; and his devout recognition of that fact led him to the apparent paradox of tracing an evil spirit to God. But we must not be so startled as to overlook the truth that Saul had prepared the fit abode for that evil spirit by his own indulgence in a whirl of sinful passions and acts, and that these were punished by their natural consequence. Any man who lets his own baser nature have full fling invites the devil. Saul had what would now be called a paroxysm of insanity. But perhaps the modern medical phrase is not to be preferred to the old scriptural one. The former is innocent of any explanation of the fact which it designates, and it may possibly be that insanity is sometimes, even now, possession. At all events, since science gives no explanation of it, and a great dim region of consciousness is now being recognised,--subliminal, to speak in the new phraseology,--he is a bold man who ventures to deny that possibility.

But be that as it may, what a striking picture is given of Saul, worn with passion and swept away by ungovernable impulses, prophesying or raving with wild gestures and uttering wilder sounds; and of David, young, calm, giving forth melodies on his harp and songs from his lips, that sought to soothe the paroxysms of fury. Browning has drawn the picture in immortal words, which all who can should read. It has been suggested that Saul did not cast his spear, but only brandished it in his fierce threat to pin David to the wall. But the youthful harper would scarcely have avoided out of his presence for a mere threat and the flourish of a lance; and a man, raging mad and madly hostile, would not be likely to waste breath in mere threats. The attempt was more probably a serious one, and the spear, flung by an arm made stronger than ever by insane hatred, quivered in the wall very near the lithe athlete who had agilely escaped it. Envy, allowed to have its way, becomes murderous. Let us suppress its beginning. A tiger pup can be held in and its claws cut, but a full-grown tiger cannot.

**III.** The third stage is Saul's getting rid of David. The growing awe of him is marked in verses 12 and 15, and the word in the latter verse is stronger than that in the former. It is a pathetic picture of the gradual creeping over a strong man of a nameless terror. Ever-thickening folds of cold dread, like a wet mist, wrap a soul once bright and energetic. And the reason is twofold: first, that God had left that tempestuous, rebellious soul because it had left Him; and second, that, in its desolate solitude, in which there was no trace of softening or penitence, that lightning-riven soul knew that the sunshine, which it had repelled, was now pouring on David. Saul's suspicions were hardened into certainties. He was sure now that what his jealousy had whispered, when the women chanted their chorus, was grim fact. And he could but helplessly watch his supplanter's steady advance in favour with men and God. The two processes of growing darkness and growing light go on side by side in the two men, and each makes the other more striking by contrast. Twice is it repeated that Saul was in awe of David. Twice is it repeated that Jehovah was with David, and that he behaved himself wisely, which last statement includes in the Hebrew word both the idea of prudence and that of success. So, on the one hand, there is a steady growth in all good, godly, and happy qualities and experiences; and on the other, a tragical increase of darkness and gloom, godlessness and despair. And yet Saul had begun so well! And Saul might have been what David was,-- companioned by God, prosperous, and the idol of his people. Two souls stand side by side for a moment on the same platform, with the same divine goodness and love encircling them, and the one steadily rises, while the other steadily sinks. How awful are the endless possibilities of progress in either direction that lie open for every soul of man!