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

**2 SAMUEL-012. PARDONED SIN PUNISHED by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"1. And It came to pass after this, that Absalom prepared him chariots and horses, and fifty men to run before him. 2. And Absalom rose up early, and stood beside the way of the gate: and it was so, that when any man that had a controversy came to the king for judgment, then Absalom called unto him, and said, Of what city art thou? And he said, Thy servant is of one of the tribes of Israel. 3. And Absalom said unto him. See, thy matters are good and right; but there is no man deputed of the king to hear thee. 4. Absalom said moreover, Oh that I were made judge in the land, that every man which hath any suit or cause might come unto me, and I would do him justice! 5. And it was so, that when any man came nigh to him to do him obeisance, he put forth his hand, and took him, and kissed him. 6. And on this manner did Absalom to all Israel that came to the king for judgment: so Absalom stole the hearts of the men of Israel. 7. And it came to pass after forty years, that Absalom said unto the king, I pray thee, let me go and pay my vow, which I have vowed unto the Lord, in Hebron. 8. For thy servant vowed a vow while I abode at Geshur in Syria, saying, If the Lord shall bring me again indeed to Jerusalem, then I will serve the Lord. 9. And the king said unto him, Go in peace. So he arose, and went to Hebron. 10. But Absalom sent spies throughout all the tribes of Israel, saying, As soon as ye hear the sound of the trumpet, then ye shall say, Absalom reigneth in Hebron. 11. And with Absalom went two hundred men out of Jerusalem, that were called; and they went in their simplicity, and they knew not any thing. 12. And Absalom sent for Ahithophel the Gilonite, David's counsellor, from his city, even from Giloh, while he offered sacrifices. And the conspiracy was strong; for the people increased continually with Absalom."*

*2 Samuel 15:1-12*

There was little brightness in David's life after his great sin. Nathan had told him, even while announcing his forgiveness, that the sword should never depart from his house; and this revolt of Absalom's may be directly traced to his father's disgraceful crime. The solemn lesson that pardoned sin works out its consequences, so that whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap, is taught by it. The portion of the story with which we are concerned has two stages,--the slow hatching of the plot, and its final outburst.

**I.** Verses 1 to 6 give us the preparation of the mine. It takes four years, during which Absalom plays all the tricks usual to aspirants for the most sweet voices of the multitude. He seems to have been but a poor creature; but it does not take much brain to do a great deal of mischief. He was vain, headstrong, with a dash of craft and a large amount of ambition. He had no love for his father, and no ballast of high principle, to say nothing of religion. He was a spoiled child grown to be a man, with a child's petulance and unreason, but a man's passions. He loved his unfortunate sister, but it was as much wounded honour as love which led him to the murder of his elder brother Amnon. That crime cleared his way to the throne; and David's half-and-half treatment of him after it, neither sternly punishing nor freely pardoning, set the son against the father, and left a sense of injury. So he became a rebel.

The story tells very vividly how he adopted the familiar tactics of pretenders. How old, and yet how modern, it reads! We who live in a country where everybody is an elector of some sort, and candidates are plentiful, see the same things going on, in a little different dress, before our eyes. Absalom begins operations by dazzling people with ostentatious splendour. In better days Samuel had trudged on foot, driving a heifer before him, to anoint his father; and royalty had retained a noble simplicity in the hands of Saul and David. But plain living and high thinking did not suit Absalom; and he had gauged the popular taste accurately enough in setting up his chariot with its fifty runners. That was a show something like a king, and, no doubt, much more approved than David's simplicity. But it was an evil omen to any one who looked below the surface. When luxury grows, devotion languishes. The senseless ostentation which creeps into the families of good men, and is sustained by their weak compliance with their spoiled children's wishes, does a world of harm. We in Lancashire have a proverb, Clogs, carriage, clogs, which puts into three words the history of three generations, and is verified over and over again.

How well Absalom has learned the arts of the office-seeker! Along with his handsome equipage he shows admirable devotion to the interests of his constituents. He is early at the gate, so great is his appetite for work; he is accessible to everybody; he flatters each with the assurance that his case is clear; he gently drops hints of sad negligence in high quarters, which he could so soon set right, if only he were in power; and he will not have the respectful salutation of inferiors, but grasps every hard hand, and kisses each tanned cheek, with an affectation of equality very soothing to the dupes. Electioneering is much the same all the world over; and Absalom has a good many imitators nearer home.

There was, no doubt, truth in the charge he made against David of negligence in his judicial and other duties. Ever since his great sin, the king seems to have been stunned into inaction. The heavy sense of demerit had taken the buoyancy out of him, and, though forgiven, he could never regain the elastic energy of purer days. The psalms which possibly belong to this period show a singular passivity. If we suppose that he was much in the seclusion of his palace, a heavily-burdened and spirit-broken man, we can understand how his condition tempted his heartless, dashing son to grasp at the reins which seemed to be dropping from his slack hands, and how his passivity gave opportunity for Absalom's carrying on his schemes undisturbed, and a colour of reasonableness to his charges. For four years this went on unchecked, and apparently unsuspected by the king, who must have been much withdrawn from public life not to have taken alarm. Nothing takes the spring out of a man like the humiliating sense of sin. The whole tone of David's conduct throughout the revolt is, I deserve it all. Let them smite, for God hath bidden them. To this resourceless, unresisting submission to his enemies, sin had brought the daring soldier. It is not old age that has broken his courage and spirit, but the consciousness of his foul guilt, which weighs on him all the more heavily because he knows that it is pardoned.

**II.** The second part of our subject tells of the explosion of the long-prepared mine. It was necessary to hoist the flag of revolt elsewhere than in Jerusalem, and some skill is shown in choosing Hebron, which had been the capital before the capture of the Jebusite city, and in which there would be natural jealousy of the new metropolis. The pretext of the sacrifice at Hebron, in pursuance of a vow made by Absalom in his exile, was meant to touch David's heart in two ways,--by appealing to his devotional feelings, and by presenting a pathetic picture of his suffering and devout son vowing in the land where his father's wrath had driven him. It is not the first time that religion has been made the stalking-horse for criminal ambition, nor is it the last. Politicians are but too apt to use it as a cloak for their personal ends. Absalom talking about his vow is a spectacle that might have made the most unsuspecting sure that there was something in the wind. Such a use of religious observances shows more than anything else could do, the utter irreligion of the man who can make it. A son rebelling against his father is an ugly sight, but rebellion disguised as religion adds to the ugliness. David suspects nothing; or, if he does, is too broken to resist, and, perhaps glad at any sign of grace in his son, or pleased to gratify any of his wishes, sends him away with a benediction. What a parting,--the last, though neither knew it!

The plot had spread widely in four years, and messengers had been sent through all Israel to summon its adherents to Hebron. If David had been as popular as in his early days, it would have been impossible for such a widely spread conspiracy to have come so near a head without some faithful soul having been found to tell him of it. But obviously there was much smouldering discontent, arising, no doubt, from such causes as the pressure of taxation, the gloom that hung over the king, the partial paralysis of justice, the transference of the capital, the weight of wars, and, at lowest, the craving for something new. Few reigns or lives set in unclouded brightness. The western horizon is often filled with a bank of blackness. Strangely enough, Absalom invited two hundred men to accompany him, who were ignorant of the plot. That looks as if its strength was outside Jerusalem, as was natural. These innocents were sufficiently associated with Absalom to be asked to accompany him, and, no doubt, he expected to secure their complicity when he got them away. Unsuspecting people are the best tools of knaves. It is better not to be on friendly terms with Absalom, if we would be true to David. The last piece of preparation recorded is the summoning of Abithophel to come and be the brain of the plot. He had been David's wisest counsellor, and is probably the familiar friend, in whom I trusted, whose defection the Psalmist mourns so bitterly, and whose treachery was a marvellous foreshadowing of the traitor who dipped in the dish with David's Lord. Note that he had already withdrawn from Jerusalem to his own city, from which he came at once to Hebron. Absalom could flatter and play the well-worn tricks of a pretender, but a subtler, cooler head was wanted now, and the treacherous son was backed up by the traitor friend. And the conspiracy was strong; for the people increased continually with Absalom. What a tragical issue to the joyous loyalty of early days! What a strange madness must have laid hold on the nation to have led them to prefer such a piece of petulance and vanity to their hero-poet-king! What did it mean?

The answer is not far to seek, and it is the great lesson of this story. David's sin was truly repented and freely forgiven, but not left unpunished. God is too loving to shield men from the natural consequences, in the physical and social world, of their sins. The penitent drunkard's hand shakes, and his constitution is not renewed, though his spirit is. Only, punishment is changed into discipline, when the heart rests in the assurance of pardon, and is accepted as a token of a Father's love. In every way God made of the vice the whip to scourge the sinner, and David, like us all, had to drink as he had brewed, though he was forgiven the sin.