

ELIJAH, THE PROPHET OF FIRE

By

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Chapter 16

NABOTH'S VINEYARD

"And the word of the Lord came to Elijah the Tishbite saying, Arise, go down to meet Ahab king of Israel, which is in Samaria: behold, he is in the vineyard of Naboth, whither he is gone down to possess it. And thou shalt speak unto him, saying, Thus saith the Lord, Hast thou killed, and also taken possession? And thou shalt speak unto him, saying, Thus saith the Lord, In the place where dogs licked the blood of Naboth shall dogs lick thy blood, even thine. And Ahab said to Elijah, Hast thou found me, O mine enemy? And he answered, I have found thee: because thou hast sold thyself to work evil in the sight of the Lord." (I Kings 21:17-20)

"AND THEY COVET FIELDS, AND TAKE THEM BY VIOLENCE; AND HOUSES, AND TAKE THEM AWAY: SO THEY OPPRESS A MAN AND HIS HOUSE, EVEN A MAN AND HIS HERITAGE. THEREFORE THUS SAITH THE LORD, BEHOLD, AGAINST THIS FAMILY DO I DEVISE AN EVIL, FROM WHICH YE SHALL NOT REMOVE YOUR NECKS; NEITHER SHALL YE GO HAUGHTILY: FOR THIS TIME IS EVIL." (Micah 1:2, 3) [230]

OUR narrative once more brings us in contact with Ahab, king of Israel, whom we now find in his palace of Samaria. *

How changed since last we beheld him entering in state the gates of Jezreel, - the stalwart Prophet running before, - full of joyous hope! Now he lies on a bed in one of the royal chambers in helpless dejection, - moaning and tossing in feverish and restless misery.

What catastrophe has overtaken that regal mourner? - why that settled gloom on these regal brows?

- Has the hand of death been in the palace halls?
- has one of the princes of the blood royal been borne to the sepulchre of the kings of Israel - and left the aching void of bereavement in that smitten heart?
- Or, has it been some sudden overwhelming national disaster?
- Have the billows of war swept over his territories?
- is the tramp of Benhadad's conquering armies heard at his gates, threatening to desolate his valleys, and carry the flower of his subjects captive to Damascus?

No, no. His family circle is unbroken; and the trophies of recent victory adorn his walls. It is a

far more insignificant cause which has led the weak and unworthy monarch to wrap himself in that coverlet, and to pout and fret like a petulant child.

This lordly possessor of palaces [231] cannot obtain a little vineyard he has coveted;- and life is, forsooth, for the moment, embittered to him.

Lamentable, but too truthful picture of human nature!

Here is a King;

- a man at the proud pinnacles of human ambition,
- the owner of vast territories,
- the possessor of one of the most princely of demesnes,
- his ivory palace perched on the wooded slopes of Gilboa - looking across the wide fertile plain of Esdraelon.

What Windsor is to Britain, or Versailles to France, so was this Jezreel, with its noble undulating grounds, to the kingdom of Israel. Even amid the miserable mud-huts of the modern Zerin, the traveller can picture, from the unchanged features of the site, what the beauty of that summer park and palace must have been. ²

But on the outskirts of this regal domain, there happened to be one small patch of ground, the hereditary possession of a Jezreelite of the name of Naboth; ** and on the occasion of one of the royal visits to this favourite hunting-seat, the eye of the king has lighted upon it.

Its acquisition seems so [232] desirable, that he resolves to have it at any cost, either by purchase or excambion.

In the true spirit of an Israelite, however, Naboth rejects the royal proposal to alienate his patrimonial acres.

Without palliating Ahab's puerile conduct, we may, at first sight indeed, deem that Naboth was an uncourteous, if not a disloyal subject, in thus thwarting the royal wishes;- that it would, at all events, have been no more than a becoming and graceful deference to the will of his sovereign, at once to surrender the desired possession.

A little consideration, however, not only justifies Naboth's determined refusal, but greatly aggravates Ahab's guilt in urging the transaction.

The soil of Israel belonged neither to Ahab nor Naboth, but to JEHOVAH. By the law of Moses, the owner of that vineyard at Jezreel was rigidly prohibited from parting with his paternal inheritance. Even in the case where debt necessitated a temporary transfer of property, that transfer was always coupled with the condition that the land could be redeemed at any time by the original and inalienable possessor; and, moreover, even without money redemption, it again reverted to him on the arrival of the year of jubilee (Leviticus 35:13; Numbers 36:7).

When Naboth therefore rejected Ahab's offer, it was not on the ground of personal disinclination, far less in a fit of dogged obstinacy. There was nothing of churlish rudeness - no boorish discourtesy in his reply. With the calm self-possession of one who acted from high religious principle, he thus grounds his refusal, "**The Lord forbid it me that I should give the inheritance of my fathers unto thee.**"

We may not indeed altogether exclude the influence of personal considerations on Naboth's conduct. [233]

Like other Jews, he was doubtless deeply attached to the heritage of his ancestors. His vineyard would be a spot endeared by sacred associations.

- It had been the hallowed haunt of childhood;
- the cradle of his earliest recollections.
- On these mountains of Gilead and Samaria, childhood's eye had gazed.
- Childhood's ear had drunk delight from the murmurs of the still existing fountain.
- Seated under the purple clusters of its trellised vines, he may have listened to instruction from revered lips.

More than all,- the honoured dust of his sires doubtless reposed in some adjoining rocky cave; and holy memories would endear his "inheritance" beyond the compensation of all Ahab's gold.

But this, we repeat, was not his main motive in refusal; it was the resolve of a high-minded patriot Israelite, to fear his GOD, even though in doing so he should incur the displeasure of his king.

That little ancestral plot of ground he felt to be his by a divine tenure. Infeft by Jehovah himself, and loyal to a Greater than Ahab, he had no alternative left him in dealing with the regal bribe. All honour to this noble-minded citizen, who resisted the talents and the royal smiles that would tamper with his conscience and his duty.

We shall think of him as one of the seven thousand who loved, from his inmost soul, the GOD of his fathers, and refused to kiss the shrine of Baal.

A pattern is he, to the many in every age, who would too often sacrifice principle and right on the altar of worldly policy; and, by base expediency, truckle to power and patronage. In these days, when we collect photographs of the great and good among our contemporaries, we may well find room for this bold sturdy peasant or vinedresser of Jezreel,- enroll him among [234] the number of our moral heroes, and write under his name the motto - "**I must obey God rather than man.**"

But what is conscientious scruple?

It is a myth and delusion to a mind blinded and demoralized like that of Ahab. He leaps in a passion into his chariot. As he drives back that long twenty-five miles to Samaria, it is with his countenance fallen.

His wishes have been thwarted, - his royalty insulted, - his dignity compromised, - his will gainsayed, - his pride injured, - by a petty subordinate.

The result is, he is miserable, - all his redundant possessions appear nothing, because he cannot call that patch of ground his own. Unworthy of a king,- unworthy of a man,- he flings himself on his bed, and sobs out to himself the tale of this most miserable disappointed ambition!

Is there no way by which these unroyal tears may be wiped away, and the coveted possession be yet obtained? If Ahab himself lack the moral courage to compass the wish by some foul and dastard deed, is there no one in the courtly circle who can gratify him, by means which imperious wills have often adopted before - cutting in two that conscientious scruple with the sword?

One there was, able and willing for the task. Jezebel, who, as we already know, had inherited all the bold passions and oriental vices of her father, was the very heroine for the emergency. Quick as thought, she devises her accursed plot. By a series of easily planned perjuries, the royal equanimity will soon be restored; the royal park and pleasure-grounds soon have the desired appendage; and, what was better to her vindictive nature, Naboth shall learn at what cost he spurns the royal wish, and questions the royal prerogative.

Getting into her possession [235] the king's signet-ring, to give the appearance of a regal mandate to her proclamation, she causes letters to be written to the nobles and elders of Jezreel, to proclaim a fast; attainting Naboth at the same time of high treason - the charge to be supported by two suborned witnesses. Never was queencraft more apparently triumphant and successful. Once get that reculant citizen accused of blasphemy, and, by a divine law, the property of the blasphemer and rebel reverts to the crown. Ahab, by an old statute, would become at once lawful lord of this petty vineyard.

Two depraved men are induced without difficulty to perjure themselves, in order to compass the destruction of an innocent man. A fast is proclaimed. It is a hideous mockery in the name of religion. "A fast!" as if some dire disaster, in the shape of famine, pestilence, or war, impended over the city, or some dire sin needed expiation. The two "**sons of Belial**," - the bribed witnesses who charged Naboth with the fictitious crime,- demand from the people summary vengeance on his head. He had "**blasphemed God and the king**" - the King as the visible representative of GOD: He had incurred the terrible penalties annexed to the boldest of transgressions, "**Thou shalt not curse God, nor revile a prince among thy people.**" (Exodus 27:27)

O Justice! Under thy sacred name how many crimes have been perpetrated, - how many traitors to sacred truth have dragged the innocent to destruction!

It does give a terrible picture of the moral debasement at this period of Israel's history, that so many were to be found among nobles and elders - (the privileged classes,- the aristocracy of their day) - to aid and abet in so foul a deed. Not even one voice was raised in [236] protest against the enormous wickedness. No wonder, after weaving such a network of deceit as this, that Jezebel's name should have been handed down from generation to generation as the symbol and by-word of all that is execrable; that it should be used in the last book of the inspired volume, by lips which cannot lie, as the emblem of wild fanaticism and licentiousness

(Revelation 2:20, 21)

The deed is done. The exasperated rabble have dragged Naboth out of the city, and "**stoned him with stones;**" and, as we learn subsequently, his innocent family were simultaneously involved in the cold-blooded massacre! "**The blood of Naboth and the blood of his sons,**" (II Kings 9:26, compare Joshua 7:24.) ⁴

The king loses no time in forthwith claiming the wages of unrighteousness. He confiscates Naboth's goods; the coveted vineyard has lapsed into his hands. "**And Ahab,**" we read, "**rose up to go down** (i.e., from Samaria to Jezreel) **to the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite to take possession of it.**" Yes, the plot had succeeded to a wish - a triumph of female sagacity. Not one noble or elder had divulged the terrible secret, which had given the semblance of legality to atrocious villainy. The bones of the murdered were heaped out of sight in some forgotten grave; and what was perhaps more than anything else to Ahab, Elijah was now, as he imagined, out of the way. He had heard nothing lately of his old troubler and tormentor. [237]

Perhaps some confused story had reached him of the wilderness flight, - that in a fit of misanthropic spleen, the Prophet had turned at once coward and hermit, and was spending the dregs of a fanatic life in the untrodden wilds of the Arabian desert. The king's fleet horses bear him along the highway to take formal possession of his dear-bought possession. ⁵ He enters the gates, and is already planning how this *aceldama* - this "**field of blood**" - can be turned to the greatest advantage. Ah, he hears it not! The dulled ear of conscience is closed; but the voice of Naboth's blood is crying from the ground, "**O God, to whom vengeance belongeth, shew thyself.**"

Soon is the prayer heard. There was one close by, whose presence he little dreamt of; - one who had last conducted him in triumph, after a day of miracle and grace, to these same gates of Jezreel. Now he stands before him the messenger of wrath- "**the Prophet of Fire**" - an incarnate spirit of evil tidings. It is ELIJAH! - his own great, bold, brave self again: no longer daunted and panic-stricken by Jezebel, and ready, when his malison is delivered, to gird himself for flight. The prediction of Ahab's awful end might indeed well have struck fresh terror into his heart as he uttered it. [238]

But he is another man since we recently met him in the Sinai desert. The frenzied queen may again vow vengeance as she pleases; he will not shrink from duty. The old visions of Horeb - the wind, and earthquake, and fire,- proclaim in his ears that "**The LORD liveth.**"

A career of unblushing impiety, on the part of Ahab, had now culminated in the most hideous of crimes, and the Herald of vengeance delivers unabashed his message. It is one of his former rapid, sudden, meteor-like appearances. Without warning or premonition, he confronts Ahab, like the ghostly shadow of the monarch's own guilty conscience; and, with a tongue of FIRE, flashes upon him the accusation - "**Hast thou killed, and also taken possession?**" We know not a grander subject for a great picture than this, - the hero - prophet standing erect before the ghostly, terror-stricken king; breaking through the barriers of court etiquette, and caring only for the glory of the GOD he served and the good of Israel, charging him with the murderer's guilt, and pronouncing upon him the murderer's awful doom. ⁶ The trembling monarch, awaking in a moment from his dream of iniquity to a sense of the presence which confronted him, shrieks

aloud- "**Hast thou found me, O mine enemy.**" "I have found thee," is the reply, "**because [239] thou hast sold thyself to work evil in the sight of the Lord.**"

And then he proceeds to deliver the terrible sentence - The sword was to avenge the blood of the innocent. His family, root and branch, were to be extirpated, - the wild dogs of the city and the winged vultures of Heaven should banquet on the flesh of his sons!

The king cowered in despair. He rent his clothes, put sackcloth on his flesh, and in bitter misery bewailed, when it was too late, his aggravated sin. So heartfelt, however, was this agony of remorse, that the GOD he had insulted graciously respites his sentence. For three years, opportunity was given him, though in vain, for a fuller repentance and amendment, ere the weapon of deferred retribution descends. But the day of vengeance comes at last. At the end of that period, in going up to battle, to Ramoth-Gilead, he is mortally wounded.

In a crimson pool, at the foot of the chariot, he lies in the last convulsions of ebbing life- "**And one washed the chariot in the pool of Samaria; and the dogs licked up his blood**"

Jezebel's end was more signal and appalling still. At that moment, which we have described, when Ahab entered to take possession of the vineyard of Naboth, two pages were seated at the back of his chariot, who overheard the stormy interview between him and the Prophet. [240]

The words Elijah then uttered, sank deep into the heart and memory of one of these. It was Jehu the son of Niinshi. And when, from the position of an attendant he rose to the dignity of a conqueror, and entered with a triumphant army the streets of Jezreel, - though twenty long years had elapsed, he seems neither to have forgotten nor misunderstood his commission, as the scourge of GOD, and the avenger of innocent blood.

When the Queen, savage and debased as ever, tried first by meretricious arts, and then by insult, to conquer or defy her invader, the blood of the incensed warrior rose in his veins; by his orders, she was thrown from her window outside the city wall-trampled under feet of the horses, and torn to pieces by the dogs.

"Go," said the merciless conqueror, "**Go, see now this cursed woman, and bury her, for she is a king's daughter; and they went to bury her, but they found no more of her than the skull and the feet, and the palms of the hands. Wherefore they came again and told him, and he said, This is the word of the Lord, which he spake by his servant, Elijah the Tishbite, saying, In the portion of Jezreel shall dogs eat the flesh of Jezebel.**"

There are many voices addressed to us from Naboth's vineyard.

One of these is - *Beware of covetousness.*

That vineyard has its counterpart in the case and conduct of many still. Covetousness may assume a thousand chameleon hues and phases, but these all resolve themselves into a sinful craving after something other than what we have.

- *Covetousness of means* - a grasping after more material wealth; the race for riches. [241]

- *Covetousness of place* - aspiring after other positions in life than those which Providence has assigned us, - not because they are better - but because they are other than our present God-appointed lot - invested with an *imaginary superiority*.

And the singular and sad thing is, that such inordinate longings are most frequently manifested, as with Ahab, in the case of those who have least cause to indulge them.

The covetous eye cast on the neighbour's vineyard is, (strange to say,) more the sin of the affluent than of the needy,- of the owner of the lordly mansion than of the humble cottage. The man with his clay floor, and thatched roof, and rude wooden rafters, though standing far more in need of increase to his comfort, is often (is generally) more contented and satisfied by far than he whose cup is full.

The old story, which every schoolboy knows, is a faithful picture of human nature.

It was Alexander, not defeated, but victorious - Alexander, not the lord of one kingdom, but the sovereign of the world, who wept unsatisfied tears.

Ahab had everything that human ambition could desire.

- The cities of Israel his father had lost, had been all restored,
- peace was within his walls, and prosperity within his palaces.
- His residences were unparalleled for beauty.
- His lordly park and demesne and gardens at Jezreel - stretching for miles on every side of the city - had every rare tree and plant and flower to adorn them.

But what pride or pleasure has he now in all these? Plants bloom, and birds sing, and fountains sparkle, in vain. So long as that one patch of vineyard-ground belonging to Naboth is denied him, his whole pleasure is blighted. He cannot brook that insult of refusal. It has stung him to the quick, and sends him to pout and fret, in unroyal tears, on his couch in Samaria! [242]

How many there are, surrounded with all possible affluence and comfort, who put a life-thorn in their side by some similar chase after a denied good, some similar fretting about a denied trifle. They have abundance; the horn of plenty has poured its contents into their lap. But a neighbour possesses something which they fancy they might have also. Like Haman, though their history has been a golden dream of prosperity; - advancement and honour such as the brightest visions of youth could never have pictured, - yet all this avails them nothing, so long as they see Mordecai the Jew sitting at the king's gate!

Seek to suppress these unworthy envious longings. "**For which things' sake,**" says the apostle, (and among "these things" is covetousness,) "**the wrath of God cometh on the children of disobedience.**"

Covetousness, GOD makes a synonym for idolatry.

He classes the covetous in the same category with the worshippers of stocks and stones. "**Be content with such things as ye have.**"

Paul was ever sound in philosophy as in religion, - his ethical, as well as his theological system, is one worthy of our profoundest study and imitation. Here is one of his maxims - **"I have learned in whatever state I am therewith to be content. I know both how to be abased, and I know how to abound; every where, and in all things; I am instructed both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need."**

The secret of his contentment was, that he was possessor of those **"true riches,"** which made him independent of all worldly honours and gains and distinctions. [243]

"I have coveted," says he, **"no man's silver or gold or apparel."** Why? because he had nobler treasures than the mines of the earth could yield or its looms fabricate. Having CHRIST for his portion, he could say - **"I have ALL and abound."**

The vineyard which he coveted, was that which **"God's own right hand had planted, and the Branch he had made strong for Himself!"**

Be assured that carping discontent will grow, if you feed it, till it comes to eat out the kernel of life's happiness, - a discontented manhood or womanhood culminating in that saddest of conditions, a peevish old age.

In other sorrows, (the real trials of life,) the heart is upheld and solaced by sympathy, and by the nobler consolations of GOD's truth. But who or what could minister to a mind thus diseased?

Who could pity the soul whining and murmuring in the midst of plenty?

Who could throw away balm-words of comfort on those piercing themselves through with many sorrows, when these sorrows are chimeras - ghosts of their own discontented brain?

As you value your peace, exorcise the foul fiend. Let Naboth alone in his vineyard, and enjoy yours just as it is. Impose not self-inflicted torture by longing for what you are better without. When shall we be taught in this grasping, avaricious, unsatisfied age, that **a man's life,** (his true being - his manhood - his glory,) **consisteth not in the abundance of the things which he possesseth!"**

Another of the voices from Naboth's vineyard is - *Keep out of the way of temptation.*

If Ahab, knowing his own weakness and besetting sin, had put a restraint on his covetous eye, and not allowed it to stray on his neighbour's forbidden property, it would have saved a black page in his history, and the responsibilities of a heinous crime. [244]

Let us beware of tampering with evil.

"If thy right eye offend thee, pluck it out, and cast it from thee." **"Avoid it,"** says the wise man, speaking of this path of temptation, **"pass not by it, turn from it, and pass away."**

If Achan had not cast his eye on the goodly Babylonish garment, the shekels of silver, and the

wedge of gold, he would have saved Israel a bloody discomfiture and himself a fearful end. But he saw them; and the sight fed and fostered and stimulated the covetous master-passion, - the latent avarice of his greedy heart.

It was David's wandering eye that led to the twin crime of adultery and murder. He, too, ventured to the place of temptation. and become an idler when he should have been a worker. The old, heroic, chivalrous days were over, when he would have despised luxurious ease, and been away rather to share the hardships of his brave army than in the field. Instead of this, he was basking in inglorious unsoldierlike fashion, after his noontide meal, on the roof of his palace.

He was out of the way of duty, and in the way of temptation; and one fatal look, and one fatal thought, entailed a heritage of bitter sorrow on himself and on his children's children.

Each has his own strong temptation, the fragile part of his nature, - his besetting sin.

That sin should be specially watched, muzzled, curbed, - that gate of temptation specially padlocked and sentineled.

- One guilty dereliction of duty,
- one unhappy abandonment of principle,
- one inconsistent, thoughtless word or deed,
- may be the progenitor of unnumbered evils.

How many have bartered their peace of conscience for veriest trifles, - sold a richer inheritance than Esau's birthright for a mess of earthly pottage! [245]

And once the first fatal step is taken, it cannot be so easily undone.

Once the blot on fair character is made, the stain is not so easily erased.

Ahab's first and irretrievable blunder, was dated long anterior to the coveting of the vineyard. We have before noted that his thoughtless, unlawful, unprincipled union with a heathen princess, whose father's name and throne were blackened with infamy, was the commencement of his downward career,- the first installment of that price, by which, we read, "**he sold himself to work iniquity.**"

He would never, in any circumstance, have been a great man; he had no native vigour or independence of character for that; but, under better fostering influences, he might have been moulded into a useful one.

His facile, vacillating nature, might, by a better plastic power, have been brought to incline to the side of virtue. But Jezebel was his evil genius. He was a mere puppet in her hands. She took anything that was noble and generous from him, - instigating him only to execrable deeds.

His better self surrendered to her base artifices, he became a depraved, effeminate weakling.

What we have already said, in a previous chapter, regarding the marriage union, is equally

applicable to all business and social connections.

How many, in the formation of these, by looking merely to worldly advantages, make shipwreck of faith and of a good conscience! How many a young man has been lured, by the prospect of money-recompense, where his religious principles will be tampered with, or where he will be in danger of conniving at dishonest gains! [246]

The high sense of honour and integrity once lost or compromised, he becomes an easy prey to base arts, - underhand, dishonourable ways, and double dealings. No worldly gains or position can make up - for the absence of true wealth of character and principle. All that Phoenician riches could secure or lavish, followed the Sidonian princess to her Hebrew home in Samaria. But what of this?

Under that Tyrian purple there lurked a heart, which turned all she had into counterfeit and base alloy.

Oh, rather far, the poorest, lowliest, most unostentatious lot, with character unsoiled, than gilded ceilings and array of servants, plate, and equipage, where the nobler element of moral riches is wanting.

Rather the crust of bread and the crippled means, with unsullied principle and priceless virtue, than all that boundless wealth can procure without them.

Another voice from Naboth's vineyard is - *Be sure your sin will find you out.*

Ahab and Jezebel, as we have seen, had managed to a wish their accursed plot. The wheels of crime had moved softly along without one rut or impediment in the way. The two murderers paced their blood-stained inheritance without fear of challenge or discovery.

Naboth was in that silent land where no voice of protest can be heard against high-handed iniquity. But there was a GOD in Heaven who maketh inquisition for blood, and who **"remembered them."** [247]

Their time for retribution did come at last, although years of gracious forbearance were suffered to intervene. As we behold the mutilated remains of that once proud, unscrupulous queen, lying in the common receptacle of offal and carrion outside the city of her iniquities, her blood sprinkling the walls, - or, in the case of the partner of her guilt, as we see the arrow from the Syrian bow piercing through "**the jointed mail,**" - or as he lies weltering in his blood - his eyes closing in agony - the wild dogs, by the pool of Samaria, lick the crimson drops from the wheels of his chariot and the plates of his armour, - have we not before us a solemn and awful comment on the words of Him who "**judgeth righteous judgment:**" - "**These things hast thou done, and I kept silence; thou thoughtest that I was altogether such an one as thyself: but I will reprove thee, and set them in order before thine eyes. Now consider this, ye that forget God, lest I tear you in pieces, and there be none to deliver**" (Psalm 50:21, 22). "**He that, being often reprov'd, hardeneth his neck, shall suddenly be destroyed, and that without remedy**" (Proverbs 29:1).

And are the principles of GOD's moral government different now?

It is true, indeed, that the present economy deals not so exclusively as the old in temporal retribution. Sinners now have before them the surer and more terrible recompense and vengeance of a world to come. But not infrequently here also, retribution still follows, and sooner or later overtakes, the defiant transgressor. They who "**sow to the wind**" are made to "**reap the whirlwind**;" the solemn assertion of a righteous GOD is not uttered in vain, - "**I will punish the men that are settled on their lees, that say in their hearts, The Lord will not do good, neither will he do evil.**"

Ay, and moreover, even should crime and wrongdoing be successfully hidden from the eye of man, Conscience, like another stern Elijah in the vineyard of Naboth, will confront the transgressor and utter a withering doom. [248]

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Their time for retribution did come at last, although years of gracious forbearance were suffered to intervene. As we behold the mutilated remains of that once proud, unscrupulous queen, lying in the common receptacle of offal and carrion outside the city of her iniquities, her blood sprinkling the walls, - or, in the case of the partner of her guilt, as we see the arrow from the Syrian bow piercing through "**the jointed mail,**" - or as he lies weltering in his blood - his eyes closing in agony - the wild dogs, by the pool of Samaria, lick the crimson drops from the wheels of his chariot and the plates of his armour, - have we not before us a solemn and awful comment on the words of Him who "**judgeth righteous judgment:**" - "**These things hast thou done, and I kept silence; thou thoughtest that I was altogether such an one as thyself: but I will reprove thee, and set them in order before thine eyes. Now consider this, ye that forget God, lest I tear you in pieces, and there be none to deliver**" (Psalm 50:21, 22). "**He that, being often reprov'd, hardeneth his neck, shall suddenly be destroyed, and that without remedy**" (Proverbs 29:1).

And are the principles of GOD's moral government different now?

It is true, indeed, that the present economy deals not so exclusively as the old in temporal retribution. Sinners now have before them the surer and more terrible recompense and vengeance of a world to come. But not infrequently here also, retribution still follows, and sooner or later overtakes, the defiant transgressor. They who "**sow to the wind**" are made to "**reap the whirlwind;**" the solemn assertion of a righteous GOD is not uttered in vain, - "**I will punish the men that are settled on their lees, that say in their hearts, The Lord will not do good, neither will he do evil.**"

Ay, and moreover, even should crime and wrongdoing be successfully hidden from the eye of man, Conscience, like another stern Elijah in the vineyard of Naboth, will confront the transgressor and utter a withering doom. [248]

- How many such an Elijah stands a rebuker within the gates of modern vineyards, purchased by the reward of iniquity!
- How many such an Elijah stands a ghostly sentinel by the door of that house whose stones have been hewn and polished and piled by illicit gain!
- How many an Elijah mounts on the back of the modern chariot, horsed and harnessed, pillowed and cushioned and liveried with the amassings of successful roguery!
- How many an Elijah stands in the midst of banquet-hall and drawing-room scowling down on some murderer of domestic peace and innocence, who has intruded into vineyards more sacred than Naboth's,- trampled virtue under foot, and left the broken, bleeding vine, to trail its shattered tendrils unpitied on the ground!

And even should Conscience itself, in this world be defied and overborne; at all events in the world to come, sin must be discovered; retribution (long evaded here) will at last exact its uttermost farthing.

The most awful picture of a state of eternal punishment, is that of sinners surrendered to the mastery of their own special transgression; these sins, like the fabled furies, following them, in unrelenting pursuit, from hall to hall and from cavern to cavern in the regions of unending woe, -

and they, at last, hunted down, wearied, breathless, with the unavailing effort to escape the tormentors, crouching in wild despair, and exclaiming, like Ahab to Elijah, "**Hast thou found me, O mine enemy?**"

We may appropriately close this chapter with the impressive words and prayer of the Psalmist:-

"Surely thou wilt slay the wicked, O God: depart from me, therefore, ye bloody men. For they speak against thee wickedly, and thine enemies take thy name in vain, Do not [249] I hate them, O Lord, that hate thee? and am not I grieved with those that rise up against thee? I hate them with perfect hatred: I count them mine enemies. Search me, O God, and know my heart: try me, and know my thoughts: and see if there be any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting." [250] [Page 251 left blank]

¹ *A careful reader will gather that Ahab and his Queen were now residing at Samaria, twenty-five miles distant from Jezreel.*

² *"The village stands on an isolated rock, which may be said to be the most northern projection of Gilboa. There is no spot in the whole extent of the plain which offers so wide a view as this rock. From this point are seen Carmel, and the mountains of Nazareth - little Hermon and the hill of Bashan and Gilead - the heights of Gilboa and the lofty ridges of Shechem and Samaria . . . Ahab certainly chose the best possible place for his royal residence." - Van de Velde, vol. ii, p. 370. - "An old square tower is in the centre, which in many respects much resembles one of our own Border strongholds, such as Hermitage Castle or Norham, only by no means so large or high . . . To the east rise the mountains of Gilead, on either side of Jordan. From these hills the Prophet Elijah could see distinctly this palace of Ahab, and beyond it that Carmel to which he so often resorted." - Dr Bonar's Land of Promise.*

³ *"The south-eastern fountain, Ain Zalud, about a mile from the village, may very probably mark the site of the vineyard of Naboth." - ibid.*

⁴ *"From another expression in this verse 'yesternight,' we may perhaps conclude that, like a later trial on a similar charge, also supported by two false witnesses - the trial of our Lord - it was conducted at night. The same word, 'yesternight,' prompts the inference that Ahab's visit and encounter with Elijah happened on the very day following the murder."-See note, Smith's Dictionary, p. 529.*

⁵ *"In the days of the kings of Israel it was the great highway from the south to the north of the country. The large stones with which that highway was laid still lie there, although for the most part broken up and thrown aside. It is not of Roman but of ancient Israelitish make; the large stones plainly indicate this, for the Roman causewaying of the roads in Palestine may be generally distinguished by their smaller quadrangular stones . . . Ahab and . . . Elijah must often have passed along this road. And it must also have been trodden by the blessed feet of our Lord JESUS CHRIST in journeying from Galilee to Jerusalem, and from Jerusalem back to Galilee." - Van de Velde, vol. i., p. 370.*

⁶ *The Jewish prophets were, in the best sense of the word, the guardians of public and social morality. Lamartine happily calls them "the sacred tribunes of the people," and represents the influence they exercised as corresponding with the modern power of the press. "Setting aside*

their divine commission," says the gifted living historian of the Jews, "the prophets were the great constitutional patriots of the Jewish state, the champions of virtue, liberty, justice, and the strict observance of the civil and religious law against the iniquities of the king and the people. They are always on the side of the oppressed. They boldly rebuke but never factiously insult their kings. They defend, but never flatter the passions of the people. In no instance does one of the acknowledged seers, like the turbulent demagogues of the Grecian or Roman republics, abuse his popular influence for his own personal aggrandisement or authority . . . Though false prophets might escape by dexterously flattering the powerful, the bold and honest discharge of the office demanded the highest zeal and intrepidity. Of all the prophets none united such distinguished qualifications or was so highly qualified as ELIJAH." - Milman's History of the Jews, in loco.

~ end of chapter 16 ~
