

W O M E N

OF THE

OLD AND NEW TESTAMENT:

A SERIES OF PORTRAITS.

With Characteristic Descriptions,

BY SEVERAL AMERICAN CLERGYMEN.

EDITED BY

WILLIAM B. SPRAGUE, D. D.

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MICHAL.

BY REV. J. F. STEARNS.

FEW monarchs have started on their career in circumstances of greater promise than Saul. Selected by God himself from among all his countrymen, set apart for his high office by one of the greatest of the prophets, noble in person, gifted in intellect, and a general favorite; a brilliant reign seemed to open itself before him. But he proved himself inadequate to his high station. Self-sufficient, jealous, and vindictive, he soon forfeited the respect and confidence of his subjects, and drew down upon him, by his disobedience, the displeasure and rejection of Israel's God.

The reign of Saul had reached its culminating point, and was fast verging to its decline. Samuel, the prophet, who anointed him to be king, had wept over his fall, till Jehovah chode with him for his vain regrets. The fatal sentence had been uttered: "God hath rejected thee from being king," and already the destined successor of his crown, a young Bethlehemite, had received in secret the prophetic blessing and the holy anointing oil. Over Saul's own spirit a dark cloud of melancholy had settled, approaching by fits to madness; and at every movement which he made, a kind of infatuation, the

result of God's desertion of him, seemed to involve him in deeper trouble.

It is in such circumstances, that Michal, the youngest daughter of Saul, makes her appearance on the stage of sacred history :

“ Weep, daughter of a royal line,
A sire's disgrace, a realm's decay ;
Ah, happy ! if each tear of thine
Could wash a father's fault away ! ”

It was the fortune of Michal to be the connecting link between a falling and a rising dynasty. The princess had set her affections on a young courtier in her father's service. Brave, generous, affectionate, and comely, he was worthy in all respects to possess the heart of a king's daughter. His early youth had been distinguished for its piety ; and, in that piety and the attainments to which it was the chief stimulus, were sown the seeds of his future greatness. David was a shepherd's boy. Tending his father's flocks on the plains of Bethlehem, and accustomed to beguile the weariness of his watch with psalms of praise to the God of Israel ; the skill which he attained upon the harp, his favorite instrument, commended him to the notice of Saul's servants, who were seeking for a minstrel to allay their master's irritation, in those fearful fits of melancholy, to which his God-forsaken spirit had become subject. In this capacity, he was introduced at court, and became the monarch's favorite.

Whether Michal, at this period, knew and loved David, the sacred narrative does not inform us. Perhaps, even then, the sweet tones of his harp stole their way into her youthful bosom. Perhaps, as the young shepherd armor-bearer retired from the august presence of his sovereign to attend the flocks of his father, the pleasing consciousness

went with him, and other ears than those of Saul had been drinking in his melody, and another heart would be waiting, with loving, longing earnestness, for the hour of his return. Over all this, time has now drawn an impenetrable veil.

The crisis of David's greatness was fast approaching. There was a perilous war going on between Israel and the Philistines. Saul and his princely son Jonathan, the pride of his house, had buckled on their armor, and gone bravely down to the field of battle. But the fortunes of the day were untoward. A mighty giant, Goliath by name, had come forth from the host of the Philistines; and, defying both the armies of Israel and the God in whom they trusted, demanded a champion, who should decide the fate of the war in single combat with himself. All Israel was in dismay; for such a champion could not be found. Saul had issued a proclamation, offering royal gifts and dignities, and, withal, the hand of his own daughter, to the successful combatant. But day followed on after day; and the splendid prize tempted none to venture the perilous endeavor.

At this juncture, young David made his appearance in the camp. He came simply for the purpose of inquiring after the welfare of his elder brothers, soldiers in Saul's army, and bringing them supplies. He saw the Philistine, and heard of the reward which Saul had offered. Surprised at the consternation of the warriors, he inquired, in the simplicity of his heart;—"Who is this Philistine, that he should defy the armies of the living God? Hath not Jehovah the power?" Then he looked upon the giant's massive form and said;—"I am but a stripling, and he a host in himself. But I remember that God helped me once to slay a lion and a bear, fierce savage beasts as they were. Shall he not make this proud blaspheming boaster as one of them?"

To Saul, the adventure seemed perilously rash; and he would fain have dissuaded the young hero. But resisting all persuasions of

fear, and casting aside the helmet and the mail, with which they would have equipped him, he chose him out five smooth stones from the brook; and, with only a shepherd's sling, confronted the giant warrior. The contrast is sublime. There stand they; David, the stripling, with his sling and bag of stones, and, striding haughty in massive armor, the mighty giant, Goliath of Gath. "Am I a dog, beardless boy?" vaunts the Philistine. "Come to me, and I will give thy tender flesh to the fowls of the air, and the beasts of the field." The youth replies, "Thou comest unto me with a sword, and a spear, and a shield. But I come to thee, in the name of the God of the armies of Israel, whom thou hast defied." There was a pause. The stripling's hand is on his sling. Swift speeds the smooth stone towards its mark. Guided by Providence, it smites and penetrates the giant's forehead; and, in a moment, Goliath of Gath falls, to rise no more. The army flee; the Israelites pursue. Even to the gates of Ekron and of Gath, the pride of Philistia is laid low.

What honors now await thee, young shepherd warrior! Thou art a nation's hero now, a nation's boast and pride. The damsels of Israel, as they attended the returning victors, chanted the achievements of that day. Saul was a glorious hero. But David, the young stripling David, now attracted all hearts towards himself. And the young maidens smiled with looks of love and admiration, as they sung, answering to each other in alternate bands, "Saul has slain his thousands, and David his ten thousands." Rejoice, monarch of Israel, thy dreaded foe can no more trouble thee. Rejoice, the nations of the earth boast no hero, that can rival thy own minstrel boy.

But, in the heart of Saul, no joy thrilled at this event, glorious as it seemed. The serpent envy was there; and, as the song went on, she hissed and reared her hateful crest, and stung his jealous bosom. At every strain, the hated words, "David his ten thousands," smote upon

his ear like the knell of his royalty. What can he have more, said he, but the kingdom? The kingdom? Yes, the kingdom. Little dreamed he that those words were prophecy. "Saul eyed David from that day forth," says the sacred narrative, "and sought occasion to slay him."

But where was Michal, the loving Michal, during these transactions? The soul of her princely brother Jonathan, the heir to the crown, was knit to David's, from that time, in a friendship which has defied all parallel. What hopes or fears beat now in his fair sister's bosom? Did not her heart thrill with unwonted emotions, as she heard, and perhaps joined the song of the damsels of Israel?

Michal had little prospect, at this period, of becoming the wife of David. Perhaps he thought not of her, nor dreamed of her secret love. By the promise of Saul, offering Merab as the prize of victory, his mind had been pre-occupied with another object. That which raised the hopes of his other admirers to the highest point was a death-blow to hers. She must now, as it seemed, relinquish for ever all her fond wishes, and be content to see the object of her love happy in the possession of another than herself.

But how strangely are the events of this world often brought about! By an act of treachery on the part of Saul, as unprovoked as it was wicked, the eldest daughter, whom David had won so nobly, and for whose sake he had submitted to so many vexing delays, and engaged in so many hazardous enterprises, became the bride of another, at the very moment when the fulfilment of the pledge which made her his, could be no longer postponed. The very act which blasted for the time all his hopes of a royal alliance, and mortified his pride in the most sensitive point, prepared the way for a connection, in which all the worldly advantages which he had before

anticipated, should be combined with that far richer and more royal prize—a loving heart.

The secret attachment of Michal now began to discover itself. It was whispered through the royal household, and came to the ears of David and of Saul. To her surprise and joy, it not only met a kind response from the young adventurer who had been hitherto its unconscious object, but was received with favor by her jealous father, and obtained his ready consent.

“She shall be his,” said the deceitful monarch. “Cheer up, young hero. It was fit and necessary that the eldest should be given to another; but my royal promise shall be kept with thee, and thou shalt still be the king’s son-in-law. Yet win her first. Bring me the trophies of a hundred slaughtered Philistines, and she, the young, the beautiful, the loving, is thine own.” The task is undertaken. Twice the number of the bloody spoils are brought and counted out at the king’s feet, and the prize won so bravely can be withheld no longer.

The fair young princess had now gained the consummation of her hopes. The hero of the field of Elah, the boast of the nation, and the admiration and praise of all the damsels of Israel, was at length her own. But new troubles awaited her. The jealousy of Saul had been kindled to new fury. He had consented to the marriage with the treacherous hope, that the adventurous bridegroom might fall a victim to his rash bravery in attempting to fulfil its conditions. Or, if not, he flattered himself that his daughter might be made a ready instrument to his own murderous hatred. But when he saw that his intended victim had escaped the snare; that he was enjoying God’s favor, growing in popularity with all the nation, and sincerely beloved and cherished by his young bride,—the rage of the monarch knew no bounds. Every day was the affectionate bosom of Michal agitated

with new fear, lest the object of her tenderest regard should fall by the hand of her own father.

Pass we to the house, where the noble pair have taken up their abode. It is night, and within all is still. But who are these, creeping stealthily about the door, in the dim starlight? They are a band of assassins. Saul has given them directions to watch the house during the night, and seize and murder the unsuspecting victim as he attempts to come forth in the morning. But Michal is on the alert. She, whom Saul gave to David that she might be a snare to him, now proves herself an angel of mercy. The morning dawns; but David comes not forth. He is sick, she replies to the inquiring messengers. Bring him hither in his bed, commands the determined monarch. The bed is brought;—the sick man sleeping apparently, with his face covered with a cloth. Burning with rage, Saul seizes a dagger in one hand, and with the other, tears off the covering. Lo, the intended victim is not there! A lifeless image, with its head resting on a bolster of goat's hair, is all that can be found. Michal had let her husband down from a window secretly during the night, and he is now far away beyond the reach of his pursuers.

It was a sad day for her when she was thus forced to part with her beloved husband, and see him driven away into a foreign land, and hunted from cavern to forest "as a partridge on the mountains," by the rage of her unscrupulous father. But she knew not yet all the bitterness of her cup of sorrow. Saul reproached her, angrily, as an unfilial daughter: and since he could not now reach the person of his intended victim, proceeded to inflict, both on him and her, the severest wound which even his malice could invent. He took the faithful wife, in the absence of her husband, and to reward her conjugal fidelity, gave her away hopelessly to another.

Now occurs a long blank in Michal's history. Severed by violence from her rightful husband, she pines, an unwilling and degraded captive, in the house of a stranger. Of her fate during this interval, her hopes and fears, her mortifications and struggles, we know nothing except from conjecture. Perhaps she had succeeded in subduing her wounded love and blunting the edge of her sensibilities ; and, soothed by the kindness of her new husband, who seems to have loved her tenderly, forgot in a degree her early attachment. Perhaps the hope of a reunion at some distant day, gleamed occasionally across her spirit, only to leave her in greater discouragement. Little dreamed she then of greeting the hunted exile, as the sovereign of Israel ; and sitting beside him, as his queen, on the throne of her father !

But the purposes of God concerning the kingdom were now fast maturing. Saul and his three eldest sons perished together on the heights of Gilboa. The tribe of Judah declared for David ; and, after a struggle of seven years,—David all the while becoming stronger and stronger, and the house of Saul weaker and weaker,—the remaining eleven tribes joined their brethren, and David was proclaimed king over all Israel.

But will he now remember the love of his youth ? It marks the strength of his attachment, no less than his wise policy ; and seems to indicate the loveliness of her person and character, that he would not consent to the proposals offered him for the settlement of the kingdom, except on the condition of her restoration. "Deliver me my wife," said he. "One thing do I require of thee ; thou shalt not see my face, except thou first bring Michal, Saul's daughter, when thou comest to see my face." It was a sad day to the unhappy man, who had all this while called and thought himself her husband ; and who manifested his sincere regard for her, by following the train

which bore her away, weeping as it went. But the king's orders were peremptory, and Michal was at length reinstated in her conjugal rights.

David was now monarch of Israel; and no king reigned with greater glory. The rebellious inhabitants of the yet unreclaimed parts of the promised land were subdued under him. He spread the terror of his arms, and the splendor of his fame all abroad; and not only reigned undisputed over all the realm of Saul, but made his dominion extend over many of the surrounding nations. Happy Michal! She sits a queen upon the throne of her father, beside the man whom her heart chose in the days of his obscurity.

But some sad changes, as well as some flattering ones, had come over the condition of the royal pair since their separation. Michal finds neither her home, nor her husband, nor herself, the same as before. No longer is she the undisputed mistress of David's royal heart. No longer do his fresh affections respond as of yore, undivided, to her every look of love. Polygamy, that curse of the domestic life of antiquity, has been throwing over their home its baleful influence. Other hearts than hers now share her lord's affections; and their claims, even she, though a king's daughter and a first-love, may not dispute. Worse than all, in the vicissitudes through which she has passed, her own mind has undergone some deterioration. She was Saul's daughter, and the curse of Saul's evil character seems at length to have begun to display itself in her own disposition and conduct. Michal's grand defect was the want of piety; and this, as we shall see in the sequel, marred, and gradually undermined all the excellencies of her character; and unfitted her for that high station, to which, as the wife of David and the mother of such a dynasty as God was founding in him, she might otherwise have been destined.

David, as we have seen already, was a man of devoted piety. No victory so thrilled his heart; no triumphs or tokens of royalty so delighted him, as the service of Jehovah, his faithful covenant-keeping God. The pleasure which he felt when a shepherd's boy, celebrating God's praises alone upon the harp, was now renewed and heightened; as a splendid choir, set in order by his own munificence, chanted those same praises with all sorts of the most exquisite instruments. He was a monarch, but he was such only by Divine interposition; and, in his acknowledgments of the Divine favor, he deemed no degree of humiliation incompatible with his regal dignity.

It was a day of special religious joy. The ark of God, the symbol of Jehovah's presence, hitherto lodged in a private house, was now to be brought in solemn pomp to its appointed place on Mount Zion. David was overflowing with gladness. God was now coming, as it seemed to him, to dwell in very deed in his own city, crowning all his victories, and fulfilling the precious promises of the covenant. It was a splendid scene. The Levites, in their sacred robes, attended in solemn procession. The priests were all at their posts. Choirs of musicians made the air ring with music, such as Israel never heard before. Some struck the cymbals, some touched the psalteries and harps, some praised Jehovah with the song. The trumpets pealed. The blood of bullocks and of rams flowed freely. All Israel, with their chiefs, from Sihor of Egypt even to the entering in of Hamath, were in attendance, an unnumbered throng. David, their king, put off the vestments of royalty, and covered his person with a simple robe of pure white linen; and, when the musicians played upon their instruments, and the singers sang, and the people shouted, David also lifted up his voice of joy, and, in the excess of his enthusiasm, "danced before the Lord with all his might."

Where now is Michal? Is she mingling with the choirs of women

to enjoy and heighten the pomp of that glorious day? When the daughters of Israel sing and dance beside their monarch, is Israel's noblest daughter proud to distinguish herself, as among the most enthusiastic of them all? No! Michal is not there. Glance your eye towards that window. There stands the royal lady, with her form half concealed, gazing on the scene. Why there? What thoughts occupy her? The scene perhaps was too exciting for her to mingle in,—the joy too great. Or, she has seized upon that post of observation, and is looking down, admiringly, upon her royal husband; now not a king or conqueror only, but a saint of God! "There stands my hero," exclaims she, "in the height of his glory. He seemed glorious, when the daughters of Israel sung the triumphant chant, as he returned from the slaughter of the Philistine. Proud was my loving heart, as I saw him second to none in my father's household. Still prouder, when he owned me as his queen, the wife of his youth not forgotten, when all Israel submitted themselves to his sceptre. But now, proudest of all, I see the honors of Heaven symbolized by those white robes in which he ministers, eclipsing by their superior splendor, all the glories of an earthly throne. Not the purple of Tyre's haughty monarch seems half so royal, as that plain linen garment. Nor the nod of the haughtiest despot shows such dignity, as the exulting dance of my monarch-saint." But no! Such thoughts rove not through the breast of Michal. Mortification is there; scornful pride corrodes her heart. Michal, Saul's daughter and David's earliest love, is looking down upon that scene with contempt!

The pomp was ended. The music and the dancing ceased. The ark was settled in its place. David distributed to all the people tokens of his bounty; and when the royal blessing was pronounced, all Israel returned to their several homes.

The monarch retired to his. He had blessed his subjects: now must he bless his own family, and find repose in their sympathy. Who comes to meet him as he approaches? It is Michal; she who, beyond all others, shared with him the fearful vicissitudes of which this day is the joyful completion. From her he might expect the intensest sympathy, especially in the matter of his piety. But what says she? Brace thy nerves, monarch of Israel. Steel thine heart for a stab. "How glorious was the king of Israel to-day, who uncovered himself to-day in the eyes of the handmaids of his servants, as one of the vain fellows shamelessly uncovereth himself!" And is it so? Little did David dream of a rebuff like this at his own door. His answer is memorable. "It was before the Lord; who chose me before thy father and before all his house, to appoint me ruler over his people, over Israel; therefore will I play before the Lord." Had the scene been one of worldly mirth, she might well have reproached him for compromising his kingly dignity. But God is higher than kings. Monarchs are dust and ashes in his sight. "And I will yet be," he proceeds, "more vile than this, and will be base in mine own sight; and of the maid-servants whom thou hast spoken of, of them shall I be had in honor."

Unhappy Michal! The secret mischief of her character, so long kept back by the force of circumstances, has now fairly discovered itself. Many excellent qualities, unquestionably, adorned her nature. Her warm and susceptible heart beat quick responses to the claims of an earthly love. Her conjugal fidelity triumphed over danger, and enabled her to face, without shrinking, the ire of her half-mad and unscrupulous father; and, when the jealous monarch would have stained his hands with the blood of a son, she, by her intrepidity, her quick invention and her prompt action, both saved him from the curse

of murder, and rescued her husband from an untimely death. For all this, she gained a worthy reward, in the attachment and enduring devotion of him to whom her heart had been given.

But Michal was a worldly woman. Not one humble prayer, one holy vow, one song of praise and thanksgiving, one sigh of penitence, or one acknowledgment of the claims of God over human hearts, is recorded as having passed her lips. The spirit of her father, who favored religion only when it might subserve his own purposes, and not that of her husband, with whom God's service was the chief end of life, ruled in her heart. The ardor of her husband's piety was a mortification to her. Like many in humbler spheres, she deemed the enthusiasm of a devout worshipper beneath the dignity of a man of eminence. Even her conjugal affection bowed to this false shame; and, to add keenness to her ungodly reproaches, she could misinterpret her husband's conduct, representing his simple robe of white linen, as a shameless uncovering of himself; and his holy exultation as the revels of the shameless fellows.

Who would have dreamed of this, when youth and beauty, and the fervor of young love clothed her with their charms? But these, without religion, are but fading graces. Like the charms which sometimes linger around the features of the dead, they may seem life-like for a while; but, dust they are, and unto dust they must return. There can be little permanent happiness in the conjugal state, where the union is not cemented by a community of feeling in respect to the most sacred relations of the soul. Fair daughter of Saul, thy charms are indeed faded now! The gold has become dim, and the most fine gold changed!

Saul's house seems to have been a doomed house, from the day when he forsook God and was forsaken of him. Awhile it seemed as if one living branch of that degenerate stock might still flourish

bearing an ingrafted scion of a better tree. But God had otherwise designed. The house of David might support itself awhile upon the remnant of Saul's, till its foundations were secured and its buttresses erected. Then must the last vestige of the ungodly king perish, and no heir of his succeed.

We have said that the curse of Saul's character was upon Michal ; and so, as we see presently, was that of his destiny. In the closing scenes of this queen's life, we seem to hear the same sentence pronounced upon her, which sounded such a knell in the ears of her unhappy father, "God hath rejected thee !" No son of thine shall sit upon the throne of David ; no scion of thy stock shall bear "the Righteous Branch." A rod shall come forth out of the stem of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots, but it shall not be thine.

Michal was childless, by God's special frown for her impiety, else, as the natural heir of both crowns, her son would have had the fairest claim to the succession. But to solace her loneliness, and perhaps to furnish, out of her own family, a probable heir to the throne, she had adopted as her own the sons of her elder sister. There was a famine in the land ; for Saul's treacherous dealings with the Gibeonites, a race of menials with whom Israel was in covenant to leave them unmolested in the midst of the nation, had drawn down the displeasure of Heaven. The Gibeonites must be avenged. We cannot stop to discuss the moral bearings of the transaction. Doubtless they are complicated. Suffice it to say, the demand of the Gibeonites, that seven sons of Saul should be given up to them for execution, in expiation of the cruelties of that cruel family, was conceded. Seven men were sought for ; and, Mephibosheth, the son of Jonathan, David's special friend, being exempted for his father's sake, there remained only the two sons of Saul by Rispah, the daughter of Aiah, and the five adopted sons of Michal, children of her elder sister.

Sad was the day when these seven brave youths perished in their prime ! The veil is drawn gloomily over the fallen dynasty ; the rejection is consummated ; and from this time forth, Michal disappears from sacred history.

We close this sketch in sadness, as we were compelled to begin it. The morning lowered with clouds around the head of this royal lady. But the sun broke through at length ; and, the tempest being still, bade fair to ride on in splendor through a bright and lovely day. But the evening shadows gathered long ere the day was spent, and night without a star, shuts up the mournful view.

Michal, like Saul, stands on the sacred page, as an example of slighted privileges. By the favor of God, she was brought very near to the kingdom of heaven, and had the strongest inducements to enter it. But she refused ; and that sinful choice spread its blight over her whole destiny.