

adob

THE DAUGHTER AND THE MASTER MASON

In the 12th century before Christ, Israel had forgotten the God of their fathers; and for their idolatry and contempt of His laws, God had delivered them into the hand of their enemies, and for 18 years the Ammonites and Philistines had laid waste their country with a great army.

After suffering severe calamities, Israel put away their strange gods, and humbled themselves before the God of Heaven, and besought Him with prayers and sacrifices to deliver them. And the Lord, whose ear is ever open to the cry of His children, heard them, "and His soul was grieved for the miseries of Israel".

The Ammonites were encamped at Gilead. The Israelites, again feeling God's presence in their midst, assembled themselves many thousand strong at Mizpah. But among all this number there was not one found who could lead them in battle. The race which had produced such illustrious warriors in the past, now found themselves without a leader.

Josephus in writing of this says, "Now there was one whose name was Jephthah, who, both on account of his father's valor, and on account of that army which he maintained at his own expense, was a potent man; the Israelites therefore sent to him to come to their assistance and promised him dominion over them for his lifetime. But he did not admit of their entreaty; and accused them, they they did not come to his assistance when he was unjustly treated, and this in an open manner by his brethren; for they cast him off, as not having the same mother with the rest, but was born of a strange mother, and this they did out of contempt of his inability to vindicate himself."

Like David he became an expatriate and received all the warlike spirits who came to him.

However, when they pressed him to accept the dominion over the Israelitish forces and swore that they would grant him the government over them all his life, he consented to lead them to battle. But, knowing his inability to lead so great a host in his own strength, he besought the Lord for help with prayers and the offering up of sacrifices. Then a mighty thing happened - the Spirit of the Lord came upon Jephthah. He no longer sent messengers back and forth trying to make terms with his enemies, but marshalled his troops and passed on with triumphant tread to face them in open battle. As he went he uttered his memorable vow. Why was this vow made? Did his faith falter in the last

moment - did it seem a thing incredible to Jephthah that God would save Israel by his hand, and did he thus seek to bind the power that overrules the fate of nations to the maintenance of his cause? Or was the vow merely the expression of a grateful heart? For being endued with the ~~SEKI~~ Spirit of the Lord may he not already have received within his own soul the assurance of victory?

It is really of little moment to us whether the vow was uttered in supplication or thanksgiving; in either case it came from an earnest soul.

Different theories have been advanced as to what Jephthah had in mind when he uttered this vow. One story that has often been repeated is that his daughter had a pet lamb, and that it was this lamb which Jephthah had in view as a sacrifice. The sacred record makes no such reference; indeed the story is too trivial for belief. This was no time for pet lambs, pigeons, turtledoves, or watch dogs. The thing offered must in some sense be commensurate with the need of the hour. Face to face with the enemy, Jephthah was conscious that his all was staked upon the issue of the battle. Defeat meant for him utter ruin and humiliation, but if victory perched upon his banners, his name would be enrolled among the illustrious heroes of the past and handed down to posterity as the saviour of his people. The very misfortune of his birth would no longer be held against him, and like Joseph of old he would be made ruler of the very brothers who had cast him out of his father's house. In that time of dire need, facing such fearful odds, knowing the bitter results to himself should Israel be defeated and put to flight before her enemies - in that solemn moment the grand old warrior offered up to the God of Battles, his heart's dearest treasure.

The forces joined in battle; the Lord delivered the Ammonites into the hand of Jephthah, and he completely subdued his enemies and delivered Israel from the hand of her oppressor.

The victorious warrior returned to Mizpah. True at heart in adversity, he was also true in prosperity, and the vow which he uttered in his extremity was not forgotten in the hour of his triumph.

My brothers, Jephthah was a Master Mason! He may never have worn the white lamb-skin or held the gavel, but he was worthy of both and in the highest sense a Mason. He pre-

sents a noble example of fidelity to his word, for he entertained no thought of trying to avoid the fulfillment of his vow.

According to the Levitical law, some sacrifices could be redeemed by the payment of money; but not a voluntary, freewill offering as was Jephthah's. It could not be redeemed by the shedding of blood, for the herds and flocks held nothing that would make a suitable substitute.

"Not all the blood of beasts,
On Jewish altars slain",

could equal in value the life of this Hebrew maiden. Nor did Jephthah expect the Lord to provide a substitute as in Abraham's case. Abraham offered Isaac in obedience to the direct command of God, and when he proved his willingness to obey, the will was accepted for the deed, and the Lord provided a substitute.

Jephthah's case was different, the sacrifice had not been required at his hands, he had offered it freely of his own accord. And yet when his daughter came to meet him in all the beauty and purity of her young womanhood, what wonder that the father should exclaim, "Alas, my daughter!" but even in the anguish of his soul he did not hesitate to declare, "I have opened my mouth unto the Lord, and I cannot go back."

There is a proverb which says, "God works at both ends of the line", and in this case it seems to have held true, for the daughter had evidently been divinely prepared for her father's statement; at least, she evinces no surprise. No word of reproach crosses her lips, or refusal to comply with her father's wishes. She was the worthy daughter of a worthy father. Without a moment's surprise or hesitation she flashes back the answer, "My father, if thou hast opened thy mouth unto the Lord, do to me according to that which has proceeded out of thy mouth." Then, as if shrinking from the sudden fulfillment of the vow, she asked leave to go into the solitude of the mountainside for 2 months and there prepare her mind for the solemn surrender of her life.

Who can fathom the mystery of the days that followed? And when the shadows crept up from the valley, and darkness settled over the mountain, and the stars came out to keep guard, overhead - what were her thoughts through the long night watches? How were her bodily wants supplied? Did she carry provisions from her father's home, or was she supplied from time to time from her father's table, or was she divinely sustained and

upheld? We know not. But one thing we do know, beast nor man could not harm her for she was under the guardianship and protection of Heaven.

The beauty and majesty of Israel's God is displayed in His impartial care of His children. The stalwart warrior in the forefront of battle, had no greater claim upon His protection than the helpless young girl in the solitude of Mount Gilead.

The time passed. Its passing was marked upon the father's heart no less than the daughter's. The trial to Jephthah was not in trusting his daughter to the keeping of the Most High, not that; many fathers have known bereavement at the open grave, and some have known the deeper sorrow of standing at the altar and giving their daughter in marriage to a man whom they knew to be unworthy of her. The iron entered Jephthah's soul when he remembered that his must be the hand to strike the fatal blow.

The daughter was fully prepared. She approached the altar fearlessly. Well she knew the loving heart of her father, and implicitly trusted her life in his hands; and those days and nights of communion with Jehovah had given her a courage and a strength which would not forsake her.

And so she offered up her life a sacrifice to preserve her father's honor, and by this act the memory of the virgin maid of Mizpah has become more famous than that of any mother in Israel, for she had the promise of the Lord to those who dedicate their virginity to Him verified to her when he said, "Unto them will I give in Mine house and within My walls a place and a name better than of sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name, that shall not be cut off."

As members of this mystic Order, there are many lessons for us to draw from this sublime story. Let no member of our Order stigmatize Jephthah's vow as being "rash". Neither let us pervert the text, as some do, by saying that the daughter was not slain but merely consecrated to perpetual virginity. Rather let us agree with Jerome and the early fathers, and the text of the Septuagint in believing "that she was offered as a holocaust, in consequence of her father's vow; and that Jephthah did sin neither in making nor in keeping his vow, since he is in no way blamed for it in Scripture; and was even inspired by God Himself to make the vow (being filled with the Spirit of the Lord) in consequence of which he obtained the victory; and therefore he reasonably concluded

that God, who is the Master of Life and Death, was pleased on this occasion to dispense with His own law; and that it was the divine will that he should fulfill his vow." According to the King James', or authorized version, the vow was, "I will offer it up for a burnt offering"; the same authority declares most emphatically, "her father did with her according to his vow which he had vowed." And as if to prevent any doubt of the purity of Jephthah's motives or actions, his name is enrolled among the "heroes of faith" in the 11th chapter of Hebrews.

My brothers, may you be as true as Jephthah, slow to pass your word, but when once given be sure you fulfill it. Better not vow than to vow and not pay. And, like Jephthah, may you always take God as the "man of your counsel," and never enter upon any undertaking that you cannot ask His help and guidance.

My sisters, let us illustrate in our lives the example of this beautiful heroine of our Order, ever manifesting the same spirit of fidelity. We have no need to offer our lives on a Jewish altar, yet we may do what is more noble and well pleasing in God's sight by following the admonition, "Present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service - that you may prove what is that good, and acceptable and perfect will of God."

In closing let us recall the lines written by the illustrious founder of our Order:

On the hills of Mizpah bloomed the mountain maid,
Blue the skies above her where she strayed,
As the light gazelle she climbed the rocky slope
Adah, child of love and hope.

Gone from the mountain, lost to her home,
Called in life's beauty to the tomb,
Hear the wild lamentations in the lonely glen,
"She will never come again."

O, the grand deliverance of the mountain maid,
Keep thy vow, my father - thus she said,
Shall a Mason's daughter fear for truth to die,
There's a home beyond the sky.

From the hills of Mizpah let the story rise,
Death before dishonor to the skies
Lament for Jephthah, ye who know his fate,
Weep and lament: But for sweet Adah, weep not, let the word
Be: "Joy to the captive, freed from earthly dust,
Joy for one witness more to woman's trust,
And lasting honor, Mizpah be the strain,
To her who died in the light without a stain".

- - - Robert Morris