

Naaman and Gehazi.

THE story of the interview between Naaman and Gehazi, told in 2 Kings v, is very commonly misunderstood. There does not appear to be any book or commentary which gives the true inwardness of it, though it is obvious enough to any one who is at all familiar with the working of the Oriental mind.

It is generally said that Gehazi ran after Naaman, after the refusal of his gift by Elisha, deceived him with a lying story, and fraudently obtained what Elisha had declined; Naaman supposing that his presents were to be used not for the benefit of Elisha, but of the two young students of the schools of the prophets, who, as Gehazi falsely represented, had just arrived unexpectedly from Mount Ephraim.

Now it may be granted that the narrative might, at first sight, bear this interpretation to a Western reader, unacquainted with Eastern methods and accustomed to take everything literally; but those who are aware that the Bible is an Oriental book, to be interpreted on Oriental principles, and who know also that there is nothing literal in the East, will never be satisfied with such an explanation, one, moreover, which entirely fails to account for the extreme severity of the punishment inflicted by Elisha upon Gehazi.

Let us go back to the beginnings of the story. Naaman was the Commander-in-Chief of the Syrian Army. It was a great post like that of Lord Kitchener in the British Army. He had achieved great success as a general commanding the forces of his king and had gained signal victories for his country, for which reason he was in high favour at court. His personal prowess in battle had been proved. He possessed, no doubt, whatever answered in his day to the Distinguished Service Order, or even the Victoria Cross. Yet there was one great trouble, which threatened his public position, his family peace, and his very life. He had been stricken with the insidious and deadly poison of leprosy.

The relations between Syria and the Northern Kingdom of Israel were, at this period, very unfriendly. Syrian bands had recently made raids on Israelite territory, and, after their manner, had brought away, amongst other booty, civilian prisoners, including

young girls, who were at once made slaves. One of these had fallen to the lot of Naaman himself,¹ as Briseis in the Iliad fell to Achilles, and he gave her to his wife as a tire-woman, or lady's maid.

The little maiden, whose lot was probably not a hard one, full of goodwill to her new master and of faith in the God of her fathers, told of the mighty deeds of the great prophet of Jehovah in Israel : how Elisha had brought an abundant supply of water for the thirsty Israelite soldiers ; how he had increased the oil in the pot of a poor widow ; how he had even raised from death the boy of the lady of Shunem, and done besides many other things beyond all human power and experience. If only her master could go and see the prophet ! Surely he would find a way to heal him of this dreadful malady.

The idea took hold. Where the doctors had failed, the prophet might succeed. It is an idea with which we are familiar to-day : the mistake too often made being that it is forgotten that prophet and physician should work together. We fly to science first, and, when science fails, turn to prayer ; whereas the true course would have been to go first to God, in full recognition of the fact that He is a God of order and uses means to secure His ends. The girl's suggestion, first discussed in the household of Naaman, found its way to the King of Syria. Perhaps Naaman himself conveyed it to him, as indeed seems likely from the form of the narrative in verse 4. The king welcomed it as the true solution of the difficulty. Nothing, as it seemed to him, could be easier. A peremptory letter, somewhat in the manner of the German Kaiser, addressed to the King of Israel, who was evidently in mortal fear of him, would have the desired effect. All these prophets, as he well knew, were time-serving sycophants, and at the command of their sovereign would kowtow and obey. Whatever occult powers this Elisha, the most celebrated thaumaturgist of his day, might possess, would at once be placed at the disposal of his servant Naaman ; and if they were not, the King of Syria would know the reason why. The gods of Syria had often had to yield to political pressure at home, and this Jehovah, the little God of little Israel, should be even as they.

Besides, there was another line of persuasion. He knew the nature of prophets. They were proverbially lovers of money.

¹ Compare Judges v. 30.

τὸ μαντικὸν πᾶν φιλάργυρον γένος. When a king strongly desires a thing, he can always make it worth a person's while to comply. Every man had his price, and he could form a fairly accurate estimate as to what Elisha's price would be. He would do the thing royally. Let Naaman take ten talents of silver, say, a couple of thousand pounds sterling, and six thousand broad gold pieces, and ten suits of handsome clothing, as a gift. That would be sufficient to bring both king and prophet to his will.

When Naaman came and delivered the letter, the King of Israel was dismayed. He looked upon it as a sort of ultimatum designed to pick a quarrel, because of the impossible nature of the demand.

Elisha heard of the affair, and then he did a fine thing. He had, it must be remembered, not so much to maintain his personal authority nor that of his sovereign, but first and chiefly, to uphold the honour of God and to prove to his king, to Naaman, and so, in the end, to the Syrian monarch, that the Lord Jehovah was the God of all the earth, and that there was no other God but He. He had to show that this One God was a God who would not refuse a suppliant, even of another and an idolatrous nation; that He would hear his prayer and grant his request without money or price; and that the only return He asked was the grateful worship of the heart. The opportunity was a great one and Elisha took it at the flood. He did not come to court himself, but, with the dignity which became the occasion, sent a messenger to the king to reprove him for the fear which had led him to rend his clothes, and to bid him send Naaman to him in order that he might learn that there was a prophet in Israel.

So Naaman took his journey to see Elisha. It was somewhat humiliating for a great man such as he was to be obliged to go to the prophet, instead of having the prophet summoned to his presence, as would no doubt have been done at home. However, this was Israel and not Syria. The thing had to be done, so he would do it in style, with the *éclat* due to his position. He drove up to the humble dwelling of Elisha in his magnificent equipage, with prancing horses, preceded, no doubt, by a *saïs*, or running footman, and accompanied by his lackeys. He had, however, to wait outside, as no Elisha came to the door; and now the discipline of Naaman begins. We are familiar with the story, how Elisha, who did not even grant him an interview, merely sent a messenger to tell him

to bathe seven times in the Jordan ; how, though much crest-fallen and annoyed, he was induced to do so ; how instantly and completely he was healed ; and how, now a humble and grateful man, he returned to the prophet's house to render thanks for the inestimable boon of health.

This time, Elisha comes out to receive his acknowledgments, because it was an occasion for publicity, the Name of the Lord having to be exalted, as it had already been vindicated.

In the presence of his men, and before all and sundry there gathered together, Naaman makes public announcement of his renunciation of all other gods and his determination to worship in future Jehovah alone, And now, he begs, let the prophet accept a present—a blessing, as he calls it, or what we should term an honorarium.

But Naaman has something yet to be taught. First, that the God of Israel is a giving God, who delights in mercy and whose gifts are gifts of grace. And next, that His prophet is like Himself, above all mercenary motives, unworldly, and rejoicing in ministering the gifts of the Almighty to all in need. Elisha solemnly declares that he will receive nothing whatever in return for the gift of God.

So Naaman starts on his journey homewards.

If only things are allowed to remain as they are, all will be well. Naaman will have learned a lesson of grace on the part of God and disinterestedness on the part of His servant, which he will never forget.

But let us remember that in this story we are east of Suez. We are concerned with Orientals and Eastern ways. They are not like our Western ideas ; least of all like those of Englishmen.

Those who have travelled in Palestine tell us that, when you visit an Eastern gentleman and he shows you objects of art and beauty amongst his possessions, if you express admiration for them, he at once presents them to you. "Take it," he says, "it is yours," and take it you must. But when you have left the house and are proceeding on your way, a servant comes after you to bring the present back. The Oriental does not mean exactly what he says. Ephron the Hittite did not really mean to present Abraham with the field and cave of Machpelah, when he said he did. Nor did Araunah the Jebusite really intend to present King David with his threshing-floor gratis, when he offered it to him. It is the formula

in the East. I give it to you ; but then, you know, you do your part, *bien entendu*.

It remained then to be seen whether anything of this sort was to be carried out upon Naaman. We know well enough that, so far as Elisha himself was concerned, nothing was farther from his thoughts. Nothing would induce him to accept a fee for his services. Like Abraham, he would accept nothing, from a thread to a shoe-latchet. God must have all the glory.

But there was some one else to be reckoned with. The entourage of a great man is not always so disinterested as himself. Elisha had a boy, as they call them, that is, a servant, and this person was destined to play an essential part in the story. Gehazi was a thorough Oriental, and he had the characteristics of his race. They are fond of gifts and inclined to covetousness ; they are given to duplicity, and they can all make up a story to suit their purpose. Gehazi had all these characteristics in a high degree.

He had been present at the great interview between Naaman and Elisha, and had marvelled to think that his master should have thrown away such an opportunity. He had seen Naaman take out his bags of money and had, with regret, watched him put them away again.

Now, then, was his chance—now or never. In a few minutes it would be too late. “ Behold,” he said to himself, “ my master has let off this foreign grandee very cheaply. He brought him a present, enough to make him a rich man for the rest of his life. If I had what Elisha refused, I could purchase an olive-yard and a vineyard and flocks of sheep and herds of oxen. I could have men-servants and women-servants, and could go about in fine clothing for the rest of my time. If I run after Naaman at once, I may not get all that he offered Elisha, but I shall get something ; and, by God, I will do it.”

So Gehazi set off at top speed, and he was not long in overtaking Naaman, for in that country the roads are very bad and carriages can only travel at a comparatively slow rate.

Naaman saw him coming, and probably said to himself : “ I thought as much ! Here comes the prophet’s servant. His refusal to take a fee was all a pretence, of course. He is just like the rest of them. He sends his man after me. Well, I have good cause to be grateful to him, and he is welcome to whatever he asks.”

Noblesse oblige. So Naaman, like the thorough gentleman he was, stopped his coachman and got out of his carriage, out of respect to the messenger of the prophet. After passing the usual greetings, Gehazi tells him the story about the two young prophets who have just arrived from Mount Ephraim. Elisha will be very greatly obliged if Naaman will give *them* a talent of silver and two changes of garments.

Now this story did not deceive Naaman at all. We may venture to say that it was not intended to deceive him. Naaman never for an instant believed it and Gehazi never for an instant thought he did. Such stories are well understood as devices to save your face. Naaman was quite expecting something of the sort, intended to lead up to a request for money and money's worth. What Naaman did *not* understand was that Gehazi was acting on his own initiative and playing for his own hand. He imagined that Elisha had sent him and that the master, and not the man, would be the recipient of whatever gifts he sent. *That* was where Naaman was taken in, not by the got-up fable about the two young prophets. However, he really wished to reward Elisha, and though Gehazi had asked only for a talent of silver, about £150, he begs him to accept twice as much. "Pray take *two* talents." So the bags come out again and the talents, in rings of silver, are tied up in them and carried by Naaman's own men to a secret place indicated by Gehazi, while Naaman went on his way.

But oh, the pity of it! Gehazi has spoilt Elisha's work. All that the prophet had done to show the Syrian general what the God of Israel was like, how good, how gracious, how willing to bestow His blessings upon all who sought Him, even from far countries and alien races, because He was the God of all the earth and all mankind—all is rendered of no avail by the covetousness and treachery of one man. He has, as we should say, "given away" his master, and done so without any justification in fact. Worse still, he has misrepresented the Lord, whom Elisha had so faithfully and so nobly represented. And may we not add, that he had injured the good effect which would have been produced upon the King of Syria by the favour granted to his servant Naaman? At all events, the sense of gratitude felt by the King of Syria was not strong enough to prevent his attacking the Israelite king again, for we read that he did so, in the very next chapter.

It was no wonder, then, that Elisha visited the crime of Gehazi so severely. It was not a punishment for *lying*. That is an offence which is let off lightly in the East. Besides, as we have already seen, Gehazi's story was not intended to be believed. Nor was it a punishment simply and solely for *covetousness*. Covetousness is indeed a great sin ; but Gehazi was not the only covetous man of his day. Elisha would have had more than enough to do if he had visited with leprosy, or any other penalty, all the liars and covetous persons in Israel.

But it was that he had been entrusted with the honour of the prophet because he was his own servant, and had been false to the trust ; that he represented Elisha to Naaman, while Elisha himself represented God ; and so, by his unfaithfulness, the Name of the Lord was dishonoured and perhaps the soul of Naaman injured. He had loved, like Balaam, the wages of unrighteousness ; he had taken the talents of the Syrian leper. Now, then, he should take the leprosy with the talents, that, as Naaman had seen that there was no God in all the earth but in Israel, and that this God was a God of mercy and grace, so Gehazi should learn, and all other men should learn through him, that the God of Israel is a God of judgment and that He will not give away His honour to another, nor suffer His Name to be polluted.

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