

Jude 1:11 (William John Hocking, Editor) 211605

The Believer's Monthly Magazine: Volume 3, Silhouette: Jephthah's Daughter. (1:11)

THE persistent misfortune of Jephthah descended to his daughter. She had shared his wanderings, dishonor and poverty, and now when at last the tide was turned, and her father returning triumphant from the great battle against the Ammonites, as she goes forth to meet him she must have been appalled at his horror-stricken appearance. "He rent his garments and said, Alas, my daughter thou hast brought me very low." Then she hears of his rash vow and his terrible purpose.

The effort to tone down the sacrifice of Jephthah's daughter to meaning mere seclusion has quite failed. It was based upon an alternative reading in the margin of the old Translation which never had the slightest ground for acceptance. If only her seclusion were meant, that would not account for Jephthah's horror and despair. It is quite beside the question to say that God does approve of human sacrifices. Of course He does not, and of course equally there is no word in the Scripture that gives the slightest sanction to Jephthah's action. The Scripture does indeed commend a man who keeps a vow to his own hurt but not one who keeps a vow to the hurt of another. Nor can any vow justify an action unlawful or morally wrong. However, Jephthah was neither the first nor the last man whom the inscrutable wisdom of the Omniscient has allowed to form and carry out a rash and disastrous purpose, impelled by good—even the best—motives.

His daughter accepts and submits to the position at once. She wastes no word in trying to turn him from his purpose; she knows he is not the kind of man for that. She only says, "My father, since thou has opened thy mouth unto the Lord, do to me according to that which has proceeded out of thy mouth; forasmuch as the Lord hath taken vengeance for thee of thine enemies, even of the children of Ammon." If any should think that the last clause sounds harsh, from such a maiden's lips let them consider that the light of Christianity had not shone upon her and consider how frightful in vile and fiendish cruelty the conduct of the Ammonites had been, as afterward described in Amos 1:13. Since her country is delivered she is willing to perish, like that fair daughter of Agamemnon, who says to her mother, "Thou baredst me not for thyself but for all the Greeks." She only asks to be allowed to go for two months on the mountains before the blow falls. Her father says "Go." Had he a lingering hope that she might take the occasion to flee and evade the horror that awaited? One could not blame him if he had, but in truth the grave strength with which both father and daughter deal with the matter seems to preclude the idea. At any rate she, whilst having plenty of opportunity to do so, did not escape, but returned with exactly the same heroism which has made the name of Regulus age-honored, but which has never, that I remember, been noticed in her case. At the appointed time, Jephthah fulfils his disastrous vow and then we know what he lost: not only his daughter; not merely his only child; but such a daughter as this.

It is nothing strange that a woman should suffer; suffering is her portion: nor that a maiden of beautiful character in the midst of triumph and the efflorescence of hope should be stricken down by calamity and death; that is too frequent for more than passing mention. But what is worthy of our contemplation—though it, also, is too common to excite much special interest—is the spirit of calm and perfect heroism in which this maiden accepted her terrible destiny. It is common enough to see some gentle and fragile woman bearing day after day without a murmur the most appalling sufferings; common enough to see one voluntarily enter into some hideous danger of noisome pestilence or endure uncomplainingly "the weariest and most loathed earthly life that age, ache, penury and imprisonment can lay on nature," because of her love or sense of duty or loyalty. When the "Black Death" raged in Europe in 1348 and slew twenty millions of people, there never was (says Prof. H. Morley) any difficulty in filling the places of the nurses as they died in the hospitals. In those ages, too, when the church provided a ritual for the sequestration of lepers like a burial service, the lepers were usually followed into their horrible exile by their faithful wives. When the Count Alberti was doomed for life to those mines where corruption commences its dreadful disfigurement at once, corroding the joints and poisoning the blood, he was followed into that charnal house by his young, beautiful and delicately nurtured betrothed. How many millions of Hindoo wives have voluntarily ascended the funeral pyres and let the flames devour them!

The characteristic of woman's heroism is patient submission to suffering, whereas that of men is necessarily of a more aggressive nature—chiefly active whilst hers is passive. I do not say that one is better than the other, but that each is best for the exigencies of the kind of life for which it is designed. The valor of Jephthah and the power of his arm are called for in the trampling throngs of the marshalled hosts at the van of the army. His daughter's fortitude is called for elsewhere to skew that "Sorrow and silence are strong, and patient endurance is God-like." Common enough too. Yet though it be as common as the sunshine, even so shall it not cease to be as beautiful. The story of Alceus going down into death for Admetus is a very old one, and a very new one too—new every day.

So she lived, and died; in whom filial love and obedience, lofty devotion, heroism and patriotism mingled in a harmony that seemed more in chord with heaven than with earth; yet we in our blindness are prone to think that such a life is more needed here than there, and to wonder that such as she are so often taken early from us, since we so sorely need them. Well may the maidens of Gilead bewail her and the shepherds sing, —

J.C.B.