

Elisha

By Arthur Quiller-Couch

A rough track--something between a footpath and a water course--led down the mountain-side through groves of evergreen oak, and reached the Plain of Jezreel at the point where the road from Samaria and the south divided into two--its main stem still climbing due north towards Nazareth, while the branch bent back eastward and by south across the flat, arable country to join the Carmel road at Megiddo.

An old man came painfully down the mountain-track. He wore a white burnoos, and a brown garment of camel's hair, with a leathern belt that girt it high about his bare legs. He carried a staff, and tapped the ground carefully before planting his feet. It was the time of barley harvest, and a scorching afternoon. On the burnt plain below, the road to Megiddo shone and quivered in the heat. But he could not see it. Cataract veiled his eyes and blurred the whole landscape for them.

The track now wound about a foot-hill that broke away in a sharp slope on his right and plunged to a stony ravine. Once or twice he paused on its edge and peered downward, as if seeking for a landmark. He was leaning forward to peer again, but suddenly straightened his body and listened.

Far down in the valley a solitary dog howled. But the old man's ear had caught another sound, that came from the track, not far in front.

Cling--cling--clink! Cling--clink!

It was the sound of hammering; of stone on metal.

Cling--cling--clink!

He stepped forward briskly, rounded an angle of rock, and found himself face to face with a man--as well as he could see, a tall man--standing upright by a heap of stones on the left edge of the path.

"May it be well with you, my son: and with every man who repairs a path for the traveller. But tell me if the way be unsafe hereabouts? For my eyes are very dim, and it is now many years since last I came over the hills to Shunem."

The man did not reply.

"--So many years that for nigh upon an hour I have been saying, 'Surely here should Shunem come in sight--or here--its white walls among the oaks below--the house of Miriam of Shunem'. But I forget the curtain on my eyes, and the oaks will have grown tall."

Still there came no answer. Slightly nettled, the old man went on--

"My son, it is said 'To return a word before hearing the matter is folly.' But also, 'Every man shall kiss the lips of him who answereth fit words.' And further, 'To the aged every stranger shall be a staff, nor shall he twice inquire his way.' Though I may not scan thy face, thou scannest mine; and I, who now am blind, have been a seer in Israel."

As he ceased, another figure--a woman's--stepped out, as it seemed to him, from behind the man; stepped forward and touched him on the arm.

"Hail, then, Elisha, son of Shaphat!"

"Thou knowest? . . ."

"Who better than Miriam of Shunem? Put near thy face and look."

"My eyes are very dim."

"And the oaks are higher than Shunem. My face has changed: my voice also."

"For the moment it was strange to me. As I came along I was reckoning thy years at three-score."

"Mayst add five."

"We may not complain. And thy son, how fares he?"

"That is he, behind us. He is a good son, and leaves his elders to speak first. If we sit awhile and talk he will wait for us."

"And thy house and the farm-steading?"

The woman threw a glance down towards the valley, and answered quickly--

"My master, shall we not sit awhile? The track here looks towards the plain. Sit, and through my eyes thou shalt see again distant Carmel and the fields between that used so to delight thee. Ah! not there!"

The old man had made as if to seat himself on one of the larger stones on the edge of the heap. But she prevented him quickly; was gone for a moment; and returned, rolling a moss-covered boulder to the right-hand of the path. The prophet sat himself down on this, and she on the ground at his feet.

"Just here, from my window below, I saw thee coming down the mountain with Gehazi, thy servant, on that day when it was promised to me that I should bear a son."

He nodded.

"For as often as we passed by," he said, "we found food and a little room prepared upon the wall. 'Thou hast been careful for us,' said I, 'with all this care. What is to be done for thee? Shall I speak to the King for thee, or to the captain of the host?' Thine answer was, 'I dwell in Shunem, among my own people.'"

"There is no greener spot in Israel."

"'But,' said my servant Gehazi, 'Every spot is greener where a child plays.' Therefore this child was promised thee."

She said, "But once a year the plain is yellow and not green; yellow away to the foot of Carmel; and that is in this season of the barley harvest. It was on such a day as this that my son fell in the field among the reapers, and his father brought him in and set him on my knees. On such a day as this I left him dead, and saddled the ass and rode between the same yellow fields to Megiddo, and thence towards Carmel, seeking thee. See the white road winding, and the long blue chine yonder, by the sea. By and by, when the sun sinks over it, the blue chine and the oaks beneath will turn to one dark colour; and that will be the hour that I met thee on the slope, and lighted off the ass and caught thee by the feet. As yet it is

all parched fields and sky of brass and a white road running endless--
endless."

"But what are these black shadows that pass between me and the sun?"

"They are crows, my master."

"What should they do here in these numbers?"

The woman rose and flung a stone at the birds. Seating herself again, she
said--

"Below, the reapers narrow the circle of the corn; and there are conies
within the circle. The kites and crows know it."

"But that day of which thou hast spoken--it ended in gladness. The Lord
restored thy son to thee."

"Thou rather, man of God."

"My daughter, His mercy was very great upon thee. Speak no blasphemy,
thou of all women."

"The Lord had denied me a son; but thou persuadedst Him, and He gave
me one. Again, the Lord had taken my child in the harvest-field, but on
thy wrestling gave him back. And again the Lord meditated to take my
child by famine, but at thy warning I arose and conveyed him into the
land of the Philistines, nor returned to Shunem till seven years' end. My
master, thou art a prophet in Israel, but I am thinking--"

She broke off, rose, and flung another stone at the birds.

"My daughter, think not slightly of God's wisdom."

"Nay, man of God, I am thinking that God was wiser than thou or I."

The old prophet rose from his stone. His dull eyes tried to read her face.
She touched his hand.

"Come, and see."

The figure of the man still stood, three paces behind them, upright against the hillside, as when Elisha had first turned the corner and come upon him. But now, led by Miriam, the prophet drew quite close and peered. Dimly, and then less dimly, he discerned first that the head had fallen forward on the breast, and that the hair upon the scalp was caked in dry blood; next, that the figure did not stand of its own will at all, but was held upright to a stout post by an iron ring about the neck and a rope about the waist. He put out a finger and touched the face. It was cold.

"Thy son?"

"They stoned him with these stones. His wife stood by."

"The Syrians?"

"The Syrians. They went northward before noon, taking her. The plain is otherwise burnt than on the day when I sought across it for his sake to Carmel."

"Well did King David entreat the hand of the Lord rather than the hand of man. I had not heard of thy son's marrying."

"Five years ago he went down with a gift to Philistia, to them that sheltered us in the famine. He brought back this woman."

"She betrayed him?"

"He heard her speak with a Syrian, and fled up the hill. From the little window in the wall--see, it smokes yet--she called and pointed after him. And they ran and overtook him. With this iron they fastened him, and with these stones they stoned him. Man of God, I am thinking that God was wiser than thou or I."

The old man stood musing, and touched the heap of stones gently, stone after stone, with the end of his staff.

"He was wiser."

Cling--cling--clink!

Miriam had taken up a stone, and with it was hammering feebly, impotently, upon the rivets in the iron band.

As the sun dropped below Carmel the prophet cast down his staff and stretched out two groping hands to help her.