

# THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY.

VOL. III.

OCTOBER—NOVEMBER, 1923.

Nos. 10 & 11.

## Crowned Dirt and Profanity.

PROF. W. H. T. DAU, St. Louis, Mo.

An unlovable spirit is revealed occasionally in the *Nation*. Formerly the refined, exquisitely critical, high-toned weekly visitor to exclusive circles of cultured Americans, the stanch and fearless defender of the great American liberties, the arbiter in the realm of literature, art, drama, statesmanship, whose praise was coveted and prized by men of letters and men of affairs, while its censure was dreaded as a blight to budding genius, this journal has lately championed radicalism and modernism, boldly advocated birth control, and lent itself to spreading propaganda literature for this destructive sexual aberration in modern life. Its most revolting escapade, however, was the selection, on February 14, of Stephen Vincent Benét's *King David* as the *Nation's* prize poem for 1923. The poem has for its theme the nasty David-Bathsheba incident. It was selected from four thousand manuscripts by about fifteen hundred writers. If *King David* was the best in this lot, we have no desire to see the second best or the third best.

The poem is in six cantos. Episode No. 1 pictures David surfeited with wealth and power, singing to his "hook-nosed harp":

The Lord is a jealous God!  
His violent vengeance is swift and sharp!  
And the Lord is King above all gods!

Blest be the Lord, through years untold,  
The Lord who has blessed me a thousandfold!

Cattle and concubines, corn and hives,  
Enough to last me a dozen lives.

Plump good women with noses flat,  
Marrowful blessings, weighty and fat.

I wax in His peace like a pious gourd,  
The Lord God is a pleasant God,  
Break mine enemy's jaws, O Lord!  
For the Lord is King above all gods!

*Ennai* seizes the snug despot. Life is nothing but eating and drinking. His poetry has lost its *élan*. His victories are become stale affairs.

My wives are comely as long-haired goats,  
But I would not care if they cut their throats!

Where are the maids of the desert tents  
With lips like flagons of frankincense?

The great national heroes of his younger years are all gone, and he is disgusted with his lonely grandeur and splendor.

Would God I had died in battle beside them!

In a thunderclap the Lord answers the pleasure-satiated darling of fortune whom He has raised up ("The Lord God is a crafty God") — and sends into the king's consciousness a violent desire that stings like a thorn and a fiery bee. He mounts to the roof of his haughty palace to survey the great, wide world.

Episode No. 2 pictures to the sensuous instinct ("The Lord God is a mighty God") the voluptuous vision of bathing Bathsheba ("And the Lord is King above all gods") before the lustful eyes of the spying king and the phenomena of rising desire and prompt resolve. A servant is dispatched to Uriah, the Hittite, at the battle-front.

In Episode No. 3 the cunning conferences between the grim warrior Uriah, "a jealous gentleman, hard to cuckold," and the lecherous king, David's bland entreaties, the delectable comfits which he offers to the Hittite, the drinking-bouts in which he engages with him — all fail to affect the stalwart man of duty. "And still Uriah kept from his wife." David becomes nervous, and his poetry shows signs of it. At last he makes the direct suggestion to Uriah after he has received him with a pious greeting. Uriah frowns upon the suggestion and voices a stern refusal: —

While the hosts of God still camp in a field,  
My house to me is a garden sealed.

Then, with the roar of a lion, David issues the order to Uriah to go and "fill his belly with blood and war," which is received with grateful rejoicing. A pliable captain is dispatched to the general at the front, with the order that Uriah must die by treachery: —

In the next assault when the fight roars high, —  
And the Lord God is a hostile God, —  
Retire from Uriah that he may die.  
For the Lord is King above all gods.

Episode No. 4. David is twanging his harp to "the friskiest ditties ever made," when a messenger arrives with the news of

Uriah's death. The king forsakes his frolicsome lyre and rends his clothes for the death of the kings slain in battle, but at the same time

he smiled for joy,  
The sly wide smile of a wicked boy.

The powerful grace of the Lord prevails!  
He has cracked Uriah between his nails!

His blessings are mighty, they shall not cease!  
And my days henceforth shall be days of peace!

He prepares himself for the coveted enjoyment. Bathsheba becomes his.

Episode No. 5. Bathsheba is *enceinte*. ("The Lord is a jealous God!") Her condition is carefully described. ("The Lord is King above all gods!") The wry and dying prophet Nathan comes in to the king and tells the parable of the poor man's single ewe-lamb. When he has roused the king's indignation, he hurls the charge at the king, barking as a jackal: "Thou art the man!" The king rises in a towering rage, but collapses under the stern glance of Nathan and cries:—

"My sin hath found me! Oh, I repent!"  
Answered Nathan, that talkative Jew:  
"For many great services, comely and true,  
The Lord of Mercy shall pardon you."

But at the same time the prophet announces that the offspring of wicked desire shall be blighted by God's curse. The message hurls David upon the rocks, and he lies there in dust and ashes, howling vain entreaties to the Lord God, a jealous God, and King above all gods.

Episode No. 6. In a week of painful sorrowing David is abased from his lust and pride.

He arose at last. It was ruddy day,  
And his sins like water had washed away.  
He cleansed and anointed, took fresh apparel,  
And worshiped the Lord in a tuneful carol.  
His servants, bearing the child to bury,  
Marveled greatly to see him so merry.  
He spoke to them mildly as mid-May weather:  
"The child and my sin are perished together. . . .  
Why should I sorrow for what was pain?  
A cherished grief is an iron chain."

The old harp is ringing again with spirited melodies.

His soul smelled pleasant as rain-wet clover:  
"I have sinned and repented, and that's all over.  
"In his dealings with heathen the Lord is hard,  
But the humble soul is His spikenard."

Soon his thoughts rove again to Bathsheba. He must go and "soothe her heart with a little psalm."

Being but a woman, a while she grieved,  
But at last she was comforted and conceived.

In due time ("The Lord God is a mighty God!") Solomon is born. ("And the Lord is King above all gods!")

What the public is to admire in this poem is most likely the daring psychology attempted in the dramatic portrayal of that sin by which David "gave great occasion to the enemies of the Lord to blaspheme." 2 Sam. 12, 14. In the admiring endorsements of the poem which the *Nation* published in its issue of May 2 many other "excellencies" are pointed out. One rejoices that at last Uriah, the Hittite, is "avenged upon the sweet singer of Israel, who was a groveling hypocrite," and that "the sensibilities of many people are wounded, who know that men are impulsive and weak, but who believe that there are compensating Godlike qualities by virtue of which some men are great." Another, a woman, thinks that "the Bible is so pitifully dead to plain, ordinary people, that is, to those who do not read it, that turning David from a psalm-singing angel into a live, lovable, erring human being is a real achievement.

'Why should I sorrow for what was pain?  
A cherished grief is an iron chain.'

Wise old thing who wouldn't have any insides! Remorse disintegrates the will; it keeps you from doing something about it, and, among mortals anyhow, breeds furtiveness, pettiness, and cruelty." Another writes: "I use King David as a test to discover whether my churchgoing friends possess an independent moral judgment or not. If they do, they praise the poem. If not, they defend David. It requires courage and a clear sense of ethical values to declare that the Lord's anointed, besides the sin which he confessed, sometimes practised a species of hypocrisy." This party also remembers that it is not so very long since he heard David's refrain: "Break mine enemy's jaw, O Lord, for Thou art King above all gods!" (Emperor Bill, whom we "canned"?) Another thinks Benét's poem "is, first of all, deeply reverent. It scoffs with righteous cleverness at outworn lauds of the lusty Killer-King and his approving Deity; it reverences the overtone that not through the stab in the back can godliness grow. Secondly, it is delicate and restrained, especially when compared with its force. It took three thousand years for a poet to discover David's 'hook-nosed harp'; one among many flashes of wonder." Another

calls the poem "big stuff," though without "beauty and insight"; as a rule, he does not like "the negro camp-meeting style of poetry," but "makes an exception for King David."

Only a few seem to have seen the dirty trick which Benét has played, not only on revealed religion and Christianity, but on common decency in literature. One says: "Benét's posture of irony is absolutely in fashion; but this fashion and the classic narrative form of King David are singularly ill-fitting." He points out that Benét has used "the robust carnality of the Old Testament not as a basis for a real and spiritual substance, but as the substance itself." Another, a woman, arrays Benét's production against the Bible biography of David and says: "If Jehovah were like most of our biographers, He would have kept quiet about David's great sin. This is just one proof that the Bible history of David is divine. Suppose one should write a lot of verse playing up some of the baser deeds of Benét's (if he has any) and call the poem Stephen Vincent Benét. I wonder if he would be willing to let it stand as a representation of his character? Certainly not. Then why call this poem King David when it only pictures David in his greatest sin, which he repented and atoned for — was punished and forgiven?" Another, again a woman, says: "That this poem is the best shows to what degradation the art of Lowell and Browning and Tennyson has fallen in these days, when brain power seems to be concentrated on science. . . . The whole poem reflects the type of mind of the Russian atheist — without pity and devoid of reverence." A withering reply is sent the editor from New York: "If this poem had been written for some college magazine or for the 'Ten Story Book' or for *La Vie Parisienne*, it would be bad enough, but to be vaunted as a prize poem for the *Nation*, which is supposed to be eligible for a man's household, calls for protest by your readers. This poem can serve no good purpose. Obscenity, when necessary to point a moral or even adorn a tale, is permissible in literature. But this is merely sophomoric rehash of a moral that has been beautifully portrayed in the Bible without obscenity. This poem contains no new theme, no new plot, and in fact does not even follow correctly the original tale. What effect do you suppose this collection of obscenity, irreverence, and utterly bad poetical meter would have on some sweet young girl or upon the cultured ladies of any household? My advice to you, wholly unsought, I am free to admit, would be to have the awarders of this prize poem psychoanalyzed."

What has been said by the foregoing critics is to the point and lays bare to a great extent the unworthiness of Benét's purpose or achievement. The justice of some of this criticism seems to be acknowledged by the editor. But the worst feature, from the Christian viewpoint, of this laureated scandal, is the caricature which it has made of the God of the Scriptures and His most endearing attribute: forgiving mercy. Benét's Jehovah is a Jew-god, a biased tribal deity. His character is base, for he incites to lewdness and rewards his selfish and aggressive darlings with the means to satisfy their lewd cravings. The mock reverence which the poet parenthetically weaves into his lines for this Hebrew Jove is nothing but profanity. There is no true conception of the Biblical view of sin, the sorrow of sin, the removal of sin, and the peace and joy of forgiveness, with its hallowing influence on the lives of the pardoned. Rather these fundamental truths of the religion even of the Old Testament are parodied and vilified by the poet. His unsavory effort is a desecration of the heart of Christianity: justification by grace through faith in the mercy of the Redeemer God, who, indeed, was the God of David.

Nathan's remark concerning the effect of David's sin on the world that is hostile to God has obtained a new verification by this poet and by those who have awarded him his honor. This will continue to happen to the end of time. The *Nation* and its beribboned songster and his bawdy-house epic take their place in a procession of antichristian scandal-mongers that wends its way through the ages. The commendations which the paper has received have roused echoes from kindred spirits. The seeds which it has sown, as it has sown much other seed of radicalism, are ripening apace, and what will the harvest be?

---