

RANTS AND UNDERPANTS

A RETELLING OF THE STORY OF NAAMAN & ELISHA

PART OF THE 'ONLY A BOY' SERIES

It started out just like any other day. The head servant wakened me before the sun was up. I washed, dressed, quickly downing some fruit and a bit of yesterday's leftover bread before starting work. I was a junior servant at the King's Palace and I had many duties in the Royal Household. There were animals to tend, supplies to store, gardens to weed, pots to wash, beds to make, flowers to arrange, wood to collect and any number of other things that may take the King's fancy. Some days, work was quite interesting, but most of the time it was pretty boring. Of course, being a servant meant I had to stay alert at all times and by the time I got to sleep late at night, I would usually be worn out.

The weather in Samaria can't make up its mind. In summer it is very hot and dry, but in winter it gets really cold and wet, especially out among the hills. Inside the Palace however, it stays fairly cool all year, due to the thick stone walls, cold marble pillars and mosaic tiled floors.

One day, shortly after the King had eaten breakfast, one of the Palace guards rushed in making a lot of noise. 'King.....important visitor...huge horses.' He blurted out what he wanted to say in such a rush that the King had to tell him to slow down and start again. I thought it was quite funny because his cheeks were bright red, he had sweat running down his face and he was puffing so hard from running he was struggling to get his words out. Also his uniform was totally mucked up, red and gold bits of tunic hanging scruffily around his belt.

An important visitor from the nearby country of Syria had arrived in town and was heading for the Palace. It emerged that he was the Captain of the Syrian Army and he wanted to see our King immediately. Surrounding him were a number of large bodyguards and our townsfolk peered from the safety of their houses to see what all the fuss was about. Normally, unannounced visits were refused but we didn't really want to argue with the Syrians. I wanted to see what the visitor looked like but had to wait until I had prepared the room for the meeting.

Servants scurried ant-like in the main reception chamber, lighting torches, tidying and arranging cushions in the seating area and building a fire to drive out the damp and overnight cold of the room.

The visitor was called Naaman and he rode an enormous white Arabian stallion. His armour gleamed brightly in the sun and his blue cloak and beautifully made gold and green garments looked very expensive. Soon, flanked by three members of his personal guard, who all looked pretty 'tough', he was ushered into the chamber and offered refreshments – cool fruit juices, breads, olives, dates and fresh ewes milk cheese.

Then the King arrived.

He had not been expecting to see anyone this early and was grumpy about having to get dressed up for a meeting. Besides, he wasn't really a "morning" person. However, the Syrians had fought us many times and nowadays we tried to avoid conflict and treat them with respect. So the King greeted Naaman with a slight smile and a wave of the hand.

As it was my turn to be on duty in court that day, I saw everything that happened. Part of my job was making sure that there was enough cool water to wash dusty feet and also to provide water and fruit juice to drink. Of course, I had to make sure I washed my hands between duties and didn't mix the waters up.

Naaman had suffered from a serious skin disease for years and the Syrian King had sent him to be healed in our country. One of our own people, a young Israelite slave-girl, had told them about the prophet from Samaria and suggested that he try to visit him. She believed that Naaman could be healed and had told Naaman's wife for whom she worked. Naaman wasn't sure at first, but was so desperate to be healed that he asked his King to send him with a letter of introduction. My master was surprised and a bit shocked, because the letter was more like an order than a request. Suspicion gave way to rising anger and the King's face grew red as he huffed and puffed gruffly.

'Who does this Syrian King think I am? Do I have the power over this man's health? What happens if he doesn't get healed? What happens if he infects us all with his disease? And just who does the Syrian King think he is bossing about?' ... Rant! Rant! Rant!

I was confused. Here was a man who was ill and one of our own people had spoken about the possibility of a cure. She believed in God's prophet and had tried to help Naaman. On the other hand, I could also see that my King felt nothing was guaranteed and that the history between our nations made him worry that there would not be a happy outcome.

Suddenly the King jumped to his feet!

With no effort to hide his feelings about being put on the spot, he clearly didn't enjoy being told what to do by this foreigner. He stomped about, annoyed, throwing things in a tantrum and finally ripping at his clothes, which was a bit extreme. In fact, he got so upset he had to leave the room and didn't come back for over an hour. Stunned, the servants just looked at each other, then continued to serve fruit and drink. Hiding our embarrassment, we tried to act as if this was all quite normal behaviour. At least most of the outburst was in Hebrew so Naaman may not have fully understood what was said, but you could cut the atmosphere with a sword.

I wondered what he was thinking, but he just stood there like the rest of us, waiting. He didn't say anything – he just waited.

I was disappointed by our King's attitude because I had brought up to believe all men were equal and shouldn't be despised because they were not Jews. Surely this man deserved some sympathy instead of being treated like a second-class person. He had come to our city with the best of intentions only to be "entertained" by the childish tantrums of the King of Samaria. Normally people would not have dared to treat Naaman this way because the Syrians could be quite brutal and this man controlled their army. Wars had started over hurt pride and careless words before.

In the hills around the city, it was hard to keep things secret. People could see who had crossed the desert and would have worked out what was happening. So it was no surprise that Elisha the prophet knew.

Now Elisha was a very strange character. He was quite old and had a bald head and a long white goatee. Spending each day alone in the hills with only a servant for company, he was like a hermit, a Holy man who had been around since the days of the great prophet Elijah, who caused all sorts of trouble for our last king, Ahab. Elisha lived simply and owned little, yet he had an amazing reputation for performing miracles and for possessing great knowledge. People said he was twice as powerful as Elijah - as though he had a 'hot-line' to God and whenever he spoke, things usually happened! People tended to stay out of his way as if being so close to God made them feel uncomfortable.

Elisha sent a message for the King. "Send Naaman to me so that he may learn that there is a God in Israel!"

'Now there's going to be fireworks,' I thought. In my excitement I wasn't controlled enough, a little snigger wiggling into the air.

The King shot a disapproving glance in my direction and I wished I could have taken my snigger back, but it was too late. Like a genie that had puffed from a bottle, smoke-like, I couldn't stuff it back in and I knew I was in trouble. However, what happened next really surprised me!

A mischievous smile twitched on my King's face. Then he told me to lead the group out of the door and off to Elisha's house. It wasn't the treatment Naaman had been expecting either. Was he seriously expected to follow a 'junior school' tour guide?

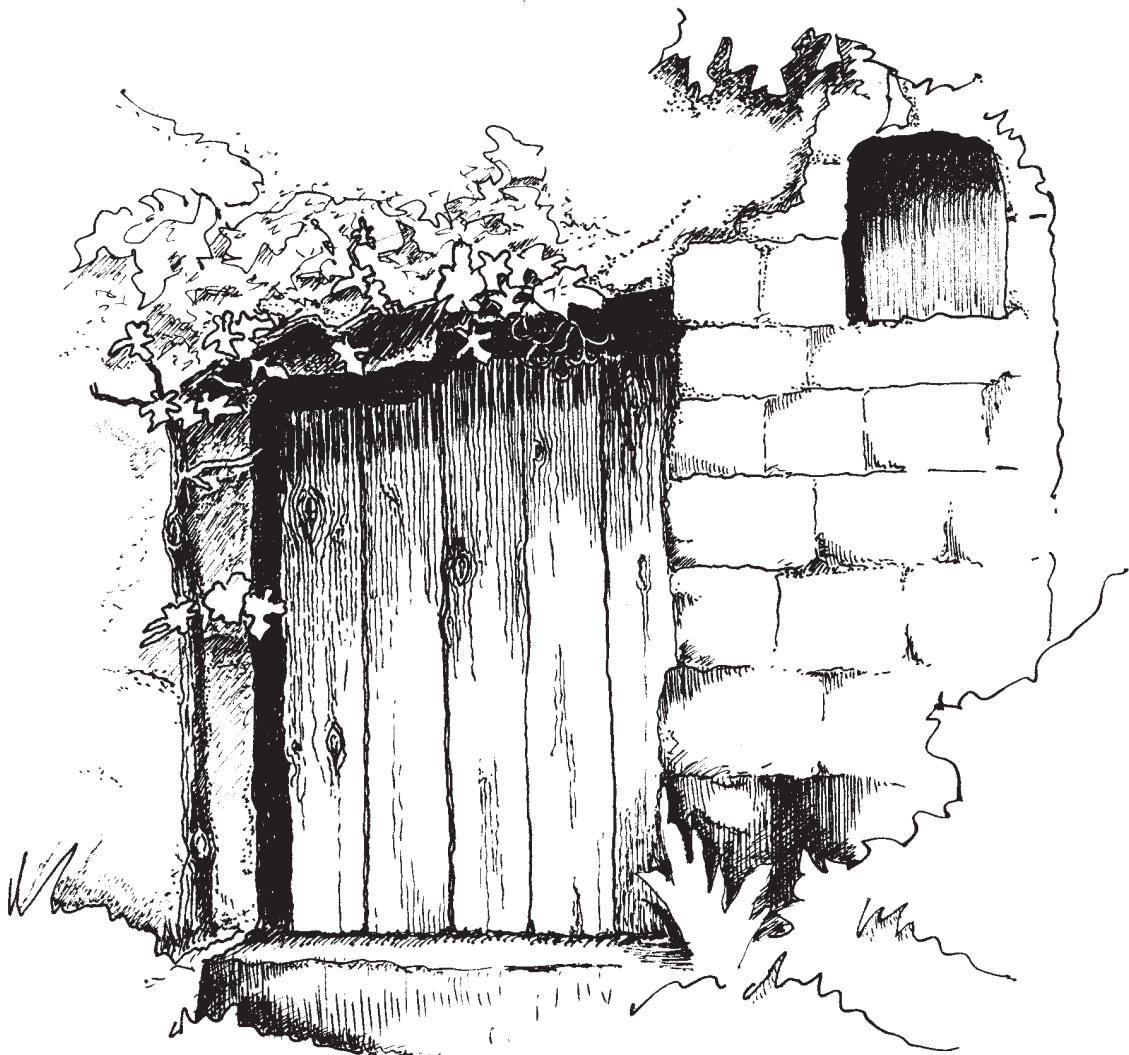
I don't know, but I had been trained to obey orders. 'Do this! Do that!' I didn't dare do otherwise. 'But how should I act?' I wondered. 'Should I say anything?' 'Should I treat him as an outsider?' I wasn't used to having a choice about what I did or thought. I felt I may be expected to act in the same way as my King, but I wasn't comfortable with that because I thought my King had acted badly.

Eventually, I decided my best option would be to treat him with honour. After all, he was obviously a very important man. Besides, he was much bigger than me - so were his guards!

I was only a boy, twelve years high and skinny and my name was Jacob ben Joram. For me, this responsibility was a great honour and I sang inwardly as I led the whole group off down the desert road, walking while they rode. As we travelled, I began talking with one of his guards. In spite of his immense size, he seemed friendly enough and I pointed to lots of interesting views along the way. I had to be careful though, because I didn't want to show him things that could be used against us in some future battle. (I still remembered the last time we fought them).

The King and court nobles thought it was very funny, this great, world-famous Army Captain following a small twelve year old boy down the road - but I didn't think of it that way. Naaman held his head high, proud and full of his own importance, but what happened next soon changed all that.

When we arrived at Elisha's house, no-one would answer the door even though I knocked twice. The Prophet lived in a cave house, cut into the rock face, with a small window and a simple wooden door. Smoke swirled softly from a fire inside, a sure sign that someone was at home.



Spotting a small gong at the side of the door, I banged it very hard with a stick, filling the area with very loud clanging noise. As the ringing died away, we waited silently, exchanging the odd insecure glance. After what seemed a very long time, an old man came out to say "Hello" to us all.

'Why didn't Elisha come out himself?' I wondered. This important Army Captain, with his whole group of companions and bodyguards had ridden for miles to visit Elisha and he wouldn't even get up to answer to the door, but sent his doddering old servant out instead. 'How rude is that?' I thought. 'Especially since Elisha had invited Naaman to visit him in the first place. What would Naaman think? Firstly our King had been really offensive and now this! Why were people so unwelcoming – so hostile?'

I remember feeling nervous and I didn't have long to wait for my fears to be realised. Now it was Naaman's turn to have a tantrum, a rant! "ENOUGH!" His patient calmness, his stuck-up, proud manners, disappeared as fast as a desert rat with a hungry hawk in the sky. "Doesn't he know who I am? Why is he insulting me like this?" he roared. He kicked at the ground, shouting what a 'pitiful' place this was. Then, demanding to see Elisha, he banged on the open door with the hilt of his sword.

At this, the old servant just went back inside and closed the door behind him. I expected that one of the huge guards would soon be told to knock the door off its hinges and my heart was beating hard as I felt the situation was getting dangerously out of control. Instead, everyone stood there in the hot sun for what seemed like an age.

We waited...
Naaman waited...
My mouth dried up...
Nothing!

I reached for the small water sling I carried, but it was nearly empty, a small drop just enough to unlock my tongue. Slowly, the door re-opened. It was the old man again.

He told Naaman to go and take a bath in the River Jordan, not just once, but SEVEN times! "A bath? Ha!" Naaman wanted Elisha to meet with him personally... not to be told to take a bath by his butler! Was this some kind of joke? Was he suggesting that Naaman smelled a bit ripe? What was wrong with the man?

It would be awful enough getting into that slimy sewer of a river once, but SEVEN times! In that water, you were more likely to end up dirtier than before, no matter how many times you washed.

Naaman simply didn't understand and stormed off in the huff! This was ridiculous! He wouldn't do it! The Jordan was a stinking mudbath, full of the gunge that had been churned up during the flood season and the sewage filled silt of the riverbed.

"I haven't come all this way to hear such utter nonsense! If I need a bath, if that's all it takes, there are plenty of clean rivers back home."

I felt a bit sorry for Naaman. I could see his point and was astonished at Elisha's rudeness. Why wouldn't he come out to talk to Naaman?

Naaman's companions were amazed. They had never seen their Captain stand for stuff like this before. Why hadn't he dragged Elisha out? Normally the guards would have dealt with such behaviour, permanently! But they hadn't seen Naaman so frustrated either. He was desperate to be free of his disease and he had tried everything he knew, but these instructions were the height of lunacy!

Eventually, one of his closest advisors went to talk with him. I overheard him asking what it would mean to him to be healed, to be free. If Elisha had asked him to do something heroic, he would have jumped at the chance. But Naaman replied that this stupidity was beneath him. It was a real struggle for him to accept it and I watched him pacing up and down, thinking deeply, lines carving deep furrows in his forehead.

After a long time and a lot more discussion, Naaman finally came back and agreed. Very slowly he took off his uniform, cloak and sword until he stood there in his underwear. He felt like a complete idiot standing in front of everyone in his pants - nice pants, but his pants all the same!

Mud squelched between his toes as he slowly lowered himself into the swirling waters, the disturbance releasing a gut-turning stench. It was awful! His feet sank several inches into the silt and his white linen 'top of the range' underwear was soon stained murky brown. He counted...once, twice, three times...until eventually he had been completely under the water seven times. Spluttering, he spat out a mouthful of the horrible water! Mud stuck in his hair and beard and I'm sure it was up his nose and in his ears too. Fully filthy from head to toe, his skin didn't look any different and we all stared at him sympathetically as he made his way slowly back to dry land, disappointment dragging down his eyes.

Suddenly, as he stepped out of the water, the disease just fell off him in the drips of water draining from his body. "Your skin!" shouted one of his servants, excitedly. "It looks brand new, just like a baby!"

We stood, open-mouthed, as if to speak, but silent. Tears streamed down his face, the result of his obedience leaving streaks where the mud had been. It seemed this Israelite God treated all men equally - there was nothing second-class about this healing. It had nothing to do with who Naaman was but everything to do with who God was, in spite of the rather strange methods.

It was true! Naaman's disease had simply vanished!

Shaking, crying for joy and trying desperately to understand, he knew his eyes were not lying. He had been freed from the prison of his disease. Strangely, in spite of the dirty water and slimy mud that was slithering down his legs, he felt really clean! Humbled and quivering, he made his way back to see the servant.

This time Elisha came out to see him, smiling widely. He hadn't wanted to be offensive before, but had intended to make Naaman choose.

Naaman tried to give Elisha lots of gifts, but he wouldn't accept them. He was so impressed that he promised to serve the God of Israel from then on, even taking home a stinking soil souvenir as a reminder.

There is a saying that pride comes before a fall and Naaman's pride and impatience meant he had nearly walked away, still suffering. I had seen two big men get really mad and frustrated – one who wanted to maintain his own image and sense of importance and one who eventually chose to become humble. Naaman was used to getting his own way by force, but it was only by believing the words of a little servant girl who knew her God and being humble enough to do what he was told, he had been made well. He discovered that God cared about him personally, even though he was an enemy of God's people. He didn't know why. He had often been cruel, but God had not treated him that way. He didn't understand that either. He couldn't understand how great power and great care could both happen at the same time, but he was incredibly thankful that they had. I'm not sure many of us understand that, but as I walked back towards the city, I knew Naaman could never be the same again.