

The King's Cup-Bearer

Amy Catherine Walton

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[Illustration: NEHEMIAH'S MIDNIGHT SURVEY.]

THE

KING'S CUP-BEARER

By

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'Elisha, the Man of Abd-Meholah'

CONTENTS.

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CHAP.

- I. THE CITY OF LILIES
- II. THE KING'S TABLE
- III. THE GOOD HAND
- IV. TO EVERY MAN HIS WORK
- V. THE SWORD AND THE TROWEL
- VI. THE WORLD'S BIBLE
- VII. TRUE TO HIS POST
- VIII. THE PAIDAGOGOS
- IX. THE SECRET OF STRENGTH
- X. THE EIGHTY-FOUR SEALS
- XI. THE BRAVE VOLUNTEERS
- XII. THE HOLY CITY
- XIII. HAVING NO ROOT
- XIV. STRONG MEASURES
- XV. THE OLDEST SIN
- XVI. GOD'S REMEMBRANCE

[Illustration: PLAN OF THE PALACE AT PERSEPOLIS.]

THE KING'S CUP-BEARER

* * * * *

CHAPTER I.

The City of Lilies.

The great Rab-shakeh, magnificently attired in all the brilliancy of Oriental costume, is walking towards the city gate. Above him stretches the deep blue sky of the East, about and around him stream the warm rays of the sun. It is the month of December, yet no cold biting wind meets him, and he needs no warm wraps to shield him from the frost or snow.

The city through which the Rab-shakeh walks is very beautiful; it is the capital of the kingdom of Persia. Its name is Shushan, the City of Lilies, and it is so called from the fields of sweet-scented iris flowers which surround it. It is built on a sunny plain, through which flow two rivers,--the Choaspes and the Ulai; he sees them both sparkling in the sunshine, as they wind through the green plain, sometimes flowing quite close to each other, at one time so near that only two and a half miles lie between them, then wandering farther away only to return again, as if drawn together by some subtle attraction.

Then, in the distance, beyond the plain and beyond the rivers, the great Rab-shakeh sees mountains, for a high mountain range, about twenty-five miles from the city, bounds the eastern horizon. He has good reason to love those high mountains, which rise many thousands of feet above the plain, for even in the hottest weather, when the heat in Shushan would otherwise be unbearable, he can always enjoy the cooling breezes which come from the everlasting snow-fields on the top of that mountain range, and which blow refreshingly over the sultry plain beneath.

The City of Lilies is a very ancient place. It was probably built long before the time of Abraham. We read in Gen. xiv. of a certain Chedorlaomer, King of Elam, who gathered together a number of neighbouring kings, and by means of their assistance invaded Palestine, and took Lot prisoner. This Chedorlaomer probably lived by these very rivers, the Choaspes and the Ulai, and Shushan was the capital city of the old kingdom of Elam over which he ruled.

Later on the City of Lilies was taken by the Babylonians. They had their own capital city, the mighty Babylon, on the Euphrates. But although it was not the capital, still Shushan was a very important place in that first great world-empire. We find Daniel, the prime minister, staying in the palace of Shushan, to which he had been sent to transact business for the King of Babylon, and it was during his visit to the City of Lilies that God sent him one of his most famous visions. In his dream he thought he was standing by the river Ulai, the very river he could see from the palace window, and before that river stood the ram with the two horns and the strong he-goat, by means of which God drew out before his eyes a picture of the future history of the world.

But the great Babylonian empire did not last long. Cyrus the Persian took Babylon, Belshazzar was slain, the great Assyrian power passed away, and the second great world-empire, the Persian empire, was built upon its ruins.

What city did the Persian kings make their capital? Not Babylon, with its mighty walls and massive gates, but Shushan, the City of Lilies. They chose it as their chief city for three reasons; it was nearer to their old home, Persia, it was cooler than Babylon because of the neighbouring mountains, and lastly, and above all, it had the best water in the world. The water of the river Choaspes was so much esteemed for its freshness, its clearness, and its salubrity, that the Persian kings would drink no other; they had it carried with them wherever they went; even when they undertook long warlike expeditions, the water of the Choaspes was considered a necessary provision for the journey.

The City of Lilies, in the days of the Rab-shakeh, was a perfect fairy-land of beauty, surrounded as it was by fruit-gardens and

corn-fields; the white houses standing out from amongst dark palm trees, and the high walls encircled by groves of citron and lemon trees. As the Rab-shakeh walks along the air is scented with their blossoms, and with the sweet fragrance of the countless Shushan lilies, growing beside the margin of the sparkling rivers.

Above him, in the midst of the city, stands his lordly home. It may well be a magnificent place, for it is the palace of the greatest king in the world, the mighty King of Persia. The palace in which the Rab-shakeh lives is not the old palace in which Daniel stayed when he visited Shushan; it is quite a new building, built only forty years before by the great Ahasuerus, the husband of Queen Esther. It was to celebrate the opening of this gigantic palace that the enormous and magnificent feast of which we read in Esther i., was given by the Persian monarch, who was its founder.

This new palace was built on a high platform of stone and brick, and the view from its windows of the green plain, of the shining rivers, of the gardens filled with fruit trees and flowers, and of the snow-clad mountains in the distance, was magnificent in the extreme. In the centre of the palace was a large hall filled with pillars, one of the finest buildings in the world, and round this hall were built the grand reception rooms of the king.

The ruins of Shushan, the City of Lilies, were discovered by Sir Fenwick Williams in the year 1851, and the bases of the very pillars which supported the roof of the great Rab-shakeh's splendid home may be seen this very day on the plain between the two rivers.

But who was this Rab-shakeh, and how came he to live in the most glorious palace in the world? He was a Jew, a foreigner, a descendant of those Jews whom Nebuchadnezzar took captive, and carried into Assyria. Yet, although one of an alien race, we find him in one of the highest offices of the Persian court, namely, the office of Rab-shakeh.

This word Rab, so often found in the Bible, is a Chaldean word which means Master. Thus, in the New Testament, we find the Jewish teachers often addressed by the title Rabbi, Master. But the title Rab was also used in speaking of the highest officials in an Eastern court. Three such titles we find in the Bible:

Jer. xxxix. 13. RAB-SARIS, Master of the Eunuchs.

Jer. xxxix. 13. RAB-MAG, Master of the Magi.

2 Kings xviii. 17. RAB-SHAKEH, Master of the Cup-bearers.

This last office, that of Rab-shakeh, was a very important and responsible one. It was the duty of the man who held it to take charge of the king's wine, to ensure that no poison was put into it, and to present it in a jewelled cup to the king at the royal banquets. It was a position of great trust and power; great trust, because the king's life rested in the cup-bearer's keeping; great power, because whilst the Persian monarchs, believing that familiarity breeds contempt, kept themselves secluded from the public gaze, and admitted very few to their august presence, the cup-bearer had access at all times to the king, and had the opportunity of speaking to him which was denied to others.

Strange that a Jew, one of a captive race, should be chosen to fill so

important a post. But King Artaxerxes knew his man. He felt he could trust him fully, and he was not disappointed in his confidence, for the great Rab-shakeh served a higher Master than the King of Persia, he was a faithful servant of the God of Heaven.

The Rab-shakeh's name was Nehemiah, a name chosen by his parents, not as a fancy name or as a family name, but chosen for the same reason which usually influenced Jewish parents in the selection of names for their children, because of its beautiful meaning. Nehemiah meant _The Lord my Comforter_.

What a sweet thought for Hachaliah and his wife as they called their boy in from play, or as they put him in his little bed and took leave of him for the night, '_The Lord is my Comforter_.' Life in sunny Shushan was surely no brighter than life in our more clouded land; they had their times of sorrow as well as their times of joy, they had their temptations, their cares, their anxieties, and their trials, just as we have. How blessed for them in one and all of these to be reminded where true comfort was to be found, so that they might turn to God in every time of grief with the name of their little son on their lips, 'The Lord is my Comforter.'

What do _we_ know of Nehemiah? Can we say from our heart, 'The Lord is _my_ Comforter?' I take Him my every sorrow, I tell Him my every trouble. He understands it, and He understands me, and He comforts me as no other can. The Lord is indeed my Comforter.

So the little Nehemiah had grown up an ever-present reminder in his parents' home of the comfort of God.

How many children Hachaliah had we are not told, but Nehemiah had certainly one brother, Hanani. There had been some years before this a parting in Hachaliah's family. Hanani, Nehemiah's brother, had left Shushan for a distant land. Twelve years had passed since all the Jews in Shushan had been roused by the news that Ezra the scribe was going from Babylon to Jerusalem, and that he was calling upon all who loved the home of their forefathers to go with him, and to help him in the work he had undertaken. Bad news had been brought to Babylon of the state of matters in Palestine; those who had returned with Zerubbabel were not prospering, either in their souls or their bodies, and Ezra, shocked by what he had heard, determined to go to Jerusalem that he might reform the abuses which had arisen there, and do all in his power to rouse the people to a sense of their duty. A brave company had set forth with him. Eight thousand Jews had been ready to leave comfort, luxury, and affluence behind, that they might go to the desolate city, and endeavour to stir up its people to energy and life.

One of the 8,000 who went with Ezra was Nehemiah's brother, Hanani. It is possible that Nehemiah himself was at that time too young to go; it is also probable that Hachaliah, the father, having been born and brought up in Shushan, was hard to move. So Hanani set forth alone, and the brothers were parted.

Twelve long years, and in all probability no news had reached the family in Shushan of the absent Hanani. A journey of five months lay between them and Jerusalem; and in those days, when all the conveniences we enjoy were unknown, they would not only never expect to meet again, but they would also never anticipate the pleasure of even hearing any news of each other, or of holding the slightest communication.

But as the Rab-shakeh walks to the gate of Shushan, on the day on which the story opens, he spies a caravan of travellers coming along the northern road. They have evidently come a long way, for they are tired, exhausted, and travel-stained. The mules walk slowly and heavily under their burdens, the skin of the travellers is burnt and cracked by the hot sun of the desert, their clothes are faded and covered with dust, their sandals are full of holes.

Where can the caravan have come from? Nehemiah finds to his astonishment that it has come from Jerusalem, the city of cities, as he had been taught to believe it, and, to his still greater surprise, he finds amongst the travellers his long-lost brother Hanani. What had brought Hanani back from Jerusalem we are not told; he may have wished once more to see his old father Hachaliah; but we can well imagine the joy with which he would be welcomed by all, and not the least by his brother Nehemiah.

As they walk together through Shushan to the palace, the Rab-shakeh asks anxiously after Jerusalem. Has Ezra's work been successful? How are matters progressing? Are the people more in earnest? Is Jerusalem thriving?

But the travellers have a dismal tale to tell. Affairs in the Holy City are about as bad as it was possible for them to be.

Neh. i. 3: 'They said unto me, The remnant that are left of the captivity there in the province are in great affliction and reproach: the wall of Jerusalem also is broken down, and the gates thereof are burned with fire.'

In other words, things are just where they were twelve years ago; the people are miserable and depressed, beset with countless troubles; the city itself is still an utter ruin, just as Nebuchadnezzar left it. The temple, it is true, is built at last, but nothing more is done; the walls lie just as they were when the city was taken,--a mass of ruins; the gates are nowhere to be seen, only a few blackened stones mark the place where they used to stand.

The Rab-shakeh's heart is very heavy as he goes to his rooms in the royal palace. What terrible news he has heard! Jerusalem is still, after all Ezra's efforts to restore it, a desolate ruined city. Nehemiah is full of sorrow, sick at heart, overwhelmed with disappointment and trouble.

But he remembers his own name and its warning, Nehemiah, 'The Lord is my Comforter'. At once, without a moment's delay, he goes to his Comforter. He weeps, he mourns, he fasts, and he pours out all his sorrow to God. As a child runs to his mother, and pours into her ear his grief or his disappointment, so Nehemiah hastens to his God.

We walk through a splendid conservatory, the pride and glory of a nobleman's garden; we admire the flowers of all shades of colour; rare blossoms from all parts of the world, ferns of every variety, palms, and grasses, and mosses, and all manner of natural beauties meet our eye at every turn. What is that plant standing in a conspicuous place in the conservatory? It is a beautiful azalea, covered with hundreds of pure white blossoms. But there is so much else to see in that conservatory that we scarcely notice it as we pass by. Nor are we at all surprised to

see it there; it is just the very place in which we should look for such a plant. Nor are we astonished to find it so flourishing and so full of bloom, for we know that everything in that conservatory is calculated to improve its growth, the atmosphere is just what it should be, not too dry or too damp, it has exactly the right soil, the proper amount of light, the most carefully regulated heat; it has in fact everything which it ought to have to make it a flourishing and beautiful plant. Accordingly we are not surprised to find it full of bloom and beauty.

But suppose, on the other hand, that walking through the slums of London we see a similar sight. In one of the closest, most filthy courts we see, in a garret window, a white azalea full of flowers, pure as the untrodden snow.

Now indeed we are surprised to see it, for it is in the most unlikely place; there is nothing to favour its growth, the air is foul, the light is dim, everything is against it, yet there it stands, a marvel of beauty! And we look at it and say, 'Wonderful!'

Surely we have even now seen the white azalea in the garret. For where should we expect to find a man of God? Dwelling in the holy temple in Jerusalem, surrounded by everything to remind him of God breathing in the very atmosphere of religion, with godly people all around him, with everything to help him to be holy and pure, no one would be astonished to find a man of God in such a place as that.

But here is Nehemiah the Rab-shakeh, living in a heathen palace, in the midst of a wicked court, surrounded by drunkenness, sensuality, and all that is vile and impure, breathing in the very atmosphere of sin, yet we find him a plant of the Lord, pure as the azalea, a man of faith, a man of prayer, a holy man of God. With everything against him, with nothing to favour his growth in holiness, he is a flourishing plant in the garden of the Lord. So it ever is. The plants of God's grace often thrive in very unlikely places. There was a holy Joseph in the court of Pharaoh, a faithful Obadiah in the house of wicked Jezebel, a righteous Daniel in Babylon, and saints even in Caesar's household.

Are we ever tempted to say, I cannot serve the Master faithfully? If I were in another position, if my home life were favourable to my becoming decided for Christ, if I had different companions, different occupation, different surroundings, then indeed I would grow in grace, and bring forth the fruit of a holy life. But as I am, and where I am, it is a simple impossibility; I can never, under existing circumstances, live near to God, or be what I often long to be, a true Christian.

What does the Master say as He hears words like these? 'My grace is sufficient for thee.' 'As thy day so shall thy strength be.'

Even in most unlikely and unfruitful soil God can make His plants to grow and flourish. Where I am, and as I am, and with exactly the same surroundings as I now possess, God can bless me, and give me grace to serve and to glorify Him. If I do not become a flourishing plant, it is not my position that is to blame, it is because I will not seek that grace which the Lord is ready to give me. 'Ye have not, because ye ask not. Ask, and ye shall receive, that your joy may be full.'

CHAPTER II.

The King's Table.

It was midnight in London, in the year 1665. The houses were closed and barred, but strange lurid fires were lighted in every street, a stifling odour of burning pitch and sulphur filled the air, and from time to time came the heavy rumble of wheels, as a terrible cart, with its awful load, passed by in the darkness of the night. With the cart came a cry; so loud, so clear, so piercing, that it could be heard in all the closed houses of the street. 'Bring out your dead, bring out your dead!' Then, one door after another was hurriedly opened, and from the plague-stricken houses one body after another was brought out, and was thrown hastily into that awful dead cart.

'Bring out your dead ! what a solemn, terribly solemn cry! How it must have filled with awe and dread all who heard it! And if that call were repeated, if the holy angels of God were to go through the length and breadth of our land, and, stopping before each house, were to cry to those within, 'Bring out your dead, bring out your dead,' not your dead bodies, but your dead souls; bring out all in your house who are not alive unto God, who are dead in trespasses and sins, how many would have to be carried out of our houses? Should we ourselves be left behind? Are we alive or dead?

The angels have not yet come to sever the dead from the living, but the time for that great separation is drawing daily nearer, when the Son of man shall send forth His angels, and they shall gather out of His kingdom all things that offend; all the loathsomeness of death, and decay, and impurity shall be collected by angel hands, and, we read, they shall cast them, not into a vast pit such as was dug in London in the time of the plague, but into a furnace of fire, there shall be wailing and gnashing of teeth.

Surely, then, it is worth while to find out whether our soul is alive or dead. What test then shall we use? How shall we settle the matter clearly and definitely?

There is one thing, and one thing only, which proves that a man has life. A man apparently drowned is brought out of the water. He does not speak, or see, or move, or feel. He is rubbed and warmed, but no sign of life can be perceived. Can we therefore conclude that the man is dead? Nay, we will put him to the test. Bring a feather, hold it before his mouth, watch it carefully, does it move? A crowd of anxious bystanders gather round to see. Soon a cry of joy is heard, the feather moves. The man lives, for he breathes, and the breath in him is the unmistakable sign of life.

How then shall I know if my soul lives? Does it breathe? That is the all-important question. But what is the breath of the soul? The breath of the soul is prayer. As the old hymn says--

'Prayer is the Christian's vital breath,
The Christian's native air.'

Saul of Tarsus, with all his outward religion, was a dead soul, till the Lord met him and gave him life. What then is the first thing we find Saul doing? 'Behold he prayeth.' As soon as he is alive, he breathes, he

prays.

Here then is the test for us to apply to our own souls. Do I know anything of real prayer? Do I love to hold communion with my God? Am I ever lifting up my heart to Him? If I live in the atmosphere of prayer, then I am alive unto God; if, on the other hand, I feel prayer a weariness, and know not what it is for my heart to hold unseen intercourse with my Lord, then indeed I am dead in sin, having no breath, and I have consequently no life.

Nehemiah, the great Rab-shakeh, was a living soul, for he loved to pray. No sooner had he heard the sad news about Jerusalem, than he went to his private apartments in the palace, and began to plead with God. He feels that all the trouble that has come upon his nation has been richly deserved, so he begins with a humble confession of sin.

'Let Thine ear now be attentive, and Thine eyes open, that Thou mayest hear the prayer of Thy servant, which I pray before Thee now, day and night, for the children of Israel Thy servants, and confess the sins of the children of Israel, which we have sinned against Thee.' And then, coming nearer home, he adds, 'both I and my father's house have sinned.'

Was it some special sin which he confessed before God then? Can his sin, and the sin of his father's house, have been the refusing twelve years ago to leave home and comforts behind them, and to return with Ezra to Jerusalem?

Then Nehemiah pleads God's promises to His people in time past, and ends by definitely stating his own special need and request (Neh. i. 8-11).

By day and by night Nehemiah prays, and nearly four months go by before he does anything further.

The next step was not an easy one. He had determined to speak to the great Persian monarch--to bring before him the desolate condition of Jerusalem, and to ask for leave of absence from the court at Shushan, in order that he might go to Jerusalem, and do all in his power to restore it to something of its former grandeur.

It is not surprising that Nehemiah dreaded this next step. The Persian kings had a great objection to being asked a favour. Xerxes, the husband of Queen Esther, when on his way to Greece with his enormous army, passed through Lydia in Asia Minor. Here he was feasted and entertained by a rich man named Pythius, who also gave him a large sum of money for the expense of the war, and furnished five sons for the army. After this Pythius thought he might venture to ask a favour of the Persian monarch, so he requested that his eldest son might be allowed to leave his regiment, in order that he might stay at home to be the comfort and support of his aged father. But, instead of granting this very natural request, Xerxes was so much enraged at having been asked a favour, that he commanded the eldest son to be killed and cut in two, and then caused his entire army to file between the pieces of the body.

Artaxerxes, the king whom Nehemiah served, was considered one of the gentlest of Persian monarchs, and yet even he was guilty of acts of savage cruelty, of which we cannot read without a shudder. For example, when he came to the throne, he found in the palace a certain eunuch named Mithridates, who had been concerned in his father's murder. He condemned this man to be put to death in the most horrible and cruel

way. He was laid on his back in a kind of horse-trough, and strongly fastened to the four corners of it. Then another trough was put over him, leaving only his head and hands and feet uncovered, for which purpose holes were made in the upper trough. Then his face was smeared with honey, and he was placed in the scorching rays of the sun. Hundreds of flies settled on his face, and he lay there in agony for many long days. Food was given him from time to time, but he was never moved or uncovered, and it was more than a fortnight before death released him from his sufferings.

It was the very king who had put one of his subjects to this death of awful torment before whom Nehemiah had to appear, and of whom he had to make a request. No wonder, then, that he dreaded the interview, and that he felt that he needed many months of prayer to make him ready for it. It was in the month Chisleu (December) that Hanani had arrived, it was not until Nisan (April) that he made up his mind to speak to the king.

Before leaving his room that morning, he knelt down, and put himself and his cause in the Lord's hands, Neh. i. 11.

Then, attired in his official dress, the Rab-shakeh sets forth for the state apartments of the palace. The central building of that magnificent pile in which the king held court was very fine and imposing, as may be seen to-day from the extensive ruins of Shushan. In the centre of it was the Great Hall of Pillars, 200 feet square. In this hall were no less than thirty-six pillars, arranged in six rows, and all sixty feet high. Round this grand hall were the beautiful reception rooms of the king, and these were carefully arranged, in order to ensure perpetual coolness even in the hottest weather. There was no room on the hot south side of the palace, but on the west was the morning room, in which all the morning entertainments were held, whilst the evening banqueting hall was on the eastern side. By this arrangement the direct rays of the sun were never felt by those within the palace. Then, on the cool northern side was the grand throne room, in which the king sat in state, and through which a whole army of soldiers, or an immense body of courtiers, could file without the slightest confusion, entering and leaving the room by stone staircases placed opposite each other. The steps were only four inches in depth and sixteen feet wide, and were so built that horsemen could easily mount or descend them.

Into one of the grand halls of the palace Nehemiah the cup-bearer enters. The pavement is of coloured marble, red, white, and blue; curtains of blue and white, the Persian royal colours, drape the windows and are hanging in graceful festoons from the pillars; the fresh morning breeze is blowing from the snow-clad mountains, and is laden with the scent of lemons and oranges, and of the Shushan lilies and Persian roses in the palace gardens.

There is the royal table, covered with golden dishes and cups, and spread with every dainty that the world could produce.

There is the king, a tall, graceful man, but with one strange deformity—with hands so long that when he stood upright they touched his knees, from which he had received the nickname of Longimanus, the long-handed.

He is dressed in a long loose robe of purple silk, with wide sleeves, and round his waist is a broad golden girdle. His tunic or under-garment is purple and white, his trousers are bright crimson, his shoes are

yellow, and have long pointed toes. On his head is a curious high cap with a band of blue spotted with white. He is moreover covered with ornaments: he has gold earrings, a gold chain, gold bracelets, and a long golden sceptre with a golden ball as its crown.

The king is sitting on a throne, in shape like a high-backed chair with a footstool before it. The chair stands on lion's feet, and the stool on bull's feet, and both are made of gold.

By the king's side sits the queen; her name was Damaspia, but we know little more of her in history, except that she died on the same day as her husband. Behind the king and queen are the fan-bearers, and fly-flappers, and parasol-bearers, who are in constant attendance on their royal majesties, and around are the great officers of the household.

Fifteen thousand people ate the king's food in that palace every day, but the king always dined alone. It was very rarely that even the queen or the royal children were allowed to sit at the king's table, which is probably the reason why Nehemiah mentions the fact that the queen was sitting by him. Perhaps he hailed the circumstance as a proof that the king was in good humour that day, and would therefore be more likely to listen to his petition. But no one who was not closely related to the king was allowed to sit at the royal table, even the most privileged courtiers sat on the floor and ate at his feet.

The feast has begun, and it is time for the Rab-shakeh to present the wine to the king. He takes the jewelled cup from the table in the king's presence, he carefully washes it, then he fills it with a specially rare wine, named the wine of Helbon, which was kept only for the king's use. This wine was made from a very fine growth of grapes, at a place in the Lebanon not far from Damascus, named Helbon. Then Nehemiah pours a little wine into his left hand and drinks it, and then, lightly holding the cup between the tips of his fingers and thumbs, he gracefully presents it to the great monarch.

Artaxerxes glances at his cup-bearer as he rises from his knees, and at once notices something remarkable in his face. Nehemiah is pale and anxious and troubled; his whole face tells of the struggle going on within, and the king cannot fail to perceive it. Turning to the Rab-shakeh he asks: 'Why is thy countenance sad, seeing thou art not sick? this is nothing else but sorrow of heart.' 'Then,' says Nehemiah, 'I was very sore afraid.' It is no wonder that he was alarmed, for it was actually a crime, proscribed by law, for any one to look sad or depressed in the presence of a Persian king. However heavy might be his heart, however sorrowful his spirit, he must cross the threshold of the palace with a smiling face, and show no signs in the king's presence of the trouble within. But Nehemiah's face has betrayed him. What will the king do? Will he dismiss him from office? Will he degrade him from his high position? Will he punish him for his breach of court etiquette? Or can it be that this is a heaven-sent opportunity in which he may make his request? He answers at once:

'Let the king live for ever: why should not my countenance be sad, when the city, the place of my fathers' sepulchres, lieth waste, and the gates thereof are consumed with fire?'

And the king, quite understanding from Nehemiah's speech that he wants something from him, asks immediately:

'For what dost thou make request?'

Oh, what a critical moment! How much depends on Nehemiah's answer to this unexpected question! What shall he say? What dare he propose? The whole future of Jerusalem may hang on his answer to the king's question.

There is a moment's pause, but only a moment's, and then Nehemiah's answer is given. Only a moment, and yet great things have been done in that short time. 'I prayed,' says the Rab-shakeh, 'to the God of Heaven.'

Did he then rush away to his own apartment to pray? Did he kneel down in the midst of the banqueting hall and call upon his God? No, he spoke no word aloud, he did not even close his eyes. The king saw nothing, knew nothing of what was going on; yet a mighty transaction took place in that short time between the silent man, who still stood holding the cup in his hands, and the King of Heaven.

We are not told what the prayer was, perhaps it was only, 'Lord, help me.' But quick as lightning the answer came. His fear fled, wisdom was given him to answer, and his heart's desire was granted.

How often we hear the complaint, 'I cannot pray long prayers, like the good people I read of in books. I lead a busy active life, and when work is done my body is weary and exhausted, and I find it impossible to pray for any length of time, and sometimes I fear that because I cannot offer long prayers I cannot therefore be the Lord's.' But surely it is not long prayers that the Lord requires. Most of the Bible prayers are short prayers, the Lord's pattern-prayer is one of the shortest. It is the heathen who think they will be heard for their much speaking. Nehemiah's was a true prayer, and an answered prayer, yet it was but a moment in length.

Nor are uttered words necessary to prayer. The followers of Baal cried aloud, thinking their much shouting would reach the ear of their god, but Nehemiah speaks not, does not even whisper, and his prayer is heard in heaven. Surely now-a-days, when there are some who seem to think that much noise, that loud shouting, that the uplifted voice must needs pierce the sky, it is well for us to be reminded that God heeds no language, hears no voice, but the language of the soul, the voice of the innermost heart.

Nor is posture a necessary part of prayer. Some choose to pray standing, others prefer to kneel. It is not the posture of body God looks at, but the posture of the heart. Reverence there must be, but such reverence as comes from the inner sanctuary of the soul, and which only finds outward expression in the body. Nehemiah stood with the jewelled cup in his hands, yet Nehemiah's prayer was heard.

So we see that heartfelt prayer--prayer which is prayer indeed--may be short, silent, and offered in a strange place and at a strange time, and yet be heard and answered by God.

Let us try to grasp the full comfort of this thought, for we live in a world of surprises. We rise in the morning, not knowing what the day may bring forth. We are walking on a road with many turnings, and we never know what may meet us at the next step!

All of a sudden we find ourselves face to face with an unexpected perplexity. What shall we do? What course shall we take? Here is the little prayer made ready for our use--

Lord, guide me.

Then, at the next turn, comes a sudden temptation. Unjust, cruel words are spoken, and we feel we must give an angry reply. Let us stop one moment before we answer, and in that moment put up the short prayer--

Lord, help me.

Or a sudden danger, bodily or spiritual, stares us in the face. At once we may lift up the heart and cry--

Lord, save me.

There is no need to kneel down, no need to speak aloud, no need to move from our place. In the office, the workshop, the schoolroom, the place of business, the railway carriage, the street, wherever we may be and in whatever company, the short silent prayer may be sent up to the God of heaven.

Thank God, no such prayer is ever unanswered!

CHAPTER III.

The Good Hand.

The mighty universe, the great empire of the King of kings, who shall give us even a faint idea of its size?

It has been calculated that about 100,000,000 stars can be seen from our world by means of a telescope. Yet who can grasp such a number as that? Which of us can picture in his mind 100,000,000 objects? Let us suppose that instead of 100,000,000 stars we have the same number of oranges; let us arrange our oranges in imagination on a long string, which shall pass through the centre of each of them. How long will our string have to be if it is to hold the 100,000,000 oranges? It will have to be no less than 6,000 miles long, and our 100,000,000 oranges will stretch in a straight line from England to China.

One hundred million stars, and of all these God is King. But these are but as a speck compared with His vast universe. Each telescope that is invented, which enables us to see a little further into space, discovers more and more worlds unseen before. Who can even guess how many still lie beyond, unseen, unnoticed, unheard of? The regions of space are endless, as God their Maker is endless.

And all these countless worlds are under the eye of the King of kings. He rules all, watches all, guides all. Can I, then, believe that He will have time to take notice of my tiny affairs? Can He care if I am sick, worried, or poor, or depressed? Surely I must be ready to say with the Psalmist--

'When I consider Thy heavens, the work of Thy fingers, the moon and the stars which Thou hast ordained, what is man, that Thou art mindful of him? and the son of man, that Thou visitest him?'

Yet that quaint old saying of John Flavel the Puritan is right, 'The man who watches for Providence will never want a Providence to watch.' In other words, he who trusts his concerns to a higher power, he who puts his cause in the Lord's hands, will never be disappointed. The God who rules the universe will not forget to attend to him, but will watch him, and guide him, and help him, as tenderly as if he was the only being in that universe.

St. Augustine used to say, 'Lord, when I look upon mine own life, it seems Thou hast led me so carefully and tenderly, Thou canst have attended to none else; but when I see how wonderfully Thou hast led the world and art leading it, I am amazed that Thou hast had time to attend to such as I.'

How much more must we wonder at God's loving care, when we look beyond this tiny world to the countless millions of worlds in the universe!

Nehemiah was watching for Providence. He had taken his case to God, he had trusted all to Him, and Nehemiah did not want a Providence to watch; the God in whom he had put his confidence did not disappoint him.

'Let me go that I may rebuild Jerusalem,' says the cup-bearer; and the great Persian king does not refuse his request, but (prompted, it may be, by the queen who was sitting by him) he asks: 'For how long shall thy journey be? and when wilt thou return?'

'And I set him a time.' How long a time we are not told. Nehemiah did not return to Persia for twelve years; but it is probable that he asked for a shorter leave of absence, and that this was extended later on, in order to enable him to finish his work.

Cheered and encouraged by the king's manner, feeling sure that God is with him and is prospering him, Nehemiah asks another favour of the king. The Persian empire at that time was of such vast extent, that it reached from the river Indus to the Mediterranean, and the Euphrates was looked upon as naturally dividing it into two parts, east and west. Nehemiah asks, ch. ii. 7, for letters to the governors of the western division of the empire, that they may be instructed to help him and forward him on his way.

He asks, ver. 8, for something more. There is a certain man named Asaph, who has charge of the king's forest or park (see margin of R.V.). The real word which Nehemiah used was paradise--the king's paradise. The derivation of the word is from the Persian words Pairi, round about, and Deza, a wall. Up and down their empire, in various places, the Persian kings had these paradises--parks or pleasure grounds--surrounded and shut off from the neighbouring country by a high fence or wall. These paradises were places of beauty and loveliness, where the king and his friends might meet and walk together, and enjoy each other's society.

Is not this the Lord's own picture of the place He went to prepare for His people? Did He not say to the thief on the cross, 'To-day thou shalt be with Me in Paradise?' It was a new name taken by our Lord from these paradises of the Persian kings, and given by Him to that new place which He went to prepare for His people, even the Garden of the Lord, the

pleasure ground of the King of kings, the place to which His people go when they die. There they enjoy His company, and see His face, and walk with Him and talk to Him, waiting for that glorious day when they shall pass from the garden of the King into the palace itself.

We are not told where this particular paradise was, of which Asaph was the keeper, but probably it was the place which the kings of Judah had always made their pleasure ground. This was at Etam, about seven miles from Jerusalem, where Solomon had fine gardens, and had made large lakes of water, fed by a hidden and sealed spring.

Solomon himself twice used the word paradise of his gardens, and these are the only places in which the word occurs in the Old Testament, except in Neh. ii. 8.

Solomon says, Eccles. ii. 5, 'I made me gardens and paradises.' In Cant. iv. 13 he speaks of 'a paradise of pomegranates, with precious fruits.'

For three purposes Nehemiah wanted wood from Asaph's paradise, and asked the king to give him an order for it, that he might deliver to the keeper.

He wanted it (1) for the gates of the palace of the house. _The_ house means the temple, and the palace should be translated the castle. It was a tower which stood at the north-west corner of the temple platform, and commanded and protected the temple courts. (2) He required wood for the gates of the wall, and (3) for 'the house that I shall enter into,' i.e. for my own dwelling-house.

All is granted--the royal secretaries are called, and are bidden to write the required instructions to the governors beyond the river, and to Asaph, the bailiff of the forest. Nehemiah takes no credit to himself that all has gone so prosperously, he does not praise his own courage, or wisdom, or tact in making the request, he knows it is a direct answer to a direct prayer, he recognises the fact that it is God's doing, and not his.

'The king granted me, according to the good hand of my God upon me.'

That was Ezra's motto, quoted by him again and again (Ezra vii. 6, 9, 28; viii. 18, 22, 31). In all his deliverances, in every one of his mercies, he had seen the good hand of his God, and he had taken those words, 'The good hand of my God upon me,' as the keynote of his praise, and as the motto of his life. But Nehemiah had in all probability never even seen Ezra, yet here we find him quoting Ezra's favourite saying. Can it be that Hanani, his brother, who had been one of Ezra's companions, had repeated it to him? Can it be that in order to cheer and encourage his brother when he undertook the difficult task of speaking to the king, he told him how Ezra was always repeating these words, and how he found them a sure refuge in time of need? If so, how gladly would Nehemiah hasten to his brother when his duties in the palace were completed, to tell him that Ezra's motto has held good again, for 'the king granted me, according to the good hand of my God upon me.'

'The good hand of my God.' What blessed words! Let trouble come, or temptation come, or death itself come, I will not fear. The good hand of my God is over me. None can pluck me from that hand. 'All my times are in Thy hand, O Lord,' and are safe there from even the fear of danger. Oh, how blessed to be one so sheltered, so shielded, underneath the good

hand of my God! But the same hand is against them that do evil. I must either be in the hand, or have the hand raised against me! Which shall it be?

All is ready now, the preparations are ended, and Nehemiah, accompanied by his brother Hanani, and by a royal escort of soldiers, sets forth on his long journey. Jerusalem, the City of David--how often he had dreamt of it, how earnestly he had longed to see it! Now, at last, his desire is to be granted. The travellers could not sing, as they rode slowly over the scorching desert, 'Our feet shall stand within thy gates, O Jerusalem,' for the gates of the city were burned with fire, and only a blackened space showed where each had stood, but they may have joined together in that other psalm, which was probably written about this time, Psalm cii.

'Thou shalt arise, and have mercy upon Zion: for the time to favour her, yea, the set time, is come.

'For Thy servants take pleasure in her stones, and it pitieth them to see her in the dust.'

There is no misadventure on the journey, they travel safely under the care of the king's guard; but surely Nehemiah saw a dark cloud on the horizon as he handed in his letters to the governors beyond the river. One of these was Sanballat, the satrap or governor of Samaria. His name was an Assyro-Babylonian one, so that he was probably descended from one of the Babylonian families settled in Samaria, and it signifies 'The Moon God gives life.' His native place was Horonaim in Moab, and Sanballat was by nation a descendant of Lot.

With the Samaritan governor was his secretary Tobiah, the servant or the feud slave, a man also descended from Lot, for he was an Ammonite, and standing evidently very high in Sanballat's favour.

It was probably Tobiah who read Artaxerxes' letter to his master, and very black and gloomy were both their faces as they heard the news it contained.

At the court of Sanballat was a friend of his, Geshem the Arabian, the head or chief of a tribe of Arabs, which we find, from the ancient Assyrian monuments recently discovered, had been planted in Samaria by Sargon, King of Assyria. This man Geshem was therefore a Bedouin, a descendant of Esau.

These three, Sanballat, Tobiah, and Geshem, cannot conceal their disgust that anyone has been sent from Persia to look after the welfare of Jerusalem. So far they have trampled the Jews under foot as much as possible, and the Jews have been powerless to resist them. But now here is a man come direct from the court at Shushan, with letters from their royal master in his hand, and with orders to rebuild and fortify Jerusalem.

From that moment Sanballat and his friends became Nehemiah's bitter enemies, determined to thwart and to oppose him to the utmost of their power.

At length the wearisome journey is over, and Nehemiah arrives in Jerusalem. He tells no one why he has come; but, worn out with the fatigue he has undergone, he goes quietly to the house of a friend,

probably to that of his brother Hanani, and for three days he rests there. Then, on the third night after his arrival, when all Jerusalem is asleep, he rises, mounts a mule or donkey, and, with a few faithful followers, steals out to explore for himself the extent of the ruin, to see how things really were, what was the state of the walls, and how much had to be done to put them into good repair.

Stealing out of the city on the south side, at the spot on which in better days the Valley Gate had stood, a gate which was so called because it opened into the Valley of Hinnom, he turned into the ravine, and went eastward. No doubt there was a moon, and by its quiet light he could see the heaps of rubbish, and the work of the fire which had destroyed the gates 150 years ago. How sad and forsaken it all looked in the moonlight, as he turned ' _towards_ the Dragon's well' (see Revised Version). The site of this Dragon's Well is very uncertain, but it is generally identified with Upper Gihon. It is sometimes confounded with the Virgin's Fount, called by the Arabs the Mother of Steps, because there are twenty-seven steps leading down to it, and the descent is very steep. This is the only spring near Jerusalem, and its water is carried by an underground passage to the Pool of Siloam. It is an intermittent spring, suddenly rising and as suddenly falling, at irregular intervals. Two explorers, Dr. Robinson and Mr. Smith, were just about to measure the water, when they found it suddenly rising; in less than five minutes it had risen a foot, in ten minutes more it had ceased to flow, and had sunk to its former level.

The common people believed in olden time, and believe still, that a dragon lies within the fountain, concealed from view; that when he is awake he stops the water from flowing, but that he finds it impossible to keep awake always, and when he falls asleep the water flows.

How eagerly those with Nehemiah would point out each object to him! We can picture Hanani walking by his side, showing him all the different

objects, to himself so familiar, to Nehemiah so well known by name, but so strange by sight.

Coming down the Valley of Hinnom they reach the Dung Gate, the gate outside which lay piles of rubbish and offal, swept out of the city, and all collected together by this gate and left to rot in the valley.

Here he examines in the moonlight the masses of fallen stonework, the small portions of wall still standing, and the gap where the gate used to stand before it was burnt.

Then on he went until he came to the Gate of the Fountain, opposite the King's Pool, or Pool of Siloam, which watered the king's garden. But at this south-east corner the rubbish was so great that the mule he was riding on could not proceed. Pile upon pile of stone, heap upon heap of broken fragments of what had once been so magnificent, lay so thickly massed together that it was of no use attempting to ride further. So Nehemiah dismounted, and probably leaving his mule with some of his companions by the Gate of the Fountain, he went on foot a little further. Going up the Kedron valley he examined the eastern wall, which was in much better condition than the rest; and then, turning to the west, he came back to the rest of the party and returned with them to the Valley Gate.

Now Nehemiah has seen the work before him, and has realised that it is

both vast and difficult. He is ready now to put his scheme before the people of Jerusalem. He finds the city governed by no single man, but by a kind of town council. He now summons a meeting of these rulers, and he also invites the nobles and the working men to be present. Then he makes his appeal:

'Ye see the distress that we are in, how Jerusalem lieth waste, and the gates thereof are burned with fire: come, and let us build up the wall of Jerusalem, that we be no more a reproach.'

Then, to cheer them on to make the effort, he tells them how God has helped him up to that point; he tells them what the good hand has done for him already in opening the king's heart and the king's purse.

What response does he meet with? As one man that large assembly rises and joins in the cry, 'Let us rise up and build.' Happy Nehemiah to find such ready help, to find those he speaks to willing at once to fall in with his scheme, and to aid him in his work.

It is to be feared that had he lived in our more cautious and calculating days, Nehemiah would have had many a bucket of cold water thrown on him and his plan. One would have risen and would have said, 'The work is too hard, the heaps of rubbish are too great, it is impossible to undertake such a task. Look at the south-east corner, who will ever be able to clear away the heaps that have accumulated there?'

Another would have been sure to grumble at the expense, would have asked how they, poor down-trodden Jews as they were, could ever afford to give time or money to such a vast undertaking?

A third would have risen with a long face, and would have asked, 'What will Sanballat say if we rebuild the wall? What will Tobiah do? What will Geshem whisper? Now indeed we have no open rupture with the governors, but who can tell what the result of our taking action in this matter will be? Surely it is better to let well alone.'

A fourth would have given as his opinion, that what had served for 150 years would surely last their time. True, Jerusalem was forlorn and defenceless, but they had grown accustomed to it now. It struck Nehemiah, of course, coming as he did fresh from the glories of Shushan, but they had become used to it, and he would soon do the same. There was no need surely to make a disturbance about it or to run into any risk about it.

A fifth would have suggested, with some warmth, that surely old inhabitants of the city were better judges of its requirements than a stranger, and that it was for the town council to propose such a scheme if they saw the necessity for it, and not for a new-comer who had been less than a week in Jerusalem.

These, and countless other objections, might have been raised, had the meeting been called in our lukewarm days.

But the Jerusalem committee did not act thus, they did not fill Nehemiah's way with difficulties and his soul with discouragement. A plain bit of work lay before him and before them; he was ready to lead, and they were ready to follow. 'Let us rise and build,' they cry. And 'they strengthened their hands for this good work.'

Let us take heed that we, as servants of Christ, follow their example. Let us never be seen with the bucket of cold water, ready to throw on the efforts of others for good. As 'iron sharpeneth iron, so a man sharpeneth the countenance of his friend.' Let us ever be ready with the word of encouragement, with the helpful hand, with the cheering spirit of hope. There is work for us amongst the ruins of God's fair world, and the labourers are few.

Let us then rise and build, each of us in earnest, each of us encouraging his brother, each of us looking beyond the discouragements of earth to the Master's 'Well done good and faithful servant.'

CHAPTER IV.

To Every Man his Work.

Once a year, in the University of Cambridge, there is a grand day called Commemoration Day. On that day, in the middle of the service, in each college chapel a list of honours is read out, a list containing the names of all those who, in times gone by, gave money or help to that college. The bodies of those whose names are read have many of them crumbled to dust long centuries ago, but their names are remembered still, remembered for what they have done; and that they may never be forgotten, they are publicly read aloud, year by year, on the great Commemoration Day.

Let us now take up God's honour list, and see who are entered upon it. We shall find it filled with the names of those who have been dead more than 2000 years, but whose names are not forgotten; they stand out fair and clear in the Book of God, all are entered on the great list of honours, and are remembered for what they have done.

Where shall we find God's great honour list? It is the list of all those who responded to Nehemiah's appeal, and who rebuilt the walls of Jerusalem. In Neh. iii. we have a list of their names, not one is omitted. There those names have stood for 2000 years; there they will stand to the end of time. Brave men, noble men were those Jews, who, as soon as the scheme was laid before them, cried, 'Let us arise and build;' and who not only responded by word of mouth, but who at once set to work to do what they had promised.

Let us take a walk round the walls of Jerusalem and watch the builders at work. We will begin where they began, ver. 1, at the Sheep Gate on the east side of the city. As we stand by the gate we see beneath us the Kedron valley, and beyond it the slopes of the Mount of Olives. Close by us, but inside the city, is the sheep-market, where the sheep and lambs are sold to those who wish to sacrifice in the temple, and near this market is the pool where the sheep are washed before being led up into the temple courts. This is the pool mentioned in John v. 2, where in later times lay the impotent man waiting to be healed.

Who are these who are busily engaged repairing the Sheep Gate and the wall beyond it; they are the priests, who have left their work in the temple courts close by, and who, with their loins girded and their long white tunics turned up, are leading, as it was right they should, the

van of Nehemiah's effort.

Heading these priests, and superintending their work, is Eliashib the high priest. The meaning of his name is God restores, a grand name for the man who began the restoration of the Holy City. This Eliashib was the grandson of the high priest Jeshua, who had returned with Zerubbabel. He is honourably mentioned by Nehemiah as leading the way in this work; but, sad to say, though he earnestly built the wall round the city, Eliashib was afterward the one who let sin come within those very walls.

The priests are building from the Sheep Gate as far as the two towers, Meah and Hananeel, which stood at the north-east corner of the city.

We pass on, and next we see a number of men building; we notice at once, by their dress, that they are not priests, so we ask them where they come from. We find they are men of Jericho, the city of palm trees, fourteen miles away in the Jordan valley. They are the descendants of the 345 men of Jericho who returned with the first detachment of Jews in the time of Cyrus. This piece of the wall has been allotted to them because it faces their own city Jericho; they are building at the very spot from which the road started that led from Jerusalem to Jericho.

Passing the Jericho men we come to a bit of the wall where one solitary man is working. His name is Zaccur. He can only have a small piece of the wall allotted to him, for we are close now upon the Fish Gate, where other builders are at work, the sons of Hassenaah. Possibly this Zaccur was a man of no importance, for we never hear of him again; probably his share of the work was only a small one, yet it was well and faithfully done, and his name stands fast in God's honour list, and will stand there while the world shall last.

We have come now to the Fish Gate, on the north side of the city. Close by us is the fish-market, for through that gate comes all the fish sold in Jerusalem. Men of Tyre are there with baskets of fish from the Mediterranean, and Galilean fishermen with fish from the great inland sea, on which in later times the apostles toiled for their daily bread.

Three men, who were probably well-known citizens, are repairing the three next pieces of the wall, their names are Meremoth, Meshullam, and Zadok. We will notice one of these three men, Meshullam, for we shall hear more of him presently. If Meshullam's name is honourably mentioned here as one of the builders of Jerusalem, we shall find it very differently mentioned as we go on with Nehemiah's story.

Passing these three men, we come to a part of the wall which is being built by the inhabitants of Tekoa, a small village not far from Jerusalem, whence came the wise woman whom Joab sent to King David. What is the matter at this part of the wall? The work does not get on as it should. They seem to have no leaders, these people of Tekoa, and to have a long stretch of wall, and but few hands to build it. We ask how this is, and we find that some in Tekoa have shirked the work (ver. 5):

'Their nobles put not their necks to the work of their Lord.'

They have been like oxen, too idle to draw the plough, which have pulled their necks from under the yoke, and have stubbornly refused to go forward. So have these nobles of Tekoa stood aloof, too proud to work side by side with the common people of the village, or too idle to join

in anything which requires continuous effort; they have left their poorer neighbours to bear the burden alone, and to do it or not as they please.

We are now passing the Old Gate, on the north of the city, the Damascus Gate of modern days, from which goes the great northern road to Samaria and Galilee.

The men of Gibeon and Mizpah, whose villages lay near together, we find next on the wall, working side by side as neighbours should, and building the part of the wall which faced their own homes, two villages standing on the hills about five miles from the northern gate.

Coming round the city we find ourselves passing the Gate of Ephraim and the Broad Wall. Here we see no workmen, for that part of the wall does not need repairing. Uzziah, King of Judah, had built a strong piece of wall here, about 200 yards long, and the Chaldeans had not been able to destroy it with the rest of the city. This wall was twice the thickness of the rest, and was always called the Broad Wall.

Near this wall we find men of two different trades working, goldsmiths and apothecaries. Trades in the East are almost always hereditary, passing down from father to son for many generations. Thus these goldsmiths and apothecaries were joined together in family guilds or unions, and came forward together to the work. The apothecaries were the spice makers, important persons in the East, where spices are so largely used in cooking, and where so many sweet-smelling and aromatic spices are employed in embalming the dead.

Then, passing on, we see the tower which protected the furnaces or brick kilns, in which the bricks were made which had been used in rebuilding the houses of the city. So unsettled was the country, that it is supposed it was found necessary to erect a tower for the defence of these brick-makers, who were often at work by night as well as by day. Close to the furnace tower we see a strange sight, and one which is well worthy of our notice. This part of the wall deserves our earnest attention, for here are actually young ladies engaged in the work, standing, trowel in hand, toiling away side by side with the other workmen. Who are these girls? They are the daughters of Shallum, the ruler of the half part of Jerusalem (ver. 12) (or rather of the country round Jerusalem). Shallum was evidently a wealthy and influential man, but he did not withdraw from the work, like the nobles of Tekoa, and so anxious are his daughters that the Lord's work should be done, that here we find them toiling away by their father's side. God noticed the effort made by these young ladies of Jerusalem, and did not forget to notice them in His great honour list.

Passing on, we come to the part of the wall which Nehemiah had examined in his moonlight ride. We see the Valley Gate, the Dung Gate, and the Gate of the Fountain, opposite the Pool of Siloam. This part of the city has suffered much from Nebuchadnezzar's work of destruction, and the work of rebuilding it is therefore very heavy. But close to the south-east corner, at the place where Nehemiah's mule stumbled and was unable to proceed, the builders have a stiff piece of work indeed. The piles of rubbish are so many and so deep, there is so much to be cleared away before they can commence building, that we find accordingly the piece given to each man to repair is not great, and that many hands are making the labour light.

We notice, too, that most of those who are working in this part of the city are repairing that bit of the wall which is immediately opposite their own houses. No less than six times we are told that the builder's own house was close to the part of the wall he built.

One man we cannot help watching as we turn round towards the eastern wall. His name is Baruch, and there is something about him which attracts our attention at once. He works as if he were working for his life, he does not lose a moment; whoever is absent, Baruch is always at his post; whoever is idle, Baruch is ever hard at work, early in the morning and late at night, when the hot sun is scorching the city and when the night dews are falling, Baruch is always busy, toiling away on the wall with all his might and main. Ver. 20 tells us he 'earnestly repaired.' The word means to be hot, to be on fire with zeal and energy. He 'earnestly repaired the _other_ piece,' or as it would be better translated '_another_ piece.' Having finished his own portion, in another part of the wall, Baruch has come to the rescue at the south-east corner, where the rubbish is deepest and the work is hardest. Baruch therefore receives the mark of distinction on God's list of honour. Round the corner, on the eastern wall, one builder we cannot pass without notice, for he is an old white-headed man. His name is Shemaiah the son of Shechaniah. We find this man mentioned in 1 Chron. iii. 22 as a descendant of King David. His son Hattush had returned with Ezra, twelve years before; now here is the old man himself, determined not to let his white hairs prevent him from helping on the good work (ver 29). He builds by the gate which was his charge, the Golden Gate, at the east of the temple court and facing the Mount of Olives.

The last piece of the wall is being done by the goldsmiths and the merchants; and now, as we pass them, we find ourselves again at the Sheep Gate, at the very spot from which we started in our walk round the city.

Listen to the ring of the trowels, hearken to the shouts of the workmen, as they call to one another and cheer each other on in the work. From morning till night, day after day, the trowels are kept busy, and the work goes on, and already, as we watch, we begin to see the gaps filled up and the ruin of many years repaired.

It was the work of the Lord, a grand work, a glorious work, which those builders of Nehemiah were doing, and God noticed and marked, and put on His list of honour every one who joined in it.

Times have changed, manners have altered, kingdoms have passed away, since the eastern sun streamed upon Nehemiah's workmen, but there is still work to be done for the Lord. The Master's workshop is still open, and the Master's eye is still fixed on the workers, and He still enters the name of each in a register, His great list of honour, kept not in earth, but in heaven.

Is my name then on God's honour list? Am I working for Him? Am I to be found at my post, faithfully carrying out the work He has given me to do?

Looking at the walls of Jerusalem, surely the Lord would have us learn three great lessons.

(1) _Who_ should work.

(2) _Where_ they should work.

(3) _How_ they should work.

Who should work? What say the walls of Jerusalem? Everyone without exception. Do we not see people of all classes at work--rich men and poor men, people of all occupations, priests, goldsmiths and apothecaries, and merchants? men of all ages, the young and strong, and the old and white-headed? those from all parts of the country--men of Jericho, and Gibeon, and Mizpah, side by side with inhabitants of Jerusalem? people of both sexes, men and women? The goldsmith did not say, 'I don't understand building, therefore I cannot help.' The apothecary did not object that it was not his trade, so he must leave it to the bricklayers and masons. Old Shemaiah did not say, 'Surely an old white-headed man like myself cannot be expected to do anything.' The men of Jericho did not complain that they were fourteen miles from their home, and that therefore it would be inconvenient for them to help. The daughters of Shallum did not say, 'We are women, and therefore there is nothing for us to do.'

But all came forward, heartily, willingly, cheerfully, to do the work of their Lord.

There is only one exception, only one blot on the page, only one dark spot on the register. The nobles of Tekoa, for 2000 years their names have stood, enrolled as the shirkers in God's grand work.

Who then are to work for God? Every one of us, whoever we are, whatever is our occupation, whatever our place of residence, whatever our age, whatever our sex, the motto in God's great workshop remains the same--'_To every one his work_', his own particular work, to be done by him, and by no one else.

Where then shall we work? Imitate Nehemiah's builders; those living in the city built each the piece of wall before his own door, those living outside built the part of the wall facing their own village, whilst the priests built the piece nearest to the temple. Let us then, as God's workers, begin at home, working from a centre outwards; our own heart first, surely there is plenty of work to do there; then our own family, our own household, our own street, our own congregation, our own city, our own country, letting the circle ever widen and widen, till it reacheth to the furthest corner of God's great workshop, to the uttermost parts of the earth.

How then shall we work? Like Baruch, the son of Zabbai, hot with zeal, on fire with earnestness and energy. Baruch did not saunter round the walls to watch how the other builders were getting on; he stuck to his post. Baruch did not work well one day and lie in bed the next, he persevered steadily and patiently. Baruch did not work as if he were trying to make the job last as long as possible, idly pretending to work, but dreaming all the time, but he worked on bravely, earnestly, unceasingly, till the work was done. So let us work while it is called to-day, for the night cometh when no man can work.

It was no easy work those Jerusalem builders had. Outdoor work in the East is always hard and heavy; it is no light matter to stand for hours in the scorching sun without a particle of shade, toiling on at heavy and unaccustomed work. But the builders bravely endured, and were steadfast in the work, and they have their reward. Their names stand on

God's honour list, not even the most insignificant amongst them is omitted.

Workers for God, does the work seem hard? Are the difficulties great? Are you weary and faint as you keep at your post? Does the hot sun of temptation often tempt you to throw up the work? Think of Nehemiah's builders. Hold on, cheer up, work well and bravely, remembering that the reward is sure. We read of certain people who lived at Philippi whose names were written in heaven. Who were these? (Phil. iv. 3.) St. Paul tells us; they were his fellow-labourers, the workers of God in that city.

No human hand, no hand of angel or archangel, enters the names on that register, for it is the Lamb's book of life. None but the Lamb can open it, none but He can write in it, none but He will read its contents in the ears of the assembled universe.

What an honour, what a wonderful joy, what a glorious reward it will be to each faithful worker, as he hears his own name read from the list! Surely it will well repay him for all he has undergone in the working days of earth.

CHAPTER V.

The Sword and the Trowel.

The sea is calm and quiet, blue as the sky above it, not a wave, not a ripple is to be seen; it is smooth as polished silver, shining like a mirror, and peaceful as the still lake amongst the mountains. On the sea is a boat, floating along as quietly and as gently as on a river. The man in the boat is having an easy time, as he rows out to sea, almost without an effort.

But what is that in the far distance? It is a black cloud, rising from the sea. In a little time the wind begins to moan and sigh, white lines are seen on the distant water, a storm is coming, and coming both swiftly and surely. The man in the boat at once rouses himself and prepares for action; it was an easy thing to go forward when all was still, he will find it a very different matter to meet the rising storm.

So found Nehemiah the governor. Up to this time all had gone smoothly and easily, the king had granted his request fully and freely, Asaph had given him the wood from the royal paradise, the committee, composed of the leading men in Jerusalem, had at once fallen in with his scheme, the people, great and small, men and women, old and young, had responded to his appeal, the walls were being rebuilt, the trowels were busy, the rubbish was being cleared away, and all was bright, cheerful, and encouraging. As Nehemiah walks round the city directing the builders, dressed, as a Persian governor, in a flowing robe, a soft cap, and with a gold chain round his neck, he feels his work both easy and pleasant. It is always a light task to direct and superintend those who have a mind to work, and Nehemiah for some time went peacefully on his way, as the man in his boat rowed easily along in the still, untroubled water.

But what is that dark cloud rising north of Jerusalem? What is that

moaning, muttering sound in the far distance? Can it be a storm coming, a terrible storm of opposition and difficulty? Surely it is, for we see Nehemiah rousing himself, and preparing to row his frail boat through troubled waters.

Signs of the approaching storm had indeed been seen by him, before the first stone had been placed on the city wall. No sooner had he revealed his plans to the people of Jerusalem, no sooner had they responded, 'We will arise and build,' than something had occurred which might well make Nehemiah feel uncomfortable. A messenger had appeared at the northern gate, bearing in his hand a letter, written on parchment, and addressed to the Tirshatha, or governor. Nehemiah opened the roll, and found it contained an insulting message from Sanballat, the governor of Samaria, a message which was evidently expressed in very scornful and unpleasant words. The upshot of the letter was this (ii. 19):

'What is this thing that ye do? will ye rebel against the king?'

Do you, Nehemiah, intend to fortify Jerusalem, and then set up the standard of rebellion against Persia? Our master, the king, may be deceived by you, but I, Sanballat, see through your hypocrisy and your wicked designs.

Nehemiah's answer was clear and to the point. Three things he would have Sanballat know:

(1) We have higher authority than that of man for what we do.

'The God of heaven, He will prosper us.'

(2) We intend to go on with our work in spite of anything you may say or do.

'We His servants will arise and build.'

(3) It is no business or concern of yours. You, Sanballat, have nothing whatever to do with it.

'Ye have no portion, nor right, nor memorial, in Jerusalem.'

Be content then, Sanballat, to manage your own province of Samaria, and to leave Jerusalem and the Jews to me and to their God.

No answer came back to Nehemiah's letter, and perhaps he and his companions fondly dreamed that this was an end to the matter, that the storm had blown over, and that Sanballat, when he saw that they were determined, and that they did not heed his threats or his ridicule, would in the future let them alone.

But one day, quite suddenly, the clouds returned, and the storm rose. The work is progressing splendidly. The priests and the merchants, and the goldsmiths and the apothecaries, the daughters of Shallum, earnest Baruch, and white-headed Shemaiah, are all at their post, when suddenly, as they look up, they see an unexpected sight. A great crowd of Samaritans is gathered together outside the northern wall, and is standing still, staring at them, and watching their every movement as they build the wall.

Sanballat the governor is there, Tobiah the secretary stands by his

side, his chief counsellors have come with him, as have also the officers of his army. Dark and thick the storm is gathering, and surely the builders feel it, for the trowels cease their cheery ringing sound, and all are listening, waiting and wondering what will come next.

The silence is broken by a loud scornful voice, loud enough to be heard down the line of workers, and by Nehemiah as he stands among them. He knows that voice well; it is the voice of Sanballat the governor. In scoffing disagreeable words he is speaking to his companions, but he is talking about the builders, and is talking for their benefit too, that they may feel the full sting of his sarcastic words.

'What do these feeble Jews?' A poor weak, miserable down-trodden set of men; what can they do?

'Will they fortify themselves?' Do they fondly dream they will ever finish their work, and fortify their city?

And how long will it take to build walls like these? Do they think it will be done directly? 'Will they sacrifice? Will they make an end in a day?' Do they expect to offer the sacrifice at the commencement of their work, and then the very same day to finish it?

Why, they have not even the necessary materials. Where will they get their stone from? Are they going to do what is impossible, to make good, solid building-stone out of the heaps of rubbish, the crumbling burnt masses which are all that remain of the old walls?

'Will they revive the stones out of the heaps of the rubbish which are burned?'

Then when Sanballat had done speaking, there follows the loud coarse sneer of Secretary Tobiah. Why if a fox (or jackal) tries to get over their miserable wall, even his light foot will break it down.

'Even that which they build, if a fox go up, he shall even break down their stone wall.'

We can picture to ourselves the burst of laughter with which this speech would be hailed by the bystanders, the officers and courtiers of Sanballat.

What does Nehemiah answer? How does he reply to this cruel ridicule, these sharp, cutting, insolent words, that provoking laughter?

If we study Nehemiah's character, we shall find that he was a man of quick feelings and of a sensitive nature. He was not one of those men who are so thick-skinned that hard speeches are not felt by them. He was moreover a man of great power and spirit. He must have felt much inclined to give Tobiah the bitter retort he so richly deserved, or to call upon his men to drive Sanballat and his party from the walls.

But Nehemiah speaks not. He does not utter a single word to Sanballat or to his friends. He remembers that this is God's work, not his; and he therefore complains to God, not man:

'Hear, O our God; for we are despised: and turn their reproach upon their own head, and give them for a prey in the land of captivity.'

Then, quietly and steadily, as if nothing had happened, he takes up his work again, and the people follow his example; they take no notice of the jeering company below, but they build on in silence, all the quicker and the more carefully for the scoffs of their enemies.

Sanballat and Tobiah soon tire of laughter and mockery, when they see it is of no avail; they move off discomfited, and the work goes on as before.

Satan, the great enemy of souls, is the same to-day as he was in Nehemiah's time. He never lets a good work alone; he never permits Christ's servants to row in smooth water, but immediately he sees work done for the Master, at once he stirs up the storm of opposition.

The young man who is careless about eternity, who is living simply to please self, has an easy time; he will not come across even a ripple of opposition, his sea will be smooth as glass. But let that young man be aroused, be awakened, be converted to God, let the good work of grace be begun in his soul, and at once Satan will stir up the storm of difficulty and opposition. Very often it begins, just as Nehemiah's storm began, in laughter. It has been said that laughter hurts no one. That statement might be true if we were all body, but inasmuch as we have a spirit within us, it is not true that laughter cannot hurt. Surely it stings, and cuts, and wounds the sensitive soul, just as heavy blows sting, and cut, and wound the body. Satan knows this, and he makes full use of the knowledge.

The man who sets out for heaven will scarcely fail, before he has gone many steps, to come across a Sanballat. He will have his taunt and jest all ready. 'What is this I hear of you? Have you turned a saint? I suppose you are too good for your old companions now; you are going to set the whole world to rights.' Or, if the words are unspoken, Sanballat has the shrug of the shoulders, and the scornful gesture, which are just as hard to bear. Nor must the man who has his face heavenwards be surprised if he hears Tobiah's sneer. 'Ah, wait a bit,' says Tobiah; 'let us see if it will last. Even a fox will throw down that wall; the very first thing that comes to vex him, the very first temptation, however small, will be sufficient to overturn the wall of good resolutions, and his religious professions will lie low in the dust, and will be shown to be nothing but rubbish.'

It is well to be prepared for Sanballat and Tobiah, for any day we may come across them. How shall we answer them? Let us follow in Nehemiah's footsteps, let us turn from man to God. He hears the taunt, even as it is spoken, and He says to each of His tried, tempted children:

'For My Name's sake, canst thou not bear that taunt,
That cruel word?
Is not the sorrow small, the burden light,
Borne for thy Lord?

For My Name's sake, I see it, know it all,
'Tis hard for thee,
But I have loved thee so, my child, canst thou
Bear this for Me?'

Sanballat and Tobiah have moved away from the walls of Jerusalem, and the work goes on prospering; the gaps are being filled up, and already

the wall is half its intended height (iv. 6), for the people had a mind to work, and much can be done in a short time when that is the case. Not a word more has, for some time, been heard of Sanballat, and perhaps the builders fancied and hoped they had seen the last of their enemies, when one day, suddenly, dreadful news is brought into the city.

Sanballat and his friends, having failed to stop the work by laughter and mockery, are going to take stronger measures, and have agreed to resort to force. Dark secret plots are being formed to gather an army together, and to come suddenly upon the defenceless builders and kill them at their work.

All the surrounding nations are invited to join Sanballat in his enterprise. Not only the Samaritans in the north, but the men of Ashdod from the west, the Arabians from the south, and the Ammonites from the east, are gathering together against Jerusalem. Psalm lxxxiii. is supposed by many to have been written at this time, and describes the great storm as it arose, and threatened to destroy the defenceless city (Psalm lxxxiii. 1-8).

Poor Nehemiah! he sees the raging of the waters, and he feels that the little boat needs a careful hand at the helm. He has a double receipt against this new opposition--a receipt which may be summed up in the two words which the Master has given us as our watch-word--Watch and pray.

'Nevertheless we made our prayer unto our God, and set a watch against them day and night.'

But the billows rose higher. Three mighty waves came sweeping on, and threatened to swamp Nehemiah's frail vessel.

(1) The builders grew discouraged and tired. The cry was raised inside the city, 'We had better give up attempting to work, the rubbish is too deep, it will never be cleared away, the men who are carrying it away are worn out, we cannot build the wall, it is of no use to try any longer.'

Ver. 10: 'And Judah said, The strength of the bearers of burdens is decayed, and there is much rubbish; so that we are not able to build the wall.'

(2) News was brought in from all sides, that any day, any night, at any moment, a sudden attack might be expected, for their enemies were boasting loudly to all they met that they were confident of taking the builders by surprise.

Ver. 11: 'And our adversaries said, They shall not know, neither see, till we come in the midst among them, and slay them, and cause the work to cease.'

And not only was there discouragement inside the city and threatened danger without, but the number of hands was lessened upon the city wall, for (3) men arrived from different parts of the country, saying that it was absolutely necessary that their brethren who had come up to work on the wall should at once return home. They were needed to guard their families and their homes from the approaching foe. Ten times over Nehemiah received deputations of this kind (ver. 12); and the spirits of the builders sank lower and lower.

But Nehemiah, like a true leader, rises to the occasion, and does not allow himself to be cast down. He did not make light of the difficulties he saw around him, but he manfully faced them, and in the hour of trial his people did not desert him.

One day, ver. 14, looking towards the north, Nehemiah suddenly saw the enemy coming. But all was ready; the weapons were laid where they could be taken up in a moment. No sooner is the alarm given than the work ceases, and the whole company of builders is changed into an army of soldiers, and swords, and spears, and bows are to be seen on the walls instead of trowels and hammers. Nehemiah had carefully arranged the position which each man was to occupy; he drew up his soldiers after their families, probably giving to each family the part of the wall nearest to their own house, that they might feel that they were fighting for their homes, their wives, and their children. Then when all were put in readiness Nehemiah called upon them to be brave in the defence of their city, and not to fear the foe.

'Be not ye afraid of them: remember the Lord, which is great and terrible, and fight for your brethren, your sons, and your daughters, your wives, and your houses.'

The enemy approaches; but instead of taking Jerusalem by surprise, as they had boasted they would, they find they are expected, and will meet with a warm reception if they advance farther. They are afraid to make the attempt; God guards the faithful city, and Sanballat and his allied forces withdraw discomfited. No sooner has the enemy beaten a retreat than the work begins again.

'We returned all of us to the wall, every one unto his work.'

But, from that time, the sword and the trowel must never be parted. Each builder worked with a sword hanging by his side; each porter held a hod in one hand, and a weapon in the other. They were always on the alert, ever ready for action.

Nehemiah had brought with him from Shushan a large following of faithful servants or slaves; on these he could thoroughly rely. He divided them into two parties, half worked at the building, filling up the gaps left by those who had returned home; the rest stood behind them, guarding the weapons, the shields, and the spears, and the bows, and the swords which were laid ready for immediate use. By Nehemiah's side stood a trumpeter, ready to blow an alarm at the first sight or sound of the enemy.

For, says Nehemiah, 'I said unto the nobles, and to the rulers, and to the rest of the people, The work is great and large, and we are separated upon the wall, one far from another. In what place therefore ye hear the sound of the trumpet, resort ye thither unto us: our God shall fight for us.'

So the work and the watching went on all day long, and when the sun set over the Mediterranean, and the stars came out in the quiet sky, and darkness made the work impossible, still the watching went on as before. Those who had laboured at the building all day lay down and slept, whilst others kept guard on the wall. The workmen who lived outside the walls were requested by Nehemiah to stay in the city all night, in order to increase the strength of their force. As for the governor himself and the little body of faithful servants, they gave themselves hardly any

rest, either by night or by day. They were almost always on duty, not one of them even undressed all that long time of watching; if they laid down to sleep, they laid in their clothes, ready at any moment for the attack of the enemy (chap. iv. 28).

Thus, day by day, the work grew and the walls rose higher, strong lines of defence once more encircled the city, and the prayer of the captives in Babylon, offered so earnestly and amongst many tears, was already receiving an abundant answer.

'Do good in Thy good pleasure to Zion, build Thou the walls of Jerusalem.'

The scene changes. Nehemiah and his workmen fade away; the walls of Jerusalem become dim and obscure, and, in their place, we see coming out, as in a dissolving view, other figures and another landscape. We see the Master, Christ Jesus, standing in the midst of His countless labourers and workmen, the great company of His faithful servants. We notice that each one is working busily at the special work the Master has given him to do, we see that this work is very varied, no two labourers have exactly the same task. But in one respect we notice that all the Master's servants are alike, they all carry a sword, for it is not possible for any one to be a worker for Christ without also being at the same time a soldier.

Nor is it difficult to see the reason of this, for, if we serve Christ, we are certain to meet with opposition. The mighty hosts of hell will come against us, to hinder and to oppose us.

Let us, then, be prepared for their attack. Let us set a watch against them. Satan and his forces always watch for our weakest point. Let us find out what that point is. What is the weak part of our defences? Is it selfishness? Is it pride? Is it prayerlessness? Is it temper? Is it an unkind spirit? Whatever it is by which we are most easily led astray, that is our weak spot, and there we ought to set a double watch. David had his weak spot, and he knew it: unguarded, hasty words were ever coming out of his mouth, but he found out the weak point in his defences, and there he set a strong and powerful guard. He called upon God Himself to keep out the enemy at that weak place:

'Set a watch, O Lord, before my mouth. Keep the door of my lips.'

Let us not only watch, but let us ever be ready to fight. Never let us lay down the sword of the Spirit, or the shield of faith. Never for a moment let us put off our armour, for we never know when the next attack may come. The unguarded moment is the moment for which Satan always watches, and which he knows only too well how to use.

Above all, let us pray, for the watching and the fighting will be of no avail unless we ask and obtain strength from on high. 'Our God shall fight for us,' cried Nehemiah to his discouraged men. But they had prayed day and night for the help which bore them safely through. 'Ye have not, because ye ask not. Ask, and ye shall receive.'

'Christian, seek not here repose,
Cast thy dreams of ease away,
Thou art in the midst of foes,
Therefore, Watch and pray.'

Gird thy heavenly armour on,
Wear it ever night and day,
Near thee lurks the evil one,
Therefore, Watch and pray.

CHAPTER VI.

The World's Bible.

A great cry, a piercing cry, raised by hundreds of voices, a cry which resounds through the streets of the city, and which is echoed by the surrounding hills. What can be the matter? What can be the cause of this mournful wail?

There was a great cry in Egypt on that awful night, when there was not a house in which there was not one dead. That was the great cry of terror.

Esau raised a great cry when he found that he had lost his father's blessing, the great cry of disappointment.

There arose a great cry in the council chamber of Jerusalem, when the Apostle Paul stood before his judges,—the cry of conflicting opinion.

But the great cry which is sounding in our ears now is no cry of terror or of disappointment, and the men who join in it are all of one mind; yet the cry is none the less bitter or heartrending. As we listen to it, we can distinguish the shrill voices of women mingled with the deeper ones of men, and we notice also, that, although the cry is one of sorrow and distress, there is a deep undertone of anger and complaining.

Who are crying, and what is the cause of their distress? Who are crying? An excited mob of men and women, standing in the streets of Jerusalem. Look at them well, surely we know some of their faces. Is it possible, can it be, that we recognize some of those whom we saw working so happily and cheerfully on the walls? What a change, what a terrible change in their faces!

What is the cause of their distress? What can have happened to move them so deeply? Have the Samaritans returned to attack the city? Are the walls on which they have spent so much labour overturned and laid low in the dust? No, all without is peaceful, there is no sound of war in the streets, and the hills around stand out brightly in the sunshine, and are untrodden by the foot of any foe. The trouble is at home this time, and as poor Nehemiah listens to the dismal noise, and as he tries to still the shrill cries, that his voice may be heard, and as he watches the people rocking to and fro, as Easterns do when moved by sorrow, he may well feel downcast and disappointed, for a city divided against itself cannot stand, and as Nehemiah listens to the cry, he clearly sees that, at that moment, Jerusalem, the city he loves best on earth, is indeed a divided city.

Who then were these citizens of Jerusalem, these men and these women, who raised the great cry? They were the poorer classes of the city; it was a cry of the poor against the rich, a cry like that which was raised all over France at the time of the French Revolution, a cry for bread.

Nehemiah listens carefully to the cry and complaints of the people, and as he does so he feels sure they are not raised without cause. There is undoubtedly great and distressing poverty in the city, and he finds that this may be traced to three principal causes.

(1) The King of Persia had only allowed the returned captives a very small tract of country to live in. The rest of the land was filled up by the Samaritans, the Arabians, the Edomites and other nations who had settled in Palestine whilst the rightful owners were in Babylon. Consequently, as their families increased, the Jews found this narrow strip of country was not sufficient to maintain them, and, as is always the case, over-population and over-crowding was followed by great poverty.

(2) Then there had evidently been a severe famine, which had made matters worse, for there had been numbers of mouths to feed and barely anything to feed them on. No country is more subject to famine than Palestine, for the harvest there is entirely dependent on the rainfall. There are but few springs, there is no river but the Jordan, and that runs in a deep ravine; the whole fertility of the country hangs on the amount of rain that falls in autumn and winter. No rain means no corn, no corn means starvation, and the people know it well. Nowhere on earth are there such fervent prayers for rain, prayers which are offered by Turk, Jew, and Christian alike, as there are in Palestine to this very day, if the rainy season is passing away and a sufficient quantity of rain has not fallen.

(3) Then Nehemiah found there was a third cause of distress. Every year, in addition to earning money to keep his wife and children alive, the poor man had to be ready for a visitor, and this visitor never received a very hearty welcome. Once a year there arrived at his door an official sent by the King of Persia. He was the tax-collector, sent to collect the tribute which had to be paid yearly to their master, the great sovereign at Shushan. Whatever else went unpaid, that tribute must be paid; whatever other debts they incurred, that sum must be paid in full, and paid at once.

Over-population, famine, tribute, it was no wonder that the people were so poor.

But the great cry in the streets of Jerusalem was not merely a cry of suffering and distress; it was an angry complaining cry; it was the cry of those who felt that others were to blame for their sorrows.

As Nehemiah walks amongst the weeping crowds, and as he talks to the people one by one, he finds that there are no less than three sets of complainants.

(1) There are the utterly poor people, those who have no private means whatever, but who are entirely dependent on the work of their hands and on the wages they get for that work. These come to Nehemiah and pour out their sorrowful tale. 'We,' they say, 'have large families, for

'We, our sons, and our daughters, are many.'

But 'Happy is the man that hath his quiver full of them,' so runs the Psalm, and are not children a heritage and gift that cometh of the Lord? Yet when the quiver is more than full (for a quiver only held four

arrows), and when bread is scarce and work bad, it needs faith to trust the children which the Lord has given to His care, and to feel sure that He who sent them will send the bread to feed them.

'Now,' say these overburdened parents to Nehemiah, 'we cannot let our children starve. We have been building this wall and earning nothing, but we have had to eat all these weeks; we have been obliged to take up corn for our families lest they should die, and the consequence is we have run very heavily into debt' (ver. 2). That was the first class of complainants.

(2) But amongst the weepers Nehemiah found a second class, those who had once been somewhat better off, and had, in happier days, owned a little property, and had some means of their own, but who, at the time of the late famine, had got into difficulties. 'I,' said one, 'had a little farm in a village near Jerusalem.' 'I,' said another, 'was the owner of a nice little vineyard or oliveyard on the hill side,' 'I,' said a third, 'built a house in the city on my return from captivity, and hoped to leave it to my children.' 'But so terrible was our distress in the famine,' say these men, 'that we were obliged to borrow money of our neighbours the rich Jews in Jerusalem. They were willing to lend the money, but they required security for it, and we were compelled to pledge or mortgage our little property to these men, and now times are still bad, and we see no hope whatever that we shall be able to buy our little possessions back again' (ver. 3).

(3) But the shrillest cries of all came from the third class of complainants. These were men who, up to a certain point, resembled the second class. They had once possessed a little property, but in the time of famine they had parted with their lands, their houses, and their vineyards like the rest. But the story of the third class did not end here, these had since then got into still worse difficulties. The tax-collector had come round to collect the tribute for Artaxerxes, and he had demanded immediate payment. They had, however, nothing to give him. What could they do? They were obliged once more to borrow money of their rich neighbours, who lent it to them at the rate of 12 per cent, (one eighth part of the money to be paid monthly). And what pledge, what security did these nobles require for their money? The poor people had already lost their houses and their vineyards, there was nothing left to them but their children, and actually the son or the daughter was pledged or mortgaged to the rich money-lender. If the heavy interest is not paid, at any moment the child may be seized, and carried off to the noble's house to be brought up as a slave. 'Nay,' cry some of the mothers in the crowd, 'our case is worst of all; some of our daughters have been taken as slaves already, and we have no power to redeem them. Yet we love our children just as much as these rich people love theirs, they are just as dear to us as theirs are to them' (ver. 5).

'And then,' says Nehemiah, 'when I had heard their cry and listened to their tale, I was very angry.' But surely it was wrong of Nehemiah to be angry. Is not anger a bad thing? Is it not one of the works of the devil, which we are bidden to lay aside?

Yet what says St. Paul? 'Be ye angry, and sin not.' So it is possible to be angry, and yet to be sinless. And we read, Mark iii. 5, that, in the synagogue at Capernaum, the Lord Jesus looked round on the hard-hearted Pharisees with anger; and in Him was no sin.

Nehemiah was very angry, yet Nehemiah sinned not in being so, for it

was anger at sin, anger at the wrongdoing which was bringing disgrace on his nation, anger at the conduct which was offending God and doing harm to God's cause. It was righteous anger against the cruelty and selfishness of those who, in those hard times, had profited from the poverty and distress of their poor fellow countrymen.

For some time Nehemiah did nothing, but he carefully turned the matter over in his mind. He says, 'I consulted with myself,' or as it is in the margin, 'My heart consulted in me.' We can picture him pacing up and down, saying again and again, What shall I do? What is the wisest course to take? How can this great evil be stopped? Doubtless, too, he took this trouble, as he had taken all his other anxieties and cares, and laid it before the God of heaven.

Then he sends for the nobles and all those who had oppressed the people, and he gives them very plainly his mind on the matter:

'I rebuked the nobles, and the rulers, and said unto them, Ye exact usury, every one of his brother.'

And thereby they had broken the law, for no Jew was allowed to take interest, or increase, of another Jew, much less to exact usury: see Exod. xxii. 25; Ezek. xviii. 8, 17.

The Hebrew was to look upon every other Hebrew as his brother, and to treat him as such. There was to be brotherly love in time of misfortune, such love as would prevent the receiving of increase from the one who was in trouble. With regard to the mortgaging of land, it does not seem that these rich men had actually broken the law, such pledges were allowed, provided that the property mortgaged was returned in the year of jubilee. But, whilst they had not broken the letter of the law, these Jews had certainly acted in a hard, self-seeking way, showing no sympathy whatever for the sorrows of those around them.

How different was this from the generous conduct of Nehemiah himself! All the time of his government he drew no taxes or contributions from the people over whom he ruled, as other governors did, and as his predecessors in Jerusalem had done. Eastern governors in those days, like Turkish governors now, were accustomed to farm their provinces. That is to say, the king allowed them no salary, but he put the taxation of the people in their hands. A certain fixed sum was to be sent to him every year from the province; and whatever the governor could grind or squeeze out of the people, over and above this stated amount, went into his own pocket and formed his salary. Jerusalem now-a-days rings with many a cry of distress caused by the unjust means used by the pacha to increase his stipend by putting fresh burdens on the people. The former Jewish governors had made as much as forty shekels a day, or £1,800 a year out of the people in their province. But when Nehemiah came to Jerusalem, he found the people so poverty-stricken and oppressed that he would not take a single penny for himself. It is probable that his salary as cup-bearer had been continued, and on this he lived and kept his household going all the time of his government. Not only so; not only did Nehemiah pay all his private expenses, but he kept open house for the people of Jerusalem; every day 150 of the rulers and chief men dined with him, besides all the visitors to Jerusalem, Jews from other countries, strangers from foreign nations who were staying but a short time in the city, all of whom were invited to the governor's house, and sat down at the governor's table.

Nehemiah himself gives us his daily bill of fare, ver. 18.

1 ox.

6 fat sheep.

Fowls without number.

A fresh supply of wine of all kinds stored in every tenth day.

It was no small expense to have above 150 men to dinner daily, yet for all this Nehemiah took not a penny from his province, so touched was he to the heart by the poverty of the people. Not only so, but all the time the walls were being built he toiled away, and allowed all his household servants to work both night and day, and yet looked for no payment or compensation, ver. 16. Then besides all this, Nehemiah had been most generous in the time of the famine; he had supplied the poor people with money and with corn, and yet he had firmly refused to allow them to pledge or mortgage their lands, much less their children, ver. 10.

And Nehemiah tells us the secret of his consistent conduct; he tells us why he differed so much from the governors who went before him. A strong power held him back from sin.

'So did not I, because of the fear of God.'

Thus Nehemiah had a right to speak, for he practised what he preached. But in spite of this, his private appeal to the nobles appears to have been in vain. They seem to have given no answer, to have taken no notice of his appeal, and to have given him no reason to think that they intended to change their conduct.

So he set a great assembly against them. He called a monster meeting of all the inhabitants of Jerusalem, rich and poor, for he felt that if their conduct was publicly exposed and condemned, they might possibly be ashamed to continue it.

Nehemiah's speech at the meeting was very much to the point. He first tried to shame the nobles by reminding them that whilst he, ever since his return, had been spending his money in buying back those Jews who had been sold into slavery to the heathen round, they on the other hand had actually been doing the very opposite, bringing their fellow citizens into slavery to themselves. Was this right, or fair, or just? The argument told, no one could answer it, there was dead silence, ver. 8.

Now, says Nehemiah, consider: 'Ought ye not to walk in the fear of our God?' Ought ye not to be careful in your conduct, kind, and just, and generous in your dealing? And why?

'Because of the reproach of the heathen our enemies.'

Because you Jews are God's people, and all these heathen round will judge your God by what you are. You make a profession of religion, you claim to have high motives; but if they see you grasping, greedy, hard, like themselves, what will they think of your religion? Surely they will say, 'These Jews are no better than ourselves, their religion cannot be worth much.'

Now, says Nehemiah, remembering all this, bearing in mind the disgrace you are bringing upon the name of Jew, I call upon you at once to give up this practice of mortgaging and pledge-taking. Not only so, but I

bid you restore at once the vineyards and the oliveyards, the fields and the houses, you have taken from these poor people. I bid you also return the interest they have paid you (the eighth part of the money), and I call upon you, in every way you can, to undo the evil you have done already, and for the future to do unto others as you would they should do to you, vers. 10, 11.

Nehemiah's earnest words prevailed,

'Then said they, We will restore them.'

This promise was followed by a very curious act on the part of Nehemiah.

'I shook my lap.'

The lap is what the Latins called the *_sinus_*, a fold in the bosom of the tunic, which was used as a pocket. Eastern-like, Nehemiah used a sign to show what will happen to any man who shall break the promise he had just made. God will cast him forth as a homeless wanderer, emptied of all his possessions, all his ill-gotten wealth. He shall be void or empty, just as Nehemiah's pocket was void or empty, ver. 13.

'And all the congregation said, Amen.'

Then, instead of the great cry of distress, was heard the great shout of joy, for

They 'praised the Lord.'

And the promise was not one of those promises made to be broken, for

'The people did according to this promise.'

It has been well said that Christians are the only Bible that men of the world read. In other words, those who will not read the Bible themselves, judge the religion of Christ simply by the Christians they happen to come across. This is not a fair way of judging; it surely cannot be right to condemn Christianity itself, because some of those who profess it are not what they ought to be.

Let us picture to ourselves an island in the Pacific Ocean, where no European has ever been seen. A large ship is wrecked not far from this island, and three men are able to make their escape in a boat, and to land upon its shore. The men belong to three different nations--one is a Frenchman, another is a German, and the third is an Englishman. The people of the island receive them most kindly, warm them, and feed them, and shelter them, and do all they can for them till a ship shall come to take them away.

What return do the three men make for their kindness? The Frenchman is grateful, and willing to make himself useful in any way he can: he amuses the children and helps in the work of the house, and does all he can to make return for the hospitality he is receiving. The German is very clever with his fingers, and spends his time in teaching the natives to make many things which they had not been able to do before; he becomes indeed so helpful to them that they dread the day coming when he will have to leave them. But the Englishman is a man of low tastes and bad morals. He spends his time in drinking the spirit he finds on the island, in quarrelling with the inhabitants, and in ill-treating

their children; there is not a soul on the island who does not rejoice when the ship bears him away, never to return.

Soon after this, news is brought that a small colony from Europe is anxious to settle on that island, and to trade with the inhabitants. The commercial advantages of this step are laid before the natives, and leave is asked for the party of traders to land. One question, and one question only, is asked by the inhabitants. Of what nation are these colonists? The answer is brought back, They are English. At once the whole island is up in arms. They shall not land, they cry, we will not hear of it; we know what English people are, we have had plenty of the English. Had they been French or Germans we would have given them a hearty welcome, but we never wish to see an Englishman again.

But surely that was not fair, it was not right to judge a whole nation by one bad specimen. Nor is it right to judge the followers of Christ in that way. I know a man, says one, who is hard and grasping and self-seeking, and that man makes a religious profession, therefore I will have nothing to do with religion. I know a Christian who is bad-tempered; I know a Christian who is not particular about truth; I know a Christian out of whose mouth come bitter, unkind words; I know a Christian who is unpleasant in his manner; I know a Christian with whom I should be sorry to do business; I know a Christian who is always mournful and miserable. These are your Christians, are they? Then do not ask me to be one; I have no opinion of any of them.

Yet, after all, the man who speaks thus draws an unfair conclusion. Because I find in my bag of gold one bad half-sovereign, or even two or three bad ones, am I therefore to throw all the rest away? And because one Christian, or several Christians, disgrace their Master, and act inconsistently, am I therefore to condemn Christianity itself? Am I therefore to cut off my own soul from all hope of safety?

But, remembering this, bearing in mind that many eyes are on us, that our conduct is being read, our ways watched, our actions weighed, our motives sifted, Christian friends, let us walk carefully. Do not let us bring disgrace on our Master, do not let us hinder others and be a stumbling-block^[1] in their way; do not let us give the world a wrong idea of Christ.

We are not half awake, we are not half careful enough; let us walk circumspectly, not as fools, but as wise. Let us, whenever we have been tempted to any inconsistency, be able to take up Nehemiah's brave noble words,

'So did not I, because of the fear of God.'

I could not get into a temper, I could not be hard or grasping, I could not do that piece of sharp practice, I could not stoop to that deceit, I could not disgrace my Master, because in my heart was a principle holding me back from sin, the fear of the Lord. I feared to grieve the One who loved me, and that fear kept me safe. 'So did not I, because of the fear of God.'

[Transcribers note 1: stumbling-black corrected to stumbling-block.]

CHAPTER VII.

True to his Post.

Lot's wife was changed into a pillar of salt; and if that pillar still remained, we should see her to-day standing in exactly the same attitude in which she was standing when death suddenly came upon her.

About a hundred years ago, a baker in the south of Italy sunk a well in his garden; and whilst doing so he suddenly came upon a buried city, a city which had been lost to the world for 1800 years. The underground city was no empty place; it was peopled with the dead, and these were found in the very attitude and position in which death had overtaken them, standing, sitting, lying, just as they had been on that awful day when Mount Vesuvius sent out terrible showers of ashes, destroying them all.

Very various were the positions of the dead in that buried city. Many were in the streets, in the attitude of running, trying to make their escape from the city gate; others were in deep vaults whither they had gone for safety, crouching, in their fear of what might fall upon them; others were on staircases and flights of stone steps leading to the roof, in the attitude of climbing to a place where they hoped the lava might not bury them. Two men were found by the garden gate of a large and beautiful mansion. One was standing with the key in his hand, a handsome ring on his finger, and a hundred gold and silver coins scattered round him. The other, who was probably his slave, was stretched on the ground, with his hands clutching some silver cups and vases. These men had evidently been suffocated whilst trying to carry off the money and treasure.

But one man in that buried city deserves to be remembered to the end of time. Who was he? One Roman soldier, the brave sentinel at the gate. There he had been posted in the morning, and there he had been bidden to remain.

And how was he found? Standing at his post, with his hand still grasping his sword, faithful unto death. There, by the city gate; whilst the earth shook and rocked, whilst the sky was black with ashes, whilst showers of stones were falling around him, and whilst hundreds of men, women and children brushed past him as they fled in terror from the city, there he stood, firm and unmoved. Should such a man as I flee? thought the sentinel. And in that same spot, in that post of duty, he was found 1800 years after, faithful to his trust, faithful unto death.

Oh, that the Lord's soldiers were more like that brave man in Pompeii! It is so easy to begin a thing, so hard to stick to it; so easy to start on the Christian course, so difficult to persevere; so easy to enlist in the army, so very hard to stand unmoved in the time of danger or trial. Yet what says the Master? He that endureth to the end (and he alone) shall be saved. What says the Captain? that it is the soldier who is faithful unto death (and no one else) who shall receive the crown of life.

Who then amongst us are faithful, true and unmoved? Who amongst us can stand firm in spite of Satan's efforts to lead us aside? Who can hold on, not for a week only, but still faithful as the weeks change into months, and the months into years, faithful unto death?

About 100 years before the time of Nehemiah, there lived a wise old Chinaman, the philosopher Confucius. Looking round upon his fellow-men, Confucius said that he noticed that a large proportion of them were 'Copper-kettle-boiling-water men.' The water in a copper kettle, said Confucius, boils very quickly, much more quickly than in an iron kettle; but the worst of it is that it just as quickly cools down, and ceases to boil.

So, said Confucius, is it with numbers of my fellow-men: they are one day hot and eager, boiling over with zeal in some particular cause; but the next day they have cooled down, and they take no interest in it whatever. Soon up, soon down, like the water in a copper kettle.

Just so is it in the service of God. There are, sad to say, many copper-kettle-boiling-water Christians, hot and earnest in the work of God one moment, but in the next they have cooled down, and are ready to leave the work to take care of itself.

But Nehemiah was no copper-kettle-boiling-water man, he comes before us as a man faithful to his post, standing firm to his duty, a man whom no one could draw from his work, or cause to swerve from what he knew to be right.

The Samaritans have made a mighty effort to stop Nehemiah's great work, the building of the walls of Jerusalem. They began with ridicule; but the builders took no notice of the shouts of laughter, but built on as before. Then they tried to stop the work by force; but they found the whole company of builders changed, as by a magic wand, into an army of soldiers, ready and waiting for their attack. Now the news reaches them, chap. vi. 1., that the walls are progressing, that the gaps are filled up, the different pieces are joined together, and that nothing now remains but to put up the gates in the various gateways.

They feel accordingly that no time is to be lost; they must, in some way or other, put a stop to Nehemiah and his work at once. They determine, therefore, to try a new plan, they will entrap Nehemiah by stratagem and deceit. So they send an invitation to Jerusalem, begging him to meet them in a certain place, that there they may settle their differences by a friendly conference.

Sanballat is to be there as the head of the Samaritans, Geshem as the head of the Arabians, and Nehemiah as the head of the Jews; and surely, meeting in a friendly way, and imbued with a friendly spirit, nothing will be easier than quietly and peacefully to confer together, and then to arrange matters in a comfortable and satisfactory manner.

The place appointed for the meeting is the Plain of Ono--the green, beautiful plain between the Judean hills and the Mediterranean--called elsewhere the Plain of Sharon. There in later days stood Lydda, the place where St. Peter healed Aeneas; there stood Joppa, from which Jonah embarked; there, at the present day, may be seen fields of melons and cucumbers, groves of orange and lemon trees, and fields of waving corn. Nehemiah would have a journey of about thirty miles before he reached the appointed meeting-place.

Sanballat's proposal sounded very fine and even very friendly, but it was a trap. His real desire was to tempt Nehemiah from behind the walls of Jerusalem, to entice him to a safe distance from his brave friends and companions, and then to have him secretly assassinated. Who then

would ever hear again of the power of Jerusalem? Who then would ever see the gates put in their places?

Is Nehemiah moved from his post of duty by Sanballat's message? Does he leave his work at once, and set off for the Plain of Ono? Look at his decided answer.

'I am doing a great work, so that I cannot come down: why should the work cease, whilst I leave it, and come down to you?'

God's work would be done better, and with more success, if all His workmen were like Nehemiah. But, alas! many who call themselves workers for God are ready to run off from the work at every call, every invitation, every appeal from the world, the flesh, or the devil. I am doing a great work, but there is that amusement I want to take part in, the work must be left to-day.

I am doing a great work; but I do not feel inclined for it just now, I feel idle, or the weather is too cold to go out, or the sun shines so brightly I should like a walk instead, I must leave my work to others to-day.

I am doing a great work; but I love my own ease, or pleasure, or convenience, better than I love the work, these must come first and the work must come second.

So speak the actions of many so-called workers, and thus it is that so much Christian work is a dead failure.

But, says Nehemiah, 'I am doing a great work, so that I cannot come down: why should the work cease, whilst I leave it, and come down to you?'

Let us remember his words, let us inwardly digest them, and the very next time that we are tempted to give up work for God and to run off to something else, let us take care to echo them.

But Sanballat is determined not to be beaten, he will try again and yet again. Four times over he sends Nehemiah a friendly invitation to a friendly conference, four times over Nehemiah steadily refuses to come. Then, when that plot completely fails, Sanballat loses his temper.

One day a messenger arrives at the gate of Jerusalem with an insult in his hand. The insult is in the form of a piece of parchment; it is a letter from Sanballat, an 'open letter,' ver. 5.

Letters in the East are not put into envelopes, but are rolled up like a map, then the ends are flattened and pasted together. The Persians make up their letters in a roll about six inches long, and then gum a piece of paper round them, and put a seal on the outside. But in writing to persons of distinction, not only is the letter gummed together, but it is tied up in several places with coloured ribbon, and then enclosed in a bag or purse. To send a letter to such a man as Nehemiah, not only untied and unenclosed, but actually not even having the ends pasted together, was a tremendous insult, and Nehemiah, who had been accustomed to the strict etiquette of the Persian court, knew this well.

But Sanballat probably sent this open letter not only with the intention of insulting Nehemiah, but also in order that every one whom the

messenger came across might read it, and that the Jews in Jerusalem and its neighbourhood might be frightened by its contents, and might therefore be inclined to forward his plans.

The letter contained a piece of gossip.

'It is reported among the heathen, and Gashmu saith it.'

So the letter began, and then there followed the scandal, the gossip about Nehemiah.

People's tongues were busy 2,000 years ago, just as people's tongues are busy now, and the gossips of those days, like the gossips of to-day, were not particular about truth.

What was the gossip which Gashmu had started against Nehemiah? It was this: Jerusalem is being built, we all see that, says Gashmu. But now, what is at the bottom of this business? Hush! says Gashmu, do not tell any one, and I will tell you a secret. You would never believe it, you would never guess it; but what do you think? As soon as those walls are built and those gates are finished, you will hear news. There is going to be a king in Jerusalem, and his name is Nehemiah. As soon as ever he has a strong city in which to defend himself, he is going to rebel against Persia. Nay, he has already paid people inside Jerusalem to pretend to be prophets, and to say to the people:

'There is a king in Judah.'

That is the gossip, says Sanballat, that is going the round of all the gossips' tongues in the land. And now what will be the result? If the King of Persia hears of it, and it is sure to reach his ears sooner or later, it will go badly with you, Nehemiah. The best thing you can do is to consent to meet me, and we will talk the matter over and see what can be done to prevent this report reaching Persia.

'Come now therefore, and let us take counsel together.'

Nehemiah has stood firm under ridicule; he has been unmoved by force or deceitful friendships; will he be frightened from his duty by gossip? No, he cares not what they say, nor who says it. He simply sends

Sanballat word that there is not a vestige of truth in the report, nor does he intend to take any notice of it.

'There are no such things done as thou sayest, but thou feignest them out of thine own heart.'

Over the entrance to one of our old English castles these words are carved in the stonework:--

THEY SAY.
WHAT DO THEY SAY?
LET THEM SAY.

These words are well worth our remembering. It is not pleasant to be talked about, especially if the words spoken about us are untrue, but it will be a wonderful thing if any of us escape the gossip's tongue.

They say, and they always will _say_, to the end of time; people

will talk, and their talk will chiefly be of their neighbours.

What do they say? Do you answer like the Psalmist, 'They lay to my charge things I knew not?' They speak unkindly, untruly, unfairly. Never mind, _Let them say._ You cannot stop their mouths, but you can hinder yourself from taking notice of their words. Let them say, for they will have their say out, but they will end it all the sooner if you take no notice of it.

Let us try for the future to be thick-skinned, and when Gashmu's tongue is whispering, and whenever some busybody like Sanballat repeats Gashmu's words to us, let us act as Nehemiah did. Let us take no notice of the repeated tittle-tattle.

Yet, although we may practically ignore the gossiping tongue, if we are naturally sensitive and highly strung we cannot help feeling some sting from the unkind or untrue speech. Poor Nehemiah, unmoved though he was by the gossip, yet feels it necessary to remember the meaning of his name, and to turn from Sanballat's letter to 'the Lord my Comforter.'

'O God, strengthen my hands.'

So he cries from the depths of his soul, and so he was comforted.

Sanballat now feels that he is attempting an impossibility. It is of no use trying himself to move Nehemiah, for Nehemiah is thoroughly on his guard against him. If he reaches him at all, he must do so through others, whom Nehemiah does not suspect. So, by means of his gold, Sanballat tempts some of the Jerusalem Jews over to his side.

There is a woman living in Jerusalem named Noadiah, and she (to her shame be it spoken) is bribed by Sanballat to give herself out as a prophetess, and to be the bearer of messages to Nehemiah, pretending that those messages were sent to him by God. Nor is Noadiah the only one who is bribed by the Samaritan governor to pretend the gift of prophecy.

One day, Nehemiah is sent for to the house of one of these people who profess to be able to prophesy. He is a young man of the name of Shemaiah, whose family had returned from Babylon with Zerubbabel, but who had never been able to prove their Jewish descent (vii. 61, 62, 64).

This young man professes to be very fond of Nehemiah, and begs him to come to see him. Nehemiah does so, and finds him shut up, his doors barred and bolted, his house barricaded like a fortress. He admits Nehemiah, and seems, as he does so, to be in a great state of fear and terror.

Then he whispers a dreadful secret in his ear. He tells Nehemiah that his life is in immediate danger, that there is a plot set on foot by Sanballat to murder him that very night, and that this plot has been revealed to him by God. He tells him that he feels his own life, as one of Nehemiah's best friends, is also in danger, and therefore he proposes that they shall go together after dark to the temple courts, and, passing through these, enter into the sanctuary itself, the Holy Place, in which stood the altar of incense, the golden candlestick, and the table of showbread. There, having carefully closed the folding doors of fir-wood, they may hide till daybreak, and those who were coming to assassinate Nehemiah will seek him in vain.

Shemaiah gives this advice as a direct message from God, but Nehemiah saw through it. He felt sure God could not have sent that message, for God cannot contradict His own Word. And what said the Word? It was clearly laid down in the law of Moses that no man, unless he was a priest, might enter the Holy Place; if he attempted to do so, death would be the penalty.

'The stranger that cometh nigh shall be put to death.' So Nehemiah bravely answers:

'Should such a man as I flee? and who is there, that, being as I am, would go into the temple to save his life? I will not go in.'

Who is there, that, being as I am--that is, being a layman, not a priest--as I am, could go into the temple and live? for that is the better translation. In other words, if I, Nehemiah, who am not a priest, should break the clear command of God, by crossing the threshold of the temple, instead of saving my life I should lose it. I will not go in.

So failed this dastardly plot to get Nehemiah to sin, in order that his God might desert him. The sentinel stood unmoved at his post, Nehemiah goes on steadily with his work. Should such a man as I flee? And in fifty-two days after its commencement, in less than two months, the wall was finished, vi. 15.

With a huge army, with hundreds of horses, and with twenty elephants, Pyrrhus, King of Epirus, crossed over from Greece to Italy to conquer the Romans. No elephants had ever before been seen in Italy; and when the two armies met, and the huge animals advanced with their dark trunks curling and snorting, and their ponderous feet shaking the earth, the horses in the Roman army were so terrified that they refused to move, and Pyrrhus won an easy victory. After the battle was over Pyrrhus walked amongst the dead, and looked at the bodies of his slain foes. As he did so, one fact struck him very forcibly, and it was this, the Romans did not know how to run away. Not one had turned and fled from the field of battle. The wounds were all in front, not one was wounded in the back.

'Ah,' said Pyrrhus, 'with such soldiers as that the whole world would belong to me.'

Soldiers of Christ, let us be brave for the Master. Let the language of the heart of each in the Lord's army be that of Nehemiah, 'Should such a man as I flee?' Nay, I will not flee, I will not desert my post, I will stand my ground, bravely, consistently, perseveringly, unto death.

CHAPTER VIII.

The Paidagogos.

The Tarpeian Rock was the place where Roman criminals who had been guilty of the crime of treason were executed. They were thrown headlong from this rock into the valley below, and perished at its base. The rock took its name from a woman named Tarpeia, who has ever been a disgrace

to her sex, and whose name was hated in Rome, for she was a traitress to her country. For a long time the war had raged between the Romans and the Sabines. The Romans were at last compelled to shut themselves up in their strong fortress, which the Sabines attempted to take, but in vain. So steep were the rocks on which it stood, so strong were the walls, that the Sabines must have given up their attempt in despair, had it not been for the treachery of Tarpeia, the governor's daughter. She looked down from the fortress into the Sabine host, and she noticed that, whilst with their right arms the Sabines held their swords, on their left arms were hung massive golden bracelets, such as Tarpeia had never beheld before. One day, leaning over the precipice, she managed to whisper into the ear of a Sabine soldier her treacherous plan. She was willing in the dead of night to unlock the gate of the fortress, and to admit the Sabines, provided that they promised on their part to give her what they carried on their left arms. Tarpeia's proposition was agreed to, and that night the governor's daughter stole the keys of the fortress from her father's room, and admitted the enemy.

But the Sabines had too much right feeling to let her treachery go unpunished. She stood by the gate, hoping to receive the bracelets, but each Sabine soldier, as he entered, threw at her head his massive iron shield, which he also carried on his left arm, until she was crushed to the ground, and buried beneath a mass of metal. They had fulfilled their promise, but in a way the treacherous Tarpeia did not expect. When she was quite dead, they took up her body, and threw it over the rock which ever after bore her name, as a warning to traitors.

Treachery within the camp, those in league with the enemy in the very midst of the citadel, those who whilst pretending to be friends are secretly conspiring to hinder and annoy. Surely such a state of things is enough to move any man's heart. Who could help feeling it bitterly?

David could not. Listen to his heartrending cry--

'For it is not an open enemy, that hath done me this dishonour; for then I could have borne it. Neither was it mine adversary that did magnify himself against me; for then I would have hid myself from him. But it was even thou, my companion, my guide, and mine own familiar friend.'

Nehemiah could not help feeling it. He had borne patiently ridicule, force, deceit from without; whatever of harm or mischief Sanballat did, he could not help, nor was he surprised at it. But when the trouble came nearer home, when he found that in Jerusalem itself, amongst those whom he had loved and for whom he had sacrificed so much, there were actually to be found traitors, then indeed Nehemiah's soul was stirred to its very depths.

He discovered to his horror that letters, secret, treacherous letters, were constantly passing from Tobiah the secretary to some of his so-called friends in Jerusalem. Nay more, he discovered that these letters were diligently answered, and that a quick correspondence was being kept up by Tobiah on the one side and these treacherous Jews on the other.

Worse still, Nehemiah found that many of those round him were acting as spies, watching all he did, taking note of every single thing that went on in Jerusalem, and then writing it down for Tobiah's benefit. And in spite of this, these Jews had the audacity and the bad taste when they met Nehemiah in the street, or sat at his table, or came across him in

business, to harp constantly upon one string--the goodness, and perfections, and excellences of dear Tobiah.

'They reported his good deeds to me, and uttered my words to him.'

Nor was this communication with the secretary at all easy to break off, for he was connected by marriage with some of the first families in Jerusalem. Tobiah himself had obtained a Jewish girl for his wife, the daughter of one of Nehemiah's helpers--Shechaniah, the son of Arah.

Not only so, but Meshullam, one of the wealthiest men in the city, one of the most earnest builders on the wall, one who had worked so diligently that he had actually repaired two portions (chap. iii. 4, 30), one who must have been either a priest or a Levite, for we read of his having a chamber in the temple, this man, Meshullam, so well spoken of, and so much esteemed in Jerusalem, had actually forgotten himself so far as to let his daughter marry the son of the secretary, Tobiah. We cannot excuse Meshullam by suggesting that his daughter may have been spoiled or wilful, and may have married in spite of her father's displeasure, for, in the East, marriages are entirely arranged by the parents, and Meshullam's daughter probably had no choice in the matter.

Seeing then that there are enemies without, and half-hearted friends within, Nehemiah feels it necessary, so soon as the walls are finished and the gates set up, to do all he can to make Jerusalem secure and strong. Solomon had appointed 212 Levites to be porters or gate-keepers, to guard the entrances to the temple. Ever since his time there had been an armed body of Levites, kept always at hand, to guard the treasures of the temple, and to keep watch at the gates. From these Nehemiah selects the keepers for his new gates. Surely these Levites will be faithful, and they have had some experience in watching, inasmuch as they have for so long acted as temple police.

Nehemiah's next step was to appoint two men to superintend these guards, and to be responsible to him for the safety of the city. At any moment he might be recalled to Persia, at any moment he might have to leave his important work in Jerusalem, that he might stand again as cup-bearer behind the king's chair. He felt that he must therefore appoint deputies to guard the city for him, so that all might not hang upon the fact of his presence in the city.

Whom did Nehemiah choose for this post of enormous trust? One was his brother Hanani, the very one who had come to see him in Persia. Why, he would never have even thought of doing this great work, if it had not been for Hanani; and he felt he could thoroughly trust him, and rely upon him entirely.

His other choice was Hananiah, the ruler of the palace or the fort, which was a tower, standing in the temple courts on the spot on which, in Roman days, stood the Tower of Antonia. Nehemiah tells us exactly why he made choice of the man Hananiah.

'He was a faithful man, and feared God above many.'

He was a faithful man, thoroughly trustworthy and reliable. He feared God above many, and therefore Nehemiah knew that he would be kept safe and free from sin. 'So did not I,' he had said of himself, 'because of the fear of God; that fear held me back from sin,' and he felt sure it would be the same with Hananiah. He feared God, and therefore he could

be depended upon.

These two rulers, Hanani and Hananiah, planned out the defence of the city. They divided the wall amongst all the men in Jerusalem, holding each man responsible for the safety of that part of the wall which lay nearest to his own house. Then, by Nehemiah's orders, they saw that the guards took care that the gates were not only carefully closed every night, but that they were kept closed till the sun was hot, that is, till some hours after sunrise. These orders were most necessary, seeing that there were traitors inside the gates as well as enemies without.

It was the sixth month of the Jewish year when the walls were finished. Then came Tisri, the seventh month, the greatest and grandest of the months. The Jews say that God made the world in the month Tisri, and in it they have no less than two feasts and one great fast.

On the first day of the month Tisri was held the Feast of Trumpets, or the day of blowing. On that day trumpets or horns were blown all day long in Jerusalem; on the house-tops, and from the courts and gardens, as well as from the temple.

Obedient to the voice of the trumpets, at early dawn the people all gathered together, and stood by the water-gate, in a large open space suitable for such a gathering. This gate is supposed to have been somewhere at the south-east of the temple courts, and to have taken its name from the fact that through it the temple servants, the Nethinims and the Gibeonites, carried water from the dragon well into the city.

Here a huge pulpit had been erected, not such a pulpit as we find in our churches, but such an one as is to be seen in the synagogues of Jerusalem, a pulpit as large as a small room, and capable of holding a large number of persons.

The pulpit by the water-gate was a raised platform, made for the purpose. In it stood Ezra the scribe, and beside him stood thirteen of the chief men of Jerusalem. Meshullam was there; but one man was conspicuous by his absence. Eliashib, the high priest, who should surely have been found taking a principal part in the solemn service of the day, was nowhere to be seen.

Before the great pulpit was gathered together an enormous crowd, men, women, and children, all those who were old enough to understand anything having been brought there, that they might listen to all that went on.

It was early in the morning, soon after sunrise, when the great company met together. The blowing of the trumpets ceased, and there was brought out by a Levite an old roll of parchment. What was it? It was the Book of the Law, the Bible of Nehemiah's day, consisting of the five books of Moses.

Slowly and reverently Ezra unrolled the law in the sight of all the people; and they, sitting below, watched him, and as soon as the book was opened they stood up, to show their respect and their reverence for the Word of God.

Then the reading began, and the ears of all the people were attentive to the book of the law. For no less than six hours Ezra read on, from early morning until midday, yet still the people stood, still the people

listened attentively. There was no stir in the crowd, no one asked what time it was, there was no shuffling of feet, no yawning, no fidgeting; in earnest, fixed attention the people listened.

As Ezra read, a body of Levites went about amongst the crowd, translating what he said. So long had the people lived in captivity that some of them had forgotten the old Hebrew, or had been brought up from children to talk the Chaldean tongue. Thus many of Ezra's words and phrases were quite unintelligible to them. So the Levites acted as interpreters; and besides explaining the words, they also opened out the meaning of what was read.

'The Levites caused the people to understand the law: and the people stood in their place. So they read in the book in the law of God distinctly, and gave the sense, and caused them to understand the reading.'

And at the end of six hours there came tears--there was not a dry eye in the crowd--men and women alike wept like children. There was Ezra in his pulpit, his voice faltering as he read, and there were the people below, sobbing as they heard the words.

What was the matter? What had filled them with grief? St. Paul tells us the secret of their tears (Rom. iii. 20).

'By the law is the knowledge of sin.'

You draw a line. How shall you know if it be straight or not? Lay the ruler beside it, and you will soon find out its crookedness.

You build a wall. How shall you tell if it be perpendicular? Bring the plumb-line, put it against it, and you will soon find out where the wall bulges.

You take up a drawing of wood, and hill, and tree; how shall you know if it be correctly sketched? Put beside it the master's copy, look from one to another, and you will soon discover the mistakes and imperfections of the pupil.

Take the perfect law of God, lay it beside your own life, as these people did, you will find out exactly what they found. You will find that you are a sinner, that you have left undone what ought to have been done, that you have done what ought not to have been done, and that you yourself are full of sin.

'Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, with all thy mind, with all thy soul, and with all thy strength.'

Have you done that? No! Then you are not like the copy.

'Ye shall diligently keep the commandments of the Lord thy God.'

Have you done that? No! Then you are not like the copy.

So felt the company at the water-gate, as they listened to the word that day. And with the knowledge came tears, bitter, sorrowful tears, as they thought of the past. Each man, woman, and child amongst them was ready to cry out

'Red like crimson, deep as scarlet,
Scarlet of the deepest dye,
Are the manifold transgressions,
That upon my conscience lie.
God alone can count their number,
God alone can look within,
O the sinfulness of sinning,
O the guilt of every sin!'

Some years ago there lived in Jerusalem a Scripture reader. He was an Austrian Jew, and he worked amongst the large Jewish population in Jerusalem. That man had been brought up to a very curious occupation. For years he had maintained himself in a very strange way. His business was this--to take children to school every morning, and to bring them home again in the evening. Each morning he called at the various houses, he led the children out, he carried the little ones, some on his back and some in his arms, he chastised with a stick those who were inclined to play truant, and he landed them all safely at the school-door.

St. Paul, when he went to the Rabbi's school in Tarsus, was taken there by just such a man as that, a man who was paid by his parents to drive him to school regularly, and to see that he arrived there in good time. This man was called in his day a Paidagogos, or Boy-driver.

Years afterwards, when the apostle was writing to the Galatians, he remembered his old Paidagogos, and he used him as an illustration. He said, in his epistle, that that boy-driver was like the law of God; just what the Paidagogos had done for him, that also the Word of God had done. That man had driven him to the school of the Rabbi, the law of God had driven him to the school of Christ. 'The law was our schoolmaster to bring us unto Christ.'

The word schoolmaster does not mean the man who teaches, but it is this very word Paidagogos or Boy-driver.

How, then, does the law of God drive us to Christ? Because it makes us feel that we need saving, that we are sinners and cannot help ourselves, that if ever we are to see the inside of the golden gates of heaven, it must be by learning in the school of Christ, by learning to know Him as our Saviour, our atonement, our all in all.

Lord, save me, or I perish, for I cannot save myself! All my righteousness is as filthy rags, I myself am full of sin. There is no hope for me except in Thee!

So the Law is our schoolmaster to bring us unto Christ.

CHAPTER IX.

The Secret of Strength.

Who was the strongest person who ever lived? Surely there is no difficulty in answering that question, surely there has never been anyone to compare with Samson in wonderful feats of strength! Did he not alone and unaided rend a young lion in two, as easily as if it had been

a kid? Did he not lift the massive iron gates of Gaza from their hinges, carry them on his back for forty miles, and climb with them to the top of a high hill? Did he not overthrow an enormous building by simply leaning on the huge stone pillars that held it up? We see trials of strength and feats of strength nowadays, we may have seen a man who could with one blow of the sword cut a sheep in two, we may have seen another who, by the mere power of his fist, could snap an iron chain, yet what modern Samson, strong and powerful and mighty above his fellows though he may be, can equal or rival the old Samson of Bible story.

Yet after all are we right in calling Samson the strongest man? It all depends upon the kind of strength of which we are speaking. If we mean bodily strength, mere physical force, then undoubtedly Samson was the strongest man.

But is bodily strength the only kind of force or power a man can possess? Is it the chief kind of strength?

What is one name that we give to physical power; do we not call it brute force? Why do we call it this? Because it is force which we have in common with the brutes, nay, it is strength in which the brutes can surpass us. Take the strongest man who ever lived, give him the most powerful limbs, the strongest back, the greatest strength of muscle, what is that man compared with an elephant? The mighty elephant has more power in one limb than the man has in his whole body. Bodily strength is then, after all, a kind of strength that is worth comparatively little, and of which we have small cause to boast, for even an animal can easily surpass us in it.

A stronger man than Samson, where shall we find him? Come to the Senate House in Cambridge, look at that man hard at work on the examination papers. Look at him well, for you will see that man's name at the head of the list when it comes out. Look at his broad forehead, his quick eager eye, his earnest face. That man is the strongest man in England: strong, not in bodily strength, he would do but little on the football field, nor could he win a single prize in athletic sports; he is a thin, slight, fragile man, but he is strong in mind, powerful and mighty in brain. That man's memory is simply perfect, his powers of reasoning are faultless, his grasp of a subject is enormous, he is a giant in intellect.

Here then we have another kind of strength, mental strength; and inasmuch as the mind is vastly superior to the body, and inasmuch as power of mind is a power which the animals so far from rivalling man, possess only in a very limited degree, we shall be ready to admit that the student is stronger than Samson, because he is strong in a superior kind of strength.

But there is a stronger than he, and it is a woman. She is weak and delicate, and has certainly no bodily strength; she knows very little, for she is a poor, simple country girl; she has no mental strength, but she is stronger than Samson, stronger than the Cambridge student, because she is endued with a strength far superior to bodily or mental strength--she is strong in soul.

A great crowd of people was gathered on the shore that day in the county of Wigton in Scotland. There lay the wooded hills and the heathery moors, and the quiet sea dividing them like a peaceful lake. Two prisoners, carefully guarded, were brought down to the shore, one was an

old woman with white hair, the other was a young and beautiful girl. Two stakes were driven into the sand, one close to the approaching sea, the other much nearer to the shore. The old woman was tied to the stake nearest to the sea, and the young girl to the other. The tide was out when they were taken there, but they were told that, unless they would deny the Master whom they loved, unless they would renounce the truth of God, there they must remain, until the high tide had covered them, and life was extinct.

The old woman was questioned by her murderers. Would she renounce her Lord? Never; she could not deny the faith of Christ. So they left her to her fate, and the sea rose. Silently, quietly, stealthily it crept on, till her arms, her shoulders, her neck were covered, and then soon after the wave came which carried her into the presence of her Lord. Then they pleaded with the girl, they tried to make her change, they used every argument likely to move her, but all in vain. She was strong in soul, strong and mighty, so strong that death itself could not make her flinch. Still the sea crept on, still the water rose, and still they tried to make her deny her Lord. But, strong in spirit, the girl held bravely on. Higher and higher came that ever-encroaching water, and soon her head was covered, and she thought her sorrows were ended, but her tormentors brought her out of the water, rubbed and warmed her, and brought her to life again, only to put the question to her once more. Would she deny her Master? No; again she refused to do so, and was dragged back, wet and dripping as she was, once more to be chained to the stake, and to lay down her life a second time. But the Lord was with her, and she was faithful to the end.

That girl was strong in soul, strong in the highest, noblest form of strength; she could say No when tempted to do wrong, she was faithful when sorely tried. But Samson was weak as water, he had no strength of soul; a woman's pretty face, a woman's coaxing word, was quite sufficient to overthrow all the strength of soul he possessed. He could resist no temptation that came across his path; he was an easy prey to the tempter.

Oh! that we were all strong, strong in this highest, grandest form of strength, mighty giants in spirit!

But do you say, How can I obtain this strength, by what means can I acquire it? I feel I need it. I am often led astray; I listen to the voice of the tempter, I give way to my besetting sin. I want to break off from it, but I cannot; I want to leave the companions who are leading me wrong, but I have not the strength to do it. How can I become strong?

Here, in the story of Nehemiah, we find the answer. Let us come again to the water-gate, at the south-east of the city. There is the huge pulpit of wood, there is Ezra with the roll in his hand, there are the people, sobbing as if their hearts would break.

But 'blessed are they that mourn, for they shall be comforted' It is for sin that their hearts are broken, they feel they have left undone so much that ought to have been done, they have done so much that they ought not to have done, that they are crushed with sorrow, and the tears will come.

But hush, who are these passing amongst the weeping crowd? There is Nehemiah the Tirshatha, or governor, there is Ezra the scribe, and they

are followed by a company of Levites. They call to the people to stop crying, and to rejoice. Is not our God a God of mercy? Is there not forgiveness with Him? If sin is confessed and forsaken, will He not pardon it? Dry your tears then, and, instead of crying, rejoice. Be merry and glad that God is willing to forgive, nay, that He has forgiven you.

Cheer up, for this day is holy unto the Lord; it is a feast day, the joyous Feast of Trumpets. Mourn not, nor weep. Do not imagine that God likes you to be miserable; He wants you to be happy. You have owned your sin, you have repented of your sin; now let your hearts be filled with the joy that come from a sense of sin forgiven.

Go home now, and keep the feast. Eat and drink of the best you have, eat the fat and drink the sweet, the new sweet wine made from this year's grapes. Go home and enjoy yourselves to the full; but do not forget those who are worse off than yourselves, remember those poor people who have suffered so much from the late famine, who have paid their last penny to the tax-collector, who have lost their all in these hard times. Let them enjoy themselves too to-day. Eat the fat and drink the sweet, but do not forget to send portions to them for whom nothing is prepared. Remember the empty cupboards, and the bare tables, and the houses where the fat and the sweet are nowhere to be seen.

What a word for us at the time of our joyous Christmas feast! God loves us to be happy. He likes us to rejoice; He does not want us to go about with long faces and melancholy looks. A long-faced Christian is a Christian who brings disgrace on his Master.

Then as we meet, year by year, round the happy Christmas table, and sit down to our Christmas dinner, let us remember that God loves us to be happy; but let us also remember that in the midst of all our joy He would have us unselfish. He would have us send portions to them for whom nothing is prepared. Is there no one whom we can cheer? Is there no desolate home into which we can bring a ray of light? Is there no sorrowful heart to which we can bring comfort? And what about the portions? Is there no poor relative, or neighbour, or friend, with whom we can share the good things that have fallen to our lot?

Our own Christmas dinner will taste all the better if we have helped some one else to happiness or comfort, our own festal rejoicing will be tenfold more full of merriment and real joy, if we have helped to spread the festal joy into dark and gloomy places.

'Go your way, eat the fat, and drink the sweet, and send portions unto them for whom nothing is prepared: for this day is holy unto our Lord: neither be ye sorry; for the joy of the Lord is your strength.'

Yes, there we have the secret of strength, of the highest kind of strength, of strength of soul. The joy of the Lord, that joy which comes from knowing our sin is pardoned.

Can I say--

'O happy day, O happy day
When Jesus washed my sins away?'

Then I have spiritual strength, for the joy of the Lord is my strength. He has forgiven me, He has washed me from my sins in His own blood; how

can I grieve Him? How can I pain Him by yielding to temptation? How can I ever risk losing the joy of my heart by going contrary to His will? I am joyful because I am forgiven, and I am strong because I am joyful.

Here then is the highest kind of strength, and it is a strength within the reach of all. Bodily strength some of us can never attain. We are born with weakly bodies, we have grown up delicate and frail, we could no more transform ourselves into strong, powerful men, than we could make ourselves into elephants.

There was a man who lived in Greece long before Hezekiah, who was determined to make his nation the strongest nation on earth; he was resolved that it should consist of mighty giants in strength, and that not one delicate or weak man should be found amongst them. But what did Lycurgus find himself obliged to do in order to secure his end? He was compelled to have every infant carefully examined as soon as it was born, and if a child had the least appearance of delicacy, he took it from its mother, and sent it to some lonely cave on the hill-side, where it was left to die of cold and hunger. He found that it was not possible to turn a puny delicate child into a strong man.

Bodily strength then is beyond the reach of many men; weak they were born, weak they live, and weak they will die, nothing will alter or improve them.

Nor can strength of mind be attained by many. They were born with no power of memory, no aptitude for learning, no gift for study; you may teach them, and labour with them, and they may work hard themselves, but no application can instil into them what was not born in them; they came into the world with second-rate intellects, and they will die with the same.

But, thank God, the highest form of strength, strength of soul is, in this respect, not like strength of body or strength of mind. No one is born with it, we are all by nature weak as water, an easy prey for Satan; but there is not one of us who may not acquire this spiritual power. If we will take the lost sinner's place, and claim the lost sinner's Saviour, we shall be filled by that Saviour with joy, joy because sin is forgiven, and with the joy will come the strength of soul.

In Greece, in that city in which all the weakly babies were murdered, those children who were spared and who were pronounced to be strong, were looked upon from that time as belonging not to their parents but to the state, and they were trained and brought up with this one object in view, to make them strong and powerful men. They were taught to bear cold, wearing the same clothing in winter as in summer; they were trained to bear fatigue, being accustomed to walk barefoot for miles; they were practised in wrestling, in racing, in throwing heavy weights, in carrying burdens, in anything and everything which was calculated to make the strength that was in them grow and increase. And it was wonderful how, by means of practice, the strength did grow.

We are told of one man, who in the public games carried a full grown ox for a mile, and we are told that he accomplished this by gradually accustoming himself to the weight. He began when the ox was a tiny calf to carry it a mile every day, and the increase of weight was so gradual that he did not feel it; his arms became used to the weight, and as the ox grew bigger, he at the same time grew stronger.

Strength of body then grows and increases in proportion to our use of it.

So, too, does strength of mind. Here is a boy, born with good abilities and with an intelligent mind. Take that child, and shut him off from every possibility of using his mind; never teach him anything, never allow him to look at a book or a picture, keep him shut off from everything that might tend to open his mind, tell him nothing, bring him up as a mere animal, and soon he will lose all his powers of mind, and become an imbecile. But, on the other hand, teach him, train him, educate him, let his mind have full scope and exercise, and his mental powers will grow and increase a hundred-fold, for strength of mind, like strength of body, grows with the using.

Just so is it with strength of soul. Every temptation you overcome makes you stronger, every lust you subdue, every battle of soul you fight, every inclination to evil you resist, makes you stronger.

'From strength to strength' is the motto of the Christian.

So let us press forward.

'Till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto _a perfect man_' (or as R.V. has it, a _full-grown man_) 'unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ.'

Now we are but children in spiritual strength, then we shall be giants in power, full-grown men, with full powers and energy and strength, ready to work for the Master through eternity.

CHAPTER X.

The Eighty-four Seals.

Merrily the Christmas bells were chiming in the old city of York, on Christmas morning in the year 1890, speaking gaily and joyfully of the Christmas feast, when suddenly there came a change. The merry peal ceased, and was followed by the quiet sorrowful sound which always speaks of mourning and death, a muffled peal. News had reached the ringers that the Archbishop of York, who had been known and respected in the city for more than twenty-eight years, had gone home to God.

And as we ate our Christmas dinner that day, as we gathered round the table to eat the fat and drink the sweet, the solemn voice of Old Peter, the great minster bell, was heard tolling for the departed soul.

Truly in the midst of life we are in death, in the midst of joy there comes sorrow, in the midst of festivity we are plunged into mourning.

'Shadow and shine is life, little Annie,
Flower and thorn.'

So the poet makes the old grandmother sum up her life's story.

And it is just the same in our religious life. One day the joy of the Lord makes us strong, the next the sense of sin weighs us to the ground; one moment we are ready to overflow with thanksgiving, the next we are down in the dust mourning and weeping.

Just such a change as this, a change from the gay to the solemn, from joy to mourning, from feasting to fasting, comes before us in the Book of Nehemiah.

Look at Jerusalem, as we visit it in imagination to-day, and take a bird's-eye view of the city. The whole place is mad with joy. They are keeping the gayest, the merriest, the prettiest feast in the whole year, the Feast of Tabernacles. It was a saying amongst the Jews, that unless a man had been present at the Feast of Tabernacles he did not know what joy was. And in Nehemiah's time this feast was kept more fully and with more rejoicing than it had been kept for a thousand years; no one had ever witnessed such a Feast of Tabernacles since the days of Joshua.

The city was a mass of green booths, made with branches of olive, pine, myrtle, and palm; and in these the people lived, and ate, and slept for eight days; whilst the whole city was lighted up, and glad music was constantly heard, and the people feasted, and laughed, and made merry.

It was the 22nd day of the month Tisri when the Feast of Tabernacles was ended, and only two days afterwards there came a remarkable change.

Look at Jerusalem again, you would hardly know it to be the same place. The green booths are all gone, they have been carefully cleared away. There is not a branch, or a banner, or a bit of decoration to be seen. The bright holiday dresses, the gay blue, and red, and yellow, and lilac robes, the smart, many-coloured turbans have all been laid by; there is not a sign of one of them. We see instead an extraordinary company of men, women and children making their way to the open space by the water gate. They are covered with rough coarse sackcloth, a material made of black goats' hair and used for making sacks. Every one of the company is dressed in this rough material; not only so, but the robe of each is made like a sack in shape, so that they look like a crowd of moving sacks, and on their heads are sprinkled earth and dust and ashes.

The rejoicing has turned into mourning, the feast into a fast. A great sense of sin has come over the people; they feel their need of forgiveness, and they are come to seek it.

The meeting seems to have assembled about nine o'clock, the time of the morning sacrifice. For a quarter of the day, for three hours, they read the law of God, for three hours more they fell prostrate on the ground, and confessed their sin. Their prayers were led by Levites, standing on high scaffolds where everyone could see them, where all could hear them as they cried with a loud voice to God.

Then just at the time of the evening sacrifice, at three o'clock in the afternoon, the Levites called to the kneeling multitude and bade them rise, 'Stand up and bless the Lord your God for ever and ever: and blessed be Thy glorious name, which is exalted above all blessing and praise.'

Then the Levites went through the history of God's wonderful goodness to His people, to Abraham in Egypt, in the wilderness, in the land of Canaan; everywhere, and at all times He had been good to them, again

and again He had delivered them. But they--what had they done?

'Thou hast done right, but we have done wickedly. Neither have our kings, our princes, our priests, nor our fathers kept Thy law, nor hearkened unto Thy commandments.... For they have not served Thee.' Therefore, as a natural consequence and result, 'Behold, we are servants this day.'

They would not serve God, they would not be His servants, so they had been made to serve someone else; they had, as a punishment for their sin, been made servants to the King of Persia. And what was the result?

'The land that Thou gavest unto our fathers to eat the fruit thereof and the good thereof, behold, we are servants in it. And it yieldeth much increase unto the kings whom Thou hast set over us because of our sins.'

The amount of tribute paid by Judea to Persia is not known; but the province of Syria, in which Judea was included, paid L90,000 a year.

'Also they have dominion over our bodies.'

They can force us against our will to be either soldiers or sailors, and can make us fight their battles for them.

They have dominion 'over our cattle.'

They can seize our cattle at their pleasure, for their own use or the use of their armies.

'And we are in great distress.'

Yes, our sin has indeed brought its punishment; and feeling this, realizing this very deeply, we have gathered together to do what we intend to do this day, to make a solemn agreement, a covenant with God. We intend to promise to have done with sin, and for the future to serve and glorify God.

Then a long roll of parchment was brought out, on which the covenant was written, and one by one all the leading men in Jerusalem came forward and put their seals to it, as a sign that they intended to keep it.

In the East it is always the seal that authenticates a document. In Babylon the documents were often sealed with half-a-dozen seals or more. These were impressed on moist clay, and then the clay was baked, and the seals were each fastened to the parchment by a separate string. In this way any number of seals could be attached.

We are given in Neh. x. the names of those who sealed, honoured names, for they made a brave and noble stand. First of all comes the name of Nehemiah, the governor, setting a good example to the rest. He is followed by Zidkijah, or Zadok, the secretary. Then come the names of eighty-two others, heads of families, all well-known men in Jerusalem. Each one fastened his seal to the roll of parchment containing the solemn covenant. No less than eighty-four seals were attached to it.

What then were the articles of the covenant?

What did those who sealed promise?

First of all, they bound themselves (x. 29) to walk in God's law, and to observe and do all the commandments. What need after that to enter a single other article in the covenant? If a man walks in God's law he cannot go wrong; if he keeps all God's commandments, what more can be required?

But they were wise men who drew up that solemn covenant. They knew and understood the human heart. Is it not a fact, that whilst we are all ready to own that we are sinners in a general sense, we are slow to own that we are guilty of any particular sin? We do not mind confessing that we are miserable sinners, but we should indignantly deny being selfish or idle, or unforgiving, or proud, or bad-tempered.

So those who wrote the parchment felt it best to go more into detail, and to put down certain things in which they felt they had done wrong in the past, but in which they meant to do better in the time to come.

(1) They promised that they would not in future marry heathen people, that they would not give their daughters to heathen men, or let their sons choose heathen wives.

(2) They engaged to keep the Sabbath, and not to buy and sell on the holy day; and they promised that if the heathen people round came to the city gates with baskets of fruit, or vegetables, or fish on the Sabbath, they would refuse to buy.

(3) They stated that for the future they would keep every seventh year as a year of Sabbath. The Sabbath year had in times past been a great blessing to the land. The one work and occupation of the Jews was agriculture, farming of all kinds. Every seventh year God commanded that all work was to stop; there was to be a year's universal holiday, that the nation might have rest and leisure to think of higher things. Yet they did not starve in the Sabbath year, for God gave them double crops in the sixth year, enough to cover all their wants until the crops of the eighth year were ripe. All that grew of itself during the seventh year, all the self-sown grain that sprang up, all the fruit that came on the olives, and the vines, and the fig-trees, was left for the poor people to gather; they went out and helped themselves, and comfort was brought to many a sad home, and cupboards which were often empty during the six ordinary years were kept well filled in the Sabbath year. But this command of God had been neglected by the Jews; it needed more faith and trust than they had possessed, and they had let it slip. Now, however, they promise once more to observe the Sabbath year.

The rest of the covenant concerned the amount to be contributed for the service of God. They agreed to pay one-third of a shekel each year towards the temple service, and to bring by turn the wood required for the sacrifices, beside giving God, regularly and conscientiously, the first-fruits of all they had.

This was the solemn covenant to which were fastened so many seals, this was the agreement by which they bound themselves to the service of God. As they went home, and shook the dust off their heads, and took off their sacks, they went home pledged to obey and to love their God.

Which of us will follow their example? Who will bind himself to God? Who will put his seal to the document, and promise to serve and obey the Master who died for him? Will you?

Is it not right, is it not wise to pull up at times and to look at our life, at what it has been, and at what it might have been? What about prayer? Has it been always earnest, heartfelt, true? What about our Bible reading? Has it been as regular, as profitable as it might have been? Do we not feel we have come short in the past, and that we should like to do better in the time to come?

What about sin, that besetting sin of ours, so often indulged in, so little fought against? Are we going on like this for ever, beaten by sin, overcome and defeated? Should we not like to leave the old careless days behind, and for the future to fight manfully against the world, the flesh, and the devil?

What about work for God? Have we done all that we could for His service? Have we given Him the tenth of our money? Have we consecrated to Him our time and our talents? Do we not feel we should like to do more for the Master in time to come?

It is a good plan to get alone and quiet for a time, and taking a piece of paper, to write down all we feel has been wrong in the past, all we mean to do in the future. Then let us sign our name to it, put the date at the bottom, fold it carefully up, put it away, let no one see it but God, it is a covenant between us and Him. He will give us grace to keep it if we only ask Him.

Will you try this plan this very night? Then you will open your eyes to-morrow morning with the recollection, 'I am the Lord's; I have given myself to Him; I am His now by my own agreement; I am pledged to His service.'

Lord, make me faithful, keep me humble, keep me prayerful, give me grace and courage and strength!

For 'better is it that thou shouldest not vow, than that thou shouldest vow and not pay.'

CHAPTER XI.

The Brave Volunteers.

'Jerusalem, my happy home, Name ever dear to me.'

So we sing, and it is the echo of the song that went up from the heart of many a Jew in olden time.

We all love our native land, our dear old England, yet none of us love it as the Jews loved Jerusalem. We have only to open the Book of Psalms to see how dear the city of their fathers was to the heart of the Jews.

'Great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised in the city of our God, in the mountain of His holiness. Beautiful for situation, the joy of the whole earth, is Mount Zion, on the sides of the north, the city of the great King,' Psalm xlviii. 1, 2.

'Our feet shall stand within thy gates, O Jerusalem. Jerusalem is

builded as a city that is compact together. Whither the tribes go up, the tribes of the Lord. Pray for the peace of Jerusalem; they shall prosper that love thee. Peace be within thy walls, and prosperity within thy palaces,' Psalm cxxii. 2-4, 6, 7.

These are just samples of countless expressions of love and devotion for Jerusalem, their happy home. And all the time of the captivity in Babylon the Jews were longing to be once more in Jerusalem! Oh, to see the city of cities again; oh, to tread once more the streets of the holy Jerusalem! They could not even think of their far-off home without tears.

'By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, yea, we wept, when we remembered Zion. If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget her cunning. If I do not remember thee, let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth; if I prefer not Jerusalem above my chief joy,' Psalm cxxxvii. 1, 5, 6.

Yet, strange to say, although the Jews were longing for the Holy City all the time they were in captivity, when they did return to their native land, and it was possible once more to live in Jerusalem, they seem to have preferred any other place before it. It was the most difficult thing to get any of them to consent to take up their abode in the capital.

Nehemiah found himself face to face with this difficulty when he had finished the repairs of the city. The rubbish was cleared away, the walls were built, the gates were set up, the fortresses were strengthened, but the city itself was nowhere. Here and there houses were scattered about, here and there was a group of buildings, but inside the walls were many great empty spaces, large pieces of unoccupied ground.

The walls had been set up on the old sites, and were about four miles in circumference. It was a large space to fill, and, as Nehemiah looked round, he saw that whilst the city was imposing from without, it was a bare, miserable place inside.

'The city was large and great; but the people were few therein, and the houses were not builded.'

Not only so, not only was the city unsightly, but there were not enough inhabitants to protect the walls. In case of an attack, what would be done? Four miles of wall was a long space to guard and defend, how could more hands be secured? It was absolutely necessary that Jerusalem should have a larger population.

Yet Nehemiah found that no one wished to move from the country places round, and to come into Jerusalem. Every town, every village in Judea was more popular than the capital. They had rather live in sultry Jericho than on the mountain heights of Jerusalem; they preferred stony Bethel to the vine-clad hills of the City of God; they had rather live in the tiny insignificant village of Anathoth than in the capital itself.

Why was this? Why had the Jews of Nehemiah's day such an objection to living in Jerusalem? Why, after longing for Jerusalem all the time of the captivity, did they shrink from it on their return?

The reason was this. Jerusalem had become the point of danger. All round the returned captives were enemies. The Samaritans, the Moabites, the Ammonites, the Edomites, and a host of others were ready at any moment to pounce down upon the Jews. In case of an attack from their united forces, what would be the mark at which all these enemies would aim? What place would have to bear the whole force of the attack? Jerusalem itself. They would pass by Jericho, Bethel, and Anathoth, as places beneath their notice, but they would all make for Jerusalem. To live in the capital was consequently to live in constant danger and in constant fear. So it is not to be wondered at that they avoided it, and that they settled down in the villages and left the capital to take care of itself.

Nehemiah sees that steps must be taken to put a stop to this state of things. In order to bring about the end he had in view, he first took a census of the whole nation, and then he required each town and district to send a tenth of its people to live in Jerusalem.

But of whom was the tenth to consist? How should the number of those who were to migrate to the capital be chosen? It was done by lot; they drew lots who were to go and who were to stay. This was probably done in the usual Jewish way, by means of pebbles. The people of a village would be divided into tens, then a bag would be brought out containing nine dark-coloured pebbles and one white one. The ten men would all draw from the bag, and the man who drew the white pebble would be the one who was to remove to Jerusalem. By this means the capital would be provided with about 20,000 inhabitants, and would be in a condition to defend itself from attack.

No doubt there was much grumbling, and there were many groans and complaints when the lots were drawn, and those who drew the white stone found they must give up their little farms, their pretty country houses, the homes they had learnt to love so well and which they had built for themselves and their children, the vineyards which their own hands had planted, the olive yards and fig groves of which they had been so proud, and which had been so profitable to them, that they must give up all these which had been so dear to them and move at once into the city in which they would be in constant danger.

But there were certain brave volunteers. Besides those on whom the lot fell, a certain number came forward and offered to go of their own free will and choice to live in the capital. They would break up their country homes, and for love of their country and love of Jerusalem would move into the Holy City. The post of danger was the post which most needed them, and they were not afraid to go to it. Brave, noble men and women, no wonder that we read that blessings were called down upon them by the rest of their countrymen. 'And the people blessed all the men that willingly offered themselves to dwell at Jerusalem,' Neh. xi. 2.

But those brave Jews, who are mentioned here with so much honour, are not the only ones who of their own free will and choice have gone with open eyes to the point of danger.

Fourteen thousand pounds arrived in the course of a few days at a certain house in London, the office of the Church Missionary Society. One person sent L5,000 with no name, only a day or two afterwards another sent a second L5,000, whilst L4,000 was contributed in smaller sums.

For what purpose was this immense sum of money sent? It was forwarded to the Society in consequence of a very famous letter which appeared in the Daily Telegraph of November 15, 1876. This letter was written by Dr. Stanley, the great African traveller. It told of a new country he had discovered in the heart of Africa, a country inhabited by a nation clothed and living in houses, and reigned over by a king of some intelligence named Mtesa. Dr. Stanley had talked to this man, he had shown him his Bible, and told him something of Christianity, and in this letter in the Daily Telegraph Dr. Stanley stated that King Mtesa was ready and willing to receive Christian teachers, if any were prepared to go out to his kingdom of Uganda.

The result of that letter was, that in a few days no less than L14,000 was sent to the Church Missionary Society, in order that they might have the means to establish a mission by the shores of the Victoria Nyanza. A committee meeting was accordingly held, and the Society declared themselves ready to take up the work.

The money was forthcoming, but a great difficulty stared them in the face. Where were the men? Who would be found willing to go to such a place as the heart of Africa? The climate was most trying and dangerous for Europeans, the food was bad and scanty, and, worst of all, the country was so unsafe that all who went must go with their life in their hands, feeling that at any moment they might be attacked and murdered by the natives.

Would any offer for such a post of danger? Would any be found willing to volunteer for the work, would any be ready to leave their safe, comfortable homes in England to take up their abode in Uganda?

Yes, men were found who willingly offered themselves for the work. Eight noble men at once came forward. A young naval officer, Lieutenant Smith; a clergyman from Manchester, Mr. Wilson; an Irish architect, Mr. O'Neill; a Scotch engineer, Mr. Mackay; a doctor from Edinburgh, Dr. Smith; a railway contractor's engineer, Mr. Clark, and two working men, a blacksmith and a builder.

'And the people blessed all the men that willingly offered themselves to dwell' in Uganda.

A meeting was held in the Church Missionary Society's house, to bid them farewell and to pray for a blessing on their work. Then each of the eight volunteers was asked to say a few words to the friends who were taking leave of them. Mr. Mackay, the young engineer, was the last to speak. Looking round on those who were sending him out, he said:

'There is one thing which my brethren have not said, and which I want to say. I want to remind the Committee that within six months they will probably hear that one of us is dead.'

There was a great silence in the room as he spoke these startling words.

'Yes,' he went on, 'is it at all likely that eight Englishmen should start for Central Africa and all be alive six months after? One of us at least—it may be I—will surely fall before that. But what I want to say is this, when the news comes do not be cast down, but send some one else immediately to take the vacant place.'

Mr. Mackay was not wrong. One of the eight, the builder, died as soon as

he landed in Africa. The seven others set off for the interior to find the country of King Mtesa. Two of these, Mackay the engineer, and Robertson the blacksmith, were taken so ill with fever that they were compelled to go back to the coast.

It was a long wearisome journey, of from four to five months, from the coast to Victoria Nyanza; for a little way they were able to go in a boat which they had brought with them from England, but after a short distance they were obliged to leave the river, and, taking their boat to pieces, to carry it with them through the tangled forest. When they arrived at a place named Mpwapwa, it seemed such a good field for missionary labour that one of their number, Mr. Clark, was left to begin missionary work there, whilst the rest pressed forward to Uganda.

The great lake at last came in sight, and they were cheered by the sight of its blue waters. But, when they arrived on its shores, the naval officer and the doctor were both very ill; for thirty-one days they had been carried by the porters, being quite unable to walk, and only a few months after their arrival at the south end of the lake the young doctor died. He was worn to a skeleton, and suffered terribly. The three who remained buried him by the side of the lake, and put a heap of stones over his grave. On a slab of limestone they carved--

'JOHN SMITH,
M.B. EDN., C.M.S.
DIED MAY 11, 1877,
AGED 25 YEARS.'

Now, only the clergyman, the architect, and the naval officer were left to carry on the work. But that very same year, in December, a quarrel broke out between two tribes living at the south of the lake. A man named Songoro, who had been friendly to the missionaries, fled to them for protection. They were at once surrounded by a party of the natives, and, on refusing to give up Songoro to his enemies, Lieutenant Smith and Mr. O'Neill, together with all the men who were with them, were murdered on December 7.

Only two days before, Lieutenant Smith had written a letter to a friend in England, in which were these words:

'One feels very near to heaven here, for who knows what a day may bring forth?'

Only one of the five who had arrived at the lake was now left, Mr. Wilson, the clergyman. But, thank God, man after man has offered himself to fill up the vacant places. Some have fallen, some still remain, labouring on.

The people blessed the men who willingly offered themselves for the post of danger. Should we not bless them too? Should we not day by day call down blessings on the brave noble missionaries? Should we not pray for them, that strength and courage may be given them? Should we not help them all we can? Let our daily prayer be:

'Lord, bless them all!
Thy workers in the field,
Where'er they be;
Prosper them, Lord, and bless
Their work for Thee--

Lord, bless them all.

Lord, bless them all!
Give them Thy smile to-day,
Cheer each faint heart,
More of Thy grace, more strength,
Saviour, impart;
Lord, bless them all!

The post of danger is the post of honour, and at that post of honour Mr. Mackay, the engineer, died, February 8, 1890. For thirteen years he had bravely held on to his work. He had never had a holiday, he had never come home to see his friends. The Secretary of the Church Missionary Society wrote at last, urging him to come to England for rest and change. His answer to this letter arrived ten days after the sorrowful telegram which told of his death. He said, 'But what is this you write; come home? Surely now, in our terrible dearth of workers, it is not the time for any one to desert his post. Send us only our first twenty men, and I may be tempted to come to help you to find the second twenty.'

So he was faithful unto death.

The _people_ blessed the men who willingly offered themselves, and surely _God_ blessed them too, for 'God loveth a cheerful giver.' He who gives to God grudgingly, or because he feels obliged to do so, had better never give at all, for God will not receive the offering. The money must be willingly given, the service must be cheerfully rendered, the post of danger must be readily occupied, or God will have nothing to do with it.

The only giver whose gifts He can receive is the cheerful giver, the one who willingly offers himself.

To be comfortable is the great aim of our lives and our hearts by nature. But sometimes God calls us to be uncomfortable, to leave the cosy home, the bright fireside, the comparative luxury, and to go forth to the post of danger, or difficulty, or trial.

God grant that we may be amongst the number of those who go forth with a smiling face amongst the people who willingly offer themselves!

CHAPTER XII.

The Holy City.

In the time of the terrible siege of Jerusalem, when the Roman armies surrounded the city, when famine was killing the Jews by hundreds, and when every day the enemy seemed more likely to take the city, a strange thing happened. Some priests were watching, as was their custom, in the temple courts at dead of night. They had passed through the Beautiful Gate, crossed the Court of the Women, and had ascended the steps leading into the inner court, which was close to the Temple itself. Suddenly they stopped, for the earth shook beneath them, whilst overhead came a noise as of the rushing of many wings, and a multitude of voices was heard saying, again and again, the solemn words, 'Let us depart, let us

depart.'

The angels of God were leaving the doomed city to its fate.

For centuries Jerusalem had been known as the Holy City. Why was it so called? Not because of its inhabitants, for, instead of being holy, many of them were sunk in wickedness and impurity. Jerusalem was called the Holy City simply because of one inhabitant; it was the dwelling-place of God, and His presence there made it what no other city of the earth was, the Holy City.

'In Salem also is His tabernacle, and His dwelling, place in Zion,'
Psalm lxxvi. 2.

'Blessed be the Lord out of Zion, which dwelleth at Jerusalem,' Psalm
cxxxv. 21.

So wrote the Psalmist, and he was right. God had chosen Jerusalem as His home on earth, His abiding-place, His dwelling; and so long as _He_ remained there, Jerusalem and all its surroundings was holy. The mountain on which it stood was the Holy Mountain; the city itself was the Holy City; the courts of the temple were the Holy Place, the temple itself was the Most Holy Place, whilst the inner sanctuary, in which God's glory appeared, was the Holy of Holies.

But at the time of the siege of Jerusalem, God was leaving the city, it was no longer to be His dwelling-place, and consequently it was no longer to be called the Holy City. And therefore it was that the holy angels cried aloud to one another, Let us depart, for it is a holy city no longer, God has deserted it; it is His no more.

But in Nehemiah's day, Jerusalem, in spite of her sins, was still the Holy City. We find her twice called so in his book, Neh. xi. 1, 18, and inasmuch as it was the Holy City, God's home on earth, His special property, His constant dwelling-place, Nehemiah felt it was only right that, as soon as the city was finished, as soon as all within its walls was set in order, the city and all it contained should be dedicated to the service of that God to whom it belonged.

Accordingly, as we visit Jerusalem in thought, we find the people busily preparing for a great and glorious day; they are going, by means of a grand and imposing ceremonial, to dedicate the city to God.

It is nearly thirteen years since the walls were finished and the gates set up. Why then did not Nehemiah hold the service of dedication before? Why did he allow so long a time to elapse before he summoned the people to put the finishing touch to their work by laying it at the feet of their King?

The Tirshatha had probably two good reasons for the delay. In the first place, there was much to do inside the city after the walls and gates were finished; the city itself had to be rebuilt, strengthened, and put into order. Then he probably dare not attempt such a grand celebration without special leave from Persia. If he made a great demonstration of any kind, it would be easy for the Samaritans to put their own construction upon it, and to write off at once to Persia to accuse him of setting up the standard of rebellion. It was, therefore, advisable to obtain direct permission for such a step from Artaxerxes himself. Now the city is in order, the necessary precautions have been taken, and

Nehemiah feels that there is nothing to hinder the holding of the solemn ceremonial of the dedication of the Holy City to God.

Who are these men who are arriving by companies at all the different gates of Jerusalem? They are the Levites, coming up from all parts of the country to the service of dedication. They are carrying with them various musical instruments--cymbals, trumpets, psalteries and harps--old instruments used by King David, and some of them evidently invented by him and bearing his name, for we find them called, in xii. 36:

'The musical instruments of David, the man of God.'

These are to be used in the grand service which is about to take place. Many new musical instruments had been invented since the time of David, and the Jews of the captivity had seen and used these in Babylon and Shushan. We read, in the Book of Daniel, of the cornet, the flute, the sackbut, the dulcimer; all these instruments were familiar to the Jews of Nehemiah's day. But we do not find one of these newly invented instruments in use at this grand service. They cling to the old instruments, used in the first temple, dear to their hearts as being connected with King David, and as having been used by their fathers before them, ver. 27.

Not only the musicians, but the singers are called together from the valleys round Jerusalem, in which the temple choir had chosen to live, in order that they might go up by turn to lead the temple singing, xii. 29.

When all who were to take part in the service had assembled, there was a great sprinkling. The priests and the Levites purified themselves, and purified the people, and the gates, and the wall.

A red heifer (see Num. xix.) was led by one of the priests outside the city. There she was killed, her blood was caught in a basin, and was sprinkled seven times before the temple. Then her flesh was burnt outside the city, and the ashes were carefully collected and mixed with water. This water was put into a number of basins, and the priests and Levites went with it up and down the city, sprinkling it first on themselves, then on the men, women and children in the city, and afterwards on the wall, and the gates, and all that was to be dedicated to God.

All were to be made pure before they could be used in God's service. The Great Master cannot use dirty vessels; they are not fit for His use, they cannot do His work.

If you want God to use you in His service, you must first be sprinkled, made pure from all defilement of sin. Until this has been done you cannot do one single thing to please God; until you have been cleansed, it is impossible for you to work for God.

How, then, can we be cleansed? How can we be made vessels meet for the Master's use, fit for the service of God? Thank God, we have a better way of cleansing than by washing in the ashes of a heifer.

'For if the ashes of an heifer, sprinkling the unclean, sanctifieth to the purifying of the flesh: how much more shall the blood of Christ, who, through the Eternal Spirit offered Himself without spot to God,

purge your conscience from dead works _to serve the living God?_' Heb. ix. 13, 14.

The blood must be sprinkled, the conscience must be purged, then begins the service of the living God; all works before that are dead, works of no avail, utterly worthless and good for nothing, in the Master's estimation.

When all was ready and the purification was complete, the great company of the musicians met in the temple courts. The blast of the priests' trumpets was heard on one side, and on the other the sweet melodious songs of the white-robed minstrels.

When all were in order they marched to the Valley Gate, on the western side of the city. Here Nehemiah divided them into two companies, in order that they might make the circuit of the city, walking in gay procession on the top of the new walls. One company was to go north and the other south, walking round the city until they met on the other side; whilst all the people stood below, watching the progress of the two processions, each of which was formed of singers, nobles and priests, who were dressed in white and flowing robes.

It must have been a grand and imposing sight, as the bright Eastern sun streamed on the dazzling white of their fine linen, and made their instruments glitter and shine. Then there was the sound of glorious music, which seemed to encircle the city in a wave of rejoicing and song. Everyone made merry that day, and no wonder; it was a day to be remembered.

The order of each procession was as follows. First and foremost went a band of musicians with their various instruments. Then followed a small company of princes, the finest men in the nation, arrayed in all the brilliance of Eastern costume, and bringing up the rear were seven priests, bearing trumpets. Each procession had a leader, Nehemiah conducted one, and Ezra the scribe the other.

Ezra's procession proceeded southward, and then eastward. They passed the Dung Gate, whence was swept out the refuse of the city. Then they came to the Fountain Gate, opposite to the Pool of Siloam, and here they descended by steps in the Tower of Siloam. They probably came down in order that they might dedicate the buildings over the Pool of Siloam and the Dragon Well, and then they climbed to the top of the wall again, by the steps that went up to that part of Jerusalem called the City of David. From thence Ezra's procession moved on to the eastern wall, where they were to meet the other party.

Nehemiah's company, on leaving the Valley Gate, turned northward, passed the Tower of the Furnaces, went across the Broad Wall, which was almost the only piece of the old wall still standing, passed the Gate of Ephraim, the Old Gate, the Tower of Hananeel, the Tower of Meah, the Sheep Gate, and so down to the temple, and the gate named the Prison Gate, because it opened upon a street leading to the court of the prison.

Then, somewhere near the Water Gate, the two processions met, and marched together into the court of the temple, the two bands now joining together in a united glorious strain, whilst the two companies of singers formed again one enormous united choir, and filled the temple courts with their harmonious song.

'So stood the two companies of them that gave thanks in the house of God,' xii. 40.

Not a voice was silent, there was no idle person in the choir. Headed by their choir-master they did their utmost to praise the Lord.

'The singers sang loud, with Jezrahiah their overseer.'

Nor were the musical people the only ones who showed their joy that happy day. For, as the priests offered great sacrifices, the rejoicing was both universal and tremendous. 'For God had made them rejoice with great joy.' Not the men alone, but the wives and the children, so that

'The joy of Jerusalem was heard even afar off.'

Women's tears, how often we read of them in the Bible! Rachel weeps over her children and will not be comforted, Hagar lifts up her voice and weeps over her son, Naomi weeps as she comes back to her desolate home, Hannah weeps as she kneels in the tabernacle court, the widow weeps as she follows her only son to the grave, and the company of women weep as Jesus of Nazareth is led out to the cross.

So many women's tears, so very few women's smiles; so much mourning and lamentation, so very little happiness and rejoicing. But, on this day of dedication, the wives were as merry and glad as the husbands, and even the children took part in the general joy.

It is interesting to notice that the Book of Psalms was the national song-book of the Jewish nation, a large number of the Psalms having been composed for special occasions, in order to commemorate certain memorable days in the history of the nation.

One Psalm, namely Psalm cxlvii., was probably composed in the time of Nehemiah, in order that it might be sung at the dedication of the walls.

Ver. 1: 'Praise ye the Lord: for it is good to sing praises unto our God; for it is pleasant; and praise is comely.'

Ver. 2: 'The Lord doth build up Jerusalem: He gathereth together the outcasts of Israel.'

Ver. 12: 'Praise the Lord, O Jerusalem; praise thy God, O Zion.'

Ver. 13: 'For He hath strengthened the bars of thy gates; He hath blessed thy children within thee.'

There follows in the Psalm a curious mention of snow and ice. The dedication of the city took place late in the year, and probably Jerusalem was white with snow as the singers in their white robes went round the walls, the snow being a glorious emblem of the purification which had just taken place. White as snow,--white in the blood.

Vers. 16-18: 'He giveth snow like wool: He scattereth the hoar frost like ashes. He casteth forth His ice like morsels: who can stand before His cold? He sendeth out His word, and melteth them. He causeth His wind to blow, and the waters flow.'

Surely as the people rejoiced on the day that the city was finished,

they must have remembered the words of old Daniel the prophet, written whilst they were in captivity, a hundred years before this time.

For what had Daniel declared? He had foretold that his nation should return from captivity, and that Jerusalem should be restored.

'The street shalt be built again, and the wall, even in troublous times.'

Nehemiah's work was evidently revealed to Daniel, and he was also told something about Sanballat, and Tobiah, and the other troublers of the Jews.

Then, says Daniel, as soon as the command goes forth to build Jerusalem, then can you begin to reckon the time to the coming of the Messiah, only a limited and stated time must then elapse before the Christ, the Saviour of Israel, shall appear (Dan. ix. 25).

No wonder then that the joy of Jerusalem was heard afar off that day, as they thought of the good days that were coming. The word of the living God had come true, the street was built, the wall was built, now they had only to wait for the fulfilment of the rest of the prophecy, for the coming of their own Messiah and King.

We should all like to have stood in Jerusalem on that joyous dedication day, and watched the glorious procession entering the temple on Mount Zion. But we shall see one day a far grander procession than that.

The leader of that procession will ride on a white horse. His eyes will be as a flame of fire, on His head will be many crowns, His name will be King of kings and Lord of lords. He will be followed in the procession by the armies of heaven, on white horses, clothed in fine linen, clean and white (Rev. xix.)

Coming down to earth, His feet shall stand in that day on the Mount of Olives, which is before Jerusalem on the east, and then passing through the Golden Gate, the King and His followers will enter Jerusalem.

Then again Jerusalem will become the Holy City, for from that day the name of the city shall be 'The Lord is there,' Ezek. xlviii. 35.

So soon as the Lord, who deserted Jerusalem, returns to her, she must become once more the Holy City. Even upon the bells of the horses and the vessels of the temple shall then be inscribed, Holiness to the Lord; all dedicated to Him and to His service.

Then indeed shall the glad cry go up:

'Awake, awake; put on thy strength, O Zion, put on thy beautiful garments, O Jerusalem, the holy city: for henceforth there shall no more come into thee the uncircumcised and the unclean.'

Then again, in that glad day, the joy of Jerusalem shall be heard afar off, for God Himself will call upon all to rejoice with her.

'Rejoice ye with Jerusalem, and be glad with her, all ye that love her: rejoice for joy with her, all ye that mourn for her,' Isa. lxvi. 10.

And the King Himself will lead the rejoicing:

'And I will rejoice in Jerusalem, and joy in My people: and the voice of weeping shall no more be heard in her, nor the voice of crying,' Isa. lxxv. 19.

Shall we indeed take part in that grand procession? Shall we stand with the King of Glory on Olivet? Shall we pass within the gate into the city? It all depends upon whether we are sprinkled, made pure, washed white in the blood of the Lamb. Only those who were purified could take part in Nehemiah's procession; only sprinkled ones, cleansed by Christ, will be allowed to join in the song of rejoicing, when the Lord comes to reign in Jerusalem gloriously.

If we are indeed His redeemed ones, let us keep the blessed hope of that day ever before us. Let it cheer us as we are tossed to and fro on the waves of this troublesome world.

'Courage! oh, have courage,
For soon His feet shall stand
Upon the Mount of Olives,
In the glorious Promised Land;
For the Prince of Peace is coming,
With pomp and royal state,
To pass, with all His followers,
Within the Golden Gate.

Courage! oh, have courage!
For the time it is not long,
E'en now across the mountains
Comes a distant sound of song;
The dreary night is closing,
'Tis near the break of day,
And thy King, the King of Glory,
Will soon be on His way.'

CHAPTER XIII.

Having no Root.

The sky is brilliant and cloudless, the snow-clad mountains stand out clear in the distance, the air is laden with the scent of orange and lemon groves, and the sweet fragrance of thousands of lilies. Nehemiah the Tirshatha is once more in Shushan; his feet are treading again, as in days gone by, the streets of the capital of Persia.

It is thirteen years since he left the City of Lilies with his brother Hanani, in order that he might go to Jerusalem, and do his utmost to improve the ruined and desolate city. He has returned with his work accomplished. The walls are built, the gates are set up, the bare spaces in the city have been built over, the whole place has been strongly fortified, the people have been brought back to their allegiance to God, and, as the topstone of his work, he has seen, just before his departure for Persia, the city and all it contained dedicated to the service of the Great King.

Very glad, very thankful is Nehemiah, as he enters once more the glorious palace on the top of the hill, and stands before his master Artaxerxes, the long-handed, to give in his report of all he has done since the king gave him leave to return to his native land.

Nehemiah finds himself once more surrounded by luxury and refinement and beauty. What is Jerusalem compared with Shushan? Surely, now his work is accomplished, he will settle down to a life of ease in Persia, where he may dwell free from fear or anxiety or care, eating the dainties from the king's table, and partaking of all the pleasures of an Eastern court. After the rough life he has led during the last thirteen years, after the perils he has undergone, and the difficulties he has surmounted, he may surely retire, now that his work has been so happily accomplished, and spend the remainder of his life in peace and comfort.

But no; Nehemiah's heart was in Jerusalem, he preferred Jerusalem above his chief joy. All the time he had been absent he had been hungering for news, and receiving none; there were no posts across the vast deserts, nor did he live in these luxurious days when the heartache of anxiety may be relieved and set at rest by a telegram. What had been going on in his absence? Were the Samaritans quiet, or had Sanballat and Tobiah taken the opportunity afforded by his absence, and invaded Jerusalem? And the people; how were they? Were they keeping the solemn covenant which had been sealed in his presence? Were they continuing to serve and obey the Heavenly King? All this, and much more, Nehemiah longed to hear.

He is therefore only too thankful when, after spending a year in Persia, Artaxerxes gives him leave to return as governor of Jerusalem.

'In the two and thirtieth year of Artaxerxes, King of Babylon, came I unto the king, and after certain days obtained I leave of the king.

'After certain days.' This is a common expression in the Bible for a year. The same Hebrew word is translated a whole year in many other passages, _e.g._ Lev. xxv. 29, Num. ix. 22. Thus we may safely conclude that a year was the length of time that Nehemiah was absent from Jerusalem.

As soon as he had received the king's permission, Nehemiah left the lovely City of Lilies behind, and set out once more across the desert for Jerusalem. Probably no one there knew when he was coming, or whether he was coming at all. When Nehemiah left the city he possibly had no idea that he would be allowed to return, but expected that his royal master would again require his services as Rab-shakeh in the palace of Shushan; nor was it likely that any news had reached the city of the permission given him to return. Suddenly, one day, a small cavalcade of camels, mules, and donkeys arrived at the northern gate, and the news spread through the city that Nehemiah the governor had returned. Was this intelligence received with unmixed joy and thankfulness, or were there some in the city to whom it came as anything but pleasant tidings?

No sooner has the governor arrived than he begins to look round the city, to see and to inquire how all has been going on in his absence. He goes up to the temple, and no sooner has he entered the gate leading into the outer court, than he notices that the whole appearance of the place is changed. The temple enclosure looks empty and deserted; a few priests in their white robes are moving about, but where is the company of Levites who used to wait upon them, and help them in their work?

Nehemiah had left no less than 284 Levites in the temple, now he cannot see one of them. And, not only does he miss those Levites, whose duty it was to attend upon the priests, but he misses also the temple singers; the sons of Asaph and their companions are nowhere to be seen. The temple choir has entirely disappeared, and the services have accordingly languished. As Nehemiah looks round the whole place appears to him quiet, empty, and dismal. Nothing seems to be going on, all is apparently at a standstill.

Nehemiah feels sure that something is wrong, and the further he goes into the temple area the more convinced he is that he is not mistaken. Passing through the Beautiful Gate, he crosses the Court of the Women, and ascends the steps into the Court of Israel, where stands the temple itself.

Into the temple Nehemiah cannot pass, for none but the priests may enter the Holy Place and Holy of Holies. But round the temple building there had been erected an out-building or lean-to which surrounded the temple on three sides, and which was made up of three stories, each containing a number of rooms, some smaller, some larger. Just such an out-building as this had been made by Solomon in the first temple (1 Kings vi. 5-10), and the builders of the new temple had copied the idea, and had put up a similar lean-to against the outer walls.

In these rooms or chambers were kept all the stores belonging to the temple. The corn, and wine, and oil belonging to the priests and Levites; the first-fruits and free-will offerings brought by the people for the temple service; and the meat-offerings, which were cakes made of fine flour, salt, and oil. One of these cakes was offered twice a day, at the morning and evening sacrifice, besides on many other occasions, and with several other sacrifices; so that it was necessary to have a number of them always ready for use. In these chambers was also stored the frankincense, of which a large quantity was used every day, for a handful of it was burnt on the altar of incense both morning and night. This frankincense was very costly; it was brought on camels' backs from Arabia, where it was obtained by making incisions in the bark of a tree which grew in no other country. Out of these incisions oozed the gummy juice of the tree, and from this was made the frankincense. It was very rare, and could only be obtained occasionally, and therefore it was important to store it carefully in the temple.

Nehemiah wonders if the stores of the temple are in good condition, and he throws open the door of one of the chambers, to see if its contents are plentiful and well-stored. As he does so, he starts back in dismay. The whole place is altered, utterly and completely transformed. The small rooms have all been thrown into one vast chamber, the partition walls have been removed, the corn, the wine, the oil, the frankincense, and all the other stores are nowhere to be seen, they have all been cleared away; the vessels in use in the temple, the knives for cutting up the sacrifices, the censers for incense, the priests' robes and other garments have all disappeared. There is not one single thing to be found which ought to have been found there, and this chamber of the temple, instead of being a useful and necessary store-house, has become more like one of the grand reception rooms of the King of Persia, a luxurious drawing-room, fit for the palace of a king. Gay curtains cover the walls, costly furniture is set in order round the large room, the softest of divans, the most comfortable of cushions, the most elaborate ornaments and decorations surround Nehemiah on all sides, as he stands

amazed and disconsolate in their midst.

Nehemiah calls one of the priests, and inquires the meaning of this extraordinary change in the building. He is told, to his horror, that this grand reception room has actually been made for the use and convenience of Tobiah the secretary. Tobiah the heathen, Tobiah, who had mocked them as they built the walls, and who had done all that was in his power ever since to annoy and to hinder Nehemiah and his helpers. This splendid apartment has actually been made and fitted up, in order that Tobiah may have a grand place in which to dwell, and in which to entertain his friends whenever he chooses to pay a visit to Jerusalem.

What an abominable thing is this, which the poor governor has discovered! For was not this Tobiah an Ammonite, a Gentile? and as such Nehemiah knew perfectly well he had no right to set his foot in the Court of the Women, or the Court of Israel; much less then had he the right to enter the temple building.

Where is Eliashib the high priest? How is it that he has not put a stop to this proceeding? Nehemiah finds, to his dismay, that Eliashib has actually been the very one who has had this chamber prepared. The very man who was responsible for the temple, and who had, by his office, the right and the power to shut out from the holy building all that was evil, had been the man to introduce Tobiah the heathen, with marked honour, into the temple itself.

Eliashib had begun well. Earnestly and heartily he had helped in building the walls; he had actually led the band of workers, and had been the very first to begin to build, chap. iii. 1.

But Eliashib had a grandson named Manasseh, and this young man had made what he thought a very good match. Priest though he was, he had married the daughter of Sanballat, the governor of Samaria, a heathen girl, who was rich and possibly good-looking, and whose father was the most powerful man in the country, but who did not fear or own the God of Israel. And the grandfather, so far from forbidding the marriage, seems to have connived at it and sanctioned it.

Nay, he seems not only to have allowed himself to be allied with Sanballat the governor, but also with Tobiah the secretary, chap. xiii. 4. In what way he was connected by marriage we are not told, but inasmuch as both Tobiah and his son had married Jewish wives, one or both of these may have been closely related to the high priest, chap. vi. 17, 18. So the friendship with the Samaritans had grown; Eliashib had probably visited Samaria, and had been made much of and royally entertained by Sanballat and his secretary; and in proportion as his friendship with the heathen had grown warm, his love and earnestness in the Lord's service had grown cold.

In the latter part of the Book of Nehemiah we never find Eliashib coming forward as a helper in any good work. Ezra stands in the huge pulpit to read the law of God, thirteen of the chief men in Jerusalem stand by him to help him, but Eliashib the high priest, who surely should have been well to the front in that pulpit, is conspicuous by his absence. How could he stand up and read the law to the people, when he knew, and they knew, that he was not keeping it himself?

Nehemiah draws up a covenant between the people and their God, in which they promise to obey God and keep His commandments. No less than

eighty-four seals are fastened to that document, but not one of those seals bears the name of Eliashib.

How could he engage to keep that covenant, one article of which was a promise to have nothing to do with the heathen, when at the very time he was living on the most friendly terms with both Sanballat and Tobiah?

Then comes the grand service of dedication, when the city and all it contained was devoted to God. Not a single mention is made of Eliashib in the account of the services of the day. Many priests are mentioned by name, but the high priest, who, we should have expected, would have taken a prominent part in the proceedings, is never heard of throughout.

Eliashib's connection with the heathen had made him cold and remiss in the service of God. It is no wonder then that so soon as Nehemiah went away, and the restraint of his presence was removed, Eliashib did worse than ever, and at length actually entertained Tobiah in the temple itself.

But poor Nehemiah had not come to the end of his painful discoveries. He inquired next what had become of all the stores of corn and wine belonging to the Levites, all the tithes which the people were accustomed to bring to the temple for their support, and which, in that solemn covenant, they had so faithfully promised to supply. Since these stores have been removed from the place which was built on purpose to receive them, Nehemiah wishes to know what new store-house has been prepared for them. But the governor finds, to his sorrow and dismay, that no sooner was his back turned upon Jerusalem, than the people had ceased to bring their tithes and their contributions for the house of God.

It was not surprising then that Nehemiah found the temple so deserted. How could the Levites serve, how could the choir sing unless they were fed? They could not live on air, no food was provided for them; what could they do but take care of themselves? In order to save themselves from utter starvation, they had been driven to leave the temple, and to go to their fields and small farms in the country, which they had been accustomed to cultivate only at such times as they were not engaged in the work of the temple (Num. xxxv. 2). Now they were compelled to resort to these fields, as a means of keeping themselves and their families from beggary. No wonder then that few were found ready to help in the temple services.

The first Sabbath after Nehemiah's arrival, he sets out, with an anxious heart, to see how it is kept by his fellow-countrymen. In the solemn covenant the people had promised carefully to observe the day of rest. They have broken their word in the matter of the tithes; have they kept their promise with regard to the Sabbath?

Nehemiah, as he walks through the city on the Sabbath day, finds a regular market going on in the streets. He is horrified to find that all manner of fruit and all kinds of food are being bought and sold, as on any other day of the week. Wine, and oil, and merchandise of all kinds is being bargained for, and the streets are filled with the noisy cries and shouts of the sellers and purchasers.

Going on to the Fish Gate, Nehemiah finds that a colony of heathen Tyrians have come to live there, in order that they may hold a fish-market close to the gate. The fish was caught by their

fellow-countrymen in Tyre and Sidon, and was sent down to Jerusalem slightly salted, in order to preserve it from corruption. Nehemiah finds that these Tyrians are doing a grand traffic in salted fish, especially on the Sabbath day. The Jews loved fish, and always have loved it. How they enjoyed it in Egypt, how they longed for it in the wilderness!

'We remember the fish which we did eat in Egypt freely.'

So they sighed, and murmured, as they thought of their lost luxuries.

There was nothing a Jew liked so well for his Sabbath dinner as a piece of fish; and, therefore, on the Sabbath, the Tyrians found they did more business than on any other day.

As Nehemiah leaves the city by the Fish Gate, he meets donkeys and mules bringing in sheaves of corn, or laden with paniers containing figs, and grapes, and melons; he meets men laden with all kinds of burdens, and women bringing in the country produce that they may sell it in the streets of Jerusalem.

Then, passing on into the fields, he notices that work is going on as usual. They are tilling the ground, gathering in the corn, pruning the vines, and standing bare-footed in the winepresses to tread out the juice of the grapes.

So the promise about the Sabbath has been kept no better than the other promise; the covenant has been totally disregarded.

Turning homewards, Nehemiah discovers that the remaining article of the agreement has also been broken. For, as he passes through the streets, and listens to the children at play, he finds that some of the little ones are talking a language he cannot understand. Here and there he catches a Jewish word, but most of their talk is entirely unintelligible to him. On inquiring into the reason of this, he is told that these children have Jewish fathers but Philistine mothers, and that they are being brought up to talk the language and learn the religion of their heathen parent. They are making for themselves a strange dialect, a mixture of the two languages they have spoken; it is half Jewish, half Philistine.

'Their children spake half in the speech of Ashdod, and could not speak in the Jews' language, but according to the language of each people,'
xiii. 24.

Poor Nehemiah must have been filled with sorrow and bitter disappointment, as he found Jerusalem and its people in such a disgraceful condition. He had left the holy city like the garden of the Lord, he comes back to find the trail of the serpent all over his paradise. They did so well whilst he was there, they wandered to the right hand and the left so soon as he was parted from them.

Nor is Nehemiah the only one who has had this bitter disappointment; many a parent, many a teacher, many a friend can enter into his feelings, for they have gone through the same.

The young King Joash 'did that which was right in the sight of the Lord all the days of Jehoiada the priest.' But as soon as the old man was in his grave all was changed, and he did instead that which was evil.

And Joash has many followers, those who do well so long as they are under good and holy influence, and who do so badly when that influence is removed.

The young man, with the anxious, careful mother, who does so well as long as she lives, and who wanders from the right path as soon as she is taken from him; the young woman, who, whilst living under her parents' roof, sheltered and guarded by wise restrictions from all that would harm her, seems not far from the Kingdom of God, but, who, leaving home and becoming her own mistress, drifts into frivolity and carelessness; the man or woman who, when removed from good and holy influence, falls away from God and goes backwards; all these are followers of Joash, all these cause pain and distress to those who watch over their souls.

What is the reason of this sad change? Why is it that some only stand firm so long as they are under the care and influence of others? The Master has answered the question. He tells us the reason.

'These have no root.'

Last Christmas we had in our house a large green fir-tree. It reached from the floor to the ceiling, and spread its branches abroad in all directions. It stood well and firmly; it had all the appearance of growing; it held its head erect, and seemed as likely to stand as any of the trees outside in the garden.

But our tree only stood for a time. So long as the heavy weights and props which held it up remained, so long as the strings, which were tightly tied to nails in the wall, were uncut; just so long the tree remained upright and unmoved. But the very instant that the props and supports were taken away our tree came down with a crash.

What was the reason of its downfall? Why did the trees in the garden stand unsupported, and yet this tree fell so soon as its props were removed?

The answer is clear and simple. The trees in the garden had each of them a root, our Christmas tree had no root. Having no root, it was impossible for it to stand alone.

There is, alas, plenty of no-root religion now-a-days. We see around us too many whose godliness is dependent on their surroundings and their circumstances. They mean well, they try to do right, but there it ends. They have no root; the heart is unchanged, unconverted, unrenewed. Their religion is merely a surface religion.

So they for a time believe, for a time do well, for a time appear to be true Christians, but in time of temptation they fall away. Their 'goodness is as a morning cloud, and as the early dew it goeth away.'

If we would stand firm, we must see to it that our religion goes deep enough. I myself must be made new if I am to grow in grace; my heart must be Christ's if I am to stand firm in the faith.

'As ye have therefore received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk ye in Him. Rooted and built up in Him, and established in the faith.'

CHAPTER XIV.

Strong Measures.

What an objection some people have to strong measures! They see around them, amongst those under their influence, a great deal going on which is downright evil. You call upon them to put a stop to it, and to do all in their power to prevent it.

But what do they say? They tell you they will go gently and quietly to work; but they do not like to hurt other people's feelings, or to tread upon their prejudices. They have no objection to try gradually, quietly, and gently, to turn the tide of evil into a good and holy channel, but they hate and abominate anything in the shape of strong measures.

And yet there are cases where nothing short of strong measures will be of any avail. Here is a man who has a diseased hand. For some time the doctor has been trying gentle remedies: the poultice, the plaster, the fomentation, have all been tried. But now the doctor sees a change in the appearance of the hand. He sees very clearly that mortification is setting in. No poultice, no plaster, no fomentation will be of any avail now, nothing but the knife, nothing but cutting off the limb will save the man's life. What a foolish doctor he would be, who should refuse in such a case to take strong measures!

The great reformer, Martin Luther, looked around him, and what did he see? The whole civilized world a slave at the feet of one man, the Pope of Rome, obeying that man as if he were God; believing every word that came from his mouth, following carefully in his footsteps as he led them astray.

Luther feels nothing will do but strong measures. He will not go gently and quietly to work in his reform, for he feels that would be of no use; the case is so serious that nothing but a strong and decided step will answer the purpose. His strong step consisted in the making of a bonfire. On December 10, 1520, as the students of the great University at Wittenburg came to the college, they found fastened to the walls a notice inviting them and the professors, and all who liked to come, to meet Martin Luther at the east gate of the college at nine o'clock the following morning.

Full of curiosity, they assembled in great numbers to find a bonfire, and Luther standing by it with a paper in his hand. That paper was a letter from the Pope to Luther, telling him that if he did not recant from all he was teaching in less than sixty days, the Pope would give him over to Satan. After reading the letter to the assembled crowd, Luther solemnly threw it into the flames and watched it burn to ashes, that all might see how little he cared for the Pope or his threats. From that time there could be no more peace between Luther and Rome.

It was certainly a strong measure, and Luther owns that he had to make a great effort to force himself to take it. He says: 'When I burnt the bull, it was with inward fear and trembling, but I look upon that act with more pleasure than upon any passage of my life.' For Luther felt, and felt rightly, that the glorious Reformation would never have been brought about unless he had used strong measures.

Nehemiah was the Martin Luther of his age, the great reformer of his nation, and never did he feel the need of strong measure to be so great, as when he came back to Jerusalem after his absence in Persia.

Four glaring evils were staring him in the face.

(1) In the temple itself a grand reception room had been prepared for Tobiah the Ammonite.

(2) The people had refused to pay tithes or contributions to the temple service, and the Levites had consequently all left the sanctuary.

(3) The Sabbath day was desecrated and profaned; trade went on as usual both within and without the city.

(4) So common had marriage with heathen people become, that even the very children in the street were chattering in foreign languages.

Four evils, all of them very serious and deep-rooted, all calling for instant reformation at his hand.

How does Nehemiah go to work? Does he shrink from giving offence, or hurting people's feelings, or calling things by their right names? No, he feels his nation have sinned; the disease of sin is spreading, mortification is setting in, nothing will do but strong measures. The offending members must be cut off, that the whole body may be saved.

He begins first with the temple. Going into the inner court, and taking with him a band of his faithful servants, he throws open the door of the great store-chamber and begins his work. Indignantly he bids his servants to clear out all Tobiah's goods, nay, he himself gives a helping hand, and leads them in the work. The grand divans, the elegant cushions, the elaborate mats, the bright-coloured curtains are all dragged out and cast forth outside. And then, when the great chamber is empty he has it thoroughly cleaned and purified and put in order, to receive again the temple vessels and stores.

A strong measure certainly, but a very necessary one. If Nehemiah had stopped to think what Tobiah might happen to say the next time he came to Jerusalem, or if he had held back because he was afraid of hurting the feelings of Eliashib the high priest, the sin would never have been stopped, the temple would never have been cleansed.

St. Paul tells all those who are Christ's, that they themselves are God's temple.

'Know ye not that ye are the temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwelleth in you? If any man defile the temple of God, him shall God destroy; for the temple of God is holy, which temple ye are.'

Ye are the temple of God, you yourself God's dwelling-place. Examine then the secret chambers of your heart. Are any of Tobiah's goods there? Is there any secret sin hidden away in your heart?

If so, be your own Nehemiah; cleanse the chamber of your heart, or rather cry unto God to do it for you.

'Cleanse Thou me from secret faults.'

This is an all-important matter, for, unless the hidden sin is removed, you will receive no answer to your prayers, and therefore to attempt to pray is useless.

'If I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear me.'

Then, too, the Holy Spirit will be grieved and will cease to move you, and without His help you can do nothing; He cannot inhabit that temple in the secret chambers of which is to be found cherished sin.

In such a case nothing but strong measures will avail. That sin must be given up, or your soul will be darkened; that chamber must be cleansed, or the holy presence of the Lord cannot remain.

Do you say, It is hard to give it up, to clear it out; it has become a second nature to me, and I know not how to rid myself of it?

Surely it is worth making the effort, however much pain and suffering it may cause. Amputation, however much agony it may entail, is necessary if mortification has set in.

'If thy right eye offend thee, pluck it out, and cast it from thee: for it is profitable for thee that one of thy members should perish, and not that thy whole body should be cast into hell. And if thy right hand offend thee, cut it off, and cast it from thee: for it is profitable for thee that one of thy members should perish, and not that thy whole body should be cast into hell.'

The first evil has been dealt with and cleared away, Tobiah and his goods have been cast out of the temple. Nehemiah now passes on to the next thing which had so greatly shocked him on his arrival in Jerusalem, namely, the neglect on the part of the people with regard to the payment of what was due from them for the temple service.

Again Nehemiah takes strong measures. He calls together the rulers, as the leaders and representatives of the rest, and he gives them very strongly his mind on the subject. No smooth words or gentle hints will do. He tells us, 'I contended some time with them' (that is, I reproved them and argued with them), 'and I said, Why is the house of our God forsaken?'

Then, without waiting for a response to his appeal, he sends round to all the Levites and singers, bidding them with all haste to come up to the temple and to take up their work again. And the people, seeing he was determined, and that there was no possibility of his allowing the matter to drop, came also, bringing with them the corn, and the wine, and the oil, with which once more to fill the empty chamber.

'Then brought all Judah the tithe of the corn and the new wine and the oil unto the treasures.'

And, in order to prevent such a thing ever happening again, Nehemiah appointed treasurers to look after the temple stores. Eliashib the high priest had been the store-keeper before, xiii. 4, but he had shown himself unworthy of his office. Four men are accordingly chosen to collect the stores, and afterwards to deal them out to the priests and Levites. One is a priest, one a Levite, one a layman of rank, and the fourth a scribe, ver. 13. Nehemiah tells us why he selected these four men. 'They were counted faithful,' and as faithful men they could be

thoroughly depended upon.

Now, having set the temple in order, Nehemiah proceeds to fight the battle with regard to the observance of the Sabbath.

Again he uses strong measures. He once more speaks strongly and hotly to the nobles, for they had led the van in Sabbath desecration. They liked the freshest fruit and the daintiest dishes for their Sabbath feast, and they had, therefore, encouraged the market-people to go on with their Sabbath trade. Then, as now, there were plenty of people who, for their own self-pleasing, were ready to argue in favour of the loose observance of the fourth commandment.

Nehemiah reminds the nobles that the destruction of Jerusalem, the overthrow of that very city which they were taking so much trouble to rebuild, had all been brought about through desecration of the Sabbath day.

For what message had Jeremiah brought their fathers?

'If ye will not hearken unto me to hallow the Sabbath day, and not to bear a burden, even entering in at the gates of Jerusalem on the Sabbath day; then will I kindle a fire in the gates thereof, and it shall devour the palaces of Jerusalem, and it shall not be quenched.'

God's word had come true. Their fathers, despising the warning, had continued to break the Sabbath, and Nebuchadnezzar had burnt and destroyed the very gates through which the Sabbath burdens had been carried. What safety, then, could they hope for now, how could they expect to keep their new gates from destruction, if they followed in the footsteps of their fathers, and did the very thing that God, by the mouth of Jeremiah, condemned?

'Then I contended with the nobles of Judah, and said unto them, What evil thing is this that ye do, and profane the Sabbath day? Did not your fathers thus, and did not our God bring all this evil upon us, and upon this city? yet ye bring more wrath upon Israel by profaning the Sabbath.'

But though Nehemiah began by rebuking the nobles, he did not stop here. He took up the matter with a high hand. He commanded the gate-keepers to shut the gates on Friday evening, about half-an-hour earlier than usual. On other nights they were shut as soon as the sun had set, but now Nehemiah orders them to close the gates on Friday evenings, so soon as the shadows began to lengthen and the day was drawing to a close. They were also, in future, to be kept shut the whole of the Sabbath, so that no mules, or donkeys, or camels, or other beasts of burden, might be able to enter the city on the holy day.

The little gate, inside the large gate, by means of which foot-passengers might enter and leave the city, was left open, in order that people living in the country villages round might be able to come into the city to attend the temple services. But at this smaller gate Nehemiah took care to place some of his own trusty servants, and gave them strict instructions to admit no burdens, no parcel, no goods of any kind into the city on the Sabbath day, xiii. 19.

Very naturally, the merchants and the salespeople did not like this. They did a good stroke of business on the Sabbath day, and would not

lose their large profits without a struggle. Accordingly, what do we find them doing? They were refused admittance into the city, so they set up their stalls outside the walls. If the Jerusalem people could not buy of them, because of that strait-laced, narrow-minded Nehemiah, still the country people who came in to attend the temple services could purchase at their stalls on their way home. They might thus maintain a certain amount of their Sabbath business, and secure at least a portion of their Sabbath gains. Not only so, but surely many Jews from the city itself, as they strolled through the gates on the day of rest, might pass by their stalls, and, in the conveniently loose folds of their robes, many, even of these inhabitants of Jerusalem, might conceal a pomegranate, or a melon, a piece of fish, or a bunch of grapes, a handful of figs, or a freshly-cut cucumber, and might easily escape detection by Nehemiah's servants, standing at the gate.

Nehemiah, seeing this state of things, feels that once again strong measures are required. He must make a clean sweep of these traders at once. So, going out to them, he gives them warning that they will be arrested and imprisoned the very next time that they come within sight of the city on the Sabbath day.

'So the merchants and sellers of all kind of ware lodged without Jerusalem once or twice. Then I testified unto them: Why lodge ye about the wall? If ye do so again I will lay hands on you.'

That put a stop to it.

'From that time forth came they no more on the Sabbath.'

Then, from that day, Nehemiah held the Levites responsible for the strict observance of this rule. His own servants had guarded the gates in the first emergency, now he bids the Levites to take their place, and to do all in their power to enforce and to maintain the sanctity of the holy day.

Surely we need a Nehemiah now-a-days, we need some of his strong measures to stop the growing disregard of the Sabbath, which is creeping slowly but surely like a dark shadow over this country of ours. We need a man who will not be afraid of being called strait-laced, or narrow-minded, or peculiar, or Jewish, or Puritanical, but who will speak his mind clearly and decidedly on such an all-important point, and who will not hesitate to use strong measures to put down the Sabbath-breaking and the utter disregard of God's law, which is threatening the ruin of our beloved country.

Let each of us ask himself or herself, What am I doing in this matter? How do I keep the Sabbath myself? God asks for the whole day; do I give it to Him, or do I spend the best of its hours in bed? Am I careful not to please myself on the Lord's Day, or do I think it no shame to amuse myself on that day as I choose, by travelling, by light reading, or by any other means that I have within my disposal? Am I anxious to dedicate the day wholly and entirely to God, setting it apart entirely for His service, and looking upon it as a foretaste of the great and eternal Sabbath that is coming?

And, if I myself keep and reverence God's Sabbath, do I see that those over whom I have influence are doing the same? Am I anxious that my children, my servants, the visitors who come to see me, all who are in my home on the Lord's Day should do the same? Do I help them by every

means in my power? Do I strive that in my home at least God shall have His due?

And if in my home the Sabbath is observed, what am I doing with regard to it outside, in my own town, or village, amongst my acquaintances, companions, and friends? Am I doing all I can, using all the influence God has given me, to lead others to reverence and observe the holy day?

And my country, dear old England; am I praying day by day that her glory may not depart, that her sun may not go down because of desecration of the Sabbath day? The old promise holds good still; it is true of individuals, of families, and of nations.

'If thou turn away thy foot from the Sabbath, from doing thy pleasure on My holy day; and call the Sabbath a delight, the holy of the Lord, honourable; and shalt honour Him, not doing thine own ways, nor finding thine own pleasure, nor speaking thine own word: then shalt thou delight thyself in the Lord; and I will cause thee to ride upon the high places of the earth.'

'FOR THE MOUTH OF THE LORD HATH SPOKEN IT.'

CHAPTER XV.

The Oldest Sin.

We have all read the adventures of Robinson Crusoe, and we have all pitied the man, alone on a desert island, alone without a friend, without a single companion, never hearing any voice but his own, being able to exchange thoughts with no one, alone, solitary, desolate.

Yet after all, in one respect, Robinson Crusoe was to be envied, for he was shut off from one of the greatest temptations which besets us in this world, a temptation which comes across the path of each of us, and from which it is by no means easy to escape. Of that temptation, Robinson Crusoe on his desert island knew nothing. He did not find himself ever tempted to one of the most common of sins. Robinson Crusoe was never tempted to keep bad company, for the simple reason that there was no bad company for him to keep.

What curious beings hermits are! they are to be found in China, India, Africa, in various parts of Europe, in fact, all over the world. And in olden time there was many a lonely cave, many a shady retreat on the hill-side, which was inhabited by one of these hermits.

Who then were these hermits? They were men who were so much afraid of falling into the snare of keeping bad company, that they refused to keep any company at all, men who so dreaded being led astray by their fellow men, that they shut themselves off from all intercourse with the human race.

It was not a right nor a wise thing to do, and these hermits found that sin followed them even to their quiet lonely caves; yet it is scarcely surprising that they dreaded evil companionship, and did all they could to avoid it, seeing as they did how much misery it had brought into the

world.

For what was the oldest sin? What was the very first sin that entered into this fair earth of ours? Some say it was pride, or selfishness, or hard thoughts of God. But surely it was no other sin than this, the keeping of bad company.

There was Eve in the garden. God had provided her with company; He had given her Adam, the holy angels came in and out of that fair paradise; nay more, God Himself was her friend, in the cool of the day He walked with Eve under the trees of the garden, walked and talked with her as a companion and friend.

But, in spite of this, Eve got into bad company. She stands, she talks, she entertains Satan, the great enemy of God, against whom she must often have been warned by God and the holy angels. And the consequence was that Eve lost paradise, became a sinner, and brought sin and all its attendant miseries into the world. We should never have had our weary battle with sin if Eve had not kept bad company.

Nor was Eve the last of those who have brought trouble on themselves and others by the same sin.

If the descendants of Seth had not kept bad company and made friends of Cain's wicked race, the flood would never have swept them away. If Samson had not gone into bad company he would never have lost his strength, and have had to grind blindly and miserably at the mill. If Solomon had not kept bad company idolatry would never have ruined Jerusalem. If Rehoboam had not kept bad company the kingdom of Israel would never have been divided; and again, and again, both in the history of the past and in the story of the present, we see men and women led astray by keeping bad company.

We have already seen Nehemiah taking strong measures to put down three of the great glaring evils which he found in Jerusalem on his return. We have now to see him battling with this dreadful curse and snare--bad company. If the other three evils needed strong measures, Nehemiah feels there is a tenfold need to take decided steps in this fourth and all-important matter.

For what does he find as he walks through the streets of Jerusalem? He discovers that the inhabitants of the holy city are fast becoming foreigners and heathen. He hears the very children in the street talking a language he cannot understand.

So common has marriage with heathen foreigners become, that Nehemiah sees clearly that unless something is done to put a stop to it the next generation will grow up utterly un-Jewish in language, appearance, and dress, and worse still, heathen in their religion, kneeling down to idols of wood and stone, and carrying on in Jerusalem itself all the vile customs and abominations of the heathen.

'If the girls are pretty and nice, and if the men like them, why should not they please themselves?' So the Jerusalem folk had talked in Nehemiah's absence. They quite forgot to what it was all leading. They shut their eyes to the danger of keeping bad company, they thought only of what was pleasant and of what they liked, they quite forgot to ask what was right, and what was the will of God.

Nehemiah, as governor of Jerusalem, summons into his presence, and commands to appear before him in his judicial court, every man in Jerusalem who had married a foreign heathen wife.

When all were assembled:

(1) He contended with them, i.e. he rebuked and argued with them, as he had done with the rulers on the question of Sabbath observance.

(2) He cursed them, or as it is in the margin 'he reviled them.' Probably he pronounced, as governor of Jerusalem, speaking in the name of God, the judgments of God on those who broke his law.

(3) He smote certain of them. That is, he had some of them publicly beaten. Nehemiah called upon the officers of the court to make an example of some of the principal offenders by inflicting corporal punishment upon them.

(4) He plucked off their hair, lit., He made them bald. The Hebrew word, marat, which is used here, means to make smooth, to polish, to peel. The word hair is not expressed in the original.

We are surely not to suppose that Nehemiah, with his own hands, either struck these men or made them bald. What he did was simply this. He, as the head magistrate, inflicted a judicial punishment upon them, a double punishment.

(1) They were beaten.

(2) They were made bald.

We read (Matt. xxvii. 26) that Pontius Pilate took our Lord and scourged him; but we surely do not imagine that the Roman governor with his own hands inflicted the scourging, but we understand it to mean that he gave the order for the punishment to the Roman soldiers. Just so, Nehemiah the governor commanded these offending Jews to be beaten and made bald by the officers of the court.

One of the most flourishing trades in an Eastern city is the trade of the barber. This may easily be seen by walking through the streets of an Eastern town, and noting the numerous barbers at work, some in their shops, which are open to the street, and others outside on the doorsteps, or in some shady corner. Especially in the evening are these numerous barbers busy; when the work of the rest of the city is drawing to a close the barber's work is at its height. Yet, strange to say, although the barber is so busy, everyone in the East wears a beard; a man in the East would think it a terrible disgrace if he was obliged to be shorn of his beard.

The beard is considered a very sacred thing; it is thought a great insult even to touch a man's beard, and if you want to make any man an object of scorn and ridicule, you cannot do so better than by shaving off his beard. This was the way in which the Ammonites insulted David's ambassadors (2 Sam. x. 4, 5). And we read that they stopped at Jericho till their beards were grown, for 'the men were greatly ashamed.'

What then is the barber's work? If men in the East wear beards, what is it that keeps him so busy? The barber in the Eastern city shaves not the man's chin, but his head. It is a very natural custom in hot, dusty

climates, where the head is always kept covered, both indoors and out of doors. It is also a very ancient custom, for even in the old Egyptian hieroglyphics we find pictures of barbers shaving the head. And we find that in these modern days, Egyptians, Copts, Turks, Arabs, Hindoos, and Chinese, all shave the head. But there is one great exception to this rule. A barber would find no work in a purely Jewish city, for not only do the Jews wear beards, but they also never shave their heads as their Eastern neighbours do. The only ones amongst the Jews who were allowed to have shaven heads were the poor outcast lepers. Hence the shaven head was to them a sign or symbol of uncleanness and of excommunication. They looked upon a man with a bald head very much as we look upon one whose hair is cropped very suspiciously close, and whom we therefore imagine must have been in gaol.

Thus it came to pass that 'Bald-head' became a common term of reproach and insult. Elisha, the holy prophet, goes up the hill, wearing a thick turban to protect his head from the sun. Out come a troop of wicked, mocking children. Elisha is not bald, for he is a Jew, nor, even if he had been bald, could these children have seen it, since his head is covered; but they wish to annoy and to insult the holy man, so they cry after him,

'Go up, thou bald head, go up.'

They simply use a common term of reproach. To have a bald head was amongst the Jews a sign that a man was cut off from his nation, that he was counted as a Gentile and an outsider, and therefore to call a man 'a bald head' was equivalent to calling him a Gentile dog and an outcast.

Now Nehemiah inflicts this very punishment on these Jews who have married heathen wives. He commands them to be made bald, as a sign of shame and disgrace. It was a very significant and appropriate punishment. They had thrown in their lot with the heathen Gentiles, let them then become Gentiles, let them be branded with their mark, let them, by being made bald, be stamped as those who are no longer citizens of Jerusalem, but who have become outcasts and foreigners.

Then, when this was done, Nehemiah calls them to him, and makes them take a solemn oath before God, that from that time forth they will never fall into the same sin again:

'I made them swear by God, saying, Ye shall not give your daughters unto their sons, nor take their daughters unto your sons, or for yourselves.'

Then he reminds them how dreadful the consequences of the same sin had been to no less a person than their great and glorious King Solomon, the wisest of men, the beloved of his God. Even Solomon had been drawn aside into sin by his love of heathen foreigners, or outlandish women, as Nehemiah calls them, women living outside his own land. If he fell, if he the wisest of men, if he the beloved of his God, was led astray, was it likely that they could walk into the very same trap, and escape being caught and ensnared by it?

'Did not Solomon King of Israel sin by these things? Yet among many nations was there no king like him, who was beloved of his God, and God made him king over all Israel: nevertheless _even him_ did outlandish women cause to sin. Shall we then hearken unto you to do all this great evil, to transgress against our God in marrying strange wives?'

Did Nehemiah then break up the marriages which had already taken place, and send the wives away? We are not told that he did. Probably he only insisted, and insisted very strongly, that no more such marriages should take place. For he knew that if the custom was continued it would lead to ruin, shame, and disgrace, and he was therefore perfectly right to take strong measures to put a stop to it.

One man he saw fit to make an example of in a still more decided way--one offending member he felt must be cut off. This was Manasseh, the grandson of the high priest, the very one who had been the cause of Tobiah's entrance into the temple, and of the friendly feeling that existed between Eliashib and the Samaritans.

Here was Manasseh, a priest, living in the temple itself, dressed in the white robe, and taking part in the service of God, yet all the time having a heathen wife, and allowing heathen ways in his household. Manasseh's wife was actually Sanballat's daughter; and so long as he and she remained in the temple precincts, Nehemiah felt they would never be free from Sanballat's influence.

Accordingly we read:

'I chased him from me.'

Nehemiah banished him from the temple and from Jerusalem, and Manasseh went away with his wife to her father's grand home in Samaria.

No doubt Nehemiah was far from popular in Jerusalem that night. There were many who thought he had been too severe, too narrow, too particular. And doubtless there were many who, if they had dared, would have rebelled against his decision. But Nehemiah had done everything; he had taken all these strong measures, not to please men, but to please God. If the Master praised him, he cared not what others might say of him. 'Lord, what wilt _Thou_ have me to do?' was the constant prayer of Nehemiah's heart; and though the work was oftentimes unpopular and disagreeable, Nehemiah did it both boldly and fearlessly.

The wheel of time goes round, and history, which works ever in a circle, constantly repeats itself, and so also does sin. The sin of Nehemiah's days is still to be seen; the same temptation which beset those Jerusalem Jews, besets us even in these more enlightened days.

We all love company. There is in us a natural shrinking from being alone and desolate. That feeling is born in us; we inherit it from our first father Adam. 'It is not good for the man to be alone,' said the Lord in His tenderness and His pity.

But a choice lies before us, a choice of friends. Our relatives are given us by God, no man can choose who shall be his father, or mother, or brother, or sister. But our friends are of our own choosing, and we do not sufficiently consider that upon that choice may hang our eternity. Heaven with all its brightness, hell with all its darkness and misery, which shall be for me? The answer may hang, it often does hang, on the choice of a friend.

For there are only two divisions in this world of ours, only two companies, only two flocks. The kingdom of darkness and the kingdom of light, the Lord's people and those who are none of His, the sheep and the goats. From which division, from which company, from which flock

shall I choose my friends?

'Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers, for what fellowship hath righteousness with unrighteousness? and what communion hath light with darkness?'

Especially careful should we be in that nearest and dearest of friendships, in the choice of the one who is to be to us our other self. Would we be made one, would we link ourselves by that firm and sacred tie, whilst knowing all the time that the one who is to be dearer to us than life itself is outside the fold? No blessing can surely rest on such a marriage. Jesus cannot be an invited guest at that marriage feast. For clear and unmistakable is the trumpet call of the great Captain of our salvation:

'Come out from among them, and be ye separate, said the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing; and I will receive you, and will be a Father unto you, and ye shall be My sons and daughters, saith the Lord Almighty.'

CHAPTER XVI.

God's Remembrance.

How fond people are of collecting old books, and what a large price old books will fetch! Those who are so fortunate as to obtain possession of a book which is four or five hundred years old may put their own price upon it, for some antiquarian will be sure to purchase it.

But how modern, how very far from being ancient, the oldest of our English books, printed in the most primitive black letter, appears, when it is laid side by side with that curious old book which travellers, visiting the little village of Nablus, are shown this very day. Well may the old white-headed man who has charge of that book bring it out with pride, for it is one of the oldest books in the world.

The book is in the form of a roll of parchment. It is made of goat skins, twenty-five inches broad, and about fifteen feet long. The skins are neatly joined together, but in many places they have been torn and rather clumsily mended. The roll is kept in a grand silver-gilt case in the form of a cylinder, embossed and engraved. On this case are carved representations of the Tabernacle, of the ark, of the two altars, of the trumpets, and of the various instruments used in sacrifice. A crimson satin cover, on which inscriptions are worked in gold thread, is thrown over this precious book.

This old manuscript is written in Hebrew, and is said by the Jews to be the work of a man whose name has already come before us in Nehemiah's story. We saw that Eliashib, the high priest, had a grandson named Manasseh, that Manasseh married the daughter of Sanballat, the Samaritan governor, and that Nehemiah felt very strongly that the temple would never be cleansed, nor God's blessing rest upon them as a nation, so long as one of their own priests had a heathen wife, and was in constant communication with Sanballat. Accordingly he chased Manasseh from him, he made him at once leave the temple and his high position there; and Manasseh, in disgust and indignation, went off to Samaria to his

father-in-law, Sanballat, taking his heathen wife and family with him.

Now it is that very Manasseh who was, according to the Jews, the writer of the Samaritan Pentateuch, that old copy of the Books of Moses. The Samaritans themselves declare that it is far more ancient; that it was written soon after the Israelites entered the land of Canaan, by the great-grandson of Aaron; whilst some scholars think it is far more modern than some other copies of the Pentateuch which have been discovered; but the Jews pronounce it to have been the work of Manasseh, the grandson of Eliashib, the high priest of Nehemiah's day.

Manasseh arrived in Samaria, indignant with Nehemiah, and determined to have his revenge. He and his father-in-law were resolved not to be outdone by the Jews. They in Samaria would build a grand temple, just as the Jews had done in Jerusalem. One hill was as good as another, so they thought; their own Gerizim, with its lovely trees and its sunny slopes, was as fair or fairer than Mount Moriah.

So they set to work with all their energy, to build the rival temple on the very hill where 1000 years before, in the time of Joshua, the blessings of the law had been read, whilst the curses were pronounced from the hill on the opposite side of the valley, Mount Ebal.

Here then, on Gerizim, the mount of blessing, rose the new temple, which was built with one object in view, that it might outvie in splendour the one in Jerusalem. When it was finished, Manasseh was made the rival high priest, and was able to do what he liked, and to exercise his authority in any way he pleased in his father-in-law's province.

Nor was Manasseh the only priest in the Gerizim temple; many other runaway priests joined him, all who were angry with Nehemiah, all who were offended or touchy, all who thought themselves injured in any way, all who had been found fault with for Sabbath-breaking or for any other sin, left Jerusalem for Samaria--chose the temple of Mount Gerizim instead of the holy temple on Mount Moriah.

Yet of the Samaritans it is said:

'They feared the Lord, and served their own gods.'

It was a half-and-half religion, Judaism and heathenism mixed up together, the worship of God and the worship of idols side by side.

Satan, now-a-days, has his modern temple of Gerizim. He does not try to lead nominal Christians to throw up religion altogether, for he sees that it would be of no use to do so. He knows we have a conscience, he knows that conscience is often busy, he knows that we fully believe that some day we must die, and that after death will come the judgment, and he sees therefore that we shall not be satisfied without some kind of religion. So Satan tries to tempt us to the Gerizim temple. Serve God by all means, he cries, but serve the world too. Go to church, say your prayers, have a fair polish of Sunday religion; it is decent, it is respectable, it is what is expected of you. But yet, at the very same time, serve the world, please yourself. Take part in any pleasure that attracts you, live as you please, enjoy yourself to the full. Let the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life have their share in your allegiance. Be half for God, and half for the world. Live partly for the world to come, and partly for this present world. By no means throw overboard religion altogether, but let it have its proper

place, let it stand side by side with self-pleasing and worldliness.

But what says the Master?

'No man can serve two masters. Ye cannot serve God and mammon.'

Let us then choose this day whom we will serve. Shall it be Christ or Satan, Jerusalem or Gerizim, God or the world?

For centuries after the time of Nehemiah, these Samaritans continued a source of annoyance to the Jews, tempting all who were disaffected and lawless to come to Gerizim, and vexing and troubling the Jews in every possible way. No one who was travelling up to the rival temple was ever made welcome in Samaria, or treated as he passed through with the slightest show of hospitality. As our Lord and His disciples journeyed up to the feast, we read that they came to a village of the Samaritans, and our Lord sent messengers before Him to engage a lodging, where they might find refreshment and shelter on their way. But we read,

'They did not receive Him, because His face was as though He would go to Jerusalem.'

Sometimes they carried this antagonism to such a degree that they would even waylay and murder the temple pilgrims who were on their way through their country, and the poor travellers were compelled to take a much longer route to Jerusalem, crossing the Jordan, and journeying on the eastern side until they came opposite Jericho, and then ascending by the long, winding, difficult road from Jericho to Jerusalem.

Once, in order to mortify the Jews, the Samaritans were guilty of a very dreadful insult. The Passover was being kept in Jerusalem, and it was customary in Passover week for the priest to open the temple gates just after midnight. Through these opened gates, in the darkness of the night, stole in some Samaritans, carrying under their robes dead men's bones and bits of dead men's bodies, and these they strewed up and down the cloisters of the temple, to make them defiled and unclean.

But perhaps the most trying thing which the Samaritans did was to put a stop to a very old and very favourite custom of the Jews. For a long time those Jews who lived in Jerusalem had been accustomed to let their brethren in Babylon know the very time that the Passover moon rose in Jerusalem, so that they and their absent friends might keep the feast together at the very same time. They did this in a very curious and interesting way. As soon as the watchers on the Mount of Olives saw the moon rising, they lighted a beacon fire, other fires were already prepared on a succession of hilltops, reaching all the way from Jerusalem to Babylon. As soon as the light was seen on Olivet the next fire was lighted, and then the next, and the next, till in a very short time those Jews who sat by the waters of Babylon saw the signal, and joined in the Passover rejoicing with their friends hundreds of miles away in Jerusalem. It showed them that they were not forgotten, and it helped them to join in the prayer and the praise of those who were in their father-land.

But the Samaritans annoyed the Jews and spoilt this beautiful old custom, by lighting false fires on other mountains, on wrong days, and at wrong hours, and thus confusing those who were watching by the beacon-fires. After a time, so many mistakes were made by means of these false signals, that the Jews were compelled to give up the system of

beacon-fires altogether, and to depend on the slower course of sending messengers.

We have now come to the end of Nehemiah's story, and we have, at the very same time, come to the end of the history of the Old Testament. For if all the historical books were arranged chronologically, Nehemiah's book would come the very last in the series. Nothing more is told us in the Book of God of this world's history, until St. Matthew takes up the pen and writes an account of the birth of the expected Messiah. Yet between the Book of Nehemiah and the Gospel of St. Matthew there is an interval of 400 years, years which were full of interest in Jewish history, but of which we are told nothing in the Bible story.

There was one prophet who lived in the time of Nehemiah, and whose book is a commentary on the book of Nehemiah. The prophet Malachi was living in Jerusalem at this very time, and if we look at his book we shall see that mention is made of many things of which we are told in the Book of Nehemiah. For instance, if we turn to Mai. iii. 8, 9, 10, we shall find the very words which the prophet spoke to the inhabitants of Jerusalem, at the time when the temple store-house was empty, and when the people had ceased to bring their tithes and offerings, and to give God the due proportion of their possessions.

'Will a man rob God? Yet ye have robbed Me. But ye say, Wherein have we robbed Thee? In tithes and offerings. Ye are cursed with a curse; for ye have robbed Me, even this whole nation. Bring ye all the tithes into the storehouse, that there may be meat in Mine house.'

Thus, if we read the Book of Malachi carefully, we shall find much that throws light on Nehemiah's history; and we can easily imagine how much the prophet's sympathy and help must have cheered and strengthened the great reformer in his trying and difficult work.

What became of Nehemiah, the great cup-bearer, the faithful governor of Jerusalem, we do not know. Whether he returned to Persia and took up his old work in the palace, standing behind the king's chair in his office of Rab-shakeh, or whether he remained in Jerusalem, guarding his beloved city from enemies without and from false friends within, we are not told. Whether he died in the prime of life, or whether he lived to a good old age, neither the Bible nor profane history informs us.

But although we know nothing of Nehemiah's death, we know much of his life. We have watched him carefully and closely, and there is one thing which we cannot fail to have noticed, and that is that Nehemiah was emphatically a man of prayer. In every trouble, in each anxiety, in all times of danger, he turned to God. Standing behind the king's chair, Nehemiah prayed; in his private room in the Shushan palace, he pleaded for Jerusalem; and all through his rough anxious life as a reformer and a governor, we find him constantly lifting up his heart to God in short earnest prayers. When Tobiah mocked his work, when the Samaritans threatened to attack the city, when the people were inclined to be angry with him for his reforms, when he discovered that there were traitors and hired agents of Sanballat inside the very walls of Jerusalem, when he brought upon himself enmity and hatred because of his faithful dealing in the matter of the temple store-house, when he had to encounter difficulty and opposition in his determination with regard to the observance of the Sabbath, and when he still further incensed the half-hearted Jews by his prompt punishment of those who had taken heathen wives, and by his summary dismissal of Manasseh; in all these

times of danger, difficulty, and trial, we find Nehemiah turning to the Lord in prayer.

There was one prayer of which he seems to have been especially fond, three times over does Nehemiah ask God to remember him.

'Think upon me, my God, for good,' v. 19.

'Remember me, O my God,' xiii. 14.

'Remember me, O my God, for good,' xiii. 31.

Can it be that this prayer was suggested to him by the words of his friend, the prophet Malachi? Can it be, that as he and Nehemiah took sweet counsel together, and spoke together of the Lord they loved, Malachi may have spoken those beautiful words which we find in chap. in. 16, 17, of his prophecy, in order to cheer and encourage his disheartened and unappreciated friend:--

'They that feared the Lord spake often one to another: and the Lord hearkened, and heard it, and a book of remembrance was written before Him for them that feared the Lord, and that thought upon His name. And they shall be Mine, saith the Lord of hosts, in that day when I make up My jewels; and I will spare them, as a man spareth his own son that serveth him.'

Can we wonder that Nehemiah longed to know that his name was in that book of remembrance of which his friend Malachi spoke, and that he often turned the desire into a prayer, pleading with God, 'Remember _me_, O my God?'

It is a very touching prayer. Nehemiah evidently felt that others did not value his work, nay, that Borne even condemned him for it. The people, instead of being grateful to him for his reforms, found fault with him, misunderstood him, and reproached him.

But God knew, the Master did not blame him. He saw that all Nehemiah did had been done for His glory and for the good of his nation. And to the Master whom he served Nehemiah appealed. Away from the fault-finding people, he turned to the merciful God.

Remember Thou me, O God, for good; others blame me, but it is Thy praise alone that I crave, wipe not _Thou_ out my good deeds, spare _Thou_ me in the greatness of Thy mercy.

There is no pride or boasting in this prayer. Is it not the very prayer of the penitent thief, 'Lord, remember me?' Look carefully at the wording of it, and you will notice, as Bishop Wordsworth so beautifully points out, that it is humble in its every detail. Nehemiah does not say, publish to the world my good deeds, but wipe them not out. He does not say, reward me, but remember me. He does not say, remember me for my merit, but according to the greatest of Thy mercies.

So Nehemiah passes away from our sight with that prayer on his lips, 'Remember me, O my God, for good.'

And was the prayer heard? Was Nehemiah remembered? Did God, has God forgotten His faithful servant? Surely not, for 'The righteous shall be had in everlasting remembrance.'

Remembered by God, and remembered for ever, entered in the great book of God's remembrance, of which he had so often thought, and of which Malachi had written.

The day is coming when we shall see Nehemiah the cup-bearer. In God's great day of reward, when one after another of His faithful servants shall appear before Him, we shall hear the response to Nehemiah's prayer.

'Remember me, O my God,' said Nehemiah, long years ago, as he toiled on, unthanked and unblessed by man.

And we shall hear the Lord answer, 'Well done, good and faithful servant, enter thou into the joy of thy Lord.'

THE END.

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