

Great Stories of the Bible

VI. Nehemiah and His Foes

Nehemiah, Chapter VI.

TOPIC FOR WEEK OF OCTOBER 13.

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It is a strange coincidence that the year 1740 was the occasion of the first great public success of two of the most national and most popular English songs, "God Save the King," and "Rule Britannia." A few years later "Hear ye of Oak" was written by David Garrick, "who had great talent in turning a ballad," and composed by Dr. Boyce. It was written to commemorate the year, the "wonderful year" of triumphs, when the British arms were covered with glory by the Marquis of Granby, Lord Hawke and General Wolfe. Garrick's song calls upon his hearers "To add something more to this wonderful year," and is intended to incite to heroism and deeds of valor.

And so we might go on delving into the quaint legends and folklore that surround the old ballads and songs, or rehearsing the interesting circumstances that attend the history of the more modern ones.

Take up the favorite songs of any land—of England, of Scotland, of Ireland, of Germany, of Wales, of Canada—delve into encyclopædia and books of reference, and learn the interesting stories and romances that surround your selections, have as many as possible sung, either as solos or as choruses, strive to waken a love for chaste wording and beautiful melody, for songs of constancy, enduring faith, devotion, patriotism, and you will not only provide a successful and entertaining evening, but an uplifting one as well.

Light On the Window Sill

ANNETTE CHADBOURNE SYMMES.

When the shadows fall, at the close of day,
When the sunset fades, and the wind grows chill,
I fold my sewing, and mend the fire,
And put a light on the window sill.

The table is spread with a savoury meal,
I wait his coming home from the mill;
The kettle sings o'er the crackling blaze,
And the light gleams bright on the window sill.

He is coming now, with a weary tread,
But he sees the light from the distant hill,
And his heart can picture home's warmth and rest,
In the glow of the light on the window sill.

Oh, many a time in the busy day,
He conquers the foe that tempts to ill,
With the thought of the home he will seek at night,
And its cheery light on the window sill.

So, courage, heart! Tho' the world's great deeds
Shall ne'er be wrought by thy labor, still
In a quiet home thou canst do thy best,
And keep a light on the window sill.

To hasten others to strive to win,
Is the humble task that thy days shall fill;
And the busy workers the hand shall bless
That keeps the light on the window sill.

The encouragement of drunkenness for the sake of the profit on the sale of drink is certainly one of the most criminal methods of assassination for money hitherto adopted by the bravos of any age or country.—*John Ruskin.*

"What is the devil offering you? Make no bargain with him—he'll cheat you."

THE power one strong, forceful personality has to impress itself upon the multitude, and to lead others whither they would never have gone unled is certainly very evident in the story of Nehemiah and his successful rallying of the discouraged Jews to the task of rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem in spite of the tricks and intimation of their Samaritan and other foes. This chapter in particular, with its record of final success in the simple words, "So the wall was finished," is as fine an illustration as one could find of the familiar words of Browning's "Paracelsus":

"'Tis in the advance of individual minds
That the slow crowd should ground their expectation
Eventually to follow: as the sea
Waits ages in its narrow bed till some
one wave
Out of the multitudinous mass extends
The empire of the whole, some trick perhaps
Over a strip of sand which could confine
its fellows so long time: thenceforth the
rest,
Even to the meanest, hurry in at once,
And so much is clear gained."

It was undoubtedly the strong personality of the Persian King's cupbearer that unified and directed the nation's vague longing for a sure defence for its capital city. Without him there would perhaps have been much longing and many painful half-determinations to proceed in the work, but they would all have come to naught with him there was daring enthusiasm and "a mind to work." And one does not in the least wonder at the fine following of the devoted people when he reflects upon the splendid leadership of this remarkable patriot. Nehemiah has "the measure of the stature of the fullness of a man," however he may be tested. His compatriot and contemporary, Ezra, may be subject to criticism from our modern ethical and religious view point, but Nehemiah is as fine a character as the pages of the Old Testament present, and as a consequence most commentators delight to do him honor. Here are a few of the tributes offered to him. Says Prof. McFadyen, "The personality revealed by the memoirs of Nehemiah is glorious almost to the point of romance. Seldom did the Hebrew people produce so attractive and versatile a figure—at once a man of prayer and of action, of clear, swift purpose, daring initiative and restless energy, and endowed with a singular power of inspiring others with his own enthusiasm."

Dr. Joseph Parker in his "People's Bible" (which, by the way, the leader of this meeting should read upon Nehemiah), is more unreserved still in his praise: "On reviewing the character of Nehemiah," he says, "we seem unable to find a single fault to counterbalance his many and great virtues. For pure and disinterested patriotism he stands unrivalled. . . . Every act of his during his government bespeaks one who has no selfishness in his nature. All he did was noble, generous, high-minded, courageous, and to the highest degree upright. . . . As a statesman he combined forethought, prudence and sagacity in counsel with vigor, promptitude and decision in action. . . . But in nothing was he more remarkable than for his piety, and the singleness of eye with which he walked before God."

Hastings' "Dictionary of the Bible"

adds its tribute as follows: "Nehemiah is a conspicuous instance of the right man in the right place. It was his privilege to render great service to his nation, for which both his character and his position befitted him. He was patriotic, courageous, and God-fearing; he knew how to exercise the inflexible will of an autocrat, as well as to be persuasive when that would best accomplish the good he had in view."

Dr. Alexander Whyte also gives him this tribute: "A self-contained man. A man of his own counsel. A man with the counsel of God alone in his mind and in his heart. A reserved and a resolute man. A man to take the command of other men. A man who will see things with his own eyes, and that without all eyes seeing him. A man in no haste or hurry. He will not begin till he has counted the cost. And then he will not stop till he has finished his work."

All these fine characteristics ascribed to Nehemiah come out best in his dealings with his persistent opponents, Sanballat, Tobiah, and Geshem. This trio of conscienceless conspirators left no stone unturned, or no vile scheme untied to defeat our patriot in his purpose, but the wise and determined governor thwarted each scheme in turn and proved himself invulnerable. When Nehemiah's commission and purpose were first made known they were met by Sanballat's angry, contemptuous remark, "What do these feeble Jews? Will they fortify themselves? . . . Will they make an end in a day? Will they revive the stones out of the heaps of rubbish, and say, 'We are builded'?" And his satellite Tobiah, after the satellite's usual manner, very dutifully reflects his master's thought, but gives the sarcasm a more striking form, "Even that which they build, if a fox go up, he shall break down their stone wall."

Notice the absence of all references to Nehemiah in these sarcasms. That is rather a suspicious feature. The tone of the utterance seems confident enough, but the studied avoidance of Nehemiah's name raises the suspicion that Sanballat and his right-hand man are not quite so confident as they seem, and that these pointed sarcasms are after all only a kind of whistling to keep their own courage up. Nehemiah answered by bringing the sneer before God in prayer just as King Hezekiah had done, and the threatening letter of the Rabshakeh before God in the temple, and by addressing himself energetically to the building of the wall until it was raised about the city to one half its required height. Meanwhile the sly and conscious Sanballat and Tobiah that this Nehemiah is a man, and that by his hand things will move most assuredly get themselves done, has grown into an unpleasant conviction. They now drop their shallow scorn. Indeed they feel their Samaritan resources insufficient to cope with the situation, form a coalition of the surrounding peoples against Nehemiah, and with the assistance of the Arabians, Ammonites and Ashdodites try the virtues of a military demonstration and threat of armed interference. They do not seem to have been very sincere in this threat, for there is no record of any actual attack being made upon Jerusalem—their hope probably being that the mere threat of attack would itself stop the building and divert the energies of Nehemiah to a more specifically military preparation. But the Governor, with a remarkable energy and determination, straightway organizes