

ENGLISH MEN OF LETTERS

Edited by

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BUNYAN

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BUNYAN

BY

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BUNYAN.

CHAPTER I.

EARLY LIFE.

‘I WAS of a low and inconsiderable generation, my father’s house being of that rank that is meanest and most despised of all families in the land.’ ‘I never went to school, to Aristotle or Plato, but was brought up in my father’s house in a very mean condition, among a company of poor countrymen.’ ‘Nevertheless, I bless God that by this door He brought me into the world to partake of the grace and life that is by Christ in His Gospel.’ This is the account given of himself and his origin by a man whose writings have for two centuries affected the spiritual opinions of the English race in every part of the world more powerfully than any book or books, except the Bible.

John Bunyan was born at Elstow, a village near Bedford, in the year 1628. It was a memorable epoch in English history, for in that year the House of Commons extorted the consent of Charles I. to the Petition of Right. The stir of politics, however, did not reach the humble household into which the little boy was introduced. His father was hardly occupied in earning bread for his wife and children as a mender of pots and kettles : a tinker,

—working in neighbours' houses or at home, at such business as might be brought to him. 'The Bunyans,' says a friend, 'were of the national religion, as men of that calling commonly were.' Bunyan himself, in a passage which has been always understood to refer to his father, describes him 'as an honest poor labouring man, who, like Adam unparadised, had all the world to get his bread in, and was very careful to maintain his family.' In those days there were no village schools in England; the education of the poor was an apprenticeship to agriculture or handicraft; their religion they learnt at home or in church. Young Bunyan was more fortunate. In Bedford there was a grammar school, which had been founded in Queen Mary's time by the Lord Mayor of London, Sir William Harper. Hither, when he was old enough to walk to and fro, over the mile of road between Elstow and Bedford, the child was sent, if not to learn Aristotle and Plato, to learn at least 'to read and write according to the rate of other poor men's children.'

If religion was not taught at school, it was taught with some care in the cottages and farmhouses by parents and masters. It was common in many parts of England, as late as the end of the last century, for the farmers to gather their apprentices about them on Sunday afternoons, and to teach them the Catechism. Rude as was Bunyan's home, religious notions of some kind had been early and vividly impressed upon him. He caught, indeed, the ordinary habits of the boys among whom he was thrown. He learnt to use bad language, and he often lied. When a child's imagination is exceptionally active, the temptations to untruth are correspondingly powerful. The inventive faculty has its dangers, and Bunyan was eminently gifted in that way. He was a violent, passionate

boy besides, and thus he says of himself that for lying and swearing he had no equal, and that his parents did not sufficiently correct him. Wickedness, he declares in his own remorseful story of his early years, became a second nature to him. But the estimate which a man forms of himself in later life, if he has arrived at any strong abhorrence of moral evil, is harsher than others at the time would have been likely to have formed. Even then the poor child's conscience must have been curiously sensitive, and it revenged itself upon him in singular tortures.

'My sins,' he says, 'did so offend the Lord that even in my childhood He did scare and affright me with fearful dreams, and did terrify me with dreadful visions. I have been in my bed greatly afflicted while asleep, with apprehensions of devils and wicked spirits, who still, as I then thought, laboured to draw me away with them, of which I could never be rid. I was afflicted with thoughts of the Day of Judgment night and day, trembling at the thoughts of the fearful torments of hell fire.' When, at ten years old, he was running about with his companions in 'his sports and childish vanities,' these terrors continually recurred to him, yet 'he would not let go his sins.'

Such a boy required rather to be encouraged than checked in seeking innocent amusements. Swearing and lying were definite faults which ought to have been corrected; but his parents, perhaps, saw that there was something unusual in the child. To them he probably appeared not worse than other boys, but considerably better. They may have thought it more likely that he would conquer his own bad inclinations by his own efforts, than that they could mend him by rough rebukes.

When he left school he would naturally have been

bound apprentice, but his father brought him up at his own trade. Thus he lived at home, and grew to manhood there, forming his ideas of men and things out of such opportunities as the Elstow neighbourhood afforded.

From the time when the Reformation brought them a translation of it, the Bible was the book most read—it was often the only book which was read—in humble English homes. Familiarity with the words had not yet trampled the sacred writings into practical barrenness. No doubts or questions had yet risen about the Bible's nature or origin. It was received as the authentic word of God Himself. The Old and New Testament alike represented the world as the scene of a struggle between good and evil spirits; and thus every ordinary incident of daily life was an instance or illustration of God's Providence. This was the universal popular belief, not admitted only by the intellect, but accepted and realised by the imagination. No one questioned it, save a few speculative philosophers in their closets. The statesman in the House of Commons, the judge on the Bench, the peasant in a midland village, interpreted literally by this rule the phenomena which they experienced or saw. They not only believed that God had miraculously governed the Israelites, but they believed that as directly and immediately He governed England in the seventeenth century. They not only believed that there had been a witch at Endor, but they believed that there were witches in their own villages, who had made compacts with the devil himself. They believed that the devil still literally walked the earth like a roaring lion: that he and the evil angels were perpetually labouring to destroy the souls of men; and that God was equally busy overthrowing the devil's work, and bringing sin and crimes to eventual punishment.

In this light the common events of life were actually looked at and understood, and the air was filled with anecdotes so told as to illustrate the belief. These stories and these experiences were Bunyan's early mental food. One of them, which had deeply impressed the imagination of the Midland counties, was the story of 'Old Tod.' This man came one day into court, in the Summer Assizes at Bedford, 'all in a dung sweat,' to demand justice upon himself as a felon. No one had accused him, but God's judgment was not to be escaped, and he was forced to accuse himself. 'My Lord,' said Old Tod to the judge, 'I have been a thief from my childhood. I have been a thief ever since. There has not been a robbery committed these many years, within so many miles of this town, but I have been privy to it.' The judge, after a conference, agreed to indict him of certain felonies which he had acknowledged. He pleaded guilty, implicating his wife along with him, and they were both hanged.

An intense belief in the moral government of the world creates what it insists upon. Horror at sin forces the sinner to confess it, and makes others eager to punish it. 'God's revenge against murder and adultery' becomes thus an actual fact, and justifies the conviction in which it rises. Bunyan was specially attentive to accounts of judgments upon swearing, to which he was himself addicted. He tells a story of a man at Wimbledon, who, after uttering some strange blasphemy, was struck with sickness, and died cursing. Another such scene he probably witnessed himself,¹ and never forgot. An alehouse-keeper in the neighbourhood of Elstow had a son who was half-

¹ The story is told by Mr. Attentive in the 'Life of Mr. Badman;' but it is almost certain that Bunyan was relating his own experience.

witted. The favourite amusement, when a party was collected drinking, was for the father to provoke the lad's temper, and for the lad to curse his father and wish the devil had him. The devil at last did have the alehouse-keeper, and rent and tore him till he died. 'I,' says Bunyan, 'was eye and ear witness of what I here say. I have heard Ned in his roguery cursing his father, and his father laughing thereat most heartily, still provoking of Ned to curse that his mirth might be increased. I saw his father also when he was possessed. I saw him in one of his fits, and saw his flesh as it was thought gathered up in an heap about the bigness of half an egg, to the unutterable torture and affliction of the old man. There was also one Freeman, who was more than an ordinary doctor, sent for to cast out the devil, and I was there when he attempted to do it. The manner whereof was this. They had the possessed in an outroom, and laid him upon his belly upon a form, with his head hanging down over the form's end. Then they bound him down thereto; which done, they set a pan of coals under his mouth, and put something therein which made a great smoke—by this means, as it was said, to fetch out the devil. There they kept the man till he was almost smothered in the smoke, but no devil came out of him, at which Freeman was somewhat abashed, the man greatly afflicted, and I made to go away wondering and fearing. In a little time, therefore, that which possessed the man carried him out of the world, according to the cursed wishes of his son.'

The wretched alehouse-keeper's life was probably sacrificed in this attempt to dispossess the devil. But the incident would naturally leave its mark on the mind of an impressionable boy. Bunyan ceased to frequent such

places after he began to lead a religious life. The story, therefore, most likely belongs to the experiences of his first youth after he left school ; and there may have been many more of a similar kind, for, except that he was steady at his trade, he grew up a wild lad, the ringleader of the village apprentices in all manner of mischief. He had no books, except a life of Sir Bevis of Southampton, which would not tend to sober him ; indeed, he soon forgot all that he had learnt at school, and took to amusements and doubtful adventures, orchard-robbing, perhaps, or poaching, since he hints that he might have brought himself within reach of the law. In the most passionate language of self-abhorrence, he accuses himself of all manner of sins, yet it is improbable that he appeared to others what in later life he appeared to himself. He judged his own conduct as he believed that it was regarded by his Maker, by whom he supposed eternal torment to have been assigned as the just retribution for the lightest offence. Yet he was never drunk. He who never forgot anything with which he could charge himself, would not have passed over drunkenness, if he could remember that he had been guilty of it ; and he distinctly asserts, also, that he was never in a single instance unchaste. In our days, a rough tinker who could say as much for himself after he had grown to manhood, would be regarded as a model of self-restraint. If, in Bedford and the neighbourhood, there was no young man more vicious than Bunyan, the moral standard of an English town in the seventeenth century must have been higher than believers in Progress will be pleased to allow.

He declares that he was without God in the world, and in the sense which he afterwards attached to the word this was probably true. But serious thoughts seldom

ceased to work in him. Dreams only reproduce the forms and feelings with which the waking imagination is most engaged. Bunyan's rest continued to be haunted with the phantoms which had terrified him when a child. He started in his sleep, and frightened the family with his cries. He saw evil spirits in monstrous shapes and fiends blowing flames out of their nostrils. 'Once,' says a biographer, who knew him well, and had heard the story of his visions from his own lips, 'he dreamed that he saw the face of heaven as it were on fire, the firmament crackling and shivering with the noise of mighty thunder, and an archangel flew in the midst of heaven, sounding a trumpet, and a glorious throne was seated in the east, whereon sat One in brightness like the morning star. Upon which, he thinking it was the end of the world, fell upon his knees and said, "Oh, Lord, have mercy on me! What shall I do? The Day of Judgment is come and I am not prepared."'

At another time 'he dreamed that he was in a pleasant place jovial and rioting, when an earthquake rent the earth, out of which came bloody flames, and the figures of men tossed up in globes of fire, and falling down again with horrible cries and shrieks and execrations, while devils mingled among them, and laughed aloud at their torments. As he stood trembling, the earth sank under him, and a circle of flames embraced him. But when he fancied he was at the point to perish, One in shining white raiment descended and plucked him out of that dreadful place, while the devils cried after him to take him to the punishment which his sins had deserved. Yet he escaped the danger, and leapt for joy when he awoke and found it was a dream.'

Mr. Southey, who thinks wisely that Bunyan's bio-

graphers have exaggerated his early faults, considers that at worst he was a sort of 'blackguard.' This, too, is a wrong word. Young village blackguards do not dream of archangels flying through the midst of heaven, nor were these imaginations invented afterwards, or rhetorically exaggerated. Bunyan was undoubtedly given to story-telling as a boy, and the recollection of it made him peculiarly scrupulous in his statements in later life. One trait he mentions of himself which no one would have thought of who had not experienced the feeling, yet every person can understand it and sympathise with it. These spectres and hobgoblins drove him wild. He says, 'I was so overcome with despair of life and heaven, that I should often wish either that there had been no hell, or that I had been a devil; supposing that they were only tormentors, and that, if it must needs be that I went thither, I might rather be a tormentor than tormented myself.'

The visions at last ceased. God left him to himself, as he puts it, and gave him over to his own wicked inclinations. He fell, he says, into all kinds of vice and ungodliness without further check. The expression is very strong, yet when we look for particulars we can find only that he was fond of games which Puritan preciseness disapproved. He had high animal spirits, and engaged in lawless enterprises. Once or twice he nearly lost his life. He is sparing of details of his outward history, for he regarded it as nothing but vanity; but his escapes from death were providences, and therefore he mentions them. He must have gone to the coast somewhere, for he was once almost drowned in a creek of the sea. He fell out of a boat into the river at another time, and it seems that he could not swim. Afterwards he seized hold of an adder, and was not bitten by it. These mercies were sent

as warnings, but he says that he was too careless to profit by them. He thought that he had forgotten God altogether, and yet it is plain that he had not forgotten. A bad young man, who has shaken off religion because it is a restraint, observes with malicious amusement the faults of persons who make a profession of religion. He infers that they do not really believe it, and only differ from their neighbours in being hypocrites. Bunyan notes this disposition in his own history of Mr. Badman. Of himself, he says : ‘ Though I could sin with delight and ease, and take pleasure in the villanies of my companions, even then, if I saw wicked things done by them that professed goodness, it would make my spirit tremble. Once, when I was in the height of my vanity, hearing one swear that was reckoned a religious man, it made my heart to ache.’

He was now seventeen, and we can form a tolerably accurate picture of him—a tall, active lad, working as his father’s apprentice, at his pots and kettles, ignorant of books, and with no notion of the world beyond what he could learn in his daily drudgery, and the talk of the alehouse and the village green ; inventing lies to amuse his companions, and swearing that they were true ; playing bowls and tipcat, ready for any reckless action, and always a leader in it, yet all the while singularly pure from the more brutal forms of vice, and haunted with feverish thoughts, which he tried to forget in amusements. It has been the fashion to take his account of himself literally, and represent him as the worst of reprobates, in order to magnify the effects of his conversion, and perhaps to make intelligible to his admiring followers the reproaches which he heaps upon himself. They may have felt that they could not be wrong in explaining his own language in the only sense in which

they could attach a meaning to it. Yet, sinner though he may have been, like all the rest of us, his sins were not the sins of coarseness and vulgarity. They were the sins of a youth of sensitive nature and very peculiar gifts : gifts which brought special temptations with them, and inclined him to be careless and desperate, yet from causes singularly unlike those which are usually operative in dissipated and uneducated boys.

It was now the year 1645. Naseby Field was near, and the first Civil War was drawing to its close. At this crisis Bunyan was, as he says, drawn to be a soldier ; and it is extremely characteristic of him and of the body to which he belonged, that he leaves us to guess on which side he served. He does not tell us himself. His friends in after life did not care to ask him, or he to inform them, or else they also thought the matter of too small importance to be worth mentioning with exactness. There were two traditions, and his biographers chose between them as we do. Close as the connection was in that great struggle between civil and religious liberty—flung as Bunyan was flung into the very centre of the conflict between the English people and the Crown and Church and aristocracy—victim as he was himself of intolerance and persecution, he never but once took any political part, and then only in signing an address to Cromwell. He never showed any active interest in political questions ; and if he spoke on such questions at all after the Restoration, it was to advise submission to the Stuart Government. By the side of the stupendous issues of human life, such miserable *rights* as men might pretend to in this world were not worth contending for. The only *right* of man that he thought much about, was the right to be eternally damned if he did not lay hold of grace. King

and subject were alike creatures whose sole significance lay in their individual immortal souls. Their relations with one another upon earth were nothing in the presence of the awful judgment which awaited them both. Thus whether Bunyan's brief career in the army was under Charles or under Fairfax must remain doubtful. Probability is on the side of his having been with the Royalists. His father was of 'the national religion.' He himself had as yet no special convictions of his own. John Gifford, the Baptist minister at Bedford, had been a Royalist. The only incident which Bunyan speaks of connected with his military experience points in the same direction. 'When I was a soldier,' he says, 'I was with others drawn out to go to such a place to besiege it. But when I was just ready to go, one of the company desired to go in my room. Coming to the siege as he stood sentinel he was shot in the heart with a musket bullet and died.' Tradition agrees that the place to which these words refer was Leicester. Leicester was stormed by the King's troops a few days before the battle of Naseby. It was recovered afterwards by the Parliamentarians, but on the second occasion there was no fighting, as it capitulated without a shot being fired. Mr. Carlyle supposes that Bunyan was not with the attacking party, but was in the town as one of the garrison, and was taken prisoner there. But this cannot be, for he says expressly that he was one of the besiegers. Legend gathers freely about eminent men, about men especially who are eminent in religion, whether they are Catholic or Protestant. Lord Macaulay is not only positive that the hero of the English Dissenters fought on the side of the Commonwealth, but he says, without a word of caution on the imperfection of the evidence, 'His Greatheart, his Captain Boanerges,

and his Captain Credence, are evidently portraits of which the originals were among those martial saints who fought and expounded in Fairfax's army.'¹

If the martial saints had impressed Bunyan so deeply, it is inconceivable that he should have made no more allusion to his military service than in this brief passage. He refers to the siege and all connected with it merely as another occasion of his own providential escapes from death.

Let the truth of this be what it may, the troop to which he belonged was soon disbanded. He returned at the end of the year to his tinker's work at Elstow, much as he had left it. The saints, if he had met with saints, had not converted him. 'I sinned still,' he says, 'and grew more and more rebellious against God and careless of my own salvation.' An important change of another kind, however, lay before him. Young as he was he married. His friends advised it, for they thought that marriage would make him steady. The step was less imprudent than it would have been had Bunyan been in a higher rank of life, or had aimed at rising into it. The girl whom he chose was a poor orphan, but she had been carefully and piously brought up, and from her acceptance of him, something more may be inferred about his character. Had he been a dissolute idle scamp, it is unlikely that a respectable woman would have become his wife when he was a mere boy. His sins, whatever these were, had not injured his outward circumstances; it is clear that all along he worked skilfully and industriously at his tinkering business. He had none of the habits which bring men to beggary. From the beginning of his life to

¹ *Life of Bunyan*: Collected Works, vol. vii. p. 299.