

The Realism of "The Pilgrim's Progress."

A tinker out of Bedford,
A vagrant oft in quod,
A private under Fairfax,
A minister of God—

So began Kipling's verses on John Bunyan in the first World War, when once again that immortal voice awoke a reverberent echo in the hearts of English-speaking men. In the second World War, Miss M. P. Willcocks gave the world the first wholly satisfactory psychological study of this extraordinary man. He was, to be sure, extraordinary in more ways than one: a man of whose life we know little, while of his soul we know much; a man without power or place, whose word, in scores of languages, has nevertheless gone out through the entire Protestant world; that rare, inexplicable thing, a man of genius.

Of his genius there is no doubt. Every page, every paragraph, every sentence, every word of *The Pilgrim's Progress* is alive with it: this tough, vigorous English with the rhythm and assonances of popular ballads, these four-square characters, personified virtues and vices, perhaps, but essentially individuals; the doggerel rhymes, the solid green realism of the symbolic country, so recognisably Bedfordshire.

John Bunyan was one of the dispossessed, a tinker by trade, but descended from English peasants who had once tilled their own fields and pastured their own beasts on the common land, but who, with the march of Enclosure, had become the landless, the vagabonds, the oppressed. One protester against the Enclosures, who had walked to London to make known his plaint, declared: "I kept four cows before the parish was enclosed, and now I don't keep so much as a goose; and yet you ask me what I lose by it!" And this man, curiously enough, came from Bedfordshire. Bunyan was born on the eve of the great conflict between King and Parliament, from which the little band of the Levellers were to carry no harvest home. The poor men were crushed between King and Parliament, as the Independents were crushed between Church and Presbytery. Bunyan was poor and an Independent; what could he reap from all this? A life of poverty and hard work, as tinker or soldier, struggling to

earn shelter and bread for his wife and children; twelve years of imprisonment for speaking the word of God without a licence—to his neighbours, and, worse than imprisonment, ever-present anxiety for his family and fear of his own future, fear of humiliation, pain and death. And at the end of his life some little satisfaction from the success of his book, some little liberty. His was a narrow life, too, circumscribed by poverty, lived almost wholly between Bedford and London, but for the brief experience of Fairfax's campaigns. Yet from this barren stuff Bunyan's genius mined the gold which has been current for centuries.

Although Bunyan in his immortal allegory testified to having "dreamed a dream," there is every probability that the vision was intensified by certain scenes with which the writer was personally acquainted, and by the local associations of his own early years.

That the personal experiences of Bunyan at the siege of Leicester plainly find some indication in the allegory of *The Holy War* has been pointed out more than once. It is somewhat curious that little corresponding endeavour has been made to localise the scenes, and enliven the characters, in *The Pilgrim's Progress*. The task is always worth attempting. To one who knows the neighbourhood of Bedford and Elstow, it is not very difficult to fix on the exact site of the Slough of Despond, the Narrow Way, By-path Meadow, the Shining Gate, the Celestial City, the Delectable Mountains, and other places mentioned in the undying dream.

Not a man or woman in *The Pilgrim's Progress* but has, under the general outline of vice or virtue, the detailed reality of a human being. That is, of course, what makes the power of this great book. No symbolic conflict that between Christian and Apollyon, but a genuine fight in which our hero is not above considering, as the enemy advances, that he has armour only on his breast, none on his back, and therefore cannot turn and flee. (Private Bunyan, perhaps, pike in hand, facing his first cavalry charge?) Surely in Faithful we have the gentlest, the most human, the most lovable "good man" Bunyan ever encountered; but Faithful suffers and dies at Vanity Fair almost as Bunyan himself might have suffered and died. The characterization of Evangelist, the guide, mentor, and friend of Christian, was surely modelled on a real person, and most likely it was good John Gifford, Bunyan's own minister. In *The Pilgrim's Progress* we have nothing invented, but all is written down much as it was under an English judiciary savagely unjust in a country torn by moral conflict; nor is Vanity Fair the imagining of a poet but the fair held annually on Elstow Green drawn to the last booth and side-show by a man who had been there and could not forget it.

Elstow was to Bunyan a spot inseparable from memory, and upon it much of his great work was focussed. There his boyhood and youth were spent at tip-cat and other games until he left to join the army. After his soldiering he returned to Elstow and indulged in such "wiles of the devil" as "bell ringing and dancing."

Bedford was, doubtless, regarded by Bunyan as an extreme contrast to Elstow; for whereas the latter was mainly remembered as the scene of his wrongdoing, and the devilry more than mere revlry of its fair, Bedford was closely associated with religious life. It was there that he threw in his lot with a "strict" sect of the Baptists, and the town, in his moods of spiritual exaltation, may well have seemed like the Celestial City. If Bunyan had blasphemed with zest, so did he begin to worship with passion.

On a mind so imaginative as that of Bunyan's, contrasts must have made an indelible impression, and well might the Priory, a part of which still remains, almost adjoining the fine old tower in which Bunyan so often rang the bells, appear, in comparison with the tinker's humble home, as the House Beautiful, and the fine entrance way, yet standing, as the Shining Gate. Furthermore, in olden times the nuns in Elstow were known as "the ladies," and tales about them were probably remembered in Bunyan's time by the grandfathers of the village. One may almost imagine that, when he wrote of Charity, Piety, and Prudence at the House Beautiful, he had in mind the ladies of Elstow Priory.

Taking Elstow Green, where a fair is still held, as the site of the City of Destruction, it may be noted that there is immediately "on the left-hand side of the road a meadow and a stile to go over it," and that meadow is called By-path Meadow. How many thousands of lovers of *The Pilgrim's Progress* have taken the "by-path" leading from the "narrow-way"—as the road from Elstow Green to Bedford was and still partly is—to the "broad road"—from Ampthill to Bedford. Not only is the thoroughfare from Elstow to Bedford "narrow," except where it was widened during the last century, but it is also "straight." The present bending of the road to the right before the railway is reached is clearly a deviation from the original alignment in order to facilitate the building of the station.

By making a pleasant detour at Elstow Green through By-path Meadow, the broad road can, as before stated, be reached, and the Slough of Despond site avoided; but nevertheless the River Ouse has to be crossed at the same spot as if the narrow and straight road had been taken.

To Bunyan's highly imaginative mind what inferences must

have arisen respecting the two ways so familiar to his locality? The road from his own rude home to Elstow Green, which is doubtless the average width of the way throughout to Bedford before the alteration in its course was carried out, is not more than twenty feet in breadth, while the road running parallel is nearly eighty feet from hedge to hedge.

It was open to the traveller to choose his own way to the city—just as the saint and the sinner, so distinctly present to Bunyan's acute religious consciousness, travel through life by such widely different paths, and yet meet before the end of each pilgrimage—by the respective roads to Bedford. In the allegorical journey through life there must be an arrival at the river, with the result, in a spiritual sense, that all who take the broad road have to meet the cold waters of death, while those, enduring to the end the dangers and hardships of the straight and narrow way, in triumph cross "the River of the Water of Life" to receive "that crown of glory which fadeth not away."

There is no place more frequently referred to in *The Pilgrim's Progress* than the Slough of Despond; and such a spot as would be likely to supply inspiration for the symbol of mire and wretchedness can clearly be traced as nearly as possible half-way between Elstow and Bedford.

Although a culvert now prevents the sluggish watercourse, which it crosses, from again becoming a "slough" to vehicular traffic and pedestrians, such an undrained low-lying spot, with its willows suggestive of damp soil, must, particularly in wet weather, have been a veritable quagmire, all the worse after the trampling therein of the many "fair cattle," to say nothing of the people who, passing and re-passing, would yet make the "slough" yet wider and deeper by churning up the filth and mud.

Not only were there few bridges made over such places in the seventeenth century, but rural road-making, and the same applies to mending, never was in any way properly carried out. The ever-observant Bunyan lets in no little light upon the subject when "the old gentleman" who addressed Christiana at the "slough" upon the deplorable condition of the spot, said "many there be who pretend to be the King's labourers and say that they are for mending the King's highway, that bring dirt and dung instead of stones and so mar instead of mend." Doubtless the way-warden of the Elstow district, who must have been well-known to Bunyan, was no exception to the usual run of those having charge of the King's highway, and very likely the condition of the "Slough of Despond" was one of the results of his remissness.

Though only the Ouse is crossed in travelling from Elstow to Bedford, Bunyan mentions two rivers—the one that of "the

water of life," and the other "the river of death." It is worth noting that below the old bridge the Ouse divides, there being actually two rivers running parallel for some little distance—certainly a mile—and of one it can well be said "there is a meadow on either either side green all the year long." The upper stream, though apparently a continuation of the Ouse as it runs past the "city," is but a kind of backwater to the actual course of the river, and it might in Bunyan's mind have been typical of death, while the ever-flowing stream symbolised life.

Of the Delectable Mountains the fact might be noted that Bedford, which itself lies very low, is surrounded by districts rising in places to three and four hundred feet. There is a clear rise of more than a hundred feet in the land behind the town, and to a poor, weary pilgrim, with recollections of the slough's mire, such rising slopes, dressed in living green, and bright in all the unclouded glory of a summer sun, might well be looked upon as veritable mountains of delight.

While inordinately tall men, like fat women, may doubtless have been exhibited at Elstow Fair, we need not suppose that either Bunyan's "giants" or his "lions" were derived from such a source. Their origin is to be sought elsewhere. Among the few books which the author of *The Pilgrim's Progress* possessed was a copy of *Sir Bevis of Southampton*, which is full of giants and fighting. Moreover, a couple of lions figure most prominently in the story, and so enabled Bunyan to yet further amplify and embellish his dream when there were no scenes or objects of local interest to enable him to do so.

When the young tinker was on the turning-point of his career he was intimately acquainted with an elderly villager who displayed a good deal of zeal for religion, only, however, to become a very extreme freethinker, or "ranter" as the Antinomians were then called, and he, in all probability, was the Atheist of the allegory. Christian addressing Atheist said, "You dwell in the City of Destruction, the place also where I was born"—thus localising it; and "the whole world," as usually represented, could scarcely have been in Bunyan's mind. Christian was born in the City of Destruction, which was the Elstow of fact, and Bunyan was born in Elstow, the City of Destruction in the "dream".

That Elstow was the City of Destruction in Bunyan's mind does not seem doubtful; for even apart from such suggestions as have already been furnished, it may be observed that Christiana and her four "children" were "a mile away" from where the dream was dreamed—the "den" or gaol—and Bunyan's wife and four children were living a mile and, to be exact, two hundred and fifty yards from Bedford Bridge.

It is not a little remarkable that, doubtless owing to an error by "the King's surveyers" before Bunyan's time, the mile post—one still marks the spot—was erected immediately opposite Elstow Green, and so impressed the distance definitely on the author's mind in writing "Pilgrim's Progress,"

Many readers of the golden dream must have thought there was a dimming of the lustre when Christian hurried on his way to everlasting bliss and left Christiana with her children behind to share in the downfall of the City of Destruction. It seems that he hardly played the manly part in doing so. But something must be allowed for Bunyan's actual experience with his first wife, and his frame of mind at the time. Mrs. Bunyan, it is certain, lost a good deal of patience with her husband, who had become so convicted of his enormous transgressions, as they appeared to him, that he had, in the opinion of his wife, "some frenzied distemper," and went on "worse and worse." And so Bunyan's wife and little ones, it is recorded, "began to be hardened—sometimes deride, sometimes quite neglect him." He would walk solitary in the fields; and for days he spent his time reading, and crying, "What shall I do to be saved?" Certainly with the Dissenters of those days there was a very literal interpretation of divine injunctions; and Bunyan no doubt found it quite natural to make his immortal Pilgrim depart from Christiana for conscience's sake, and so carry out to the letter the law of Christ, and escape the condemnation that "he that loveth son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. And he that doth not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me."

For the Enchanted Ground of the allegory any valley on a drowsy summer day will serve. But as Pilgrim reaches the end of the journey the topography grows more and more vague.

Bunyan rejoiced to see a little satisfaction from the success of his book. Of the first part he writes in merry mood:—

My Pilgrim's book has travelled sea and land;
Yet could I never come to understand
That it was slighted, or turned out of door,
By any kingdom, were they rich or poor.

But if by chance Christiana should meet someone who dislikes Part One of his parable, then she must remember that—

Some love no cheese, some love no fish, and some
Love not their friends, nor their own house or home;
Some start at pig, slight chicken, love not fowl,
More than they love a cuckoo or an owl.
Leave such, my Christiana, to their choice,
And seek those who to find thee will rejoice.

That is, it's a queer fellow who cares neither for friend, nor

home; neither for chicken nor fish—nor for my doughty Pilgrim.

Enough has been said now to indicate the local basis and colour on which the great allegory was built up. It is curious to reflect how many thousands of readers, beyond the seas of Britain, beyond the Atlantic and the Pacific, have hung enraptured over the geography of *The Pilgrim's Progress*, all unconscious that the map and the road-book of Christian's unforgettable journey are to be found to this day in a quiet town of rural England and its sleepy neighbour villages.

No man was more suited than he to write *The Pilgrim's Progress*, who was himself the pilgrim, while only a genius at once so simple and universal could, at the turn of the mediaeval to the modern world, have charged the threadbare allegory of man's earthly pilgrimage with new and actual meaning.

JOHNSTONE G. PATRICK.

Isaac Watts, by Arthur P. Davis (Independent Press, Ltd., 8s. 6d.)

This is the English edition of a book which appeared in the United States in 1943. The Independent Press is to be commended for making it available in this country, for it is based upon careful research, and, though it does not contain much new material, it replaces the older biographies by Gibbons (1780), Milner (1834), Paxton Hood (1875) and Wright (1914), providing a readable and comprehensive survey of Watts's life and writings. The appendices (which include a complete list of the known letters of Watts) and the thirty pages of notes indicate the labour that Mr. Davis put into the book and will prove of considerable value to those interested in eighteenth century Nonconformity. One wishes, however, that Mr. Davis had known the essays of the late Bernard Lord Manning and that he could have found room for a more extended and deeper examination of Watts's hymns, for it is on these that his enduring fame and worth rest. Why did Watts cease so early in life to use his poetic gift? One would like to know more details about his early sale of the copyright of *Hymns and Spiritual Songs*. But Mr. Davis's main concern was to provide a full documented biography and to show how many sided were Watts's interests. In this he has admirably succeeded.

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