

## THE BUNYAN TERCENTENARY.

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JOHN BUNYAN was baptized at Elstow Parish Church on November 30, 1628. Presumably he was born a few weeks earlier. And now, after a lapse of three hundred years, peoples of many races and many tongues, all the world over, are calling to remembrance the man and his work. Look at it how we may, this fact is remarkable, and seems to call for some explanation. When John Bunyan's friend, Charles Doe, in 1691 published "Thirty Reasons why Christian people should promote" the circulation of Bunyan's works—particularly in the folio edition—he had mainly in mind contemporary readers. But, with a boldness which some may have deemed ludicrous and others improper, he looked much farther ahead. "If," he says, "God had not put it into the heart of some Christians or Church to preserve the Epistles of the Apostle to the Romans, Corinthians, Galatians and others, we in this age of the world should in all probability never have known that there ever were any such Christians and doctrines . . . for God mostly works by second causes." On this he proceeds to ask, "Why should any Christian people, that have reason to reckon themselves obliged herein, set themselves aside from communicating to other Christians and the ages to come the gospel labours of so eminent a minister [John Bunyan] as God so graciously honoured and assisted them with?" "The ages to come"—a bold assumption, and, although three hundred years may seem too short a space as yet to warrant a claim that the hope is fulfilled, it fully justifies Charles Doe's endeavour. But for his zeal many of the lesser-known works of Bunyan might long ago have passed from the knowledge of all save the curious in seventeenth-century literature.

But Charles Doe's reasons will not of themselves suffice to explain the present world-wide regard for Bunyan. They are touched in part by the personal interests of one who, if Bunyan's friend, was also a publisher, and not wholly free from the guile popularly, no doubt unjustly, associated with that occupation. He chants the advantages of his folio edition with a fervour not entirely divorced, we may suppose, from a reasonable desire to come home over the enterprise. But the larger reasons he advances—Bunyan's piety, his power as a preacher, his disregard of worldly gain, his prison sufferings, his profit to the "many thousands" who "had the soul benefit and comfort of his ministry to astonishment"—even these without fuller explanation will hardly account for the fact that Bunyan is a greater person to-day than when he died in August, 1688. Much that Charles Doe alleges on behalf of Bunyan might, indeed, have been urged with some justice on behalf of contemporaries, whose names, if not forgotten by all save a few, at least have no

world-wide significance. Perhaps, too, we are justified in doubting whether Doe's enthusiasm was shared by many of his time, even amongst those who bought the folio edition. Southey long ago pointed out that, if either Bunyan himself or his own admirers had anticipated the breadth or the duration of his fame, they would doubtless have given us more details of his life and circumstances.

In seeking for ourselves an answer to the question we are at once faced with the doubt whether the present fame of Bunyan must be traced mainly to the character and experience of the man, or to his works, or to the man *plus* his works. To put the question in another way, would Bunyan be remembered if he had never written the *Pilgrim's Progress* and *Grace Abounding*? Or, would the *Pilgrim's Progress* have retained its hold on public favour if it had appeared anonymously? Would it have fared better than *The Whole Duty of Man* if its authorship had been assigned at one time and another to half a dozen persons? But this doubt is, after all, unlikely to arise in many minds. With most of us the man and these two of his books are inseparable. *Grace Abounding* is one way of recording Bunyan's own spiritual conflict; the *Pilgrim's Progress* is another. That imagination is called in to help in one telling of the story does not destroy its personal character. We think of the man and the book together, and this whether we pass with him through the throes of the long-drawn spiritual conflict, or are following the adventures of his Pilgrim. The personality of the man, then, as well as the merit of his works must be counted as playing each a part in making his fame.

But the personal history of John Bunyan, apart from his own works, would not have kept his memory green. It is in many ways an interesting history. But it is doubtful whether in any single detail it could not be matched. His rise from lowliness and poverty to fame can be paralleled without difficulty within the ministry of the Church of England. His change from a vicious life to a life of faith is not more remarkable than that of John Newton. His appearance as an author is not more surprising than the development of "the old African blasphemer" into the author of *Cardiphonia* and the *Authentic Narrative*. With some readers the story of his spiritual conflict would be less impressive than that of Thomas Scott in his *Force of Truth*. But perhaps the case of "holy Mr. Gifford" more fitly marks the insufficiency of the life-story alone to account for Bunyan's position. For Gifford's career was more romantic than that of Bunyan, and his conversion hardly less remarkable. Any history of the English Baptists must find a place for Gifford; but, if he had never ministered to the anguished mind of Bunyan, he would have been little more than a name, interesting as his story is. Gifford had been a Major in the Royalist army, and had remained true to the cause after the failure. When, in 1648, civil war again broke out, Gifford took part in the Kentish rising, and was captured when Fairfax defeated the Royalists at Maidstone. Gifford, with eleven others, was condemned to death. The night before the day appointed for his execution, his sister was allowed to visit him in

prison. She found the sentinels asleep, and urged her brother to escape. Apparently there was a good deal of laxity, for his fellow-prisoners were too far gone in drink to join in the attempt. Gifford got safely away, for three days lay hiding in a ditch, was then helped by friends to travel in disguise to London, and so later came on to Bedford. He took up life there as a doctor, a calling which seems then to have been open to any person of sufficient assurance. His escape from death in no way changed his character; he was a drinker, a gambler and an openly profane person. He hated his old enemies so deeply as to contemplate the murder of a leading Puritan of Bedford just because he was a Puritan. One night he lost £15 in gambling, but, whilst revolving desperate thoughts, took up a book by Robert Bolton.<sup>1</sup> His attention was arrested, a conviction of his parlous state grew within him. After a few weeks of spiritual conflict he reached a condition of assurance and peace which was never lost. Regarded for some time (like Bunyan) with hesitation, he was afterwards chosen as pastor of a little flock by a group which included the very Puritan whose murder he had planned.

The claim of the man as well as the book, and the man with the book, is obvious in the matter of *Grace Abounding*. For it is the period of Bunyan's life so closely packed with spiritual conflict which most compels attention. If some observers make much of his imprisonment—whilst often exhibiting a curious disregard of like sufferings inflicted by sympathizers with Bunyan upon other folk—with many minds it is the long and agonizing conflict that rivets attention. This is very marked in the Lives of Bunyan which are written without party or ecclesiastical feeling. It can be found in Southey and in Froude. The fact invites attention. For it is easy to see that Bunyan's story might be dismissed by some as morbid and melancholic. Religious mania is not a highly exceptional form of mental trouble. A hostile critic might be expected to find a hundred reasons for setting the story aside as merely recording the experiences of an unbalanced mind. Yet this is not the reception with which the book meets. The man's story lays hold even of the unsympathetic reader. It is so simple, so manifestly the outpouring of a mind which not only found relief in making full confession, but honestly hoped thereby to help other people. In its artless way it surpasses artistry. Its dramatic situations are not worked up to, but confront one with developments which fiction would have avoided or treated after a different fashion. We are never tempted to think

<sup>1</sup> Robert Bolton, according to Anthony à Wood, was "a most religious and learned Puritan," a man of good family and of many parts. But when in 1602 he obtained a Fellowship at B.N.C., Oxford, he was reputed to be a "swearer, a Sabbath-breaker and a boon companion." After narrowly escaping perversion to Rome, he became a changed man, was admitted to holy orders, and was speedily made Rector of Broughton, Northamptonshire. There he gained great repute for piety as well as learning. "He was so famous for relieving afflicted consciences that many foreigners resorted to him, as well as persons at home, and found relief." His *Instructions for the Right Comforting Afflicted Consciences* was published in 1631, the year of his death. The learned and gentle Rector of Broughton became through Gifford a helper of Bunyan.

of Bunyan in the way in which we view a hero of romance ; we are always conscious of dealing with a man who wrote down things that had happened.

It is much the same in the case of the *Pilgrim's Progress*. The man and the book go together. It may very well be that many of those who read the book in other tongues than our own know little or nothing about the author. And yet, as they are, in a very large measure, people associated with or attracted to the Christian Church, most of them may be told something about the man who wrote the story. With ourselves the man and the book are always joined together. The simplest reader, learning but a little about John Bunyan and his history, seems at once to assume that the Pilgrim is Bunyan himself, and is not at all put off when, from people and events of ordinary life, the traveller moves into the realms of sanctified imagination. Just as nobody supposes that *Grace Abounding* could have been written had Bunyan not passed himself through the struggles described, so nobody thinks that Bunyan would have written of his Pilgrim if he had not himself felt the burden of sin, faced the very kind of tempters and temptations noted in the story, and found at last such joyful assurance as his Pilgrim reached.

But here we touch the fringe of another question. Has Bunyan's conversion always been viewed aright ? His early sins have, we know, been measured in different ways. On one side the anxiety to magnify an undoubted work of grace, to show by example how fully Christ can " save His people from their sins," has led to a rather distorted view of Bunyan. He has been pictured only as an abandoned youth, plucked from a dissolute and disordered life like a brand from the burning. On the other side we are invited to think of the low moral standard of his times, and to view him as quite a decent young citizen, who has written himself down as worse than he was. The truth seems to lie between the two extremes. He was not as black as by some he has been painted. He was not in childhood, youth or early manhood an utter ignoramus, knowing nothing of God or of the Gospel. He went to school ; he went to Church ; he must have heard the instruction of Puritan army chaplains ; as a young married man he became an eager reader. In a licentious age he was neither a fornicator nor an adulterer ; he was neither, we should judge, by habit an idler nor a thief. Before Bunyan was dead traducers sought to blast his reputation by false accusation. He met them openly. Now posterity has sometimes unveiled in ruthless fashion the personal lives of the famous. But nothing has been revealed to make us think less of Bunyan. Endeavours to make sport of the man over the matter of his trade, or of his little learning, or of his early attempts at verse, have been many ; but time has left the character of the man just where he left it himself.

But with all this it is plain that the young man Bunyan, when at sixteen he joined the Parliamentary forces, was in a parlous state. As a boy he " had but few equals . . . both for cursing, swearing, lying and blaspheming the holy name of God." Later on he became a " ringleader of all the youth that kept me company in all manner

of vice and ungodliness." Indeed he charges himself with having "let loose the reins to my lusts, and delighted in all transgression against the law of God." That apparently might cover anything and everything of which youth is capable. But Bunyan's own repudiation of the sin of fornication is so definite that it must extend to his earlier years wherein he otherwise went astray so fully. His sins were no doubt deemed small offences by many of his time. It was not an age in which foul speech, or contempt of the Lord's Day, or youthful disregard of law and order were made much of. It is plain, however, that Bunyan had started on the way that might have led on to a wholly corrupt and dissolute life. And in after-years he saw this so clearly that the sins and offences of his youth appear in their true colours. He views them from the light of a man's experience and a godly man's convictions. He knows that such a boyhood, and such a youth as his had been, might, unchecked, have grown into a dissolute and hopeless manhood. Viewing it so, he has no temptation to find comfort in the reflection that he was no worse than many other young people of his age.

Whatever we may think of Bunyan's early faults, it is clear that he was never one of those who have sinned in blind ignorance, nor yet of those who sin without reflection or remorse. He himself leaves us in no doubt about this. For, even in the childhood which he reprehends, he says that "the Lord . . . did scare and affright me with fearful dreams, and did terrify me with dreadful visions." Further, he was "greatly afflicted and troubled at the thoughts of the fearful torments of hell fire." In the midst of his "many sports and childish vanities" he was "overcome with despair of life and heaven." As he grew into youth he declares that he forgot these experiences, so that "heaven and hell were both out of sight and mind." Yet at this very time he was so far from being utterly reprobate that the sight of "wicked things by those who professed goodness" made him tremble and his "heart to ache." His providential escapes from death he notes as leaving him "more and more rebellious against God"—and rebellion implies remembrance. Indeed his early years, treated as he himself treats them, suggest the misdeeds not of a wholly vicious and careless boy and youth, but rather of one who sinned against some measure of light. No wonder, then, that, when his young wife led him to reading the two good books her father had used, they begat in him "some desires to religion," and led him to habits of Church-going. The young man who, in that age, was conscience-smitten on hearing a sermon in Church on Sabbath-breaking was no case-hardened offender. So, much about the same time, the voluble swearer, who was rebuked by a woman, herself "a very loose and ungodly wretch," and thereat was "put to secret shame," as he thought, "before the God of heaven"; who so pathetically wished that he might be a child again, so that a father might "learn" him to speak "without this wicked way of swearing," he could have been no utterly careless and indifferent soul. A sinner he was, who certainly as he says "knew not Jesus Christ," but hardly one of those who have never had light and have long ago lost a sense of sin.

This view of Bunyan prepares us in some sort the better to understand the duration and the strange complications of his spiritual conflict. Those periods of most agonizing perplexity, spent in wrestling with some promise or warning in Holy Scripture, those occasions when "peace would be in and out sometimes twenty times a day; comfort now and trouble presently; peace now, and before I could go a furlong, as full of fears and guilt as ever heart could hold"—those times may best be understood by keeping in mind the earlier life, the boyhood's fears, the conscience that could not be drowned in the folly of youth, the temperament that found satisfaction for a time in assiduous churchgoing, the intelligence that had yielded to guidance from the *Practice of Piety* and the *Plaine Man's Pathway*.

It may be argued with reason that this Bunyan has a wider appeal to man than the Bunyan who is thought of merely as a ribald tinker, reft from wholly sottish contempt of God to paths of righteousness. For the vast majority of those into whose hands his books come are not of the hopeless and utterly depraved class. The devout reader sees here a closer relation to actual life. As for others, they may be persons who, if careless, perhaps even reckless and of irregular habit, are still not without moments of reflection, of repentance, of yearnings—perhaps vague, fitful and unenduring—towards better things. Another class may be persons who are neither plainly of religious nor of irreligious habit; who form perhaps a large proportion of our own population. Now both these latter classes may find in Bunyan a figure of some kinship with themselves. He would have understood their lapses and their stirrings of conscience. He would have felt for them because, like himself, so many of them would have had no definite religious training or example in childhood, possibly no parental restraint in youth. These, in fine, would be won to the books in no small degree because of the books' witness to the man, and to a man whom they could understand.

The appeal of Bunyan may be looked at in another way. Here indeed is a religious teacher, and one most desperately resolved on expounding theology as it concerned the saving of men's souls and their duties in life. But, in his best known works, he does not teach it in the manner of text-books. Despite the resolute will of his characters to improve the occasion, and upon the smallest provocation to deliver little homilies, his lessons are taught rather by the characters themselves than by their disquisitions. Whether in the *Pilgrim's Progress* or in the *Holy War* his sinners and saints make themselves plain before our faces. In many cases we recognize them off-hand; we have met them in life; we know how exact is the character-sketch, despite the passage of time and the changes of custom. That is why Bunyan is read, and read to profit, whilst many other works designed to alarm the ungodly or instruct the anxious, works by more learned men, have long ago passed into oblivion.

And here perhaps is a suggestion or a warning to preachers. Bunyan's more definitely theological works, though full of carefully compiled matter, are, in effect, forgotten. The books that are full of

life remain. In like manner the sermon that is only a brief theological treatise quite possibly leaves the minds of many hearers to wander at will over thoughts that have no relation to it, whilst the sermon that touches life, through observation of character and by illustration from fact and experience, though perhaps inferior in structure and in diction, wins and holds attention. Bunyan's purely doctrinal and expository works will, for this reason, repay study. Few preachers will cram as much clear-cut theology and as many supporting texts into a sermon as Bunyan did into the parts of a narrative or a treatise of a sermon's length. But he always joins them on to life. Herein he might with much advantage be followed. But the following will call for the exercise of a quality which Bunyan possessed in a pre-eminent degree. He was an accurate observer. He saw what men did ; he saw also why they did it, and knew the thoughts that lay behind the actions. Even so the wise and purposeful teacher of to-day will see that he instructs out of a divinely ordered text-book, the Holy Scriptures, but that he also relates his teaching to the circumstances of his times and his people. And this he should largely do, not from second-hand knowledge, not with illustrations culled from the stores of other men, but from personal and thoughtful observation of life. Here Bunyan was most eminently successful. It may well have been that his great hold as a preacher—for in his day he was, in his own land, as great as a preacher as now he is as an author—was due not only to the fervour with which he unfolded the Gospel but also to the sureness of touch with which he dealt with mankind.

Yet so far as the world-wide fame of Bunyan goes, we must deem it to rest on a simple thing most wondrously well set forth—the plain demonstration that man needs a Saviour, that his Saviour can be found by the man that seeks Him, and that this Saviour is indeed able very completely and triumphantly to “save His people from their sins.”

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