

# The Pilgrim's Progress.

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## The Start.

IT is to be noted at the outset that while the story of Christian is not only an allegory of spiritual things, but a type of the Christian life, in which the unity of the leading character is sustained throughout as in an actual biography, yet it is not given as the only type of Christian experience. Theologians generally, and especially those of an age which tended to define its faith with extreme precision of detail, are apt to demand too much uniformity in religious experience. Bunyan is too close an observer of life, too full of human nature, to fall into that mistake. His Christian, his Hopeful, and his Faithful each arrives at the City by a way of his own, though for a longer or shorter distance they may go together; and these individual ways are determined by the individual natures.

## The Dreamer.

The opening words about the WILDERNESS and the DEN introduce the book with a sigh. John Bunyan, too, was a footsore pilgrim. The den is Bedford Jail—whether the traditional jail on the bridge, or one with more comfortable quarters, has been disputed (cf. J. A. Froude, *Bunyan*, chap. 6). Be that as it may, it was from prison that the book came, like so many great books. John in Patmos, Cervantes in Spain; Ayala in England; Luther in the Wartburg—these are a few of Bunyan's fellows in this respect.

## The Dream.

The dream has a double significance and interest.

1. Dreams were by the Puritans regarded in the solemn and, indeed, fearful aspect of the normal means by which the supernatural world broke through upon the soul, in revelations which were generally ominous. A sensitive and brilliant imagination like Bunyan's was peculiarly subject to such conceptions. 'Even in my childhood,' he tells us, 'the Lord did scare and affrighten me with such fearful dreams, and did terrify me with fearful visions.' Compare the dream-lore of Shakespeare, and such weird 'year and a day' pre-

monitions as that of Boyle of the famous Hell-fire Club. This uncanny character appears frequently in the present book, which breaks into many portentous terrors.

2. It was the conventional form of the older English literature of the imagination. The early French romances regularly take this form, and retain it in their English translations. Chaucer's introduction to his early *Romaunt of the Rose* gives the Mediæval point of view concerning dreams very fully. One of the best known and finest instances is Langland's, beginning—

In a somer seson whan soft was the sonne . . .  
I was wery forwardred, and went me to reste  
Under a brode banke bi a bornes side;  
And as I lay and lened and looked in the waters  
I slumbered in a sleeping, it sweyned so merye.

De Guileville's *Pelerinage de l'Homme*, which is in some ways the prototype of Bunyan's book, begins similarly, as also the other thirteenth-century epics of the *trouvères*, as *La Voie de Paradis* and *Le Songe d'Enfer*, of which latter, it is said, the influence is strongly marked in Dante's *Inferno*. It is worthy of remark, however, that Dante's vision is not a dream. He was wide awake (in this, as in so much else, an exception and a protest), when—

In the midway of this our mortal life  
I found me in a gloomy wood.

## The Man.

is suddenly introduced—a typical figure, like 'Everyman' in the old Morality Play.

*In rags.* Cf. Isaiah 64<sup>6</sup>.

*His face from his own house.* There are many things that set men's faces from their own house—tempting sins, the craving for excitement and company, a roving fancy. Of them all, the only respectable one is Conscience, which is that here told of.

The central facts about this man are, that he is—

1. *A man with a burden.*
2. *A man with a book.*

The social problem has been summed up in this sentence: 'Two men, a woman, and a loaf.' The

Christian problem is similarly summed up in 'A man, a burden, and a book.'

1. *A man with a burden.* Sin is often described by active and aggressive metaphors—it is a deceiver, a destroyer, an enemy, etc. This passive one is more dreadful. It tells of the dead weight of fact. Facts are 'chiels that winna ding.' Sin is, to Paul, 'this dead body'; and the flaccid mass of inelastic flesh, at once soft and heavy, is horrible enough without the implied hint of decay. The worst thing about sin is just that it is there—an irrevocable fact which the sinner has put there. At first it is felt as a burden. The man cannot sleep, or eat, or work, or play as once he did. That is a precious pain. The far deeper danger is that one should grow accustomed to it, as the Swiss peasant to the growing load of hay, or Milo to his ox, until he is able complacently to 'draw iniquity with a cart rope.' The unblushed-for past—the dead weight of sinful facts faced deliberately and carried lightly—these are the doom of the souls that are pleased with their treacherous ease.

2. *A man with a book.* There are among us many 'whose life was moulded by a book.' We all of us possess several books, but there are some whom one book possesses. It is of vast importance to choose carefully what book it shall be. A man's one book will very likely become his tyrant. Doughty travelled in Arabia for three years with nothing but the Bible and Spenser's *Faerie Queene*. His *Arabia Deserta* is written as with the pen of Spenser. One of the most pathetic things in Nansen's *Farthest North* is the story of that dreary winter when the two men, cut off from all the world, had no literature but the *Nautical Almanac*. Here we have the Great Book doing its work. It has become the master of the man's imagination, the tyrant of his conscience. The Bible is the never antiquated text-book of Hebraism. Culture, in the form of Hellenic æstheticism and intellectualism, is also God's word to man. But it is the other word, spoken in the harsher tongue, which has deepened and kept deep the conscience of the generations.

*Moreover, etc.* The burden was not the fear of punishment, but the fact of sin. Burns' scornful lines are familiar—

The fear of hell's a hangman's whip  
To keep the wretch in order.

Yet the fear of punishment is also a factor in the event. We need not be too dainty about this.

The prodigal son came back to his father only when the fear of perishing came upon him; it was not a noble, but a very mean motive for coming, yet the main thing is the fact that he came.

*His treatment by his family* was an appeal to every form of human weakness. *Deriding* appealed to his self-esteem; *chiding* to his anger and his cowardice; *neglect* to his loneliness and need of friends. Some are mocked out of their highest destiny, others scolded out of it, others, who would have resisted active opposition, drop it through the humiliating experience of neglect. It is this that is hardest of all to bear—the sense of one's utter insignificance, the quiet flow of the world past one. There is, indeed, one harder thing, and that is *pity*. Browning never described a nobler course than that of his *Grammarian*—

He knew the signal, and stepped on with pride  
Over men's pity.

But here the man turned the tables on them. *He began to pray for and pity them.* He takes the high ground of certainty. 'We are of God, and the whole world lieth in wickedness.' Doubtless they would not thank him, but they would feel it. Nothing is so impressive as a man who is dead sure. His pity was irritating at the time, but it brought them after him in the end.

This may seem to the reader a poor introduction to a hero (cf. Kerr Bain, i. 48). First impressions are important, and neither tears nor fears are impressive. Yet Bunyan acted advisedly in this. To him, as to all Puritans, it was not the man, but the man's conscience, that was the real hero. As in that wonderful poem, 'The Hound of Heaven,' by Francis Thompson, it is not fear, but Heaven that is pursuing the soul. The situation, when that is realized, becomes terrible indeed, but not pitiable. And further, there is here a very true heroism, in spite of fears and tears. Nothing in the world is so heroic, after all, as to cut one's way alone through conventions and habits and troops of friends, out into the open, where there is no company but conscience, and no property but the burden of sins.

### Guide and Pilgrim.

In the words which follow the start we are introduced to the new figure of Evangelist. Bunyan's ministers would form a rare gallery of portraits. Each is individual, clearly drawn, and

characteristic. Of Evangelist there are in all three notices; but this is the only one found in the original edition. As the editions went on, Bunyan's conception of Evangelist was enriched and changed somewhat. In the tenth edition a verse was added here in which the words occur, 'Evangelist who lovingly him greets.' Experience mellows Bunyan's conceptions, and love is the last word to life, which here goes back and makes itself also the first.

The picture of the man is essentially that of a prophet. He is severe, austere, without those little human touches which make us feel in him a man, a brother. He is aloof and withdrawn. This air of authority and mastership is at once attractive and repulsive, and in both ways it is liable to deterioration. When it repels it is apt to react in a kind of self-conscious isolation and imaginary sense of martyrdom very deadly to the prophet's influence. When it attracts it may become priestliness, or it may lapse into mere personal vanity and conceit. Evangelist-worship, with the excessive sense of the importance of the Evangelist's own spiritual experiences and exploits, and the neurotically personal relations which are apt to follow, is one of the perpetual dangers of this high office. Here, Bunyan is sane and healthy as usual. This prophet's authority rests on nothing but the sheer force of truth; his work is to send men away from himself to the light by which man must live.

Evangelist's way of dealing with this inquirer is instructive and significant by its extreme simplicity. There is no trick or machinery of any kind, but the simplest sort of fair and honest dealing. There is no haste nor 'indecent urging,' for the soul's processes cannot be forced. There is no play upon the feelings. From first to last the interview is an appeal to reason. Reason as an instrument of evangelism is generally undervalued among us. Yet some of the most eminent Christians have testified that they owed their conversion to a sermon or a book, not merely rational but controversial and argumentative. The most striking feature of Evangelist's work here is in general its reticence and reserve. He does not say more than is absolutely needed; and the mark of excellence in dealing with the souls of men is to have learned not to say too much.

The art of questioning is also well developed here. By swift advances he immediately gets beyond all possible shams to realities, beyond

side-issues to the heart of the matter, beneath confused states of feeling to the actual facts of the case. Like an able lawyer, he is only interested in facts, and is determined above all else to reach perfect clearness.

(For fuller descriptions of this and indeed of all other characters in the book, see Dr. Kerr Bain's brilliant volumes.) What are the facts revealed by this scrutiny? *A man, in utter bewilderment and abject fear,*—'he looked this way and that way as if he would run, and yet he stood still.' This sentence has been compared to the statue of a racer petrified, as it were, in the act of starting. The reason of such an attitude is frequently spiritual inertia and paralysis of will. Thousands of men know but cannot go. When the Psalmist says, 'I will run in the way of thy commandments when thou hast enlarged my heart,' he wishes his soul to be set free to do what it knows quite well. But *this* inactivity is different. The man does not know where he is nor what to do. What he wants is enlightenment and definite direction. 'The propeller,' as Dr. Kerr Bain says, 'works close to the rudder,' and there will be no want of pace if the man knows where to go.

The first effect of Evangelist on the pilgrim is to bring out into clearness the truth about himself and his condition. Amidst all his bewilderment one thing grows perfectly clear. He is terribly afraid of death. There is a light-hearted way of discounting death, and mocking the fear of it, which passes for courage, and is really mere slightness of intellect and poverty of conscience and imagination. The awfulness of death remains, felt by ineradicable instinct, and it was meant to remain. The subject may be called crude, harsh, morbid, if you like; but the winding-sheet, the coffin, and the six feet of earth are facts that wait for us. We may change the colour of its livery, but the fact we cannot change. It has been supposed to be a religious thing to meditate on death, and forecast its circumstances, and in this way religion has grown morbid. A well-known passage in modern fiction illustrates the morbidness without the religion. Thinking of her birthdays 'she suddenly thought one afternoon, when looking in the glass at her fairness, that there was yet another date, of more importance to her than those; that of her own death, when all these charms would have disappeared; a day which lay sly and unseen among all the other days of the year, giving no

sign or sound when she actually passed over it; but not the less surely there. When was it? Why did she not feel the chill of each yearly encounter with such a cold relation?' The only use of such speculations is to force death back into the region of actual realities that we may reckon with it, and pass on to the true business of life. Lost in the mists of the future the event of death seems uncertain and life eternal. Did we know the hour, life, foreshortened by the exact sight of the end, would shrink to a very small appearance though the limit were at fivescore years.

Out of the mist the spectre of death has risen with appalling clearness upon this man, because death is but the second last of terrors. It is the depth 'lower than the grave,' the days after the day of death, that arm the fear. This, too, is a great human fact. Hamlet's soliloquy and the preacher's experience in Browning's *Christmas Eve* are two of the countless records of it.

What is the solution? The wicket gate stands for an incident in life that will destroy the fear of death. What it means we are not yet told. The man cannot see it, and he says so frankly, At this stage he can see nothing clearly. The whole region of religious truth is confused and obscure. No directions mean anything to him. The redeeming feature is that he says so frankly 'No.' The exaggeration of experience, the too facile compliance with advice which one does not as yet understand, are the real dangers of this state. Evangelist is too wise to urge him. There is a shining light ahead, and he points him to that. Every soul of man can see *some* light of hope ahead, shining in the direction at least of the God or Christ or ideal which is as yet obscure. It may be but the light of some possible duty,

some sense of honour, some belief in life, some vague trust in the future. Such an experience is splendidly sung by Longfellow in his 'Light of Stars.'

The point is, not that the light is full, nor even comprehensible. If it be clear enough to flee towards, that is all. For here as elsewhere *solvitur ambulando*. What is wanted is directed motion towards the light. The rest will follow. So it comes to pass that one may be on the road to Christ when one cannot as yet see Him. Many passages in Romanes' *Thoughts on Religion* afford fine illustrations of this.

What follows is immediate action — Carlyle's great advice in the 'Everlasting Yea' of *Sartor Resartus*. It is a rude beginning, this breaking away from the people about him, with his fingers in his ears. Yet from the days of Ulysses and the Sirens until now it is the only way to begin a decisive course. The future is so beset with uncertainties that the only safety lies in refusing to hear any voice but one; and refusing to dazzle with side-lights, even from kindly windows, the eyes that have caught the first faint gleam in the sky that calls them on.

The last words of the description are full of poetic and dramatic suggestion, 'he fled towards the middle of the plain.' We see the man going out into the open of the world, and we feel the vast loneliness of the second day of religious experience. That plain has to be crossed, though it be dreary and dispiriting as the first stage of Childe Roland's adventure in Browning's similar allegory. There is always, however, the possibility of the visions of the plain. (Cf. Ramsay's *Education of Christ*. Prologue, 'The Power of the Great Plains.')

## At the Literary Table.

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By William Prideaux Courtney. (*Constable*,  
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