

The Life of John Bunyan

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Chapter 1

John Bunyan, the author of the book which has probably passed through more editions, had a greater number of readers, and been translated into more languages than any other book in the English tongue, was born in the parish of Elstow, in Bedfordshire, in the latter part of the year 1628, and was baptized in the parish church of the village on the last day of November of that year.

The year of John Bunyan's birth was a momentous one both for the nation and for the Church of England. Charles I., by the extorted assent to the Petition of Right, had begun reluctantly to strip himself of the irresponsible authority he had claimed, and had taken the first step in the struggle between King and Parliament which ended in the House of Commons seating itself in the place of the Sovereign. Wentworth (better known as Lord Strafford) had finally left the Commons, baffled in his nobly-conceived but vain hope of reconciling the monarch and his people, and having accepted a peerage and the promise of the Presidency of the Council of the North, was foreshadowing his policy of "Thorough," which was destined to bring both his own head and that of his weak master to the block. The Remonstrance of Parliament against the toleration of Roman Catholics and the growth of Arminianism, had been presented to the indignant king, who, wilfully blinded, had replied to it by the promotion to high and lucrative posts in the Church of the very men against whom it was chiefly directed. The most outrageous upholders of the royal prerogative and the irresponsible power of the sovereign, Montagu and Mainwaring, had been presented, the one to the see of Chichester, the other - the impeached and condemned of the Commons - to the rich living Montagu's consecration had vacated. Montaigne, the licenser of Mainwaring's incriminated sermon, was raised to the Archbishopric of York, while Neile and Laud, who were openly named in the Remonstrance as the "troublers of the English Israel," were rewarded respectively with the rich see of Durham and the important and deeply-dyed Puritan diocese of London. Charles was steadily sowing the wind, and destined to reap the whirlwind which was to sweep him from his throne, and involve the monarchy and the Church in the same overthrow. Three months before Bunyan's birth Buckingham, on the eve of his departure for the beleaguered and famine-stricken city of Rochelle, sanguinely hoping to conclude a peace with the French king beneath its walls, had been struck down by the knife of a fanatic, to the undisguised joy of the majority of the nation, bequeathing a legacy of failure and disgrace in the fall of the Protestant stronghold on which the eyes of Europe had been so long anxiously fixed.

The year was closing gloomily, with ominous forecasts of the coming hurricane, when the babe who was destined to leave so imperishable a name in English literature, first saw the light in an humble cottage in an obscure Bedfordshire village. His father, Thomas Bunyan, though styling himself in his will by the more dignified title of "brazier," was more properly what is known as a "tinker"; "a

mender of pots and kettles," according to Bunyan's contemporary biographer, Charles Doe. He was not, however, a mere tramp or vagrant, as travelling tinkers were and usually are still, much less a disreputable sot, a counterpart of Shakespeare's Christopher Sly, but a man with a recognized calling, having a settled home and an acknowledged position in the village community of Elstow. The family was of long standing there, but had for some generations been going down in the world. Bunyan's grandfather, Thomas Bunyan, as we learn from his still extant will, carried on the occupation of a "petty chapman," or small retail dealer, in his own freehold cottage, which he bequeathed, "with its appurtenances," to his second wife, Ann, to descend, after her death, to her stepson, his namesake, Thomas, and her own son Edward, in equal shares. This cottage, which was probably John Bunyan's birthplace, persistent tradition, confirmed by the testimony of local names, warrants us in placing near the hamlet of Harrowden, a mile to the east of the village of Elstow, at a place long called "Bunyan's End," where two fields are still called by the name of "Bunyan's" and "Further Bunyan's." This small freehold appears to have been all that remained, at the death of John Bunyan's grandfather, of a property once considerable enough to have given the name of its possessor to the whole locality.

The family of Buington, Bunyun, Buniun, Boynton, Bonyon, or Binyan (the name is found spelt in no fewer than thirty-four different ways, of which the now-established form, Bunyan, is almost the least frequent) is one that had established itself in Bedfordshire from very early times. The first place in connection with which the name appears is Pulloxhill, about nine miles from Elstow. In 1199, the year of King John's accession, the Bunyans had approached still nearer to that parish. One William Bunion held land at Wilstead, not more than a mile off. In 1327, the first year of Edward III., one of the same name, probably his descendant, William Boynton, is found actually living at Harrowden, close to the spot which popular tradition names as John Bunyan's birthplace, and was the owner of property there. We have no further notices of the Bunyans of Elstow till the sixteenth century. We then find them greatly fallen. Their ancestral property seems little by little to have passed into other hands, until in 1542 nothing was left but "a messuage and pightell (1) with the appurtenances, and nine acres of land." This small residue other entries on the Court Rolls show to have been still further diminished by sale. The field already referred to, known as "Bonyon's End," was sold by "Thomas Bonyon, of Elstow, labourer," son of William Bonyon, the said Thomas and his wife being the keepers of a small roadside inn, at which their overcharges for their home-baked bread and home-brewed beer were continually bringing them into trouble with the petty local courts of the day. Thomas Bunyan, John Bunyan's father, was born in the last days of Elizabeth, and was baptized February 24, 1603, exactly a month before the great queen passed away. The mother of the immortal Dreamer was one Margaret Bentley, who, like her husband, was a native of Elstow and only a few months his junior. The details of her mother's will, which is still extant, drawn up by the vicar of Elstow, prove that, like her husband, she did not, in the words of

Bunyan's latest and most complete biographer, the Rev. Dr. Brown, "come of the very squalid poor, but of people who, though humble in station, were yet decent and worthy in their ways." John Bunyan's mother was his father's second wife. The Bunyans were given to marrying early, and speedily consoled themselves on the loss of one wife with the companionship of a successor. Bunyan's grandmother cannot have died before February 24, 1603, the date of his father's baptism. But before the year was out his grandfather had married again. His father, too, had not completed his twentieth year when he married his first wife, Anne Pinney, January 10, 1623. She died in 1627, apparently without any surviving children, and before the year was half-way through, on the 23rd of the following May, he was married a second time to Margaret Bentley. At the end of seventeen years Thomas Bunyan was again left a widower, and within two months, with grossly indecent haste, he filled the vacant place with a third wife. Bunyan himself cannot have been much more than twenty when he married. We have no particulars of the death of his first wife. But he had been married two years to his noble-minded second wife at the time of the assizes in 1661, and the ages of his children by his first wife would indicate that no long interval elapsed between his being left a widower and his second marriage.

Elstow, which, as the birthplace of the author of "The Pilgrim's Progress," has gained a world-wide celebrity, is a quiet little village, which, though not much more than a mile from the populous and busy town of Bedford, yet, lying aside from the main stream of modern life, preserves its old-world look to an unusual degree. Its name in its original form of "Helen-stow," or "Ellen-stow," the STOW or stockaded place of St. Helena, is derived from a Benedictine nunnery founded in 1078 by Judith, niece of William the Conqueror, the traitorous wife of the judicially murdered Waltheof, Earl of Huntingdon, in honour of the mother of the Emperor Constantine. The parish church, so intimately connected with Bunyan's personal history, is a fragment of the church of the nunnery, with a detached campanile, or "steeple-house," built to contain the bells after the destruction of the central tower and choir of the conventual church.

Few villages are so little modernized as Elstow. The old half-timbered cottages with overhanging storeys, peaked dormers, and gabled porches, tapestried with roses and honeysuckles, must be much what they were in Bunyan's days. A village street, with detached cottages standing in gardens gay with the homely flowers John Bunyan knew and loved, leads to the village green, fringed with churchyard elms, in the middle of which is the pedestal or stump of the market-cross, and at the upper end of the old "Moot Hall," a quaint brick and timber building, with a projecting upper storey, a good example of the domestic architecture of the fifteenth century, originally, perhaps, the Guesten-Hall of the adjacent nunnery, and afterwards the Court House of the manor when lay-lords had succeeded the abbesses - "the scene," writes Dr. Brown "of village festivities, statute hirings, and all the public occasions of village life."

The whole spot and its surroundings can be but little altered from the time when our hero was the ringleader of the youth of the place in the dances on the greensward, which he tells us he found it so hard to give up, and in "tip-cat," and the other innocent games which his diseased conscience afterwards regarded as "ungodly practices." One may almost see the hole from which he was going to strike his "cat" that memorable Sunday afternoon when he silenced the inward voice which rebuked him for his sins, and "returned desperately to his sport again." On the south side of the green, as we have said, stands the church, a fine though somewhat rude fragment of the chapel of the nunnery curtailed at both ends, of Norman and Early English date, which, with its detached bell tower, was the scene of some of the fierce spiritual conflicts so vividly depicted by Bunyan in his "Grace Abounding." On entering every object speaks of Bunyan. The pulpit - if it has survived the recent restoration - is the same from which Christopher Hall, the then "Parson" of Elstow, preached the sermon which first awoke his sleeping conscience. The font is that in which he was baptized, as were also his father and mother and remoter progenitors, as well as his children, Mary, his dearly-loved blind child, on July 20, 1650, and her younger sister, Elizabeth, on April 14, 1654. An old oaken bench, polished by the hands of thousands of visitors attracted to the village church by the fame of the tinker of Elstow, is traditionally shown as the seat he used to occupy when he "went to church twice a day, and that, too, with the foremost counting all things holy that were therein contained." The five bells which hang in the belfry are the same in which Bunyan so much delighted, the fourth bell, tradition says, being that he was used to ring. The rough flagged floor, "all worn and broken with the hobnailed boots of generations of ringers," remains undisturbed. One cannot see the door, set in its solid masonry, without recalling the figure of Bunyan standing in it, after conscience, "beginning to be tender," told him that "such practice was but vain," but yet unable to deny himself the pleasure of seeing others ring, hoping that, "if a bell should fall," he could "slip out" safely "behind the thick walls," and so "be preserved notwithstanding." Behind the church, on the south side, stand some picturesque ivy-clad remains of the once stately mansion of the Hillersdons, erected on the site of the nunnery buildings in the early part of the seventeenth century, with a porch attributed to Inigo Jones, which may have given Bunyan the first idea of "the very stately Palace, the name of which was Beautiful."

The cottage where Bunyan was born, between the two brooks in the fields at Harrowden, has been so long destroyed that even the knowledge of its site has passed away. That in which he lived for six years (1649-1655) after his first marriage, and where his children were born, is still standing in the village street, but modern reparations have robbed it of all interest.

From this description of the surroundings among which Bunyan passed the earliest and most impressionable years of his life, we pass to the subject of our biography himself. The notion that Bunyan was of gipsy descent, which was not entirely rejected by Sir Walter Scott, and which has more recently received elaborate support from writers on the other side of the Atlantic, may be

pronounced absolutely baseless. Even if Bunyan's inquiry of his father "whether the family was of Israelitish descent or no," which has been so strangely pressed into the service of the theory, could be supposed to have anything to do with the matter, the decided negative with which his question was met - "he told me, 'No, we were not'" - would, one would have thought, have settled the point. But some fictions die hard. However low the family had sunk, so that in his own words, "his father's house was of that rank that is meanest and most despised of all the families in the land," "of a low and inconsiderable generation," the name, as we have seen, was one of long standing in Bunyan's native county, and had once taken far higher rank in it. And his parents, though poor, were evidently worthy people, of good repute among their village neighbours.

Bunyan seems to be describing his own father and his wandering life when he speaks of "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." He and his wife were also careful with a higher care that their children should be properly educated. "Notwithstanding the meanness and inconsiderableness of my parents," writes Bunyan, "it pleased God to put it into their hearts to put me to school, to learn both to read and write." If we accept the evidence of the "Scriptural Poems," published for the first time twelve years after his death, the genuineness of which, though questioned by Dr. Brown, there seems no sufficient reason to doubt, the little education he had was "gained in a grammar school." This would have been that founded by Sir William Harpur in Queen Mary's reign in the neighbouring town of Bedford. Thither we may picture the little lad trudging day by day along the mile and a half of footpath and road from his father's cottage by the brookside, often, no doubt, wet and miry enough, not, as he says, to "go to school to Aristotle or Plato," but to be taught "according to the rate of other poor men's children."

The Bedford school-master about this time, William Barnes by name, was a negligent sot, charged with "night-walking" and haunting "taverns and alehouses," and other evil practices, as well as with treating the poor boys "when present" with a cruelty which must have made them wish that his absences, long as they were, had been more protracted. Whether this man was his master or no, it was little that Bunyan learnt at school, and that little he confesses with shame he soon lost "almost utterly." He was before long called home to help his father at the Harrowden forge, where he says he was "brought up in a very mean condition among a company of poor countrymen." Here, with but little to elevate or refine his character, the boy contracted many bad habits, and grew up what Coleridge somewhat too strongly calls "a bitter blackguard." According to his own remorseful confession, he was "filled with all unrighteousness," having "from a child" in his "tender years," "but few equals both for cursing, swearing, lying and blaspheming the holy name of God." Sins of this kind he declares became "a second nature to him;" he "delighted in all transgression against the law of God," and as he advanced in his teens he became a "notorious sinbreeder," the "very ringleader," he says, of the village lads "in all manner of vice and ungodliness."

But the unsparing condemnation passed by Bunyan, after his conversion, on his former self, must not mislead us into supposing him ever, either as boy or man, to have lived a vicious life. "The wickedness of the tinker," writes Southey, "has been greatly overrated, and it is taking the language of self-accusation too literally to pronounce of John Bunyan that he was at any time depraved." The justice of this verdict of acquittal is fully accepted by Coleridge. "Bunyan," he says, "was never in our received sense of the word 'wicked.' He was chaste, sober, and honest." He hints at youthful escapades, such, perhaps, as orchard-robbing, or when a little older, poaching, and the like, which might have brought him under "the stroke of the laws," and put him to "open shame before the face of the world." But he confesses to no crime or profligate habit. We have no reason to suppose that he was ever drunk, and we have his own most solemn declaration that he was never guilty of an act of unchastity. "In our days," to quote Mr. Froude, "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." How then, it may be asked, are we to explain the passionate language in which he expresses his self-abhorrence, which would hardly seem exaggerated in the mouth of the most profligate and licentious? We are confident that Bunyan meant what he said. So intensely honest a nature could not allow his words to go beyond his convictions. When he speaks of "letting loose the reins to his lusts," and sinning "with the greatest delight and ease," we know that however exaggerated they may appear to us, his expressions did not seem to him overstrained. Dr. Johnson marvelled that St. Paul could call himself "the chief of sinners," and expressed a doubt whether he did so honestly. But a highly-strung spiritual nature like that of the apostle, when suddenly called into exercise after a period of carelessness, takes a very different estimate of sin from that of the world, even the decent moral world, in general. It realizes its own offences, venial as they appear to others, as sins against infinite love - a love unto death - and in the light of the sacrifice on Calvary, recognizes the heinousness of its guilt, and while it doubts not, marvels that it can be pardoned. The sinfulness of sin - more especially their own sin - is the intensest of all possible realities to them. No language is too strong to describe it. We may not unreasonably ask whether this estimate, however exaggerated it may appear to those who are strangers to these spiritual experiences, is altogether a mistaken one?

The spiritual instinct was very early awakened in Bunyan. While still a child "but nine or ten years old," he tells us he was racked with convictions of sin, and haunted with religious fears. He was scared with "fearful dreams," and "dreadful visions," and haunted in his sleep with "apprehensions of devils and wicked spirits" coming to carry him away, which made his bed a place of terrors. The thought of the Day of Judgment and of the torments of the lost, often came as a dark cloud over his mind in the midst of his boyish sports, and made him tremble.

But though these fevered visions embittered his enjoyment while they lasted, they were but transient, and after a while they entirely ceased "as if they had never been," and he gave himself up without restraint to the youthful pleasures in which his ardent nature made him ever the ringleader. The "thoughts of religion" became very grievous to him. He could not endure even to see others read pious books; "it would be as a prison to me." The awful realities of eternity which had once been so crushing to his spirit were "both out of sight and mind." He said to God, "depart from me." According to the later morbid estimate which stigmatized as sinful what were little more than the wild acts of a roystering dare-devil young fellow, full of animal spirits and with an unusually active imagination, he "could sin with the greatest delight and ease, and take pleasure in the vileness of his companions." But that the sense of religion was not wholly dead in him even then, and that while discarding its restraints he had an inward reverence for it, is shown by the horror he experienced if those who had a reputation for godliness dishonoured their profession. "Once," he says, "when I was at the height of my vanity, hearing one to swear who was reckoned for a religious man, it had so great a stroke upon my spirit that it made my heart to ache."

This undercurrent of religious feeling was deepened by providential escapes from accidents which threatened his life - "judgments mixed with mercy" he terms them, - which made him feel that he was not utterly forsaken of God. Twice he narrowly escaped drowning; once in "Bedford river" - the Ouse; once in "a creek of the sea," his tinkering rounds having, perhaps, carried him as far northward as the tidal inlets of the Wash in the neighbourhood of Spalding or Lynn, or to the estuaries of the Stour and Orwell to the east. At another time, in his wild contempt of danger, he tore out, while his companions looked on with admiration, what he mistakenly supposed to be an adder's sting.

These providential deliverances bring us to that incident in his brief career as a soldier which his anonymous biographer tells us "made so deep an impression upon him that he would never mention it, which he often did, without thanksgiving to God." But for this occurrence, indeed, we should have probably never known that he had ever served in the army at all. The story is best told in his own provokingly brief words - "When I was a soldier I with others were 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; to which when I consented, he took my place, and coming to the siege, as he stood sentinel, he was shot in the head with a musket bullet and died." Here, as is so often the case in Bunyan's autobiography, we have reason to lament the complete absence of details. This is characteristic of the man. The religious import of the occurrences he records constituted their only value in his eyes; their temporal setting, which imparts their chief interest to us, was of no account to him.

He gives us not the slightest clue to the name of the besieged place, or even to the side on which he was engaged. The date of the event is left equally vague. The last point however we are able to determine with something like accuracy.

November, 1644, was the earliest period at which Bunyan could have entered the army, for it was not till then that he reached the regulation age of sixteen. Domestic circumstances had then recently occurred which may have tended to estrange him from his home, and turn his thoughts to a military life. In the previous June his mother had died, her death being followed within a month by that of his sister Margaret. Before another month was out, his father, as we have already said, had married again, and whether the new wife had proved the proverbial INJUSTA NOVERCA or not, his home must have been sufficiently altered by the double, if we may not say triple, calamity, to account for his leaving the dull monotony of his native village for the more stirring career of a soldier. Which of the two causes then distracting the nation claimed his adherence, Royalist or Parliamentarian, can never be determined. As Mr. Froude writes, "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 thought the matter of too small importance to be worth mentioning with exactness."

The only evidence is internal, and the deductions from it vary with the estimate of the counter-balancing probabilities taken by Bunyan's various biographers. Lord Macaulay, whose conclusion is ably, and, we think, convincingly supported by Dr. Brown, decides in favour of the side of the Parliament. Mr. Froude, on the other hand, together with the painstaking Mr. Offor, holds that "probability is on the side of his having been with the Royalists." Bedfordshire, however, was one of the "Associated Counties" from which the Parliamentary army drew its main strength, and it was shut in by a strong line of defence from any combination with the Royalist army. In 1643 the county had received an order requiring it to furnish "able and armed men" to the garrison at Newport Pagnel, which was then the base of operations against the King in that part of England. All probability therefore points to John Bunyan, the lusty young tinker of Elstow, the leader in all manly sports and adventurous enterprises among his mates, and probably caring very little on what side he fought, having been drafted to Newport to serve under Sir Samuel Luke, of Cople, and other Parliamentary commanders. The place of the siege he refers to is equally undeterminable. A tradition current within a few years of Bunyan's death, which Lord Macaulay rather rashly invests with the certainty of fact, names Leicester. The only direct evidence for this is the statement of an anonymous biographer, who professes to have been a personal friend of Bunyan's, that he was present at the siege of Leicester, in 1645, as a soldier in the Parliamentary army. This statement, however, is in direct defiance of Bunyan's own words. For the one thing certain in the matter is that wherever the siege may have been, Bunyan was not at it. He tells us plainly that he was "drawn to go," and that when he was just starting, he gave up his place to a comrade who went in his room, and was shot through the head. Bunyan's presence at the siege of Leicester, which has been so often reported that it has almost been regarded as an historical truth, must therefore take its place among the baseless creations of a fertile fancy.

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