

Fox's Book of Martyrs

A History of the lives, sufferings and triumphant deaths of the early Christian martyrs

Edited by William Byron Forbush

CHAPTER XIX

An Account of the Life and Persecutions of John Bunyan

This great Puritan was born the same year that the Pilgrim Fathers landed at Plymouth. His home was Elstow, near Bedford, in England. His father was a tinker and he was brought up to the same trade. He was a lively, likeable boy with a serious and almost morbid side to his nature. All during his young manhood he was repenting for the vices of his youth and yet he had never been either a drunkard or immoral. The particular acts that troubled his conscience were dancing, ringing the church bells, and playing cat. It was while playing the latter game one day that "a voice did suddenly dart from Heaven into my soul, which said, 'Wilt thou leave thy sins and go to Heaven, or have thy sins and go to Hell?'" At about this time he overheard three or four poor women in Bedford talking, as they sat at the door in the sun. "Their talk was about the new birth, the work of God in the hearts. They were far above my reach."

In his youth he was a member of the parliamentary army for a year. The death of his comrade close beside him deepened his tendency to serious thoughts, and there were times when he seemed almost insane in his zeal and penitence. He was at one time quite assured that he had sinned the unpardonable sin against the Holy Ghost. While he was still a young man he married a good woman who bought him a library of pious books which he read with assiduity, thus confirming his earnestness and increasing his love of religious controversies.

His conscience was still further awakened through the persecution of the religious body of Baptists to whom he had joined himself. Before he was thirty years old he had become a leading Baptist preacher.

Then came his turn for persecution. He was arrested for preaching without license. "Before I went down to the justice, I begged of God that His will be done; for I was not

without hopes that my imprisonment might be an awakening to the saints in the country. Only in that matter did I commit the thing to God. And verily at my return I did meet my God sweetly in the prison."

His hardships were genuine, on account of the wretched condition of the prisons of those days. To this confinement was added the personal grief of being parted from his young and second wife and four small children, and particularly, his little blind daughter. While he was in jail he was solaced by the two books which he had brought with him, the Bible and Fox's "Book of Martyrs."

Although he wrote some of his early books during this long imprisonment, it was not until his second and shorter one, three years after the first, that he composed his immortal "Pilgrim's Progress," which was published three years later. In an earlier tract he had thought briefly of the similarity between human life and a pilgrimage, and he now worked this theme out in fascinating detail, using the rural scenery of England for his background, the splendid city of London for his Vanity Fair, and the saints and villains of his own personal acquaintance for the finely drawn characters of his allegory.

The "Pilgrim's Progress" is truly the rehearsal of Bunyan's own spiritual experiences. He himself had been the 'man cloathed in Rags, with his Face from his own House, a Book in his hand, and a great Burden upon his Back.' After he had realized that Christ was his Righteousness, and that this did not depend on "the good frame of his Heart"-or, as we should say, on his feelings-"now did the Chains fall off my legs indeed." His had been Doubting Castle and Sloughs of Despond, with much of the Valley of Humiliation and the Shadow of Death. But, above all, it is a book of Victory. Once when he was leaving the doors of the courthouse where he himself had been defeated, he wrote: "As I was going forth of the doors, I had much ado to bear saying to them, that I carried the peace of God along with me." In his vision was ever the Celestial City, with all its bells ringing. He had fought Apollyon constantly, and often wounded, shamed and fallen, yet in the end "more than conqueror through Him that loved us."

His book was at first received with much criticism from his Puritan friends, who saw in it only an addition to the worldly literature of his day, but there was not much then for Puritans to read, and it was not long before it was devoutly laid beside their Bibles and perused with gladness and with profit. It was perhaps two centuries later before literary critics began to realize that this story, so full of human reality and interest and so marvelously modeled upon the English of the King James translation of the Bible, is one of the glories of English literature. In his later years he wrote several other allegories, of which of one of them, "The Holy War," it has been said that, "If the 'Pilgrim's Progress' had never been written it would be regarded as the finest allegory in the language."

During the later years of his life, Bunyan remained in Bedford as a venerated local pastor and preacher. He was also a favorite speaker in the non-conformist pulpits of London. He became so national a leader and teacher that he was frequently called "Bishop Bunyan."

In his helpful and unselfish personal life he was apostolic.

His last illness was due to exposure upon a journey in which he was endeavoring to reconcile a father with his son. His end came on the third of August, 1688. He was buried in Bunhill Fields, a church yard in London.

There is no doubt but that the "Pilgrim's Progress" has been more helpful than any other book but the Bible. It was timely, for they were still burning martyrs in Vanity Fair while he was writing. It is enduring, for while it tells little of living the Christian life in the family and community, it does interpret that life so far as it is an expression of the solitary soul, in homely language. Bunyan indeed "showed how to build a princely throne on humble truth." He has been his own Greatheart, dauntless guide to pilgrims, to many.