

and, without doubt greatly blessed, because they were the servants, as I then thought, of God, and were principal in the temple to do his work therein."

So strong was this superstitious feeling—one shared by the ignorant peasantry in many portions of England, even at the present day—that "had he but seen a priest, though never so sordid and debauched in his life, his spirit would fall under him; and he could have lain down at their feet and been trampled upon by them—their name, their garb, and work, did so intoxicate and bewitch him." It little matters what form superstition takes—image-worship, priest-worship, or temple-worship; nothing is transforming except Christ in the heart, a Saviour realized, accepted, and enthroned. Whilst adoring the altar, and worshipping the surplice, and defying the individual who wore it, Bunyan continued to curse and blaspheme, and spend his Sabbaths in the same riots as before.

One day, however, he heard a sermon on the sin of Sabbath-breaking. It fell heavy on his conscience; for it seemed all intended for him. It haunted him through the day, and when he went to his usual diversion in the afternoon, its cadence was still knelling in his troubled ear. He was busy at a game called "Cat," and had already struck the ball one blow, and was about to deal another, when "a voice darted from heaven into his soul, 'Wilt thou leave thy sins and go to heaven, or have thy sins and go to hell?'" His arm was arrested, and looking up to heaven, it seemed as if the Lord Jesus was looking down upon him in remonstrance and severe displeasure; and at the same instant, the conviction flashed across him, that he had sinned so long that repentance was now too late. "My state is surely miserable—miserable if I leave my sins, and but miserable if I follow them. I can but be damned; and if I must be so, I had as good be damned for many sins as few." In the desperation of his awful conclusion he resumed the game; and so persuaded was he that heaven was forever forfeited, that for some time after he made it his deliberate policy to enjoy the pleasures of sin rapidly and intensely as possible.

To understand the foregoing incident, and some which may follow, the reader must remember that Bunyan was made up of vivid fancy and vehement emotion. He seldom believed; he always felt and saw. And he could do nothing by halves. He threw a whole heart into his love and his hatred; and when he rejoiced or trembled, the entire man and every movement was converted into ecstacy or horror. Many have experienced the dim counterpart of such processions as we are now describing; but will scarcely recognise their own equivalent history in the bright realizations and agonizing vicissitudes of a mind so fervent and ideal.

For a month or more he went on in his resolute sinning, only grudging that he could not get such scope as the madness of despair solicited, when one day standing at a neighbour's window, cursing and swearing, and "playing the madman, after his wonted manner," the woman of the house protested that he made her tremble, and that truly he was the ungodliest fellow for swearing that she ever heard in all her life, and quite enough to ruin the youth of the whole town. The woman was herself a notoriously worthless character; and so severe a reproof, from so strange a quarter, had a singular effect on Bunyan's mind. He was in a moment silenced. He blushed before the God of heaven; and as he there stood with a hanging head, he wished with all his heart that he were a little child again, that his father might teach him to speak without profanity; for he thought it so inordinate now, that reformation was out of question. Nevertheless, so it was, from that instant onward he was cured of his wicked habit, and peopled wondered at the change.

"Quickly after this I fell into company with one poor man that made profession of religion; who, as I then thought, did talk pleasantly of the Scriptures and of the matter of religion. Wherefore, falling into some love and liking of what he said, I betook me to my Bible, and began to take great pleasure in reading, but with the historical part thereof; for as for Paul's Epistles and such like Scriptures, I could not away with them, being as yet ignorant of the corruption of my nature, or of the want and worth of Jesus Christ to save me. Wherefore I fell into some outward reformation, both in my words and life, and did set the commandments before me for my way to heaven; which commandments I also did strive to keep, and, as I thought, did keep them pretty well sometimes, and then I should have comfort; yet now and then should break one, and so afflict my conscience; but then I should repent, and was sorry for it, and promise God to do better next time, and there got help again; for then I thought I pleased God as well as any man in England. Thus I continued about a year; all which time our neighbours did take me to be a very godly man, a new and religious man, and did marvel much to see such great and famous alteration in my life and manners; and indeed so it was, though I knew not Christ, nor grace, nor faith, nor hope; for, as I have well since seen, had I then died, my state had been most fearful. But, I say, my neighbours were amazed at this my great conversion, from prodigious profaneness to something like a moral life; and so well they might; for this my conversion was as great as for Tom of Bedlam to become a sober man. Now, therefore, they began to speak well of me, both before my face and behind my back. Now I was, as they said, become godly; now I was become a right honest man. But oh! when I understood these were their words and opinions of me, it pleased me mighty well. For though, as yet, I was nothing but a poor painted hypocrite, yet I loved to be talked of as one that was truly good. . . . And thus continued for about twelvemonth or more."

Though not acting from enlightened motives, Bunyan was now under the guidance of new influences. For just as the Spirit of God puts forth a restraining influence on many during the days of their carnality, which

makes the change of their conversion less conspicuous than if they had been lifted from the depths of a flagitious reprobacy; he long subjects to a preparatory process, during which some of the old and most offensive things of their ungodliness pass away; and when the revolution, effected by the entrance of the evangelical motive, at last takes place, it is rather to personal consciousness than to outward observation that the change is perceptible. The real and final transformation is rather within the man than upon him. So was it with John Bunyan. One by one he abandoned his besetting sins, and made many concessions to conscience, while as yet he had not yielded his heart to the Saviour. It was slowly and regretfully, however, that he severed the "right hand." One of his principal amusements was one which he could not comfortably continue. It was bell-ringing; by which he probably means the merry peals with which they used to desecrate their Sabbath evenings. It was only with degrees that he was able to abandon this favourite diversion. "What if one of the bells should fall?" To provide against this contingency, he took his stand under a beam fastened across the tower. "But what if the falling bell should rebound from one of the side walls, and hit me after all?" This thought sent him down stairs, and made him take his station, rope in hand, at the steeple door. "But what if the steeple itself should come down?" This thought banished him altogether, and he bade adieu to bell-ringing. And by a similar series of concessions, eventually, but with longer delay, he gave up another practice, for which his conscience checked him—dancing. All these improvements in his conduct were a source of much complacency to himself, though all this he wanted the soul-emanipulating and sin-subduing knowledge of Jesus Christ. The Son had not made him free.

There is such a thing as cant. It is possible for flippant pretenders to acquire a peculiar phraseology, and use it with a painful dexterity; and it is also possible for genuine Christians to subside into a state of mind so listless or secular, that their talk on religious topics will have the imane and heartless sound of the tinkling cymbal. But as there is an experimental religion, so is it possible for those who have felt religion in its vitality to exchange their thoughts regarding it, and to relate what it—or rather, God in it—has done for them. There are few things which indicate a healthier state of personal piety than such a frank and full-hearted Christian intercourse. It was a specimen of such communings which impressed on the mind of Bunyan the need of something beyond an outside reformation. He had gone to Bedford in prosecution of his calling, when, passing along the street, he noticed a few poor women sitting in a door-way, and talking together. He drew near to listen to their discourse. It surprised him; for though he had by this time become a great talker on sacred subjects, their themes were far beyond his reach. God's work in their souls, the views they had obtained of their natural misery and of God's love in Christ Jesus, what words and promises had particularly refreshed them and strengthened them against the temptation of Satan; it was of matters so personal and vital that they spake to one another. "And methought they spake as if you had made them speak; they spake with such pleasantness of Scripture language, and with such appearance of grace in all they said, that they were to me as if they had found a new world—as if they were people that dwelt alone, and were not to be reckoned among their neighbours."

The conversion of these people made a deep impression on Bunyan's mind. He saw that there was something in real religion into which he had not yet penetrated. He sought the society of these humble instructors, and learned from them much that he had not known before. He began to read the Bible with avidity; and that portion which had formerly been most distasteful, the Epistles of Paul, now became the subject of his special study. A sect of Antinomians, now boasted that they could do whatsoever they pleased without sinning, now fell in his way. Professors of religion were rapidly embracing their opinions, and there was something in their wild fervour and apparent raptures, prepossessing to the ardent mind of Bunyan. He read their books, and pondered their principles; but prefaced his examination with the simple prayer,—"O Lord, I am a fool, and not able to know the truth from error. Lord, leave me not to my own blindness. If this doctrine be of God, let me not despise it; if it be of the devil, let me not embrace it. Lord, in this matter I lay my soul only at thy foot; let me not be deceived, I humbly beseech thee." His prayer was heard, and he was saved from this snare of the devil.

The object to which the eye of an inquiring sinner should be turned, is Christ—the finished work and the sufficient Saviour. But, in point of fact, the chief stress of the more evangelical instruction has usually been laid on Faith—on that act of the mind which unites the soul to the Saviour, and makes salvation personal; and it is only by studying faith that many have come at last to an indirect and circuitous acquaintance with Christ. By some such misdirection Bunyan was misled. In quest of faith he went a long and joyless journey, and was wearied with the greatness of his way. It was secretly urged upon his mind, that if he had faith he would be able to work miracles; and passages of Scriptures were borne in upon his mind, which bespoke the omnipotence of faith. One day, on the road from Elstow to Bedford, it was suggested to his mind to try some miracle, and that miracle should be, "to say to the puddles which were in the horse-pads, 'Be dry,' and to the dry places, 'Be you puddles.'" However, before doing this, he thought he should go over the hedge and pray for faith, and then come and speak the word. "But what if, after you have prayed and tried to do it, nothing happens?" The dread of this alternative made him postpone the anxious experiment, and left him still in doubt.