

# The Wife of Bunyan

Taken from the book entitled, *Heroines of the Faith*, early 1900's

The influence for good which a woman can exert in shaping the life and character of her husband has never been more strikingly shown than in the case of John Bunyan. It is well known that as a youth he was wild and reckless, the leader in all mischief, and a terrible swearer; "enough," as one woman told him, "by his example to spoil the youth of the whole town." He was not, however, altogether bad, and his conscience frequently reproached him for his wild ways; but it remained for his wife to stir up the good qualities of his nature, which lay dormant.

When just verging on manhood he married a young woman, of whom we know very little beyond the fact that she was "born of good, honest, godly parents, who had instructed her as well as they were able in the ways of truth and saving knowledge." The young couple settled down at Elstow, near Bedford, where Bunyan worked as a tinker. They were very poor, "not having so much household stuff as a dish or a spoon betwixt them." The wife, however, had two good books, which her father had given her—*The Plain Man's Pathway to Heaven*, and *The Practice of Piety*. These she persuaded her husband to read, and he was thus awakened to a full knowledge of the wickedness of his past life.

The struggle between good and evil which followed was long and severe. Gradually he gave up his bad ways, till at length he became a Christian. Throughout his conflict he was sustained and comforted by the devotion of his wife. She, however, only lived to see the fulfilment of her hopes and desires, for about 1656 she died, leaving two sons and two daughters, one of whom was blind.

Bunyan was now called by the brethren of the Baptist Church at Bedford to preach in the villages round about. The earnestness of his words carried conviction to his hearers, and crowds flocked to hear him.

In 1659 Bunyan married again. More is known of his second wife, Elizabeth; she is described as being equal in piety to the first, but of greater intelligence and fortitude. She had only been married about a year when Charles the Second came to the throne, and at once proceeded to enact laws against all who would not conform to the services of the Church of England. Ministers who did not belong to the Episcopal Church were forbidden to preach even in the open air, and all who attended their meetings were to be punished. Many of those who refused to obey the King were imprisoned. In defiance of these laws Bunyan continued to pass from village to village in the fulfilment of his duties. Towards the end of 1660 he was arrested and thrown into prison.

At the end of a few months he was brought before the magistrates at Bedford. The charge against him was, "that being a labourer, he had perniciously abstained from going to church to hear divine service, and was a common upholder of several unlawful meetings and conventicles, to the great disturbance and distraction of the good people of this kingdom, contrary to the laws of our sovereign lord, the King."

Bunyan admitted that he had long since ceased to attend the parish church because he could not find in the Bible that he was commanded to do so, and that he had with those like minded as himself held meetings for prayer and instruction in the Word of God. This was taken as a confession of guilt, and sentence was accordingly passed in the following words :

"You must be had back again to prison, and there lie for three months following, and at the end of that time if you do not submit to go to church to hear divine service, and leave your preaching, you must be banished the realm. And if after such a day as shall be appointed you to be gone, you shall be found in this realm, or be found to come over again without special license from the King, you must stretch by the neck for it, I tell you plainly."

To this Bunyan replied that he should preach when- ever he got the chance.

In the events which followed, Mrs. Bunyan proved herself a worthy companion for such a man. When the sentence was pronounced she was in very weak health, and the state of agitation into which she was thrown brought on a serious illness which nearly proved fatal. Fear for her husband's welfare greatly retarded her recovery. She knew well that his determined character and uncompromising zeal, which led him openly to defy the authorities, would sooner or later end in his banishment or death. What to do to save him she knew not. The local magistrates spurned her oft-repeated petitions, and she was in despair.

At length the 23rd of April 1661 was fixed for the coronation of Charles, and in this event the faithful wife saw one last grand remaining chance to obtain her husband's freedom, for it was customary to signalize such an event by the release of a number of prisoners. Might not her husband be among that number? No, it could not be; ordinary criminals who had merely transgressed the laws might be released with safety, but Bunyan was no ordinary criminal. He had opposed the King in a cherished ambition, and if such an one was set free, who could foretell the consequences; might there not be a repetition of the scene enacted at Whitehall thirteen years before? So the King may have reasoned; at all events he refused to allow Bunyan his liberty.

In spite of repeated rebuffs, Elizabeth continued fondly to cherish the hope of accomplishing her object. She determined to address the Government in person. She accordingly went to London, and presented a petition in the House of Lords praying for her husband to be released. The Peers were friendly disposed towards her, and took great interest in her case. They could not, however, grant her request, as her husband had in the meantime repeated his refusal to obey the commands of the court. He would neither attend the parish church nor give up preaching, and was accordingly sent back to his cell to await the decision of the assize judges at the court to be held in August.

Disappointed, but resolute, she returned to Bedford to make preparations for laying her appeal before the authorities. Nothing was forgotten, no scheme left untried. On three occasions she presented three different petitions to the judges, begging them to take an impartial view of her husband's case, and not to pass sentence of condemnation until they had heard him in his own defense. At the present time such a request seems highly absurd; but in those days it was necessary, and to a certain extent advisable, for "the fountains of justice were corrupted, and the seats of judgment occupied by men who, in their judicial procedure, acting as the tools of a

tyrannical Government, often outraged the principles of justice, and even the law as it then existed."

She laid her first petition before Sir Matthew Hale. He was anxious to aid the poor woman, and promised to do what he could to help her. She threw the second into the coach of Judge Twisdon, who on reading it exclaimed, "Your husband is a convicted person, and cannot be released unless he promises to preach no more." Again she appeared before Judge Hale when he was on the bench; but owing to the hostility of his colleagues he refused to receive her petition, for he rightly thought that if he accepted it in opposition to them it would do her case more harm than good.

Afterwards, when the judges were sitting together talking, Elizabeth ventured again before them. "My lords," she said, "I make bold to come once more to you to know what may be done with my husband. He is kept unlawfully in prison, for he was never asked whether he was guilty or no, neither did he confess."

"He was lawfully convicted," remarked one of the judges.

"It is false," exclaimed Elizabeth, "for when he was asked if he confessed the indictment his only reply was that he had been at several meetings. It is false," she continued, "for it was but the word of a discourse that was taken for a confession."

"Will your husband leave off preaching?" asked Twisdon. "If he will do so, send for him."

"He dares not leave off preaching as long as he can speak, my lord."

"I told you so," said Twisdon angrily, turning to Sir Matthew Hale. "He is a rebel and a disturber of men's minds and the public rest."

"He desires to live peaceably and to follow his calling," said Elizabeth, "that his family may be maintained. He desires a fair trial and freedom; but because he is a tinker and a poor man he cannot have justice."

With these words she left the room. Speaking afterwards of this interview, she told her friends that "there was no prevailing to have my husband sent for, though I often desired them that they might send for him that he might speak for himself; telling them that he could give them better satisfaction than I could in what they demanded of him." The dignity and spirit which she displayed on her husband's behalf are among the finest instances on record of wifely courage in the defense of an absent and condemned prisoner. It is said that she shook the resolution of some of the judges; but they alone, among whom was Sir Matthew Hale, were unable to conquer the violent opposition which they met with.

During the long dreary period of twelve years Bunyan was a prisoner in Bedford Gaol. Fortunately, the kindness of friends and neighbours kept them from starving; but the patience of Mrs. Bunyan must have been sorely tried. She had ever before her eyes the thought that her husband might be exiled or executed, and the care of his four children under such circumstances

was no light task. But she did her duty faithfully and bravely, and, though she was at times inclined to question the utility of so much hardship and suffering, faith raised her up, supreme in the knowledge that "all things work together for good to them that love "God."

At length Bunyan obtained his freedom, and was chosen as the minister of a church in Bedford. The remaining sixteen years of his life were spent in the joyful performance of the work for which he had borne so much. Confinement had not lessened his power as a preacher, and his sermons were eagerly listened to by large audiences. The faithful Elizabeth had her reward, and was satisfied. Bunyan died in 1688, and four years later his wife followed him to the eternal city.

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