

The Pilgrim's Progress.

BY THE REV. JOHN KELMAN, JUN., M.A., EDINBURGH.

The Wicket Gate.

THIS passage is a masterpiece of power and simplicity, qualities which Bunyan learned from Christ's own style of metaphor—e.g. the 'Fold,' the 'Bread,' and indeed the 'Way' and the 'Gate.' It is in strong contrast to the elaboration of the same scene in the spurious third part of *The Pilgrim's Progress*.¹ In that there is much detail of a shower of arrows, a certificate, and a magic crutch replacing a weak reed, and having the virtue to stay the bleeding of wounds, to give strength, and to refresh the spirits by emitting an odoriferous perfume. Bunyan's experience of God's grace was a far simpler matter.

The Wicket Gate is said to have been suggested by the old church door at Elstow. But in the story it is brought out into the open and stands across the way, a mere gate without either an enclosure or a house. Obviously such a gate is there to mark a boundary. It stands for a decisive choice, separating the course of the journey into two sections, one before and the other after it. It is, as Cheever has called it, 'a beginning and an end.'

It stands for one aspect of conversion, its human aspect, as a decisive choice. The question has been asked why the gate stands so long before the Cross, and it is curious that Mr. Stead omits all mention of it in his children's version of the allegory. Bunyan has a marginal note to the effect that 'there is no deliverance from the guilt and burden of sin but by the death and blood of Christ'; and no one need fear on account of his orthodoxy! Yet he knew human nature well

¹ In 1692-93, four years after Bunyan's death, this Third Part was published by Joseph Blare, a London publisher, who signed the preface J. B., and professed that it was the fulfilment of the promise made in the last sentence of the Second Part. This preface is a model of audacity and cunning:—'It is a piece as rare and transcending what has hitherto been published of this kind, that I dare without any further apology, leave it to the censure of all mankind who are not partial or biassed: and so, not doubting but it will render comfort and delight, I subscribe myself as heretofore your soul's hearty well-wisher, J. B.' In the eighteenth and early nineteenth century editions it was usually bound up with the First and Second Parts.

enough to be aware that not always the same aspect of the great crisis comes first to a man. In this case Christian takes the critical step immediately upon a clear apprehension of God's *goodwill* in Christ. It is exactly the act which is described as repentance unto life in the answer to Question 87 of the Shorter Catechism. The full meaning of the Cross he will realize afterwards; meanwhile there is only the light shining on him through the archway—hope in God's goodwill seen in the framework of an active choice.

The illumination reminds us of the orientation of ancient temples, which were so built that on a certain day the light of the rising sun struck through the open door direct upon the statue of the god. The contrast is very significant. In the older case the light shone not to bless the man, but to honour the God—here it is upon the worshipper that it shines, and the great truth is proclaimed not only that man is for God, but that God is for man also.

It is a clever touch in Hawthorne's *Celestial Railroad* which obliterates the wicket gate from fashionable modern religion as a narrow and inconvenient obstruction (cf. Temple Bar in Fleet Street) and erects upon its site a railway station and ticket office, declining, however, to give an opinion as to whether the tickets will be received at the Celestial City. The difference between the two religions' is that the one has within it a distinct act of choice and the other no such decision.

Goodwill.

Whom does this figure stand for? One naturally thinks of the angels' word (Lk 2¹⁴), and there is from the first a suspicion of superhuman personality. This is distinctly developed in the Second Part, where Goodwill is spoken of as 'the Lord.' At this stage the author has hardly decided the point even with himself. It must have seemed a delicate and hazardous matter thus to represent the Saviour, and the indistinctness shows the modest reverence of Bunyan's spirit. In the famous Greek phrase, the figure is 'divine; or mortal, or both mingled.' It reminds one of Mr. Hole's picture of Christ looking down upon Jeru-

salem, where the face gains its unique impressiveness by being shadowed to indistinctness against the setting sun. The simple soul of Bunyan finds the right way in this as in so much else, the child entering where the man cannot enter. If we contrast this Goodwill with Milton's Christ, we feel at once how much too strong the light is in the latter presentment. The fact that makes such blending of the human and the divine possible at all is the great event of the Incarnation, in which history and mystery are so marvellously mingled; and the remembrance of this may have encouraged Bunyan in his daring portraiture. It is significant that by the time of the writing of Part Second Bunyan had as it were grown accustomed to the figure, and we miss there the delicate and almost timid shyness which is seen here. It is like a picture spoiled by retouching, and Dr. Kerr Bain justly notes how seldom an author may venture to introduce characters again in a second work. Abundant examples of sequels in fiction will occur to the reader.

Standing Before the Gate.

He knocked more than once or twice, we are told. This reminds us of the folly and presumption of staking our religious destinies upon a single test, such as the answer to a specific prayer, as if we had a right to prescribe immediacy to the great Will that stands behind. This man was wiser. All he saw was a wooden gate studded with iron nails, if the suggestion of Elstow Church be correct. All a man may see may be the chair he kneels at, or whatever part of the solid material world confronts him as he makes his spiritual choice, but ever through the waiting time there are the words, 'Knock, and it shall be opened unto you,' written overhead. While these words are there his duty and his wisdom are to wait.

Christian and Goodwill.

When Goodwill came to the gate it was a 'grave person' that Christian saw: the word *grave* retaining rather its older sense which the Latin *gravitas* expresses than the modern sense, in which it would be the epitome of the legend that though Christ was often seen in tears no one ever heard Him laugh.

In contrast with such a view, and showing how cordial the grave man may be, are the first words of Goodwill explicitly reported, 'I am willing with

all my heart.' These words are the refrain of some very beautiful verses, included in B. M.'s *EZEKIEL*, under the title of 'The Man at the Gate.' No words could better express the cordiality of Christ. They free Him from all ecclesiastical bonds of routine or mere form. Instead of being 'the head of the clerical party,' a functionary of the Church, he appears as a layman in all the freshness of Goodwill. Though pilgrims come to Him every day, yet each new soul is as interesting to Him as if it had been the first.

The little incident next told is deeply true to experience. The demonology of Bunyan will have our attention later. The air in Puritan times was full of devil-lore, and the stories regarding Luther had their parallel in the experience and imagination of all earnest men. The arrows of Beelzebub shot at souls near the wicket gate are those special temptations which come upon men while they stand before the great decision of their lives reasoning and hesitating. At such times the whole nature is excited and the nerves strung and tingling. Many examples might be quoted from Bunyan's own experience as related in *Grace Abounding*. In narratives of the more violent types of religious revival, such conditions frequently assume even physical aspects. But in any case it is a time of danger. By and by the man will have the shield of faith which comes after a strong output of the will in decision; as yet he is defenceless, and the one hope for safety is to flee quickly within. The *pull* given by Goodwill has much familiar Scripture behind it (cf. Cant 1⁴, Ps 18¹⁶, Jer 31³, Jn 6⁴⁴ 12³²). Here we have a very vivid description of God's act and man's free choice combined in the supreme event of conversion, as indeed they are combined in every act of life.

An extraordinary wealth of religious thought has gathered round the figure of the door open or shut. The words of Goodwill are from Rev 3⁸, and they give an additional hint of the divineness of the personality. We may contrast this with the shut door which no man can open, the tragedy of opportunity for ever lost, of which Christ tells in His parable of the ten virgins.

Another contrast may be suggested by the legend that before the destruction of Jerusalem the enormous brazen doors of the Temple swung open without the touch of hands for the exit of God. Again there are the two metaphors of Christ knocking and man knocking at a closed door, each of

which has its own significance at life's hour of crisis. Here, the thought that is most impressive is the contrast between without and within. Outside all is danger, the uncertainty and the fear of life; inside, the loving Christ and His embrace. Before the opening of the door some wait, as has been suggestively said, looking through open sparwork, beyond which they can see but cannot penetrate; while others seem to be facing closely joined planks relentlessly opaque. In either case the tragic fact is that as yet there is a plank's breadth between them and their highest destiny. Perhaps the strangest phenomenon of the gate is that so many go on knocking as if it were closed and fail to see that it is wide open already. There is a tale of a prisoner who lay for long years languishing in his cell, counting the stones in the wall, watching the spiders and the mice, until at last one day—he just rose up and walked out! In any case, after whatever experience on the other side, the supreme issues of life are in these simple words, 'he opened the gate.' To hear that gate shut behind us, to be suddenly sure of God's acceptance—life has no experience comparable with that.

The first question which Goodwill asks is How it is that Christian comes alone?—for as we shall find at the Palace Beautiful the Lord had said that He 'would not dwell in the mountain of Zion alone,' and He misses those who do not come.

In Christian's answer regarding Pliable we have the phrase repeated, 'that side next to his own house.' This vivid description of turning back has evidently caught the writer's ear. Yet Christian turns quickly to the confession of his own failure. It is the mark of a really great soul that he does not dismiss the names of those who have disappointed him with a bitter last word. There is no boasting over Pliable, but only a sense of what might have been in his own case. In the initial verse he had called himself an undeserving rebel—an epithet that shows marks of the times in which the book was written. Here he describes himself in a poorer aspect. The incident reminds us of the words of another famous Christian, who, on seeing a criminal being led to execution, exclaimed, 'There, but for the grace of God, goes John Bradford.'

All that Goodwill has to say about the dangerous mountain to which Christian had wandered is that it has been the death of many and will be the death of many more. One of the deepest mysteries

in the whole tragedy of life is the refusal of Christ to coerce the wills of men, and His sorrowful contemplation of the fact that there are those who will not come unto Him and have life. The next words of Goodwill abound in graciousness and remind us of Knox's sentence in his Communion service, 'Our Lord keepeth not back any penitent person, how grievous soever his sins before have been, but only such as continue in sin without repentance.' Thus is the figure of Goodwill a wonderful combination of awfulness and pleasant tenderness. His welcome is gentle and hearty as a child's, yet 'His decision is final; His will is fate.'

Goodwill's Directions.

The figure of the Way, taken up and made eternal by Jesus Christ, may be traced back to Isaiah's grand conception of the Highway (Is 19²³ 35⁸ 40³). It was a figure in which were blended a magnificent realization of past deliverance with an equally magnificent assurance for the future. The path, running high and straight across the desert, might be that which led from Egypt or from Babylon to the home-land of Israel. The narrowness of the way thus symbolized has been sometimes so understood as to teach that of two ways we must always choose the least pleasant if we are to be sure that it is the way of Christ. This is certainly a wrong view. God may, and often does, lead men in 'ways of pleasantness and paths of peace,' as He did of old. It is straightness that is the real test. In choosing between two possible careers, it is wholly a mistake to decide upon one simply because it involves more self-sacrifice than the other. The right question to ask is, Which of the two lies most directly in the line of usefulness and service? In which shall I best be able to exercise my powers, to let my natural disposition and education tell, and so to find my special destiny? Whichever path meets these requirements, it will be found at times narrow and difficult. There is the Cross, the need for some self-denial, in every day's journey.

It has been noticed already that Christian enters the wicket-gate with his burden still upon him. To those who find that strange, the words of Montgomery may be quoted, that '*The Pilgrim's Progress* is the history of *one* man's experience in *full*, and the experience of many others in *part*.' In fact this was Bunyan's own experience; for two

years, he tells us, he preached nothing but sin and hell. It will be observed that Christian does not take with him the love of sin, but only the weight of sin. There is in an old book of religious emblems a woodcut representing the covetous man struggling to get through the gate with an enormous bundle of wealth upon his back, but held from entering because the bundle was larger than the door. This John Bunyan would certainly have endorsed. The general course of experience here described seems to be that of a man who first knows the wonderful welcome of Christ's love, although his conscience is not yet at peace, and who afterwards comes to understand the Cross and is assured of release from sin. The practical lesson of it is, in Dr. Whyte's words, 'get into the right way and leave your burden to God.' It is thus that the labouring and heavy-laden *find* rest unto their souls. Christian began to gird up his loins, etc., is a phrase frequently repeated.

We can imagine the feelings with which Bunyan wrote the final words, 'Christian took leave of his

friend.' At first he may have hesitated to use such a familiar title for the person who has been growing more and more manifestly divine. Yet on second thoughts it could seem no irreverence, since Christ Himself had said, 'I have called you friends,' and 'ye are my friends.' Indeed it is the tenderness and familiarity of goodwill which are the note of all this passage. He is tenderer than Evangelist, tenderer than any man. His tenderness is that of the Shepherd whom Faber describes so feelingly in his hymn, 'Souls of men, why will ye scatter.' He is there to welcome pilgrims, and it is characteristic that He is described by Christian to the Interpreter as the 'man that *stands* at the gate.' It is Christ's typical attitude, as Stephen saw Him in his vision (Ac 7⁵⁵).

The contrast is inevitable between the reception at this gate and the story of the other gate (Gn 3²⁴), when—

Fierce as a comet
The hastening angel caught our lingering parents
And to the eastern gate led them direct.—MILTON.

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