

THE CASE OF JOHN BUNYAN. (I.)

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THE casuistry of the numerous forms of insistent mental processes of a pathological character has of late years become very extensive. The names and sub-classes of these morbidly insistent kinds of feeling, thought, or volition have occasionally been multiplied beyond any reason, until, in view of the endless '*manias*' and '*phobias*' that some writers have been disposed to dignify with special titles, I myself have sometimes wondered whether it would not be wise for some one, in the interests of good sense, to try to check this process by defining, as a peculiarly dangerous type of insistent impulses, a 'new mental disorder,' to be described as the '*mania*' for multiplying words ending in *mania* or in *phobia*. Meanwhile, despite this inconvenience, and despite numerous hasty speculations upon the whole subject, there can be no doubt that the theoretical interest of these morbidly insistent mental processes is great, and that the pathological secret and the genuine natural classification of these disorders will be such as well to repay the trouble of the most minute study of cases, if only that secret ever comes to be made out, and that natural classification is ever set up. And while we wait for further light, the careful preliminary scrutiny of cases is indeed the only course open to students of psychology.

The present paper is but a very modest contribution to the casuistry of the morbidly insistent mental processes. I have no new *phobia* or *mania* to define, and in any case I speak only as student of psychology. The medical reader might be able to see much more in the documents to which I here wish to attract his attention than I am able to see. My task is simply one of summary and report. The case to which I wish to call

attention is meanwhile one of peculiar interest, namely, that of the author of the *Pilgrim's Progress*. The principal document concerned is John Bunyan's remarkable confession, entitled *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*, an autobiographical statement which Bunyan wrote and published, as the title-page tells us, "for the support of the weak and tempted people of God." This little book is, from the literary point of view, of very high interest, ranking, as I suppose, amongst all the author's works, second only to the great *Pilgrim's Progress* itself. As a record of human experience, the *Grace Abounding* will never lose its charm, both for lovers of religious biography, and for admirers of honesty, of sincerity, and of simple pathos. Nothing that can be said as to the psychological significance of the author's recorded experiences will ever detract from the worth of the book, even when viewed just as the author viewed it, as a 'support' for the 'weak and tempted.' Bunyan, as we shall see, had at one time a decidedly heavy and morbid burden to bear. But, like many another nervous sufferer of the 'strong type' (Koch's *starker Typus*), Bunyan carried this burden with heroic perseverance, and in the end won the mastery over it by a most instructive kind of self-discipline. In view of this fact, a clearer recognition of the nature of the burden, from the psychological point of view, rather helps than hinders our admiration for the author's genius, and our respect for his unconquerable manhood. It is this sort of case, in fact, that renders the study of the nervous disorders so frequently associated with genius, a pursuit adapted, in very many instances, not to cheapen our sense of the dignity of genius, but to heighten our reverence for the strength that could contend, as some men of genius have done, with their disorders, and that could conquer the nervous 'Apollyon' on his own chosen battle-ground.

But an estimate of Bunyan's genius belongs not here. I venture only to say that I write as an especially profound admirer of this wonderful and untaught artist, whose homely style shows in almost every line the born master, whose simple realism in portraying human character as he saw it amongst the live men about him often puts to shame the ingenuity of scores of cunning literary craftsmen in these our

own most realistic days, and whose few highest flights of poetic imagination, such as the closing scenes of the first part of the *Pilgrim's Progress*, belong without question in the really loftiest regions of art. Range of invention, self-control in production, perfect objectivity in the portrayal of human life,—these are leading traits in the work of this man; and these things, as well as others that we shall later see, forever forbid our classing Bunyan, taken as a whole, amongst the weaklings. It is perfectly consistent with this fact, however, when we find this admirable man and artist living, for a bitter and instructive period of his early years, a life of stern conflict with a nervous foe of a fairly recognizable and, under the circumstances, decidedly grave type. How, unaided and ignorant, he won the victory, is in itself an interesting tale. And, for the rest, the case tends to throw light on the interesting problem as to how far the presence of elaborate insistent mental processes of a morbid type is of itself a sufficient indication of the depth of the 'degeneracy' of constitution of the subject who, is for a time burdened with them.* That Bunyan's malady must have had a certain constitutional basis will, I suppose, appear decidedly probable to most readers of the following summary. Yet it will be hard to question the fact that, quite apart from his special creative abilities, Bunyan's general constitution,—his extraordinary and persistent power of work, his long endurance of very serious mental and physical hardships, his reasonably lengthy life of sixty years (ended by an acute disease, due to an exposure), his apparently even temper and self-possession in later years, his sustained influence over men as leader, adviser, and preacher,—when taken all together, must give us an idea of his inherited organization that will, in any event, stand in a fairly strong con-

* The frequent association of the morbidly insistent processes with the nervously 'degenerate' type is a commonplace in the literature of the subject, and a few years since it was, I believe, an almost if not quite universal dogma that considerable masses of insistent fears, impulses, or thoughts occurred only as part of the 'stigmata' of degeneracy. The possibility of the development of even elaborate systems of such insistent impulses upon a basis of wholly acquired neurasthenia was maintained by Dr. Cowles, in his well-known paper on *Insistent and Fixed Ideas* in the *Amer. Journal of Psychology* (vol. 1. p. 222 sq.), and has also been asserted by others.

trast to the impression that the temporary nervous disorder of his early manhood, if it were taken alone, would leave upon our minds.

But a deeper estimate of such things I must leave to more competent judges. I have here only to present the facts.

I.

John Bunyan was born November 30, 1628, and died August 31, 1688. The principal known facts of his life which bear in any way upon the question of his health and constitution, apart from the narrative in the *Grace Abounding*, are as follows: * Bunyan was a native of the little village of Elstow, near Bedford. His family can be traced in Bedfordshire as far back as 1200. In the sixteenth century, an ancestor of Bunyan, and the wife of this ancestor, appear in court records as brewers and bakers. Thomas Bunyan, his grandfather, was 'a small village trader.' Difficulties in the courts are the occasion of some of the records preserved of these ancestors, but the difficulties named are petty, e.g., minor violations of excise laws, disrespect to churchwardens, and perhaps religious nonconformity. † Bunyan's father was notoriously, like Bunyan himself, a 'tinker' or 'brasier,' probably, says Brown, "neither better nor worse than the rest of the craftsmen of the hammer and the forge." Tinkers had, to be sure, in that time and place, a reputation as rather hard drinkers; but on the other hand they wandered much on foot, and so lived freely out of doors. Bunyan's father lived until 1676, dying at seventy-three years of age. The poet's mother was of a poor but very honest and thrifty family; she died when John Bunyan himself had reached the age of fifteen. Little more is known of the family before we reach our poet himself. He was not an only child. One sister is known to have died early. One brother is known to have lived until 1695.

* I use, for the most part, the principal recent biography, that of John Brown (2d edition, London, 1886)—an elaborate and extremely patient research into every discoverable detail relating to Bunyan's family and fortunes. Other recent accounts are those of Venables (in the 'Great Writers' series, London, 1888) and of Froude (in the 'English Men of Letters' series). The ground has thus been very thoroughly gone over, for all literary purposes, in recent years.

† Brown, pp. 27-31.

Of John Bunyan's childhood history we shall see a little soon. In youth he was apparently, until after the time of his marriage, of pretty lusty health. The 'wicked' early life of which he speaks so severely in his *Grace Abounding* proves, on the whole, to have been, physically speaking, a wholesome life, during all the time preceding his conversion. Alcoholic excesses and unchastity are, in the opinion of all his modern biographers, nearly or quite excluded by what we most certainly know of him at this time. At about sixteen years of age Bunyan was enrolled in the army, probably on the Parliamentary side, and remained some two years in service, but apparently without any physical ill effects. He married at twenty years of age, both himself and his wife being very poor. He now followed his trade as tinker. Within the next four years fall, first his conversion, and then the experiences of which we are principally to speak in what follows. In these years, furthermore, falls also the birth of his first child, a daughter who was very early blind. In 1653, after he had passed through these principal experiences, he joined the church in Bedford. In 1654 his second child was born, also a daughter. In 1655 he began that career as preacher which he continued thenceforward, so far as he was permitted to do so, until the end. In 1660 he was imprisoned in the county jail at Bedford, for violating the law by acting as an irregular preacher; and there he remained, in a confinement which varied in its degrees of strictness, for some twelve years. The physical strain of this imprisonment must have been great, and the mental anxieties involved were of the severest, as we learn from his own account; yet Bunyan plainly experienced no return of his previous mental troubles with anything like their old force. He was now often weak in body and depressed in mind, but never long despairing. He busied himself both in preaching to his fellow-prisoners and in writing. He was released in 1672. For three years thereafter he was at liberty. In 1675-6 he suffered a second imprisonment, during which it was, according to recent research, that he wrote the *Pilgrim's Progress*.* Thenceforth he continued working as writer and preacher to the end.

* Brown, p. 254; Venables, p. 151.

The list of his works contains 'sixty pieces,' says his first bibliographer, 'and he was sixty years of age.' One standard edition occupies four volumes octavo. His works are, of course, largely theological. They are certainly laborious productions, even apart from the genius involved; for this man was never trained to write.

As to his health otherwise, we know that, after 1653, there was a time in his early life when, as he says, "I was much inclining to a consumption, wherewith, about the Spring, I was suddenly and violently seized with much weakness in my outward man, insomuch that I thought I could not live." Other times, still later, he mentions, when he was 'very ill and weak'; and he notes great depression of spirits as characteristic of his state at all such times.* Brown† holds, concerning Bunyan, that "at any time he was far from strong" as to physical health. But when one considers his remarkable activity both as writer and preacher, and the long and severe strains to which he had been subject before he reached sixty years of age, and when one remembers also the possibly hypochondriac nature of the disorders of which his own account, as just cited, speaks, it seems hard, after all, to form any exact opinion as to the actual degree of the physical weakness of his constitution. One is disposed to set the work done and the external sufferings endured over against the rather meagre record of later illnesses in his life. "His friend," says Brown (a friend, namely, who wrote an account of Bunyan), "tells us that though he was only sixty he was worn out with sufferings, age, and often teaching." One remembers hereupon that a persecuted genius who had written 'sixty pieces' without having received any sort of early scholarly training, and who had passed more than twelve years in unjust imprisonment, and all his life in struggle, had a right to be somewhat worn at sixty.

He died of 'a violent fever,' or, as others say, of 'the sweating distemper,' after having been exposed to 'heavy

* "The Tempter did beset me strongly (for I find he is much for assaulting the soul when it begins to approach towards the grave, then is his opportunity."—*Grace Abounding* (Clarendon Press Ed.), p. 375.

† *Op. cit.* p. 390.

rains and drenched to the skin' while on a preaching journey. Bunyan was twice married. He had in all three daughters and three sons. His first child, born during the time of his early disorder—a daughter—was, as observed above, blind, and died before him. Descendants of another of his daughters are the only descendants of Bunyan still known to survive. The later history of the family is incomplete, but, as reported by Brown, contains nothing of any note for our present purpose,—no record, namely, of remarkable disease or ability.

Of Bunyan's outward seeming, in his later years, we have two good accounts by contemporaries. One runs thus :

“As for his person, he was tall of stature, strong-boned, though not corpulent, somewhat of a ruddy face, with sparkling eyes ; . . . his hair reddish, but in his latter days time had sprinkled it with gray ; his nose well set, but not declining or bending, and his mouth moderately large ; his forehead something high, and his habit always plain and modest. He appeared in countenance to be of a stern and rough temper, but in his conversation mild and affable, not given to loquacity or much discourse in company, unless some urgent occasion required it ; observing never to boast of himself or his parts, but rather to seem low in his own eyes and submit himself to the judgment of others. . . . He had a sharp quick eye, accomplished with an excellent discerning of persons, being of good judgment and quick wit.”

The other account speaks of his countenance as ‘grave and sedate,’ and of a sort to “strike something of awe into them that had nothing of the fear of God.” The writer adds that his memory was “tenacious, it being customary with him to commit his sermons to writing after he had preached them.” Bunyan's executive ability in church management and discipline is also noted in this account. As to his eloquence as a preacher, all accounts agree. This great ‘dreamer,’ then, was also, in his later years, a man of decided practical power, dignified in bearing, accustomed to control other men.

II.

So much, then, for the man as a whole. As to the experiences of his early manhood, recorded in the *Grace Abounding*, biographers in general have felt their perplexing intensity and abnormality, but have been accustomed either to refer them once for all to Bunyan's theological associations and ideas, or else to conceive them as indeed somehow pathological, but then to define their abnormal nature with the utmost looseness and confusedness.*

Patent, then, as are the reported experiences, beautifully as Bunyan confesses them, transparently as he unveils himself, one still has to go almost alone in trying to portray their actual connections; for biographer after biographer has passed these connections by with blindfold eyes. Yet the story, read in its psychological aspect, is as follows:

As a child Bunyan showed some of the familiar signs of the sensitive brain. He is not at all concerned, in his *Autobiography*, to gossip as to any minor matters. He tells us almost nothing of the externals of his life. He is wholly concerned in setting forth what God has done for his soul. He feels it worth while, however, to describe to us, in beginning the narration of his spiritual conflicts, certain of his early mental experiences. In childhood, so we learn, his 'cursing, swearing, lying, and blaspheming' were very marked faults. To quote his own words: "So settled and rooted was I in these things, that they became as a second Nature to me. The which, as I have with soberness considered since, did so

* Macaulay, for instance, in his *Miscellanies*, declares that, at a certain point, Bunyan's mind began to be 'fearfully disordered'; but he then proceeds, with a very indiscriminating analysis of the data, to define Bunyan's mental symptoms so that, if this analysis were sound, they would make up a case of what we should now define as 'hallucinatory delirium.' This Bunyan's disorder very certainly was not, in any fashion whatever. Taine, who, as psychologist, should have seen more clearly, is, in his way, (in the account of Bunyan in the *English Literature*.) almost equally confused as to Bunyan's true temperament and condition, and even imagines the calm and self-possessed art of *Pilgrim's Progress* to be the outcome of the 'inflamed brain' whose sufferings are depicted in the *Grace Abounding*. But the Bunyan of 1650 was not yet the Bunyan of the *Pilgrim's Progress* of 1675. Venables and Brown, well as they summarize the salient facts, fail to see their psychological significance. Froude also appears to go wholly astray in this respect.

offend the Lord, that even in my Childhood He did scare and affright me with fearful Dreams, and did terrify me with dreadful Visions. For often after I had spent this and the other day in sin, I have in my Bed been greatly afflicted, while asleep, with the apprehensions of Devils and wicked Spirits, who still, as I then thought, laboured to draw me away with them, of which I could never be rid." To these persistent nocturnal terrors there were added still other and evidently often waking troubles, 'thoughts of the Day of Judgment,' which gave him fears and 'distressed' his 'soul,' 'both night and day,' so that "I was often much cast down and afflicted . . . yet could I not let go my sins." These experiences came "when I was but a child, nine or ten years old." "Yea," he adds, "I was also then so overcome with despair of life and heaven, that I should often wish either that there had been no Hell, *or that I had been a Devil*—supposing they were only Tormentors; that if it must needs be that I went thither, I might be rather a Tormentor, than tormented myself." Of such early sufferings we have several accounts besides the foregoing summary statements.

Childhood experiences of this sort have to be estimated as important in direct proportion to their depth and in inverse proportion to their dependence upon the suggestions to which a given child is subjected. These dreams were, plainly, in some instances very elaborate and detailed. Bunyan's later youthful ignorance, so freely confessed, concerning all theological matters indicates, however, that these fears and this despair were no part of any very coherent system of childish thoughts on religious topics. The content of his 'terrible dreams' was of course derived from what he heard at church and elsewhere; but a sufficient basis, in these suggested ideas, for such marked trouble seems very improbable. That the nocturnal terrors and the despair were in part primary symptoms of nervous irritability, one can thus hardly doubt. As to the depth of the experiences themselves, the very fact of Bunyan's careful report of them is, under the circumstances, convincing. For his Autobiography is, as has just been noted, extremely reticent as to all matters that he does not consider essential parts of the tale of God's dealings with his soul.

In youth, at what seems to have been the healthiest period of his life, these dreams left him, and were "soon forgot . . . as if they never had been." And now began the wilful and sinful time which Bunyan later so unsparingly condemns. That his sins did not include unchastity or drunkenness seems, as aforesaid, clear to all his recent biographers, and for good reasons too, into which I need not here enter. Bunyan was now a very active and daring lad, who, in his almost complete ignorance, as Froude and others have observed, had no other way of expressing his genius than by "inventing lies to amuse his companions, and swearing they were true" (Froude's expression), and by showing extraordinary ingenuity as the chief swearer and wild talker of the village, so that even 'very loose and ungodly' wretches, as Bunyan tells us, were shocked by the flood of bad language in which this still unconscious poet was moved to voice his latent powers. These offences, and the still worse crime of playing tip-cat on Sundays, abide later in Bunyan's memory as evidences of the depth of his lost condition during these days. Meanwhile, despite the vulgarity of his surroundings and the restless waywardness of his life, Bunyan would otherwise appear to have been, on the whole, an exceptionally pure-minded youth. His early education, obtained in a local school, was extremely meagre.

His boyish marriage must have involved serious responsibilities. He and his young wife had at first not 'so much household stuff as a Dish or Spoon' between them. But the wife, 'whose Father was counted godly,' had, as her inheritance from this now dead father, two religious books, which Bunyan read with her, yet, so far as he was concerned, without 'conviction.' But ere long these books and his wife's speech 'did beget within me some desires to religion,' and for a while Bunyan attended church busily, 'still retaining my wicked life,' but already feeling some doubtful concern as to his own salvation, and much admiration for the formal side of church worship. A sermon against Sabbath-breaking brought him his first 'conviction.' After service and dinner, that day, when his full stomach had made him already cheerfully forget his transient remorse, he went, as usually on Sunday after-

noons, to play his game of cat. But having struck the cat one blow from the hole, "just as I was about to strike it a second time, 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 this," he goes on, "I was put to an exceeding maze. Wherefore, leaving my Cat upon the ground, I looked up to Heaven, and was as if I had, with the Eyes of my understanding, seen the Lord Jesus looking down upon me, as being very hotly displeased with me, and as if he did severely threaten me." The result of this sudden internal vision, of which he said nothing to his comrades, was an immediate sense of his general sinfulness, an overwhelming despair, which kept him standing 'in the midst of my Play, before all that were then present,' until, with a swift dialectic characteristic of all his later experiences, he had reasoned out the conclusion that it was now too late, since he had sinned so much, and that the only hope was to go back to sin, and take his fill of present sweets. "I can but be damned, and if I must be so, I had as good be damned for many sins as damned for few." He thereupon went on with the game, and in the immediately subsequent days swore, played, and 'went on in sin with great greediness of mind.'

The automatic internal vision seen with 'the eyes of the understanding,' but seen more or less suddenly, with extraordinary detail and with strong emotional accompaniment, appears henceforth as a frequent incident in Bunyan's inner life, and later became, of course, the main source of his peculiar artistic power. He was plainly always a good visualizer. But this automatic organization of his images was an added characteristic of the man, and an invaluable one. This 'power of vision' remained, as the *Pilgrim's Progress* itself shows, late in life; and without it our 'dreamer's' genius could not be conceived. In his times of depression these visions, in later days, took on the shading of his mood; but in themselves they were of course signs, not of depression, but of poetic power. Apart from other and serious causes of disturbance they plainly never approached near to any hallucinatory degree; and Bunyan always describes them so as to distinguish them

clearly from hallucinations, even when his condition, as described, is one of great agitation.

Shortly after this time the reproof of a neighbor again startled Bunyan from his reckless ways, and he resolved to begin in earnest the work of reform. The result was a period of a year (or probably somewhat less), during which he undertook nothing less than a systematic course of conscientious self-suppression. He 'left' his swearing at once, and in a way that astonished himself. He gave up his games as vain practices; after a long struggle he even abandoned dancing. He read the Bible; he lived a life of reform that astonished his neighbors; "for this my conversion was as great as for Tom of Bethlem to become a sober man." Inhibition of all outwardly suspicious deeds became the one rule of his life. He still wholly lacked what he later regarded as true piety, and he indulged in some spiritual pride in view of the approbation of his neighbors; but he cultivated a painful scrupulosity. We can well conceive how the material cares that beset this very poor but now married youth, and this sudden change from a careless life, of numerous relaxations, to an existence wherein every act was a matter of scruple, and wherein the opinions of all his neighbors were now so much taken into account, must have involved a considerable strain. The immediate consequences were characteristic of the whole case.

(To be continued.)