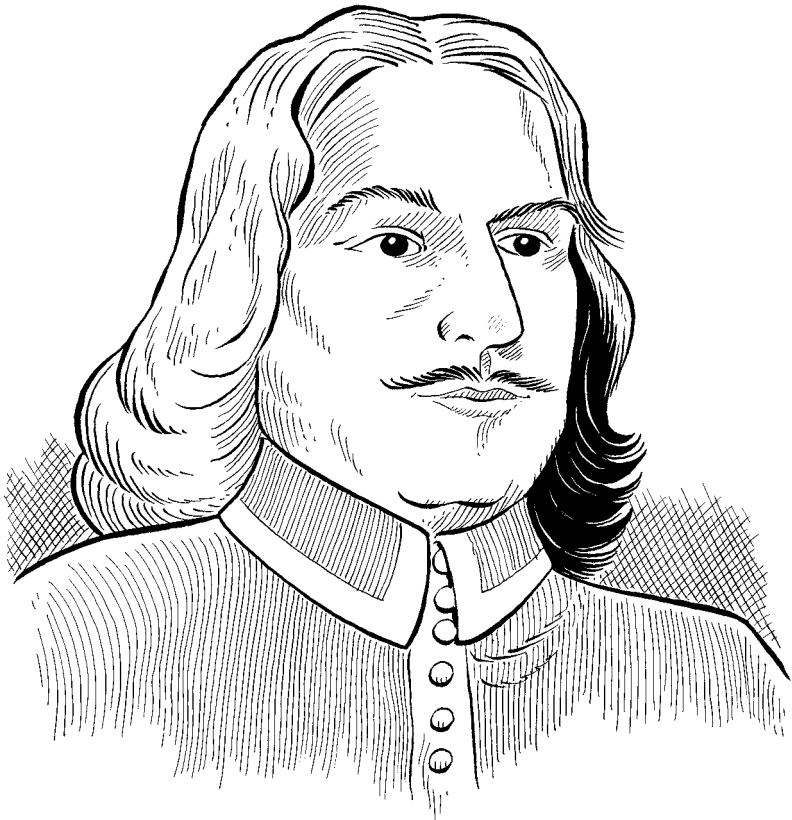


# John Bunyan

The Tinker of Bedford



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**William Deal**

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**John Bunyan: The Tinker of Bedford**

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# Introduction

By any measure, John Bunyan was an unusual man. Having little formal education, he nevertheless wrote sixty books, one for each year of his life. Although he had no formal legal training, he helped secure a place for religious freedom in English law. Imprisoned for twelve years for refusing to obtain a “license” to preach, he nevertheless profoundly influenced his countrymen through the power of his pen, which no prison walls could still. Although he was ordained by no “officially” recognized denomination, he was among the most powerful preachers of his generation.

The son of a poor tinker, Bunyan accomplished more in one lifetime than most men could in ten. Yet whatever he did and wherever he went, conflict dogged his steps. Early in life he was sorely exercised about the state of his soul, but he could not shrug his burden of sin and was unable to find deliverance till he reached adulthood. In the English Civil War, he escaped death during a Royalist attack only because a friend had taken his place on guard duty—an event that powerfully brought home to him the meaning of Christ’s atoning death. He was jailed repeatedly for preaching without a license. Though he was a skillful controversialist, engaging both Quakers and Anglicans, many of his writings were banned during his lifetime. Ugly rumors were spread about him by men who sought to undermine the effectiveness of his ministry.

Through these and many other trials, movingly recounted in these pages, John Bunyan remained faithful to his calling as he saw it. His dedication to Jesus Christ and fervor for the Gospel were acknowledged by even his most bitter enemies. And his vision endures in *Pilgrim’s Progress*, one of the best-loved books in English.

The uncompromising courage and compassion of John Bunyan remains an enduring testimony to twenty-first century Christians who wish to impact the world for Christ.

# chapter 1

Thomas Bunyan, the tinker, sat by the open fireside in his small home in Elstow, about two miles from Bedford, waiting for word from his wife. “How’s Margaret now?” he called. He had laid down his tools some time before and expected at any moment the cry of a newborn baby.

“Very soon now!” the midwife called.

Thomas Bunyan was a large, muscular man—every inch a smith—with a shock of brown hair. He strode back and forth before the fireplace as Margaret, his beautiful young wife, cried with birth pangs in the room next door.

“At last!” shouted the midwife. “Come, Mr. Bunyan, behold your son.” Thomas burst into the room and glanced at the wee thing with its astonishing shock of thick red hair.

“Ugh,” he grunted, “Just like his Grandfather Bunyan—another red-head! Another hot temper to deal with!” Then turning to his wife, “A fine fellow, Margaret, what shall we call him?”

Margaret looked at her husband with large, luminous eyes. “I’ve been thinking about John. Do you like that?”

“John Bunyan,” he said softly. “John Bunyan. An excellent name.”

It was November 30, 1628. The Puritan Pilgrims had been in America eight years. There were religious uprisings in Ireland; the Presbyterians were battling for freedom in Scotland, and the English Puritans were facing rough times. Thomas Bunyan mused as he looked into the flickering firelight. “I wonder,” he thought, “what kind of world will this wee one live to see.”

Thoughts of the future blended with thoughts of the past. Elstow had originally been “Helenstow,” named for St. Helena, the mother of Constantine. It was near the ancient Saxon church which had been dedicated to Helena long ago. Once a place of pride and station, it had gradually declined to its present insignificant state.

Bunyan's own small cottage was between two streams and at the edge of about nine acres of land. It had been in the family for centuries. Bunyan's ancestors had come from Europe about the time of William the Conqueror and had owned vast lands and a castle. All that was left of such fame and fortune now was a poor tinker and a small bit of land.

Bunyan's musings were interrupted by a loud knock at the door, which burst open to reveal a huge, redheaded man with a high forehead and deeply set blue eyes.

"Come in, Grandpa!" grinned Thomas, as the older Bunyan came into the room.

"How is Margaret? Any baby yet?" demanded Thomas's father as he pulled up a chair.

"A boy!" Thomas said, "A chip off the old block! Red hair like yours!" He led the older man to Margaret's side.

"Great day, if he's not another Bunyan from way back yonder," Grandpa roared.

"I was thinking how the Bunyan fortunes have wasted away," said Thomas. "From Norman knights to mere tinkers is a long step down, I'd say."

"Yes son, that's true, but then from 1066 to 1628 is a long time, and knights and lords can lose property and titles same as others."

"I could wish a better way of life for this poor babe," said Thomas, "but when one is low in England, there's no way to rise. He is sealed to his fate."

"True, son," said the older man rising to leave, "but no man's spirit need be sealed to a lowly life. Now I must go and tell Grandma the news. What's the name of the boy?"

"We've called him John, may it bring him luck," Thomas said with a wide smile.

"Huh, little luck can he expect in this world," was all old Bunyan replied. A few weeks later, little John was christened. Several remarked about his striking resemblance to his grandfather. Margaret Bunyan, conversing with the ladies about John, said, "He is already showing the spirit of his grandfather, very willful and determined. Thomas is so quiet and mild but Grandpa always liked to fight." Everyone laughed. Everyone in the village knew Grandfather Bunyan, and his quarrels and hot temper and loyalist views.



Young John Bunyan grew up to the blaze of the smithy-fire, to the ring of the tinker's hammer and to many an itinerant jaunt through the countryside as his father traveled from place to place mending pots and pans.

Sundays found him in church. The sermons smelled of brimstone and fire. "You are a piece of iron," the rector roared one day. "You are heated white hot in the forge. You are being pounded flat. Hell will be worse than that."

"You are stuck fast in the slough," the preacher cried on another occasion. "You are caught in all the filth and stench."

Such sermons made a vivid impression on John. He was haunted by horrible dreams. "I dreamed I was in hell," he said to his mother. "The devil was there with a pitchfork. It was red-hot and he tried to stick it through me. I ran and ran. Jesus helped me out but I was scared to death." He thought a moment. "If I have to go to hell I think I'd like to be a devil rather than one of his victims."

John's father thought the boy had better stop listening to the stern old preacher. "No, Thomas," said his wife. "We just need to teach him repentance. The boy already has a hot temper and is quick to pick up bad words from the older boys."



One day, the door opened and in stepped Grandpa and Grandma Bunyan, who had come home late. When they visited it was always a time of great fun for the children. While Grandpa Bunyan was quarrelsome and a man of bad temper, he was a kind and interesting storyteller for the children.

"Well, well, what brings you two over at such an hour?" Thomas Bunyan asked. "We were just preparing to send the children to bed, but now this will all have to be changed. They would never sleep a wink if they did not hear a good-night story from you, Grandpa," Thomas said as he offered them chairs before the large open fireplace.

Young John's grandparents had seen a hanging in Bedford. "You know the Suttons?" said Grandpa. "Well, the old man heard the rector preach in St. Paul's on the judgment of God. He came under conviction of sin and confessed the horrible crimes he and his wife had been committing for years. Remember the burning of the Johnson home? Robbery and murder were involved in that. Sutton confessed to the crime."

"Why that was five years ago," Margaret cut in, "just after little Margaret was born."

“Yes! and they did it.” Grandpa said. “The rector told old Sutton to confess to the authorities. They hanged both of them today. It was horrible.”

“When I reached the village green I saw a large crowd,” Grandpa continued. “There was a scaffold and two people were standing near it. I watched the sheriff place a black hood over their heads. One of them was a woman. The man standing beside me said it was her request that she be hanged with her husband, for they were equally guilty.”

“Were they old people, Grandpa?” John asked, eagerly listening to every word of his grandfather’s story.

“Oh, I’d say they were not too old, maybe fifty years,” Grandpa replied. “But the thing that was so hard about it was what happened when they got them both up on the scaffold. They made a double scaffold so they could hang them at the same time. Just as they placed the rope around the woman’s neck, she started screaming. ‘O God, I’m lost, I’m lost, I’m lost—I am soon going to hell! Oh, why have I lived such a life?’ Then the sheriff’s deputy placed the rope about her neck and stepped off the scaffold. The man said nothing. Then they pulled the trap door from under their feet and they both hanged. Ah, I never want to see such a sight again. The awful words of that woman burn in my ears. ‘I’m lost—I’m lost. I am soon going to hell!’ I cannot get these words out of my mind,” Grandpa said as he sat gazing steadily into the open fire, as if he were looking toward something far beyond the fire in the fireplace.

Margaret quietly handed the large family Bible to Grandma. The devotions were from Galatians, “For whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap.”

After prayers, Margaret said, “All right, children, come now, get to bed. Tomorrow will be a happier day. Maybe Grandpa can find us a better story if he comes tomorrow night.”

John asked one parting question before leaving the room. “Grandpa, what will happen to these people? Will they go to hell and be burned forever?”

“I don’t know, son. All I know is what the woman said just before she died,” Grandpa explained. “I hope God granted her repentance. I saw her bow her head and mumble something just before the deputy put the rope around her neck.”

John had a bad night. In his sleep, he relived the story of the hanging. Several times he thought he heard the woman screaming, “I’m lost—I am soon going to hell!” Near morning, he dreamed that the devil came



to his bed and was about to take him away to torment. "You have been swearing and telling lies," the devil said to him. "I have come for you. I will torment you forever!" John awoke screaming so loud that his mother was awakened.

"Oh, Mother," he sobbed, "the devil has just been here to get me and I jumped clear of him. He was here for real, Mother. I saw him and heard him," he cried. "He was red all over and had horns and a long fork in his hands. I saw him right here by my bedside. When I jumped up, he left, Mother. Please pray for me. I have been very mean."

"What have you been doing, my boy?" she asked, sitting down beside him in the dark room, on his bedside.

"Oh, Mother, I have been telling lies and swearing, and other bad things. I feel I will be lost in hell, like that poor woman Grandpa saw hanged yesterday."

"If you have been doing these things, John," his mother said quietly, "you must ask God to forgive you, and then you must stop them. These are sinful things and you must not do them."

"But Mother, God will not forgive one who has been so mean. I am a most sorry and no good boy; I cannot stop these things. I hear them in my head and I want to do them in my heart. Oh, Mother," John lamented, "am I already too bad to be saved?"

"No, of course not. Jesus said He would forgive all manner of sins. Now you trust in Him, and He will give you peace in your heart." She sat by him on the bedside and prayed with him.

The effect of the dream wore off as John went about the day's activities. He was a little sad, but his mother said no more to him of the dreams.

# chapter 2

The years slipped by and soon John was ten. Often during these years the growing boy was haunted by frightful dreams in which he saw dark scenes, devils with horns and pitchforks and cats that turned into demons.

One night Thomas Bunyan said to Margaret, "John's ten. It's about time the lad was sent to school to learn his letters."

His opinion was strengthened the next day when young John demanded, "What's a king supposed to do?" He had heard his parents discussing King Charles's problems with the Dissenters.

"See there, Margaret?" Thomas said. "He doesn't even know what a king is. I tell you we must send him to school. We're sending him to the grammar school at Bedford."

"But Master Vierney is so hard on children, he beats them," Margaret said. "I've already taught John to make his letters. And he can read some."

Thomas arched his eyebrows.

"But I think you've another reason for sending him there," Margaret continued. "Master Vierney is a King's man, a loyalist, and you want John to be a strong King's man, too."

Thomas grinned. His wife could read him like a book.

Shortly after this, John found himself walking to Grammar School at Bedford. John's friend Tad had gone to school there for two years and had learned a lot.

"John, ye best not tell Master Vierney that you be not a King's man," Tad warned John. "Master Vierney is a loyalist and he expects all his scholars to be King's men, too. If they are not, he beats them till they at least *say* they be King's men." Young John's independent spirit had already imbibed some of the liberal views of the Dissenters. Tad knew this and sought to caution his friend.

The school building was a small stone house with three small windows on each side and a door in the front end. It had two windows in the back. All the windows were high enough that one could not see out of them when seated at the desk. John and Tad joined other youths pouring into the school.

Master Vierney rose from his chair when all the students were seated. John looked him over. He was tall, raw boned and had a large, reddish nose. His deep-set blue eyes shined out from beneath shaggy eyebrows and sandy hair. He had large, ugly hands. John wondered just how hard he could hit a fellow with his stick.

Just then Master Vierney bellowed out, "Get your slates and line up at the table." John lifted his new slate from his lap and rose with the other boys.

"I see we have a new scholar today," Master Vierney said as he looked toward John. "Tell us your name, son," he demanded.

"I'm John Bunyan, Thomas Bunyan's boy. He's the village tinker at Elstow," John replied.

"I know, I know," Master Vierney roared at him. "I did not ask for your family history, boy, just your name. If I want more information I will ask for it," he said. "And you say, 'sir' to me, or I'll pull your ears till they ache," he scowled.

He came toward John, brandishing his stick. "There is one thing every boy in the grammar school must learn, young fellow," he said. His cold blue eyes fastened upon John. "In this school every student is to be a King's man, and never anything else. Are you a King's man?"

"Ye know that my father be's a King's man, and I'm loyal to my King," John said.

"Not *ye* know, like a country hooligan, but *you* know; and not *be's* loyal, but *is* loyal," the school master shouted at John.

"Yes, sir."

"Now, I want to know, are you just loyal to the King, or do you believe the King has absolute right to rule all men, even without a Parliament?" Vierney asked, frowning.

"What's a *Parleyment*?" John asked.

"*What?*" shouted the schoolmaster, raising his stick as if to strike John. "Do you mean that you are so ignorant you don't even know what Parliament is? *Parli-ment*—not Parleyment—is the group of Lords and Commoners who are elected by the people to advise the King on matters of rule when he asks for it," Vierney explained.

“Doesn't the King need these men to advise him? Even a king cannot know everything, can he?” John asked quite frankly.

“The King rules by divine right from God. He knows what's best for the people. He only needs Parliament to help enforce his laws,” Vierney answered.

“I asked are you a King's man? Do you believe in his absolute rule?” the master thundered.

John cringed. He knew that to argue was to invite the stick on his back, so he meekly said, “Yes, I believe he has absolute right to rule the people.”

“That's better!” Master Vierney said, lowering his stick. “We are all loyal men around here. We will allow no traitors in this school.” He brandished his stick and glowered at the class. Young John Bunyan got the message. The schoolmaster was an intolerant bigot and a bully who would use his stick to enforce his views.



John continued to have bad dreams. “Last night I saw the flying butresses of the Abby chapel with great big eyes in them, looking at me as if I had committed all the sins of the whole world. All of a sudden, the very earth broke apart and I began to sink down into a great chasm, into hell, I guess it was. Then, a bright and shining One flew from a white cloud in the heavens and reached down and got hold of me and drew me back out of the great hole. He said to me, ‘Come unto me and I will give you rest.’ Is that in the Bible, Mother?” John asked, looking longingly at her.

“Why, yes, son, this is found in Matthew 11:28. It is Christ's promise to the sinner. All you have to do is to repent and believe on Him, and you can be saved,” she explained.

“I'm going to stop swearing,” John promised.

But in a few days John had forgotten the dream and even his promise not to swear, and was at it as loud as ever with the village boys.



All went well in school for several days. John had mastered his alphabet completely and was quickly learning to read and write better. He was becoming the best reader in his grade.

One day the matter of religion came up. Tad asked Master Vierney why he was opposed to the return of Parliament to power. “If the Parliament helps the King to rule well, then why do you not want Parliament to be recalled?”

“We do not need a Parliament, our King is a sensible man and he can rule us far better than any bickering, money-wasting and quarrelsome Parliament,” Vierney shot back at him.

“My mother believes in Parliament,” John said quietly.

“She has no right to believe in this since her husband is a King’s man,” Master Vierney said. “She should be subject to her husband and believe as he does.”

“Why can’t a person think for himself, even if there is a king? The king cannot think for all the people, can he?” John asked.

Master Vierney’s face turned red, his anger growing all the while. “Young fellow, it is treachery to speak like this of our King. Of course he can think for all the people in matters that concern us politically. We will not allow such talk here, do you understand?”

“My mother is not a King’s man, even if Papa is, and while I am loyal to my King, I think people have the right to think for themselves,” John blurted out.

“So you are a fence straddler, are you?” snarled the schoolmaster. “We have no place in England for fence straddlers. You’d better decide for the King, boy, or your neck may stretch from a rope.”

Vierney looked around and fastened his eyes on Tim Sutton, whose father was known to be a Puritan. “You there, Sutton, does your father have a right to work against the King by demanding the recall of Parliament?” the teacher asked.

“He has the right to use his own mind and do what he thinks is best, doesn’t he, sir?” Tim said cautiously.

“The King is the head of the Church of England. Your father has no right to go to conventicles<sup>†</sup> and refuse to attend the proper church,” Vierney snapped.

“My father has to obey his conscience in such matters. The King is not his God,” Tim said quietly.

There was a considerable pause. The boys were horrified to hear one of their own defy a King’s man like Master Vierney with such bold words. They shuffled in their seats and several coughed.

“So he can disobey the King and act as he pleases, and still he is a worshipper of God. You think that, do you?” Master Vierney shouted at him, coming closer and gripping his big stick.

Tim was fourteen years old but he was poor and not too strong. His deep blue eyes were quiet and kind. He looked the teacher in the eye.

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<sup>†</sup> A *conventicle* is a religious worship service that is held in secret without the authorization of the state church, in this case, the Church of England.

“That’s treason, the same kind of bunk the traitorous Scots say,” yelled Vierney, his face red with rage. “I’ll have no such talk in this school!” He grabbed Tim by the hand and yanked him off his wooden bench.

In cold rage, the master thrashed the young offender into unconsciousness. Melvin Crowley, one of the bigger boys, had had enough. Leaving his seat, he caught the bullying schoolmaster a blow that felled him to the floor.

That was the end of Vierney’s reign of terror. The school board replaced him with a Mr. Jones who, although just as cruel, was able to keep his temper on a better level—not that it made much difference to John. His school days were almost done, for he was old enough to join his father in the tinker trade.



The small Bunyan land holdings which belonged to John’s father were at a site commonly known as Bunyan’s End. It was in the east end of Elstow Parish, not far from Harrowden, where once flourished the Saxon church, dedicated to St. Mary and St. Helena, until around the time of Henry VIII. Queen Mary had given this land to Sir Humphery Radcliff, whose widow lived there until about the end of the sixteenth century. Her son sold the property to Sir Thomas Hillersdon, who had a fine stone mansion built on the property.

John loved to fish in its ponds, despite the fact that Sir Hillersdon had forbidden all such trespassing. Forbidden or not, on this October morning as the sun rose brightly over the eastern hills, John decided he would try for some fish in Sir Hillersdon’s pond.

Suddenly the young poacher’s peace was disturbed. He sprang up in alarm, an alarm tinged with awe and admiration as he recognized the intruder.

“Never mind me, my lad,” the stranger said. “Let’s see you catch a fish. What’s your name, boy? How do you pass your time?”

John said, “I’m the son of Thomas Bunyan the tinker. I help him in his work.” He waxed confident. “I guess I’m a bad boy, sir, trespassing like this. I’m afraid I swear and steal apples, too.”

“That’s wrong, son,” the stranger replied, “but then boys will be boys. I hope you’ll grow up to be a fisher of men.”

That day, after getting a thorough soaking in the pond, John caught a fine fish. He recounted his adventures to his mother. “You’ll never guess



who fished with me today!" he cried. "No, I expect not," his mother replied.

"None other than Oliver Cromwell himself," John replied excitedly.

"*Cromwell?*" Margaret exclaimed. "Was he nice to you?"

"I reckon he was. See how wet I am? I slid into the pond and would have been drowned if he had not been there to pull me out," John explained. "And he got this big fish I was wrestling with when I slipped into the pond."



About a month after the above incident, word reached Bedford and Elstow that the Earl of Strafford had been imprisoned for treason. Secretary of State Windebank had gone to France; Archbishop Laud was locked up in the Tower; and Finch, the Lord Keeper of the King, had fled to the Continent. Things were moving fast now toward a showdown with the King. Parliament passed a law that no bishop could sit in the House of Lords. Another law was passed providing that no subject could be taxed without the tax being levied by Parliament. Parliament also passed an act whereby it would never again have to wait for the King to call it into session. Even some in the King's own army were plotting against him. By mid-spring, Strafford had been executed by the King's consent, though he was a "King's man." Confusion reigned. Some of the men of Elstow shouted, "Strafford is dead, he will do us no more harm!" Others mourned his death, among whom were Thomas Bunyan—he too was a King's man.

London was in an uproar. Almost anything could happen. Civil war was almost certain now. The House of Commons swore to protect political liberty and the freedom of religion. The King still believed in the divine right of the kings and toyed with the idea of war to prove his point.

About that time John made the annual summer boat trip with his father to Lynn to buy metal for use in their work. John listened to the conversations of the men on the boat. At Great Bradford another tinker boarded the vessel and had hardly been aboard when he said, "Thomas, have you heard there is likely to be war between the King and Parliament?"

"Surely Parliament would never risk that," Thomas Bunyan said, lifting his shaggy eyebrows.

"Ah, you never know," a farmer cut into the conversation. "The Queen has just left for Dover, taking the crown jewels to trade for munitions, so I heard."

"The two Houses of Parliament are now united in their stand against the King," another passenger said. "How can we avert a civil war?"

"The Cavaliers have deserted the King, and the King told Parliament that, if he granted all their wishes, he'd be no more than a phantom king," the man from Great Bradford said.

"Why can't the King and Parliament get together; what is the use of a civil war? It will settle nothing," another passenger said.

Thomas Bunyan thought best to keep his thoughts of his King to himself for the rest of the trip.



During the last part of June, the Bedfordshire men in the House of Commons appealed to the people in what they called the Grand Remonstrance. Its purpose was to give the King a chance to save face by relieving him of all the blame for the common grievances of the people and placing the blame upon his advisors and counselors.

But the King did not listen to the pleas of the common people. That August, at Nottingham, he raised his standard and the Civil War began.



The September heat brought weakness to Grandpa Bunyan. He complained of pains in his chest. During August he had helped Thomas now and then in his work. He went to the Ouse River with John twice to watch its waters course under the famous old bridge at Bedford. The jailhouse sat on that bridge, a jailhouse which also served as the tollhouse where tolls were taken from riverboats, many of which carried grain to London. But now Grandpa kept to his house.

November brought bright clear weather. John's birthday would soon be coming and Grandpa walked to Bedford to look for a gift for John.

About midnight that night Thomas Bunyan was awakened by his mother beating on the door of his home. "Come quickly, Thomas, something has happened to Grandpa!" she shouted. The whole family rushed to Grandpa's house. Grandpa's eyes were glassy and his head was cold and very damp. Margaret laid her hand upon his brow and shook her head. John came up to the bed just as Grandpa gave a small sigh and his breath left him.

"He's gone," Margaret said, as she walked away from the bedside.

John broke into tears. "He can't be gone—not Grandpa!" he cried as he laid his hand on Grandpa's face. It was cold and clammy, and John knew his Grandpa was dead.

Grandma was weeping softly as she approached John. "Here, John, I'm going to give you this now. Grandpa walked to Bedford and back today to get this for your birthday." She handed him a beautiful book which Grandpa had bought for his birthday, *The Seven Champions of Christendom*.

John grasped the book in his hand and walked to the fireside where he could look at it for a moment. Then he wailed out in his boyish way, "My last gift from Grandpa!" A moment later, as he sat by the fireside, John prayed silently, "O God, help me to be like Grandpa!"

The night his grandfather was buried, John dreamed that he saw him riding a large white horse and carrying a trumpet in his hand. He was

dressed in a long, flowing white robe and was so happy and smiling as he glided by where John was standing in the churchyard. "May there be peace on earth for all men," he heard his Grandpa shout as his horse rose and disappeared into the blue heavens.



Meanwhile, England was girding for war. By January 1643, the battle lines were being drawn between King and Parliament. Men of stern will and strong conviction opposed each other, and the temper of the people was rising.

One day in springtime, John Okey rode into Elstow and stopped his horse by Thomas Bunyan's house and forge. Thomas Bunyan looked at him sourly and said, "Now what do you want, swords for Roundhead soldiers?"

"All of Bedfordshire is for Parliament," said Okey. "We have gibbets<sup>†</sup> ready for those who aid the King."

Bunyan contemplated his anvil and the low burning fire of coal in the forge. Looking up at Okey he replied, "I guess I was being somewhat hasty."

"Parliament needs the support of all good men," Okey replied.

"I can't make swords to fight my King," Bunyan said stubbornly.

"Very well, Bunyan, I will give your word to Cromwell, Pym, and Pampden. I have delivered my message," Okey said as he mounted his horse.

John had stood by silently and heard it all.

"But why be for the King, Papa, when you know he is not for the common man and the poor, such as we are?" John asked.

Thomas Bunyan drew a deep breath. "Get this straight, lad," he said. "For generations the Bunyans have stood for their King."

"Yes, sir, but Grandpa felt that Parliament was often right and that the King was often wrong, didn't he?" John ventured.

"Your grandpa did sometimes feel this way, but he never lifted a finger against his King," Thomas Bunyan chided.

John said no more, but his mind was made up. "When I am old enough to fight I certainly will not fight for the King," he mumbled to himself.



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<sup>†</sup> A *gibbet* was a type of gallows consisting of a single post with a projecting arm at the top; it was formerly used to hang executed criminals in chains for public display.

The spring of 1643 brought smallpox to the Midlands. John was frightened. Times were uncertain. Cromwell, his idol, was now a captain in the Parliamentary Army. Captain Cromwell's son was stationed at Newport Pagnell. John was stunned one day when word reached Elstow that Cromwell's son had died of smallpox.

"Will we get smallpox and die, Mama?" John asked that evening as he came in from work, when the news had been brought about Cromwell's son.

"I hope not, son. But if this is the way the Lord wants to take us, we should have no fear," she said. This was of little comfort to John. He did not want to die of smallpox; he wanted to die for a noble cause, like helping Cromwell win the war. He knew better, though, than to voice such an idea in his father's presence.

A few days after this, John met his old friend Tad Simmons, now a Roundhead soldier.

"Cromwell is a colonel," announced Tad. "He's got fighting stuff in him, John. He'll lead Parliament to victory for sure. He is asking for godly men to join his army. Each soldier gets a Pocket Testament and a small Catechism and is supposed to attend church regularly."

"Then what are *you* doing in his army, pray tell?" John asked, grinning up at Tad. "You're a rascal. You cheat, lie, steal and drink, and even run around with women."

"That doesn't matter, John. A fellow can still handle a gun; good gunmen are needed, as well as praying men," Tad laughed.



During the fall of 1643, the Royalist army made an attack on Bedford, mostly to secure food. Prince Rupert, the King's nephew, was in charge. John happened to be on the road between Elstow and Bedford one afternoon when he saw a group of soldiers coming toward him. They were dressed in the King's Army uniforms. John thought they were beautiful.

The soldiers stopped, and one of them asked John if he knew where the Bedfordshire food was stored.

"I don't know, sir," John replied.

"Do you speak truth?" the soldier asked.

"I don't always, but I do so now, sir," John said, his heart pounding so loudly he wondered if the soldier could hear it.

Just then a soldier in blue rode up on horseback. His boots were shiny and his high hat looked immaculate. The soldier who had been speaking

to John addressed the newcomer as “Your highness, Prince Rupert.” John’s heart leaped. “Prince Rupert! Now I’ll have a story for the family at suppertime. I have seen Prince Rupert face to face,” he thought as the Royal Cavaliers rode away. After this John was more interested than ever in joining the army.



The spring of 1644 found John Bunyan working six or seven hours a day with his father in the forge, mending kettles and pans and doing other work and wishing for November when he could be a soldier. In the evenings he read whatever came to hand or played with Margaret and Willie, the youngest Bunyans. He often read to them from his birthday book, *The Seven Champions of Christendom*.

One day Tad Simmons came by for a chat. He was stationed at Newport Pagnell, at the Parliamentary Army Post. “Oliver Cromwell talks about God as if he knew Him personally,” he said. “And Sir Samuel Luke—you know him—he’s confident we’ll win this war. He says God told him we’ll win.”

John told his mother about Tad’s visit after supper that evening while his father was still at the forge. He noticed she was warming a brick by the fire. “What’s the brick for, Mama?” he asked.

“It’s to warm my feet, John. I am so cold all over,” she replied.

The next day she was worse. After supper she lay down again and asked Margaret to place the hot brick to her feet. Margaret felt her face. It was flushed with temperature.

“What shall we do, John, Papa’s gone to the alehouse and you know what that likely means—midnight before he returns,” Margaret said. “She has no spots on her but what if she has the plague?”

John felt his stomach tighten. “Where would she get that?” he whispered.

“It’s everywhere,” Margaret explained.

“I’m going for Dr. Banister right now,” John said.

The doctor examined the large, red, boil-like lump on her leg. “The *plague*, sure enough,” he muttered to himself.

Just then Thomas Bunyan staggered in at the door, drunk.

Margaret went to him and said, “Papa, Mama has the plague.” Her father looked at her with bleary eyes and sank into a chair by the fireside.

John came out of the bedroom and stared unbelievably at his father. “Papa, Mama may be dying now of the plague, and here you are drunk!” he exclaimed.

Some time later, Thomas Bunyan emerged from his drunken stupor and sat bolt upright in his chair. "Where's Margaret?" he asked. The doctor came forward and said, "Your wife has the plague. It's time you pulled yourself together and tried to be of some comfort to her."

Staggering into the room, Thomas fell across Margaret's bed and wept like a child. "Forgive me, oh, forgive me, Maggie dear!" he cried. "I did not know you were so sick!"

Lifting her feeble hand, she laid it on his face. With great effort she said, "I'm going now, Thomas, I'm going ... going to Heaven.... Meet me there...." Her voice trailed off into a whisper, and soon after she was gone.

"It's all over, children; your mother is safe on the heavenly shore," the doctor said quietly.

Thomas Bunyan staggered from the room wailing, "Oh God, I can't stand it, I can't stand it!"

Two days later, Margaret Bunyan was buried. That night sobs shook young John's frame, and he shivered in the cool night air. His sister Margaret heard him crying and came to him. Placing her arms around him she said, "O John, please do not weep so hard. We shall see Mama again. It will not be long."

"But I am so sinful, I shall never see her again," John sobbed.

"But John, 'the blood of Jesus Christ, God's Son, cleanseth us from all sin,' it says in the Bible. It will cleanse you, too, and you will see Mama again some day," she said, comforting him.

That night John dreamed that he saw the angels escorting his mother to her mansion. She looked back toward earth and said to them, "Don't forget my son, John. Bring him, too."

The angel said, "He is on the list. We will help him come."

When John awoke he felt great joy for a moment, but then he remembered it was only a dream—a dream which may never come true.