

TWO

I left the chapel, unsure what to do, except that I would be obliged to return later to see if Bunyan had turned up. It was now early afternoon, annoyingly too late to do what every sensible person does in France: have a jolly good lunch. I found myself on the seafront and in the middle of what seemed to be a huge traffic jam. All the cars had stopped and many of their occupants had got out. Children were playing between the cars, and would be, I thought, in some danger when the traffic started to move. All this went through my head quite quickly, for I almost immediately realised that the cars were in a queue waiting for the next ferry to England.

‘I think I sight a Christian.’

I turned at the sound of Bunyan’s voice. He was perhaps twenty, or even thirty, yards away. I am no good at estimating distances. I mention the distance only because I felt a mite irritated at being shouted at. Bunyan did not seem to shout, but he had a carrying voice; not as a result of big lungs, for he was on the small size. He had the actor’s trick of filling a space. But the result was the same had he been using a megaphone. His call interrupted the activities of numerous motorists, their wives or consorts and their children, and was acknowledged by some laughter, albeit of a good natured

sort. Several people patted his shoulders as he came towards me. I was a stranger and ye took me in. Bunyan has a way of suggesting quotations.

‘You’ve made friends,’ I said.

‘Aren’t they lovely?’

Bunyan was not being sarcastic. One of Bunyan’s limitations as a churchman was that he took a benign view of humanity. It was difficult to see anything lovely in this mass of spent holidaymakers. Sad, if you like, but hardly lovely. I was beginning to regret having answered his plea to come to Dieppe. I resolved to grant him as brief a time as was decently possible, to have a good dinner and to take the boat home. I would cut my losses to a day.

‘You weren’t in the chapel?’ I said, prepared magnanimously to dismiss his apology. But I had lost him. He had been waylaid by a woman who was pressing on him a hamburger and a plastic cup of tea.

Am I being begrudging about Bunyan? I expect I am, but I hate hanging around waiting for people. We priests have our patience tested enough by our inconsiderate flock. Is it too much to expect that our own people should be kinder to us? In the end I had to go into the crowd to extract Bunyan. He had a dozen people around him, perhaps more. He saw me and held up his hands in a gesture to draw me to his side. I must admit I frowned and I pointed to my watch.

‘My dear fellow, please forgive me,’ he said in his penetrating voice. ‘We have been having such fun.’

Bunyan’s fun-loving companions were looking at me, not perhaps in a hostile way, but no doubt wondering who I was. I felt an intruder, and rather a conspicuous one. Physically, I am rather a big fellow, slightly running to fat.

As we walked away Bunyan put his arm through mine and again sought my forgiveness. ‘Time passes so unobtrusively, but it was your time I was spending.’ Bunyan was overdoing it. Over-apologising rather eliminates the humility from an apology.

‘You didn’t feel like joining in?’ Bunyan said.

‘I didn’t fancy second billing.’

The remark was meant to be a pleasantry. But Bunyan seemed hurt. He stopped, and as he was still gripping my arm I stopped too. He faced me.

‘I was showing off, wasn’t I?’

Bunyan looked back towards the crowd of motorists and their families. Some people waved, a lot more it seemed than the dozen or so I had seen him with.

‘You have a talent,’ I said, I hope not begrudgingly. ‘I shouldn’t have interrupted.’

Several car engines were being started up

‘There they go. I was lucky to have had so long with them.’

We walked on, no more than a few steps, to a public bench.

Bunyan sat down, and waved me to the place beside him, as though offering me carefully prepared hospitality.

‘So what brings you to Dieppe?’ he said.

No doubt my expression was a mixture of surprise and crossness, for immediately Bunyan said, ‘Oh yes. Of course. Oh dear. You must think I am very rude.’

‘Are you well, Edward?’

Now Bunyan laughed. ‘A very reasonable question. You must think I am potty. I have been under some strain, which is why I phoned you. Did I alarm you?’

‘You sounded bloody desperate.’

‘How weak of me. What can I say? But you responded. You met the test. So good did come of it.’

I felt that Bunyan deserved a good clout round the ear, but I said, ‘The strain: you can cope?’

‘It isn’t important.’

‘You want to talk about it?’

‘No.’

‘No more midnight phone calls?’

‘I know you will always come.’

That did not sound very satisfactory.

Bunyan laughed again. 'For one thing, they're jolly expensive, phone calls.' He slapped my knee. 'Anyway, now you are here, let's have a good evening.

At least that prospect pleased me. I visualised a fishy meal. Some mussels to start, then a sole done in delicious sauce, with something dry to help it down. Perhaps in a more relaxed atmosphere Bunyan would unburden himself and, supportively, I could justify the trip.

Bunyan, though, had a different view of what would constitute a good evening. I had stood up, assuming that we would move on. A rather sharp wind was coming in from the Channel.

'Autumn's coming,' I said cosily.

Bunyan started to remove his sweater.

'Here, have this.'

'Please, Edward,' I said, restraining him.

'I really don't need it, old chap. I've got woollies on under all this.' All this was his clerical garb reaching down to his boots.

'The frock itself is tons warm.'

I might have taken this as a rebuke that I was not in clerical dress had I not been more concerned with other matters.

'I thought we were going to eat, Edward. Wasn't that the plan?'

Bunyan looked doubtful. 'I had a sandwich for lunch. But I dare say I could try another.'

'Sandwich be blowed. We are going to a restaurant.'

Bunyan looked at his watch. 'The people for the next ferry will be arriving soon. If I'm not mistaken the first cars are pulling in now.'

He gazed across to the beginning of a new car jam. There was evangelism in his stare. He looked at me. What did I see in his face? Pleading, perhaps. There were lives over there to be changed. Would I deprive him of that delight for the lure of a 12-euro menu?

So Satan had to hunt elsewhere, and I had to be satisfied with spiritual nourishment. Bunyan had promised equal billing, as I had put it, and no doubt his intention was sincere. But he could not

subdue his gift. I thought I did quite well, chatting not too heavily to the little group I collected about matters that here and there touched on moral issues. The waiting passengers had nothing else to do, and a clergyman was a novelty. But Bunyan may have done more: got some people to rejudge their lives. The perception, if it can be called that, may not have lasted their journey home. But for now Bunyan had touched on something new to them. Because I was talking to my own group I did not get much chance to observe Bunyan's method. Towards the end of our little mission, though, when my lot had drifted away, I stood at the edge of Bunyan's crowd. The words he was using seemed to be from a preacher's customary vocabulary, but there was a touch of passion to them. I thought I saw a young woman kneeling in front of him, although I could not be sure. She may have just been squatting on the ground.

I could have caught the midnight boat back to Newhaven, but Bunyan looked disappointed when I suggested it. I didn't need a lot of persuasion to linger. Proselytising is not a common experience for me, and I wanted to savour it still, rather as one is reluctant to abandon a nice dream. Bunyan said the spirit was within me. I was not sure about that. I suppose I was on what drug-takers call a high.

We slept on the floor of the chapel, he in his sleeping bag, me on a row of hassocks under a rug. He said he did not feel justified in paying for a hotel room when the chapel provided shelter. It was all the chapel was good for, as no one came to worship there. When I awoke next morning Bunyan was already dressed. He had been out to buy croissants: an exceptional extravagance, he said, but he thought I deserved a recompense after missing my meal the previous evening.

No doubt he thought it a gracious gesture, but with the morning I felt myself back in the ordinary world, irritated with Bunyan and cross with myself for having made a wasted journey. I also had a sore back and dust in my mouth from the hassocks. The chapel had only a washbasin and I wanted a shower. I made myself as clean as

possible. I wondered what Bunyan did about bathing; not much, I suspected. It was deplorable that a man of the church should not keep himself clean in body, especially, as in Bunyan's case, he was in physical contact with a lot of people.

'I go to the public baths,' Bunyan said. 'Every day.'

I suppose I had made my objection rather obvious.

'Oh dear. I'm grouchy in the morning.'

Bunyan said nothing. He was eating half a croissant I had left.

I said, 'Before I go, Edward, is there nothing I can do?'

'Oh yes, if you feel strong.'

I braced myself for a confession.

'This chapel,' Bunyan said. 'I have been wondering what best to do with it. There's homeless in Dieppe. This could be a shelter for them. Will you ask the Bishop about it?'

I suppose, put that simply, it doesn't sound a bad idea. Although Bunyan was exaggerating when he said no one came, it was true that the regular congregation was small, perhaps no more than single figures. All the same, it was pleasant to have an outpost of the church in Dieppe. There was a waiting list for clergy to look after the place. Not all of them held it in the poor regard that Bunyan did.

'Have you thought this out, Edward? The cost, for instance?'

'I could get the money for some beds, and to equip a kitchen. Last night people were pressing money on me. Better not tell the Bishop I was refusing money for the church.' Bunyan smiled. I found it difficult to return the smile. I was not at all keen to be Bunyan's emissary.

'Would it not be best if you put your ideas on paper? The money, and so on.'

Bunyan appeared to consider my evasive reply.

'All right,' he said, after perhaps half a minute, 'I will write a letter.'

He found a sheet of paper, and sat down, at the altar, this being the only table. He wrote quickly, covering both sides of the paper in

perhaps ten or fifteen minutes. He read the letter through and put it in an envelope which he did not seal. He handed me the letter.

‘Please feel free to read it now. There may be some questions you feel the Bishop will want to ask.’

I was still the emissary. I would not like to say he had tricked me. I suppose I was the victim of his simplicity. I opened the envelope and read the letter. Of course there were questions, dozens of them. I replaced the letter in the envelope.

‘I’ll see it gets to the Bishop safely.’

‘You may have to hand it over to his secretary.’

‘It’s all right, Edward. I won’t cheat. I’ll do my best.’ Bunyan then embraced me. When that was over I said, ‘Don’t expect too much.’

If the name Bunyan sounds a familiar one, it is no doubt because a famous criminal lawyer had the same name.

‘Any relation?’ people would sometimes say to Bunyan when they were introduced. Probably they still say it.

The famous Bunyan was Edward’s father. Few sons of famous men manage to overcome this calamity. The best way is to become even more famous, but there are not many Pitts or George Formbys. Bunyan’s father gave him lots of encouragement. On the several occasions I met him I found the elder Bunyan an immensely enjoyable man. Once we discussed whether the Anglican church or the Roman church offered the best chance of a brilliant career. I got the feeling that he believed Rome did better with its prize of the papacy. Edward would have none of this talk of ambition. ‘My aim is to become obscure,’ he told me, not wholly frivolously. He did not directly disparage his father’s success, but he told stories that cast doubt on his probity. Some of these were of such intimacy that they suggested a rare confidence between father and son. It is possible that Edward made them up, but they sounded authentic. One I remember vividly concerned his father’s boyhood at boarding school.

On the opposite side of the street to his father's school was the village school. On Saturdays and Sundays a child, or more usually two or three children, would sit on the steps of the village school. Boys from the boarding school would visit them. For sixpence the village girls would play with the boys' parts.

Bunyan's father walked across the street and spoke to the prettiest of the girls.

'What is your name?'

'Pamela.'

'Would you go the whole way?'

'Yes.'

'How much?'

'Five shillings.'

'Here is half a crown. I will give you the rest this evening if you still feel like doing it. Come to the Hat boarding house at seven. Wear a veil or a scarf. Tell the woman who answers the door you are waiting for someone.'

'Is this inside or outside?'

'Inside, a proper bed.'

'I ought to charge more for a proper bed.'

'We made a bargain, Pamela. We must keep to it.'

When Bunyan's father arrived at the Hat the patronne had made Pamela welcome, had shown her to a room and given her a cup of tea.

He said, 'How old are you?'

'Thirteen.'

'You are not supposed to do this until you are a bit older.'

'Who wants old people?'

Bunyan's father said nothing. He was fifteen.

Pamela said, 'Got the thing?'

'Yes.'

'Get on with it then. Mum expects me home soon.'

'Making love takes time.'

'I can't tell Mum that.'

This was on a Sunday. Pamela was asked to come to the Hat the following Thursday and to tell her mother that this time she would be home a little later. Lovemaking, Pamela was told, deserved at least an hour. Bunyan's father arranged for some flowers to be put in the room and he bought Pamela a present of chocolate. He gave her an extra shilling for what he said was her loveability. So, with four shillings for the patronne of the Hat, the evening cost a total of ten shillings. That routine, Sunday and Thursday, continued pleasantly for perhaps eighteen months. The two never met outside the Hat, even for special celebrations like Pamela's birthday. The school was very strict about its boys talking to girls.

One of the other boys at the school asked if he could go with Pamela one day a week. Pamela said yes, but after a month or two she ended the arrangement 'by mutual agreement'. She had acquired some stylish phrases. But the boy had not been paying her. Bunyan's father got the money the boy owed Pamela and she said she would have him back. But her protector had been thinking about Pamela's future. He was due to go to Oxford shortly and he decided that someone, other than her mother, was needed to look after Pamela. Her friends with whom she had sat on the village school steps had got jobs, in the village grocery, the bakery or wherever, and were mostly courting. Pamela's chances of finding a husband did not seem high.

In the next town was a house Bunyan's father visited occasionally when Pamela had her monthlies. It was run by a woman who called herself Mrs Romance. She poured him a glass of wine and started to tell him who was available. But he had come to see if Mrs Romance would take Pamela in.

'I think I might if she is clean and willing, as you say she is. We are a little shorthanded at the moment.'

It was agreed that Pamela would be brought to see Mrs Romance the following day, for tea, at half past three.

Then Bunyan's father said, 'War is coming. Soon this port will be full of warships, and the ships will be full of sailors wanting sexual

relief.’

‘Sailors? Captains?’ Mrs Romance was bothered.

‘Not many captains or admirals. But thousands of ordinary chaps wanting quick service. The place next door to this one is for sale. I will buy it and let you have it rent free. I will give you the money to have it done up as an attractive and workable house.’

‘And you’ll take the profit?’

‘Not a lot. A quarter, in return for my investment and my idea. You will get three-quarters of the profit for your work and knowledge.’

He drew a child’s drawing of her house, which he called the Ritz, and of the new house, which he called the Jolly Roger. He said he would not take any money she made from the Ritz.

‘Who says there will be a war?’

‘I do, Mrs Romance.’

‘You are very sure of yourself for a lad.’

‘Some people know things at seventeen that others do not know at seventy. War will be with us this summer. The British and the Germans have got the fever.’

‘I hate that Kaiser.’

‘Well, there you are.’

Next day Pamela was brought to see Mrs Romance. They chatted well over tea. As Bunyan’s father left, Mrs Romance said, ‘I agree to the other thing too.’ He said he would send someone, a solicitor, to make the arrangements and pay her the money she needed to get the house ready.

Conscription was not introduced until 1916, so he had two years in Oxford before becoming a soldier. All the famous regiments had vacancies, but, the way the war was going, he did not think they offered the prospect of a longish career. He enlisted in the Royal Army Catering Corps. The recruiting sergeant was surprised, and perhaps suspicious, that someone well-spoken wanted to be a cook rather than put a bayonet into a German. Bunyan’s father said that he had always been impressed by Napoleon’s dictum on the matter,

and the sergeant did not pursue it.

At the end of the war he went to see Mrs Romance. She wrote him a cheque for a large amount of money. She had kept careful and honest accounts, perhaps because she wanted to keep the partnership going.

‘Is there going to be another war?’ she said.

‘Yes. They are setting out the pieces.’

‘This year?’

‘No the fever has dispersed. It has to build up again.’

Mrs Romance was disappointed. ‘We could set up Jolly Rogers in other ports.’

But this was not the time to expand. There was going to be a slump. In any case, he had lost interest in primitive capitalism. He made over the ownership of the Jolly Roger to Mrs Romance and suggested that she sold it or tried to expand her quality trade. He proposed to return to Oxford for further study and then go into politics. He thought he could make it to attorney-general or, possibly, the lord chancellor. As it happened, he stayed in private practice and did very well.

During the war Pamela had married a sailor, one of her clients. Two months later he was killed. Mrs Romance had made Pamela her assistant, so she felt secure, and she had her war widow’s pension. ‘Yes, I’ve had an interesting life, a full life,’ she said. She was then seventeen.

Bunyan told me this story one evening around the time his father received his knighthood. The newspapers had carried pictures of him outside the Palace, and television had run a fulsome item on his career. Bunyan did not offer a direct word of criticism about his dad, but obviously there was an ‘if only they knew’ implication by telling the yarn at all.

My own feeling was that the story did not reflect badly on Bunyan’s father. Of course, no one could condone immorality, but he had done his best to protect Pamela. I also felt that the school had been pretty lax.

‘Waffle,’ Bunyan said. ‘That won’t get you through the gates of Heaven. Strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, that leadeth unto life.’

It was on the edge of my tongue to remind Bunyan not to judge, that he be not judged. But an exchange of biblical quotations is, in my view, only a form of boasting, and, being often misleading, does a disservice to those who first uttered them. I said something on those lines to Bunyan.

‘Not only a waffler,’ he said, ‘but pompous, too.’

When his father died Bunyan asked me if I would accompany him to the funeral. Naturally I agreed; I had planned to go anyway. He chose to sit with me among the congregation, a large one naturally, rather than with the other family mourners. At the graveside, too, he stayed at the edge of the crowd. I assumed that he was too distressed by the loss of his father to take a conspicuous part in the proceedings. No doubt this was the assumption of others there. But his distress was that he felt unable at the service to join in the prayers for his father’s soul.

‘Am I a terrible son, old chap?’

I was indeed shocked.

‘He is not yet ready for the Kingdom, you know.’

‘Would it not be better for God to decide that?’

‘He takes a lot of notice of prayer at a funeral, especially a son’s. It is a kind of reference, you see?’

Of course I saw the rather folksy parallel.

‘But your father, Edward. Really.’

Perhaps my reproachful attitude had an effect, for Bunyan said, ‘I will pray for him tomorrow. I won’t let him burn for more than twenty-four hours.’

So that was the famous Bunyan. Now where was I? Back in England, where I carried out my promise to Bunyan, without enthusiasm, but, I hope, without prejudice. Bunyan had forecast that I would have to deliver the letter to the Bishop’s secretary rather than hand it to the Bishop myself. Reaching up to authority in the

church is not that simple. Perhaps Bunyan was having a little joke, or perhaps his tendency to vagueness extended to his knowledge of church authority. My immediate superior was the archdeacon. I sometimes think that the line of command in the Communist party was composed by someone who had studied the structure of the Church of England. The best I could do was to hand Bunyan's letter to the archdeacon's secretary. He read it, asked me some obvious questions, and said, in effect, that it was a daft idea. He doubted anyway whether Dieppe came into his diocese, as it was foreign. He would have to look into it. I assumed that this was the end of the matter, apart from an eventual polite acknowledgement which could be passed to Bunyan. However, next day I had a call that the Bishop wanted to see me. How odd.