

**THE GIPSIES: AS ILLUSTRATED BY
JOHN BUNYAN, MRS. CARLYLE,
AND OTHERS. AND DO SNAKES
SWALLOW THEIR YOUNG?**

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The Gipsies: As Illustrated by John Bunyan, Mrs. Carlyle, and Others. And Do Snakes Swallow Their Young? by James Simson

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JAMES SIMSON

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INTRODUCTION.

THE admission of Mrs. Carlyle of her descent from William Baillie, the splendid Scottish Gipsy chief, who was killed in 1724, and of her relationship (so affectionately expressed) to his son and successor Matthew Baillie—"a thorough gentleman in his way"—who was living about 1770, has a very important bearing on the elucidation of the history of the Gipsy race in Scotland, as well as in other countries. In my *Disquisition on the Gipsies* I said that

"A few years ago a pillar of the Scottish Church, at Edinburgh, upon the occasion of founding a society for the reformation of the poor class of Scottish Gipsies, and frequently thereafter, said that *he himself was a Gipsy*" (p. 405); referring to the late Rev. Dr. Robert Gordon, of the High Church there, a man whom it would be difficult to match in Scotland. And I added that,—“The admission of the good man alluded to casts a flood of light upon the history of the Scottish Gipsy race, shrouded as it is from the eye of the general population; but the information given by him was apt to fall flat upon the ear of the ordinary native unless it was accompanied by some such exposition of the subject as is given in this work” (p. 415).*

I have always been of the opinion that Professor Wilson was also one of the Gipsy tribe, for reasons given at page 30. Carlyle in his *Reminiscences* said of his wife and Francis Jeffrey, that “they discov-

* A few of the extracts in the following pages have done duty, in the same way, on a previous occasion.

ered mutual old cousinships by the *maternal* side, and soon had common topics enough.” He seems to have been kept in the dark regarding the long-continued affection that was struck up between them. Had this reference to the fact of *both* of them having Gipsy blood in their veins? Jeffrey’s description by Carlyle is as follows:—

“Uncommonly bright black eyes, instinct with vivacity, intelligence, and kindly fire; roundish brow, delicate oval face, full of rapid expression.” And Lord Cockburn said of him:—“His father was George Jeffrey, who was bred to the law, and became one of the Depute-Clerks in the Supreme Court (called the Court of Session); not a high but a very respectable situation. His mother was Henrietta Loudon, a daughter of Mr. John Loudon, who had been educated for the church, but abandoned it for farming, which he practised near Lanark.”

If the Rev. Dr. Gordon and Mrs. Carlyle were “members of the tribe,” why might not John Wilson and Francis Jeffrey also have been members of it? In the preface to my pamphlet entitled *Was John Bunyan a Gipsy?* I said:—

“It is a long stretch for a native family to trace its descent to people living in the time of Henry VIII., but a very short one for a semi-barbarous tribe as such, having so singular an origin as a tent, as applicable to all descending from it, however much part of their blood may be of the ordinary race; the origin of which is generally unknown to them. Thus they have no other sense of origin than a Gipsy one, and that ‘theirs is a Gipsy family,’ of

an arrival in England like that of yesterday" (p. 3).

This applies to a descent from a male Gipsy, or through a female Gipsy marrying into a native family, and by inoculating her descendants and working conversion (but not *corruption*) of blood and sentiment, and turning them into the Gipsy current in society, as has frequently been done. In reply to this *Blackwood*, for May, 1866, said:—

"If your great-great-grandfather had the eccentric taste to marry a Hottentot, you have at least the comfort of thinking that by this time the cross must have pretty nearly disappeared." To this I replied:—"It is hardly necessary for me to point out the trifling fallacy in comparing the idea of being a member of the Gipsy tribe, that exists in Scotland and every other country, with that of a person having had a remote ancestor from one of the tropical countries visited by Scotchmen." (*Com.*, pp. 154-5).*

The strangest thing about the subject of the Gipsies, as now considered, is the ignorance of mankind in regard to it, and the incredulity as to the facts of it, and the unwillingness to have it investigated and treated according to its merits. It is also surprising that people should not have stumbled by accident on the true position of the question, rather than on the current one, without any knowledge of it on the part of themselves or others; which led me to ask:—

* There is something positively interesting, as illustrative of the "vagaries of the human mind," to find that this writer, while apparently knowing nothing of the subject he was discussing, said that my additions to the *History of the Gipsies* were "wild speculations and unsupported assertions." A writer in the *Atlantic Monthly*, for August, 1866, seemingly as ignorant as the one in *Blackwood*, described them as "a mass of rather interesting rubbish."

"How could any one say that the progeny and descendants of this people had no more affinity with the tribe, or even knowledge of it, than the company that played the part on the stage the night before?" (*Com.*, p. 112).

Imagine an oriental, tented people arriving in Great Britain, about 1506, from the Continent, where they had existed for about a century; those that arrived in Scotland probably coming from Spain through Ireland. Imagine also that this people, who were at first ignorant of the Scottish language, became legally and socially proscribed; and that to escape this double proscription, when it would serve their purposes, they denied that they were Gipsies, and in every way hid the fact from the native race when they took their places alongside of it, in the various relations in life. It had a cast of mind or a soul of nationality peculiar to itself, and a language and signs by which its members could recognize each other. These last would be natural to them, as a wandering tented robber tribe, and would become intensified by the double proscription to which they were exposed. At its best, the feeling of the population was averse to marry with them, however much they might have encouraged them to visit their premises in country places for their use or amusement. With that exception, they were substantially looked upon as "that mischievous progeny of Gipsies," so that "nothing but vipers could come out of a tent." Hence the natural feeling on the part of the Gipsies for their origin, tribe, and language, pulled very strongly in that direction; while the prejudice of the natives pushed them from them in the same direction. The result has been two currents in society, or a double nationality—the Gipsy one and the ordinary one of the country. A complete amalgamation with the natives,

so that the Gipsy element and feeling would disappear, was thus in the nature of things impossible. For there can be no such amalgamation with the ordinary natives of a people like the Gipsies which might be effected of individuals having no other peculiarity than birth in another country, or of natives of the same country who had followed any peculiar calling, or became disliked by the rest of the population, or of a clan or residents of a district that had made themselves obnoxious to others. A change of character, or calling, or residence, and the progeny of such people, under different circumstances, associating and marrying promiscuously with others, would in the nature of things, sooner or later, obliterate the distinctions of families and feelings that formerly existed; for they were all "ordinary natives of the soil." But none of these circumstances apply to the Gipsies, for it is natural for them to be "members of the tribe," while the proscription of the name and blood has never been removed. And none, with the two exceptions I have given, have publicly avowed their membership or relationship to it, so that the subject in all its bearings could easily be understood, and lead to the removal of the proscription of it. All of its members hold themselves to be "Gipsies" in secret, which has a wonderful influence on its perpetuation as a society or tribe distinct from, and unknown to, the rest of the human family. Hence it is, that it is wonderful why it should have been held, without real investigation, knowledge, or reflection, that the Gipsy element in its descent has been "absorbed by the native," instead of that a part of the native blood has been "absorbed by the Gipsies," adding greatly to the number of the tribe; or that "the Gipsies have ceased to be Gipsies by a change of habits."

Admitting (what cannot be dis-

puted) that the Rev. Dr. Robert Gordon and Mrs. Carlyle were "members of the tribe," we can easily believe the same of John Bunyan. In his autobiography, entitled *Grace Abounding*, he said:—

"For my descent, it was, as is well known to many, of a low and inconsiderable generation; my father's house being of that rank that is meanest and most despised of all the families in the land."

This is a very precise and graphic description of his people, in which he ignored the word Gipsy, owing to the legal and social responsibilities attaching to the name. He said that his "descent" was "well known to many," as something that need not be more accurately defined, or particularly alluded to, but rather kept from being publicly recorded. Then there was his intense anxiety to learn whether his family were "of the Israelites or no?" and his father's emphatic denial, "No, we were not." They were simply "tinklers," that is, Gipsies of more or less mixed blood, like Mrs. Carlyle's people, whom the author of the *History of the Gipsies* spoke of as "tinklers," when, in reference to Matthew Baillie and some of his tribe occupying the old smearing-house, while making horn spoons, he said that in it "nothing but a band of tinklers were quartered" (p. 215). The idea is further illustrated by a very minute description of a Gipsy family at St. Boswells, given in the *History*, pp. 309-318. Bunyan's father evidently followed, in 1628, a more legitimate way of life than Matthew Baillie did about or before 1770, that is, one of steady and hard industry. I have said of him that

"Bunyan's father had apparently a town beat, which would give him a settled residence, and prevent him using a tent, and lead him to conform with the ways of the ordinary inhabi-

tants; but doubtless he had his pass from the chief of the Gipsies for the district. The same may be said of John Bunyan himself" (p. 512). "Be all that as it may, Bunyan's father seems to have been a superior, and therefore important, man in the tribe, from the fact, as Southey says, of his having 'put his son to school in an age when very few of the poor were taught to read and write.'" (p. 519). Bunyan said:—"But notwithstanding the meanness and inconsiderableness of my parents, it pleased God to put it into their hearts to put me to school, to learn me both to read and write; the which I also attained according to the rate of *other* poor men's children." To this I added, that this is "a form of expression always used by the Gipsies when speaking of themselves, as distinguished from others. The language used by Bunyan, in speaking of his family, was in harmony with that of the population at large; but he doubtless had the feelings peculiar to all of the tribe, with reference to their origin and race" (p. 511).

It is very surprising that the Rev. John Brown, of Bunyan Church, Bedford, apparently knowing nothing of the subject of the Gipsies, and perhaps as unwilling to examine it, should have maintained that Bunyan's "descent," in the face of Bunyan's "own words," was from an aristocratic family that entered England from Normandy, under William the Conqueror! Or that it could have applied to a *native Englishman*, like Thomas Bonyon, who succeeded his father, William Bonyon, to nine acres of land and a cottage, called *Bunyan's End*; for such a man, even if called a "labourer" (and his wife a "brewer and baker"), in a legal document or record, was *not* the "meanest and most despised of all the families in the land." The language, "in harmony with that of the population at large," was applicable to the Bonyons if they were Gipsies, or had become Bunyans by the "conversion (but not *corruption*) of blood and sentiment" through a

Gipsy woman marrying a native, and turning the descent into "the Gipsy current in society."

A very unsatisfactory thing about Mr. Brown in this matter is his shifting his ground when speaking of Bunyan. First he maintained that Bunyan could not have been a Gipsy, because the name existed in England before the race arrived in it! This was inexcusable under any circumstances, and especially after I had demonstrated the case to the contrary, for its lack of reason was obvious to almost any one. Then, with my pamphlet entitled *John Bunyan and the Gipsies* before his eyes, in which I anticipated a reply to what he afterwards wrote, he addressed a letter to the *Daily News*, in which he maintained that Bunyan could not have been a Gipsy, because his general and legal residence was at a cottage, so that he was not likely to use a tent in his peregrinations around Bedford, in the way of the calling of a tinker, although most, if not all, of the primitive Gipsies live in houses during the winter; and because of an ancestor who was probably or apparently a native of England, viz., William or Thomas Bonyon, as if Gipsies of mixed blood must not necessarily have had an ancestor outside of the Gipsy tribe, which at the present day is applicable to almost all, if not all, of them! Then he said that I had "really nothing to go upon but Bunyan's own words," in regard to his descent, which he cast aside, and attempted to solve the question of Bunyan's descent or nationality by "words" and groundless suppositions of his own.

In my two pamphlets, entitled *John Bunyan and the Gipsies*, and *Was John Bunyan a Gipsy?* there are three letters addressed to an English clergyman. I refrained from designating him by name, for the reason that I believed he was a private person; but since he

turns out to be the author of *Bunyan, the hero of Bedford*, I claim the privilege of saying that he is the Rev. James Copner, vicar of Elstow. I was under the impression that, being a clergyman of the Church of England, he would be above the prejudices of some of the other denominations, and of the population at large; and I therefore ventured to address him, on the 9th May, 1882, in reply to a letter which I received from him, as follows:—

"In bringing up Bunyan in connexion with the Gipsies in the way I have done, it is impossible but that, sooner or later, you will be in some way involved in the subject. For that reason I beg you will give the question your most careful consideration, and if necessary consult with friends in regard to it. . . . Sooner or later the subject of the Gipsies, in all its bearings, will doubtless be treated with justice, and Bunyan enrolled as one of the race; still leaving him an 'English worthy' that, for that very reason, will stand higher than he has done. As this will become a part of the history of England, it would be desirable that you, as the vicar of Elstow, should occupy a position in it that will be in every way creditable to you."

I see that the two reverend gentlemen have been consulting (I might almost say *conspiring*;) with the effect, whatever the intention, of preventing the truth being elucidated; which is contrary to the Scotch legal usage as regards witnesses; for Mr. Copner says:—

"He would not have the smallest objection to believe that Bunyan was one of the race if the fact was only proved by sufficient evidence"; and Mr. Brown:—"None of Bunyan's admirers would object to his being shown to be a Gipsy, if only sufficient proof were adduced." In reply to both I said that they had "ignored everything that bears upon the subject, even what came out of Bunyan's mouth."

I cannot have the privilege of

cross-questioning these two reverend gentlemen in this matter, but I have already submitted fifteen interrogatories for Mr. Brown to answer, and which are equally applicable to Mr. Copner.* Both should know that it is contrary to reason to hold that Bunyan was an ordinary native, and not a Gipsy, until the latter can be proved of him, for as I said in my 12th question,

"Might not *any* person be of the Gipsy race, notwithstanding it was not even surmised, much less *proved*, by any one acquainted with the Gipsy subject, and much more so by one apparently totally ignorant of it?"

If they would only look at the evidence they could conclude, intuitively and instinctively, without an argument, that Bunyan was "the first (that is known to the world) of eminent Gipsies, the prince of allegorists, and one of the most remarkable of men and Christians"; and that England had the honour of his having been born and reared on her soil, although he was what he was in spite of the prejudices of the population that were not of his own race. They both doubtless believe that Bunyan was "a divine instrument for the benefit of humanity in its highest concernment"; so that it would ill become *them* to be found fighting against what in a sense might be called "the Lord's anointed." It is to be hoped that they will be able to "discern the signs of the times" in this matter.

The *Graphic*, for the 26th August, expressed its pleasure on finding, according to Mr. Brown's fanciful theory, that Bunyan's family were "positively respectable people," and not "tinkering Gipsies." Therein lies all the trouble. Surely the Rev. Dr. Robert Gordon was, in every way in which he

* *Was John Bunyan a Gipsy?* (p. 16).