

For Christ's Crown

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CHRIST'S
CROWN

*Sketches of Puritans
and Covenanters*

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With love to my grandchildren:
Nathan, Anna, Josiah, and Timothy, and to those
who will follow in their train.

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JOHN GIFFORD AND JOHN BUNYAN

Evangelist and Pilgrim

(Bunyan: 1628–1686)

On June 2, 1648, the first rays of sun lit the streets and fields of Maidstone, England. Throughout the day and night before, the army of Parliament had crushed a large force loyal to King Charles I. Hundreds of bodies lay dead in the streets. The wounded groaned. More than one thousand exhausted royalist soldiers hid in the hop fields and woods on the edge of town. The morning light revealed that they were completely surrounded. With no hope of rescue, the soldiers of the king surrendered.

The Battle of Maidstone was one of the last of the English Civil War, leaving King Charles I defeated and Parliament ruling the land. Parliament later released all of the royalist prisoners from the battle, except twelve of the leaders who were sentenced to hang. Among them was Major John Gifford.

The night before Gifford's execution, his sister came to visit him. She found the guard at the door fast asleep and the rest of the watch in a drunken stupor. "This is your chance," she told Gifford. "Make your escape and save your life."

Slipping past the dozing guards and out into the darkness, Gifford ran across fields and crept into a narrow ditch. He lay there three days while soldiers scoured the countryside for him. He dared not

return to his home in Kent for fear of capture, so with the help of royalist friends, he hid out for months. In time, he settled in Bedford, a small town where no one knew him.

John Gifford, a loud, immoral drunkard who swore constantly, made a mess of his new life in Bedford. He despised Christians and made his disdain known to all. His hatred for Anthony Harrington, an outspoken Christian of the town, led Gifford to boast that he would kill Harrington one day.

The money Gifford made, he quickly lost through gambling. His gambling losses cast him into fits of despair. Many times he resolved to quit gambling, but the addiction always overpowered him. One night after losing a large sum of money, Gifford threw himself into a rage, cursing God and blaming the Almighty for his troubles. In the midst of his tirade, he was struck dumb when he heard the blasphemy spewing from his mouth and caught a glimpse of the evil in his heart. For weeks, he suffered under the crushing weight of his sin and guilt. Out of desperation, he began to read the Bible, and he discovered the forgiveness of sins promised to all who come to Jesus Christ.

John Gifford's life turned upside down. He stopped drinking and gambling and cursing. He discovered a love for others that he had never felt before. When he learned about a small group of Christians—that included Anthony Harrington—who met for Bible study and prayer, he asked to join them. At first they put him off. "He has been so vile and done such wild things in town," they said to one another. They remembered his threats to kill Harrington. But Gifford wouldn't take no for an answer. Time and again he asked to come to their meetings. His persistence wore them down, and they reluctantly agreed to let him come. From the start, they could tell he was a heartfelt Christian who soaked in the Word of God like a sponge. Before long, Gifford was leading the Bible study, clearly explaining the Scriptures and applying them to everyday life.

In 1650, when the small group of believers in Bedford decided to form an independent congregation, they agreed unanimously to call John Gifford as their first pastor. The Christians of Bedford called him "Holy Mr. Gifford." At this time, there was no king—Parliament and Oliver Cromwell ruled the land. Cromwell allowed Protestant Christian groups to worship freely. Nonconformist and

Independent congregations, which had been persecuted during the reign of Charles I, began to thrive. Cromwell's government granted Gifford's small congregation the use of the chapel of St. John's Hospital in Bedford.

The little congregation grew slowly, but what they lacked in numbers, they made up for in zeal. John Gifford's winsome preaching and his wise counsel deepened the faith of his flock.

Now there was a tinker from the nearby village of Elstow who often came to Bedford to mend pots and pans. His name was John Bunyan. Like Gifford, he had been widely known as a crude man, full of cursing and folly. But he had started reading religious books and going to his parish church. He took an oath to stop swearing—and stuck to it. His neighbors, amazed by the change, praised him for it. "I please God as well as any man in England," he said to himself.

One day, as Bunyan walked along a street in Bedford—his anvil on his back and tool box in hand—he saw some women sitting on a porch in the sun. He overheard them talking about their relationship with God. "I drew near to hear what they said," Bunyan said later, "for I, too, was now a brisk talker in the matters of religion."

The women's conversation stunned him. They said that in themselves they could do nothing good, and that they were saved only through the righteousness of Christ. The women rejoiced that they had been born again through faith in Jesus. "I heard them," Bunyan said, "but I did not understand them; for they were far above me. They spoke as if joy made them speak. They spoke with such pleasantness of Scripture language and with such appearance of grace in all they said, that they were to me as if they had found a new world."

Realizing that he had been playing religious games, Bunyan left, his chest pounding and his spiritual pride shattered. "They were on the sunny side of some high mountain, refreshing themselves with the pleasant beams of the sun," he said of the women, "while I was shivering under a dark cloud in the frost and snow."

As the weeks passed, Bunyan often went to see the Bedford women. They read the Scriptures to him and urged him to put his trust in Jesus Christ. "You need to talk to our pastor," they said. So they walked him across town and introduced him to John Gifford. The stout old Gifford gripped his hand warmly and invited him in. They

talked for hours. Again and again, he met with Gifford for counsel, prayer, and Bible study.

He began attending Gifford's church, but doubts plagued him for a long time. Once he went to worship worried that Christ would never accept him. Gifford preached about the undying love of Christ for sinners. "These words did suddenly break in upon me," Bunyan said later, "'My grace is sufficient for you, My grace is sufficient for you, My grace is sufficient for you,' three times together; and I thought that every word was a mighty word unto me."

"Christ! Christ! There was nothing but Christ before my eyes," Bunyan declared. "Now Christ was my all; all my wisdom, all my righteousness, all my sanctification, and all my redemption." Bunyan walked home, his heart overflowing. "I could have spoken of His love and mercy to me, even to the crows who sat upon the ploughed land before me," he said.

Bunyan started to lead others to Christ. In 1655, two hard blows fell upon Bunyan: his wife died and left him alone to care for their four children, and not long after, John Gifford passed away. Gifford, in a letter to his congregation written from his deathbed, exhorted his flock to walk together in love when he was gone. "You were not joined to the ministry," he reminded them, "but to Christ and the Church. Stand fast; the Lord is at hand."

The congregation sent men from the church, including Bunyan, to preach in the nearby villages. Bunyan proved to be an effective preacher. "I had not preached long," Bunyan wrote, "before some began to be greatly afflicted in their minds with the greatness of their sin and of their need for Jesus Christ."

Soon large crowds came to hear him preach. Although he kept earning his living as a tinker, he spent more and more time preaching. John Bunyan married a Christian woman named Elizabeth who loved his children as her own. Elizabeth gave birth to two more children. The Bunyan home brimmed with laughter and joy.

Everything changed in 1660 when King Charles II came to the throne. He wanted to force everyone in the kingdom, regardless of conscience, to worship using the Book of Common Prayer in their local Church of England congregation. Those who failed to attend their parish church faced fines or imprisonment. Laws were passed making it illegal for nonconformists like Bunyan to preach or gather

for worship. One evening, when Bunyan began to preach to some poor farmers in a country cottage, the constable and his deputies barged in and seized him. As they pulled him away, Bunyan told the congregation, "It is a mercy of God to suffer for doing good. Better by far to be the persecuted than the persecutors."

The next morning the constable hauled Bunyan before a judge, who asked him, "Why do you go to such meetings and preach?"

"I went," Bunyan replied, "to instruct the people to forsake their sins and trust in Christ."

"But you are a tinker," the judge said, "why don't you follow your trade? It is unlawful for you to carry on religious services as you do."

"I do follow my calling and preach the Word too," Bunyan answered.

"I will send you to jail unless you promise to stop preaching," the judge said.

"I shall not stop speaking the Word of God," Bunyan said. "I shall continue to counsel, comfort, and teach the people that desire it."

"Don't you love your wife and children?" asked the judge.

"Indeed I do, very dearly," Bunyan said, his heart breaking at the thought of leaving his family, "but in comparison with Jesus Christ I do not love them at all."

The judge ordered him held in jail to be tried at the next meeting of the county court.

Two months passed before Bunyan stood before a panel of judges. A clerk read the charge. "John Bunyan of the town of Bedford, laborer, has devilishly and perniciously abstained from coming to church to hear divine service, and is a common upholder of unlawful meetings to the great disturbance and distraction of the good subjects of the kingdom contrary to the sovereign laws of our lord the king."

"What say you to this?" asked the clerk.

"I frequently attend the Church of God," Bunyan answered, "And I am, by God's grace a member with all the people over whom Christ is the head."

"You know what we mean," one judge shouted, "Do you attend the parish church of the Church of England?"

"No, I do not," Bunyan answered.

"Why not?" asked the judge.

"Because I do not find it commanded in the Word of God," Bunyan replied.

"We are commanded to pray," the judge responded.

"Yes, but not by the Common Prayer Book," Bunyan said.

"How then are we commanded to pray?" asked the judge.

"With the Spirit," Bunyan answered. Holding up his well-worn Bible, he said, "Show me the place in the Bible where the Common Prayer Book is written, or one text of Scripture that commands me to read it, and I will use it."

"We can't waste anymore time," another judge snapped. "Do you confess or not?"

"I confess," Bunyan said, "that we have many meetings together to pray to God and to exhort one another. I confess that I am guilty of nothing else."

"You will be sent back to prison until you promise to stop your preaching."

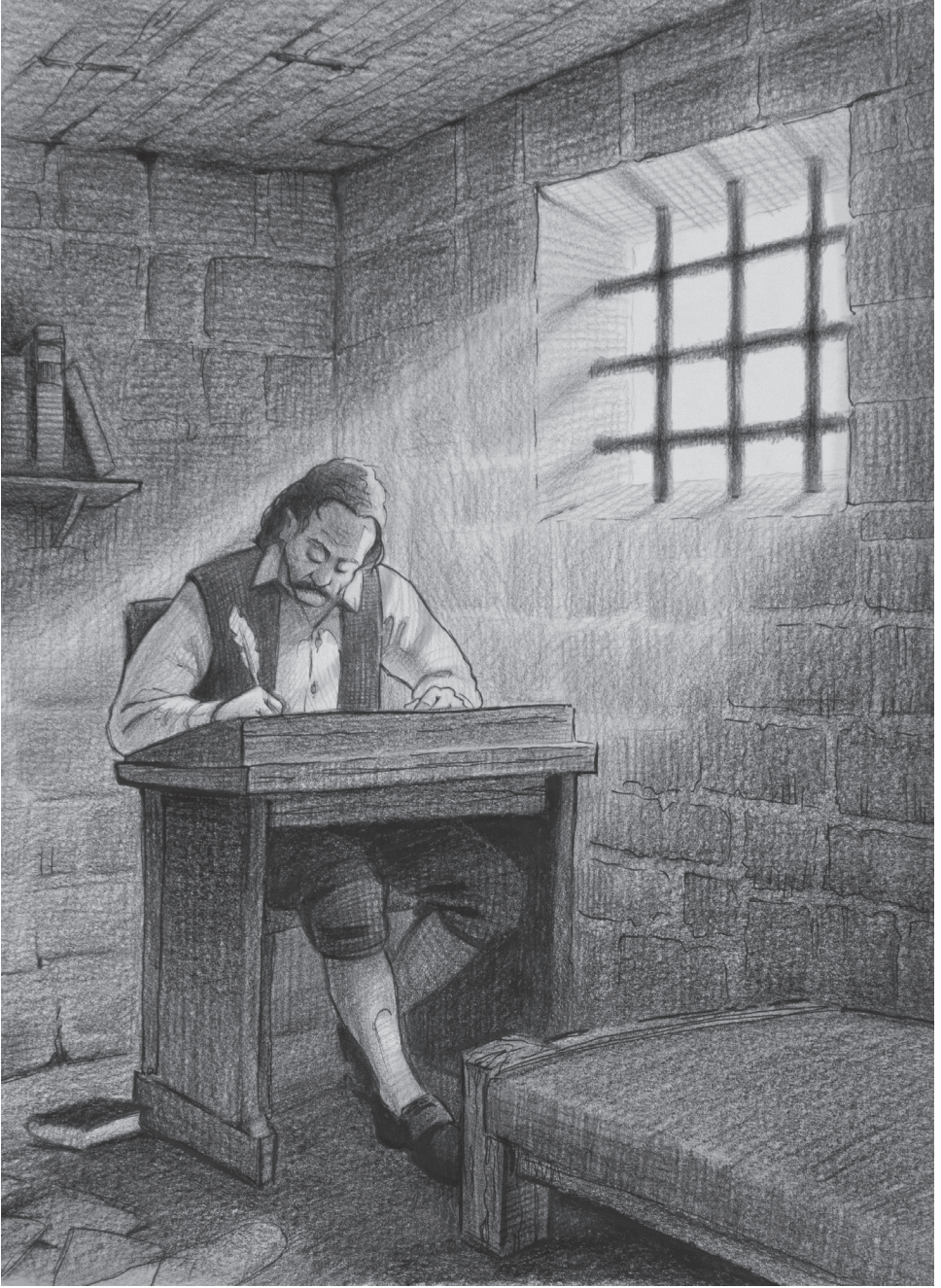
"If I were out of prison today," Bunyan said, "I would preach the gospel again tomorrow."

The judges sent him to jail. "The parting from my wife and poor children," Bunyan wrote from prison, "broke my heart to pieces."

He made leather boot straps to provide a little money for his family. Bunyan prepared himself for exile or death, but neither came. Instead, he spent year after year in jail. Other Christian prisoners came and went. He taught them from the Bible. Blest by his insights and down-to-earth explanations, they urged him to write down his meditations on the Word of God. A printer in London published them, and they encouraged Christians across England. He wrote several books, including the story of his conversion, *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*.

After twelve years behind bars, he was released. The king decided to grant nonconformist ministers permission to preach. Bunyan stopped mending pots and gave all his time to preaching, planting churches, and writing books. Before long, the king changed his mind again and banned nonconformists from preaching. But Bunyan refused to stop. Soon he landed in jail again.

During that second round in prison, he wrote a book unlike anything he had written before. Bunyan imagined the Christian life as a dangerous pilgrimage through the world to heaven. He called it, *The Pilgrim's Progress From This World to That Which is to Come*. He wrote it as an allegory, telling the story of a man named Christian



JOHN BUNYAN

“He spent year after year in jail.”

who travels the difficult way to heaven, encountering trials and temptations. Throughout, he is helped by the good counsel of a man named Evangelist. Bunyan's tale was taken from his own life. He was Christian and John Gifford was Evangelist.

When he showed the story to his friend, John Owen, Owen told him to have it published. It was an instant success. Printers could not make copies fast enough. Although *The Pilgrim's Progress* made a great deal of money for printers and booksellers, Bunyan received little for it. But that did not concern him. "The true spirit of prayer," Bunyan said, "is more precious than thousands of gold and silver."

In December 1671, the king reversed course again and overturned the laws against nonconformists. Bunyan left prison for good. He became the pastor of his Bedford congregation, and he preached far and wide. "I have seen him preach to 1,200 people at seven o'clock in the morning on a working day in the middle of winter," one man recalled.

Once, a crowd of three thousand so jammed the pews and aisles of a London church to hear Bunyan preach that he had to be lifted over people to reach the pulpit. Content to serve his little flock in Bedford, he turned down offers of large salaries from churches in London.

In 1688, he died while visiting London to preach. They laid his body in Bunhill Fields, a burial ground in London for nonconformists. More than 300 years later, his books still bring comfort and inspiration to countless people. Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, translated into scores of languages, remains one of the most widely-read books in the world.

ALEXANDER "SANDY" PEDEN

Covenanter Prophet

(1626–1686)

Late one Sunday night, in 1663, a small congregation in southwestern Scotland wept as they stood around their minister, Sandy Peden. He had just finished a sermon that ran for hours. He urged them to go home, but they clung to him.

For three years, Alexander Peden, or “Sandy” as he was called, had pastored his flock at New Luce, a village nestled in the green hills of Galloway. But this was to be Peden’s last service in the church. The king had ordered the ejection of all ministers who refused to acknowledge him as head of the church. Peden and other “outed” ministers were forbidden to come within fifty miles of their congregations and banned from preaching or ministering the sacraments anywhere in the kingdom.

Peden consoled his broken-hearted people saying, “Be calm and trust in God.”

Before he left the church, he walked to the pulpit, tapped it with his Bible, and said, “In my Master’s name, I charge thee that none ever enter thee but such as enter as I have done by the door.”

He meant that no one but a true minister of the Word of God should preach in the church. It happened as Peden charged, for the pulpit remained empty for twenty-five years until the persecution

of the crown had ended and a faithful preacher took up the work there again.

Peden bid farewell to his congregation, and slipped away into the night. But he had no intention of abandoning his calling as a minister—he would obey God rather than men.

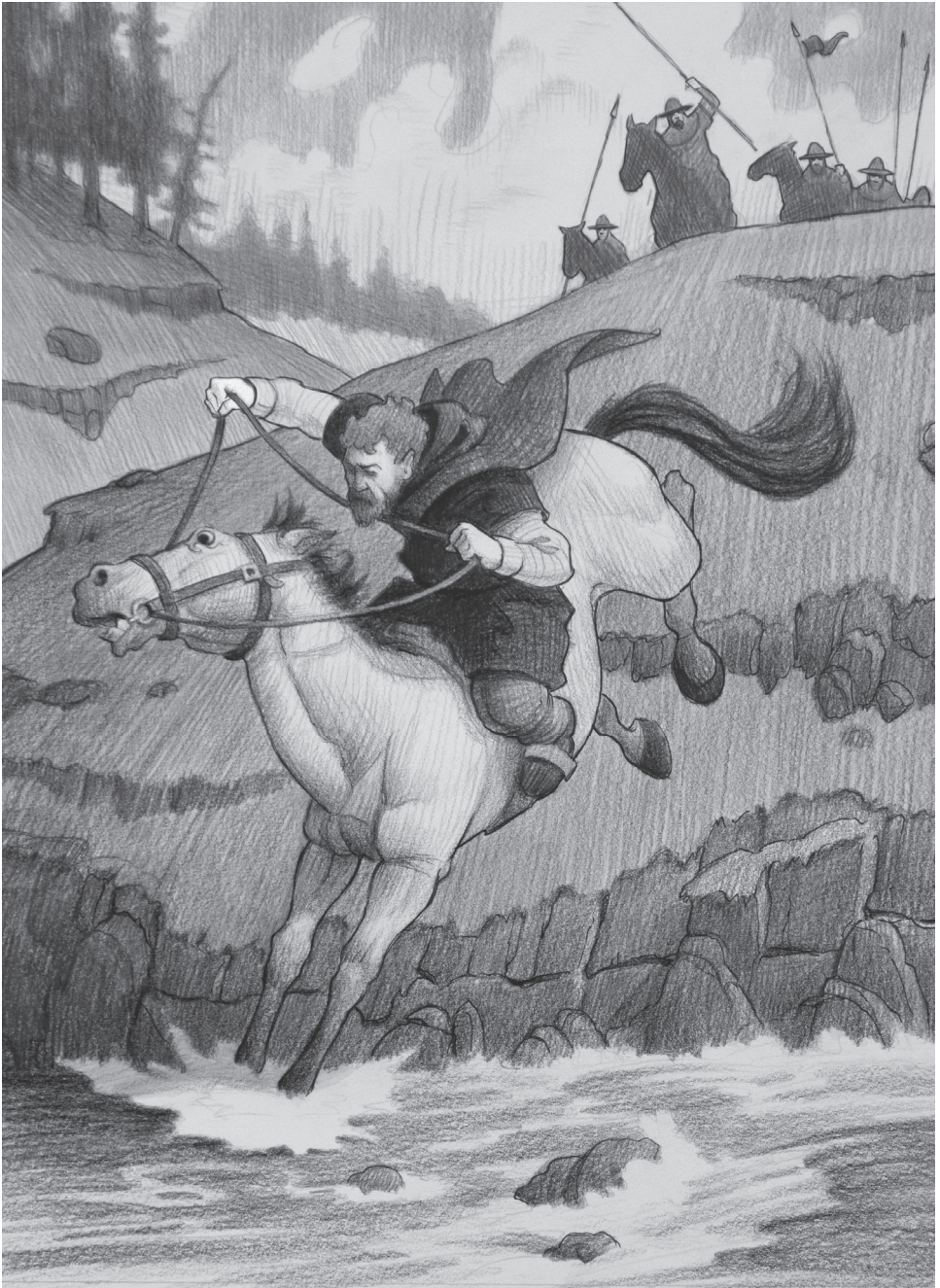
Sandy Peden wandered the hills and valleys of Scotland proclaiming the good news of Jesus Christ. For twenty-three years he ministered on the run, preaching in fields and sleeping in caves. He baptized by the side of creeks and celebrated the Lord's Supper on rocky crags. He never married, never had a home. Like his Savior, he had no where to lay his head, but he didn't complain. "It is honorable to be a footman in Christ's company, and run at Christ's foot from morning to evening," he said.

People hiked for miles, often in the rain, to a remote glen to hear Peden preach. He spoke a bit haltingly but powerfully. "I observed that every time he spoke," one man said, "whether conversing, reading, praying, or preaching, between every sentence he paused a little, as if he had been hearkening to what the Lord would say to him, or listening to some secret whisper."

Not long after the authorities threw Peden out of his church, they charged him with preaching and baptizing illegally. The crown declared Peden a rebel. If caught, he could be put to death.

Sandy Peden joined other Covenanters whose rallying cry was: "Christ alone is head and king of His Church." The Covenanters disagreed how to respond to the persecution. Some thought they should raise an army and fight the king's troops. Others believed that armed resistance was wrong. In 1666, when Covenanters rose up and marched toward Edinburgh, Peden went with them, preaching to them across the countryside. But as they traveled, Peden came to see that the small, poorly-organized band was headed for slaughter against the king's well-armed troops. He urged them not to go to battle. When the Covenanter militia pressed on, Peden left them. A few days later, they were crushed at the Battle of Rullion Green. Later, one of his friends said to him, "You did well when you left them, seeing that you were persuaded that they would fall and flee before the enemy."

"I should have stayed with them," Peden sighed, "though I would have been cut in pieces."



ALEXANDER "SANDY" PEDEN

*"As he fled on horseback with the king's horsemen hard on his heels,
he came to a river, raging with a flood of melted snow."*

Whenever Peden preached, he challenged his hearers to cling to Christ and to pray. "It is praying folk alone who will get through the storm," he said.

Peden assured the people that the Lord was always near when they prayed. "If there be one of you, Christ will be the second," he said. "If there be two, He will be the third. You shall never lack company in prayer."

"Where is the Church of Scotland at this day?" he asked in a sermon on the moors. "It is not among the great clergy. I will tell you where the Church is. It is wherever a praying young man or young woman is beside a dike in Scotland. That's where the Church is."

Once he refused to preach for he knew that Covenanters were dying on a battlefield at that very hour. "Let the people go to their prayers," he said, "As for me—I neither can nor will preach any this day; for our friends are fallen and their blood is running like water."

Yet through all the hardship Peden kept an unswerving confidence in God's watch over the Church. Once, when chided that the king would crush the Scottish believers, Peden replied, "I defy the world to steal a lamb of Christ's flock unmissed."

While on the run, he often encouraged himself and others by singing Psalm 32: "Thou art my hiding place; thou shalt keep me from trouble."

Even in the face of all the difficulties, he remained joyful and thankful, quick to smile and the first to build up the discouraged. "His cheerfulness made others cheerful," one man said.

The king's men tried desperately to capture Peden and end his ministry to the people, but countless times the Lord snatched him from their clutches. His breathtaking escapes, told from fireside to fireside across Scotland, warmed the hearts of the beleaguered Covenanters. One spring, dragoons surprised him. As he fled on horseback with the king's horsemen hard on his heels, he came to a river, raging with a flood of melted snow. He plunged in with his horse. As the current rapidly pulled them down river, Peden struggled to cling to his mount. The soldiers halted at the river's edge and dared not follow. They watched from the bank, certain that Peden would be swept to a watery grave. But with strength and skill, he prodded his horse through the icy torrent and up the opposite bank. Soaking wet, he turned in the saddle, smiled and waved to the soldiers. "Lads,"

he shouted, "you lack my boat for crossing the waters and you will certainly drown. Consider where your landing would be. You are fighting for the devil. O think of it!"

Once, a party of soldiers in search of Peden approached him and a friend on a country road. Peden's friend nearly fainted and feared that they would be captured. But Sandy calmed him. "Keep up your courage and confidence," Peden said, "for God will keep these men from doing us any harm."

As the soldiers came upon them, Peden asked if he could be of assistance. "We are trying to find a spot to cross the river," the captain said.

"Follow me," Peden replied, leading the soldiers down a hillside to a shallow place to ford the river. He watched the troops cross over and received a thankful wave from the captain. "Why did you go with them?" his astonished friend asked.

"It was safe for me," Peden answered, "for my hour of falling into their hands is not yet come."

At another time, a troop of horsemen surprised Sandy Peden and a small group of Covenanters. They fled on foot, darting through heather and briars. They ran quite a distance, but they couldn't shake their pursuers, and they were exhausted. After gaining a little ground by scrambling up a hillside, Peden stopped, gathered the others and said, "Let us pray here; for if the Lord does not hear our prayers and save us, we are all dead men."

He bowed his head and prayed, "Lord, it is thy enemies' day and hour. Lord, cast the lap of thy cloak over old Sandy and these poor ones and save us. And we will remember and praise thy goodness, pity and compassion."

No sooner had Peden finished his prayer than a thick fog blanketed the hillside. The soldiers could barely see their hands in front of their faces. They gave up the chase. The Covenanters slipped away to preach and pray another day.

He did not always escape. While spending the night in the home of a friend, Peden was captured and hauled to Edinburgh to stand trial. The court condemned him to the prison on Bass Rock, a stony island in the Firth of Forth, a hellish place where many prisoners died from the harsh conditions.

"We are not permitted to talk, to gather or to worship together," Peden wrote a friend. "We are locked up day and night to hear only the sighs and groans of our fellow prisoners. O for grace to thank Him in whatever service He places us, whether in bonds or freedom."

He loved to watch the birds soaring over the island prison. "They call on us to bless God for his mercies," he said. But he also confessed he envied the freedom that the birds enjoyed.

One day as Peden walked in the prison yard, a guard shouted at him, "The devil take you."

"Poor man," Peden said to him, "you don't know what you are saying; but you shall repent of it."

Peden's reply cut the man to the quick and he seemed to lose his senses. As another guard led him away, he called for Peden's help. "The devil will come immediately and take me away," he cried.

Later, Sandy Peden sought out the guard. He found the man wrestling under a deep sense of his sin. Peden led him to trust in Christ for forgiveness. The next day, the guard did not report for duty. When his commander ordered him to take his weapon and watch the prisoners, he refused, "I will lift no arms against Jesus Christ and His people," he said. "I have done that for too long."

The warden threatened him with death if he did not do his guard duty. "Though you tear me in pieces," he said, "I shall never lift arms in that way again."

Stripped of his rank and expelled from the service, the man returned home and lived the rest of his life as a faithful Christian.

For four years, Peden endured the brutal life on Bass Rock. Then he was moved to the Tolbooth, a ghastly prison in Edinburgh. "A grave for men alive," some called it. After fifteen months, he and sixty other Covenanters were banished to America, doomed to work as slaves on the plantations of Virginia, never to return to Scotland under pain of death. Guards marched the prisoners to the coast and put them on a ship. Many of them wept, believing they would never see their homeland again. "Be of good cheer," Peden told them. "The ship has not been built that will carry us over the sea to any of the plantations."

They sailed to London where they were to be transferred to a convict ship bound for America. "You need not fear," Peden told his

companions. "Lift up your hearts for the day of your redemption draws near. In London we will all be set free."

What Peden predicted came to pass. The captain of the convict ship at dock in London, expecting a gang of Scottish thieves, refused to take on board the good Christian men who were being punished for their faith. He set them free. Peden and the others walked back to Scotland.

The years of exposure to the weather and the harsh conditions of prison took a toll on Sandy Peden. His gray, wrinkled, and stooped body made him look far older than he was. When Peden lay dying in a cave near his boyhood home, he sent for James Renwick, a bold, twenty-three-year-old preacher. Peden and Renwick had never met, yet Peden had formed a bad opinion of Renwick based on what others had told him. Renwick came at once and found Peden, pale and weak. Peden propped himself up on his elbow and looked at him. "Sir," he asked, "are you the Mr. James Renwick that there is so much noise about?"

"Father," he answered, "my name is James Renwick; but I have given the world no grounds to make noise about me, for I have taught no new principles or practices, but what our Reformers and Covenanters have held."

"Sit down, sir," Peden said, "and tell me about your conversion and your call to the ministry."

Renwick told him how God had saved his soul and led him into preaching. He gave God the glory for the fruit of his work in the lives of others. When he finished, Peden said, "You have answered me to my soul's satisfaction, and I am very sorry that I should have believed any ill reports of you. But, sir, before you go, you must pray for me; for I am old and going to leave the world."

Renwick kneeled and poured out his heart to God for Peden. Then Peden took his hand and embraced him. "Sir," he said, "I find you a faithful servant to your Master. Go on depending on the Lord alone."

Shortly before he died, Peden said, "God has been good and kind to poor old Sandy through a long tract of time." He looked forward to the sleep of Christ. "That I might have quiet in my grave," he said, "for I have had little in my life."

Sandy Peden died in the winter of 1686, worn out at the age of sixty. His friends secretly buried him in the churchyard not far from

his childhood home. But soldiers discovered the spot and dug up his body. Seeking to dishonor and punish him even in death, they carried it to a hillside in the village of Cumnock where prisoners were executed. They buried him, like a common criminal, at the foot of the gallows. In the years that followed, the people of Cumnock stopped using the church graveyard and began to bury their dead on the hillside that they might lay beside Sandy Peden. As one Scot later wrote, "That spot has become the hallowed God's Acre, where in the midst of his own kith and kin, the prophet of the Lord sleeps until the Resurrection Day."