THE

FORCE OF TRUTH.

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PART I.

An Account of the state of the Author’s mind and conscience in the early part of his life, especially showing what his sentiments and conduct were, at the beginning of that change of which he proposes to give the history.

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HOUGH I was not educated in what is commonly considered as ignorance of God and religion, yet, till the sixteenth year of my age, I do not remem­ber that I ever was under any serious conviction of being a sinner, in dan­ger of wrath, or in need of mercy; nor did I ever, during this part of my life, that I recollect, offer one *hearty* prayer to God in secret. Being alie­nated from God through the ignorance that was in me, I lived without him in the world, and as utterly neglected to pay him any voluntary service, as if I had been an *Atheist* in principle.

But about my sixteenth year I began to see that I was a sinner. I was indeed a leper in every part, there being “no health in me;” but, out of many external indications of inward depravity, conscience discovered and reproached me with one especially; and I was, for the first time, disquieted with apprehensions of the wrath of an offended God. My attendance at the Lord’s table was expected about the same time; and though I was very ignorant of the meaning and end of that sacred ordinance, yet this circum­stance, uniting with the accusations of my conscience, brought an awe upon my spirits, and interrupted my before undisturbed course of sin.

Being, however, an utter stranger to the depravity and helplessness of fallen nature, I had no doubt that I could amend my life whenever I pleased. Previously therefore to communicating, I set about an unwilling reformation; and, procuring a form of prayer, I attempted to pay my secret addresses to the Majesty of heaven. Having in this mariner silenced my conscience, I partook of the ordinance: I held my resolutions also, and continued my de­votions, such as they were, for a short time: but they were a weariness and a task to me; and, temptations soon returning, I relapsed; so that my prayer-book was thrown aside, and no more thought of, till my conscience was again alarmed by the next warning given for the celebration of the Lord’s Supper. Then the same ground was gone over again, and with the same issue. My “goodness was like the morning-dew that passeth away;” and, loving sin and disrelishing religious duties as much as ever, I returned, as “the sow that is washed, to her wallowing in the mire.”

With little variation, this was my course of life for nine years: but in that time I had such experience of my own weakness, and the superior force of temptation, that I secretly concluded reformation in my case to be im­practicable. “Can the *Ethiopian* change his skin, or the leopard his spots?” I was experimentally convinced that I was equally unable, with the feeble barrier of resolutions and endeavours, to stem the torrent of my impetuous inclinations, when swelled by welcome, suitable, and powerful temptations: and being ignorant that God had reserved this to himself as his own work, and had engaged to do it for the poor sinner who, feeling his own insuffi­ciency, is heartily desirous to have it done by him, I stifled my convictions as well as I could, and put off my repentance to a *more convenient season.*

But, being of a reflecting turn, and much alone, my mind was almost con­stantly employed. Aware of the uncertainty of life, I was disquieted with continual apprehensions, that *this more convenient season* would never ar­rive; especially as, through an unconfirmed state of health, I had many warnings and near prospects of death and eternity. For a long time I en­tertained no doubt that impenitent sinners would be miserable for ever in hell: and at some seasons such amazing reflections upon this awful subject forced themselves into my mind, that I was overpowered by them, and my fears became intolerable. At such times my extemporary cries for mercy were so wrestling and persevering, that I was scarcely able to give over; though at others I lived without prayer of any sort! Yet, in my darkest hours, though my conscience was awakened to discover more and more sin­fulness in my whole behaviour, there remained a hope that I should one day repent and turn unto God. If this hope was from myself, it was a horrid presumption; but the event makes me willing to acknowledge a persuasion that it was from the Lord: for had it not been for this hope, I would pro­bably have given way to temptations, which frequently assaulted me, to put an end to my own life, in proud discontent with my lot in this world, and mad despair about another.

A hymn of Dr Watts’ (in his admirable little book for children) entitled “*The all-seeing God,*”at this time fell in my way. I was much affected with it, and having committed it to memory, was frequently repeating it, and thus continually led to reflect on my guilt and danger. Parents may from this inconsiderable circumstance be reminded, that it is of great importance to store their children’s memories with useful matter, instead of suffering them to be furnished with such corrupting trash as is commonly taught them. They know not what use God may make of these early rudiments of instruction in future life.

At this period, though I was the slave of sin, yet, my conscience not be­ing pacified, and my principles not greatly corrupted, there seemed some hope concerning me; but at length Satan took a very effectual method of silencing my convictions, that I might sleep securely in my sins; and justly was I given over to a strong delusion to believe a lie, when I held the truth that I did know in unrighteousness. I met with a *Socinian* comment on the Scriptures, and greedily drank the poison, because it quieted my fears and flattered my abominable pride. The whole system coincided exactly with my inclinations and the state of my mind. In reading this exposition, sin seemed to lose its native ugliness, and to appear a very small and tolerable evil: man’s imperfect obedience seemed to shine with an excellency almost divine; and God appeared so entirely and necessarily merciful, that he could not make any of his creatures miserable without contradicting his natural pro­pensity. These things influenced my mind so powerfully, that I was ena­bled to consider myself, notwithstanding a few little blemishes, as upon the whole a very worthy being. At the same time, the mysteries of the gospel being explained away, or brought down to the level of man’s comprehension, by such proud and corrupt, though specious, reasonings; by acceding to these sentiments, I was, in my own opinion, in point of understanding and discernment, exalted to a superiority above the generality of mankind; and I pleased myself in looking down, with contempt, upon such as were weak enough to believe the orthodox doctrines. Thus I generally soothed my conscience: and if at any time I was uneasy at the apprehension that I did not thoroughly *deserve* eternal happiness, and was not entirely fit for heaven; the same book afforded me a soft pillow on which to lull myself to sleep: it *argued,* and, I then thought, *proved,* that there were no *eternal* torments; and it insinuated that there were *no* torments except for notorious sinners, and that such as should just fall short of heaven would sink into their original nothing. With this welcome scheme I silenced all my fears, and told my accusing conscience, that if I fell short of heaven I should be annihilated, and never be sensible of my loss.

Byexperience I am well acquainted with Satan’s intention, in employing so many of his servants to invent and propagate those pestilential errors, whe­ther in speculation or practice, that have in all ages corrupted and enervated the pure and powerful doctrine of the gospel; for they lead to forgetfulness of God and security in sin, and are deadly poison to every soul that imbibes them, unless a miracle of grace prevent. Such, on the one hand, are all the superstitious doctrines of popery: purgatory, penances, absolutions, indulgences, merits of good works, and the acceptableness of will-worship and uncommanded observances; what are these but engines of the devil to keep men quiet in their sins? Man, resolved to follow the dictates of his de­praved inclination, and not to bound his pursuits and enjoyments by the li­mits of God’s holy law, catches at anything to soften the horrible thought of eternal misery. This is the awakening reflection, God’s sword in the con­science, which it is Satan’s business, by all his diabolical artifices, to endea­vour to sheath, blunt, or turn aside; knowing that while this alarming ap­prehension is present to the soul, he can never maintain possession of it in peace. By such inventions therefore as these, he takes care to furnish the sinner with that which he seeks, and to enable him to walk according to the course of this wicked world, and the desires of depraved nature, without be­ing disturbed by such dreadful thoughts. The same, on the other hand, is the tendency of all those speculations of reasoning men, which set God’s at­tributes at variance with each other; which represent the Supreme Gover­nor as so *weakly* merciful, that he regards neither the demands of his jus­tice, the glory of his holiness, the veracity of his word, nor the peaceable or­der and subordination of the universe; which explain away all the mysteries of the gospel; and represent sin, that fruitful root of evil, that enemy of God, that favourite of Satan, as a very little thing, scarcely noticed by the Almighty, and which, contrary to the Scriptures and universal experience and observation, would persuade us that man is not a depraved creature.

To these latter sentiments I acceded, and maintained them as long as could; and I did it most assuredly, because they soothed my conscience, freed me from the intolerable fears of damnation, and enabled me to think favourably of myself. For *these reasons alone,* I loved and chose this ground: I fixed myself upon it, and there fortified myself by all the arguments and reasonings I could meet with. These things I wished to believe; and I had my wish: for at length I did most confidently believe them. Being taken captive in this snare of Satan, I should here have perished with a lie in my right hand, had not the Lord whom I dishonoured, snatched me as a brand from the burning!

In this awful state of mind I attempted to obtain admission into *Holy Or­ders!* Wrapt up in the proud notion of the dignity of human nature, I had lost sight of the evil of sin, and thought little of my own sinfulness; I was filled with a self-important opinion of my own worth, and the depth of my understanding: and I had adopted a system of religion accommodated to that foolish pride; having almost wholly discarded mysteries from my creed, and regarding with sovereign contempt those who believed them. As far as I understand such controversies, I was nearly a *Socinian* and *Pelagian,* and wholly an *Arminian*:**[[1]](#footnote-1)**yet, to my shame be it spoken, I sought to obtain admission into the ministry, in a church whose doctrines are diametrically op­posed to all the three; without once concerning myself about those barriers which the wisdom of our forefathers has placed around her, purposely to pre­vent the intrusion of such dangerous heretics as I then was.

While I was preparing for this solemn office, I lived as before in known sin, and in utter neglect of prayer; my whole preparation consisting of no­thing else than an attention to those studies which were more immediately requisite for reputably passing through the previous examination.

Thus, with a heart full of pride and wickedness; my life polluted with many unrepented unforsaken sins; without one cry for mercy, one prayer for direction or assistance, or a blessing upon what I was about to do; after having concealed my real sentiments under the mask of general expressions; after having subscribed articles directly contrary to what I believed; and after having blasphemously declared, in the presence of God and of the con­gregation, in the most solemn manner, sealing it with the Lord’s Supper, that I judged myself to be “inwardly moved by the Holy Ghost to take that office upon me (not knowing or believing that there was a Holy Ghost;) on *Sept.* the 20th, 1772, I was ordained a *Deacon.*

For ever blessed be the God of all long-suffering and mercy, who had pa­tience with such a rebel and blasphemer; such an irreverent trifler with his Majesty; and such a presumptuous intruder into his sacred ministry! I never think of this daring wickedness without being filled with amazement that I am out of hell; without admiring that gracious God, who permitted such an atrocious sinner to live, yea, to serve him, and with acceptance, I trust, to call him Father; and as his minister to speak in his name. “Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me bless his holy name. Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits: who forgiveth all thine iniquities, and healeth all thy diseases; who redeemeth thy life from de­struction, who crowneth thee with loving-kindness and tender mercies.” May I love, and very humbly and devoutly serve that God, who hath mul­tiplied his mercies in abundantly pardoning my complicated provocations.

I had considerable difficulties to surmount in obtaining admission into the ministry, arising from my peculiar circumstances; which likewise rendered my conduct the more inexcusable: and my views, as far as I can ascertain them, were these three:—A desire of a less laborious and more comfortable way of procuring a livelihood, than otherwise I had the prospect of:—the expectation of more leisure to employ in reading, of which I was inordinately fond:—and a proud conceit of my abilities, with a vain glorious imagination that I should some time distinguish and advance myself in the literary world. These were my ruling motives in taking this bold step: motives as opposite to those which should influence men to enter this sacred office, as pride is opposite to humility, ambition to contentment in a low estate, and a willingness to be the least of all and the servant of all; as opposite as love of self, of the world, of filthy lucre, and slothful ease, is to the love of God, of souls, and of the laborious work of the ministry. To me therefore be the shame of this heinous sin, and to God be all the glory of over-ruling it for good, I trust, both to unworthy me, and to his dear people, “the church which he hath purchased with his own blood.”

My subsequent conduct was suitable to these motives. No sooner was I fixed in a curacy, than with close application I sat down to the study of the learned languages, and such other subjects as I considered most needful, in order to lay the foundation of my future advancement. And, O! that I were now as diligent in serving God, as I was then in serving self and ambition! I spared no pains, I shunned, as much as I well could, all acquaintance and di­versions, and retrenched from my usual hours of sleep, that I might keep more closely to this business. As a minister, I attended just enough to the public duties of my station to support a decent character, which I deemed subservient to my main design; and, from the same principle, I aimed at morality in my outward deportment, and affected seriousness in my conversation. As to the rest, I still lived in the practice of what I knew to be sinful, and in the en­tire neglect of all sacred religion: if ever inclined to pray, conscious guilt stopped my mouth, and I seldom went further than “God be merciful unto me!”

Perceiving, however, that my *Socinian* principles were very disreputable, and being conscious from my own experience that they were unfavourable to morality, I concealed them in a great measure, both for my credit’s sake, and from a sort of desire I entertained, (subservient to my main design) of successfully inculcating the practice of the moral duties upon those to whom I preached. My studies indeed lay very little in divinity; but this little all opposed that part of my scheme which respected the punishment of the wicked in the other world: and therefore (being now removed to a distance from those books whence I had imbibed my sentiments, and from the reasonings contained in them, by which I had learned to defend them,) I began gradually to be shaken in my former confidence, and once more to be under some ap­prehension of eternal misery. Being also statedly employed, with the ap­pearance of solemnity, in the public worship of God, whilst I neglected and provoked him in secret, my conscience clamorously reproached me with base hypocrisy: and I began to conclude that, if eternal torments were reserved for any sinners, I certainly should be one of the number. Thus I was again filled with anxious fears and terrifying alarms: especially as I was continually meditating upon what might be the awful consequence, should I be called hence by sudden death. Even my close application to study could not soothe my conscience nor quiet my fears; and, under the affected air of cheerfulness, I was truly miserable.

This was the state of mind when the change I am about to relate began to take place. How it commenced; in what manner, and by what steps it proceeded; and how it was completed, will be the subject of the Second Part. I shall conclude this by observing, that though staggered in my fa­vourite sentiment before mentioned, and though my views of the person of Christ were verging towards *Arianism;* yet, in my other opinions I was more confirmed than ever. What those opinions were, I have already briefly de­clared: and they will occur again, and be more fully explained, as I proceed to relate the manner in which I was constrained to renounce them, one after another, and to accede to those that were directly contrary to them. Let it suffice to say, that I was full of proud self-sufficiency, very positive, and very obstinate; and, being situated in the neighbourhood of those whom the world calls *Methodists,***[[2]](#footnote-2)** I joined in the prevailing sentiment; held them in sove­reign contempt; spoke of them with derision; declaimed against them from the pulpit, as persons full of bigotry, enthusiasm, and spiritual pride; laid heavy things to their charge; and endeavoured to prove the doctrines which I supposed them to hold, (for I had never read their books) to be dishon­ourable to God, and destructive to morality. And, though in some companies I chose to conceal part of my sentiments, and in all affected to speak as a friend to universal toleration; yet, scarcely any person can be more proudly and violently prejudiced against both their persons and principles, than I then was.

1. Possibly some readers may not fully understand the import of these terms: and for their benefit I would observe, that the *Socinians* consider Christ as a mere man, and his death merely as an example of patience, and a confirmation of his doctrine, and not as a real atonement satisfactory to divine justice for man’s sins. They deny the Deity and personality of the Holy Spirit, and do not admit that all Chris­tians experience his renewing, sanctifying, and comforting influences; and they generally reject the doc­trine of eternal punishments. The *Pelagians* deny original sin, and explain away the scriptural history of the fall of man. They do not allow the total depravity of human nature, but account for the wicked­ness of the world from bad examples, habits, and education. They suppose men to possess an ability, both natural and moral, of becoming pious and holy, without a new creation or regeneration of the heart by the Holy Spirit; and they contend for the *freedom of the will,* not only as constituting us voluntary agents, accountable for our conduct, but as it consists in *exemption from the bondage of innate carnal propensities;* so that man has in himself sufficient resources for his recovery to holiness by his own ex­ertions. The *Arminians* deny the doctrines of gratuitous personal election to eternal life, and of the final perseverance of all true believers; and numbers of them hold the doctrine of justification by works *in part at least;* and verge in some degree to the Pelagian system, in respect to the first moving cause in the conversion of sinners. (5th Ed.) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *Methodist*, as a stigma of reproach, was first applied to Mr Wesley, Mr Whitefield, and their followers: and to those who, professing an attachment to our established Church, and disclaiming the name of Dissenters, were not conformists in point of parochial order, but had separate seasons, places, and assemblies for worship. The term has since been extended by many to all persons, whether clergy or laity, who preach or profess the doctrines of the reformation, as expressed in the articles and liturgy of our Church. For this fault they must all submit to bear the reproachful name, especially the ministers; nor will the most regular and peaceable compliance with the injunctions of the Rubric exempt them from it, if they avow the authorized, but in a great measure exploded, doctrines to which they have subscribed. My acquaintance hitherto has been solely with Methodists of the latter description, and I have them alone in view when I use the term. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)