

Thomas Scott, the Commentator.

A CENTURY has not yet elapsed since the death of one of the most remarkable divines of his age. This surely is not too great a testimony to the worth of the prominent Evangelical "father" whose *Force of Truth* reclaimed Kirke White from Deism and whose preaching was the practical turning point and early inspiration of the career of the great Baptist missionary, William Carey, and to whom Cardinal Newman declared that "he almost owed his soul."

Thomas Scott was the son of a small industrious and ambitious farmer in the village of Braytoft in Lincolnshire. Possessed of a large family of thirteen children, the elder Scott found life a great struggle. Thomas, his tenth child, was born in 1747 and began his schooling at the age of eight. When he was ten he went as boarder to a Grammar School at Scorton in Yorkshire, but he was apparently not an exemplary pupil, although he showed considerable proficiency in Latin. He returned home at the age of fifteen and was soon apprenticed to a neighbouring surgeon, his father wishing him to enter the medical profession. His career here was short-lived, as his employer soon dismissed him for some serious breach of conduct. As a result of this bad start, his father being unable to place him elsewhere, Scott was obliged to work as a labourer on his father's farm, and the strenuous, exposed and irksome life of a shepherd lad severely tried his not over strong constitution. It was here probably that he laid the seeds of the asthma which troubled him so terribly in his later life.

Young Scott soon became soured and discontented with his position and also a source of trouble to his parents, whose censures he frequently incurred. He however still continued his studies and had dreams of a future literary career. At the age of twenty-five he suddenly left home, and through the aid of a friendly clergyman at Boston he sought and obtained admission to Holy Orders and was ordained deacon in September, 1772. He soon undertook the joint curacies of Stoke Goldington and Weston Underwood at a stipend of £50 a year. Unorthodoxy was very prevalent in the eighteenth century and Scott frankly confesses that he was at this time a Socinian and denied the doctrines of the Trinity, the Incar-

nation and the Atonement. He seems, however, to have performed his ministerial duties in an exemplary manner as a zealous parish clergyman and was ordained priest in 1773 after only a six months' diaconate. He was moreover a diligent student and soon mastered the study of Hebrew.

In 1774 Scott married on an income of £90 a year and soon after accepted the curacy of Ravenstone. It was while he was here that he met his future friend, John Newton, and passed through a long spiritual crisis which resulted in a complete change of his theological views and in his firm acceptance of the Catholic and Evangelical teaching of the Church of England. He earnestly threw in his lot with the Evangelical clergy whom he had previously despised as "Calvinists" and "Methodists." By this complete change Scott earned the contempt of many of his former friends, the temporary estrangement of his relatives, as well as forfeiting the prospect of ecclesiastical preferment. In 1777 he removed to Weston Underwood, but in 1780 he was persuaded to accept the curacy of Olney which his friend Newton had recently vacated. Here for a time Scott met with great difficulties from a captious and quarrelsome congregation whose strong Antinomian sympathies were vigorously exposed by his plain and practical preaching.

In 1785 Scott accepted the joint chaplaincy of the Lock Hospital in London which then attracted a wealthy and influential congregation. He soon found his difficulties rather increased than lessened in his new sphere, since his fellow Chaplain, a popular and elegant preacher, pandered to the extreme Calvinistic and Antinomian views acceptable to the majority of the congregation but which Scott had been strenuously denouncing whilst at Olney. The Governors also deceived Scott as to his stipend, only allowing him £80 a year on which to live and keep a family in London! His preaching soon brought down upon him the charge of being an Arminian and even a Papist, but he held his ground and resolutely refused to modify or alter his convictions at the bidding of a congregation. Many of his flock, however, welcomed his faithful preaching and Scott often numbered among his hearers such celebrated names as Henry Thornton, Wilberforce, Hannah More and Lord Dartmouth. He was also most diligent and earnest in his ministrations to the unfortunate inmates of the Hospital, an un-

pleasant duty which previous Chaplains had often neglected. Scott was so keenly interested in this work that with very great effort he instigated and carried through a scheme for the erection of a Home to receive the reformed and penitent inmates of the Hospital on their discharge, the forerunner of the present Lock Rescue Home.

In 1802 Scott was chosen sole Chaplain for the Hospital at a stipend of £150, but the Governors were just too late to redeem their previous unjust and parsimonious treatment, as the year before he had been presented by Mrs. Barber, an old friend, with the small living of Aston Sandford in Buckinghamshire, which was then worth about £180 a year but was without a parsonage. Scott elected to retire to this secluded country parish as a sort of haven of refuge from the struggles, strife and contention and irksome associations of his London labours. As, however, he had at once to build a rectory house he was financially no richer than when at the Lock Hospital.

It was while he was in London that Scott became a member of the famous Eclectic Society and earnestly advocated the formation of a missionary society to the heathen. In 1799 he was elected the first honorary Secretary of the newly formed "Society for Missions to Africa and the East," and although he resigned this office in 1802 he was an ardent supporter of what was soon styled the Church Missionary Society during his ministry at Aston Sandford. Missionary students were received and trained by him at Aston, and in his tiny parish of eighty souls, all poor except two small farmers, he raised £303 for the C.M.S. during his eighteen years' ministry (1803-1821). The first anniversary sermon for the Society was also preached by Scott at St. Anne's, Blackfriars, in 1801.

It is almost certain, in spite of the increasing weakness and infirmities of his later years, that Scott was happier at Aston than in any of his former spheres of work. The tradition of his great influence and popularity as a preacher and pastor still survives. The writer, who was for a time a successor of Scott in the picturesque little parish nestling under the shadow of the Chiltern Hills, met those whose grandmothers had received all their education at his night school or whose fathers and grandfathers had come regularly from neighbouring villages to listen to his faithful exhortations or to form part of his choir. As we read Scott's *Village Sermons* we

can see there must have been a fascinating power in his practical, homely and searching presentation of the Gospel message. His preaching so attracted people from the neighbourhood, even in that dead and careless age, that a portrait hangs in the vestry showing the window from which Scott preached to the overflow congregation accommodated in the churchyard. Even earlier in his career Scott evidently possessed great power as an earnest Evangelistic preacher, for Dean Burgon records in his *Lives of Twelve Good Men* how the father of Charles Higgins, when attending Scott's ministry at Weston Underwood, was influenced by his solemn and vigorous appeals from the pulpit. The wandering attention of the lad Higgins was attracted by an energetic thrust of Scott's fist as he declared, "It is very commonly said that the devil is in you, but you little think how true it is" (p. 424).

But earnest and faithful as he was as a pastor and preacher Scott will always be remembered chiefly as a writer and commentator. He was the author of several doctrinal treatises, but his remarkable and fascinating little autobiography, *The Force of Truth*, published in 1779, at once gained him a considerable notoriety. It is a transparently sincere and frank narration of his singular religious experience, describing a gradual and most unlikely change to a full acceptance of Evangelical doctrines. Scott wrote the account because, as he says, "He considered himself as a singular instance of a very unlikely person, in an uncommon manner, being led on from one thing to another, to embrace a system of doctrine which he once heartily despised." Starting his ministry as an avowed Socinian, with a contempt and detestation of all "Methodists" and "enthusiasts," against whom he frequently railed from the pulpit, step by step he was led on until at length he became an earnest advocate of the truths he previously denied and vilified. His conversion was the more remarkable because he confesses that he was most obstinate, conceited and prejudiced in his opinions, and his ultimate acceptance of Evangelical teaching meant for him not only the loss of possible preferment but estrangement and persecution from those whose approval and friendship he greatly valued.

But all through Scott had been the sincere and earnest seeker after Truth. His firm resolve was, as he states, "to embrace it wherever I found it, and whatever it might cost" (p. 103). Scott owed his conversion to the influence of no single individual, although

his friendship with Newton, whom he vainly expected "he would have the honour of rescuing from his enthusiastical delusions" (p. 28) was undoubtedly a great example to him. While he shows clearly that the chief cause of his change of views was his diligent and prayerful study of the Scriptures, yet during his protracted three years' spiritual struggle he studied widely the writings of prominent Anglican divines and owed much to such dissimilar men as Bishop Beveridge, Bishop Burnet, and William Law, while the Homilies and Hooker's sermon gave him a firm grasp of the Scriptural doctrine of Justification. In the end, to his amazement, he came to see that the doctrines taught by the despised "Methodists" were exactly those which the Reformers had preached and enshrined in the Church of England formularies. The more he studied the works of the Reformers the more convinced was he, as Evangelicals realize fully to-day, that the Evangelicals who were then "ignorantly branded as Methodists and enthusiasts, were "zealously preaching the very doctrines of the first Reformers" (p. 115).

It is pathetic that by far the greatest and most enduring of Scott's literary labours should have been the cause of actual pecuniary loss to him as well as of years of worry and anxiety. In 1788 he began his Commentary on the Holy Scriptures, which his publisher obliged him to produce with undue haste in weekly parts. It was completed in 1792 and very soon had a wide and popular circulation in this country and in America. It reached a third edition, and although its sales soon brought in thousands of pounds to the publishers Scott received the mere pittance of a guinea a copy! His ignorance of business methods, combined with the bad faith and insolvency of his publishers, also actually landed him in serious debts and difficulties, so that in 1813 he was compelled to appeal to his influential and wealthy Evangelical friends to assist him out of his financial embarrassments.

Scott was a most careful, diligent and painstaking Bible student, and his Commentary was deservedly popular. His main aim had been to give a plain and literal interpretation of the text of Holy Scripture, avoiding all forced, fanciful or allegorical methods, and in this he certainly succeeded, and for many years Scott's "Bible" was a theological "classic." Although he himself declares that the literary labours of twenty-one years had not yielded him £1,000

profit, yet the great service he rendered by this means to the cause of Christian Truth can never be estimated, for as the epitaph on his memorial tablet in Aston Sandford Church well records, "In his writings he will long survive and widely proclaim to mankind the unsearchable riches of Christ."

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