

MY APPRENTICESHIP

by Beatrice Webb

*with an introduction by
Norman MacKenzie*

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Note to the reader: the Appendix from the 1926 edition is omitted in this edition.

CHAPTER I

CHARACTER AND CIRCUMSTANCE

IN the following pages I describe the craft of a social investigator as I have practised it. I give some account of my early and crude observation and clumsy attempts at reasoning, and then of the more elaborated technique of note-taking, of listening to and recording the spoken word and of observing and even experimenting in the life of existing institutions. Though for the purpose of describing my craft I quote pages from my MS. diary, I have neither the desire nor the intention of writing an autobiography. Yet the very subject-matter of my science is society; its main instrument is social intercourse; thus I can hardly leave out of the picture the experience I have gathered, not deliberately as a scientific worker, but casually as child, unmarried woman, wife and citizen. For the sociologist, unlike the physicist, chemist and biologist, is in a quite unique manner the creature of his environment. Birth and parentage, the mental atmosphere of class and creed in which he is bred, the characteristics and attainments of the men and women who have been his guides and associates, come first and foremost of all the raw material upon which he works, alike in order of time and in intimacy of contact. It is his own social and economic circumstance that determines the special opportunities, the peculiar disabilities, the particular standpoints for observation and reasoning—in short,

CHARACTER AND CIRCUMSTANCE

the inevitable bias with which he is started on his way to discovery, a bias which ought to be known to the student of his work so that it may be adequately discounted. Moreover, in the formative years of childhood and youth, the passionate search for a creed by which to live precedes the acquisition of a craft; the craft, in fact, growing out of the creed, or maybe out of the loss of a creed. Hence, if in describing my apprenticeship I tell too long and too egotistical a tale, the student can skip what appears to him irrelevant.

The family in which I was born and bred was curiously typical of the industrial development of the nineteenth century. My paternal grandfather, Richard Potter, was the son of a Yorkshire tenant farmer who increased the profits of farming by keeping a general provision shop at Tadcaster; my maternal grandfather, Lawrence Heyworth, belonged to a family of "domestic manufacturers" in Rossendale in Lancashire, the majority of whom became, in the last decades of the eighteenth century, "hands" in the new cotton mills. Evidently my grandfathers were men of initiative and energy, for they rose rapidly to affluence and industrial power, one as a Manchester cotton warehouseman, the other as a Liverpool merchant trading with South America. Nonconformists in religion and Radicals in politics, they both became, after the 1832 Reform Act, Members of Parliament, intimate friends of Cobden and Bright, and enthusiastic supporters of the Anti-Corn Law League.¹

My father graduated in the new London University, of which my grandfather, as a leading Unitarian, was one of the founders. He was called to the Bar, but without intending to

¹ Richard Potter, who had contested the borough of Wigan when it was still a close corporation, was returned as its member in the 1832 Parliament. Lawrence Heyworth became member for Derby in 1847. For details about the Potters of Tadcaster see *From Ploughshare to Parliament*, by my sister Georgina Meinertzhagen.

MY FATHER

practise. For a few years he divided his time between nursing his father, who was in failing health, and amusing himself in London political society. On the death of his father, being young, attractive and with sufficient means, he took to a life of leisure. It was at Rome, in the course of making the grand tour with a young sister, that he met my mother, likewise enjoying herself with a young brother. They fell in love amid the sights of Rome, married and settled as mere *rentiers* in Herefordshire, intending to take an active part in the work and pleasures of the county. But a stroke of good luck saved my parents and their children from this deadening environment. The financial crisis of 1847-48 swept away the major part of his moderate inheritance; and, with a rapidly increasing family, he had, at the age of thirty, to find some way of earning a sufficient livelihood. His father-in-law, Lawrence Heyworth, at that time a leading promoter of the new railways, made him a director of the Great Western Railway, whilst a schoolfellow, W. E. Price,¹ offered him a partnership in an old-established timber merchant's business at Gloucester. From this position of vantage my father became a capitalist at large.

The family income was mainly drawn from the timber yards of Gloucester, Grimsby and Barrow; but the mere routine of money-making did not satisfy my father. Daily attendance at an office, at work each day on the same range of facts, seemed to him as much the badge of an underling as manual work in factory or in mine. Once engaged in business he quickly developed a taste for adventurous enterprise and a talent for industrial diplomacy. For the first two years of

¹ Mr. Price remained my father's greatest friend till death parted them. Ugly, shrewd, silent and kindly, he was for many years chairman of the Midland Railway and Liberal member for Gloucester. His grandson, Philips Price, famous for his adventures in and sympathy for Soviet Russia, contested Gloucester in the 1923 and 1924 elections as a Labour candidate of the Left Wing.

CHARACTER AND CIRCUMSTANCE

business life he worked assiduously at the Gloucester office, mastering the technique of the timber market. The horrors of winter fighting in the Crimean War yielded the first opportunity for big enterprise. He persuaded the English War Office, and afterwards the French Emperor, to save the soldiers' lives during the winter weather, by using the timber merchant's brains, together with the depreciated stock in the timber yard, for the output of wooden huts: an operation which was worth a profit of £60,000 to the firm.¹ From that

¹ From an entry dated February 7, 1855, in the unpublished journals of N. W. Senior, quoted in *Many Memories of Many People*, by M. C. M. Simpson (daughter of Nassau Senior), pp. 170-71, I gather that my father found the French Government more efficient than the British Government in respect of the handling of the wooden huts.

"Jeune told me that Potter told him that for three weeks after he had made his proposal to the Duke of Newcastle he got no answer; that he wrote to ask what was to be done, and was told that the paper had been mislaid, and that they wished for a copy of it; that at length the War Department having, after a great delay, resolved to have them, they were made and sent by rail to Southampton, but that the contract entered into by the Ordnance ended when they reached the railway terminus; that, after some delay, another contract was entered into for putting them on board of steamers, but that this contract merely heaped them on deck; that a further contract and a further delay was necessary to get them down into the hold; and he does not believe that at this instant they have got beyond Balaklava. Louis Napoleon sent for Potter to Saint-Cloud to consult about their being supplied to the French army. In a couple of hours the whole matter was arranged between Louis Napoleon and himself. The question then was how soon the execution of it could be begun. This was Saturday. A letter could not get to Gloucester before Monday. Louis Napoleon rang for a courier, gave him fifteen napoleons, and ordered him to be in Gloucester in twenty-four hours. Potter proposed to go to his hotel, write out the contract and specification, and return with them. Louis Napoleon said no, they must be written out immediately; that he was going out for a couple of hours, and hoped on his return to find all ready. Potter was thus left two hours alone in Louis Napoleon's cabinet, with all his private papers about. The contract, etc., was ready in two hours, was in Gloucester on Sunday, and the workmen were employed in executing it by six o'clock on Monday morning."

When it came to settling the account, my father's experience was reversed. The British Government paid up at once. After making many applications to the French Government, my father betook himself to Paris, but utterly failed to get access to the minister concerned. With a large overdraft at the bank the financial position became intolerable. Presently his friend Tom Brassey appeared on a like quest but with greater experience of foreign governments. "My dear Potter, what an innocent you are! Go to the Bank of France and cash a cheque for a thousand pounds; give the porter at the

BUSINESS ENTERPRISE

time onwards he spent the bulk of his energy and all his intellectual keenness in the administration of public companies and in financial speculations. For some years he was chairman of the Great Western Railway of England; for ten years, just the years of my girlhood, he was president of the Grand Trunk Railway of Canada. Memory recalls a maze of capitalist undertakings of which he was director or promoter; undertakings of every degree of rank and permanence, of success or failure—from high-grade concerns like the Hudson Bay Company and the Dutch Rhenish railways, to humble establishments for the manufacture of railway wagons and signals. The most far-fetched and risky projects were not excluded from his vision. I remember a concession from the Turkish Government, obtained by him and a group of friends—among them Tom Brassey, the great contractor—to make a Grand Canal through Syria to compete with the Suez Canal; an enterprise abandoned on the report of the engineers that such a canal would not only submerge the Holy places—a small matter—but take forty years to fill. “We are not going to wait forty years for our money to make Potter’s fortune,” said Brassey to Perks and Watkiñ. There was another scheme for a live-cattle trade between Barrow-in-Furness and the United States, balked by Privy Council orders against cattle disease, or, as my father complained, against free trade in food. Some issues were moral rather than financial. I recollect anxious discussions as to whether he ought to “cover” certain

ministry twenty francs, and pay your way handsomely until you get to the minister; then put down five hundred pounds and you will get your money all right. Otherwise you will never get it: Great Britain will not go to war with France to get you paid!” My father took the advice. When he was admitted into the minister’s presence he put down the equivalent of five hundred pounds. The minister put it in his pocket, said pleasant things about my father’s stay in Paris, and signed the requisite papers authorising immediate payment. My father used frequently to ask the more scrupulous of his business associates what they would have done under the circumstances.

CHARACTER AND CIRCUMSTANCE

misdoings of the financiers who dominated the board of a great trans-continental railway, by remaining a director, which was settled in the negative; and there was a conscientious refusal to accept the presidency of another Canadian railway because he suspected queer transactions in land on the part of its promoters. But the purest commercial ethics did not always prevail. The German, like the British Government, could not be bribed, but in the transactions with most other foreign governments legislators and officials were paid "for services rendered" without scruple. There were similar ups and downs with regard to the speculative investments: he lost heavily in Welsh coal-mines by buying and selling at the wrong time; he gained considerably by taking up the shares of the Barry Docks before the investing public had become aware of their value. His not infrequent losses were due to an over-sanguine temperament, a too easy-going way with subordinates, and, above all, to a rooted distaste for the work of inspection and control. His successes as a money-maker arose from his talent for negotiating new agreements; his genius was, in fact, for planning and not for executing. He had a winning personality, a pleasant voice, a strong will, a clearly conceived aim, and a remarkable faculty for finding the exact form of words which would give him all he wanted without seeming to deny the aims of the other parties. Moreover, he believed in the Jewish maxim—a maxim he often cited—that a bargain is not a good bargain unless it pays both sides.

When I was myself searching for a social creed I used to ponder over the ethics of capitalist enterprise as represented by my father's acts and axioms. He was an honourable and loyal colleague; he retained throughout his life the close friendship of his partners; his co-operation was always being sought for by other capitalists; he never left a colleague in a tight place; he was generous in giving credit to subordinates;

THE ETHICS OF PROFIT-MAKING

he was forgiving to an old enemy who had fallen on evil times. But he thought, felt and acted in terms of personal relationship and not in terms of general principles; he had no clear vision of the public good. "A friend", he would assert, "is a person who would back you up when you were in the wrong, who would give your son a place which he could not have won on his own merits." Any other conduct he scoffed at as moral pedantry. Hence he tended to prefer the welfare of his family and personal friends to the interests of the companies over which he presided, the profits of these companies to the prosperity of his country, the dominance of his own race to the peace of the world. These graded obligations were, of course, adjusted to the law of the land and to the conventions of the circle in which he was at the time moving. His conception of right conduct was a spacious one, of loose texture, easily penetrated by the surrounding moral atmosphere. What he did in the United States he would not do in the United Kingdom. For the circumstances of mid-Victorian capitalist enterprise were hostile to any fixed standard of morality. The presidents of American railways, international financiers, company promoters and contractors, were forceful men, frequently of magnetic personality and witty conversation; but the common ideal which bound them in a close fraternity was a stimulating mixture of personal power and personal luxury; their common recreation was high living. Uniquely typical was the life on board a president's car on an American railway: the elaborate accommodation and fittings; the French chef; the over-abundant food; the extravagantly choice wines and liqueurs; above all, the consciousness of personal prestige and power; the precedence of the president's car over all other traffic; the obsequious attentions of ubiquitous officials; the contemptuous bargaining with political "bosses" for land concessions and for the passage of bills through legislatures —

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altogether a low moral temperature. My father struggled against this adverse moral environment; he submitted, with childlike docility, and, be it added, with childish delight in evasion, to the dietetic rules imposed on him by his women-kind and the family physician; his insistence on his daughters' company whenever he went abroad was, I think, partly due to a subconscious intention to keep out of less desirable associations. In his struggle with the sins of the world and the flesh (he was never tempted by the devil of pride, cruelty or malice) he had two powerful aids—his wife and his God. His wife was puritan and ascetic, and he adored her. He had been brought up in the arid creed of Unitarianism and he had lived with intellectual iconoclasts; but unlike his wife and some of his daughters, he was never troubled with doubts as to the divine government of the world, or as to the reality of communion with an outside spiritual force. He attended church regularly, took the sacrament and prayed night and morning. It seems incredible, but I know that, as a man, he repeated the prayer taught him at his mother's lap—"Gentle Jesus, meek and mild, look upon a little child", etc.

As a citizen of the British Empire my father bred true to the typical political development of Victorian capitalism. His grandfather, the Tadcaster farmer and shopkeeper, had had his windows broken by the Tory mob for refusing to illuminate at the reported victory of the British troops over the Americans in their War of Independence; his father, the Manchester cotton warehouseman, was a leading rebel in the days of Peterloo and, as a member of the reformed House of Commons of 1832, he belonged to the Free Trade and pacifist Radical group which made matters lively for the Whig Government. But I doubt whether my father was ever a convinced Radical; and some time in the 'sixties he left the Reform Club and joined the Carlton. Fervent and long-enduring

THE POLITICS OF THE BUSINESS MAN

therefore was his indignation at Disraeli's "treacherous" Reform Act of 1867; from first to last he objected to any extension of the suffrage below the £10 householder, in which class he wished to include women householders, women being, as he thought, more intuitively Conservative than men. The central article of his political faith was, indeed, a direct denial of democracy: an instinctive conviction, confirmed as he thought by his experience of American institutions, that the rulers of the country, whether Cabinet Ministers or judges, permanent heads of Government Departments or Members of Parliament, ought in the main to be drawn from a leisured class—all the better if the property upon which the leisure depended was inherited property. The political and municipal corruption of the United States of America was, he maintained, due to the absence of an hereditary caste of leisured persons standing, as trustees for the permanent prosperity of the country, above the struggle for existence, whether of wage-earners or profit-makers. Even more disastrous was the replacing of this caste by political bosses elected by a mob of propertyless persons, but drawing their incomes from particular financial and industrial corporations. "The American boss", he said, "combines the ignorance of the labourer with the graft of the company promoter." But he was always ready to compromise with new forces and to adjust his political programme to social circumstances. When once the suffrage had been lowered he became enthusiastic about working-class education. "We must educate our masters," he was never tired of asserting. "If necessary we must send our daughters to educate the masses," was an indiscreet remark at a political meeting, which shocked the Conservatives and infuriated the Radicals. Unlike my mother, he had no use for the abstract principles of political economy; his father's old friends Cobden and Bright he regarded as fanatics deceiving themselves and

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others with wire-drawn logic and moral platitudes. Some sliding-scale tax on corn ought to have been maintained so as to preserve and stabilise an agricultural population. As for "peace at any price", any experienced business man knew that, broadly speaking, "trade followed the flag!"

Notwithstanding frequent absence, my father was the central figure of the family life—the light and warmth of the home. How well I remember how we girls raced to the front door when we heard the wheels on the carriage drive: the eager questions, the cheery replies, however tired he might be. He worshipped his wife, he admired and loved his daughters; he was the only man I ever knew who genuinely believed that women were superior to men, and acted as if he did; the paradoxical result being that all his nine daughters started life as anti-feminists! He made his wife and daughters his confidantes in all his undertakings, or at any rate he seemed to do so. In spite of his business preoccupations he had retained a love of poetry, of the drama, of history and of idealistic philosophy; he was a devout student of Dante (in the original), of Shakespeare and of Plato; he taught us to appreciate the eighteenth-century humorists and the French encyclopædists and the novels of Jane Austen and Thackeray; he was a fanatical admirer of Burke and Carlyle and John Henry Newman—an oddly assorted trio, proving, I think, that his preferences were inspired by emotional thought rather than by pure reason. He always talked to us as equals; he would discuss with his daughters, even when they were young girls, not only his business affairs, but also religion, politics and the problems of sex, with frankness and freedom. I remember asking him at the age of thirteen whether he advised me to read *Tom Jones*. "By all means read it, if it interests you; it will give you a good idea of the manners and customs of the eighteenth century, and Fielding wrote splendidly virile English"; to

MY MOTHER

which he added, as if thinking aloud, "If you were a boy I should hesitate to recommend *Tom Jones*, but a nice-minded girl can read anything; and the more she knows about human nature the better for her and for all the men connected with her". Perhaps as a consequence of this policy of the "open door" I recollect no curiosity about sex: my knowledge of the facts always outrunning my interest in the subject. He delighted in the beauty of moor and mountain, in wild winds and the changing hues of cloud and sea. But his peculiar charm lay in his appreciation—his over-appreciation of the intellect and character of those with whom he lived. We girls thought him far too long-suffering of Mother's arbitrary moods; she thought him far too acquiescent in his daughters' unconventional habits. Yet in spite of this habitual self-subordination to those he loved, notwithstanding his "noble amiability", to use an epithet of Herbert Spencer's, he controlled the family destinies. My mother lived where it suited him to live, and he came and went as he chose; his daughters married the sort of men he approved, notwithstanding many temptations to the contrary.

My mother was nearing forty years of age when I became aware of her existence, and it was not until the last years of her life, when I was the only grown-up daughter remaining in the home, that I became intimate with her. The birth of an only brother when I was four, and his death when I was seven years of age, the crowning joy and devastating sorrow of my mother's life, had separated me from her care and attention; and the coming of my youngest sister, a few months after my brother's death, a partial outlet for my mother's wounded feelings, completed our separation. "Beatrice", she wrote in a diary when I was yet a child, "is the only one of my children who is below the average in intelligence", which may explain her attitude of indifference. Throughout my childhood and

CHARACTER AND CIRCUMSTANCE

youth she seemed to me a remote personage discussing business with my father or poring over books in her boudoir; a source of arbitrary authority whose rare interventions in my life I silently resented. I regarded her as an obstacle to be turned, as a person from whom one withheld facts and whose temper one watched and humoured so that she should not interfere with one's own little plans. This absence of affection between us was all the more pitiful because, as we eventually discovered, we had the same tastes, we were puzzling over the same problems; and she had harboured, deep down in her heart, right up to middle life, the very ambition that I was secretly developing, the ambition to become a publicist.

My mother's pilgrimage through life was a much harder one than my father's. She had started life heavily handicapped by the unqualified indulgence and adoration of a wealthy widowed father, who insisted on her brothers regarding her as a paragon of virtue, beauty and learning—a perilous ordeal even for a selfless nature. Fortunately for her happiness, and I think also for her character, she found the same unqualified adoration in marriage; and she and my father remained lovers to the day of her death. In all other aspects her life had been one long series of disappointments. She had visualised a home life of close intellectual comradeship with my father, possibly of intellectual achievement, surrounded by distinguished friends, of whom she had many as a girl and young married woman (among them I recollect the names of Sir George Cornwall Lewis and Dr. Jeune). This vision of a life of learned leisure was rudely swept on one side by the loss of the unearned income. When wealth returned it found her an invalid, with a nursery full of children, and a husband who was preoccupied and constantly away.

But her great disillusionment was in her children. She had

A DIVIDED PERSONALITY

been reared by and with men, and she disliked women. She was destined to have nine daughters and to lose her only son. Moreover, her daughters were not the sort of women she admired or approved. She had been brought up "a scholar and a gentlewoman": her daughters refused to be educated and defied caste conventions. For the most part they were unmistakably Potters, the descendants of the tall dark woman of Jewish type who read Hebrew and loved music—my father's mother, whose confinement in a lunatic asylum during the latter years of my grandfather Potter's life (she was obsessed by the mania of leading the Jews back to Jerusalem and actually got as far as Paris, alas! poor lady, alone and without her fancied following) was always referred to as a slur on our birth. But besides these untoward circumstances, my mother was cursed with a divided personality; she was not at peace in herself. The discords in her nature were reflected in her physiognomy. In profile, she was, if not ugly, lacking grace: a prominent nose with an aggressive bridge, a long straight upper lip, a thin-lipped and compressed mouth, a powerful chin and jaw, altogether a hard outline, not redeemed by a well-shaped but large head. Looked at thus, she was obviously a managing woman, unrelenting, probably domineering, possibly fanatical. But her full face showed any such interpretation of her character to be a ludicrous libel. Here the central feature, the soul of the personality, were the eyes, soft hazel brown, large but deeply set, veiled by overhanging lids and long eyelashes set off by delicately curved and pencilled eyebrows: eyes uniting in their light and shade the caress of sympathy with the quest of knowledge. To this outstanding beauty were added fine flossy hair, an easily flushed fair skin, small flashing teeth, a low musical voice, pretty gestures and long delicate hands: clearly a woman to charm, perhaps to inspire. "I think you knew my grandfather Lawrence Heyworth," said I to John

CHARACTER AND CIRCUMSTANCE

Bright when I met him at a political demonstration at Birmingham in 1884—three years after my mother's death. "Lawrence Heyworth, yes. Then you are the daughter of Laurencina Heyworth?" And after a pause he added—"One of the two or three women a man remembers to the end of life as beautiful in expression and form". [MS. diary, March 16, 1884.]

As I discovered during the few years of intimacy, the divided personality reflected in the diverse testimony of profile and full face was manifested in consciousness by a never-ending controversy relating, not only to man's relation to the universe, but also to the right conduct of life. Her soul longed for the mystical consolations and moral discipline of religious orthodoxy. She spent hours studying the Greek Testament and the Fathers of the Church; and she practised religious rites with exemplary regularity. But she had inherited from her father an iconoclastic intellect. I remember as a wee child being startled by my grandfather Heyworth's assertion that Adam and Eve, so long as they lingered in the Garden of Eden, were roaming pigs, and that it was only by eating the forbidden fruit of the tree of knowledge that their descendants became something more than beasts of the field. What troubled my mother was the doubt whether men and women *had* become, or were becoming, more than pigs, however much they buried their snouts in the heaped-up apples of the tree of knowledge; whether seeking pleasure and avoiding pain did not sum up all human instincts, impulses and motives, and thus constitute the whole duty of man. An ardent student of Adam Smith, Malthus, and particularly of Nassau Senior, she had been brought up in the strictest sect of Utilitarian economists. In middle life she had translated some of the essays of her friend Michel Chevalier, who represented the French variant of orthodox political economy, a variant which caricatured the

THE CREED OF SELF-ADVANCEMENT

dogmatic faith in a beneficent self-interest.¹ And my mother practised what she preached. Tested by economy in money and time she was an admirable expeditor of the family income: she never visited the servants' quarters and seldom spoke to any servant other than her own maid. She acted by deputy, training each daughter to carry out a carefully thought-out plan of the most economical supply of the best regulated demand. Her intellect told her that to pay more than the market rate, to exact fewer than the customary hours or insist on less than the usual strain—even if it could be proved that these conditions were injurious to the health and happiness of the persons concerned—was an act of self-indulgence, a defiance of nature's laws which would bring disaster on the individual and the community. Similarly, it was the bounden duty of every citizen to better his social status; to ignore those beneath him, and to aim steadily at the top rung of the social ladder. Only by this persistent pursuit by each individual of his own and his family's interest would the highest general level of civilisation be attained. It was on this issue that she and Herbert Spencer found themselves in happy accord. No one of the present generation realises with what sincerity and fervour these doctrines were held by the representative men and women of the mid-Victorian middle class. "The man who sells his cow too cheap goes to Hell" still epitomises, according

¹ The following description of my mother, given by her friend Michel Chevalier to his friend Taine, the historian, appears in *Notes on England*, by H. Taine, trans. by W. F. Rae, 1872 (p. 93): "M. —, being invited to the country, discovered that the mistress of the house knew much more Greek than himself, apologised, and retired from the field; then, out of pleasantry, she wrote down his English sentence in Greek. Note that this female Hellenist is a woman of the world, and even stylish. Moreover, she has nine daughters, two nurses, two governesses, servants in proportion, a large, well-appointed house, frequent and numerous visitors; throughout all this, perfect order; never noise or fuss; the machine appears to move of its own accord. These are gatherings of faculties and of contrasts which might make us reflect. In France we believe too readily that if a woman ceases to be a doll she ceases to be a woman."