

THE
LIFE OF RICHARD COBDEN.

CHAPTER I.

EARLY LIFE.

HEYSHOTT is a hamlet in a sequestered corner of West Sussex, not many miles from the Hampshire border. It is one of the crests that, like wooded islands, dot the great Valley of the Weald. Near at hand the red housetops of Midhurst sleep among the trees, while Chichester lies in the flats a dozen miles away, beyond the steep escarpments of the South Downs, that here are nearing their western edge. Heyshott has a high rolling upland of its own, part of the majestic wall that runs from Beachy Head almost to Portsmouth. As the traveller ascends the little neighbouring height of West Lavington, he discerns far off to the left, at the end of a dim line, the dark clump of sentinel firs at Chanctonbury, whence one may look forth over the glistening flood of the Channel, or hear the waters beat upon the shore. The country around Midhurst is sprinkled thinly with farms and modest homesteads. Patches of dark forest mingle with green spaces of common, with wide reaches of heath, with ponds flashing in the sunlight, and with the white or yellow clearing of the fallows. The swelling turf of the headland, looking northward across the Weald to the loved companion downs of Surrey, is broken by soft wooded

1804. hollows, where the shepherd finds a shelter from the noon-tide sun, or from the showers that are borne along in the driving flight of the south-west wind.

Here, in an old farmhouse, known as Dunford, Richard Cobden was born on June 3, 1804. He was the fourth of a family of eleven children. His ancestors were yeomen of the soil, and it is said, with every appearance of truth, that the name can be traced in the annals of the district as far back as the fourteenth century. The antiquarians of the county have found out that one Adam de Coppdene was sent to parliament by the borough of Chichester in 1314. There is talk of a manor of Cobden in the ninth of Edward IV. (1470). In 1562 there is a record of William Cobden devising lands on the downs in Westdean. Thomas Cobden of Midhurst was a contributor of twenty-five pounds to the fund raised for resisting the Spanish Armada. When hearth-money was levied in 1670, Richard Cobden, junior, is entered as paying for seven out of the seventy-six hearths of the district. In the Sussex election poll-book for 1734 a later Richard Cobden is put down as a voter for the parish of Midhurst, and four or five others are entered as freeholders in other parts of West Sussex. The best opinion seems to be that the settlement of the Cobdens at Midhurst took place sometime in the seventeenth century, and that they were lineal descendants of Sir Adam and Sir Ralph of former ages.

However all this may be, the five hundred years that intervened had nursed no great prosperity. Cobden's grandfather and namesake was a maltster and farmer, and filled for several years the principal office of bailiff for the borough of Midhurst. When he died in 1809, he left a very modest property behind him. Dunford was sold, and William Cobden, the only son of Richard the elder, and the father of the Richard Cobden with whom we are

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I.] PARENTAGE AND FAMILY MISFORTUNES. 3

concerned, removed to a small farm on the outskirts of 1809-13. Midhurst. He was a man of soft and affectionate disposition, but wholly without the energy of affairs. He was the gentlest and kindest of men. Honest and upright himself, he was incapable of doubting the honesty and uprightness of others. He was cheated without suspecting it, and he had not force of character enough to redeem a fortune which gradually slipped away from him. Poverty oozed in with gentle swiftness, and lay about him like a dull cloak for the rest of his life. His wife, the mother of Richard Cobden, had borne the gracious maiden-name of Millicent Amber. Unlike her kindly helpless husband, she was endowed with native sense, shrewdness, and force of mind, but the bravery of women in such cases can seldom avail against the shiftlessness of men. The economic currents of the time might seem to have been all in their favour. The war and the scarcity which filled all the rest of the country with distress, rained gold upon farmers and landlords. In the five years during which William Cobden was at Guillard's Oak, (1809-13), the average price of wheat was just short of five pounds a quarter. In spite of tithes, of war-taxes, and of tremendous poor-rates, the landowners extracted royal rents, and the farmers drove a roaring trade. To what use William Cobden put these good times, we do not know. After the harvest of 1813, the prospect of peace came, and with it a collapse of the artificial inflation of the grain markets. Insolvency and distraint became familiar words in the farmhouses that a few months before had been revelling in plenty.

William Cobden was not the man to contrive an escape from financial disaster. In 1814 the farm was sold, and they moved from home to home until at length they made a settlement at Westmeon, near Alton in Hampshire. His neighbours were as unfortunate as himself, for Cobden was able to say in later years that when he returned to his native

1814-19. place, he found that many of those who were once his play-
Ær. 10-15. fellows had sunk down to the rank of labourers, and some of
them were even working on the roads.

It is one of the privileges of strength to add to its own the burdens of the weak, and helpful kinsfolk are constantly found for those whom character or outer circumstance has submerged. Relatives of his own, or his wife's, charged themselves with the maintenance of William Cobden's dozen children. Richard, less happy than the others, was taken away from a dame's school at Midhurst, and cheerful tending of the sheep on his father's farm, and was sent by his mother's brother-in-law, a merchant in London, to a school in Yorkshire. Here he remained for five years, a grim and desolate time, of which he could never afterwards endure to speak. This was twenty years before the vivid genius and racy style of Dickens had made the ferocious brutalities of Squeers and the horrors of Dotheboys Hall as universally familiar as the best-known scenes of Shakespeare. The unfortunate boy from his tenth to his fifteenth year was ill fed, ill taught, ill used; he never saw parent or friend; and once in each quarter he was allowed such singular relief to his feelings as finds official expression in the following letter (March 25, 1817) :—

“HONOURED PARENTS,

“You cannot tell what rapture I feel at my once more having the pleasure of addressing my Parents, and though the distance is so great, yet I have an opportunity of conveying it to you free of expense. It is now turned three years since our separation took place, and I assure you I look back with more pleasure to that period than to any other part of my life which was spent to no effectual purpose, and I beg to return you my most sincere thanks as being the means of my gaining such a sense of learning as will enable

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I.] EDUCATION AND EARLY DAYS IN LONDON. 5

me to gain a genteel livelihood whenever I am called into the world to do for myself." 1819-25.
Æt. 15-21.

It was not until 1819 that this cruel and disgusting mockery of an education came to an end. Cobden was received as a clerk in his uncle's warehouse in Old Change. It was some time before things here ran easily. Nothing is harder to manage, on either side, than the sense of an obligation conferred or received. Cobden's uncle and aunt expected servility in the place of gratitude, and in his own phrase, "inflicted rather than bestowed their bounties." They especially disapproved of his learning French lessons in the early hours of the morning in his bedroom, and his fondness for book-knowledge was thought of evil omen for his future as a man of business. The position became so unpleasant, that in 1822 Cobden accepted the offer of a situation in a house of business at Ghent. It promised considerable advantages, but his father would not give his approval, and Cobden after some demur fell in with his father's wish. He remained where he was, and did not quarrel with such opportunity as he had, simply because he had missed a better. It is one of the familiar puzzles of life, that those whose want of energy has sunk their lives in failure, are often so eager to check and disparage the energy of stronger natures than their own.

William Cobden's letters all breathe a soft domesticity which is more French than English, and the only real discomfort of his poverty to him seems to have been a weak regret that he could not have his family constantly around his hearth. Frederick, his eldest son, was in the United States for several years; his father was always gently importunate for his return. In 1824 he came home, having done nothing by his travels towards bettering fortunes that remained stubbornly unprosperous to the end

1824. of his life. Between Frederick Cobden and Richard there
 Æt. 20. always existed the warmest friendship, and when the former found a situation in London, their intercourse was constant and intimate. There were three younger brothers, Charles, Miles, and Henry; and Richard Cobden was no sooner in receipt of a salary, than he at once took the place of a father to them, besides doing all that he could to brighten the shabby poverty of the home at Westmeon. Whenever he had a holiday, he spent it there; a hamper of such good cheer as his purse could afford was never missing at Christmas; and on the long Sundays in summer he knew no happier diversion than to walk out to meet his father at some roadside inn on the wide Surrey heaths, midway between Alton and the great city. His little parchment-bound diary of expenses at this time shows him to us as learning to dance and to box, playing cards with alternating loss and gain, going now and again to Vauxhall Gardens, visiting the theatre to see Charles Matthews, buying Brougham on Popular Education, Franklin's Essays, and Childe Harold. The sums are puny enough, but a gentle spirit seems still to breathe in the poor faded lines and quaint French in which he made his entries, as we read of the little gifts to his father and brothers, and how he is debtor by *charité*, 1s. —*donné un pauvre garçon, 1d.*—*un pauvre garçon, 2d.* By-and-by the sombre Shadow fell upon them all. In 1825 the good mother of the house helped to nurse a neighbour's sick child, in the midst of an epidemic of typhoid; she caught the fever, and died at the age of eight and forty. "Our sorrow would be torment," Frederick Cobden wrote to his father, "if we could not reflect on our conduct towards that dear soul, without calling to mind one instance in which we had wilfully given her pain." And with this gentle solace they seem to have had good right to soothe their affliction.

The same year which struck Cobden this distressing blow, brought him promotion in his business. The early differences between himself and his uncle had been smoothed away by his industry, cheerfulness, and skill, and he had won the approval and good-will of his employers. From the drudgery of the warehouse, he was now advanced to the glories of the road. We may smile at the keen elation with which he looked to this preferment from the position of clerk to that of traveller; but human dignities are only relative, and a rise in the hierarchy of trade is doubtless as good matter for exultation, as a rise in hierarchies more elaborately robed. Cobden's new position was peculiarly suited to the turn of his character. Collecting accounts and soliciting orders for muslins and calicoes gave room in their humble sphere for those high inborn qualities of energy, and sociability, which in later years produced the most active and the most persuasive of popular statesmen. But what made the life of a traveller so specially welcome to Cobden, was the gratification that it offered to the master-passion of his life, an insatiable desire to know the affairs of the world. Famous men, who became his friends in the years to come, agree in the admission that they have never known a man in whom this trait of a sound and rational desire to know and to learn was so strong and so inexhaustible. It was not the curiosity of the infantile dabbler in all subjects, random and superficial; and yet it was as far removed from the dry parade of the mere tabulist and statistician. It was not bookish, for Cobden always felt that much of what is best worth knowing is never written in books. Nor was it the curiosity of a speculative understanding; yet, as we shall see presently, there soon grew up in his mind a body of theoretic principles, and a philosophic conception of modern society, round which the knowledge so strenuously sought was habitually grouped, and

1825.

Æt. 21.

1825. by which the desire to learn was gradually directed and
Æt. 21. configured.

The information to be gathered in coaches and in the commercial rooms of provincial hotels was narrow enough in some senses, but it was varied, fresh, and in real matter. To a man of Cobden's active and independent intelligence this contact with such a diversity of interest and character was a congenial process of education. Harsh circumstance had left no other education open to him. There is something pathetic in an exclamation of one of his letters of this period, not merely because it concerns a man of Cobden's eminence and public service, but because it is the case of thousands of less conspicuous figures. In his first journey (August—October, 1825) he was compelled to wait for half a day at Shrewsbury, for a coach to Manchester. He went to the abbey, and was greatly impressed by its venerable walls and painted glass. "Oh that I had money," he says to his brother, in plain uncultured speech, "to be deep skilled in the mysteries of mullions and architraves, in lieu of black and purple and pin grounds! How happy I should be." He felt as keenly as Byron himself how

The lore

Of mighty minds doth hallow in the core
Of human hearts the ruin of a wall,
Where dwelt the wise and wondrous.

1826. In his second journey he visited the birthplace of Robert Burns, and he wrote to his brother from Aberdeen (Feb. 5, 1826) :—"It is a sort of gratification that I am sure you can imagine, but which I cannot describe, to feel conscious of treading upon the same spot of earth, of viewing the same surrounding objects, and of being sheltered by the same roof, as one who equally astonished and delighted the world." He describes himself as boiling over with enthusiasm upon approaching "Alloway's auld haunted kirk," the brig o'

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I.]

VISITS BURNS'S BIRTHPLACE.

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Doon, and the scene of Tam o' Shanter's headlong ride. 1826.
 With a pang of disillusion he found the church so small that *Æt.* 22.
 Cuttie-Sark and her hellish legion can have had scanty space
 for their capering, while the distance to the middle of the
 old bridge, and the length of the furious immortal chase, can
 have been no more than one hundred yards. The party on
 this occasion were accompanied by a small manufacturer
 from Paisley, who cared little for the genius of the place,
 and found Cobden's spirit of hero-worship tiresome. "Our
 worthy Paisley friend remarked to us, as we leaned over the
 Bridge of Doon, and as its impetuous stream rushed beneath
 us, 'How shamefully,' said he, 'is the water-power of this
 country suffered to run to waste: here is the force of twenty
 horses running completely idle.' He did not relish groping
 among ruins and tombstones at midnight, and was particu-
 larly solicitous that we should leave matters of discussion
 until we reached Burns's birthplace, where he understood
 that they kept the best whiskey in that vicinity." To
 Burns's birthplace at length they came, where at first their
 reception was not cordial. "But my worthy friend from
 Paisley had not forgotten the whiskey; and so, tapping the
 chin of the old dame with his forefinger, he bade her bring a
 half-mutchkin of the best, 'to set the wheels going,' as he
 termed it, and, having poured out a glass for the hostess,
 which she swallowed, I was pleased to find that it did set
 the wheels of her tongue going. 'Ye would maybe like to
 gang and see the verra spot where poor Robbie was borned,'
 she said, and we instantly begged her to show it to us. She
 took us along a very short passage, and into a decent-looking
 kitchen with a good fire. There was a curtain hung from
 the ceiling to the floor, which appeared to cover one part of
 the wall. She drew aside the curtain, and it disclosed a
 bed in a recess of the wall, and a man who had been hidden
 in the clothes first put his head out and looked round in

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LIFE OF COBDEN.

[CHAP.

1826. stupid amazement, and then rose up in the bed and ex-
 claimed, 'What the deil hae ye got here, Lizzie?'
 'Whisht, wisht, gudeman!' said the old dame, out of
 whose head the whiskey had driven all thoughts of her hus-
 band, 'the gentlemen will be verra pleased to hear ye tell
 them a' about poor Robbie.' Our Paisley friend had again
 poured out a glass of whiskey and presented it to our host,
 who drank it off, and, bringing his elbow round with a
 knowing flourish, he returned the glass upside down, to
 show he drank clean. 'I knew Robbie weel,' said he,
 wiping his mouth with his shirt-sleeve. 'I was the last
 man that drank wi' him afore he left this country for
 Dumfries. Oh, he was a bonnie bairn, but owre muckle
 gien to braw company.' 'And this is the spot, gentle-
 men,' said the impatient gudewife, catching the narrative
 from her husband, 'where Robbie was borned, and sic a
 night that was, as I have heard Nancy Miller, the coach-
 man's mither say; it blew, and rained, and thundered, just
 like as if heaven and earth were dinged thegither, and ae
 corner of the house was blawn away afore the morning, and
 so they removed the mither and the bairn into the next
 room the day after.' Now I believe if these two bodies
 were put upon their oath to all they told us, that they would
 not be guilty of falsehood or perjury, for I am quite sure
 they are both persuaded that their tale is true, and
 from no other cause than that they have told it so often.
 And yet I would venture to bet all I possess, and what
 is more, *all I owe*, that they never saw Burns in all their
 lives."¹

The genial eye for character and the good-humoured
 tolerance of foibles, which so singularly distinguished Cob-
 den in the days when he came to act with men for public
 objects, are conspicuous in these early letters. His hospi-

¹ *To F. Cobden*, Feb. 5, 1826.