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 978-1-108-02682-6 - The Life of Richard Cobden, Volume 2
 John Morley
 Excerpt
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THE LIFE OF RICHARD COBDEN.

CHAPTER I.

ELECTION FOR THE WEST RIDING.—PURCHASE OF DUNFORD.—
 CORRESPONDENCE.

DURING Cobden's absence in the autumn of 1847, a general election had taken place. While he was at St. Petersburg he learned that he had been returned not only for his former borough of Stockport, but for the great constituency of the West Riding of Yorkshire. He wrote to thank Mr. Bright for his powerful and friendly services at the election. "But I cannot conceal from you," he went on to say, "that my return for the West Riding has very much embarrassed and annoyed me. Personally and publicly speaking, I should have preferred Stockport. It is the greatest compliment ever offered to a public man; but had I been consulted, I should have respectfully declined."¹ After the compliment had actually been conferred, it was too late to refuse it, and Cobden represented the West Riding in two parliaments, until the political crash came in 1857. The triumph of Cobden's election for the great Yorkshire constituency was matched by the election of Mr. Bright for Manchester, in spite of the active and unscrupulous efforts of some old-fashioned Liberals. They pretended to find him

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¹ Sept. 18, 1847.

1847. violent and reckless, he wanted social position, and so forth.

Æt. 43. For the time they were swept away by the overwhelming wave of Mr. Bright's popularity, but they nursed their wrath and had their revenge ten years afterwards.

Another important step had been taken while Cobden was abroad. His business was brought to an end, and the affairs relating to it wound up by one or two of his friends. A considerable portion of the sum which had been subscribed for the national testimonial to him, had been absorbed in settling outstanding claims. With a part of what remained Cobden, immediately after his return from his travels, purchased the small property at Dunford on which he was born. He gave up his house in Manchester, and when in London lived for some years to come at Westbourne Terrace. Afterwards he lived in lodgings during the session, or more frequently accepted quarters at the house of one of his more intimate friends, Mr. Hargreaves, Mr. Schwabe, or Mr. Paulton. His home was henceforth at Dunford. His brother Frederick, who had shared the failure of their fortunes at Manchester, took up his abode with him and remained until his death in 1858. Five or six years after the acquisition of his little estate, Cobden pulled down the ancestral farm-house, and built a modest residence upon the site. In this for the rest of his life he passed all the time that he could spare from public labours. Once in these days, Cobden was addressing a meeting at Aylesbury. He talked of the relations of landlord and tenant, and referred by way of illustration to his own small property. Great is the baseness of men. Somebody in the crowd called out to ask him how he had got his property. "I am indebted for it," said Cobden with honest readiness, "to the bounty of my countrymen. It was the scene of my birth and my infancy; it was the property of my ancestors; and it is by the munificence of my countrymen that this

small estate, which had been alienated from my father by necessity, has again come into my hands, and enabled me to light up afresh the hearth of my father where I spent my own childhood. I say that no warrior duke who owns a vast domain by the vote of the Imperial Parliament, holds his property by a more honourable title than I possess mine.”² If the baseness of men is great, so too is their generosity of response to a magnanimous appeal, and the boisterous cheering of the crowd showed that they felt Cobden’s answer to be good and sufficient.

The following is Cobden’s own account, at the time, of the country in which he had once more struck a little root. He is writing to Mr. Ashworth:—

“*Midhurst, Oct. 7, 1850.*—I have been for some weeks in one of the most secluded corners of England. Although my letter is dated from the quiet little close borough of Midhurst, the house in which I am living is about one and a half miles distant, in the neighbouring rural parish of Heyshott. The roof which now shelters me is that under which I was born, and the room where I now sleep is the one in which I first drew breath. It is an old farm-house, which had for many years been turned into labourers’ cottages. With the aid of the whitewasher and carpenter, we have made a comfortable weather-proof retreat for summer; and we are surrounded with pleasant woods, and within a couple of miles of the summit of the South Down hills, where we have the finest air and some of the prettiest views in England. At some future day I shall be delighted to initiate you into rural life. A Sussex hill-side village will be an interesting field for an exploring excursion for you. We have a population under three hundred in our parish. The acreage is about 2000, of which one proprietor,

² *Speeches*, i. 440. Jan. 9, 1850. In the same place will be found his account of the way in which he dealt with his land.

1847. Colonel Wyndham, owns 1200 acres. He is a non-resident, as indeed are all the other proprietors. The clergyman is also non-resident. He lives at the village of Sledham, about three miles distant, where he has another living and a parsonage-house. He comes over to our parish to perform service once on Sundays, alternately in the morning and afternoon. The church is in a ruinous state, the tower having fallen down many years ago. The parson draws about 300*l.* a year in tithes, besides the produce of a few acres of glebe land. He is a decent man, with a large family, spoken well of by everybody, and himself admits the evils of clerical absenteeism. We have no school and no schoolmaster, unless I give that title to a couple of cottages where illiterate old women collect a score or two of infants whilst their parents are in the fields. Thus 'our village' is without resident proprietors or clergyman or schoolmaster. Add to these disadvantages, that the farmers are generally deficient of capital, and do not employ so many labourers as they might. The rates have been up to this time about six shillings in the pound. We are not under the new poor law, but in a Gilbert's Union, and almost all our expense is for outdoor relief.

"Here is a picture which will lead you to expect when you visit us a very ignorant and very poor population. There is no post-office in the village. Every morning an old man, aged about seventy, goes into Midhurst for the letters. He charges a penny for every despatch he carries, including such miscellaneous articles as horse collars, legs of mutton, empty sacks, and wheelbarrows. His letter-bag for the whole village contains on an average from two to three letters daily, including newspapers. The only newspapers which enter the parish are two copies of *Bell's Weekly Messenger*, a sound old Tory Protectionist much patronized by drowsy farmers. The wages paid by the farmers are very low, not

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L] PICTURE OF RURAL LIFE IN SUSSEX. 5

exceeding eight shillings a week. I am employing an old man nearly seventy, and his son about twenty-two, and his nephew about nineteen, at digging and removing some fences. I pay the two former nine shillings a week and the last eight shillings, and I am giving a shilling a week more than anybody else is paying. What surprises me is to observe how well the poor fellows work, and how long they last. The South Down air, in the absence of South Down mutton, has something to do with the healthiness of these people, I dare say. The labourers have generally a garden, and an allotment of a quarter of an acre; for the latter they pay three and ninepence a year rent. We are in the midst of woods, and on the borders of common land, so that fuel is cheap. All the poor have a right to cut turf on the common for their firing, which costs two shillings and threepence per thousand. The labourers who live in my cottages have pigs in their sties, but I believe it is not so universally. I have satisfied myself that, however badly off the labourers may be at present, their condition was worse in the time of high-priced corn. In 1847, when bread was double its present price, the wages of the farm labourers were not raised more than two to three shillings a week. At that time a man with a family spent all he earned for bread, and still had not enough to sustain his household. I have it both from the labourers themselves and the millers from whom they buy their flour, that they ran so deeply in debt for food during the high prices of 1847, that they have scarcely been able in some cases up to the present to pay off their score. The *class feeling* amongst the agricultural labourers is in favour of a cheap loaf. They dare not say much about it openly, but their instincts are serving them in the absence of economical knowledge, and they are unanimously against Chowler and the Protectionists.

I can hardly pretend that in this world's-end spot we can

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1847. say that any impulse has been given to the demand for agricultural labourers by the Free Trade policy. Ours is about the last place which will feel its good effects. But there is one good sign which augurs well for the future. Skilled labourers, such as masons, joiners, blacksmiths, painters, and so on, are in very great request, and it is difficult to get work of that kind done in moderate time. I am inclined to think that in more favourable situations an impulse has likewise been imparted to unskilled labour. It is certain that during the late harvest-time there was a great difficulty in obtaining hands on the south side of the Downs towards the sea coast, where labour is in more demand than here under the north side of the hills. I long to live to see an agricultural labourer strike for wages!"

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Before he had been many weeks in England, Cobden was drawn into the eager discussion of other parts of his policy, which were fully as important as Free Trade itself. The substitution of Lord Palmerston for Lord Aberdeen at the Foreign Office was instantly followed by the active intervention of the British Government in the affairs of other countries. There was an immediate demand for increased expenditure on armaments. Augmented expenditure meant augmented taxation. Each of the three items of the programme was the direct contradictory of the system which Cobden believed to be not only expedient but even indispensable. His political history from this time down to the year when they both died, is one long antagonism to the ideas which were concentrated in Lord Palmerston. Yet Cobden was too reasonable to believe that there could be a material reduction in armaments, until a great change had taken place in the public opinion of the country with respect to its foreign policy. He always said that no Minister could reduce armaments or expenditure, until the English people abandoned the notion that they were to

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I.]

THE SPANISH MARRIAGES.

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regulate the affairs of the world. "In all my travels," he wrote to Mr. Bright, "three reflections constantly occur to me: how much unnecessary solicitude and alarm England devotes to the affairs of foreign countries; with how little knowledge we enter upon the task of regulating the concerns of other people; and how much better we might employ our energies in improving matters at home."³ He knew that the influential opinion of the country was still against him, and that it would be long before it turned. "Until that time," he said, in words which may be usefully remembered by politicians who are fain to reap before they have sown, "I am content to be on this question as I have been on others in a minority, and in a minority to remain, until I get a majority."

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While he was away that famous intrigue known as the Spanish Marriages took place. The King of the French, guided by the austere and devout Guizot, so contrived the marriages of the Queen of Spain and her sister, that in the calculated default of issue from the Queen, the crown of Spain would go to the issue of her sister and the Duke of Montpensier, Louis Philippe's son. Cobden, as we shall see, did not believe that the King was looking so far as this. It was in any case a disgraceful and odious transaction, but events very speedily proved how little reason there was why it should throw the English Foreign Office into a paroxysm. Cobden was moved to write to Mr. Bright upon it:—

"My object in writing again is to speak upon the Marriage question. I have seen with humiliation that the daily newspaper press of England has been lashing the public mind into an excitement (or at least trying to do so) upon the alliance of the Duke of Montpensier with the Infanta. I saw this boy and girl married, and as I looked at them, I could not help exclaiming to myself, 'What a couple to excite the

³ *To Mr. Bright.* Sept. 18, 1847.

1847. animosity of the people of England and France!’ Have we
 Æt. 43. not outgrown the days when sixty millions of people could be set at loggerheads by a family intrigue? Yes, we have probably grown wiser than to repeat the War of Succession, but I see almost as great an evil as actual hostilities in the tone of the press and the intrigues of the diplomatists of England and France. They keep the two nations in a state of distrust and alienation, they familiarize us with the notion that war is still a possible event, and worse still, they furnish the pretext for continually augmenting our standing armaments, and thus oppressing and degrading the people with taxation, interrupting the progress of fiscal reforms, and keeping us in a hostile attitude ready for war.

“I began my political life by writing against this system of foreign interference, and every year’s experience confirms me in my early impression that it lies at the bottom of much of our misgovernment at home. My visit to Spain has strengthened, if possible, a hundredfold my conviction that all attempts of England to control or influence the destinies, political and social, of that country are worse than useless. They are mischievous alike to Spaniards and Englishmen. They are a peculiar people not understood by us. They have one characteristic, however, which their whole history might have revealed to us, i.e. their inveterate repugnance to all foreign influences and alliances, and their unconquerable resistance to foreign control. No country in Europe besides is so isolated in its prejudices of race and caste. It has ever been so, whether in the times of the Romans, of the Saracens, of Louis XIV., or of Napoleon. No people are more willing to call in the aid of foreign arms or diplomacy to fight their battles, but they despise and suspect the motives of all who come to help them, and they turn against them the moment their temporary purpose is gained. As for any other nation permanently swaying the destinies of Spain, or

finding in it an ally to be depended on against other Powers, it would be as easy to gain such an object with the Bedouins of the Desert, with whom, by the way, the Spaniards have no slight affinity of character. No one who knows the people, nobody who has read their history, can doubt this; and yet our diplomatists and newspaper-writers are pretending alarm at the marriage of the youngest son of Louis Philippe with the Infanta, on the ground of the possible future union of the two countries under one head, or at least under one influence. Nobody knows the absurdity of any such contingency better than Louis Philippe. He feels, no doubt, that it is difficult enough to secure *one* throne permanently for his dynasty, and unless his sagacity be greatly over-rated, he would shrink from the possibility of one of his descendants ever attempting to wear at the same time the crowns of Spain and France. I believe the French King to have had but one object,—to secure a rich wife for his younger son. He is perhaps a little avaricious in his old age, like most other men. But I care nothing for his motives or policy. Looking to the facts, I ask why should the French and English people allow themselves to be embroiled by such family manœuvres? He may have been treacherous to our Queen, but why should kings and queens be allowed to enter into any marriage compacts in the name of their people? You will perhaps tell me when you write that the bulk of the middle class, the reflecting portion of the people of England, do not sympathize with the London daily press on the subject of the Marriage question; and I know that there is a considerable portion of the more intelligent French people who do not approve of all that is written in the Paris papers. But, unhappily, the bulk of mankind do not think for themselves. The newspapers write in the name of the two countries, and to a great extent they form public opinion. Governments and diplomatists act upon the views expressed in the influential journals.

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1847. " . . . There is one way in which this system of interfering
Ær. 43. in the politics of Spain is especially mischievous. It prevents Spanish parties from being formed upon a purely domestic basis, and thus puts off the day when the politicians shall devote themselves to their own reforms. At present, all the intrigues of Madrid revolve round the diplomatic manœuvres of France and England. There is another evil arising out of it. It gives the bulk of the Spaniards a false notion of their own position. They are a proud people, they think all Europe is busy with their affairs, they hear of France and England being on the point of going to war about the marriage of one of their princesses, they imagine that Spain is the most important country in the world, and thus they forget their own ignorance, poverty, and political degradation, and of course do not occupy themselves in domestic reforms. If left to themselves, they would soon find out their inferiority, for they are not without a certain kind of common sense.

"I have always had an instinctive monomania against this system of foreign interference, protocolling, diplomatising, etc., and I should be glad if you and our other Free Trade friends, who have beaten the daily broad-sheets into common sense upon another question, would oppose yourselves to the Palmerston system, and try to prevent the Foreign Office from undoing the good which the Board of Trade has done to the people. But you must not disguise from yourself that the evil has its roots in the pugnacious, energetic, self-sufficient, foreigner-despising and pitying character of that noble insular creature, John Bull. Read Washington Irving's description of him fumbling for his cudgel always the moment he hears of any row taking place anywhere on the face of the earth, and bristling up with anger at the very idea of any other people daring to have a quarrel without first asking his consent or inviting him to take a part in it.