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THE LIFE OF WILLIAM COBBETT

THE LIFE OF WILLIAM COBBETT

by

G. D. H. COLE

With a Chapter on *Rural Rides* by the late
F. E. GREEN.



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PREFACE

I MUST explain how I came to write this book. I had been for some years gathering together materials for a study of Cobbett, when I received a letter from the late Mr. F. E. Green. He told me that he was engaged in writing Cobbett's life, and asked me for the loan of certain of his books, difficult to obtain even in libraries. I lent him the books, and thought no more, for the time, of my own projected study. But within a few months Mr. Green died—a lamentable loss in these days when there are few who can write with power and insight of the labouring people of the English countryside. Mrs. Green asked me if I would write the book which her husband had begun, and I willingly undertook the task. Mr. Green's unfinished MSS. were placed in my hands, and I set to work upon them. He had written, I found, but one section, dealing with Cobbett's *Rural Rides*. The rest of his papers were mere scattered notes, giving no clear idea of the plan he had in mind.

For the whole of this book, with the single exception of Chapter XXI., I am solely responsible. I have used, here and there, a note of Mr. Green's; but I have worked over the whole of the material myself, and I do not wish to claim his responsibility for any section. Chapter XXI., on the other hand, is almost wholly his, only edited here and there by me so as to make it fit in with the general plan of the book.

It was fortunate for me, and for the readers of this volume, that Mr. Green began with *Rural Rides*; for I profess to no intimate knowledge of the countryside, and I could not have come near his graphic study of this aspect of Cobbett's work and personality. He had done just what I could not have done, and I owe him a debt—which alas I cannot repay—for helping me to make a better, and a more balanced book than I could have made alone.

Certain other debts I must acknowledge. Mr. R. Page Arnot has helped me greatly by the loan of his collection of Cobbett's writings—a valuable supplement to my own,

which has saved me many weary days in libraries. Mr. J. L. Hammond has very kindly read the book for me in proof. I have also to thank Mr. Joseph Trask for his skill in searching out for me certain rare books that I needed, and my wife for valuable help and suggestions on many points. And especially I must thank Mrs. Green for giving me the chance of writing this book and placing her husband's papers at my disposal.

G. D. H. COLE.

HAMPSTEAD, *June*, 1924.

Oh, bear him where the rain can fall,
And where the winds can blow,
And let the sun weep o'er his pall,
As to the grave ye go!

And in some little lone churchyard
Beside the growing corn,
Lay gentle nature's stern prose bard,
Her mightiest—peasant born.

Yes! Let the wild-flower wed his grave,
That bees may murmur near,
When o'er his last home bend the brave,
And say—"A man lies here."

EBENEZER ELLIOTT.

(*From his Elegy on the Death of Cobbett.*

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CHAPTER I

THE TIMES

THE life of William Cobbett spans the gulf between two worlds—between the aristocratic feudalism of the eighteenth century and the plutocratic absolutism of the new industrial system. In first manhood he saw the fall of aristocratic feudalism in France, and heard the new watchword of Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity proclaimed amid the smoke of the burning chateaux and the flight of noble émigrés to all the courts of Europe. He heard then the revolutionary voices calling for a world-wide crusade against the tyrants and the privileged orders. He watched the French Revolution through its successive phases, from the taking of the Bastille to the rise and fall of the Napoleonic Empire, felt the thrill which passed through Europe at the Terror and the execution of the King, marked the changes by which the war of Europe against Jacobinism and republican principles became a struggle against the revolutionary Imperialism of Napoleon, the military broom with which France swept out the petty courts and principalities, and cleared the way for a new Europe not of its planning, but largely the product of the forces which it had set in motion. From 1789 to 1815 the politics and the political thinking of Europe were dominated by the great fact of France, by the power of the ideas which the French Revolution, drawing some inspiration from its American predecessor, had set abroad in the world, by the struggle of the older order against that new power, and by the internal conflicts engendered by the breakdown of the established conventions and principles of eighteenth century politics.

Cobbett was twenty-six years old when the Bastille fell before the people of Paris. He was fifty-two when Napoleon suffered final defeat at Waterloo. In 1815 he had been writing steadily and voluminously on political questions for more than twenty years; but he had still written hardly a line of his best and most influential work. He had proved his

genius as the most effective pamphleteer and political journalist of his time; but, had he died in 1815, he would have left behind him no clear message, and perhaps no single book that would have been remembered to-day. He had mastered fully long before then the art of political writing: only after the Peace did he really learn how to turn his mastery to purposeful use. His great books and his greatest journalism were the work of an old man.

The intensity of the struggle against France, the vicissitudes of the successive coalitions in which Pitt and the inheritors of his tradition marshalled the forces of Europe, first against Jacobinism and then against Napoleon, served to mask the vast changes in Great Britain itself which were taking place through the whole period of the French wars. If the French Revolution and the rise of Napoleon were facts of vital and overmastering importance to the world, the contemporary changes in the inner structure of English society were no less important, and no less world-wide in their effects. For, while the old world of the eighteenth century was employing all its resources in order to crush out the new things in politics which France represented and preached, changes in industry and agriculture were accomplishing, behind its back, a revolution far more subversive, and quite impossible to combat with the aristocratic military power which brought Napoleon at last to his knees. Had the new things in economics been allied with the new things in politics and inspired by the democratic ideas of 1789, the world might have seen, instead of modern capitalism, a democratic industrial order arising on the ruins of feudalism. But the new economic forces deployed behind the flashing swords of the dying feudal aristocracy; and drew from the financial needs and commercial opportunities of war an additional impetus and an increased power. Capitalism joined with feudalism to fight Napoleon, and was an essential instrument of his destruction. England bought victory, as she bought her European allies, with the subsidies furnished by her money-lords. The English aristocracy won the war only by getting into debt to the English capitalists. And this unholy alliance defeated, not so much France, as the common people of England.

The general character of those vast changes which we call the "Industrial Revolution" is too well known to need description here. Between 1760 and 1830—to a great extent

between 1789 and 1815—Great Britain became the great manufacturing country, the "workshop of the world." While the eyes of the statesmen, and, to a large extent, of the people, were fixed on the struggle with France, Great Britain became capitalist in a new sense by the rise of machine-production, the development of the factory system, the creation of the modern wage-working proletariat corralled in the hideous, unclean, sprawling towns of the north and the Midlands. Population increased with unprecedented rapidity: it migrated from the south, the home of agriculture and the domestic system of industry, to the new manufacturing centres. A new class of autocrats—cotton-lords, coal-lords, iron-lords—grew up, with power over their wage-slaves more absolute, and far more brutally employed, than the power of the aristocratic landowner over his tenants and villagers. Far more absolute, because untrammelled by customs and traditions, or by long knowledge and experience of human relations. Far more brutally exercised, because the new capitalism involved a ruthless competitive scramble for wealth, and the demands of developing industry for fresh supplies of capital called for a high rate of "surplus value," to be obtained only by naked tyranny and relentless exploitation.

Mr. and Mrs. Hammond, in *The Town Labourer*, have graphically described both the situation of the poor during the progress of this revolution and the "mind of the rich"—the attitude which could combine humanitarian solicitude for the negro slave with complacent justification of the worst enormities of the factory system at home. The humanitarians—by far the greater part of them—simply turned the blind eye of their souls to the horrors of factory slavery, content to regard even the doing to death of little children as an inscrutable working of the divine laws of Providence and economics. They were under the spell of the machine and of the wealth which it created: all things were surely good that ministered to that vast increase. They were, moreover, even the best of them, under the influence of terror. The rapid increase of population seemed to them, before the food supplies of the New World were opened up by the revolution in transport, to threaten universal famine. The doctrines of Malthus frightened them into regarding the sternest repression of the poor as a moral duty.

A second terror worked in their minds with at least equal

power. The whole propagandist zeal of the governing classes had been put into the crusade against Jacobinism. The fear of revolution at home had been used to justify the anti-revolutionary war of 1793, and was used again and again, with the excesses of the Reign of Terror as its most powerful argument, to stimulate flagging energies and prevent a lasting peace of compromise with the new order in France. The old governing class and the new lords of industry were alike dominated by the panic fear of a British Revolution. They mistook the tiny Radical organisations of the seventeen-nineties for the first rumblings of a national revolutionary movement: they suppressed with needless violence the little corresponding societies of Thomas Hardy, Muir, and their associates. This panic fear, once born in the minds of the rich, never died till Victorianism was in the full bloom of its prosperous complacency: it haunted the rich, an ever-present skeleton at the feast of wealth. It has often been said that the fear caused by the French Revolution put back the Reform movement for a generation. It did more than that: it made inevitable the final alliance between the old and new lords of land and factory which is the basis of the English oligarchy of to-day.

Cobbett, like many of his countrymen, lived through the earlier stages of the Industrial Revolution, aware indeed of some of its outstanding incidents, but hardly conscious at all of its wider social implications. Until 1800 he was in America; and on his return to England he plunged head-long into the political controversies of the capital, occupying himself mainly with foreign affairs, and making his mark in political journalism as the determined enemy of the Peace of Amiens—that truce with France which Pitt permitted as a breathing-space to the nation until she could resume the struggle refreshed. Preoccupation with foreign affairs was the main reason why at first Cobbett hardly took note of the economic changes around him. But there was another and a stronger cause, which held him back long after this first reason had ceased to count. He was a man of the country, with no aptitude, as he freely admitted, for the understanding of the affairs of industry. He had been born a peasant, and though he had taken to politics, a peasant at heart he remained. When, therefore, he awoke to the facts of economic change, what struck his imagination was not the revolution in industry or the growth of mechanical power,

but the great silent revolution which was proceeding in the countryside, turning the race of peasants partly into landless labourers working for a wage or a dole, and partly into outcasts from their villages who must seek work for wages in the growing factory towns.

Not until a decade ago did the primary importance of the Agrarian Revolution come to be at all fully appreciated by the writers of economic and social history. Mr. and Mrs. Hammond have told the story of it, as it affected the common people of the countryside, in their fine study of *The Village Labourer*. This revolution proceeded side by side with the revolution in industry, to which it powerfully contributed both by forcibly expelling many of the folk from the countryside and driving them to swell the new proletariat of the towns, and by accumulating in the hands of the landowners wealth which became available for use in all sorts of business enterprise. From the middle of the eighteenth century, the movement for the enclosure of the common lands, thitherto proceeding very slowly, took a great leap forward in consequence of the spreading knowledge of improved means of cultivation, which gave an added incentive to the landlord and the large farmer to develop their holdings. The war, by shutting off foreign supplies and making increased calls for food for the Allied armies, gave this movement an immense further stimulus. The old methods of cultivation, the old rights of commoners, the traditionalism of the old village community, were represented as putting insuperable barriers in the way of better farming and increased food supply. The landowners, moved both by economic motives and by the call for more food, set to work to enclose the land and to overturn altogether the traditional forms of village life. Between 1760 and 1844 no less than 2554 separate Enclosure Acts passed through Parliament, and it is estimated that 4,039,023 acres were enclosed, as against 237,845 in the sixty years from 1700 to 1760.[1]

These enclosures, as Mr. and Mrs. Hammond have shown, resulted in a wholesale dispossession of the poor. They were carried through by a Parliament of landowners, by a method of Commission which practically threw the power into the hands of the principal landowners of each district. They were marked by an almost complete disregard for

[1] Arthur Johnson, *The Disappearance of the Small Landowner*, p. 90.

the interests of the smaller owners and of those who, by legal right or established custom, had enjoyed privileges of commonage on the lands marked out for enclosure. Customary claims were often ignored altogether; even legal rights were largely ineffective in practice against the power of the larger owners who dominated the Commissions entrusted with the task of carrying through the schemes of enclosure drawn up by the squire and the farmer in their own interest. Even if the smaller claimants were awarded a parcel of land in compensation for the loss of their customary rights, they often could not afford the expense of hedging and fencing which the scheme made compulsory, and were forced to sell their claims for a few pounds to the great owners. The face of England was changed. The peasant, who had held an independent, though modest, position in the village community, lost his status and came to depend for the means of life solely on wage-labour eked out more and more by poor relief.

The time of war, taken as a whole, was for both farmer and landowner a time of extraordinary prosperity. The prices of agricultural produce rose very high, and rents were very greatly increased. Long leases at fixed rents ceased to pay the landowner, and yearly tenancies, which enabled the owner to raise rents quickly in response to a rise in prices, were extensively substituted for them. The landowner found, too, that larger farmers could pay the rising rents more easily than small yeomen. Farms were thrown together to form larger units; farmhouses and cottages decayed; many of the smaller farmers were thrust, with the cottagers dispossessed by enclosure, into the ranks of the agricultural proletariat or driven to seek a livelihood in the towns or overseas. Commercialism, "farming to pay" in a commercial sense, invaded the countryside, and set up there a new ethical code and a new set of social relationships. The squire, enriched by rising rents and perhaps also by speculation in the funds, adopted a more lavish style of living, and often deserted his estate for the life of the town. The larger farmers, growing rich also, aped the squire, and began to pose as gentlefolk. The claims of luxury, living on the land and on the labourer, became vastly greater under the influence of war-time prosperity and war prices.

Meanwhile, the continuance of the war, in which Great Britain became more and more the financier of her European

allies, bribing them with subsidy after subsidy to continue the struggle, imposed an ever-increasing strain on the resources of the nation. The National Debt grew vaster by an almost geometrical progression; and stock-jobbers and aristocratic speculators as well as war contractors made huge fortunes out of the national necessity. The pouring out of money for war purposes engendered, moreover, a mood of extravagance in statesmen. Where jobbers and contractors were piling up fortunes so fast at the national expense, surely the politicians themselves and their friends and relatives were entitled to a share. Corruption grew fast. The old eighteenth century scandal of pensions, sinecures, and places, against which Burke had directed, in 1782, his scheme of "economical reform," grew to proportions hitherto undreamed of. The prevailing hostility to reform of every sort, born of the fear of revolution, killed the movement against corruption. War conditions multiplied corruption tenfold in a few years. All sections of the governing class shared the swag, and piled fresh burdens on the people over and above the multiplying charges for interest on the debt.

Thus, though production and wealth increased very fast, there was no surplus for the unfortunate labourer. His wages did not rise to meet the hugely increased prices of commodities; on the contrary they fell. For the changes in the countryside both made wage-labour more abundant and decreased the demand for its services. The new methods of farming required less labour than the old. Wages, indeed, were speedily driven down to such a point that it became manifestly impossible for the labourer to exist at all on his earnings. He must be relieved, or he would positively starve to death. Hence the rapid growth of the poor rates throughout the country; hence the famous Speenhamland decision of the Berkshire magistrates which, spreading rapidly to other districts, soon made it normal for the labourer in full work to have his wages brought up to a living standard by relief from the rates, and for the unemployed labourers, in return for bare subsistence, to be hired out in gangs to the farmers—an open and unashamed reversion to slave labour without even the continuous responsibility involved in actual and permanent ownership of the slave by a master.

Even while the war, and war prices, continued, all did not go well with the landowner and the farmer. Taxation grew fast, and the burden of the rates also mounted up

steadily from year to year. The higher standards of living adopted in consequence of prosperity became more difficult to sustain. At the debt, and the jobbers and contractors and sinecurists whom it enriched, the country gentlemen and the farmers only grumbled; against high rates they took action by progressive reduction in the scales of relief and by stricter and more deterrent administration of the Poor Laws. Nevertheless, the burden grew; for wages were forced down still further, and enclosures continued to add to the numbers of the rural proletariat. The Speenhamland system, moreover, by granting relief in proportion to the number of children, encouraged large families, and added plausibility to the vaticinations of Malthus and his disciples. Long before 1815 there was discontent among the farmers as well as among the labouring poor.

The return of peace made the condition of the countryside far worse. The debt remained, and became in reality far heavier with the fall in prices, which meant that the interest upon it represented an increased claim on the national production. Agricultural prices fell very sharply, with the cessation of war demands and the reopening of continental supplies. The cost of living fell far less, and unemployment increased, so that the burden of the rates was in no way reduced, although the labourer's lot grew progressively worse as the resources of farmers and landowners were diminished. The misery of the rural poor reached almost the lowest point in the years following the "peace without a parallel."

Cobbett, watching with the eyes of an educated peasant the processes of the Agrarian Revolution, sent forth his thunders first of all against the financial system, which seemed to him the chief source of rural distress. The growth of the National Debt, the rise to wealth of the stock-jobber and the financier, the increase of sinecurists battening on the public purse, seemed the first cause of the misery of the agricultural workers. It appeared to threaten them, the farmers and the old landowning class, with a common ruin. Cobbett, who had first leapt into prominence as the leading pamphleteer of the anti-Jacobins, the defender of the old order against republicans and levellers, made his protest first of all in the interests of that old order, against the rising horde of get-rich-quick financiers whom Pitt's economic policy encouraged and rewarded. To the end of his life, he was eager to convince landowners and farmers that they

and the common people had a common enemy, and should unite to save "old England" from the clutch of the "Pitt system." But, though individuals might listen, landowners and farmers as a class were far too much frightened of revolution to listen to proposals of reform; and Cobbett was unwillingly driven more and more to separate himself from them, and appear as the independent champion of the workers against their oppressors. He was becoming a Radical critic by 1804: the coming to power of his patron, William Windham, and his political friends in Grenville and Fox's Ministry of All the Talents in 1806 soon caused him to break with his orthodox associates, when he found that they contemplated no departure from the system which he had denounced. By 1807 he had passed into definite opposition to Whigs and Tories alike, as the enemy of all the factions, and the fierce champion of a policy which had as its central feature the repudiation of the greater part of the National Debt.

While the war lasted, there could be no widespread Radical movement. Individuals and small groups here and there might denounce abuses and demand reform; and distress in town and country might lead to rick-burning in the countryside or machine-breaking by the Luddites, who saw in the new labour-saving machines their doom to unemployment and starvation. But, during the war, the political conditions were lacking for any general movement of revolt. It needed the terrible slump of the years immediately following the Peace to convert unrest into a positive campaign for the redress of grievances, and to force dramatically to the front the sufferings and the claims of the common people.

Suddenly, public opinion awoke to a real consciousness of the Industrial Revolution and its results. The classes found themselves face to face with the masses, with the new massed proletariat of the factories which the Industrial Revolution had called into being. They resorted at once to the repressive measures which had stifled unrest a generation before. Hastily Acts were passed to restrict free speech and the right of meeting and combination: excessive severity was employed by magistrates, backed by military force, in the execution of the law. But this was not done before the demand for reform had been set plainly before the people; nor could the new movement, far more deeply rooted in popular distress and rising consciousness among the industrial workers, be stamped out so easily as the little Radical movements of

1794. Cobbett had been among the first to realise and to seize the opportunity offered by the new conditions. Hitherto, he had been speaking mainly to the upper and middle class. Now he suddenly changed the character of his appeal. He had, in *The Political Register*, founded as an anti-Jacobin organ in 1802, the most powerfully written political journal of the time. Reducing the price from a shilling to twopence, he addressed himself directly to the labourers and artisans, and assumed, in a moment, his place at the head and forefront of the whole Radical working-class movement.

From that time onward, Cobbett was engulfed in the popular movement, focusing all his claims on behalf of the oppressed classes in the one demand for Parliamentary Reform. The last twenty years of his long life—he was seventy-two when he died—were immeasurably the most crowded with achievement. He had assumed, in 1816, a representative character as the spokesman of the common people; and the assumption gave him a new confidence and a new power. Already the best journalist in England, he became something far greater: the man who, in his books and articles alike, spoke out plainly what was in the minds of the English poor.

Yet, for all his fighting on the side of the new popular forces which the Industrial Revolution had called into being, Cobbett took his stand to the last on the ground of the past, far more readily harking back to the old England of his boyhood than forward to the new England of the enclosures and the factory town. "We want nothing new," he was always saying; "we want only what our forefathers enjoyed, what the stock-jobbers and the place-hunters and the Pittites and the cotton-lords have taken away." As late as 1832, after the Reform Act had been passed, he was still writing in this strain: "In addressing the Lords, some time ago, I endeavoured to convince them that, in the whole body of the industrious and working people of England, there was scarcely a single man to be found that had ever entertained the slightest thought of envying his richer neighbour, of wishing to share in his property, of wishing to see all men pulled down to a level —I never could gather from one single working man, during the whole course of my communication with them, that he wished for any thing beyond—that he wished for any change other than—that which would leave him the enjoyment of the fair fruit of his earnings. There

never was a working people in the whole world, so reasonable, so just, and so easily satisfied." [1]

Cobbett was no Socialist, seeking a reconstruction of society in terms of the new economic conditions. He had no sympathy with Robert Owen and his schemes, and I do not recall a single mention in his works of the Owenite Co-operative Movement, though it was developing and influencing working-class opinion for a good ten years before he died. He did not think in terms of the new social conditions; he felt in terms of the old. Consistently throughout his life, to his Tory and Radical friends alike, he sought rather to preserve and purify the old England of his boyhood than to set in its place a new England based on the collective control of man's new-found mechanical command over the forces of nature. The new world appeared to him a world of stock-jobbers and profiteers far more tyrannous and far less humane than the old aristocracy whose places and power they usurped.

This is not to say that Cobbett went on upholding aristocracy. He would perhaps have upheld it, if it had stood firm against the assaults of plutocracy. To the end he hated the old aristocrats far less than the usurpers. For them in their decline and subjection to the plutocrats he felt, not hatred, but a sort of pity. They had betrayed—with Pitt as their instrument—their own cause, and the cause of old England. They had allied themselves with the money-lords, and they were getting the worst of the alliance. He thought of the struggle for Reform as directed not so much against aristocratic power as against the subjection of that power to the money-lords. Rotten boroughs, sinecurists and placemen, politicians blown this way and that by forces they had not the courage or the will to control—these he abused roundly on all occasions. But, in the true spirit of eighteenth century England, he attacked them less on grounds of abstract democratic principle than because they were become the creatures of the money-power. He hated a stock-jobber far worse than a duke: he would have saved the peers, if he could, from the consequences of their own surrender.

Cobbett, is, in fact, a symbolic figure of the transition. His immense hold over the workers of his time is largely explained by the fact that they, like him, were peasants unclassed. They had been torn from the land, and flung into the factory. But they kept, for a generation at least, the

[1] *Tour in Scotland*, p. 55.

hearts and the feelings of peasants, and responded more readily to a peasant's appeal than to programmes based on the acceptance of the new industrial conditions. They were not at home in the factory, not reconciled to their lot as wage-earners under rigid factory discipline. Nor was Cobbett at home in these grim, though wonderful, new temples of the industrial Moloch. "I have never been," he wrote in 1832, "into any manufacturing place without reluctance, and I positively refused to go into any of them here (in Scotland), alleging that I had no understanding of the matter, that the wondrous things that are performed in these places only serve, as I behold them, to withdraw my mind from things which I do understand." [1]

We must study Cobbett, then, in this book, not as the apostle of the modern working-class movement, but as the tribune of the transition, the faithful representative of the feeling of the dispossessed of his time, not the preacher of strange new doctrines, but the John the Baptist, linking old and new together. His personal appearance bears out this understanding of his character and significance. J. S. Buckingham, Radical member for Sheffield in the reformed Parliament, described him in 1833 in these words: "His appearance was prepossessing: a strong, hale, stout, man, with a head crowned with the snow of age, a ruddy countenance, a small laughing eye, and the figure of a respectable English farmer." [2] Hazlitt spoke of him as "a very pleasant man: easy of access, affable, clear-headed, simple and mild in his manner, deliberate and unruffled in his speech, though some of his expressions were not very well qualified. His figure is tall [3] and portly: he has a good, sensible face, rather full, with little gray eyes, a hard, square forehead, a ruddy complexion, with hair gray or powdered, and had on a scarlet broad-cloth waistcoat, with the flaps of the pockets hanging down, as was the custom for gentlemen-farmers in the last century, or as we see it in the pictures of Members of Parliament in the reign of George I. I certainly did not think less favourably of him for seeing him." [4] Carlyle called him "the pattern John Bull of his century, strong as the

[1] *Tour in Scotland*, p. 208.

[2] *Parliamentary Review*, Vol. I., p. 12.

[3] Cobbett stood six feet and one inch in his stockings.

[4] William Hazlitt, *The Spirit of the Age, Essay on Cobbett.*

rhinoceros, and with singular humanities and genialities shining through his thick skin." [1]

Always to observers this idea of the farmer, the "pattern John Bull" occurred as Cobbett's proper description. He was essentially a countryman, with an unconquerable instinct to cleave to the soil. He could not be happy, however busy he might be with writing and politics, without a bit of land to till. Though he lived much in town, the town always stifled him, and he fled back to the country at the first chance. The factory-slaves of the north had no such chance. But, when they read Cobbett's writings, the breath of the country came to them, and added immensely to his political appeal. He was one of them: he knew their longings, because they were his own.

So it comes about that this story of his life, which I am about to tell, is also in great measure the story of the England of his time. And that too in no mere external sense, through his close contact with the great social movements of this most moving period in English history, but also in a spiritual and symbolic sense. As Walt Whitman represents and symbolises a phase of the expansion of young America, Cobbett represents and symbolises a phase of the dissolution of old England.

Yet, as we shall see, if Cobbett and those with whom he felt died defeated, unable to stay the onrush of the new forces of economic revolution, he and they were not defeated in vain. In the building up of the new working-class movements which he did not profess to understand or to guide, Cobbett played, nevertheless, a vitally important part. At a time when all the material conditions, all the colossal power of men and machines, conspired to reduce the workers to submission and despair, Cobbett gave them confidence and helped them immensely to the power of thinking for themselves. Though he railed at much that we call "education," he was a great educator—above all, a great educator of the working class. His appeal was so simple, so straightforward, and so direct that there was no possibility of not understanding it; and it helped the workers to understand, with their own experience to guide them, things and forces which Cobbett himself did not understand. More than any other man, he taught the workers to think for themselves, and to address their minds with courage and with hope to the solution of their own problems.

[1] *Essay on Scott.*

CHAPTER II

BOYHOOD AND YOUTH

WILLIAM COBBETT was born at Farnham, Surrey, on March 9th, 1763,[1] "To be descended from an illustrious family," he wrote, "certainly reflects honour on any man, in spite of the *sans-culotte* principles of the present day. This is, however, an honour that I have no pretension to. All that I can boast of in my birth is that I was born in old England."[2]

The country round Farnham was given over largely to the cultivation of hops, but thickly set also with beautiful gardens and fine estates. His birthplace retained always a strong hold on his affections. He loved to go back to it, to dwell on it in memory, to contrast and compare it with all manner of places at home and abroad. Other scenes were constantly reminding him, by likeness or unlikeness, of the countryside of his boyhood. He carried the memory to America: it peeps out again and again in his *Rural Rides* through the counties of England and Scotland. The labourers of the south were, he felt, his own people; a different note came into his writing when he addressed them. The Northerners and the factory operatives were "you"; the labourers of the south remained always "we" in Cobbett's mind.

Cobbett's father was a small farmer, who also kept an inn, The Jolly Farmer, on the outskirts of Farnham. His grandfather had been a day-labourer, who "worked for one farmer from the day of his marriage to that of his death, upwards of forty years." "He died," wrote Cobbett, "before I was

[1] This date may be taken as established by Mr. E. I. Carlyle's researches. See Appendix to his *William Cobbett*. Cobbett regularly misstated his own age, under the impression that the year of his birth was 1766. The earlier biographers give the date, following his son's statement in their edition of his *Political Works*, as 1762; but 1763 in undoubtedly correct.

[2] All quotations in this chapter, save where it is otherwise stated, are from *The Life and Adventures of Peter Porcupine* (*Porcupine's Works*), 1801, Vol. IV.

born, but I have often slept beneath the same roof that had sheltered him, and where his widow dwelt for several years after his death. It was a little thatched cottage, with a garden before the door. It had but two windows; a damson tree shaded one, and a clump of filberts the other. Here I and my brothers went every Christmas and Whitsuntide to spend a week or two, and torment the poor old woman with our noise and dilapidations. She used to give us milk and bread for breakfast, an apple pudding for our dinner, and a piece of bread and cheese for supper. Her fire was made of turf, and her evening light was a rush dipped in grease."

This and other reminiscences of childhood are to be found in Cobbett's racy autobiography, *The Life and Adventures of Peter Porcupine*, published during his residence in America when he was thirty-three years old. "With respect to my ancestors," he wrote, "I shall go no farther back than my grandfather, and for this plain reason, that I never heard talk of any prior to him." Cobbett's ancestors were plain peasantry—a good stock, from whom he derived a body abounding in health and vigour, and a mind independent and tenacious. All that we know of his forbears we learn from himself; for no expectant chroniclers were there to foresee the birth of genius, or record its source. Similarly, we depend wholly on him for the story of his childhood; for no one else noticed, or at least no one else recorded, how he grew up. Fortunately, he was impressionable, and his memory was both vivid and retentive.

Cobbett's father, like his grandfather, had experienced day-labour. "When a little boy, he drove plough for twopence a day." But he was no ordinary labourer; for "these his earnings were appropriated to the expenses of an evening school. What a village schoolmaster could be expected to teach, he had learnt; and had, besides, considerably improved himself, in several branches of the mathematics. He understood land-surveying well, and was often chosen to draw the plans of disputed territory: in short, he had the reputation of possessing experience and understanding, which never fails, in England, to give a man in a country place some little weight with his neighbours. He was honest, industrious, and frugal: it was not, therefore, wonderful, that he should be situated in a good farm, and happy in a wife of his own rank, like him, beloved and respected."

Our William Cobbett was the third of four children, all

boys, with less than four years between the ages of eldest and youngest. All four were speedily employed on the land. "A father like ours, it will be readily supposed, did not suffer us to eat the bread of idleness. I do not remember the time when I did not earn my living. My first occupation was driving the birds from the turnip-seed, and the rooks from the peas. When I first trudged afield, with my wooden bottle and my satchel swung over my shoulders, I was hardly able to climb the gates and stiles; and, at the close of the day, to reach home was a task of infinite difficulty. My next employment was weeding wheat, and leading a single horse at harrowing barley. Hoeing peas followed, and hence I arrived at the honour of joining the reapers in harvest, driving the team, and holding plough. We were all of us strong and laborious, and my father used to boast, that he had four boys, the eldest of whom was but fifteen years old, who did as much work as any three men in the parish of Farnham. Honest pride, and happy days!"

Of schooling the young Cobbetts had little, in any formal sense. "I have some faint recollection of going to school to an old woman, who, I believe, did not succeed in learning me my letters. In the winter evenings my father learnt us all to read and write, and gave us a pretty tolerable knowledge of arithmetic. Grammar he did not perfectly understand himself, and therefore his endeavours to learn us that necessarily failed; for, though he thought he understood it, and though he made us get the rules by heart, we learnt nothing at all of the principles."

"Our religion was that of the Church of England, to which I have ever remained attached; the more so, perhaps, as it bears the name of my country. . . . As to politics, we were like the rest of the country people of England: that is to say, we neither knew nor thought anything about the matter. The shouts of victory, or the murmurs of a defeat,[1] would now and then break in upon our tranquillity for a moment; but I do not remember ever having seen a newspaper in the house; and, most certainly, that privation did not render us less industrious, happy, or free."

Cobbett did not work always on his father's farm. At one time he was employed in the garden of Waverley Abbey, a neighbouring estate, formerly a house of the Cistercians. At another he worked in the garden of Farnham Castle. He

[1] In the American War of Independence.

acquired early that love of gardens which was strong in him in later life. One of his strongest criticisms of the Americans was that, though they were excellent farmers, they had no beautiful gardens. His *American Gardener* was an attempt to bring them to his way of thinking. And it was his love of gardens that led him into his first serious escapade.

"At *eleven*[1] years of age my employment was clipping of box-edgings and weeding beds of flowers in the garden of the Bishop of Winchester, at the Castle of Farnham, my native town. I had always been fond of beautiful gardens; and a gardener, who had just come from the king's gardens at Kew, gave such a description of them as made me instantly resolve to work in these gardens. The next morning, without saying a word to any one, off I set, with no clothes, except those upon my back, and with thirteen halfpence in my pocket. I found that I must go to Richmond, and I, accordingly, went on from place to place inquiring my way thither. A long day (it was in June) brought me to Richmond in the afternoon. Two-penny worth of bread and cheese and a pennyworth of small beer, which I had on the road, and one halfpenny that I had lost somehow or other, left threepence in my pocket. With this for my whole fortune, I was trudging through Richmond, in my blue smock-frock and my red garters tied under my knees, when, staring about me, my eye fell upon a little book in a bookseller's window, on the outside of which was written: "TALE OF A TUB; Price 3d." The title was so odd, that my curiosity was excited. I had the threepence, but, then, I could have *no supper*. In I went, and got the little book, which I was so impatient to read, that I got over into a field, at the upper corner of Kew Gardens, where there stood a *hay-stack*. On the shady side of this, I sat down to read. The book was so different from any thing that I had ever read before: it was something so *new* to my mind, that, though I could not at all understand some of it, it delighted me beyond description; and it produced what I have always considered a sort of birth of intellect. I read on till it was dark, without any thought about supper or bed. When I could see no longer, I put my little book in my pocket, and tumbled down by the side of the stack, where I slept till the birds in Kew Gardens awaked me in the morning; when I started to Kew, reading my little book. The singularity of my dress, the simplicity of my manner, my confident and

[1] More probably *fourteen*.

lively air, and, doubtless, his own compassion besides, induced the gardener, who was a Scotsman, I remember, to give me victuals, find me lodging, and set me to work. And it was during the period that I was at Kew, that the present King [1] and two of his brothers laughed at the oddness of my dress while I was sweeping the grass plot round the foot of the Pagoda. The gardener, seeing me fond of books, lent me some gardening books to read, but these I could not relish after my *Tale of a Tub*, which I carried about with me wherever I went, and when I, at about twenty years old,[2] lost it in a box that fell overboard in the Bay of Fundy in North America, the loss gave me greater pain than I have ever felt at losing thousands of pounds." [3]

From Kew, after a time, Cobbett returned home to Farnham. These were the days of the American War of Independence, and Cobbett points out its effect in awakening political consciousness among the people. The passage, written in his anti-Jacobin days, is coloured by the "loyalist" point of view which residence in America strengthened in him; but it describes an important factor in the forming of his mind. "After the American war had continued for some time, and the cause and nature of it began to be understood, or rather misunderstood, by the lower classes of the people in England, we became a little better acquainted with subjects of this kind (*i.e.*, politics). It is well known, that the people were, as to numbers, nearly equally divided in their opinions concerning that war and their wishes respecting the result of it. My father was a partisan of the Americans: he used frequently to dispute on the subject with the gardener of a nobleman who lived near us. This was generally done with good humour over a pot of our best ale; yet the disputants sometimes grew warm and gave way to language that could not fail to attract our attention. My father was worsted, without doubt, as he had for antagonist a shrewd and sensible old Scotchman, far his superior in political knowledge; but he pleaded before a partial audience: we thought there was but one wise man in the world and that that one was our father. He who pleaded the cause of the Americans had an advantage, too, with young minds: he had only to represent the king's troops as sent to cut the throats of a people, our

[1] George IV.

[2] Probably twenty-three.

[3] *Political Register*, February 19th, 1820.

friends and relations, merely because they would not submit to oppression; and his cause was gained. Speaking to the passions is ever sure to succeed on the uninformed."

Despite Mr. Martin, the Scotch gardener, Cobbett's father remained a staunch partisan of the Americans. "He would not have suffered his best friend to drink success to the king's arms at his table." His son illustrates his tenacity with another anecdote.

"My father used to take one of us with him every year, to the great hop-fair at Wey-Hill. The fair was held at Old Michaelmas-tide, and the journey was, to us, a sort of reward for the labours of the summer. It happened to be my turn to go thither, the very year that Long Island was taken by the British.[1] A great company of hop-merchants and farmers were just sitting down to supper as the post arrived, bringing in the Extraordinary *Gazette*, which announced the victory. A hop-factor from London took the paper, placed his chair upon the table, and began to read with an audible voice. He was opposed, a dispute ensued, and my father retired, taking me by the hand, to another apartment, where we supped with about a dozen others of the same sentiments. Here Washington's health, and success to the Americans, were repeatedly toasted, and this was the first time, as far as I can recollect, that I ever heard the General mentioned. Little did I then dream that I should ever see this man."

Sixteen years later this early respect for the Americans acquired by Cobbett through his father was to take him as an emigrant to the United States after his first unsuccessful conflict with the forces of corruption in British public life. Though, as we shall see, the events of his early manhood seem at first sight to belie the conclusion, Cobbett's democratic principles, acquired in youth, remained deeply implanted. For some time, circumstances caused them to be overlaid by contrary opinions and prejudices; but they remained in his mind, and reasserted themselves as soon as his conditions again favoured their growth. And, political opinions apart, one democratic quality Cobbett certainly acquired in childhood. "If my father had any fault it was not being submissive enough, and, I am much afraid, my acquaintance have but too often discovered the same fault in his son."

[1] 1776.

Perhaps it was this spirit of independence, reinforced by an insatiable thirst for knowledge and adventure, that made Cobbett, happy as he was, soon dissatisfied with the narrow room of his father's farm. He loved "the occupations and sports of a country boy—fairs, cricket-matches, and hare-hunts." But his anecdotes of adolescence are largely accounts of attempted escapes into a wider world. We have seen how he ran away to Kew, showing early his way of following his bent without thought of the consequences. This escapade was followed a few years later by another. He was nineteen years old when, in the autumn of 1782, he went on a visit to a relative who lived near Portsmouth.

"From the top of Portsdown, I, for the first time, beheld the sea, and no sooner did I behold it, than I wished to be a sailor. I could never account for this sudden impulse, nor can I now. Almost all English boys feel the same inclination: it would seem that, like young ducks, instinct leads them to rush on the bosom of the water. But it was not the sea alone that I saw: the Grand Fleet was riding at anchor at Spithead. I had heard of the wooden walls of old England: I had formed my ideas of a ship, and of a fleet; but, what I now beheld so far surpassed what I had ever been able to form a conception of, that I stood lost between astonishment and admiration. I had heard talk of the glorious deeds of our admirals and sailors, of the defeat of the Spanish Armada, and of all those memorable combats, that good and true Englishmen never fail to relate to their children about a hundred times a year. . . . The sight of the fleet brought all these into my mind, in confused order, it is true, but with irresistible force. My heart was inflated with national pride. The sailors were my countrymen, the fleet belonged to my country, and surely I had my part in it, and in all its honours: yet these honours I had not earned; I took to myself a sort of reproach, for possessing what I had no right to, and resolved to have a just claim by sharing in the hardships and dangers."

In brief, Cobbett made up his mind to be a sailor. He reached his uncle's house late that night, after thirty miles of walking. Nevertheless, "I slept not a moment. It was no sooner daylight than I arose and walked down towards the old castle on the beach of Spithead. For a sixpence given to an invalid, I got permission to go upon the battlements: here I had a closer view of the fleet, and at every look my

impatience to be on board increased. In short, I went from the castle to Portsmouth, got into a boat, and was in a few moments on board the *Pegasus* man of war."

But Cobbett was not destined to become a sailor. The captain of the *Pegasus* misunderstood the motives of the intending recruit. "He represented to me the toils I must undergo, and the punishment that the least disobedience or neglect would subject me to. He persuaded me to return home, and I remember he concluded his advice with telling me that it was better to be led to church in a halter than to be tied to the gangway, or, as the sailors call it, married to *Miss Roper*. From the conclusion of this wholesome counsel, I perceived that the captain thought I had eloped on account of a bastard. I blushed, and that confirmed him in his opinion. . . . I in vain attempted to convince Captain Berkley, that choice alone had led me to the sea: he sent me on shore, and I at last quitted Portsmouth; but not before I had applied to the Port-Admiral, Evans, to get my name enrolled among those who were destined for the service. My request was refused, and I happily escaped, sorely against my will, from the most toilsome and perilous profession in the world."

"I returned once more to the plough," Cobbett comments on this adventure, "but I was spoiled for a farmer. I had, before my Portsmouth adventure, never known any other ambition than that of surpassing my brothers in the different labours of the field; but it was quite otherwise now: I sighed for a sight of the world; the little island of Britain seemed too small a compass for me. The things in which I had taken the most delight were neglected; the singing of the birds grew insipid, and even the heart-cheering cry of the hounds, after which I formerly used to fly from my work, bound o'er the fields, and dash through the bracken and coppices, was heard with the most torpid indifference. Still, however, I remained at home till the following spring, when I quitted it, perhaps for ever."

Hitherto, his adventures had been but episodes, with no direct results on his career. We come now to an adventure, equally illustrative of his character, and of vastly greater consequence, since it severed him permanently from his family and friends, and launched him on the great world to fend thereafter for himself. It is characteristic of the man that he set out on this great adventure without five minutes'

premeditation, following once more an immediate impulse with no thought for the future.

It fell out thus. On May 6th, 1783, William Cobbett, "like Don Quixote, sallied forth to seek adventures." "I was dressed in my holiday clothes, in order to accompany two or three lasses to Guildford Fair. They were to assemble at a house about three miles from my home, where I was to attend them; but, unfortunately for me, I had to cross the London turnpike road. The stage-coach had just turned the summit of a hill, and was rattling down towards me at a merry rate. The notion of going to London never entered my mind till this very moment, yet the step was completely determined on before the coach came to the spot where I stood. Up I got, and was in London about nine o'clock in the evening.

"It was by mere accident that I had money enough to defray the expenses of this day. Being rigged out for the fair, I had three or four crown and half-crown pieces (which most certainly I did not intend to spend), besides a few shillings and halfpence. This, my little all, which I had been years in amassing, melted away, like snow before the sun, when touched by the fingers of the innkeepers and their waiters. In short, when I arrived at Ludgate Hill, and had paid my fare, I had but about half a crown in my pocket."

Money never stayed long in Cobbett's pocket at any time of his life—he had too many uses for it. But fortune was with him. "By a commencement of that good luck, which has hitherto attended me through all the situations in which fortune has placed me, I was preserved from ruin. A gentleman, who was one of the passengers in the stage, fell into conversation with me at dinner, and he soon learnt that I was going, I knew not whither, nor for what. This gentleman was a hop-merchant in the borough of Southwark, and, upon closer inquiry, it appeared that he had often dealt with my father at Wey-Hill. He knew the danger I was in; he was himself a father, and he felt for my parents. His house became my home; he wrote to my father and endeavoured to prevail on me to obey his orders, which were to return immediately home. I am ashamed to say that I was disobedient. It was the first time I had ever been so, and I have repented of it from that moment to this. Willingly would I have returned, but pride would not suffer me to do it. I feared

the scoffs of my acquaintances more than the real evils that threatened me."

The hop-merchant, finding that Cobbett would not return home, was at a loss what to do with him. The only course was to find him employment. "He was preparing an advertisement for the newspaper when an acquaintance of his, an attorney, called to see him. He related my adventure to this gentleman, whose name was Holland, and who, happening to want an understrapping quill-driver, did me the honour to take me into his service, and the next day saw me perched upon a great high stool, in an obscure chamber in Gray's Inn, endeavouring to decipher the crabbed draughts of my employer."

Cobbett thus found himself fairly embarked on a way of life for which he was utterly unsuited. "No part of my life has been totally unattended with pleasure, except the eight or nine months I passed in Gray's Inn. The office (for so the dungeon where I wrote was called) was so dark that, on cloudy days, we were obliged to burn candle. I worked like a galley-slave from five in the morning till eight or nine at night, and sometimes all night long. How many quarrels have I assisted to foment and perpetuate between those poor innocent fellows, John Doe and Richard Roe! How many times (God forgive me!) have I set them to assault each other with guns, swords, staves, and pitchforks, and then brought them to answer for their misdeeds before our Sovereign Lord the King seated in his Court of Westminster! When I think of the *saids* and *soforths*, and the counts of tautology that I scribbled over; when I think of those sheets of seventy-two words, and those lines two inches apart, my brain turns. Gracious heaven! if I am doomed to be wretched bury me beneath Iceland snows and let me feed on blubber; stretch me under the burning line, and deny me thy propitious dews; nay, if it be thy will, suffocate me with the infected and pestilential air of a democratic club-room; but save me from the desk of an attorney!"

Cobbett was a countrymen, to whom the close confinement of a London office was poison. He was, moreover, no clerk. "I could write a good plain hand, but I could not read the pot-hooks and hangers of Mr. Holland. He was a month in learning me to copy without almost continual assistance, and even then I was of but little use to him; for, besides that I wrote at a snail's pace, my want of knowledge in

orthography gave him infinite trouble: so that, for the first two months, I was a dead weight upon his hands. Time, however, rendered me useful; and Mr. Holland was pleased to tell me that he was very well satisfied with me, just at the very moment when I began to grow extremely dissatisfied with him."

To the confinement and the utterly uncongenial work was added a complete lack of companionship. Cobbett knew no one in London, and his occupation gave him no chance of making friends. "Mr. Holland was but little in the chambers himself. He always went out to dinner, while I was left to be provided for by the *laundress*, as he called her. Those gentlemen of the law, who have resided in the Inns of Court in London, know very well what a *laundress* means. Ours was, I believe, the oldest and ugliest of the sisterhood. She had age and experience enough to be Lady Abbess of all the nuns in all the convents of Irish-Town. It would be wronging the witch of Endor to compare her to this hag, who was the only creature who deigned to enter into conversation with me. All except the name, I was in prison, and this weird sister was my keeper. Our chambers were, to me, what the subterraneous cavern was to Gil Blas: his description of the Dame Leonarda exactly suited my laundress; nor were the professions, or rather the practice, of our masters altogether dissimilar."

No wonder Cobbett was in a mood to try any way of escape from such a life! Not for this had he run from home, and come to London in search of adventure. "I never quitted this gloomy recess except on Sundays, when I usually took a walk to St. James's Park, to feast my eyes with the sight of the trees, the grass, and the water. In one of these walks I happened to cast my eye on an advertisement, inviting all loyal young men, who had a mind to gain riches and glory, to repair to a certain rendezvous, where they might enter into His Majesty's Marine Service, and have the peculiar happiness and honour of being enrolled in the Chatham Division. I was not ignorant enough to be the dupe of this morsel of military bombast; but a change was what I wanted: besides, I knew that marines went to sea, and my desire to be on that element had rather increased than diminished by my being penned up in London. In short, I resolved to join this glorious corps, and, to avoid all possibility of being discovered by my friends, I went down to Chatham and enlisted,

into the marines as I thought, but the next morning I found myself before a captain of a marching regiment. There was no retreating: I had taken a shilling to drink His Majesty's health, and his further bounty was ready for my reception.

"When I told the captain (who was an Irishman, and who has since been an excellent friend to me), that I thought myself engaged in the marines: 'By Jasus! my lad,' said he, 'and you have had a narrow escape.' He told me that the regiment into which I had been so happy as to enlist was one of the oldest and boldest in the whole army, and that it was at that moment serving in that fine, flourishing, and plentiful country, Nova Scotia. He dwelt long on the beauties and riches of this terrestrial paradise, and dismissed me, perfectly enchanted with the prospect of a voyage thither."

Private William Cobbett was bound for the New World.

. . . . . .

So, mainly in Cobbett's own words, we have brought the story of his life up to the time when, at the age of twenty-one, he joined the army. In later years he loved to look back to the days of his youth. We have seen him in this chapter mainly as he remembered himself twelve years later, when he wrote down the story of his life for the discomfiture of his American opponents. Later, he made many allusions to his youth in *The Political Register*, and in his books, especially *Advice to Young Men*. He was one of the most autobiographical of writers, constantly using memories drawn from his own past to point a moral or illustrate a political argument. He had, besides a retentive memory, a keen sense of the significant, and there is hardly an anecdote told by him in later life that does not throw up plainly some aspect or other of the growth of his character. His biographers are saved the search for significance: he has it all ready for them. They have, for his early years, but to use his own words to show what manner of boy he was, and how he grew up to manhood.

He dwelt always much on himself, and he has often been called an egotist. That is true enough; but his egotism was not of an introspective sort. He had a way, almost like Walt Whitman's, of identifying himself with his countrymen, and of imagining each deed or suffering, all praise or blame, accorded to him, as given him in a sort of representative capacity.

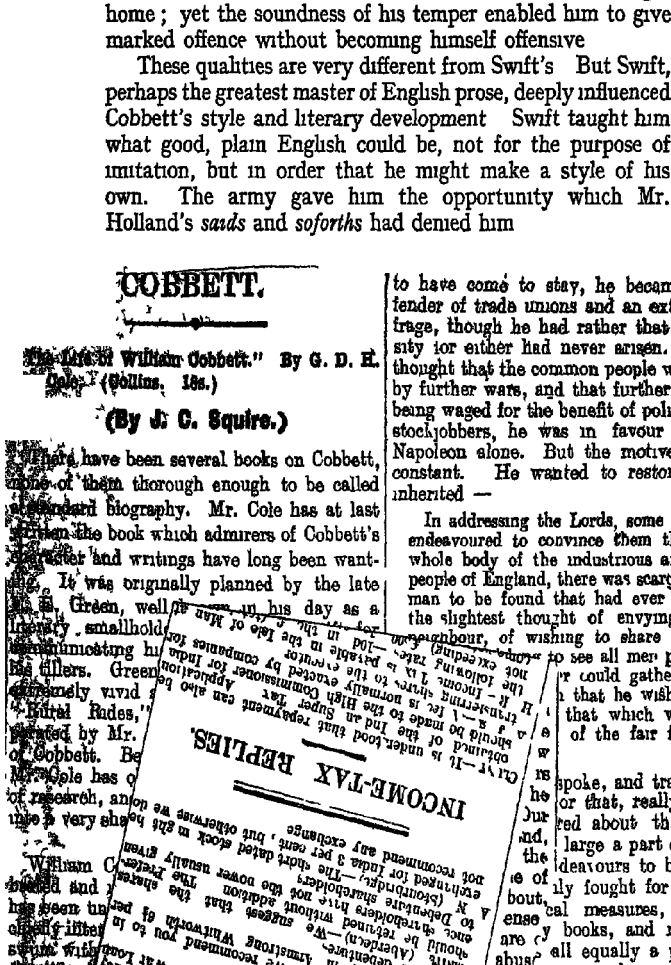
" Oneself I sing, a simple separate Person,
Yet utter the word Democratic, the word En Masse."

As Whitman felt that he was Young America, Cobbett felt that he was Old England. He knew himself for a person both important and attractive to his fellow-countrymen; he realised that his power depended even more on his personality than on his ideas. His aim was to be present among his readers as vividly by the written word as in the flesh: his anecdotes and his egotism were his way of making himself personally known to the many thousands he could not hope to reach by direct contact. He could talk freely of himself because he had the excellent excuse of talking well, as we have seen him talking in *The Life and Adventures of Peter Porcupine*. He was seldom dull, on any subject: never, when his subject was himself.

We have seen him, in these early adventures, laying the foundations of the character which was his throughout life. He has told of his ancestors, " from whom, if I derive no honour, I derive no shame,"—of his father, who helped to implant in him both his love of study, and those amazing habits of industry which enabled him to crowd a dozen lives into the space of one. We have seen his bent for adventure, his way of following an adventurous impulse without thought of ulterior consequences. He formed his opinions as he determined his actions, by swift impulses following hard upon the impact of some external event or visual impression. His attraction to literature, to the world of books, was the result of that quick, fortunate impulse that made him spend his last threepence on *A Tale of a Tub*. His style is not like Swift's, though critics have often looked for a resemblance. He has not Swift's polish or rhythm or careful balance or keen point of phrasing. He is direct, like Swift, with a mastery of plain speaking in pure English; but there the resemblance ends. Cobbett does not marshal his periods: he lets his words flow on from point to point, crashing into thunders of pointed phrase and stinging sprays of abuse as he meets a rock in his passage. He does not always find the *mot juste*, or the sentence telling by its exactness. But his readers had no excuse for not knowing exactly what he meant, and he had an unrivalled power of pointing his discourse with an apt allusion, a nickname from which there was no escape, or a lively personal reference. He was not detached enough to be a satirist;

but as a controversialist he has few rivals. His blows got home; yet the soundness of his temper enabled him to give marked offence without becoming himself offensive

These qualities are very different from Swift's But Swift, perhaps the greatest master of English prose, deeply influenced Cobbett's style and literary development Swift taught him what good, plain English could be, not for the purpose of imitation, but in order that he might make a style of his own. The army gave him the opportunity which Mr. Holland's *sauds* and *soforths* had denied him



COBBETT.

"The Life of William Cobbett." By G. D. H. Cole. (Collins. 18s.)

(By J. C. Squire.)

There have been several books on Cobbett, some of them thorough enough to be called standard biography. Mr. Cole has at last written the book which admirers of Cobbett's character and writings have long been wanting.

It was originally planned by the late John R. Green, well in his day as a literary . smallhold[illegible] incommoding h[illegible] has fillers. Green[illegible] extremely vivid [illegible] Rural Rades," [illegible] revised by Mr. [illegible] of Cobbett. Be[illegible] Mr. Cole has c[illegible] of research, an[illegible] this a very sha[illegible]

William C[illegible] dreaded and [illegible] has seem[illegible] chiefly [illegible] this title. [illegible] a portrai[illegible] was the [illegible] journalis[illegible] particul[illegible] as it [illegible] Series [illegible]

INCOME-TAX REPLIES.

to have come to stay, he became the d[illegible] tender of trade unions and an extended su[illegible] frage, though he had rather that the nece[illegible] sity for either had never arisen. When h[illegible] thought that the common people would suff[illegible] by further wars, and that further wars we[illegible] being waged for the benefit of politicians an[illegible] stockjobbers, he was in favour of lettin[illegible] Napoleon alone. But the motive remains constant. He wanted to restore the di[illegible] inherited —

> In addressing the Lords, some time ago, [illegible] endeavoured to convince them that, in t[illegible] whole body of the industrious and worki[illegible] people of England, there was scarcely a sing[illegible] man to be found that had ever entertain[illegible] the slightest thought of envying his rich[illegible] neighbour, of wishing to share in his pr[illegible]

[illegible] to see all men pulled do[illegible] [illegible]r could gather from o[illegible] [illegible]h that he wished for a[illegible] [illegible] that which would lea[illegible] [illegible] of the fair fruit of l[illegible]

[illegible]spoke, and travelled s[illegible] [illegible]or that, really, he w[illegible] [illegible]red about the comm[illegible] [illegible] large a part of his E[illegible] [illegible]deavours to better th[illegible] [illegible]ly fought for or agai[illegible] [illegible]cal measures, but wr[illegible] [illegible]y books, and manuals [illegible] all equally a part of [illegible] an enclosure, to w[illegible] [illegible]king of tea, or to ad[illegible] [illegible], before choosing wives, [illegible] the girls washed behind [illegible]s great sorrow that [illegible]racy, instead of realising [illegible] much that they had cared [illegible]rce with the new plutocr[illegible] [illegible]ng in the wilderness did [illegible]nt him, and much that, in

CHAPTER III

LIFE IN THE ARMY

COBBETT was twenty-one when he joined the army. For a year, he remained at Chatham at his regimental depot: then for more than six years he served abroad, practically the whole of the time in New Brunswick. He was promoted corporal before leaving England, and within a year of his arrival in New Brunswick he became sergeant-major of his regiment, "over the heads of fifty sergeants." In 1791, immediately after his regiment's return to England, he obtained his discharge. These seven years, to be described in this chapter, brought him to full and developed manhood. Cobbett's life in the army played a very great part in the development of his character.

At first he lived hard by compulsion; later, by choice. It was not in his nature to do things by halves, or to be content till he had got the last ounce of effort out of mind and body alike. The army of his day was a hard and a dangerous school, dangerous not only to life and limb, but to character and capacity. Food was abominable and utterly insufficient, a large part of the official rations being corruptly held back from the men. Pay was low, and the majority of the men who joined were of a poor type. For most of his officers Cobbett felt only contempt. They did not understand their jobs, and they made scant attempt to do them properly. Having bought or been given their commissions for social reasons, they regarded the service as affording the opportunity for a good time. They drank and gambled, and the rank and file followed their example, and drank and gambled too. This at least is the impression which Cobbett records. It is doubtless an overstatement; but other contemporary pictures show that it contains a large element of truth. Wellington's own remarks about his soldiers were uniformly uncomplimentary, save when he spoke of their fighting qualities.

Life at the Chatham military depot was not pleasant, but it allowed Cobbett a great deal of time to himself. And of

this time he made very excellent use. He remained there more than a year, learning his military duties, and awaiting the call to join his regiment in Nova Scotia. Before the year was out, he was raised to the rank of corporal—"a rank which, however contemptible it may appear in some people's eyes, brought me in a clear twopence *per diem*, and put a very clever worsted knot upon my shoulder too."[1] His experience as a clerk caused him to be appointed copyist to Colonel Debieg, the commandant of the garrison, and his work in this capacity stimulated him to further exertions in the task he had already set out to accomplish—the acquiring of a complete mastery of English grammar and composition. His time in Holland's office had already taught him the limitations of his knowledge, and a friend made during his stay in London had adjured him, above all things, to master thoroughly his own language. "Without that knowledge," wrote this friend,[2] "you will be laughed at by blockheads: with it, you may laugh at thousands who think themselves learned men." Cobbett set out, then, to learn grammar—by which he meant to learn to write correctly and well. A style of writing such as his cannot be learnt: it is a gift. But it was essential to the development of his ability to write at all that he should learn the rules, and find out how to avoid the elementary mistakes from which the ordinary educated man is guarded by his early training. Cobbett had almost no schooldays: he had to find out everything for himself.

So, with an infinity of labour and an excess of reverence born of the lack of early education, he set out to teach himself "grammar." Lowth's *Grammar* was his textbook. He "wrote the whole grammar out two or three times"; he got it by heart, repeated it every morning and every evening, and, when on guard, imposed on himself the duty of saying it all over once every time he was posted sentinel. The work, he tells us, taught him not only to write correctly, but also to remember. It trained his memory to the prodigious feats which he accomplished later. Cobbett certainly spared no pains.

For the manner of his learning, I cannot better his own account:—

"I learned grammar when I was a private soldier on the pay of sixpence a day. The edge of my berth, or that of the

[1] *Life and Adventures of Peter Porcupine*, p. 46.

[2] Benjamin Garlike. See *P.R.*, December 6th, 1817.

guard-bed, was my seat to study in; my knapsack was my bookcase; a bit of board lying on my lap was my writing-table; and the task did not demand anything like a year of my life. I had no money to purchase candle or oil; in winter time it was rarely that I could get any evening-light but that of *the fire*, and only my *turn* even of that. And if I, under such circumstances, and without parent or friend to advise or encourage me, accomplished this undertaking, what excuse can there be for *any youth*, however poor, however pressed with business, or however circumstanced as to room or other conveniences? To buy a pen or a sheet of paper I was compelled to forego some portion of food, though in a state of half-starvation! I had no moment of time that I could call my own; and I had to read and to write amidst the talking, laughing, singing, whistling, and brawling of at least half a score of the most thoughtless of men, and that, too, in the hours of their freedom from all control. Think not lightly of the *farthing* that I had to give, now and then, for ink, pen, or paper! That farthing was, alas! a *great sum* to me! I was as tall as I am now; I had great health and great exercise. The whole of the money, not expended for us at market, was *twopence* a week for each man. I remember, and well I may! that, upon one occasion, I, after all absolutely necessary expenses had, on a Friday, made shift to have a halfpenny in reserve, which I had destined for the purchase of a *red herring* in the morning; but, when I pulled off my clothes at night, so hungry then as to be hardly able to endure life, I found that I had *lost my halfpenny*! I buried my head under the miserable sheet and rug, and cried like a child."[1]

Cobbett learned in a hard school. Not content with his labours at the grammar, he joined a circulating library at Brompton—this probably after his promotion to be corporal—and read more than once most of the books it contained. "The library was not very considerable, it is true, nor in my reading was I directed by any degree of taste or choice. Novels, plays, history, poetry, all were read, and nearly with equal avidity."[2] The hatred of works of *romance*, which he expressed in later life, had not yet come upon him.

"Such a course of reading," he wrote later, "could be attended with but little profit: it was skimming over the

[1] *Advice to Young Men*, par. 44. [2] *Life and Adventures*, p. 44.

surface of everything." [1] There he was surely wrong: this wander-year of reading probably helped, fully as much as the grammar, to give him his mastery of language and also to broaden his ideas. His writings show abundant traces of his later memories of the despised "plays and romances" which he read at Chatham. He professed to despise Shakespeare, but he often used his phrases to advantage.

With all his work, Cobbett found time to amuse himself. He fell in love, he tells us, with the pretty daughter of the Brompton librarian, and, years afterwards, when he revisited Chatham, one of his liveliest memories was of the pretty girls he had known there in his "cap-and-feather days." Cobbett was not the solemn person his own accounts of his assiduity sometimes suggest. He had a keen sense of enjoyment, and liked a "bit of fun" as much as any one.

After his promotion, Cobbett grew impatient to leave Chatham and see the world. At length, in the spring of 1785, his wish was granted, and Corporal Cobbett sailed, with a detachment from the depot, to join his regiment in America. He had "a short and pleasant voyage," and duly arrived at Halifax, in Nova Scotia, where his regiment then was. "Nova Scotia," he wrote later, "had no other charm for me than that of novelty." It served only to introduce him to "bogs, rocks, and stumps, mosquitoes and bull-frogs," and to the curious society produced there by the "Yankee Loyalist" immigration which had followed the American Revolution. "Thousands," he writes, "of captains and colonels without soldiers, and of 'squires without stockings or shoes. In England I had never thought of approaching a 'squire without a most respectful bow; but, in this new world, though I was but a corporal, I often ordered a 'squire to bring me a glass of grog, and even to take care of my knapsack." [2]

In Nova Scotia, however, Cobbett remained only a few weeks, at the end of which his regiment was ordered to St. John's, in New Brunswick, where, or at Fredericton, in the same province, he remained continuously till his return to England in 1791. This was a great improvement: he liked his new quarters, and speedily made himself thoroughly at home.

Cobbett's account of his life in New Brunswick, scattered through many references in *The Political Register*, *Advice*

[1] *Life and Adventures*, p. 44. [2] *Ibid.*, p. 46.

to Young Men, and other writings, is extraordinarily characteristic. It is marked by all his egotism and assertiveness: it reads on occasion like the vainest boasting: it lends itself readily to caricature; and yet most of it is indubitably true. It is, indeed, hardly to be supposed, though at times he would have it so, that Cobbett was the only white sheep in a bad, black regiment; and accounts which he gives of some of his comrades refute the idea. But it is true that within a year he rose, above many senior to him in the service, to be regimental sergeant-major, and that most of the business administration of the regiment, and not a little else, passed into his competent and willing hands. He was a horse for work. Absolute punctuality in the performance of his duties somehow left him abundant time for all the other things he set out to do. "I was *always ready*," he writes; ". . . never did any man, or anything, wait one moment for me." My custom was this: to get up in summer at daylight, and in winter at four o'clock; shave, dress, even to the putting on of my sword-belt over my shoulder, and having my sword lying on the table before me ready to hang by my side. Then I ate a bit of cheese, or pork and bread. Then I prepared my report, which was fitted up as fast as the companies brought me in the materials. After this I had an hour or two to read, before the time came for any duty out of doors. . . ."[1]

According to his own account—and there is no reason to doubt its substantial accuracy—Cobbett did nearly every one else's work as well as his own. The adjutant, on whose ignorance of grammar Cobbett was fond of dwelling, gradually left matters wholly to him, and the writing of all manner of regimental reports fell into his hands.

"When I came to my regiment, I soon found the use of my knowledge of grammar, of which I found all my *superiors* wholly ignorant. I was first Clerk to the Regiment. The accounts and letters of the Paymaster went through my hands; or, rather, I was the maker of them. All the Returns, Reports, and other official papers were of my drawing up. Then I became the Sergeant-Major to the Regiment, which brought me in close contact, at every hour, with the whole of the *Epaulet* gentry, whose profound and surprising ignorance I discovered in a twinkling. But, I had a very delicate part to act with these gentry; for, while I despised them for their gross ignorance and their vanity, and hated them for

[1] *Advice to Young Men*, par. 39.

their drunkenness and rapacity, I was fully sensible of *their power*, and I knew also the envy, which my sudden rise over the heads of so many old serjeants had created. My path was full of rocks and pit-falls; and, as I never disguised my dislikes or restrained my tongue, I should have been broken and flogged for fifty different offences, given to my supreme jack-asses, had they not been kept in awe by my inflexible sobriety, by the consciousness of their inferiority to me, and by the real and almost indispensable necessity of the use of my talents. First I had, by my skill and by my everlasting vigilance, eased them all of the trouble of even *thinking* about their duty; and this made me their master, a situation in which, however, I acted with so much prudence, that it was impossible for them, with any show of justice, to find fault. They, in fact, resigned all the discipline of the Regiment to me, and I very freely left them to swagger about, and to get roaring drunk out of the 'profits of their pillage,' though I was, at the same time, making preparations for bringing them to justice for that pillage, in which I was finally defeated by the protection which they received at home." [1]

Cobbett's contempt for his officers was not based wholly on intellectual grounds; but he had enough against them on this score. The administrator of a regiment is the adjutant. Cobbett describes his adjutant as "a keen fellow, but wholly illiterate." "The Orders, which he wrote, most cruelly murdered our mother tongue. But, in his absence, or during a severe drunken fit, it fell to my lot to write Orders. As we both wrote in the same book, he used to look at these. He saw *commas*, *semi-colons*, *colons*, *full points*, and *paragraphs*. The questions he used to put to me, in an obscure sort of way, in order to know *why* I made these divisions, and yet, at the same time, his attempts to disguise his object, have made me laugh a thousand times. . . . He at last fell upon this device: he made me *write*, while he pretended to *dictate*! Imagine to yourself me sitting, pen in hand, to put upon paper the precious offspring of the mind of this stupid curmudgeon! But, here, a greater difficulty than any former arose. He that could not *write* good grammar, could not, of course, *dictate* good grammar. Out would come some gross error, such as I was ashamed to see in my handwriting. I would stop, suggest another arrangement; but this I was, at first, obliged to do in a very indirect and delicate manner.

[1] *P.R.*, December 6th, 1817.

I dared not let him perceive that I saw, or suspected his ignorance; and, though we made sad work of it, we got along without any very sanguinary assaults upon mere grammar. But, this course could not continue long; and he put an end to it in this way: he used to tell me *his story*, and leave me to put it upon paper, and thus we continued to the end of our connection." [1]

Probably the adjutant was as much amused at Cobbett's pedantry as Cobbett at his blunders. But he did not scruple to employ his sergeant-major's talents to the full. A body of Commissioners were sent out from England to examine the state of Nova Scotia and New Brunswick. The regiment, then at Fredericton, entertained the Commissioners to dinner, and, by Cobbett's account, they all got roaring drunk together. The illiterate adjutant, under this influence, offered to help the Commissioners, who had been more intent on enjoying themselves than on studying the country, by writing their report for them. They gladly agreed, and the adjutant came diplomatically to turn the job over to Cobbett. As this was no part of his duties, Cobbett at first affected not to understand; but, cajoled by the promise of a period of leave to go off up-country " to see an old farmer and his family, and to shoot wild pigeons," he at length took the job in hand. The report—a large one, full of statistical matter—was speedily completed from the papers of the Commission: the adjutant copied it out, and handed it to the Commissioners as his own; " and, having shown it, and had it highly applauded, 'Well, then,' said he, 'here, Sergeant-Major, *go and make a fair copy*.' This was the most shameless thing that I ever witnessed." [2]

Cobbett, to save his superior's face and get his pigeon-shooting secure, said, when the Governor asked him who had written the report, that it was the adjutant's. But the story came out, and years later the Duke of Kent, who had come across it when he was Commander in New Brunswick, carried it to England, and complimented Cobbett personally on his work. " I remember," writes Cobbett, " that I was myself very much pleased with it, and that this pleasure, together with the party of pigeon-shooting, made up the whole of the reward that I either received, expected, or wished for." [3]

It would be possible to collect from Cobbett's writings many good stories of his army experiences. But, unless

[1] *P.R.*, December 6th, 1817. [2] *Ibid.* [3] *Ibid.*

these have some important bearing on his career, or throw a direct light on the manner of man he was, the reader must be left to search them out for himself. We have seen how low was his opinion of most of his officers, partly on intellectual grounds, but at least as much on account of definite corruption. He found, for example, that the Quartermaster, who had the issuing of the men's provision to them, *kept about a fourth part of it to himself.* "This, the old sergeants told me, had been the case *for many years*; and they were quite astonished and terrified at the idea of my complaining of it. This I did, however; but the reception I met with convinced me, that I must never make another complaint till I got safe to England, and safe out of the reach of that most curious of courts, a *Court-Martial.*"

But Cobbett was not content to let matters rest. Though he was helpless for the time, he set to work deliberately to collect materials for an exposure of the corruption which prevailed in the regiment. With the aid of a Corporal Bestland, he copied out large sections from the regimental accounts, which he himself had to keep, giving clear proof of corrupt practices on the part of many of the officers. The subsequent history of this incident, which belongs to a time after Cobbett's return to England, will be found in the next chapter.

The reader may be pardoned if he concludes at this point that Cobbett cannot have been very popular in his regiment, especially with the officers whom he denounces. As we have seen, he attributed his immunity from attack to the fact that those in power were "kept in awe by my inflexible sobriety, impartiality, and integrity, by the consciousness of their inferiority to me, and by the real and almost indispensable necessity for the use of my talents." In other words, it was not easy to find a handle against him, and his capacity and willingness to do a dozen men's work made him exceedingly useful. This doubtless accounts in large measure for the power he was allowed to wield; but these characteristics would hardly by themselves have endeared him either to his officers or to his fellows in the non-commissioned ranks. The fact that he was offered a commission towards the end of his service, and that he was clearly liked by some of his officers and popular among the men, calls for further explanation. Indeed, Cobbett's own accounts, always fragmentary and designed to illustrate a particular point, sometimes convey a misleading impression. It is clear from many

passages in which he recalls his life in New Brunswick that he was by no means only a person of unbending rectitude, never wasting a moment and attending always sternly to his own and other people's duty. He knew how to enjoy himself as well.

We have already seen how he earned a pigeon-shooting holiday by his indirect services to His Majesty's trusted and well-beloved Commissioners. We have abundant testimony elsewhere to the pleasure he took in the country of New Brunswick. We hear much from him of rambles and journeys up country, usually with a companion, of his visits to farmers, of his delight in the abundant woodlands, of his love of the natural beauty of a land where were spots which "far surpass in natural beauty any other that my eyes ever beheld." His account of the scenery of New Brunswick, in *Advice to Young Men*, is one of the very best pieces of descriptive writing he ever made.[1] He made friends both among the people of the country, and among his own comrades. Of some of the latter he spoke in after years in the warmest terms of affection. Of one, John Fletcher, a Staffordshire man, from Walsall, he wrote: "The most witty man I ever knew was a private soldier. He was not only the most witty, but *far* the most witty. I have heard from that man more bright thoughts of a witty character, than I ever heard from all other men. . . . No coarse jokes, no puns, no conundrums, no made-up jests, nothing of the *college* kind; but real, sterling, sprightly wit." [2] And of another, endeared to him by old comradeship, he spoke as follows:—

"There was one of our own Sergeants, whose name was Smaller, and who was a Yorkshireman. . . . He was about my own age; he was promoted as soon as he could write and read; and well he deserved it, for he was more fit to command a Regiment than any Colonel or Major that I ever saw. He was strong in body, but still stronger in mind. He had capacity to dive into all subjects. Clean in his person, an early riser, punctual in all his duties, sober, good-tempered, honest, brave, and generous to the last degree." [3]

With this man Cobbett had an adventure. "He was once with me in the dreary woods, amongst the melting snows, when I was exhausted at night-fall, and fell down, unable to go farther, just as a torrent of rain began to pour upon us.

[1] *Advice to Young Men*, par. 142. [2] *P.R.*, December 6th, 1817.
[3] *Ibid.*

Having first torn off his shirt and rent it in the vain hope of kindling fire by the help of his pistol, he took me upon his back, carried me five miles to the first dwelling of human beings, and at the end of his journey, having previously pulled off his coat and thrown it away, he had neither shoe nor stocking, nor gaiter left; his feet and his legs were cut to pieces, and covered with blood; and the moment he had put me down and saw that I was still alive, he bursted into a a flood of tears that probably saved his own life; which however, was then saved only to be lost in Holland, under the Duke of York." [1]

"How often," Cobbett comments, "has my blood boiled with indignation at seeing this fine, this gallant, this honest, true-hearted and intelligent young man, standing with his hand to his hat before some worthless and stupid sot of an officer, whom nature seemed to have designed to black his shoes. And, does not the English Army contain many a Smaller *now*?" [2]

Cobbett's life, then, was by no means one hard grind of duty. He found pleasure, and he found friendship. Nay, more, he found love. His sojourn in New Brunswick brought him two love-affairs, and he tells both the characteristic stories in *Advice to Young Men*. Ann Reid, who became his wife, he met first in New Brunswick under circumstances not conventionally romantic.

"When I first saw my wife she was *thirteen years old*, and I was within about a month of *twenty-one*.[3] She was the daughter of a Sergeant of Artillery, and I was the Sergeant-Major of a regiment of Foot, both stationed in forts near the city of St. John, in the province of New Brunswick. I sat in the same room with her for about an hour, in the company of others, and I made up my mind that she was the very girl for me. That I thought her beautiful was certain; for that I had always said should be an indispensable qualification; but I saw in her what I deemed marks of that sobriety of *conduct* of which I have said so much, and which has been by far the greatest blessing of my life. It was now dead of winter, and, of course, the snow several feet deep on the ground, and the weather piercing cold. It was my habit, when I had done my morning's writing, to go out at break of day to take a walk on a hill at the foot of which our barracks lay. In about three mornings after I had first

[1] *P.R.*, December 6th, 1817. [2] *Ibid.* [3] Really twenty-four.

seen her, I had, by an invitation to breakfast with me, got up two young men to join me in my walk; and our road lay by the house of her father and mother. It was hardly light, but she was out in the snow, scrubbing out a washing-tub. 'That's the girl for me,' said I, when we had got out of her hearing." [1]

Cobbett made up his mind at once. "From the day that I first spoke to her, I never had a thought of her ever being the wife of any other man, more than I had the thought of her being transformed into a chest of drawers; and I formed my resolution at once, to marry her as soon as we could get permission, and to get out of the army as soon as I could. So that this matter was at once settled as firmly as if written in the book of fate." [2]

They became engaged; but six months later the two regiments were moved apart, and some time after the artillery were sent back to England, and Ann with them. Cobbett's regiment, on the other hand, was kept overseas for two years beyond its time; and the interval was all but fatal to his engagement. On one of his expeditions, he became lost, and at length found refuge in the house of one of those "Yankee Loyalists" who had settled in New Brunswick. He was hospitably received, and his host had a daughter. And now Cobbett was led, as he explains, into "the only *serious sin* I ever committed against the female sex.

"There was *another member* of the family, aged nineteen, who (dressed according to the neat and simple fashion of New England, whence she had come with her parents five or six years before), had her long light-brown hair twisted nicely up, and fastened on the top of her head, in which head were a pair of lively blue eyes, associated with features of which that softness and that sweetness, so characteristic of American girls, were the predominant expressions, the whole being set off by a complexion indicative of glowing health, and forming, figure, movements, and all taken together, an assemblage of beauties far surpassing any that I had ever seen but *once* in my life. That *once* was, too, *two years agone*; and, in such a case and at such an age, two years, two whole years, is a long, long while! It was a space as long as the eleventh part of my then life. Here was the *present* against the *absent*: here was the power of the *eyes* pitted against that of the *memory*; here were all the senses up in arms to subdue the

[1] *Advice to Young Men*, par. 94. [2] *Ibid.*, par. 95.

influence of the thoughts; here was vanity, here was passion, here was the spot of all spots in the world, and here were also the life, and the manners and the habits and the pursuits that I delighted in; here was everything that imagination can conceive, united in a conspiracy against the poor little brunette in England!" [1]

A narrow escape. So it presented itself to Cobbett's mind in later years. Almost he forgot Ann; almost he deceived himself; almost he was "deluded into something very nearly resembling sincere love for a second object, the first still, however, maintaining her ground in the heart." For more than two years he saw his Yankee friends regularly, spending all his spare time with them, undoubtedly, though they knew of his previous engagement, arousing expectations in their minds. Almost, he settled down to be a farmer in New Brunswick, under conditions which might well have tied him for life to that country. Had Cobbett married his Yankee love instead of Ann, there might have been no call to write his life, or a very different life might have been called for. But at length his regiment was recalled to England. His choice had to be made. He said good-bye to his Yankee friends; but not even in old age would he describe the manner of his going. "To describe this parting would be too painful even at this distant day, and with this frost of age upon my head." [2] Somehow, it was done. Cobbett set out for England and for fresh adventures. Immediately on arrival he set about procuring his discharge from the army.

[1] *Advice to Young Men*, par. 146. [2] *Ibid.*, par. 150.

CHAPTER IV

THE SOLDIER'S FRIEND

COBBETT landed at Portsmouth with his regiment in November, 1791. On the 19th of December he was discharged from the army, with an excellent testimonial from his major, Lord Edward Fitzgerald, to the good services he had rendered. He had two immediate objects in view—to find and marry Ann Reid, and to pursue his charges of corruption against those responsible for the affairs of his late regiment. First of all, he sought out his promised wife, finding her in ill circumstances, in domestic service with a family at Woolwich. And thereby hangs a tale. At the time when Ann had left New Brunswick, Cobbett had saved out of his pay and allowances one hundred and fifty guineas. This he had sent to Ann Reid, asking her to keep it for him, or, "if she found her home uncomfortable, to hire a lodging with respectable people; and, at any rate, not to spare the money, by any means, but to buy herself good clothes, and to live without hard work," until he arrived in England. He would get, he said, plenty more before his return. Yet, in the event, after two years' delay beyond the time when he had expected to return, "I found my little girl *a servant of all work* (and hard work it was), at *five pounds a year*, in the house of a Captain Brisac; and, without hardly saying a word about the matter, she put into my hands *the whole of my hundred and fifty guineas unbroken!*"

William Cobbett and Ann Reid were married at Woolwich on the fifth of February, 1792. They "lived happy ever afterwards"; for Cobbett's home life remained, through all his buffetings with fate, cheerful and tranquil. He could carry tranquillity even into Newgate Prison. Though some will think he chose his helpmate in an odd manner, certainly he chose well.

But before his marriage a good many things had occurred. Having secured his discharge, he lost no time before pursuing his charges. On January 14th, having marshalled his material,

he wrote to Sir George Yonge, the Secretary at War, enclosing a petition to the king, and making a series of grave accusations against certain officers of his regiment. His colonel, whom he had intended to charge, died shortly after his return to England. There remained three officers against whom specific accusations were preferred. On January 24th, Cobbett called, by request, at the War Office. He had an interview with Sir George Yonge, and was promised an immediate answer to his communication.

He waited—nothing happened. It was not until February 15th, after he had protested strongly that his scanty means forbade long delay in London, that he got an answer. The men accused were to be tried, but only on a part of the charges, and not, in Cobbett's view, the most material part. The indictments had been so drawn, he held, as to make acquittal easy, and, above all, the trial was to be held, not as he had asked, in London, but at Portsmouth. This was a vital point, because he had urged from the first that in Portsmouth neither he nor his witnesses would be safe from violence, and the witnesses would not dare to tell the truth. After a direct appeal to Pitt, he at length got the trial—a court-martial, it was to be—removed to London.

His troubles, however, were only beginning. Despite his urgency, the War Office would take no steps to secure the regimental books, or prevent tampering with them. His most vital witness, Bestland, suspected of connivance with Cobbett, was refused his discharge. He wrote to the Judge Advocate, refusing to appear at all unless the books were secured and a man he would name was granted his discharge. There was no answer. He got wind from a friend of a plot hatched against him. Men were being brought up to London to swear that he had "drunk destruction to the House of Brunswick." He saw the toils closing round him.

It was never Cobbett's way to run his head against a brick wall, unless he had good reason to believe that the wall would suffer more than he. He resolved, in face of obstacles which he saw to be too great for him, to abandon his attempt to bring the defaulters to justice. He had, moreover, come to realise, since his return to England, that the peculations and corruption he was attacking were not peculiar to his regiment, or to New Brunswick, but were parts of the system under which the army as a whole was conducted. Corruption existed throughout the service, and was generally recognised

and taken for granted. Cobbett's attack therefore necessarily assumed the form, not of bringing three isolated malefactors to justice, but of unmasking a system in which great and powerful personages connived and participated. Such an undertaking was manifestly too great for one young man with neither powerful friends nor resources behind him. Cobbett beat a retreat. When the court-martial was called on March 24th, he did not put in an appearance. It was adjourned for three days; but still the prosecutor could not be found. The case was then taken, and the three prisoners were duly acquitted in the absence of their accuser. It may be that they had done no more than other officers in similar positions habitually did, or than the easy official conscience of their time was prepared to tolerate. It was the age of pensions, sinecures, purchased offices of profit, respectable peculation of public funds justified by the social standing of the peculator. One man could have become a martyr, but he could, without special influence, have done nothing by becoming a martyr to alter the system.

Cobbett was fiercely attacked in his lifetime, and has been strongly criticised since his death, for his action over the abortive court-martial. When he became a Radical leader, the friends of law and order never wearied of dragging up the incident against him. He had brought false charges against his superior officers, and had "funked" appearing in their support. The report of the court-martial was published many years later in pamphlet form, and assiduously circulated by his opponents. The attacks did him no harm. The repressive policy adopted within a year or two by the Government taught men the need for discretion as well as valour; and so many worse charges of corruption were known to be true that the truth of Cobbett's accusations was readily believed. Lovers of heroics may regret that Cobbett ran away: I should have thought him a fool if he had stayed. The reader, doubtless, will make up his own mind for himself.

Sir George Yonge, we have seen, kept Cobbett waiting an unconscionable time on the doorstep of the War Office. Here was an invitation to activity. Not content with preparing his case for the court-martial, and getting married, Cobbett, there is little doubt, entered the lists as a pamphleteer. Early in 1792 appeared a small pamphlet, *The Soldier's Friend*, containing an account of some of the grievances and disabilities of the private soldier, with proposals for redress.

It included a strong attack on army corruption of just the kind with which Cobbett was concerned in the court-martial proceedings.

Cobbett's authorship of this pamphlet has been challenged, and positively denied. It was denied, indeed, by some one who ought to know—Cobbett himself—in 1805; but, in at least two later passages of his writings, he admits the authorship. "The very first thing I ever wrote for the press in my life," he said in 1832, "was a little pamphlet called *The Soldier's Friend*, which was written immediately after I had quitted the army in 1791, or early in 1792."[1] He then goes on to explain the circumstances of its appearance.

Both these statements, the intelligent reader will exclaim, cannot be true. Either Cobbett wrote *The Soldier's Friend*, or he did not. But the matter is not quite so simple as that. How if he wrote only part of it? Or how if several hands worked on the draft, and he put it finally into shape? The latter is most probably what occurred. His proceedings in connection with the court-martial brought him into touch with various friends of the private soldier and enemies of army corruption. With them in some way he wrote the pamphlet, which was issued by a most respectable Whig publisher, Ridgway, after Cobbett had left England. He had nothing to do with the printing or publishing, and he was not the sole author. But it was he who gave the pamphlet its distinctive and effective literary form.

And it was effective. The first edition, indeed, passed with little notice. But the following year it was re-issued in a cheaper form, and had a very large circulation. Radicals and reformers took it up with enthusiasm: it is said—with what justice who knows?—to have been among the inspiring influences of the mutiny at the Nore in 1797. As such, at all events, it was raked up against Cobbett in 1805, after his quarrel with the Government; and it was this accusation that provoked him to a denial of authorship. In fact, without much doubt the pamphlet is mostly his—a radical outburst from a man who was shortly to become the great pamphleteer of the Anti-Jacobins, the arch-Tory, the unmeasured denouncer of *sans-culottism* and all revolutionary principles. Cobbett's first work was in the manner, not of his middle, but of his later, years; truly, in *The Soldier's Friend* coming events cast their shadows far before.

[1] *P.R.*, June 23rd, 1832.

The pamphlet was provoked by a discussion then proceeding in Parliament, where the Government had asked for an increased vote of money in order to raise the soldiers' allowances to three shillings a week. It was pointed out, in the House and in the pamphlet, that in former times the private soldier had actually received this sum, and that it was still legally assured to him under an Act passed each year by Parliament. The practice, however, had developed of the officers withholding and appropriating a growing share of this money, so that the sum actually received by the soldier had fallen to two shillings or one shilling and sixpence. It was now proposed to raise it to the old sum, not by correcting this act of appropriation, but by voting an additional sum of public money. Misappropriation had a way in the eighteenth century of acquiring, not only a vested interest, but a vested right subsequently recognised by Parliament. "It had so happened," said the Secretary at War, "that of late years the soldier had only eighteenpence or two shillings a week."

"It has *so happened*," replied the pamphleteer, "and for years too! astonishing! It has *so happened* that an Act of Parliament has been most notoriously and shamefully disobeyed for years, to the extreme misery of thousands of deluded wretches (our countrymen), and to the great detriment of the nation at large; it has *so happened* that not one of the offenders has been brought to justice for this disobedience, even now it is fully discovered; and it has *so happened* that the hand of power has made another dive into the national purse, in order—not to add to what the soldier ought to have received; not to satisfy *his* hunger and thirst; but to gratify the whim or the avarice of his capricious and plundering superiors."

The anticipation of Cobbett's later manner of writing is evident, even to the effective use of italics. Whether he admitted authorship or denied it, *The Soldier's Friend* was stamped as, at least in part, his work.

Before this pamphlet appeared, Cobbett had again taken leave—French leave, this time—of his country. While the court-martial was ending in fiasco without him, Cobbett was on his way—to France.

It was March, 1792. More than two years before, the Bastille had fallen, and since then the drama of the French Revolution had been slowly unrolling. Louis had taken

flight to Varennes, had been brought back virtually a prisoner to Paris, had accepted the new constitution. The Legislative Assembly was in session. The Emperor Leopold had appealed to the sovereigns of Europe to aid Louis and restore the Divine Right of Kings. Prussia and Austria had leagued themselves against France. In England, Burke's *Reflections on the French Revolution* and Paine's *Rights of Man* were circulating everywhere, and a host of writers had entered the lists for or against the new principles of Liberty, Equality and Fraternity. Burke, indeed, had denounced the Revolution and all its works in unmeasured terms; but the time was not yet when all respectable Englishmen were ready to accept his estimate. The French Revolution had not passed beyond the pale, into that stage of violence and dictatorship which was largely the product of foreign intervention. Great Britain was still at peace with France, though already many drums were beating for war. If I may employ a modern analogy, France had not yet "gone Bolshevik," though constitutional statesmen shook their heads and respectable journals feared the worst.

What took Cobbett to France at such a time? What are we to make of his visit? Had it any political significance, bearing on the state of his political opinions at this outset of his public career? So far, we have said nothing of Cobbett's political views. For an excellent reason: he had given no sign of possessing any. But now we approach the threshold of his career as a political controversialist. It is important to estimate, if we can, where he stood and what he was thinking. He was twenty-eight, of an age by which many have sown their political wild oats and settled down to an established attitude. But Cobbett developed late and slowly. Before he entered the army, he had no contact with political affairs, save his youthful endorsement of his father's views on the American Revolution. His year at Chatham brought no political contacts, and the rest of his army service was spent far away from England, under circumstances little likely to arouse political interests in his mind. He had virtually no chance of developing an attitude on such questions until after his landing at Portsmouth.

But to what an England he came back! Into the hottest heat of the disputation raised by the happenings in France, into an atmosphere charged with the electricity of first principles. Coleridge and Southey, respectable Conservatives

in the later years of Cobbett's Radicalism, were carried away and dreamed of Pantisocracy on the banks of the Susquehannah. Wordsworth wrote of the time,—

> "Blest was it in that dawn to be alive;
> But to be young was very Heaven."

Wordsworth, soon to grow old before his time in political disillusionment. Intoxicating winds of doctrine were blowing: even in a month or two a man might be touched by them. And Cobbett, intent on his little protest against corruption in high places, and keen to remedy the crying grievances of the private soldier, would fall naturally into a set to which the Revolution in France stood for the summit of human achievement. His departure for France may have had no political significance at all; for he had taught himself French while he was in the army, and France was the easiest place to fly to from the danger which threatened him. But it is at least possible that it was sympathy with the Revolution that made Cobbett seek refuge in France when England grew too hot to hold him and his accusations. Perhaps, his collaborators, those who were with him in the writing of *The Soldier's Friend*, packed him off to France when they saw his danger.

To France, at any rate, he went, accompanied by his wife, with the intention of using the opportunity to perfect his knowledge of the French language. For, not content with his other labours, he had set out to teach himself French with the same thoroughness he had employed in learning English. His conduct tallies with this declared object, and would seem to show that revolutionary doctrines had no very great hold on him. He made, not for Paris, but for Tilques, a village near St. Omer, and there he stayed for more than five months, meeting, he says, "everywhere with civility, and even with hospitality, in a degree that I had never been accustomed to." [1] He learned to like the French, and even in his high Tory days, when he could find no words too strong for his detestation of "Jacobin principles," he wrote that he had found the people among whom he lived "honest, pious, and kind to excess," saving only—this to salve his anti-Jacobin conscience—"those who were already blasted with the principles of the accursed revolution."

[1] *Life and Adventures*, p. 49.

At length Paris called him, and in August, 1793, he took coach meaning to go there. But at Abbeville he heard that the Tuileries had been attacked and Louis deposed. This meant, he realised, war between France and England. France, like his native country, would be too hot to hold him. He turned aside to Le Havre, and took ship for America. There his wife, who had been left behind when he made his hasty departure, shortly after joined him. Yet again Cobbett had set out on a new adventure in search of fame or fortune. He was to find the one, if not the other.

CHAPTER V

PETER PORCUPINE IN AMERICA

FOR more than seven and a half years—from the twenty-ninth to the thirty-seventh year of his age, Cobbett was a sojourner in the United States. This was an eventful time. For nearly the whole of it, Great Britain was at war with France, engaged in that long warfare which, beginning as a contest against the principles of the Jacobin revolution, developed into a death-struggle with Napoleon for European supremacy. Feeling ran high in the United States. Only seventeen years had passed since the Declaration of Independence, and the memory of French sympathy with the Americans in their contest with the might of England was still fresh. Tom Paine and Lafayette served to link the two revolutions together: the Declaration of Independence and the *Déclaration des Droits de l'homme et du Citoyen* made appeal to the same fundamental emotions and ideas. True that, before Cobbett reached America, Paine and Lafayette were both manifestly on the losing side in France, and the French Revolution was passing into a phase which estranged many sympathisers. But Americans had but hardly won their own political independence; and they could see the sister republic girt round by hostile monarchies, struggling for its young existence, and driven to dictatorship and bloodshed as means of self-preservation. Small wonder if American sympathy—popular sympathy in particular—was mainly on the side of the Revolution and of France. There was a strong interventionist movement, a strong party anxious to renew the quarrel with Great Britain and to take up arms on the French side. Jefferson and the Democrats were all for an open French alliance.

But Washington was still President and the Federalists were in power. They were led by men of conservative views, many of them admirers of monarchy, and intent on shaping the republican institutions of America on the model of the monarchies of Europe, content with the political independence that had been established, intent on making firm the

precarious unity of the American states, by no means anxious to court a further change of system or to subvert existing social relationships and distinctions. Was not America a "free country," newly and practically made free by the effort of her own sons? And was not her task, now that she had thrown off the yoke of King George and escaped from the vexatious burdens of the old régime, to live at peace with the world, and even to renew with Great Britain the friendship which only injustice and oppression had caused to be broken? Washington and his colleagues were as much aristocrats as the governing classes in England. They had some sympathy, no doubt, with the initial stages of the Revolution in France; but they were soon estranged when men like Lafayette passed into opposition, when deeds of violence began to be done, when the stream of *emigrés* began to spread, as it did very soon, to the New World. There were not wanting in America those who agreed with Burke, and the neutrality which Washington and his colleagues sought to maintain was in effect a neutrality friendly to the British, and hostile to France. For British supremacy at sea meant the isolation of America from France, if she once acquiesced in the cutting off.

But, while there were in America powerful interests not unfriendly to Great Britain, the Democrats, led by Jefferson, were strongly for the French Revolution, and the prevailing popular opinion was certainly on their side. Especially was this so in the Democratic city of Philadelphia, in which Cobbett passed most of his sojourn in the United States. He was prone, no doubt, to exaggerate the dominance of anti-British sentiment; but that in Philadelphia it was much the stronger view is well-established fact. The America which Cobbett found was on the whole sympathetic to the Revolution, even in its later phases, and keenly hostile to the aristocratic monarchies which were seeking, in the name of Legitimacy, to restore the old régime. For, if the argument of Legitimacy was invoked against France, could it not be invoked with equal force against their own republic?

But more important than the rival views of Washington and the Democrats in determining the American attitude in this crisis of the world's affairs was the character and situation of the American people. America was an agricultural country. The merchants of New England and generally the people of the towns might be politically the

most articulate section; but the typical American was a farmer, intent above all on cultivating his acres undisturbed. He would not have strong, centralised government: he wanted to be let alone in order that he might develop the vast potentialities of wealth that were before him. Such men do not want war, and are particularly unlikely to go out of their way to interfere in a war in which nothing save their own deliberate will can involve them. The United States had, indeed, bound itself by treaty with France, before the French Revolution, to safeguard certain of the French possessions in the West Indies; but the treaty was never implemented. Though the Democrats had the sympathy of the people on their side when they spoke up for France against England, Washington and his party held in their hands all the cards essential to the making of policy. Short of extreme stupidity on the part of England, such as actually led to war twenty years later, there was not much likelihood of actual American intervention on the side of France.

Opinions, however, were strongly held; and the war of words ran high. Democratic clubs through the States upheld revolutionary principles, and denounced Washington and his Government. Into this conflict, at a moment highly critical for the fortunes of England, or rather of the English aristocracy, Cobbett found himself plunged on his arrival in the United States. But not at once, or by premeditation, did he embark on the troubled waters of political controversy. What precisely was in his mind, beyond escape from his entanglements in Europe, when he set sail for America, it is impossible to say. Certainly he entertained some hopes of obtaining employment under the American Government; for he carried with him a letter to Thomas Jefferson from Short, then American Ambassador in Paris, and in forwarding this to Jefferson he definitely suggested that a place might be found for him. "Ambitious to become the citizen of a free state, I have left my native country, England, for America. I bring with me youth, a small family,[1] a few useful literary talents, and that is all." Incidentally, the writing of this letter, addressed to the great Democratic leader, throws some light on Cobbett's political opinions at this time.

[1] This letter was written in November, 1792. Cobbett had married in February, and arrived in America in October. His first child must have been born in November.

Jefferson replied sympathetically, but was unable to help him. The new American Government was not rich in political or administrative appointments. The Federal Government, still very weak, had practically no Civil Service. Cobbett had to turn elsewhere for the means of life; for his residence in France and his long journey must have depleted his reserves. Perhaps he thought of setting up as a farmer, as he had dreamed of settling in New Brunswick on an occasion already described. For in America at least he could hope to find free land and open opportunity for strong arms and earnest application. If this was his design, fate ordered matters otherwise.

Cobbett landed in America early in October, 1792, and, after visiting Philadelphia, took up his abode for a time at Wilmington, a small port on the Delaware, rather less than thirty miles below Philadelphia. There his first child was born —a boy, who died in June, 1794, just when he "was beginning to prattle." "I began my young marriage days," he wrote later, "in and near Philadelphia. At one of these times to which I have just alluded, when life is always more or less in danger, in the middle of the burning hot month of July, I was greatly afraid of fatal consequences to my wife for want of sleep, she not having, after the great danger was over, had any sleep for more than forty-eight hours. All great cities, in hot countries, are, I believe, full of dogs; and they, in the very hot weather, keep up, during the night, a horrible barking and fighting and howling. Upon the particular occasion to which I am adverting, they made a noise so terrible and so unremitted, that it was next to impossible that even a person in full health and free from pain should obtain a minute's sleep. I was, about nine in the evening, sitting by the bed: 'I do think,' said she, 'that I could go to sleep *now*, if it were not *for the dogs*.' Downstairs I went, and out I sallied, in my shirt and trousers, and without shoes and stockings; and, going to a heap of stones lying beside the road, set to work upon the dogs, going backward and forward, and keeping them at two or three hundred yards' distance from the house. I walked thus the whole night, barefooted, lest the noise of my shoes might possibly reach her ears; and I remember that the bricks of the causeway were, even in the night, so hot as to be disagreeable to my feet. My exertions produced the desired effect: a sleep of several hours was the consequence; and, at eight o'clock in

the morning, off I went to a day's business which was to end at six in the evening." [1]

It is extraordinarily difficult to give any picture of Cobbett's wife. He spoke and wrote of her often. "One hair of her head," he said, "is more dear to me than all the other women in the world." He was, in later years, always telling his children, who were very loving children to both their parents, how wonderful a mother they had. But, save in his account of the ideal qualities of a wife in *Advice to Young Men*—clearly a picture of his own—he tells us little of her, and this account is rather of her qualities than of her personality. Visitors to Botley in later years, including Miss Mitford, the novelist, and Tom Moore, the poet, spoke of her very highly. She was a homely woman, an admirable housewife, wrapped up in her family, and intensely in love with and anxious for her husband. He did not, as we shall see, talk to her much about his public affairs. She was not a politician, or an educated woman. She managed his house and made for him a home, often under conditions of the greatest difficulty. He had always, when the affairs of the world upset him, a harbour in which his tranquillity was restored. "The truth is," he wrote many years later, "that, throughout the whole of this long time of troubles and labours, I have never known a single hour of *real anxiety*; the troubles have been no troubles to me; I have not known what *lowness of spirits* meaned; I have been more gay, and felt less care, than any bachelor that ever lived. 'You are *always in spirits*, Cobbett!' To be sure; for why should I not? *Poverty* I have always set at defiance, and I could, therefore, defy the temptations of riches; and, as to *home* and *children*, I have taken care to provide myself with an inexhaustible store of that *sobriety* which I am so strongly recommending my reader to provide himself with." [2]

Cobbett gives a further picture, in *Advice to Young Men*, of the conditions of his early married life. "Till I had a second child, no servant ever entered my house, though well able to keep one; and never, in my whole life, did I live in a house so clean, in such trim order, and never have I eaten or drunk, or slept or dressed, in a manner so perfectly to my fancy, as I did then. I had a great deal of business to attend to, that took me a great part of the day from home; but whenever I could spare a minute from business, the child

[1] *Advice to Young Men*, par. 166. [2] *Ibid*, par. 92.

was in my arms. I rendered the mother's labour as light as I could; any bit of food satisfied me; when watching was necessary, we shared it between us; and that famous *Grammar* for teaching French people English, which has been for thirty years, and still is, the great work of this kind throughout all America and in every nation in Europe, was written by me in hours not employed in business, and in great part, during my share of the night watchings over a sick, and then only, child, who, after lingering many months, died in my arms." [1]

The writing of this famous *Grammar* arose out of the occupation by which Cobbett first earned his living in the United States. He always strongly urged emigrants, before committing themselves in a new country to a settled way of life, to find some temporary work which would keep them until they had given themselves time to look round and find their real place. His own immediate design on landing in America was to maintain himself by putting some of his new-found knowledge to good use. He had learned French thoroughly: he had mastered English. Well and good: he could employ both his accomplishments by setting up as a teacher of English to the numerous Frenchmen who were flocking to the United States. His bent for teaching he had shown already. While he was in New Brunswick, he had constituted himself volunteer instructor to many of his colleagues. "When I was in the army," he wrote later, "I made, for the teaching of young corporals and serjeants, a little book on *arithmetic*; and it is truly surprising in how short a time they learned all that was necessary for them to know of that necessary department of learning." Cobbett had, all through his life, the itch to be teaching his fellows.

Cobbett's first occupation in America was the teaching of English to French *emigrés*, mostly moderate Republicans, who had fled to America after the fall of the Girondins. Before long he moved to Philadelphia, a better centre for his work; and there he remained for more than six years. His first work, written in French to aid his students, was the book mentioned above. It was entitled *Le Tuteur Anglais*, an English grammar written in French. This was not actually published until 1795; but it seems clear that Cobbett used it, as he had used his *Arithmetic* in the army, making his pupils copy

[1] *Advice to Young Men*, par. 161.

out the book and get it by heart as a means of learning the rules of the language. The little volume afterwards had an enormous circulation. Reprinted in France under the title *Le Maître Anglais*, it passed through forty or more editions, and was still widely used in a revised form half a century after the author's death. He had trouble more than once over pirated editions revised without his sanction.[1]

Cobbett, in his later years, thought poorly of the book, which he described as "a very hasty production";[2] but he claimed for it—what was indeed the cardinal virtue of all his writings—the quality of "*clearness*, and of making the learner see the *reason* of the rules." "It is esteemed," he wrote, "because its ideas are simple, and because it appeals to the *reason* of the scholar."[3]

His teaching work was, apparently, fairly remunerative, and he estimated his earnings from it at about £330 a year, then a considerable sum. But, in addition to it, he began to get his hand in for original writing by a good deal of translating. Of one book which he translated, *Martens on the Law of Nations*, he writes as follows, showing that his habit of industry remained with him to the full.

"I translated it for a quarter of a dollar (thirteenpence halfpenny) a page; and, as my chief business was to go out in the city to teach French people English, I made it a rule to earn a dollar while my wife was getting the breakfast in the morning, and another dollar after I came home at night, be the hour what it might; and I have earned many a dollar in this way, sitting writing in the same room where my wife and only child were in bed and asleep."

So far, Cobbett's American career is uneventful enough. He was doing well; for, as he wrote, "this country is good for getting money, that is to say, if a person is industrious and enterprising." He made friends also, especially among the French; but he did not like the country or the people. In 1794 he described the Americans, or at least the Philadelphians, as a "cheating, sly, roguish gang." He planned a removal to St. Domingo or Martinique, and even a return to England within a few years. But perhaps the discontent manifest throughout his letters of this time came of his misfortunes—of the death of his son, of the still-birth of a

[1] *P.R.*, February 21st, 1818. [2] *Ibid.*
[3] *P.R.*, December 6th, 1817.

second. He was to have many adventures before he left the United States.

He was set on the path of these adventures, and to the finding of his true vocation, by an incident of his teaching career, which he graphically relates in *The Political Register*.[1] Newspapers, he says, were a luxury for which in those days he had neither time nor relish; but it chanced that one of his French students elected one day to read his newspaper by way of lesson. It chanced, moreover, that this very issue of the newspaper contained material to inflame Cobbett's zeal. The lesson became an argument: "the dispute was as warm as might reasonably be expected between a Frenchman, uncommonly violent even for a Frenchman, and an Englishman not remarkable for *sang-froid*"; and the result was a declared resolution on Cobbett's part to write and publish a pamphlet in defence of his country, a refutation of the statements in the newspaper which had so aroused his ire. "Thus, sir," wrote Cobbett later, "it was that I became a writer on politics."[2]

What, then, was the newspaper article which started Cobbett on his polemical career? It was a reprint of the addresses which a number of American societies had offered to Dr. Joseph Priestley on his landing in the United States, together with Priestley's replies. The addresses seemed to Cobbett full of "malicious attacks upon the monarchy and the monarch of England": the replies he regarded as "invectives against England" by the learned doctor. Cobbett rallied at once to the defence, and, as usual, his method of defence was to take the offensive.

Dr. Priestley bears an honoured name in the annals of science. Politically, he is best remembered because it was his house and laboratory that the mob of Birmingham selected for special attention in the Anti-Jacobin riots of 1791. A leading chemist and a Nonconformist divine of high standing, Priestley had become politically famous, in America as well as in England, by his writings in defence of the colonies during the War of Independence. A keen reformer, he was a leading member of Major Cartwright's Constitutional Society, out of whose banquet celebrating the fall of the Bastille the Birmingham riots arose. From 1791 to 1794 he was in London, as preacher at the famous Gravel Pit Chapel at Hackney. But early in 1794 he determined to settle in the

[1] *P.R.*, September. 6th, 1804. [2] *P.R.*, September 29th, 1804.

United States, where his arrival was greeted with enthusiasm and many addresses of welcome from the Democratic clubs in which tributes to his work mingled with attacks on the British Government, now at war with revolutionary France and busy combating sedition by prosecuting the Corresponding Societies at home.

Any Republican sympathies Cobbett may have acquired in London had clearly by this time altogether worn off. The French Revolution had reached its more dictatorial phases, and England, against the protests of Fox and the Whig rump in Parliament and of the reforming bodies outside, had plunged into the anti-revolutionary war. In Philadelphia, Cobbett was surrounded by men professing republican principles and friendly to the French not from this cause alone, but also because France was fighting the England from whose yoke they had but lately freed themselves. Cobbett was still far more a soldier than a politician. The attitude which had prompted his attack on military corruption at home slipped off him in the sympathy he felt for the British soldiers who were fighting, and in face of the combination of republican and anti-British sentiments he found among his neighbours. It did not cross his mind that England's rulers might be in the wrong: an attack on them and their policy seemed to him an attack on England itself. Priestley was to his mind not an English democrat seeking a republican harbour from English repression, but a traitor and renegade denouncing his country to a pack of foreigners. Cobbett was, and remained all his life, very English, above all in his instinctive reaction to the criticism of foreigners.

So now, he launched upon the worthy Dr. Priestley the full torrent of his wrath, or rather the full charge of his polemical blunderbuss, as he himself, with his genius for a telling name, called one of his later pamphlets.[1] If we except *The Soldier's Friend*, probably his only in part, the *Observations on the Emigration of Joseph Priestley* is Cobbett's earliest piece of political writing; but in it his style has already reached almost to maturity. The argument, indeed, is somewhat thin, and for the most part denunciation takes its place. But this does not impair at all the vigour of the writing, the point and pungency of the satire, the skill with which Priestley is made to look a fool as well as a knave.

[1] *The Gros Mousqueton Diplomatique: or Diplomatic Blunderbuss*, Philadelphia, 1796.

Cobbett's style is, within the limits of his matter, as good, in this, his first work of note, as in his writings which have lived. The matter does not, indeed, make such calls upon his powers as he was to make later. The *Observations* is all on one note: it lacks those extraordinarily characteristic and personal digressions which made half the charm of his mature best. But what he set himself to do he did with surpassing thoroughness, leaping instantly to the front rank of political pamphleteers, not of his own day alone, but of all time.

Cobbett wrote in the heat of passion. He had next to find a publisher for what he had written—no such easy matter in a city almost wholly dominated by anti-British feeling, where Chatham's statue had been beheaded by the mob, and George II.'s portrait torn down and trampled, and where the public journals and the booksellers were on the side of the majority. Cobbett betook himself first to Matthew Carey, one of the two leading booksellers and publishers in the town. He tells of his reception in *The Life and Adventures of Peter Porcupine.*

"Mr. Carey received me as booksellers generally receive authors (I mean authors whom they hope to get but little by): he looked at the title from top to bottom, and then at me from head to foot. 'No, my lad,' says he, 'I don't think it will suit.' *My lad!* God in Heaven forgive me! I believe that, at that moment, I wished for another yellow fever to strike the city; not to destroy the inhabitants, but to furnish me with *the subject of a pamphlet* that might make me rich." [1]

Thomas Bradford was Carey's principal rival, but more definitely anti-British in attitude. To him Cobbett went next. Bradford was apparently a man of business first and a politician second; for he agreed to publish the pamphlet, after a vain endeavour to secure some modification in its tone. Cobbett would only agree to alter the title first written down, *The Tartuffe Detected*; of the pamphlet itself he refused to alter a line. "I never was of an accommodating disposition in my life," [2] he says in describing the negotiation. He never was.

Bradford published the *Observations*; but he left his name off the title page, for fear of his shop windows, and the pamphlet appeared anonymously. It had a large sale,

[1] *Life and Adventures*, p. 53. [2] *Ibid.*, p. 54.

and was speedily reprinted in England, under the auspices of the Government's supporters. Cobbett was fairly launched on his political career.

Cobbett's first pamphlet was an attack on a fellow-Englishman, and dealt mainly with England and Anglo-French affairs. But, published in America, it necessarily led him into the thick of American political controversies. The Democrats attacked him violently: a section among the Federalists gave him support. Philadelphia, where he himself lived, was almost solidly hostile. It was not in Cobbett's nature to remain quiet, or even calm, in face of criticism, and he was rapidly involved in controversy, no longer with fellow-Englishmen or with emigrant Frenchmen, but with American writers and journals. Writing always openly as an Englishman and steadily refusing to become naturalised—the taunt of being a mere foreign adventurer was constantly flung at him by his opponents—he necessarily occupied a position somewhat isolated, and could not become the servant of any American party. Virtually, he constituted himself the unofficial publicity agent of the British Government in America, enjoying a freedom to attack all and sundry which no official agent could possibly have possessed. It has, indeed, often been suggested that he was secretly in the pay of the British Government; but this he consistently denied, and there is no evidence at all for believing it to be true. Certainly, his pamphlets were reprinted regularly in England, and his English agent was a bookseller, John Wright, closely associated with the supporters of the Government. Doubtless, Cobbett received money from the English sales of his works, and his career was closely watched by the Government and its supporters. But he was certainly never in the Government's pay: he wrote what he thought and felt, far less for money than for the satisfaction of his controversial instincts. It is, however, the case, that the British Ambassador in America, Sir Robert Liston, did make him an offer of money in return for his services, and that this offer came directly from the Home Government. The Ambassador admitted this when Cobbett was on trial for his attack on the Government of Ireland in 1804. The offer was refused by Cobbett.[1]

He needed no incentive of such a sort, because, for the greater part of his stay in America, he was so obviously

[1] *P.R.*, April 10th, 1830.

enjoying himself. He loved nothing better than a good, hot, polemical set-to, and of these he was getting his fill. The *Observations* was speedily followed up by other pamphlets which brought him more and more into the thick of American political controversy. In 1795 *A Bone to Gnaw for the Democrats*, a vigorous attack on the pro-French and anti-British attitude of the Democratic Party, appeared in two parts. The first part received very hostile reviews in the Democratic Press; and Cobbett at once retaliated, before the appearance of Part II., with a further pamphlet, *A Kick for a Bite*, in which he faithfully and brusquely "told off" the editor of the *American Monthly Review*. These were followed, in the same year, by *A Little Plain English addressed to the People of the United States*.

A Kick for a Bite is notable for the fact that on its title-page first appeared the pseudonym under which Cobbett wrote the remainder of his American pamphleteering. A reviewer likened him to a porcupine. Nothing could have pleased him better. The name had obvious qualities. A porcupine was just what he meant and needed to be, in the hostile environment of Philadelphia. "Peter Porcupine" he became, eagerly thanking the Democratic reviewer for teaching him that word. "Peter Porcupine" he remained, until a change in his surroundings and in the character of his work made the name for the time a misnomer after his return to England. But "Peter Porcupine," in fact if not in name he was speedily to become once more, and "Peter Porcupine" he remained in his political methods to the very end. That he was personally good-humoured and pleasant does not make the name a misnomer: there is no reason why a porcupine should not be an amiable beast—under its quills.

1795 had been for Cobbett a productive year: 1796 was even more productive. Before its end he had published, apart from translations, editions, prefaces, and one or two minor writings, several long political pamphlets, one issue of an abortive periodical, and seven numbers of a new monthly journal of his own, *The Political Censor*, each of these being in itself a longish pamphlet. The political controversies of the previous year were continued in *A New Year's Gift to the Democrats* and *The Gros Mousqueton Diplomatique or Diplomatic Blunderbuss*, already mentioned. In *The Bloody Buoy* Cobbett delivered a frontal attack on the Revolution

in France, and accused the revolutionaries of "a Multitude of Horrid Barbarity, such as the eye never witnessed, the tongue never expressed, or the imagination conceived, until the commencement of the French Revolution." With this belongs his scurrilous and wholly uncritical *Life of Thomas Paine*, based on the malignant pamphlet by Oldys, published in England. Paine was accused of almost every crime in the calendar, his private equally with his public life being traversed with scant regard to facts. This *Life*, which was a painful memory to Cobbett in later years, when he chose strange ways of expiation,[1] was first issued in *The Political Censor*, and speedily reprinted on both sides of the Atlantic.

The remaining pamphlets of the year were more personal in tone, and included the racy *Life and Adventures of Peter Porcupine*, to which numerous references have been made already. Cobbett's pamphleteering involved him in abundance of disputes, personal as well as political. He was dealt with by others as he dealt with Tom Paine, and in the *Life and Adventures*, and also in *The Scare-Crow* and some of the numbers of *The Political Censor*, he gave at least as good as he received.

"Dear father," he wrote in a letter home, which he quoted in *The Political Censor*, "Dear father, when you used to set me off to work in the morning, dressed in my blue smock-frock and woollen spatterdashes, with my bag of bread and cheese and bottle of small beer swung over my shoulder on the little crook that my old god-father Boxall gave me, little did you imagine that I should one day become so great a man as to have my picture stuck in the windows, and have four whole books published about me in the course of one week." [2]

And again:—

"When I had the honour to serve King George, I was elated enough at the putting on of my worsted shoulder-knot, and, afterwards, my silver-laced coat; what must my feelings be then, upon seeing half a dozen authors, all *Doctors*, or the devil knows what, writing about me at one time, and ten times that number of printers, bookbinders, and booksellers, bustling, running, and flying about in all directions, to

[1] See page 235.

[2] From *Remarks on the Pamphlets lately published against Peter Porcupine* (*Porcupine's Works*, Vol. IV., p. 114).

announce my fame to the impatient public? What must I feel upon seeing the newspapers filled from top to bottom, and the windows and corners of the houses placarded with a *Blue Shop for Peter Porcupine*, a *Pill for Peter Porcupine*, *Peter Porcupine Detected*, a *Roaster for Peter Porcupine*, a *History of Peter Porcupine*, a *Picture of Peter Porcupine*? The public will certainly excuse me, if after all this I should begin to think myself a person of some importance." [1]

These were the great days of the political pamphlet—squibs, lampoons, mere scurrility, party controversialists at it hammer and tongs, serious and philosophical argument making its topical appeal. Cobbett's incursion into politics, and the instantaneous success of his vigorous writings, called a host of pamphleteers into the field. Strange stories of Cobbett's boyhood, garbled accounts of his abortive charges against his officers and of his flight from England, mere inventions, filled volume after volume. In *The Life and Adventures of Peter Porcupine* Cobbett replied with a short and admirably written story of his career: in *The Scare-Crow* and other works he turned and rent his accusers. That he enjoyed himself hugely is clear enough from the manner of his writing. His adversaries took the gloves off, and so did he.

Early in the year, his connection with the bookseller, Bradford, came to an end. His early pamphlets had a very big sale; but he got little enough by them. In the *Life and Adventures* [2] he printed a statement showing his receipts from all the pamphlets issued by Bradford, up to and including the *New Year's Gift* and the first number of a new periodical, *The Prospect from the Congress Gallery*, in which it was proposed to issue, under his editorship and with his comments, a regular report of the proceedings in Congress. Only the first number ever appeared, and out of this, aggravated by other troubles, came his rupture with Bradford. For all his work up to this time, including the *Prospect*, he had received in all 403 dollars and 21 cents—not a large reward. Indeed, its inadequacy was shown when Cobbett offered to buy back the copyright of the pamphlets for the whole sum which he had received for them. Bradford rejected the offer. Although the initial sale was over, the copyrights were worth more than the total sums paid.

[1] From *Remarks on the Pamphlets lately published against Peter Porcupine* (*Porcupine's Works*, Vol. IV., p. 115).

[2] Page 58.

Cobbett parted from Bradford in anger,[1] despite a very much improved offer for his future work. For a month or two he published through another bookseller, Davies. But he had already determined to open a shop of his own, and into the plan he put all his talent for combining publicity and provocation. Philadelphia, we have seen, was strongly Democratic, overwhelmingly anti-British, keenly pro-French. Cobbett set out deliberately to flout all its most cherished views, to dare the mob to commit acts of violence against him, to carry his point by sheer audacity. Hitherto, while his works had become famous, he had been comparatively little known as their author. Now, he took a large house in Second Street,[2] in the busiest part of Philadelphia, and set to work to fit it up as a shop. For the day of opening, in July, 1796, he prepared a display calculated to annoy as many people as possible. George III. was hardly likely to be popular in the United States—very well, the shop-window should be adorned with an imposing picture of him. Benjamin Franklin was a national hero: his portrait should be held up to scorn. Every possible obnoxious king, prince, or minister should have a place of honour, and in the centre of all should be a huge battle-piece depicting "Lord Howe's Decisive Victory over the French." Cobbett's friends did their best to dissuade him. His house, they feared, would be sacked or burnt down: violent reprisals were bound to come of so provocative a show. But their forebodings appear only to have added to Cobbett's enjoyment.[3]

On the appointed day, he opened his shop, and a blaze of "aristocratic portraits" and anti-Democratic cartoons greeted the passers-by. A huge mob gathered round. Threats of violence were plentiful; but no actual violence was done. From the standpoint of audacity, the stroke was perfect. Cobbett's defiance ran round the United States: his writings were already known: his shop made their author famous. Bookseller never started business with a better advertisement.

The danger, however, was not over. Cobbett rented his house from a rich Quaker, John Oldden. After the opening, Oldden had strong pressure brought upon him to evict his

[1] For details of his quarrel with Bradford, and much abuse, see *Life and Adventures*, and many passages scattered through *Porcupine's Works*.

[2] The rent was £300 a year.

[3] Introduction to *The Scare-Crow* (*Porcupine's Works*, Vol. IV., p. 1).

unpopular tenant, and was threatened, by anonymous letter, with the destruction of his property if he allowed Cobbett to remain. His reply was to offer to make Cobbett a present of the house, just as it stood, an offer which was refused on the ground that Cobbett would not rob Oldden's children.[1] But Cobbett did not let matters rest there. In *The Scare-Crow*, he made a slashing reply to those who had threatened him with violence, reaffirmed all he had said and done, and defied them to do their worst.

While he was still writing for Bradford, in January, 1796, Cobbett had already received the singular compliment, for a man of his views, of a visit from M. Talleyrand. The great French minister was then in Philadelphia. Ostensibly, he was in exile; but in Cobbett's view, confirmed by others, he was acting as an unofficial French agent in the United States, trading a little as a flour-merchant, but more at his own trade of political intrigue. At all events, he asked Cobbett to meet him, and at length a meeting was arranged.

"I expected that he wanted to expostulate with me on the severe treatment he had met with at my hands: I had called him an apostate, a hypocrite, and every other name of which he was deserving; I therefore leave the reader to imagine my astonishment when I heard him begin with complimenting me on my *wit* and *learning*. . . . Having carried this species of flattery so far as he judged it safe, he asked me, with a vast deal of apparent seriousness, whether I had received my education at Oxford or at Cambridge! Hitherto I had kept my countenance pretty well; but this abominable stretch of hypocrisy, and the placid mien and slow accents with which it was pronounced, would have forced a laugh from a Quaker in the midst of a meeting. I don't recollect what reply I made him; but this I recollect well: I gave him to understand that I was no trout, and consequently was not to be caught by tickling."[2]

In due course, it appeared what Talleyrand wanted, ostensibly at least. He wanted to be taught English. "He knew the English language as well as I did; but he wanted to have dealings with me in some way or other."

If Talleyrand had conceived the idea of buying Cobbett over to the French cause, nothing came of it. The time was

[1] *P.R.*, April 10th, 1830.

[2] *Porcupine's Gazette*, May 6th, 1797 (in *Porcupine's Works*, Vol. V., p. 360 ff.).

not ripe for his political conversion; but it is interesting, in view of the tone of his writings, that the idea should have been conceived. Even Talleyrand can hardly be credited with the prescience needed to detect the future apostle of Radical Reform in the author of *The Bloody Buoy*.

With the following year, 1797, the stream of Cobbett's pamphleteering begins to fall off, not because he was writing less, but because he found other outlets for his energies. *The Life of Tom Paine* reappeared as a pamphlet, and in a second, *A Letter to the Infamous Tom Paine*, Cobbett took up the cudgels on behalf of Washington, whose policy and record Paine had attacked. *Observations on the Debates of the American Congress* renewed the attack on the "undue timidity" of the United States in its dealings with France, and defended the seizure by the British of American vessels on the high seas. But in March, 1797, Cobbett established a daily paper of his own, *Porcupine's Gazette and Daily Advertiser*, and necessarily most of his energy went into making the new venture a success. In it he defended the Federalist administration, while urging it to more vigorous action, bitterly attacked the Democrats, continued his denunciation of the French Revolution and of all reformers, and generally had a fling at all and sundry whose persons or policies he disliked. The paper rapidly secured a large circulation; but, when it came to an end, he stated that he had never made a penny by it. Daily journalism was even then uphill work for a man who had no capital behind him.

Porcupine's Gazette soon brought Cobbett into trouble. The Spanish Minister [1] requested the American Government to bring an action against him for libels on the King of Spain and on himself, and Cobbett was prosecuted in the State Court of Pennsylvania before the Chief Justice, Thomas M'Kean, who was a keen politician, a Democrat, and consequently a good Cobbett-hater. Incidentally, he was also the father-in-law of the Spanish minister. For this occasion, fortune was with Cobbett, and, by a majority of one, the grand jury threw out the bill against him. But, though he escaped, this trial was, in a sense, the beginning of his troubles. For, not content with his escape, he at once turned and rent M'Kean, who had strongly denounced him in his charge

[1] Cobbett had nicknamed him "Don Sans-Culotta de Carmagnola Minor," in reference the subservience of Spain to France.

to the jury. *The Democratic Judge*,[1] the pamphlet in which Cobbett dissected the career and principles of the Chief Justice, was a vigorous piece of writing; but, as the event showed, its vigour was hardly expedient. For there were further troubles to come.

Among the leaders of the Democratic Party in America was Dr. Benjamin Rush, well known as a physician and writer on medicine. Dr. Rush and Cobbett had already had their political differences; but in 1797 Cobbett entered the lists against the doctor on less favourable ground. In 1793 there had been in Philadelphia an epidemic of the yellow fever, and Dr. Rush had designed a method of treatment all his own for combating the disease. His patients, and those of his followers, were regularly and copiously bled, and at the same time treated with "mercurial purges," known as "Rush's powders." Medical opinion was, on the whole, against this treatment; but it became widely popular. In 1797 the yellow fever returned, and Dr. Rush's methods were again energetically boomed in the American Press. Certain editors, Cobbett among them, took up a strong line against the bleeding treatment, and Cobbett, in *Porcupine's Gazette*, was particularly vigorous in politico-medical denunciation of Rush, whom he nick-named "Doctor Sangrado," after the bleeding physician in *Gil Blas*. He applied, moreover, to Rush's medical advice the same method as he had used in combating his political opinions—abuse and satire rather than argument. He did not, probably, realise that the freedom of comment allowed in political controversy would not be permitted in a different field, or that, in attacking Dr. Rush in his professional capacity, he would be laying himself open to a suit for damages, likely to be all the more ruthlessly pursued because of its entanglement with a political issue. Perhaps the knowledge of this would not have restrained him from speaking his mind, but he seems to have been surprised, as well as angry, when, in October, 1797, Dr. Rush entered a suit for libel against him.

It was more than two years before Dr. Rush's action came to trial, and Cobbett always alleged that it was repeatedly put off in order, first, to keep the threat hanging over him and so check his freedom of utterance—on another issue he had been bound over to be of good behaviour in recognisances of $4000—and secondly, in order that the

[1] Published in England as *The Republican Judge*.

prosecution might safely assure itself of a packed jury and avoid a repetition of the previous fiasco. He alleged also that the case was finally brought to trial at very short notice, after a further postponement had been announced, in the hope of catching him unawares. For at length, in 1799, finding Philadelphia, where M'Kean was now Governor of the State, too hot to hold him, he determined on a removal to New York, and took steps to re-establish his bookselling business there. His furniture and most of his effects he transferred to New York, and he himself remained in Philadelphia for some time only to await the trial. Finally, being assured of its postponement to the next sessions, he left for New York, suspending the publication of *Porcupine's Gazette* with the intention of reviving it in the new centre. But immediately after his departure the trial was hurried on, and he had to return post-haste to Philadelphia for his defence.

The trial took place, and the result was a verdict for $5000 in Dr. Rush's favour. The new Chief Justice, Shippen, was a Democrat and a friend of M'Kean, and Cobbett alleged, on grounds difficult to estimate, treachery on the part of one of his counsel. But, whatever the merits of Rush's treatment, there is no doubt that Cobbett had libelled him again and again, and the verdict hardly calls for a malicious explanation, even if there had been political prejudice in the minds of judge and jury. This prejudice was shown rather in the speed with which effect was given to it; for within a few days Cobbett's property in Philadelphia was sold up, and a whole impression of *Porcupine's Works*, his collected edition of his American writings, lying in sheets awaiting issue, was sold as waste paper and destroyed.

Cobbett returned to New York angry and financially embarrassed. But he set to work at once to re-establish his business there, getting supplies of books from England and making final arrangements for the publication of *Porcupine's Works*. He decided, however, not to revive *Porcupine's Gazette*, and in January, 1800, issued to his subscribers a farewell number, in which he announced that he had never made money by the paper, and that it would be discontinued. This, however, did not mean that he was abandoning journalism, for in the following month he issued the first number of a new fortnightly paper, *The Rushlight*, in the title of which he once more took "Dr. Sangrado's" name in vain. This journal, of which only five numbers appeared, was

wholly devoted to a voluminous and more argumentative attack on Dr. Rush, dealing both with his political opinions and with his treatment—Cobbett had learned by experience to increase the proportion of medical argument to abuse—and to a full account of the trial, with comments on its conduct and severe strictures on Chief Justice Shippen and the M'Kean influence. He made, at any rate, one very telling point. On the very day on which the jury gave its verdict against him, George Washington, the Great President, was dying under Dr. Rush's famous treatment, though the cause of death was stated as "malignant sore throat" and "lack of strength."

Cobbett seems to have been at this time doubtful of his intentions. We find him writing to his London agent, John Wright, first of his intention to return to England, and then later in terms which indicate the successful establishment of his business in New York, and his intention to continue it. But gradually his mind changed. His position in America had become difficult: indeed, in 1799, he had narrowly escaped deportation at the orders of the Federalist President, Adams, whose policy he had, on the whole, defended. He could not hope to make a lasting career in the United States unless he would become a naturalised American, and this he refused to do. On the other hand, he had been assured both through the British Embassy and by his friends in London—John Wright, Gifford, and others—that his career was being watched with sympathy by the British Government, and that fine opportunities awaited him at home. He did not like America: for the time he was exceedingly sore at the treatment he had received, unjust as he thought it, though it might seem natural enough to others. He determined to return to England, and on June 1st he set sail, leaving his American business in good hands. As he went, he shook the dust of the United States from his feet in a characteristic open letter sent to the American papers.

"When people care not two straws for each other, ceremony at parting is mere grimace; and, as I have long felt the most perfect indifference with regard to a vast majority of those whom I now address, I shall spare myself the trouble of a ceremonious farewell. Let me, however, not part from you in indiscriminating contempt. If no man ever had so many and such malignant foes, no one ever had more friends, and those more kind, more sincere, and more faithful. If

I have been unjustly vilified by some, others have extolled me far beyond my merits; if the savages of the city have scared the children in my cradle, those children have, for their father's sake, been soothed and caressed by the affectionate, the gentle, the generous inhabitants of the country, under whose hospitable roofs I have spent some of the happiest hours of my life.

"*Thus* and *thus*, Americans, will I ever speak of you. In a very little time I shall be beyond the reach of your friendship and your malice; beyond the hearing of your commendations or your curses, but being out of your power will alter neither my sentiments nor my words. As I have never spoken anything but truth *to* you, so I will never speak anything but truth *of* you; the heart of a Briton revolts at an emulation in baseness, and although you have as a nation treated me most ungratefully and unjustly, I scorn to repay you with ingratitude and injustice.

"To my friends, who are also the real friends of America, I wish that peace and happiness which virtue ought to ensure, but which I greatly fear they will not find; and as to my enemies, I can wish them no greater scourge, than that which they are preparing for themselves and their country. With this I depart for my native land, where neither the moth of *Democracy* nor the rust of *Federalism* doth corrupt and where thieves do not, with impunity, break through and steal five thousand dollars at a time." [1]

This parting shot is obviously influenced by the circumstances under which it was delivered; but it is also an interesting revelation of Cobbett's mind. He had constituted himself the defender of England in America; and he felt that an insult or injustice done to him was an insult or injustice to England. He had Walt Whitman's way of imagining and making himself one with his country—the representative man. But the England he found on his return was not the England he had imagined while he was sojourning in a strange land.

Two had left England: four returned. Cobbett's first child, as we saw, died at Wilmington in the early days of his residence in America, and a second was still-born. But in 1795 he had a daughter, whom he named Anne, and in 1798 a son, William.

[1] Quoted in *Porcupine's Works*, Vol. XII., p. 1.

CHAPTER VI

ENTRY INTO ENGLISH POLITICS

COBBETT was thirty-seven years of age when he returned to England, after an absence of nearly eight years. The years of his first residence in the United States, described in the preceding chapter, were from the political standpoint wander-years, and from the standpoint of the literary craftsman years of apprenticeship. Cobbett had learned, and learned thoroughly, his craft of political journalism: he had not discovered the uses to which he really desired to apply his mastery. He had become a brilliant journalist, an incomparable writer of plain English: but he was still addressing his most violent denunciations to those who were, within a few years, to become his friends and allies. He had struck out in America the characteristic forms which he was to apply in England—*The Political Censor* foreshadowed *The Political Register*; *The Prospect from the Congress Gallery* was the germ of the *Parliamentary Debates*; the method of direct personal address by means of the "Open Letter" he had already practised, and found well suited to his style; the mingling of autobiography with controversy, of observation with argument, was fully present in his American pamphlets. As a craftsman, he had, indeed, after his return to England, to accustom himself to a new environment and to modify his controversial methods; but there was no essential change in his style or manner of treatment. What changed, gradually and at times almost imperceptibly over a period of years, was the purpose for which his power as a pamphleteer and journalist was employed. From the most Anti-Jacobin of Anti-Jacobins, he gradually became a Radical; but the process of the change, never quite complete to the day of his death, took years to reach maturity. He himself could hardly have said how it came about: his biographer has hard work to give a coherent account of his development, of the revolution in his opinions. The first phase of the change, and Cobbett's adventures during the years immediately following his return, form the subject of this chapter.

From New York Cobbett went to Halifax, Nova Scotia, where he had a friendly reception from the versatile Duke of Kent, later the confidant of Robert Owen. Thence he set sail for England, landing at Falmouth early in July, 1800, and proceeding almost at once to London. His fame had, of course, long preceded him. His American writings had been regularly reprinted in England, and John Wright, the anti-Jacobin bookseller, had long acted as his English agent. He had often been adjured to return, both by Wright and his friends among the anti-Jacobin pamphleteers, such as William and John Gifford, and semi-officially by those in close touch with the Government. To the anti-Jacobin groups he brought the hope of invaluable controversial help.

He reached England at a critical time, both in foreign affairs and in British domestic politics. In France, the Directorate had fallen in 1799, and Napoleon had become First Consul. The war against revolutionary France was taking on the new aspect of a war against Napoleon and the menace of French ascendancy in Europe. The First Consul had just reconquered Italy in the brief and sensational campaign of Marengo. Pitt's second coalition against revolutionary France was falling rapidly to pieces. But at the time of Cobbett's return, the consequences of Napoleon's victory were not yet plain and the Austrian collapse was not yet final. Peace talk had not gathered force: the Armed Neutrality was only beginning. Pitt was still Prime Minister in a Cabinet committed to a war policy. The chain of events which led up to the Peace of Amiens was still incomplete. In domestic politics, the Act of Union with Ireland was being forced by all manner of bribery and corruption through the Irish Parliament, and half-promises of Catholic Emancipation to follow the Union were being made with Pitt's consent to Irish Catholics.

Cobbett had a flattering reception. He took a lodging in St. James's Street, and began to mix with the literary supporters of the Government. On August 1st he received from William Windham, Secretary at War in Pitt's Government and a member of the Cabinet, an invitation to dinner for August 7th. At dinner he found not only the leaders of the anti-Jacobin literary group, Canning, Frere, and Ellis, but also Pitt himself and another member of the Government, George Hammond, the Under-Secretary for Foreign Affairs. Pitt, usually no friend to journalists, was very affable, and

Cobbett was delighted with his reception. A few days later he dined with Hammond and again met Canning and other supporters of the Cabinet.

William Windham, who was, during the next few years, Cobbett's closest political associate or even patron, was an English gentleman of the old school. He came of a very old family, resident for many generations at Felbrigg, near Cromer, in Norfolk. A keen bookman, a mathematician of parts, an energetic supporter of country sports, something of a philanderer, and very much of a conversationalist, he was in private life one of the most popular men in the society of his time. He was a close friend of Burke and of Dr. Johnson, and an intimate member of the Johnson circle. With Burke, he acted as one of Johnson's pall-bearers. Towards the great Doctor's end Windham visited him at Ashbourne, and drew from him a remarkable tribute. "Such conversation," said Johnson, "I shall not have again till I come back to the regions of literature; and there Windham is *inter stellas Luna minores*." His contemporaries bear unanimous witness to his conversational charm. They praised his oratory no less highly, some preferring him to Burke, and all agreeing that in his later years he was the best speaker in Parliament. Yet, as a statesman, Windham was remarkably ineffective. He was too honest, or rather, perhaps, too meticulous in his honesty, always worried by conscientious scruples which often paralysed his power of action. "Don't be afraid, sir," said Dr. Johnson, when Windham consulted him on a knotty point of political ethics, "you will soon make a very pretty rascal." But Windham never did make a very pretty rascal. He was usually in opposition, and generally on the point of resignation when he was in office. His fellow ministers, finding him an inconveniently scrupulous colleague, repeatedly tried to remove him to the House of Lords. But he would not go: he remained to plague himself and them by his scruples.

Windham's dominant political idea was veneration for the memory of Edmund Burke. Burke, who had died in 1797, had been his closest friend, and to the end of his own life, in 1810, he tried to carry on Burke's tradition. Like Burke, he regarded the war against the French Republic, not as a *guerre de convenance*, a measure defensive of British interests, but as a holy crusade against Jacobin principles. Like Burke, he "pitied the plumage, and forgot the dying

bird." The fierceness of Cobbett's anti-Jacobin writings in America naturally endeared him to such a man. Windham took Cobbett to his bosom, only to find, within a few years, that he had nourished a Jacobin serpent.

Cobbett's conversion to Radicalism and Reform, however, was still some years away.

The Pittites had decided that he could be useful to them, and they went out of their way to welcome him. Benefits more tangible than a good dinner and the conversation of the great were speedily proffered. Hammond sent for Cobbett to his office, and offered him the control of one of the Government's daily papers. "The Government had two, the *True Briton* and the *Sun*; the former a morning and the latter an evening paper. They were *their property*, office, types, lease of houses, and all; and the former was offered to me as a *gift* with all belonging to it." [1] Elsewhere, Cobbett says that he was offered the choice between the two papers.[2]

"My answer to Mr. Hammond was conveyed in reminding him of the fable of the *wolf* and the *mastiff*, the latter of which having, one night, when loose, rambled into a wood, met the former all gaunt and shagged, and said to him, 'Why do you lead this sort of life? See how fat and sleek I am! Come home with me and live as I do; dividing your time between eating and sleeping.' The ragged friend having accepted the kind offer, they then trotted on together till they got out of the wood, when the wolf, assisted by the light of the moon, the beams of which had been intercepted by the trees, spied a *crease*, a little *mark*, round the neck of the mastiff. 'What is your fancy,' said he, 'for making that mark round your neck?' 'Oh,' said the other, 'it is only the mark of my *collar* that my master ties me up with.' '*Ties you up!*' exclaimed the wolf, stopping short at the same time; 'give me my ragged hair, my gaunt belly, and my *freedom*!' and so saying he trotted back to the wood." [3]

In short, Cobbett refused, considerably to the Government's surprise and that of his friends. There was in such an offer, according to the standards of the time, nothing unusual. John Heriot, the ostensible proprietor of the *Sun* and the *True Briton*, the Giffords, John Reeves, and many others lived on Government money. Pensions and sinecures

[1] *P.R.*, April 10th, 1830. [2] *P.R.*, January 4th, 1817.
[3] *P.R.*, April 10th, 1830.

were common as blackberries. But Cobbett had other views. Though he had brought but £500 back from America, he refused an offer worth several thousands. "From that moment," he wrote thirty years later, "all belonging to the Government looked on me with *great suspicion*." They were not far wrong. The days of Cobbett's militant anti-Jacobinism were numbered.

Little aware, perhaps, of the difficulties confronting him, he determined to bring out a daily paper of his own. *The Porcupine* was to be a supporter of the Government; but it reserved its freedom to take its own line. And as, just then, differences within the Government itself were beginning to gather force, this freedom had a special importance. The first number appeared on October 30th, 1800, heralded by an announcement of its principles. It would give independent backing to the Government, and it would insert no advertisements of patent medicines. "I am told that, by adhering to this resolution, I shall lose five hundred a year, and excite the resentment of the numerous body of empirics; but this money I hope I shall never be so graceless as to covet, and as to resentment, I have nothing to fear from that, so long as I abstain from their death-dealing nostrums." [1]

The Porcupine was not a financial success. Cobbett had looked to secure a considerable circulation in America; but he found that a Mr. Freeling, Secretary of the Post Office, had secured a monopoly of the right of forwarding periodicals to America by the king's packet-boats, then, in time of war, the only safe means of conveyance. Freeling wanted five guineas a year for each copy sent. He subsequently offered to take three guineas, provided that Cobbett kept the transaction quiet; but Cobbett refused this bargain, and appealed to the Postmaster-General, Lord Auckland, from whom he got no redress. This severely injured his American sales; and also got him the enmity of the Post Office, which withdrew its advertisements from his paper. He also alleged that his deliveries of *The Porcupine* in Great Britain were constantly hampered by the postal authorities, orders for other newspapers being maliciously substituted by the Clerks of the Roads, who took most of the orders in the country districts.

Cobbett said that he lost about £750 on *The Porcupine*. Towards the end of November, 1801, he gave up the struggle

[1] *The Political Register*, in later years, contained many medicinal advertisements.

and sold it to John Gifford.[1] Apparently, he had some correspondence with William Windham on the subject, and was almost induced to call the bargain off. But, if Windham offered his help to keep the paper going, the offer came too late. John Gifford bought it; but less than two months later it was merged in *The True Briton*, the Government organ of which, a year earlier, Cobbett had been offered the control.

There were reasons for Windham's anxiety over the loss of *The Porcupine*; for during 1801 the political situation had radically changed. At the end of 1800 the Second Coalition collapsed, and Austria, again defeated at Hohenlinden, made a separate peace with France. In the same month Russia, Denmark, Sweden, and Prussia definitely formed the League of "Armed Neutrality" directed against the maritime power of Great Britain, and the exercise of the right of search at sea claimed by the British Government. British isolation became complete, and Napoleon was master of Europe for the time.

Moreover, Pitt had fallen from office, or left it of his own accord. As soon as the Union with Ireland was an accomplished fact, Pitt raised in the Cabinet the issue of Catholic Emancipation. But George III. refused point-blank to agree to emancipation in any form, and Pitt thereupon resigned. The Catholic question was the ostensible cause of his going; but it has often been suggested that he took advantage of this, and of his half-pledges to the Irish Catholics, to find a way of escape from the difficulties of the international situation. He had come to the view that Great Britain must make peace with Napoleon, a peace bound to be unsatisfactory and even humiliating, since it would fully recognise the French ascendancy in Europe, but also most unlikely to be

[1] This John Gifford (1758-1818), whose original name was John Richard Green, was no relation of the more famous William Gifford (1756-1826), collaborator and associate of Canning on *The Anti-Jacobin* and, later, editor of *The Quarterly Review*, with whom Cobbett had dined at William Windham's. John Gifford was, like William, a pamphleteer and journalist on the Government side. He wrote a life of Pitt, and was connected with *The Anti-Jacobin Review*, which is not the same as *The Anti-Jacobin*. Later, he became a metropolitan police magistrate and Government pensioner. It was William, not John Gifford, who, Cobbett said, avowed to him his Radical sympathies, though he continued to work and write on the Tory side. See *Advice to Young Men*, par. 56. Cobbett was in correspondence with William Gifford before his return from America: he was in close touch with both William and John for some time after his return.

lasting. Pitt had tried for peace before, on at least two occasions; but he had failed, in face of the militant policy of the Directory. Napoleon, like Great Britain, might well desire a breathing-space. But a peace, made under the conditions of 1801, could bring no honour to its maker. Whether or not the Catholic question was merely an excuse, Pitt must have resigned office with a sense of relief.

He was succeeded by his close friend, the Speaker of the House of Commons, Henry Addington, commonly known as "the Doctor," in allusion to his father's profession. Cobbett had from the first a supreme contempt for him, and assailed "the Doctor" with all manner of derisive epithets. Canning called him "Britain's guardian gander." In later years, as Viscount Sidmouth, he was the most repressive of Home Secretaries, and earned a new and unenviable notoriety under the second name.[1] The Addington Ministry from the first clearly held office at Pitt's good pleasure. Pitt persuaded some of his followers to join it, and gave it general support in the House of Commons. Its leader was a nonentity and a stop-gap. He was there to make an inconclusive peace, and to hold office until Pitt's return to nominal, as well as real, power should seem both possible and expedient.

The Catholic question being shelved, the first business of the new Cabinet was to make peace. But on this issue the groups which had supported Pitt were sharply divided. Grenville in particular and William Windham were against any attempt to make peace with France. In the autumn, when the preliminaries of peace were signed, Grenville, Windham, and others strongly criticised the proposals. Pitt significantly abstained from influencing the House by his voice; but privately his weight was thrown on the side of peace. Pitt's party, and the great anti-Jacobin Coalition which had been behind him, had broken up into a number of separate and growingly hostile groups. At home, as well as abroad, Pitt's coalition had dissolved.

Cobbett, now very closely in touch with Windham, with whom he corresponded regularly, was among the most active opponents of the peace with France. When the question

[1] As Home Secretary in Lord Liverpool's Government from 1812 to 1822, *i.e.*, at the time of the Peterloo Massacre and the repression after the Napoleonic Wars. See *The Town Labourer*, by J. L. and B. Hammond, and *P.R.*, *passim*, especially the articles reprinted as *The History of the Last Hundred Days of English Freedom.*

came under public discussion, he strongly opposed the peace-makers in *The Porcupine*. The mass of the people, he was well aware, were keenly in favour of peace; for bad trade, due to the blockade, had brought widespread unemployment, and bad harvests and high prices had caused great distress among the inhabitants of the growing industrial towns. There was talk of the chances of revolution, and Cobbett, in a letter to Windham on October 10th, 1801, said that he looked forward to a revolution with as great certainty as he did to Christmas or New Year's Day. This was written in heat, just after the preliminaries of peace had been signed, and when the French envoy had been drawn in triumph by the crowd through the streets of Westminster.

London was generally illuminated in honour of the Peace; but Cobbett's windows in Pall Mall showed no light. He had moved to 11 Pall Mall, in March, 1801, setting up a bookseller's shop at the Crown and Mitre in partnership with John Morgan, an Englishman whom he had met in Philadelphia, and with whom he had been associated in setting up business in New York. Now the crowd surged round his unlighted windows. His wife, who had just been confined, had been removed for fear of disturbances; his children remained. All the windows of the house were broken, and the door forced. Cobbett then at last lighted his candles; but the crowd stayed round the house till morning, while another section attacked his publishing office in Southampton Street and did some damage there. These scenes recurred when the Treaty of Amiens was formally ratified in March, 1802. Again Cobbett refused to illuminate, and again his house was attacked. On both occasions the public authorities were slow in coming to his protection; but this time a troop of Horse Guards at length arrived and dispersed the crowd. Six men were arrested, and three sent for trial and heavily fined. They proved to be Civil Service clerks, and persons closely associated with the Government's paid literary supporters. Cobbett refused to join in a recommendation to clemency, saying, "Certainly not, sir; I came here to ask for justice and not for mercy."

Though *The Porcupine* did not sell largely, it attracted a great deal of attention. After the riots of October, 1801, it had to be suspended for two days, while the damage to the printing plant was repaired. It resumed publication with the first of a series of *Letters to the Right Honourable Lord*

Hawkesbury,[1] Foreign Secretary in Addington's Government. In these, and in the *Letters to the Right Honourable Henry Addington*, which followed them, Cobbett attacked the Peace both for its general tendency to the establishment of French supremacy and for its particular terms humiliating or disadvantageous to Great Britain. The *Letters to Hawkesbury* appeared in book form with a good deal of other matter from *The Porcupine*, in November, 1801, under the title, *A Collection of Facts and Observations relative to the Peace with Bonaparte*, and the *Letters to Hawkesbury and Addington* were issued in a single volume early in 1802. Cobbett had by this time ranged himself in definite opposition to the Government, as a supporter of Windham, and, to a less extent, Grenville.

The sale of *The Porcupine* to John Gifford left him, for the moment, without a paper of his own. But Windham and the opponents of the Peace thought him far too valuable an ally to be suffered to remain silent. Plans were at once set on foot for providing him with a new journal. Windham and others set to work to raise funds by private subscription, and the sum needed was speedily forthcoming. "These advances," Cobbett said, in describing the transaction many years later,[2] "were made and extended upon the express and written conditions that I should never be under the influence of anybody. The money was to be looked upon as sunk in the risk; and I was never to be looked upon as under any sort of obligation to any of the parties. It was long before I would consent to the thing at all; but when I did, it was upon these express and *written* conditions. And never did any one of the persons who advanced the money attempt in the slightest degree to influence my opinions, which were frequently opposed to their own."

Thus began *The Political Register*, with which Cobbett's name was to be associated for the rest of his life. Founded with money provided by William Windham and his friends, the paper began its career as the friend of Church and State, the energetic opponent of peace with France and of all manifestations of "Gallican opinion," the denouncer of Reform and of all doctrines and policies hostile to the established order. These were Cobbett's own sentiments at the time of its establishment, and his independence is from the outset

[1] Afterwards Earl of Liverpool, Prime Minister from 1812 to 1827.

[2] *P.R.*, January 4th, 1817.

unquestionable. Windham supported Catholic Emancipation in Ireland: Cobbett felt no hesitation in opposing it. Though he used Windham's money, and the *Register* came for a time to be regarded as the Windhamite organ, Cobbett was never under Windham's thumb, and Windham never supposed that he could dictate to him or attempted to do so. The change which gradually came about in the *Register* was the change in Cobbett's own opinions. Peter Porcupine was always one to say exactly what he thought, even if he did not always pause to think twice. The *Register*, in its prejudices and arguments alike, faithfully reflects the development of Cobbett's mind.

While *The Porcupine* was dying and the plans for its successor being matured, the firm of Cobbett and Morgan continued their business at the Crown and Mitre. Their first venture, in May, 1801, was the issue of *The Works of Peter Porcupine*, in twelve volumes, published by subscription, with a subscribers' list headed by the Prince of Wales, the Royal Dukes, Canning, Addington, and many other notables. It had been intended to publish *Porcupine's Works* in America; but, as we have seen, the Rush trial was fatal to the project, and the American edition was sold as waste paper before issue to defray the costs of the trial. Now, Cobbett brought the volumes out in England, securing a long list of subscribers on both sides of the Atlantic. Cobbett and Morgan were also the publishers of the *Letters to Hawkesbury and Addington*, and of other works, new and old, by Cobbett; but in March, 1803, the business was sold, and Morgan returned to the United States, where he kept up his friendly connection, and continued to act as Cobbett's American publisher. Cobbett himself, on leaving the Crown and Mitre in Pall Mall, took lodgings in Duke Street, Westminster. John Wright, his old American agent, about this time also failed in business, and was sent to jail for debt, partly at Cobbett's instance. But either this action was taken by agreement, or they speedily patched matters up; for in 1803 Wright definitely became Cobbett's business and literary assistant in his publishing concerns—an association which continued until 1810, when it was dissolved by a quarrel to be described in its place.

State of Affairs as to a Constitutional Reform of Parliament



WILLIAM COBBETT. ESQ.

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CHAPTER VII

"THE POLITICAL REGISTER"—PARTY CHANGES—THE "PITT" SYSTEM—THE PASSING OF ANTI-JACOBINISM

THE first number of *The Political Register* appeared on January 16th, 1802, before the Peace of Amiens had been ratified, and while the discussions concerning it were still at their height. The last appeared in 1838, more than two years after Cobbett's death, an intermittent attempt by his sons to carry it on having failed. During the thirty-three years between 1802 and 1835, when Cobbett died, the paper appeared regularly, with only one short interval in 1817, while Cobbett was on his way to America and settling down there out of reach of the repressive policy which followed the Peace of 1815. For the whole of this long term of years, Cobbett wrote voluminously, contributing a considerable section of every number, and issuing through the *Register* many of his works which subsequently appeared in book form. From first to last the whole policy of the paper was under his exclusive personal direction. It was Cobbett undiluted, and it was bought above all as the expression of his personality and his views. These changed, indeed; but from the first number the *Register* possessed, what so many papers lack and what is the surest key to journalistic success, the clear impression of a personality. Cobbett talked rather than wrote to his readers: his articles had always the vividness of a personal conversation. This was true even in the early days, when the *Register* was appealing to a narrow and largely governing-class audience: it became doubly true when at last Cobbett found himself and began to talk straight to the common people.

The Political Register was, at the very beginning, a huge success. It was a new kind of journalism—the forerunner of the modern political review, with something in it of the *Spectator* or the *New Statesman*, and something also of *John Bull* and of *Truth*.[1] Every one who was any one read it—

[1] This description is meant to apply mainly to the *Register* as it was until 1816, when Cobbett brought down the price to 2d., and began to write principally for working-class readers.

the memoirs and journals of the time, amply sprinkled with references to Cobbett's opinions, are evidence enough of the fact. It equipped the opponents of the peace, the determined enemies of Jacobinism at home and abroad, with a powerful organ of opinion. It was for a time the rallying point of the New Opposition—the Windhamites—in their struggle to overthrow Addington and to compass a renewal of the war with France.

It was at first intended to issue the *Register* fortnightly; but its success was so great that after two numbers it became a weekly. The earlier volumes were also re-issued—huge tomes containing also a mass of State papers—as *Cobbett's Annual Register*. Printing was cheap in those days. No journal, no matter how successful, would nowadays give its readers the mass of facts and materials Cobbett set out to provide. The price was, indeed, high—tenpence a number; but the days of large circulations were yet to come. Cobbett declared in 1802 that *The Morning Post* sold only 1250 copies daily, and *The Times* no more. High prices—largely the consequence of outrageous stamp duties—put the newspapers out of the reach of the great mass of the people. The *Register* in its early days looked for its sale hardly beyond the narrow circles which were definitely political. The struggle for a cheap press—the great conflict of the "unstamped," in which Cobbett was to play his part—was still in the future.

Cobbett disclaimed systematic opposition to the Government; but he was uncompromising in his hostility to the Peace. So uncompromosing, indeed, was his language, that in July, 1802, the French Minister drew the special attention of the Foreign Secretary to his writings as calculated to give offence to a friendly power. Nothing, however, came of this, and Cobbett did not mitigate his violence. "One never loses anything by hardihood," he wrote to Windham in explanation of his attacks on the supporters of the Peace.

He found time, in the intervals of these attacks, to support Windham in another crusade. Bull-baiting was, especially in some of the northern counties, a popular pastime. Its suppression by Act of Parliament was proposed; and Cobbett lashed himself into a fury concerning the lamentable effects of any interference with the manly sports of the British people. Largely owing to Windham's efforts in Parliament and Cobbett's outside, the Bill failed to become law. Cobbett's first choice of a cause of popular liberty to

defend was perhaps unfortunate; but the manner of his defence has much in it that foreshadows his later and more happy interventions on the side of public freedom. We find him also, in the supplement to the first volume of *The Political Register*[1], energetically defending the Slave Trade, on the ground of its necessity to British commerce. All talk of the rights of man was still enough at this stage to ensure his opposition. He repeatedly denounced the "freedom of the Press" as a cloak for treason, though he claimed for himself all the freedom any one could require.

Despite Charles James Fox's visit to Paris and friendly meeting with Napoleon in 1802, there was never much prospect that the Peace of Amiens would last. It was clearly, for both sides, no more than a breathing-space, and so strained was the situation that the renewal of hostilities could not be long deferred. Napoleon interpreted the Peace as giving him a free hand in Europe, and rapidly pushed on with fresh annexations on the Continent. Great Britain, professing to regard the terms of peace as setting a limit to French conquest, demanded compensation for all subsequent annexations by France, and refused to fulfil her part of the treaty, especially the evacuation of Malta. Napoleon at length deliberately provoked a breach, and war was renewed in May, 1803. The Peace had failed to bring at home the alleviation of distress which had been hoped for, and popular opposition to the war had largely subsided. A new war spirit, the spirit behind the long struggle with Napoleon, was being developed, and Cobbett's was among the most influential voices in rousing it. As soon as war was declared, he wrote a pamphlet, *Important Considerations for the People of the Kingdom,*[2] appealing to the war spirit and rejoicing in the resumption of hostilities. This pamphlet was published in July, 1803, under Royal authority; and the Government itself, now anxious to use Cobbett's powerful aid, distributed it broadcast throughout the country, sending a special copy to the officiating minister of every parish in England. It does not appear whether Scotland was similarly honoured.

Important Considerations is a trumpet-call, and not an

[1] *P.R.*, Vol. I., supplement, p. 917.

[2] Reprinted in *Cobbett's Political Works*, Vol. I., p. 304.

argument. It denounces French aggression in unmeasured terms, represents Great Britain as the most quiet and peace-loving of countries, professes to regard the Peace of Amiens as a serious attempt to restore European tranquillity, rendered abortive only by French jingoism. Its final trumpet-blast is a fine piece of writing.

"The sun, in his whole course round the globe, shines not on a spot so blessed as this great, and now united Kingdom. Gay and productive fields and gardens, lofty and extensive woods, innumerable flocks and herds, rich and inexhaustible mines, a mild and wholesome climate, giving health, activity, and vigour to fourteen millions of people: and shall we, who are thus favoured and endowed; shall we, who are thus abundantly supplied with iron and steel, powder and lead; shall we, who have a fleet superior to the maritime force of all the world, and who are able to bring two millions of fighting men into the field; shall we yield up this dear and happy land, together with all the liberties and honours, to preserve which our fathers so often dyed the land and the sea with their blood; shall we thus at once dishonour their graves, and stamp disgrace and infamy on the brows of our children; and shall we, too, make this base and dastardly surrender to an enemy whom, within these twelve years, our countrymen have defeated in every quarter of the world? No; we are not so miserably fallen; we cannot, in so short a space of time, have become so detestably degenerate; we have the strength and the will to repel the hostility, to chastise the insolence of the foe. Mighty, indeed, must be our efforts, but mighty also is the meed. Singly engaged against the tyrants of the earth, Britain now attracts the eyes and the hearts of mankind; groaning nations look to her for deliverance; justice, liberty, and religion are inscribed on her banners; her success will be hailed with the shouts of the universe, while tears of admiration and gratitude will bedew the heads of her sons who fall in the glorious contest." [1]

For a year after the renewal of the war, Addington remained Prime Minister. But he was a weak man, and no war lord. Pitt was the obvious leader of the nation in arms, and, from the moment when the Peace ended, he was eager to return to power. The King's opposition to Catholic Emancipation was no barrier: that issue simply disappeared for the time.

[1] *Political Works*, Vol. I., p. 312.

Negotiations were first opened between Pitt and Addington, and Pitt was offered, first, his choice of a place in Addington's Cabinet. He soon made it plain that he would serve neither under Addington nor with Addington under another leader. Addington would have accepted office under Pitt; but Pitt preferred to make his own Government, insisting on the return to power, not only of his own followers and of Windham and the Grenvilles, the groups excluded in 1801, but also of Fox and his "Old Whig" party. For Fox's attitude was already changing. He had supported the French Revolution and opposed the war directed against it. But in 1803 he held that Napoleon's attitude made war unavoidable.

The King, however, would not have Fox in the Government, and Lord Grenville would not take office without him. For some time the negotiations hung fire, and finally, in May, 1804, Pitt assumed office, not by arrangement with Addington, but by forcing his resignation, and only by agreeing to leave Fox and his followers out of the Government. The Grenvilles, therefore, also remained in opposition, and Windham with them. Pitt's new Cabinet consisted mainly of his own followers and of a selection from the late Government. Addington himself was left out; but he rejoined the Cabinet, as Lord Sidmouth, early in 1805. The New, as well as the Old, Opposition remained outside. The war had been resumed; but the extreme war party, as well as the Foxites, constituted the opposition.

These political changes had an important effect on Cobbett's attitude. He had been in violent opposition to Addington, and now he found Pitt at the head of a largely Addingtonian Ministry from which his own political friends were excluded. At the same time, his chief cause of quarrel was removed; for the new Government was prosecuting the war with all the vigour he could require. From this time, other issues began to occupy the foremost place in Cobbett's mind, and in the columns of the *Register*. He did not change his mind about the war for some time yet; but he began to think and write more about other questions. In particular, his dislike of Pitt, already considerable while that statesman was lurking behind Addington, became greater now that Pitt was again Prime Minister. The re-orientation of parties pushed Cobbett into more definite opposition to the Tories.

Already, he had given signs of a growing disposition to challenge, not merely Addington's foreign policy, but his

policy at home. In 1803 there appeared in the *Register*, over the signature "Juverna," a series of articles dealing with the administration of Ireland. The whole Irish Government, from the Lord-Lieutenant downwards, was vigorously assailed, at once for its incompetence and for its stupid repressiveness towards the Irish people, to whom union with Great Britain had certainly brought no redress. The articles were not by Cobbett; but by inserting them in the *Register* he, of course, became responsible for them. The Government first made inquiries concerning the author's name, with a view to proceeding against him: when this was not revealed, they took proceedings against Cobbett himself. Cobbett called many well-known politicians as witnesses to his character and loyalty, but the case went against him, to the tune of £500 damages. A second case, brought against him by the Solicitor-General for Ireland, had a like result. Cobbett thereupon gave up the original MS. of the articles to the Crown, and it was revealed that their author was an Irish judge, by name Robert Johnson. Proceedings were then taken against Johnson; but the case was again and again postponed, and was finally withdrawn in 1806. Johnson then retired on a pension. This, it may be noted, was when Grenville, Windham, and Cobbett's other friends had assumed office in the "Ministry of All the Talents." Cobbett was never called upon to pay the damages given against him.

Cobbett has been strongly criticised for escaping the consequences of these trials by betraying his contributor. But there is no evidence to show whether or not he acted with Johnson's consent. Johnson was apparently powerful enough to protect himself from any evil consequences, whereas the blow might have been fatal to Cobbett's prospects at this stage. Probably the Pitt Ministry, on taking office in May, 1804, was not particularly anxious to push the case against a critic of its predecessor.

The Irish question was not the only issue on which Cobbett was already taking up an independent attitude. There was another matter, far more important in its effects on his outlook and political position, over which he diverged sharply, not only from Addington and Pitt, but from his more immediate political friends. This was the question of public finance, far more vital than most writers on Cobbett have recognised in the development of his radical opinions. The

year 1803 is, indeed, the turning-point in Cobbett's career; for, although the full effects of the change did not appear until later, it was during that year that he first began really to criticise, not merely this or that statesman, but the common stock of ideas which all the established political groups upheld. Many years later, Cobbett gave, in his *Manchester Lectures*, an account of the circumstance which first turned his mind to financial questions. There, in speaking of "loan-mongering," he wrote:

"I cannot adopt a better method of explaining this matter to you, than by describing a transaction by which means I was likely to become a loan-monger myself, and which first opened my eyes with regard to this matter. When I came home from America, in 1800, I was looked upon by the Government people as likely to become one of their vigorous partisans. It was the custom, in those glorious days of Pitt and paper, to give the literary partisans of the Government what were called '*slices*' of a loan. For instance, Moses was the loan-monger; and as the *scrip*, as it used to be called, was always directly at a *premium*, a bargain was always made with the loan-monger that he should admit certain favourites of the Government to have certain portions of scrip at the same price that he gave for it. I was offered such a portion of *scrip*, which, as I was told, would put a hundred or two pounds into my pocket at once. I was frightened at the idea of becoming responsible for the immense sum, upon which this would be the profit. But I soon found that the *scrip* was never even to be shown to me, and that I had merely to pocket the amount of the *premium*. I refused to have anything to do with the matter, for which I got heartily laughed at. But this was of great utility to me; it opened my eyes with regard to the nature of these transactions; it set me to work to understand all about the debt, the funds, and the scrip, and the stock, and everything belonging to it." [1]

Cobbett applied for advice to his parliamentary friends Windham and Dr. Laurence. They told him to read Adam Smith and Dr. Chalmers. He did so, and received little enlightenment. Next, for himself, he went steadily through all the Acts of Parliament relating to loans and banking,

[1] *Manchester Lectures*, Lecture IV., p. 95.

more especially those dealing with the position and powers of the Bank of England. He also, in 1803, read Tom Paine's brilliant tract, *The Decline and Fall of the English System of Finance*. Writing in 1796, Paine realised, quite as plainly as Pitt, the vital importance of financial staying-power in the struggle between France and Great Britain. He saw the public loans piling up, and the vast extension of paper money beginning, and he confidently predicted that the growth of the "funding system" would bring Great Britain to bankruptcy, banknotes being worth less in reality than French *assignats*, because the latter had at any rate the solid wealth of the national property behind them.

Cobbett had spoken evil and scurrility enough about Paine; but in *The Decline and Fall of the English System of Finance*, he found exactly what he wanted. "Here was no bubble, no mud to obstruct my view: the stream was clear and strong: I saw the whole matter in its true light, and neither pamphleteers nor speech-makers were, after that, able to raise a momentary puzzle in my mind." [1]

Of Cobbett's financial doctrines, based originally on his reading of Paine, there will be more to say at a later stage. Here we have only to notice that in 1803 he began to write on the subject, attacking first of all Pitt's funding system, and pointing out at once how the growth of the National Debt was leading to the rise of new classes of parasites, living on the labour of the people. "The stock-jobbing lovers of peace and plenty; the omnium-eaters; all the innumerable swarm of locusts, who, without stirring ten miles from the capital, devour three-fourths of the produce of the whole land"; [2] these were the new objects of Cobbett's aversion, dangerous enemies for a man who held himself the loyal servant of Church and State. For the tendrils of high finance were already twined closely about the altars of his gods.

The attack on the funding system soon broadened itself out into a more general onslaught on the financial assumptions of the time and on Pitt's policy in particular. Cobbett speedily learnt to connect the increase in paper-money, due to the methods of war finance, with the rise in prices. The value of money, he saw, was depreciated, and from this flowed serious consequences for the mass of the people.

[1] *Paper against Gold*, Letter XXV., p. 333.

[2] *P.R.*, May 21st, 1803.

For example, landlords were generally refusing to grant farmers long leases, such as used to be general, and were letting farms only by the year or for short terms. This was partly in order that they might more fully absorb in rents the increased value of agricultural holdings under war conditions of scarcity. But it was also because the fluctuation in the value of money made fixed money rents fluctuate in value. By yearly leases, the landlord was able to secure a higher nominal rent as prices rose. This reacted most unfavourably on the farmers, for whom Cobbett always felt strongly as the class from which he had sprung. Moreover, "one article, namely, labourers' wages, do not rise with the same rapidity as corn does. They are always lagging a certain distance behind; and, when corn rises very suddenly, the labourers' wages bear no proportion thereto. But remember, sir, or, if you should not, the farmers will *feel*, that this circumstance is no advantage to them, though dreadfully injurious to the country. The agricultural labourer never receives more than enough to maintain himself and family; and therefore, in whatever degree his wages fall off, considered relatively with the price of corn, in that degree he must, and does, receive aid from the parish, that is to say, from the farmer." [1]

Thus, Cobbett's consideration of the state of public finance under the funding system led him directly to a study of the condition of England, both of the farmers and of the labouring poor. Hitherto, his writings had dealt almost entirely with foreign affairs. Even his attacks on the French Revolution and on Jacobin principles had been the onslaughts of an Englishman on the ways of a country with which England was at war. He had scarcely tried or troubled to understand Tom Paine or the French: he had merely denounced them as the enemies of his country. In America, with its vast areas of free land, and its virtual absence of a proletarian class, he had found no intrusive social question to trouble his mind. He had looked on England from afar as a rustic paradise. Even after his return, he had moved almost exclusively in political circles, seeing little or nothing of the country for himself, preoccupied with party struggles and the overshadowing question of the war with France. But, in London, one social question obtruded itself on his notice —the rise of a new class—new to him at least, and new in

[1] *Letters to Pitt, P.R.*, October to December, 1804.

the extent of its power and ramifications—of stock-jobbers and *rentiers*, living on the country in return for no service rendered. Impelled to examine their proceedings, he found himself led from an examination of the question of public finance, to study the condition of England, the social effects of the rapid redistribution of wealth which was then proceeding. His feet were set at last on the road which he was to travel for the rest of his life.

But the result was no sudden conversion. The change in his mind was gradual. For some time after he began his attacks on the stock-jobbers and the funding system he continued to denounce not only the French Revolution, but also reform at home, with unabated vehemence. He was not conscious for some time of the direction in which his discoveries were leading him. In 1803 Cobbett was still beating the war-drum, still reviling the Peace of Amiens, and calling for a display of "national valour" as the sole means of regeneration. He had still as fine a collection of anti-reform prejudices as the veriest Tory in the country. "Except *national valour*, nothing is excluded from some share of wisdom: money and manufactures: the nasal twang of a methodistical nose; the extermination of bull-frogs: the converting of negroes into saints; Sunday-schools for making scholars of those whose business it is to delve; soup-kitchens for feeding those who are too idle to work and too proud to beg; the abolition of tithes; thick handkerchiefs for ladies' bosoms: each of these, as being *the means of national salvation*, has its numerous partisans, while, in resistance of France and her half a million of soldiers, to use powder and steel, to call on the people to buckle on their armour, is almost universally regarded as madness!" [1]

Moreover, at this time, if Cobbett had developed unorthodox economic views on the subject of finance, he was still thoroughly orthodox on the popular economic question of the day—population. "Parson Malthus" got plenty of hard words from him in later years; but in 1803 and 1804 he was still writing of the "principle of population" as a sublime truth. "Nor will it be denied that the tendency of the human species to multiply is much greater than the rapidity with which it is possible to increase the production of the earth for their maintenance" [2]—this in opposing a

[1] Article on "A Stock-Jobbing Nation" in *P.R.*, May 14th, 1803.
[2] *Letters to Pitt*, *P.R.*, December 8th, 1804.

Bill for granting a bounty on the export of corn. And in 1805 he described the principle of Malthus as "a doctrine which never can be shaken." His conversion was still far from complete.

The change, however, in political conditions was contributing, as well as his new views on the question of finance, to a re-statement and a revaluation of his beliefs. The French Revolution, as a question of Jacobinism *versus* Aristocracy, was ceasing to be a live political issue. In France, Napoleon had established himself as First Consul and thus secured a life-tenure of power. When war was renewed, it was against, not a democratic Republic, but what seemed to most English observers an Imperialist monarchy.

"The tide has turned: from popular enthusiasm it has turned back to despotism: Bonaparte's exaltation to the post of Consul for life began the great change in men's minds, which has been completed by his more recent assumption, and which not only removes the danger before to be apprehended from the prevalence of notions in favour of liberty, but tends to excite apprehensions of a different kind; to make us fear that, by the means of the immense and yet growing influence now deposited in the hands of the Minister by the funding and banknote system, we may, in fact, though not in name, become little better than slaves, and slaves, too not of the king, but of the Minister of the day, who threatens to exercise his authority alike over king and people." [1]

In England the radical Reform movement, never strong, had been almost completely crushed by governmental repression. The small working-class radical bodies—the Corresponding Societies—had died out towards the end of the century: the few indefatigable upper-class reformers, such as Burdett and Major Cartwright, had no popular movement behind them. In England, as well as in France, sans-culottism seemed a dead issue: there was discontent enough, but it was economic and not political. The Jacobin and anti-Jacobin pamphleteering of the nineties died away: new issues, and above all the struggle between England and France, both monarchies and both Imperialist, for command of the world occupied men's minds.

In flogging the Revolution, therefore, Cobbett appeared for the time to be flogging a dead horse. Moreover, Fox and his followers, who had supported the Revolution and opposed

[1] *P.R.*, September 1st, 1804.

the war, had since 1801 sat on the Opposition benches in Parliament side by side with the militant enemies of the Peace of Amiens. The New and Old Oppositions had acted together then, and, when Grenville and Windham, refusing to enter the Cabinet without Fox, were left outside on Pitt's return to power in 1804, their unity became closer. The main cause of difference had disappeared; for Fox, while he still desired a good peace with France, acquiesced in the renewal of war in 1803, and felt towards Napoleonic Imperialism little of the goodwill he had displayed towards the Republic. Cobbett had heaped on Fox all manner of abuse; but now Fox and Windham were acting together, and there was nothing in their collaboration for Cobbett to disapprove. When negotiations were in progress for Fox's inclusion in Pitt's Ministry of 1804, the *Register* supported his claims, and Cobbett openly avowed and justified his change of attitude, affirming at the same time that "with regard to the French Revolution itself, as well as with regard to the justice and necessity of the last war with France, I still retain all those principles, as to which I was, both during and since the war, opposed to Mr. Fox." [1]

Fox was not the only statesman of whom Cobbett was revising his opinion. He had attacked in even more bitter terms Sir Francis Burdett, the leading personality among the independent Radical reformers and a man regarded as far more extreme than Fox and his Whig followers. But in September, 1804, when Burdett stood for Middlesex against a Pittite candidate, Cobbett gave him a hardly qualified support.

"The objections to him, as a Member of Parliament, must be confined to his political principles and views, and for the evidence of these we are referred to his *former* conduct. To such a standard I object, on many accounts. It is to revive the political animosities of the late war, and to divide us into parties bitterly hostile to each other, at a time which imperiously calls for a union of all hands and hearts in defence of our country and of that monarchy, under which alone our liberties can exist." [2]

In other words, the time had gone by when a spirited foreign policy and anti-Jacobin ideas necessarily went together. The rise of Napoleon had changed the issues: party sympathies and programmes had to be thought out anew.

[1] *Letters to Pitt*, *P.R.*, October 6th, 1804.
[2] *P.R.*, September 1st, 1804.

CHAPTER VIII

FARNHAM RE-VISITED—LIFE AT BOTLEY—COBBETT AS EMPLOYER—HE TAKES UP THE LABOURERS' CASE

FROM 1800 to 1804 Cobbett, preoccupied by his political concerns in London, seems to have given few thoughts to the countryside. Ever since his journey to London in 1783 he had been, except for his brief sojourn in France, a dweller in barrack or in town; but his love of the country and of life in the open had not died away. He had, indeed, shortly after his return to England in 1800, revisited Farnham, his native place.

"I had to cross in my post-chaise the long and dreary heath of Bagshot. Then at the end of it to mount a hill called Hungry Hill; and from that hill I knew that I should look down into the beautiful and fertile vale of Farnham. My heart fluttered with impatience, mixed with a sort of fear, to see all the scenes of my childhood; for I had learned before of the death of my father and mother. There is a hill, not far from the town, called *Crooksbury Hill*, which rises up out of a flat, in the form of a *cone*, and is planted with Scotch fir-trees. Here I used to take up the eggs and young ones of crows and magpies. The hill was a famous object in the neighbourhood. It served as the superlative degree of height. *As high as Crooksbury Hill* meant with us the utmost degree of height. Therefore, the first object that my eyes sought was this hill. *I could not believe my eyes!* Literally speaking, I, for a moment, thought the famous hill removed, and a little heap put in its stead; for I had seen in New Brunswick a single rock, or hill of solid rock, ten times as big, and four or five times as high! The post-boy, going down-hill, and not a bad road, whisked me, in a few minutes, to the Bush Inn, from the garden of which I could see the prodigious *sand hill*, where I had begun my gardening works. What a nothing! But now came rushing into my mind all at once, my pretty little garden, my little blue smock-frock, my little nailed shoes, my pretty pigeons, that I used to feed out of my hands, the last kind words and

tears of my gentle-hearted and affectionate mother! I hastened back into the room. If I had looked a moment longer, I should have dropped. When I came to reflect, *what a change*! I looked down at my dress. What a change! What scenes I had gone through! How altered my state! I had dined the day before at the Secretary of State's in company with *Mr. Pitt*, and had been waited on by men in gaudy liveries. I had had no one to assist me in the world. No teachers of any sort. Nobody to shelter me from the consequences of bad, and no one to counsel me to good behaviour. I felt proud. The distinctions of rank, birth, and wealth, all became nothing in my eyes; and from that moment (less than a month after my arrival in England), I resolved never to bend before them." [1]

After settling down in London, Cobbett made occasional visits to the country; but his journalistic ventures tied him closely to his office, and as long as he had to attend to the business as well as the writing, any considerable absence from town was impossible. In 1803, as we have seen, John Wright was installed as his assistant, and to Wright Cobbett gradually transferred—with disastrous consequences in the long run—practically the whole business management of the *Register*. Wright, moreover, acted as a sort of sub-editor, and could safely be left to see the *Register* through the press as long as Cobbett's copy was faithfully delivered. When, therefore, Wright was fully installed, and had established himself in a position of trust, there was no longer the same necessity for Cobbett to remain permanently in town. He was free to gratify his desire for a country life and at least a partial return to the pursuits of his childhood. In 1804 he was absent from London for prolonged periods, staying with friends in the country and sending in his copy for the *Register*, while Wright kept him plentifully supplied with the political news of the town, both by letter and by forwarding newspapers and other documents.

During the visits of 1804 Cobbett, who had definitely made up his mind to settle down in the country, not too far from London, was still looking out for a suitable home. He found just the place he wanted in the village of Botley, five miles from Southampton and on the River Hamble. Here, in July, 1805, he bought a farm, called Fairthorn, on the river between Botley and Curbridge. To the original

[1] *A Year's Residence in America* (1818), p. 56.

farm he gradually added more land, including eighty-seven acres of woodland, which he purchased for development in 1808. The farmhouse was roomy and comfortable, and there, towards the end of 1805, Cobbett definitely settled down with his family. It was his residence until his bankruptcy in 1820. He had four children when he settled there —Anne and William, born in America, and John Morgan and James Paul,[1] born while he was living in London. A second daughter, Eleanor, was born at Botley in December, 1805, and a third, Susan, in 1807. Richard Baverstock Brown Cobbett, also born at Botley in 1814, completes the tale of his children who survived infancy. Several others were still-born, or died shortly after birth. It was no sinecure to be Cobbett's wife.

Advice to Young Men, one of the best and liveliest of Cobbett's books, contains many records of his life at Botley, and especially of his ways with his children. He had strong views about the way in which children should be brought up. "Did we, who have bred up a family of children, and have had servants during the greater part of the time, *never* leave a young child to the care of servants? Never; no, not for *one single hour*. Were we, then, tied constantly to the house with them? No; for we sometimes took them out; but one or the other of us *was always with them*, until, in succession, they were able to take good care of themselves; or until the elder ones were able to take care of the younger, and then *they* sometimes stood sentinel in our stead. How could we *visit*, then? Why, if both went, we bargained beforehand to take the children with us; and if this were a thing not to be proposed, one of us went, and the other stayed at home, the latter being very frequently my lot. From this we *never* once deviated. We cast aside all considerations of convenience; all calculations of expense; all thoughts of pleasure of every sort. And what could have equalled the reward that we have received for our care and for our unshaken resolution in this respect?"[2]

[1] John Morgan Cobbett, born in 1800, was named after Cobbett's partner in business in America and at the Crown and Mitre. James Paul, born in 1803, was called after a Philadelphian friend, a benefactor of Cobbett's in later years, with whom he had often stayed while in America. Richard Baverstock Brown was named after another friend and benefactor. For the later careers of Cobbett's children see p. 437.

[2] *Advice to Young Men*, par. 256.

Cobbett insisted on the importance of good health, air, and exercise. But he also had a maxim that prevented him from making his views a burden to his children. This was to "make their lives as pleasant as you possibly can."

"I have always admired the sentiment of Rousseau upon this subject. 'The boy dies, perhaps at the age of ten or twelve. Of what *use*, then, all the restraints, all the privations, all the pain, that you have inflicted upon him? He falls, and leaves your mind to brood over the possibility of your having abridged a life so dear to you.' I do not recollect the very words; but the passage made a deep impression upon my mind, just at the time, too, when I was about to become a father; and I was resolved never to bring upon myself remorse from such a cause; a resolution from which no importunities, coming from what quarter they might, ever induced me, in one single instance, or for one single moment, to depart. I was resolved to forego all the means of making money, all the means of living in anything like fashion, all the means of obtaining fame or distinction, to give up everything, to become a common labourer rather than make my children lead a life of restraint and rebuke. . . . I was resolved that, as long as I could cause them to do it, my children should lead happy lives; and happy lives they did lead, if ever children did in this whole world." [1]

Cobbett realised the importance of book-learning, and even more the pleasure of it. "Being myself fond of *book-learning*, I naturally wished them to possess it too; but never did I impose it on any one of them. . . . I effected everything without scolding, and even without *command*. My children are a family of *scholars*, each sex its appropriate species of learning; and I could safely take my oath, that I never *ordered* a child of mine, son or daughter, *to look into a book*, in my life." [2] "My first duty," he writes, "was to make them healthy and strong, if I could, and to give them as much enjoyment of life as possible. Born and bred up in the sweet air myself, I was resolved that they should be bred up in it too. Enjoying rural scenes and sports, as I have done, when a boy, as much as any one that ever was born, I was resolved that they should have the same enjoyment tendered to them." [3]

[1] *Advice to Young Men*, par 281. [2] *Ibid.*, pars. 288 and 290.
[3] *Ibid.*, par. 288.

Outdoor sports he encouraged: indoor games he cordially disliked. "What need of *cards, dice,* or of any *games,* to '*kill time*'; but, in fact, to implant in the infant heart a love of *gaming,* one of the most destructive of all human vices?"[1]

"We wanted no stimulants of this sort to *keep up our spirits*; our various pleasing pursuits were quite sufficient for that; and the *book-learning* came among the rest of the pleasures, to which it was, in some sort, necessary. I remember that, one year, I raised a prodigious crop of fine *melons,* under hand-glasses; and I learned how to do it from a gardening book; or, at least, that book was necessary to remind me of the details. Having passed part of an evening in talking to the boys about getting this crop, 'Come,' said I, 'now let us *read the book.*' Then the book came forth, and to work we went, following very strictly the precepts of the book. I read the thing but once, but the eldest boy read it, perhaps, twenty times over; and explained all about the matter to the others. Why, here was a *motive*! Then he had to tell the garden-labourer *what to do* to the melons. Now, I will engage, that more was really *learned* by this single *lesson* than would have been learned by spending, at this son's age, a year at school; and he *happy* and *delighted* all the time."[2]

Cobbett believed in home life and home influence, with good and intelligent parents, as greatly better than any sort of school education. Where the parents could be at home with the children, and could teach them by methods like his own, he saw no need of schools. But he realised that many men's occupations took them too much from home to permit of this; and therefore some schools there must be. "If, after all, however, a school must be resorted to, let it, if in your power, be as little populous as possible. As 'evil communications corrupt good manners,' so the more numerous the assemblage, and the more extensive the communication, the greater the chance of corruption. *Jails, barracks, factories* do not corrupt by their walls, but by their condensed numbers. Populous cities corrupt from the same cause; and it is, because *it must be,* the same with regard

[1] *Advice to Young Men,* par. 292.

[2] *Advice to Young Men,* par. 298. The whole of Letter V. should be read for getting a clear impression both of Cobbett's character and manner of life, and of his quality as a writer.

to schools, out of which children come not what they were when they went in. The master is, in some sort their enemy; he is their overlooker; he is a spy upon them; his authority is maintained by his absolute power of punishment; *the parent commits them to that power*; to be taught is to be held in restraint; and, as the sparks fly upwards, the teaching and the restraint will not be divided in the estimation of the boy. Besides all this, there is the great disadvantage of *tardiness* in arriving at years of discretion. If boys live only with boys, their ideas will continue to be boyish. . . . It is, *at last*, only by hearing *men* talk and seeing men act, that they learn to talk and act like men." [1]

For girls, he disliked schools even more. "What duty so sacred as that imposed on a mother to be the teacher of her daughters!" [2]

He sent his own children to school as little as he could. "My two eldest sons, when about eight years old, were, for the sake of their health, placed for a very short time, at a clergyman's at Mickledever, and my eldest daughter, a little older, at a school a few miles from Botley, to avoid taking them to London in the winter. But, with these exceptions, never had they, while children, *teacher* of any description; [3] and I never, and nobody else ever, taught any one of them to read, write, or anything else, except in *conversation*; and yet, no man was ever more anxious to be the father of a family of clever and learned persons." [4]

However busy Cobbett might be—and he was always very busy—he found time to be with his children, to talk to them, and to teach them by example. He tells some pretty stories of his ways of helping them to the acquisition of good habits. "To teach the children the habit of *early rising* was a great object; and every one knows how young people cling to their beds, and how loth they are to go to those beds. This was a capital matter; because here were *industry* and *health* both at stake. Yet, I avoided *command* even here; and merely offered a *reward*. The child that was *downstairs* first, was called the LARK *for that day*; and, further, *sat at my right hand at dinner*. They soon discovered, that to rise

[1] *Advice to Young Men*, par. 308. [2] *Ibid*, par. 309.

[3] See, however, p. 167. [4] *Advice to Young Men*, par. 290.

early, they must *go to bed early*; and thus was this most important object secured." [1]

"Children," wrote Cobbett, "naturally want to be *like* their parents, and to *do what they do*." [2] This was the principle on which he worked. Farming knowledge and book knowledge "*crept in*, of its own accord, by imperceptible degrees." [3] He interested his children and made them partners in his daily concerns about the farm; and, very young, they began to take an interest in his literary work also, and to help him in a hundred ways. With his abundant energy, he could be at once farmer and writer and supervisor of his children's studies and upbringing; and the accounts of other observers leave no doubt that the household at Botley was extraordinarily happy and united. Cobbett was a good father because he sympathised: he treated his children, not as nuisances, but as human beings with interests like his own; and they responded with abounding affection. Perhaps, his personality was too strong for them, and some of them tended to become but shadows of their father. Perhaps this was where Cobbett's scheme of education a little broke down, by giving his children too little contact with others of their own age. For this, in truth, and not its superiority as a means of formal education, is the case for the school for children coming from good homes. To make the school the one means of education is one evil: to deny the school altogether has also its dangers. But of Cobbett's views on education there will be more to say at a later stage.

Be this as it may, there is no doubt that Cobbett was loved, and his children happy. The often-quoted account of a visit to Botley, given by Miss Mitford, author of *Our Village*, makes a graphic picture of the household, and, though it refers to a rather later period, can best be cited here.

"He had at that time a large house at Botley, with a lawn and gardens sweeping down to the Bursleden River, which divided his territories from the beautiful grounds of the old friend, where we had been originally staying, the great squire of the place. His own house—large, high, massive, red, and square, and perched on a considerable eminence—always struck me as being not unlike its proprietor. . . . I never saw hospitality more genuine, more

[1] *Advice to Young Men*, par. 292. [2] *Ibid.*, par. 297. [3] *Ibid.*

simple, or more thoroughly successful in the great end of hospitality, the putting of everybody completely at ease. There was not the slightest attempt at finery, or display, or gentility. They called it a farm-house, and everything was in accordance with the largest idea of a great English yeoman of the old time. Everything was excellent, everything abundant—all served with the greatest nicety by trim waiting-damsels: and everything went on with such quiet regularity, that of the large circle of guests not one could find himself in the way. I need not say a word more in praise of the goodwife . . . to whom this admirable order was mainly due. She was a sweet, motherly woman, realising our notion of one of Scott's most charming characters, *Ailie Dinmont*, in her simplicity, her kindness, and her devotion to her husband and her children.

"At this time William Cobbett was at the height of his political reputation; but of politics we heard little, and should, I believe, have heard nothing, but for an occasional red-hot patriot, who would introduce the subject, which our host would fain put aside and get rid of as soon as possible. There was something of *Dandie Dinmont* about him, with his unfailing good-humour and good spirits—his heartiness, his love of field sports, and his liking for a foray. He was a tall, stout man, fair, and sunburnt, with a bright smile, and an air compounded of the soldier and the farmer, to which his habit of wearing an eternal red waistcoat contributed not a little. He was, I think, the most athletic and vigorous person that I have ever known. Nothing could tire him. At home in the morning he would begin by mowing his own lawn, beating his gardener, Robinson, the best mower, except himself, in the parish, at that fatiguing work.

"For early rising indeed he had an absolute passion, and some of the poetry that we trace in his writings, whenever he speaks of scenery or rural objects, broke out in his method of training his children into his own matutinal habits. The boy who was first downstairs was called the Lark for the day, and had, amongst other indulgences, the pretty privilege of making his mother's nosegay and that of any lady visitors. Nor was this the only trace of poetical feeling that he displayed. Whenever he described a place, were it only to say where such a covey lay, or such a hare

was found sitting, you could see it, so graphic—so vivid—so true was the picture." [1]

By the time of Miss Mitford's visit Cobbett's house at Botley had become a regular resort for Radicals and Reformers. He was very hospitable; and he enjoyed nothing better than presiding over a large party of friends and sympathisers. But this came later, when he had thrown in his lot fully with the Radicals. For the early months of his residence he was busy getting the place in order and settling his style and scale of living, which was lavish without formality or ostentation. He was busy also planting trees; for wherever he settled in the country this was his chief delight. His agricultural books are full of directions for the cultivation of trees; and in later years, he wrote article after article in the *Register* giving practical hints to farmers on this subject. He was, in this matter at least, a great agricultural improver, who left a permanent mark on the English countryside.

Cobbett soon made Fairthorn a real home. Very soon he began to take an active interest in the affairs of the village, especially in local sports and jollities. This brought him into contact with the Rev. Mr. Baker, the "Botley parson." At first, they appear to have got on well enough; but Baker was unpopular in the village, very autocratic and hard in the exaction of his tithes. Moreover, Cobbett did not like the parson's sermons—high Tory orations with which he grew more and more impatient, until he "longed to horsewhip him in the pulpit for talking such nonsense." [2] But, as a devout Churchman, for a while he sat under Mr. Baker and suffered in silence.

After a time, they had an open quarrel, partly because of some observations of Cobbett's about parsons, which he published in the *Register*, but more because they disagreed fundamentally about village affairs. They became violent enemies, making no secret of their mutual dislike. Cobbett took a delight in finding appropriate and unpleasant names and epithets to apply to the "Botley parson." "The Magpie" was perhaps his favourite, and he even broke into verse about it.

> "The magpie, bird of chattering fame,
> Whose tongue and hue bespeak his name;

[1] Mitford, *Recollections of a Literary Life*, p. 199.
[2] *Rural Rides*, Vol. I., p. 65 (Pitt Cobbett's edition).

The first, a squalling, clam'rous clack;
The last, made up of white and black;
Feeder alike on flesh and corn;
Greedy alike at eve and morn;
Of all the birds, this prying pest
Must needs be parson o'er the rest." [1]

"What a difference," he wrote from America in 1817, "between the sober, sedate, friendly man, who preaches to one of these congregations (in the United States), and the greedy, chattering, lying, back-biting, mischief-making, everlasting plague that you go to hear." [2]

When Cobbett went to prison in 1810, Mrs. Cobbett and Baker temporarily patched up their differences, much to the annoyance of Cobbett, who wrote to her from Newgate entreating that she should have nothing to do with him. He also took the first occasion from prison to renew the quarrel. The occasion arose out of the misfortunes of Daniel Eaton.

Daniel Eaton was a Radical writer and bookseller, editor of a Radical and anti-religious paper variously known by the names of *Hog's Wash, Politics for the People,* and *Salmagundy for Swine,* who had republished Tom Paine's *Age of Reason.* This was a forbidden, supposed "atheistical" book, though Paine was a Deist, and for the offence of publishing it Eaton was sentenced to stand in the pillory, and to two years' imprisonment. Cobbett, himself in jail, had a fellow-feeling for the sufferer. It would be better, he urged, if Paine was wrong, to refute him instead of suppressing his books. And he accordingly challenged the "Botley parson" to produce a reasoned answer to Paine, promising, if he would, to publish it, through Eaton's publishing house, at his own expense. Mr. Baker at first accepted the challenge, but subsequently backed out. The quarrel between him and Cobbett then became more bitter than ever. In later years, whenever Cobbett wanted an evil example of corruption and reaction in the Church, he always selected Mr. Baker by preference as the object of his diatribes.

Another incident, in which Cobbett was wholly guiltless, served to embitter the quarrel. Some persons unknown practised a hoax on Mr. Baker. "It seems that somebody

[1] *Year's Residence in America,* Chap. XIV., p. 433. [2] *Ibid.*

danced him up from Botley to London, by telling him that a legacy had been left him, or some such story. Up went the parson on horseback, being in too great a hurry to run the risk of coach. The hoaxers, it appears, got him to some hotel, and there set upon him a whole tribe of applicants, wet-nurses, dry-nurses, lawyers with deeds of conveyance for borrowed money, curates in want of churches, coffinmakers, travelling companions, ladies' maids, dealers in Yorkshire hams, Newcastle coal, and dealers in dried night-soil at Islington. In short, if I am rightly informed, they kept the parson in town for several days, bothering him three parts out of his senses, compelled him to escape, as it were from a fire, and then, when he got home, he found the village posted all over with handbills giving an account of his adventure, under the pretext of offering £500 as a reward for a discovery of the hoaxers!" [1] The parson thought Cobbett had done this; but Cobbett had nothing to do with it. Apparently, the "Botley parson" had other enemies besides Peter Porcupine.

It will be seen that Mr. Baker was something of a character in his way. Many stories of him found their way into the *Register*, and many more survived in local tradition as late as the 'seventies, when Cobbett's faithful biographer, Edward Smith, went down to Botley in search of local colour. Baker was horsewhipped by the village doctor: he adjured the parish clerk to thrash his wife for not coming to church, and was advised to try the medicine first on Mrs. Baker; he came to fisticuffs with the doctor in the vestry; and when Cobbett in public called him "an abominable liar," the assembled villagers cheered wildly.[2]

Edward Smith also tells of Cobbett an excellent story which survived in local tradition. On one occasion, Cobbett wanted his labourers at Botley to work on a Sunday, on some special job that needed finishing. He offered them double time payment, and they agreed. "The day's work being done, a grand dinner was provided, during which Cobbett went round the table and put everybody's money in front of him. This being done, he said, 'Now, if you do go to hell for working on a Sunday, don't go and say you ben't paid!'" [3]

If the parson was unpopular, Cobbett soon made himself

[1] *Rural Rides*, Vol. I. (Everyman edition), p. 186.

[2] Smith, *William Cobbett*, Vol. II., p. 151. [3] *Ibid.*

thoroughly at home with the people of Botley. Hardly had he settled down there when he promoted a single-stick competition which drew to the village the most redoubtable players of all Hampshire and Wiltshire. Cobbett was an enthusiast for sport, particularly if it involved an element of danger and hardihood. We have seen him already defending bull-baiting against legislative attack; and in a letter to Windham describing the single-stick competition at Botley, he dwelt on the endurance demanded. "The object," he wrote, "is to break the opponent's head so that the blood may run an inch." His attitude on this point is clearly stated in an article in the *Register* of 1805. A man had been killed in a bout of fisticuffs, by bursting a bloodvessel, and a jury had given a verdict of murder. "One may confidently hope," wrote Cobbett, "that this will not be the instance in which the last blow will be struck at that manly, that generous mode of terminating quarrels between the common people, a mode by which the common people of England have, for ages, been distinguished from those of all other countries." [1]

In the decay of "manly sports" Cobbett saw signs of national degeneracy.

"Commerce, Opulence, Luxury, Effeminacy, Cowardice, Slavery: these are the stages of national degradation. We are in the fourth; and, I beg the reader to consider, to look into history, to trace states in their fall, and then say how rapid is the latter part of the progress! Of the symptoms of *effeminacy* none is so certain as a change from athletic and hardy sports, or exercises, to those requiring less bodily strength, and exposing the persons engaged in them to less bodily suffering; and when this change takes place, be assured that national cowardice is at no great distance, the general admiration of deeds of hardihood having already been considerably lessened. Bravery, as indeed the word imports, consists not in a readiness and a capacity to kill or to hurt, but in a readiness and a capacity to venture, and to bear the consequences. . . . Not only boxing, but wrestling, quarter staff, single stick, bull-baiting, every exercise of the common people, that supposes the possible risk of life or limb, and, of course, that tends to prepare them for deeds of bravery of a higher order, and, by the means of those deeds and of the character and consequence naturally growing

[1] *P.R.*, August 10th, 1805.

out of them, to preserve the independence and the liberties of their country; every such exercise seems to be doomed to extirpation. . . . On the selfishness of the common people, particularly the labouring part of them, the Pitt system of finance and taxation has, directly at least, no hold; and, therefore, it required the aid of the system of effeminacy which includes the suppression of mirth as well as of hardy exercises, and indeed of everything that tends to produce relaxations from labour and a communication of ideas of independence among the common people. . . . Render the whole nation effeminate; suffer no relaxation from labour or from care; shut all the paupers up in workhouses, and those that are not so shut up, works in gangs, each with its driver; this do, and it is evident, that you will have no internal commotion: it is evident that you will hold the people in complete subjection to your will; but then, recollect, that they will be like the ass in the fable, that they will stir neither hand nor foot to prevent a transfer of their subjection to another master." [1]

With these views, Cobbett made his house from the first a centre for sports and games, and energetically took the lead in the life of the village. He held a second single-stick competition in 1806; and he was always to the fore at local and county meetings. With farmers and labourers he seems to have been very generally popular, and there is abundant testimony to his good relations with those who worked for him. "My people, though never hired but by the week, lived with me for years; and indeed no man that I recollect ever quitted me by choice." [2]

At a time when labourers' wages were far too low to sustain life, and it was the regular practice, under the Speenhamland system,[3] to subsidise them out of parish rates, Cobbett always paid good wages. His labourers lived rent free, and had free fuel, and besides they received usually at least two shillings above the current rates. These facts, and Cobbett's popularity with his workers as well as his neighbours, are vouched for by independent testimony and survived in local tradition after his death.

"I made it a rule, that no man that worked regularly for me should, during his being employed by me, be a *pauper*,

[1] *P.R.*, August 10th, 1805. [2] *Twopenny Trash*, October, 1830.

[3] See page 407.

that is, receive *parish relief*. I paid my men, however large their families, enough to maintain them well." [1]

Nor was Cobbett content only to see that his own labourers —who fed often at his own table—fared well. No sooner was he settled there than he was brought into contact with the most grievous social question of the times, that of the enclosure of common land. In the neighbourhood was a common, Horton Heath, of great value to the poorer inhabitants. An attempt was being made to enclose it, and Cobbett set to work at once to make an agitation against the proposal. For a time he was successful; but finally the enclosers had their way, and the land was taken away from the people. Thus Cobbett had his first direct experience of the result of the enclosure movement in dispossessing the poor of the countryside. He had already written critically of the proposal to pass a General Enclosure Bill in the *Register* of 1804, and from the time of his Botley experience he became steadily more critical, urging that, as much of the land already enclosed was not being properly used to increase production, there could be no case for further enclosures. Most of the plans put forward, he said, were "wild schemes": they involved "an outrageous invasion of private property": they fell "on title-deeds and records with teeth as unsparing as those of a paper mill"—in short, they would certainly do no good to the mass of the people, while they would do great harm to the persons directly affected by the loss of common rights. [2]

At the same time, he saw even greater evil in the rapid extinction of small farms which, with the abolition of leases and the substitution of yearly tenancies, was everywhere proceeding. The small man was being crushed out by land speculation and rack-renting, and this reacted on the political system; for the small freeholders were sharing in the leaseholders' doom and were being forced to sell out, thus losing their voting rights in the counties. "The taxing and funding, or, in other words, the *paper* system has, and from its very nature it must have, drawn the real property of the nation into fewer hands: it has made land and agriculture objects of speculation; it has, in every part of the kingdom, moulded many farms into one; it has almost entirely extinguished

[1] *Twopenny Trash*, October, 1830.

[2] Various articles in *P.R.*, August, 1804, November, 1807, March, 1808, etc.

the race of small farmers; from one end of England to the other, the houses which formerly contained little farmers and their happy families, are now seen sinking into ruins, all the windows except one or two stopped up,[1] leaving just light enough for some labourer, whose father was, perhaps, the small farmer, to look back upon his half-naked and half-famished children, while, from his door, he surveys all around him the land teeming with the means of luxury to his opulent and overgrown master. . . . We are daily advancing to that state in which there are but two classes of men, *masters*, and *abject dependants*." [2]

Cobbett was far gone towards Radicalism when he wrote these words; and certainly nothing contributed more to his conversion than the actual first-hand knowledge of the labourers' condition which he gained during his residence at Botley. He was still fain, indeed, to trace all these evils to the funding system, and to miss their wider significance. He was still in process of gradual conversion to Parliamentary Reform, still by no means an advocate of democratic ideas. But at Botley he had taken up the cause of the common people, and before long that cause led him all the way.

[1] Because of the Window Tax. [2] *P.R.*, March 15th, 1806.

CHAPTER IX

COBBETT JOINS THE RADICALS

WILLIAM PITT died on January 23rd, 1806, amid the collapse of his last European coalition against France. Austria, crushed by the overwhelming defeats of Ulm and Austerlitz, had made peace with Napoleon; Prussia, abandoning her allies, had also come to terms; Russia had withdrawn her forces: two British military expeditions to Italy and Germany had achieved nothing. The naval victory of Trafalgar had, indeed, confirmed and finally secured to Great Britain the command of the seas; but on the Continent Napoleon's triumph was even more complete than in 1801. Pitt, who had abandoned every liberal idea at home and abroad in order to pursue the struggle against France to the bitter end, died in the consciousness of failure.

Cobbett had attacked Pitt living: he did not spare him dead. It was at once proposed to accord the dead minister a public funeral and burial in Westminster Abbey, and this proposal, with an expression of the sense of "great and irreparable loss," was adopted by the House of Commons against the votes of Fox and Windham and the Whig minority. Soon was added the proposal, which was also adopted, that the nation should pay the debts which Pitt had left behind. Cobbett wrote strongly against all these projects. He had regarded Pitt's influence as pernicious, and Pitt himself, with a good deal of justification, as the fountain-head of political corruption. He would have preferred, he said, to say nothing at such a time; but the proposed public "Honours to Mr. Pitt" compelled him to speak. He denied that Pitt was a genius, save in that he possessed exceptional debating talent, which he had put to evil uses. He denied "that the loss of Mr. Pitt is a subject of regret to the people." "That he may be regretted by those who were looking up to his power for emoluments, or for *shelter*;[1] by the numerous swarm of 'blood-suckers and muck-worms'; that his loss

[1] An allusion to the protection given by Pitt to Lord Melville in the case described below. See p. 108.

may be regretted, and deeply regretted, by these, I am far from meaning to deny; but that he is regretted by the *people of England* is a falsehood which, come whence it will, never shall pass uncontradicted by me. They do not regret his loss; so far from regarding his death as an 'irreparable loss,' they regard it as no loss at all; they feel and they *express* satisfaction at it; their resentment has ceased; they retain little or no anger against him; it is in their nature easily to forgive; but, they look upon his death as the first dawn of their deliverance from an accumulation of danger and disgrace." [1]

If we do not tell the truth about public men when they are dead, "Away goes," wrote Cobbett, "at one sweep all historical truth, and, with it, all the advantages therefrom derived, whether in politics or morals." [2] He thus set, in this first case in which the problem was presented to him, the precedent he followed throughout his life, of saying, on the occasion of the death of any important public character, exactly what he thought of him and his doings, without being held back by any respect for the maxim, *De mortuis nil nisi bonum.* We shall see him repeating the cold douch of uncomplimentary candour over the graves of others, and, in the special case of Castlereagh, dancing over his suicide's grave a positive war-dance of exultation. "Good form," as it was ordinarily understood, did not appeal to Cobbett. He believed in saying exactly what he thought and felt upon all occasions. He did not affect a sorrow or an admiration which he did not feel. This infuriated his enemies, and shocked some of his friends; but their adverse opinions did not affect him. He had, moreover, a political justification: he held that the dead were exploited by the living for their own ends. "Peace to those ashes, with all my heart! Profound peace to them, as far as historical truth will permit. But, let it be real peace; peace on both sides; let them not be raked up for the purposes of annoying us; let them lie quiet; let them not be thrown either in our eyes or our teeth; for, if they are, we must, and we certainly shall, as in self-defence and in duty we are bound, throw them back again." [3]

[1] *P.R.*, February 1st, 1806. The words "blood-suckers and muck-worms" are quoted from Lord Chatham, who applied them to the corrupt hangers-on of politics. Cobbett also accused Pitt of actual corruption in the use of public money.

[2] *P.R.*, February 1st, 1806. [3] *Ibid.*

Pitt's death meant a complete change of Government.[1] George III., indeed, attempted to get the Ministry reconstructed under Lord Hawkesbury, afterwards Earl of Liverpool and Prime Minister from 1812 to 1827; but Hawkesbury knew the weakness of his position and refused the task. The king then turned to Lord Grenville, and agreed to the inclusion of Fox in the Ministry as the price of Grenville's acceptance. The Old and New Oppositions combined, with certain elements from the old Government, including the inevitable Sidmouth, to form the Ministry of All the Talents. Grenville was First Lord of the Treasury, Fox Foreign Secretary, Erskine Lord Chancellor, Grey at the Admiralty, and Windham, Cobbett's friend, Secretary of State for War and the Colonies. The Whig influence predominated.

In the new Ministry Cobbett's friends and patrons were at last in office, and, had he been like many other pamphleteers and journalists of the time, he would have settled down to steady support of their conduct, right or wrong. The event was very different. Within a week or two, he had opened his big guns on the Ministers; within a few months his severance from them, and from orthodox politics as a whole, had become complete. For at least two years before this he had been vigorously attacking all manner of abuses in Church and State—the financial system, the immense prevalence of pensions and sinecures held by the great and their friends and hangers-on, maladministration in the fighting services and the civil departments, definite corruption in high places. The range and vigour of his denunciations had steadily increased; but he had continued to attribute all these evils mainly to one man, and to the system for which he held that man responsible. William Pitt was to him the root of all evil—the Pitt system the origin of every abuse. In 1805 there had been a gross scandal at the Admiralty; it had been revealed that large sums of public money had been applied to improper uses, or even merely appropriated by responsible officials. Lord Melville, better known as Henry Dundas, Pitt's closest political associate, who was First Lord of the Admiralty in Pitt's Ministry, was at least indirectly implicated, though the blame was assigned to his deputy,

[1] Cobbett, who had vigorously attacked Pitt in his lifetime, pursued him no less vigorously when he was dead. In common with Fox and Windham, he opposed the public funeral which was voted by Parliament, and he waxed very indignant over the decision of Parliament to pay Pitt's debts.

and Melville himself was acquitted when he was impeached,[1] on Samuel Whitbread's initiative, in 1806. Cobbett had fiercely attacked Melville from the first, and had been led by the revelations at the Admiralty to a more general examination of the public finances, which had brought many more instances of corruption and maladministration to light. The Melville scandal is also important, because it led to the first association of Cobbett with the local politics of Westminster, in a campaign of protest against this piece of corruption.[2]

At the same time Cobbett began the fierce attack on pensions and sinecures which he kept up to the end of his life.[3] This was one of the most important counts in the Radical indictment of the political system, and brought him at once into closer contact with the Radical leaders. In 1802, he had protested against a particularly gross case of this sort, when Addington had bestowed a sinecure worth £3000 a year on his son, then a child of twelve. But this was in the course of political controversy: his frontal attack on the whole system of pensions and sinecures hardly began until 1805. Then he began to publish regular articles, and to note all gross cases which came to his knowledge, in *The Political Register*.

The return of Grenville, Windham, and Fox to power seemed to Cobbett the occasion for a complete and drastic change. He demanded of them that they should begin a new epoch in politics, that they should sweep away the whole "Pitt system," thoroughly overhaul and reform the national finances, cease to pay interest on a National Debt piled up by unjust means under the "funding system," sweep the State clean of pensioners and sinecurists of all sorts, reorganise the Army and Navy by abolishing all forms of corruption, paying the private soldier a fair wage, and opening promotion to merit, deal drastically with rack-renters and land speculators, put down the stock-jobbers from their seats, and, generally, restore the "good old days" before William Pitt

[1] This deputy, Alexander Trotter, and other officials whose guilt was clear, were brought to book. Melville's complicity was uncertain; but he did not hold office again.

[2] *P.R.*, May 10th, 1806.

[3] Windham had already had some difficulty in keeping Cobbett from making a big attack on Grenville, as a recipient of public money by way of sinecure.

and his minions had broken through to corrupt and steal.[1]

Was the change of Ministry to be merely a change of men, or a change of system as well? This was, to Cobbett's mind, the outstanding question. He began writing confidently of the new Ministers' intention to reform abuses; but their statements on meeting Parliament severely shook his faith, and within a month of their assumption of office he was in a highly critical mood. He had "anxiously looked for something very different indeed from a mere change of men, a mere transfer of emoluments; looked, in short, for a complete *change of system*, as the only means of giving the country a chance of restoration."[2] "The expectations of the people," he wrote, "were very great; for, though they did not hope for an immediate good effect from the change of council, they expected an immediate indication of a wish, of an intention, and even of a resolution, on the part of the new ministers, to make such *alterations*, to introduce such a *change of system*, as would be an earnest of future good. This expectation has not, it must be avowed, been yet fulfilled."[3]

Cobbett, in fact, made in 1806 precisely the same mistake as he had made in 1792. Then, he had mistaken for an isolated instance of corruption in a single regiment what was in reality a system of corruption extending through the whole service. In the same way, he now put down to Pitt and his satellites a system of political corruption in which all parties were involved. The politicians lived on pensions and sinecures;[4] the general corruption was, almost as much as the rotten borough, a part of the British Constitution: a change of Ministers from one party to another was most unlikely to bring any substantial reform. The men who had applauded Cobbett's onslaughts on the corrupt practices of Pitt and Addington were not disposed to reject the spoils of office, or to incur the immense odium, or bear the colossal burdens, involved in an attempt to change the system. They had applauded Cobbett's party hits: they were not disposed to run their heads against the brick wall of political corruption.

No Ministry that could possibly have held office would

[1] See *P.R.*, February 8th, 1806, for Cobbett's demands upon the new ministry.

[2] *P.R.*, March 8th, 1806. [3] *Ibid.*

[4] Windham himself was free from this reproach.

have accepted Cobbett's programme. Whigs, as much as Pittites and Tories, lived on pensions and sinecures, and secured parliamentary representation through rotten boroughs and by corrupt means. The organisation of the Army and the Civil Services to afford places for younger sons, friends, and hangers-on was of equal concern to all sections of the governing classes. Whigs were no more likely than Tories to suspend the payment of interest on the National Debt, or to remove taxation from the necessaries of life. Cobbett's disillusionment was inevitable; for he had committed the last crime of a party pamphleteer—the crime of meaning what he said. Whenever Cobbett's friends assumed office, the break was bound to come.

In some respects, precisely how it came is still obscure. Cobbett states that, as soon as the Ministry of All the Talents came to power, he wrote to Windham stating that he would accept no place of profit under the new Government.

"The moment I heard that a new Ministry was actually forming, I went to Mr. Windham, and, in the most distinct and decided manner, expressed to him my resolution, never to accept of any place of emolument under the Government as long as I lived." [1]

Cobbett could undoubtedly have had the enjoyment of a pleasant sinecure in return for his support; but he made no secret of his intentions. To Windham in particular he addressed himself; for the control of the army came within Windham's authority, and the army was still for Cobbett a matter of paramount interest. To the new Secretary for War, shortly after his assumption of office, Cobbett therefore addressed both a set of proposals for ending the corruption prevalent in the service, and "A Plan for the Forming an Efficient and Permanent Army," offered as an alternative, or rather a complement, to Major Cartwright's plan for a civilian militia based on universal service.[2] In preference to raising rates of pay, Cobbett desired a system of allowances to the parents of men serving in the army, which was to be

[1] *P.R.*, November 8th, 1806.

[2] Cobbett's *Plan* was published in *P.R.*, March 22nd, 1806; Major Cartwright's in a book entitled *England's Ægis*. Cobbett's sympathy with the plan of so great a Radical as Cartwright shows how near he was to a complete change of associations.

a standing force of volunteers, enrolled for fifteen years in all. The ex-soldier was to have the right to work as master or journeyman in any trade, without regard to legal restrictions, and to settle in any parish of his choice. Disabled men were to receive pensions equal to the full amount of their pay, and there were to be no religious distinctions, save that only Christians were to be admitted into the forces. "All blacks and mulattoes should be carefully shut out of the army."

This plan was little likely to be accepted in the War Office of the day, even under Windham's guidance; and still less likely were Cobbett's demands for the cessation of all forms of jobbery and corruption to be satisfied. Within a fortnight of Windham's assumption of power, the breach was complete. "Came away in carriage with Fox; got out at end of Downing Street, and went to office, thence to Cobbett. Probably the last interview we shall have." So runs an entry in Windham's diary, under the date February, 28th, 1806. Some letters passed between them subsequently; but even their correspondence, constant until that time, ceased on March 9th. Cobbett had broken his last link with the official parties.

The immediate cause of this rupture seems to have been, in part, the reception of Cobbett's proposals for Army reform, and in part a definite attack upon Lord Grenville which he had already delivered in the *Register*. The paper was still regarded to some extent as Windham's mouthpiece, and he got into some trouble over the attack on his chief. Cobbett made it plain in the paper that he spoke for himself alone; but the gulf between the two men had become too wide to be bridged. Windham, upright and open according to his standards, which were the common standards of the time, was no Radical. He strenuously opposed every suggestion of Parliamentary Reform, strongly disapproved of Cobbett's financial iconoclasm, and saw in the new tone the *Register* was taking a menace to all manner of established institutions which he valued. He realised, more fully than Cobbett himself, the radical nature of his comments on men and affairs. The links that had bound them together had been snapped. Anti-Jacobinism was a dead issue, and under the changed conditions their social views went different ways. Not only had the Peace of Amiens, which they had both opposed, been broken, and the war renewed: Windham had become a leading member of a Ministry which was, at that

moment, opening negotiations with Napoleon for a new peace. In opposition, Cobbett and Windham might have gone on for a while acting together: as soon as the Opposition became the Government there was bound to be a break.

Hostility to the Ministry of All the Talents developed gradually in the *Register* from week to week. Soon Cobbett became convinced that all the essential elements of the Pitt system—the financial policy, corruption, the holding and granting of pensions and places, would continue under their successors. The curious can trace in the *Register* the gradual process of his disillusionment. By May it had gone far enough for him to signalise it by a symbolic action.

The borough of Honiton, in Devonshire, had then the privilege of returning two members to Parliament. One of these, a Mr. Robson, had been very active in following up scandals concerning the improper expenditure of public money, especially in the War Office. The other, Mr. Cavendish Bradshaw, accepted in May, 1806, the lucrative sinecure of Teller of the Irish Exchequer, and had to seek re-election. Cobbett, hoping, perhaps, that Robson had prepared the soil, was determined that Bradshaw should be opposed. He first made efforts to get some well-known man to come forward; then, failing in these, he determined to offer himself as a candidate, and put forward an election address through the *Register*. His declaration of principles was confined to a single point, the burden of taxation due to improper expenditure on placemen and pensioners. As the most telling way of driving this point home, and also the clearest declaration of his own political principles, he gave an explicit pledge, which he coupled with a second declaration not very likely to appeal to a body of electors—four hundred in number—most of whom were used to look on their votes as a source of profit.

"As to professions, Gentlemen, so many and so loud, upon such occasions, have they been; so numerous are the instances, in which the foulness and shamelessness of the apostasy have borne an exact proportion to the purity and solemnity of the vow; so completely, and with such fatal effect, have the grounds of confidence been destroyed, that it is now become necessary, upon all occasions like the present, to give a pledge, such as every man can clearly understand, and such as it is impossible to violate without exposing the violator to detection and to all the consequences of detected

hypocrisy and falsehood; and such a pledge I now give in declaring, that, whether you elect me or not, I never, as long as I live, either for myself, or for, or through the means of, any one of my family, will receive, under any name, whether of salary, pension, or other, either directly or indirectly, one single farthing of the public money; but, without emolument, compensation, or reward of any kind or in any shape, will, to the utmost of my ability, watch over and defend the property, the liberties, and the privileges of the people, never therefrom separating, as I never yet have, the just and constitutional rights and prerogatives of the Crown. . . .

"But, Gentlemen, as it is my firm determination never to receive a farthing of the public money, so it is my determination equally firm, never, in any way whatever, to give one farthing of my own money to any man, in order to induce him to vote, or to cause others to vote, for me; and, being convinced, that it is this practice of giving, or promising to give, money, or money's worth, at elections; being convinced, that it is this disgraceful, this unlawful, this profligate, this impious practice, to which are to be ascribed all our calamities and all the dangers that now stare us in the face, I cannot refrain from exhorting you to be, against all attempts at such practices, constantly and watchfully upon your guard." [1]

Cobbett duly posted down to Honiton, arriving in the constituency on June 7th, 1806. He was driven down with a party of friends by Colonel Bosville, a leader among the Parliamentary Reformers, who were now disposed to make much of him. But he never went to the poll; for, on the following day, there arrived Lord Cochrane, who had seen the copy of the *Register* calling on some man of public spirit to come forward, and was prepared to contest the seat. Cochrane, moreover, readily subscribed to Cobbett's formula, and pledged himself never to accept any pension, place, or sinecure, though in his case the words had to be so framed as to exclude the pay of a naval officer. In view of Lord Cochrane's attitude, Cobbett at once withdrew and gave the great sailor his support. After a somewhat stormy scene at the hustings, at which Cobbett managed to make two long speeches and to quell a mob of interrupters by his sheer determination to be heard, Cochrane and Bradshaw were

[1] *P.R.*, June 7th, 1806.

duly nominated for the seat. The proceedings are fully described in the *Register*.[1]

Lord Cochrane, subsequently one of our most famous seamen, was at this time almost at the beginning of his adventurous career. He had already distinguished himself greatly on active service; but he had not mixed at all in politics, nor, as he explains in his autobiography, had he even become a Parliamentary Reformer or a Radical. Getting into Parliament was, however, even then "a long-cherished scheme"; and, his ship putting opportunely into port and Cobbett's open letter in the *Register* coming to his notice, he made up his mind in a moment, got leave of absence, and set off for Honiton.

Cochrane's method of conducting the election was all his own. He had little respect for the probity of the constituents whose votes he sought, and he soon found that he was expected to bribe his way into the House of Commons. "You need not ask me, my lord, who I votes for, I always votes for Mister Most," he was told by one "independent" elector. Cochrane, however, refused to bribe, and, despite the electioneering aid of Cobbett and a good phalanx of Radicals, was duly beaten. Then he sprung his surprise.

"Immediately after my defeat, I sent the bellman round the town, having first primed him with an appropriate speech, intimating that all who had voted for me might repair to my agent, J. Townsend, Esq., and *receive ten pounds ten*! The novelty of a defeated candidate paying double the current price expended by the successful one—or, indeed, paying anything—made a great sensation. Even my agent assured me that he could have secured my return for less money, for that, the popular voice being in my favour, a trifling judicious expenditure would have turned the scale. I told Mr. Townsend that such payment would have been bribery, which would not accord with my character as a reformer of abuses—a declaration which seemed highly to amuse him. Notwithstanding the explanation that the ten guineas was paid as a reward for having withstood the influence of bribery, the impression produced on the electoral mind by such unlooked for liberality was simply this—that if I gave ten guineas for being beaten, my opponent had not paid half enough for being elected; a conclusion which, by a similar process

[1] *P.R.*, June 14th, 1806.

of reasoning, was magnified into the conviction that each of his voters had been cheated out of five pounds ten." [1]

The effect was seen at the following election. Mr. Bradshaw became markedly unpopular, and Cochrane was triumphantly returned.

"Aware of my previous objection to bribery, not a word was asked by my partisans as to the price expected in exchange for their suffrages. It was enough that my former friends had received ten guineas each after my defeat, and it was judged best to leave the cost of success to my discretion." [2]

After the election's triumphant ending, Cochrane was plainly asked how much he intended to pay. "Not one farthing!" was the reply. He sat for Honiton in that Parliament; but at the dissolution he discreetly moved to Westminster, where he was returned, by more democratic methods, for one of the few popular constituencies of the unreformed House of Commons.

Cochrane's return for Honiton took place at the General Election of October, 1806, and Cobbett was by then busily engaged elsewhere. But the bye-election of June made a profound impression on his mind, and completed his political conversion. In March, 1806, while he had already broken with the Government, he was still writing against Parliamentary Reform, attributing the evils of society to the funding system, and holding Reform of Parliament useless while that system remained in being.

"Of what has been denominated Parliamentary Reform, I have always disapproved; because I could never perceive, in any one of the projects that were broached, the least prospect of producing a real reform. Of universal suffrage I have witnessed the effects too attentively and with too much disgust ever to think of it with approbation. That the people of property; I mean *all* persons having real property, should have some weight in the election of Members of Parliament, I allow; but . . . viewing the House of Commons as "the guardians of the property of the people," as Mr. Pitt, in his better days, described them; and not as assembled merely to discuss, or rather, to sanction executive measures, I cannot . . . perceive any ground for hoping that any practical good would, while the funding system exists

[1] *The Autobiography of a Seaman*, by Thomas, Tenth Earl of Dundonald (Lord Cochrane), p. 112.

[2] *Op. cit.*, p. 127.

in its present extent, result from the adoption of any of those projects which have professed to have in view what is called *Parliamentary Reform*; to which I must add, that, in my opinion, every such project would be found utterly impracticable; that it would, at once, drop lifeless from the hands of the projector, or, what is infinitely worse, would disseminate the seeds of a convulsion, to be freed from the numerous torments and horrors of which, the people would gladly resort to the at once protecting and deadly shield of a military despot. When the funding system, from whatever cause, shall cease to operate upon civil and political liberty, there will be no need of projects for Parliamentary Reform. The Parliament will, so far as shall be necessary, then reform itself; and, until then, no attempt at alteration in this respect should, in my opinion, and for the reasons I have above stated, be made, either in or out of the Houses of Parliament." [1]

Thus, when Cobbett went down to stand for Honiton, no proposal for Parliamentary Reform found a place in his election address. He attacked financial abuses; but his remedy was their direct abolition, and not a change in the structure of Parliament. His experience of the unconcealed bribery practised at Honiton opened his eyes. He described it fully in the *Register*, protesting against the view that would lay the blame solely upon the electors—" reproaches the more unjust and the more disgusting when they come from the *corrupters*, which is not infrequently the case. The greater fault is in those who expose the poor and miserable to the temptation of selling their votes." [2] Cobbett had pathetic stories to tell of men who would fain have voted for him; but, as one elector told him, " I have a numerous family of small children, and I cannot bear to see them crying for bread." [3]

" Can there be a statesman," Cobbett concluded, " who can say that he has done his duty; who can quiet the calls of his conscience; who can calmly lay his head down upon his pillow; who can close his eyes without a dread as to

[1] *P.R.*, March 15th, 1806. It should be stated that these words were written primarily against a proposal by the Whig, Tierney, not for a large democratic reform of Parliament, but for certain minor changes designed to prevent direct bribery and restrict plural voting.

[2] *P.R.*, June 28th, 1806. [3] *Ibid.*

where and how he shall awake; is there a statesman in England who can do these things until he has formed a solemn resolution to endeavour to correct this shocking abuse; to remove this terrible curse from the land committed to his care?" [1]

But, even at this moment, Cobbett hesitated to commit himself to the policy of the Reformers. He confessed his doubt as to the means of remedy, stating, however, that it was not, as Blackstone vainly imagined, "to be removed by the laws now in existence." At the same time he declared that, while he had no desire to be in the House of Commons, —"my habits do not lead me that way, nor any way that takes me from my home" [2]—he would, as often as occasion arose, present himself again to the electors on the basis of the principles he had proclaimed at Honiton. If none of the candidates for Westminster would make a clear declaration never to take a farthing of the public money, Cobbett announced that he would stand at the next election. He expressed, however, his willingness to make way for, and to give all possible help to, any other man who would take up the same attitude; "for again and again I repeat, that I have no desire to be in Parliament, nor any desire ever to appear in public, if the good I wish to see done can be done by others, and others there are enough and more than enough, if they will but bestir themselves." [3]

The City of Westminster, to which Cobbett thus directed his attention, was, for the whole period between the French Revolution and the Reform Act of 1832, the storm-centre of English politics. Possessing a wide franchise and a large body of working-class electors, it was a difficult and expensive field for the exercise of bribery and corruption. Its citizens, moreover, were, from their nearness to the centre of political activity and the constant attention bestowed on them by politicians of all views, keenly alive to the issues of the day. Electoral contests in Westminster were always exciting, and were usually conducted in terms of live political realities. Charles James Fox sat for this constituency: of the early reformers, Horne Tooke contested it in 1796; it was the centre of Francis Place's tireless organising activities. At this time, however, Westminster had been disarmed by means of a political bargain. Fox was allowed to hold one seat, by arrangement with the Tories, who were to hold the other.

[1] *P.R.*, June 28th, 1806. [2] *Ibid.* [3] *Ibid.*

Independent Radical candidates, with both party machines against them, stood, but with no prospect of success. The "scot and lot" voters had, for several elections, bowed to this arrangement, which virtually deprived the elections of importance, though not of interest; for, even when the result was a foregone conclusion, there was always a lively campaign.

Cobbett opened his appeal to the electors of Westminster with a series of letters in the *Register*. He roundly denounced the prevailing system of corruption and electoral bargaining, and urged the citizens to quit themselves like men, and return only candidates pledged against the misuse of public money. Especially he appealed to the working-class electors. "The possessor of the elective franchise," he wrote, "is the holder of a trust: he acts not only for himself, but for his country in general, and more especially for his family and his children. To violate his trust, or to neglect the performance of what it imposes upon him, is, therefore, not merely an act of baseness, not merely a degradation of himself, but a crime against others; and, a man so acting, ought to be regarded by his neighbours as a public offender: as an injurer of every other man; as a person to be shunned and abhorred; as a person very little, if at all, less detestable than one who betrays his country into the hands of an enemy." [1] Cobbett then went on to deal with the powerful influences making for corruption —rich men, placing temptation in the way of the poor—the Church. "Of all detestable characters, the most detestable assuredly is, what is called an *electioneering parson*. From the chalice of such a priest one would flee as from a goblet of poison." [2]

Cobbett did not hope that corruption could be altogether removed. Some would sell their votes; but honest men, and especially honest working-men, might prevail against them in such a place as Westminster.

"That there will, upon the present occasion, be *few* such men found amongst you, it would be too much to hope; but, surely, it may reasonably be hoped, that a *majority* of you will not be found of that class. The *journeyman* who comprise no small part of the electors of Westminster, appear to me to be entirely out of the reach of seduction. They are, generally speaking, independent of the power of their employers; and, if that power be attempted to be exercised

[1] *P.R.*, August 9th, 1806. [2] *Ibid.*

over them; if their employers attempt to deter them from voting according to their consciences, every means should be taken of exposing to scorn and indignation the conduct of such employers. The artisans of a workshop, led to the hustings under the command of the master, are degraded to a level with cattle, retaining all the sins of the worst description of men." [1]

The journeymen of Westminster belonged, indeed, to a superior class of workers, hardly touched as yet by the misery and degradation which accompanied the Industrial Revolution. They were handicraftsmen, working for the most part in small-scale trades barely affected by the growth of machinery. Comparatively, they were well-educated and economically independent—very different from the half-starved slaves of the new industrial towns. They had provided most of the recruits for Thomas Hardy's London Corresponding Society in the days of the French Revolution: and they were to form, in London, the backbone of every advanced movement for a generation to come. Francis Place, when he began his organising work in Westminster in 1807, found among them his most valuable recruits, and nearly thirty years later, they were among the founders of the Chartist movement.

In 1806 the Reform movement as a whole was at a low ebb. Reform, as we have seen, had been driven out of practical politics by the wave of anti-Jacobin feeling and Pitt's repressive policy in the nineties. It had been kept under by the continuance of war and the continuous dominance of home affairs by foreign politics and the French menace. The Reformers had few followers and practically no working-class backing. Cobbett, turning now in his disgust with orthodox politics to the journeymen electors of Westminster, set out on his long career of popular agitation, and lighted a candle which was not to be put out till the Reform Act of 1832, or rather, until the decline of the Chartist movement in the forties.

He appealed to the Westminster electors, moreover, definitely as a Reformer. "There always will be," he wrote, "until a material change in the representation takes place, a great majority in favour of whomsoever is minister: the representation arising from the decayed boroughs will always produce in point of mere numbers, the means of overbalancing

[1] *P.R.*, September 20th, 1806.

anything that can be done by the independent electors." [1] But he held that a few true men, with popular feeling behind them, could afford a sufficient means of salvation. Fiercely he now attacked the rotten boroughs and the whole system of political corruption.

"To hear some persons talk of an election for Westminster, a stranger to the state of things would believe, that the electors were the bondsmen, or, at best, the mere menial servants of a few great families. The question, upon hearing such persons talk, seems to be, not what man the electors may wish to choose, but what man is preferred by a few of the noblemen, though, by the way, it is well known, that the law positively forbids such noblemen to interfere in elections. Notwithstanding this law, we hear the boroughs called after the names of the peers who are the *owners* of them; we hear that such a peer has so many members in the House of Commons, and such a peer so many more; and this we, at last, have come to hear and talk about with perfect unconcern." [2]

The series of *Letters to the Electors of Westminster* began to appear in the *Register* in August, 1806.[3] In the following month Charles James Fox died. His first effort, on assuming office, had been to make peace with Napoleon; but, in the negotiations which followed, he became convinced of the impossibility of a durable peace on a basis which the English Parliament could accept. Peace would have meant complete freedom of action for Napoleon on the Continent, and this would have involved the complete domination of Europe by France—an issue in which the Foxite Whigs were no more prepared than the Pittites or Windhamites to acquiesce.

Fox's death was a severe blow to the ministers, among whom he was the one outstanding personality. It also destroyed the last vestige of sympathy for them in Cobbett's mind. It is true that, towards the end of the year, he addressed to William Windham through the *Register* a series of open letters in which he expressed the view, that it was still within the Ministry's power, by drastic reforms, to save the country; but these letters were inspired by personal feeling for

[1] *P.R.*, August 9th, 1806. [2] *Ibid.*

[3] Cobbett had already written a *Letter to the Electors of Westminster* in May, 1806; but this dealt only with a special point, arising out of the affair of Lord Melville.

Windham, in whose uprightness and good intentions Cobbett retained his faith, and not, as their tone shows, by any real hope that the ministers would rise to the occasion. For the Grenvilles Cobbett had no respect at all: Fox had seemed to him the one strong man who might still be stirred to action.

In home affairs, however, Fox had been a disappointing leader. The Whigs, on their return to Parliament in 1801 after the secession of the nineties, had refrained from raising the issue of Reform, and this was also ruled out by the terms of the coalition which formed the Ministry of All the Talents. Now, on Fox's death, an arrangement was made to hand over his seat at Westminster to a pure party nominee, a very young man of no political experience, whose sole claim was that he was son to the Duke of Northumberland. Fearing independent opposition, the party managers arranged a little scheme. In addition to Lord Percy, Richard Brinsley Sheridan, dramatist and political orator, was nominated for the seat, but he soon reached a definite understanding with the supporters of Lord Percy. At the last moment he withdrew from the contest, and left the way clear.

The plan succeeded, and Percy was returned unopposed. There was no time for Cobbett to come forward, or for an independent candidature to be arranged. But Cobbett exposed the whole plot in the *Register*, and made a trenchant attack on the Sheridans, father and son, who between them received, by way of sinecures, about £7000 a year of public money.[1] A dissolution, moreover, was impending, and a General Election took place in November, 1806. Now was the opportunity for which Cobbett had been waiting. He was accused in the press of endeavouring to thrust himself forward as a candidate, presumably on account of his published declaration that he would stand, if no other independent candidate would come forward. By this time, however, the Radicals were prepared, and their candidate was James Paull, a retired Indian merchant, to whom Cobbett at once pledged his support.

This James Paull was a curious fellow. He was born in 1770, the son of a tailor, as he was often reminded by his political opponents. Migrating to India, he built up a flourishing business at Lucknow, and became involved in a

[1] *P.R.*, September 27th, 1806.

violent dispute with Wellesley,[1] who was then Governor-General. In 1804 he returned to England, comparatively wealthy, and settled down to prosecute his grievance against Wellesley. He became friendly with William Windham, then in opposition, and Windham introduced him to Cobbett, who took up his case. In 1805 he secured his election to Parliament for Newtown, Isle of Wight; but he only held this seat for a year. Failing to get Whig support for his attack on Wellesley, he joined the Radicals, and became candidate for Westminster with the support of Cobbett and Burdett. A duel in India had already cost him the use of his right arm; and before long his quarrelsomeness was to lead him into further troubles in England.

Contested elections were apt to be exciting affairs in those days. Money was spent freely, and free beer and food lavishly distributed. Burdett alone contributed £1000 to Paull's election expenses. Violence, moreover, was common: bodies of hired "bludgeon-men" attended at the hustings on behalf of the candidates who had engaged them: it was a rare event for an election speech to be fully heard amid the uproar of the contending factions. The Tories, with Admiral Sir Samuel Hood, and the Whigs, this time with Sheridan as their candidate—Lord Percy had sought a safer refuge—were again in coalition, and the Radicals had against them the full strength of both party machines and an abundant flow of money. But they made an excellent showing. Sir Francis Burdett, then the leading man among the Reformers in Parliament—he was immensely rich and sat for Middlesex, not without the aid of his riches—was Paull's proposer: Cobbett and a good force of Radicals ran the election, with Francis Place in the background as organiser of the working-class vote. "I know no word," said Place, "so well calculated to confound an audience as the open sound Paull."[2] The Radicals shouted "Paull!" almost continuously whenever Sheridan or Hood or their supporters essayed to speak.

The official candidates triumphed; but Paull polled surprisingly well, securing 4481 out of a total of 14,717 votes cast, and getting over 3000 "plumpers." The whole Radical movement was immensely heartened by the result, and Paull's committee, keeping together after the election,

[1] Marquis Wellesley, the brother of the Duke of Wellington.

[2] Wallas, *Life of Francis Place*, p. 45.

formed the nucleus of a permanent Radical organisation. From this time forward Westminster was never without a strongly organised Radical party, until the whole political situation changed after 1832, and the Reform Act, which enfranchised the middle-classes throughout the country, destroyed the democratic "scot and lot" franchise of Westminster, and drove the Radicals there into the Chartist agitation.

We shall have a good deal more to say in this book about the politics of Westminster, and the relations between Cobbett and the Westminster leaders, Burdett and Place. We shall see Burdett getting less and less Radical, until he develops into a staunch and orthodox Whig, and quarrels first with Cobbett and at last even with Francis Place, who remained faithful long after Cobbett had thrown Burdett over. We shall see Cobbett fiercely embroiled with Place himself, and "the Radical breeches-maker of Charing Cross" denounced as the leader of a "Rump" which was betraying Westminster Radicalism into the hands of the Whigs. Though there was always, from 1806, a strong Radical movement in Westminster, we shall see that the various sections of that movement were by no means always agreed; and that candidates professing milder or more extreme forms of Radicalism fought one another for the Westminster seats on several occasions. These disputes, however, undoubtedly helped the political education of the people of Westminster. Rival politicians cultivated them assiduously, and the seed was not cast on stony ground.[1]

The General Election of 1806 gave the Ministry of All the Talents a majority in Parliament; but it had become by this time almost purely a Whig Ministry, and Tory opposition was solidifying against it. It survived long enough to carry through Fox's great measure for the abolition of the Slave Trade—its one substantial achievement—and to execute a few minor financial reforms, with the effect of raising a larger proportion of the national expenditure by taxation, and less by way of loans. But Windham's plan for a large standing

[1] Westminster politics of those times are fully described in Graham Wallas's *Life of Francis Place*. In general, the account is excellent, marred only by too faithful reproduction of Place's own views and estimates of men and events. Place, like Cobbett, had a way of belittling every one else, and claiming for himself the whole credit of all the enterprises in which he was engaged. This was one, but not the only, reason why they did not get on well together.

army, partly based on Cobbett's scheme, hung fire, and caused dissension inside the Cabinet, mainly on account of Windham's hostility to Pitt's volunteers. The Ministry was growing weaker, and, in March, 1807, the Catholic question led to its fall. Without securing the King's consent, the Whigs proposed a general opening to Catholics of commissions in the Army and Navy. George III. at once intimated that he would refuse his assent to the Bill; and although they then withdrew the whole plan, he sought to exact from his Ministers the pledge which he had actually exacted from Pitt, never to raise the question again. Sidmouth had already resigned from the Ministry in opposition to its proposals: the whole Government now refused the King's ultimatum, and placed its resignation in his hands. George III. asked the Duke of Portland to form a Government, and the Tories entered upon the long lease of power which lasted, under different Governments of varying complexions, almost to the time of the first Reform Bill.

At the General Election which followed the fall of the Whigs, the Tories obtained a majority; but at Westminster the fruits of the previous year's work were harvested. The Westminster Radicals, encouraged by their good poll, determined to run two candidates, and secured Sir Francis Burdett to run in company with Paull. Cobbett again backed Paull at the start; but, unfortunately, there arose between the two Radical candidates a violent personal quarrel. This led to a duel, in which both were seriously wounded—Paull dangerously. The circumstances were not creditable to Paull, who was a terribly quarrelsome fellow, and Cobbett transferred his allegiance to Burdett, with whom he had become increasingly friendly. The majority of the Radical committee also dropped Paull, who nevertheless persisted in his candidature, with the support of a considerable section. Lord Cochrane, also a friend of Cobbett's, appeared as a fifth candidate, and to him Cobbett and the followers of Burdett gave their support. The result, with Francis Place's organising capacity behind it, was an amazing triumph. Burdett and Cochrane were returned by overwhelming majorities, with Sheridan and Elliott, the Tory, hopelessly behind. Paull withdrew before the close of the poll, and doubtless some of his support was transferred to the two successful candidates. [1] Reform

[1] Ruined by an unsuccessful election petition after the previous contest, by the expenses of the two elections, Paull, after a failure

could hardly become a living political issue with the two great parties still disinclined even to discuss it—the Tories fiercely opposed, the Whigs divided and determined to shelve the whole question. But the popular Reform movement—the movement of the people outside Parliament—had begun, and the accession of Cobbett and his *Register* to the cause had given the Reformers a new and powerful instrument of popular agitation.

Cobbett's letters to Windham, in the winter of 1806, were his last attempt to appeal to the orthodox political leaders. They begin with a most amazing description of Sheridan's experiences at the Westminster elections of 1806. Sheridan's chronic impecuniosity was notorious, and his private creditors, despite his large income from public sources, were lucky if they saw the colour of his money. When, therefore, Sheridan fiercely attacked Cobbett's proposal that the State should cease to pay interest on the National Debt, he laid himself open to an obvious retort. He had said that he "detested" Cobbett's "recommendation for *breaking faith with the public creditors*"—"which words were hardly out of his mouth when the air rang with a shout of indignant surprise; and this unusual clamour, in which every voice had been strained to its utmost, being followed by a short interval of comparative silence, a man, from the middle of the crowd, in a very distinct voice, uttered the following words: "*Hear! hear! hear! Sheridan; Richard Brinsley Sheridan,* DETESTS BREAKING FAITH WITH CREDITORS!" which words were echoed and re-echoed through every part of the immense multitude collected in Covent Garden and the adjoining streets and houses." [1]

The election crowds of those days were quick to take a point. Elections were more amusing when all the rival candidates and their supporters gathered to a single meeting than in these days when, for the most part, political speeches are spoken only to the faithful.

to retrieve his fortunes by gambling, committed suicide in 1808. He nearly fought another duel with Elliott, one of the Westminster Radical Committee; but this was stopped by the police.

[1] Sheridan was already an old foe of Cobbett's. In 1804, still in his anti-Reform days, he had published a whole large book against him. This was *The Political Proteus: a View of the Public Character and Conduct of R. B. Sheridan, Esq.* Sheridan had attacked the *Register*, and especially Cobbett's financial proposals. Cobbett replied with an analysis of the remarkable changes of opinion which had carried Sheridan from Opposition to the Treasury bench.

Having dealt with the topic of the Westminster elections, Cobbett, in his *Letters to Windham*, turned to more serious matters. Though he had not seen Windham even once since their difference shortly after the Ministry assumed office, Cobbett was very reluctant to break with his old patron, for whom he had still a very sincere respect. In November, he could still appeal to Windham to lead the Ministry into better paths, probably encouraged by rumours that there had been differences between the Secretary for War and his colleagues, and that he had even tendered his resignation. "The present ministry have it completely in their power to endear themselves to the people; and I am of opinion, that there requires nothing but *some one man* amongst them to speak the first word." [1] This was hardly Cobbett's reasoned opinion at the time; but he still regarded Windham as a potential reformer of abuses.

The main purpose of his letters was, however, not to appeal to the Government or even to Windham personally, but to put his actions and policy before his old patron in a favourable light. He was sorry that Windham had broken with him, and anxious to justify the course he had taken. The letters, therefore, furnish a valuable statement of Cobbett's mind and policy at this time of his complete identification with the Radicals. He was keen to show that the popular cause involved neither pacifism nor disloyalty to the throne.

"I found the people of that populous city (Westminster) full of public spirit, of real loyalty, and of resolution to defend their country. In all the various situations, into which I was thrown during the contest, I heard, from no man, a single sentiment of disloyalty; and, the sentiments the most favourably received were those of attachment to the king and the constitution, and those of hatred towards their and our enemies." [2]

Radical sentiments on the subject of Reform did not yet involve anti-monarchical ideas, or a desire to make peace with French Imperialism.[3] To the arguments of the traders that peace was essential if British exports were to be maintained, Cobbett replied scornfully that "exports of every

[1] *P.R.*, November 29th, 1806. [2] *Ibid.*

[3] Cobbett came round to the side of peace some time later, but he remained a strong monarchist to the end of his life.

sort, generally speaking, only tend to enrich a few persons and to cause the labouring part of the people to live harder than they otherwise would do." [1] Many nations had prospered without exports, and France was at that very moment a clear example of such prosperity. The root of all evil lay in the claims of the privileged few to control all matters of policy. The Westminster elections had taught Cobbett, "notwithstanding all my feelings on the side of birth and of rank," that there existed "against the exercise of the undoubted rights of the people, a combination avowedly founded upon the arrogant and unjust allegation, that, on account of our low birth, we were unworthy of any public influence or trust." [2] "France, on the contrary, has exhibited a most complete proof of what *the people alone* are able to do." [3] Cobbett then referred ironically to the great services of the Royal Dukes, to whom, under the supreme command of the Duke of York, "the defence of England is now so judiciously committed": he urged the need for "something more than the wisdom and courage of our generals, great as they may be, and aided as they are by Prussian discipline and dress and by Hanoverian troops." [4]

From this contrast between aristocrat-ridden England and France, where the people had rallied in defence of their country, Cobbett drew his moral.

"It is greatly to detract from the merit of patriotism, or love of country, to regard it as an attachment to the mere soil, an attachment of which brutes are not only capable, but which they invariably entertain. Love of country is founded in the value which men set upon its renown, its laws, its liberties, and its prosperity; or, more properly speaking, perhaps, upon the reputation, the security, the freedom from oppression, and the happiness, which they derive from belonging to such country. . . . Among the mass of people, freedom from oppression, and that happiness which arises from comfortable subsistence, will always be the chief objects of attachment, and the principal motives of all the exertions which they will make in defence of their country."

And then, as the climax to his whole argument, Cobbett

[1] *P.R.*, December 6th, 1806. [2] *Ibid.* [3] *Ibid.*

[4] A reference to the reorganisation of the Army on the Prussian model, and to the presence of Hanoverian regiments in the king's forces.

[5] *P.R.*, December 6th, 1806.

made his first plain declaration that the condition of England question was the fundamental question in politics, by which all statesmen and parties ought to be judged.

"Persons who do not examine or reflect; persons, who, in certain situations of life, can know nothing of the distresses and miseries of the labouring part of the people, may be excused for paying no attention to them; but, such inattention in a statesman is, at all times, and particularly at a time like the present, inexcusable. Experience, daily observation, minute and repeated personal inquiry and examination, have made me familiar with the state of the labouring poor, and, sir, I challenge contradiction when I say, that a labouring man, in England, with a wife and only three children, though he never lose a day's work, though he and his family be economical, frugal, and industrious in the most extensive sense of these words, is not now able to procure himself by his labour a single meal of meat from one end of the year unto the other. Is this a state in which the labouring man ought to be? Is this a state, to preserve the blessings of which he can reasonably be expected to make a voluntary tender of his services? Is this a state, to prevent any change in which he must naturally be ready to make, if necessary, a sacrifice of his life?" [1]

"*We, the people,*" wrote Cobbett in a *Letter to the Electors of Westminster*, a few months later.[2] He had abandoned the politics of the orthodox parties, and taken his stand firmly—more firmly than many other Reformers of the time—among the common people, from whom he had sprung. The anti-Jacobin pamphleteer had become the democratic leader, the associate of Cabinet Ministers the leader of an extra-parliamentary campaign for the abolition of abuses. The prodigal son had come back to his own people. He appealed to them in these words:

"That, henceforward, you may reject, with equal scorn, the appellation of *Foxite*, of *Pittite*, of *Whig*, or of *Tory*; that you may, in the exercise of your elective rights, be influenced by *principles* and not by *names*; and that your conduct, by becoming an example to electors in general, or a *timely indication to the elected*, may lead to a constitutional reform

[1] *P.R.*, December 6th, 1806. [2] *P.R.*, March, 28th, 1807.

of the gross abuses that exist, and thereby produce the restoration of our liberties, and ensure the safety of the throne, is the unfeigned wish of

"Your faithful friend

"And obedient servant,

WM. COBBETT." [1]

[1] *P.R.*, May 23rd, 1807.

CHAPTER X

THE CHANGE IN COBBETT'S OPINIONS—"PERISH COMMERCE!"

The Political Register, of which Cobbett always wrote a very large part, absorbed most of his attention during the years traversed in the last few chapters. But even this, with the addition of his practical farming work from 1805 onwards, did not absorb the whole of his energies. In 1804, when he had found how to make full use of John Wright's sub-editorial capacities, he started two new enterprises. An abridged edition in French of certain parts of the *Register*, under the title of *Le Mercure Anglais*, he had produced in 1803; but this had been brought to an end by the resumption of the war. From January of the following year he began to publish, in weekly numbers, a new venture, *The Spirit of the Public Journals*, consisting wholly of articles and comments extracted from the newspapers of the day. At the end of the year this, like the *Register*, was re-issued in volume form; but its reception was not good enough to justify its continuance, and it was dropped after the one year's trial.

Cobbett's other venture of 1804 was more important. In the spring appeared the first volume of *Cobbett's Parliamentary Debates*, a faithful verbatim reprint of the speeches in Parliament. This was the first attempt at a complete report of Parliamentary proceedings, and it has survived continuously to the present time. From 1807 onwards it was printed by T. C. Hansard, and in 1811, when Cobbett was in financial difficulties, he sold it to the printer and surrendered all further interest and control. It became then, and remains now, *Hansard's Parliamentary Debates*, familiarly known as *Hansard* long after it has become the property of the State. The whole credit for its initiation, and for the provision of a full and accurate record of the proceedings in Parliament, belongs to Cobbett, though he had little to do with the actual editing of the work. This was left to Wright and other subordinates.

In 1806 yet another enterprise arose out of the *Debates*.

the need was felt for the best record that could be secured of the proceedings in Parliament up to the date at which the *Debates* began. Cobbett therefore undertook the issuing of a new work, of which nine huge volumes were published between 1806 and 1811. This was *Cobbett's Parliamentary History of England*, a vast compilation based on the available records of political proceedings from 1066 to 1803. The editing of this was left to Wright, Cobbett contributing only certain prefatory matter and a number of suggestions. In 1811 the *History*, like the *Debates*, passed out of Cobbett's hands, and was completed under Wright's editorship without his aid. Though much of it has been invalidated or supplemented by later research, it still remains a valuable work of reference for Parliamentary history. But Cobbett can claim little credit for the actual work, though he fathered it and acted to some extent as supervising editor.

One other enterprise of a similar kind, though it belongs to a period slightly later than we have yet reached, can conveniently be grouped with the *Debates* and the *History*. This is *Cobbett's Complete Collection of State Trials*, of which the first four volumes, covering the period from 1163 to 1649, were published in 1809. Four more volumes followed in 1810, and two in 1811, when the *Trials* also passed out of Cobbett's hands. The name of the real editor, Thomas Bailey Howell, with whom the work is now usually associated, was then substituted for Cobbett's on the title page.

Cobbett had even less to do with the editorship of the *State Trials* than with the *Parliamentary History*. When the enterprise was first planned, Wright set to work to find a suitable editor. He selected Howell, a young barrister, and recommended him to Cobbett. Amusing passages in Cobbett's letters to Wright, now preserved in the British Museum, relate to this transaction. Cobbett did not like lawyers, and he was highly suspicious of Howell, on the score of both honesty, and capacity. Finally, however, he was persuaded to agree, and Howell was duly installed as editor. The series has become a classic, and is still generally used as a work of reference.

It is difficult to say what were the respective shares of Cobbett and of Wright in the initiation of all these projects. Their correspondence throws no light on the point; for the planning was done in the course of conversation. But, whosesoever the ideas, the service to historical scholarship was

very great. If the editing was not always of the first order, still a huge mass of valuable material was rescued from oblivion and placed at the disposal of the scholar. Moreover, a tradition was set of making original documents widely available, and of publishing State papers, old and new, for general use. Cobbett's work of this sort in the *Register* and in his other ventures was a very valuable contribution to the cause of political publicity.

Apart from these reports and compilations, Cobbett, during these years when his political and social convictions were taking on a mature form, published little outside the *Register*. In 1804, indeed, still in his anti-Reform days, he began his quarrel with Sheridan, returning with interest, in *The Political Proteus, a View of the Public Character and Conduct of R. B. Sheridan, Esq.*, the attacks which Sheridan had made on Windham and himself. The motto of the work was—

> " He in the course of one revolving moon
> Was playwright, fiddler, statesman, and buffoon."
> *Dryden.*

But thereafter he confined himself to the *Register*, publishing his longer works as serials therein, chiefly in the form of letters to the leading statesmen of the time. The *Letters to Hawkesbury* and the *Letters to Addington*, mentioned in an earlier chapter, had proved a highly satisfactory instrument of political controversy. To them succeeded the *Letters to Pitt* (1804), dealing with the general tendency of his political conduct and especially with his financial policy and the " funding system." In 1806 came the *Letters to the Electors of Honiton*, the *Letters to the Electors of Westminster*, a very long series continued into 1807 and often resumed in later years, and the *Letters to Windham*. After the fall of the Whigs and the return of the Tories to power, came in 1807, the *Letters to Spencer Perceval*, the Chancellor of the Exchequer in the new Government. In 1808 the *Letters to William Roscoe* [1] analysed the international situation with reference

[1] Roscoe was a Liverpool lawyer and banker who has survived in memory chiefly as a writer on Italian history. He was Whig M.P. for Liverpool from 1806 to 1807, when he refused to stand again. His banking house failed in the panic of 1816. The best known of his books is the *Life of Lorenzo de' Medici*. Besides his historical works, he wrote poetry and political pamphlets. Cobbett's *Letters* were an answer to one of these last.

both to the British quarrel with America and to the war with France. Cobbett's style of writing lent itself particularly well to this form of address, and he took full advantage of his discovery of a favourable method of expression.

The years 1807 and 1808, important as a formative time in the development of Cobbett's views, contain few events of importance for the study of his life. They were passed at Botley, where he was actively developing his estate, planting trees and doing very well by the sale of timber, adding fresh ground to his original holding, teaching his children at once the rudiments of book-learning and more than the rudiments of agricultural work. He was sinking money heavily in his farming, and probably he did not know whether it was paying or not; for as fast as he got money from the land he put it back into the land. Meanwhile, he kept open house, and his pleasant home became a regular place of assembly for Reformers and persons of advanced opinions. Cochrane, Burdett, Dr. Mitford, were regular visitors, and strangers came from far and near to meet or consult Cobbett on any and every concern of life. His own pictures of his life during these years give, as we have seen, an impression of serenity and happiness seldom surpassed.

Cobbett's writings during 1807 and 1808 are remarkable for the immensely wide range of subjects with which they deal. Usually, he had some particular idea or subject which was master of his mind and intruded itself into nearly all that he wrote. But his work during these years gives rather a sense of adventure and experiment. He had changed his allegiance and became a Radical: he was trying out the effects of his new attitude on a wide variety of questions of the day—sometimes to assert a fundamental change of view, sometimes to show that his new general attitude had made no difference to his position on this or that particular question.

To some extent, Cobbett was restrained in what he wrote during this period by fear that proceedings might be taken against him. Since his break with the political leaders, he had no powerful influence behind him save the force of his own pen, and he knew that, in Government circles, the best means of silencing him was being freely discussed. His letters to Wright again and again order the softening down of this or that passage, the omission of this or that reference, with a view to giving no handle for a prosecution. This, however, did not impair the vigour of his writing, or materially

affect its range. There was enough that he could safely say in attacking abuses, and he filled the *Register* with telling exposures of jobbery and corruption, lists of sinecures and pensions, and appeals for a complete change of policy and a thorough reform of the Parliamentary system.

His views on the press at this time were strong, and he expressed them strongly. "The press, which has been called the Palladium of free men . . . has, like many other things in our political state, been so completely perverted, as to be one of the chief means, by which freedom, real and necessary freedom, the freedom which an honest and loyal man ought to enjoy, has been nearly extinguished among us." [1] The Government, he pointed out, held the threat of prosecution over every independent editor; but this was not the most powerful means by which the press was perverted. Government advertisements, then an important source of revenue, were given or withheld from motives of policy: the Stamp Office discriminated unfairly against the Radical journals, and the Stamp Duties held independent papers up to a price beyond the popular reach: the Post Office also exercised unfair discrimination: the Government itself subsidised papers which uttered what it wished the people to hear. "If ever there ever was in the world a thing completely perverted from its original design and tendency, it is the press of England; which, instead of enlightening, does, as far as it has any power, keep the people in ignorance; which, instead of cherishing notions of liberty, tends to the making of the people slaves; and which, instead of being their guardian, is the most efficient instrument in the hands of all those who oppress, or wish to oppress, them. . . . It is by the semblance of freedom that men are most effectually enslaved." [2] And again, "Some truths, and valuable truths, get abroad through the means of the press; but these are infinitely outnumbered by the falsehoods; and, if the people were left without any press at all, matters would be much better, because they would then judge and act from what they *saw* and what they *felt*, and not from what they read." [3]

The "freedom of the press" was, in short, in Cobbett's view, an illusion. It was not really free, because of the arbitrary power which the Government had over it; and

[1] *P.R.*, April 11th, 1807. [2] *Ibid.* [3] *P.R.*, August 29th, 1807.

such freedom as it did possess was perverted to the telling of half-truths and falsehoods in the interests of the rival governing cliques. Cobbett himself, since his change of attitude, was judging, not by what he read, but by what he saw and felt; and the effect on him of this going back to direct observation as the source of sound political ideas was to make him turn from the political gossip and factionism which had so long obscured his own vision.

Seeing and feeling were, indeed, becoming the sources of Cobbett's political faith. For example, he had formerly been opposed to Catholic Emancipation. Now, he supported it; but he flatly refused to agree with those who saw, in the removal of Catholic disabilities in Ireland, a means of pacifying or restoring to happiness the people of that unhappy country. In Ireland, as in England, the social question was the question of real account. "To tranquillise Ireland, indeed! Tranquillise two or three millions of half-starved, half-naked, half-barbarous people! To the principle of the Bill I have nothing to object; but to ascribe to it such amazing practical effects is, surely, most strongly to exaggerate. . . . It is the whole *state* of Ireland; it is the *system of governing Ireland*, that all men, when they speak their minds, say ought to be changed." [1] The Ministry had proposed only to open commissions in the Army and Navy freely to Catholics: even this had been too much for the King; but Cobbett pointed to the fact that behind the Catholic question in Ireland lay the whole system of misgovernment and oppression, aggravated by Pitt's Act of Union, but existing long before the Union. A change of system was wanted; and the change must be of such a kind as to lift from the Irish peasant the burden of grinding poverty under which he laboured.

Not on all questions was he so advanced. For Fox's work in abolishing the Slave Trade he had no sympathy, holding that "there is not a reflecting man in the kingdom that cares one straw about it." [2] Cobbett could only sympathise where he could see and feel. He was far too much occupied with the slavery of the labourer at home to concern himself with negro slavery abroad. He was no longer concerned to defend the Slave Trade; but he refused to

[1] *P.R.*, April 18th, 1807. [2] *P.R.*, May 2nd, 1807.

treat it as an urgent question. His charity began and ended nearer home.[1]

In particular, he was roused to fury by the plan of Samuel Whitbread, the Foxite Whig, who was also a pioneer advocate of the minimum wage for agricultural labourers, for the reform of the Poor Law. "Damn them, they would put badges upon us all," he wrote in a letter to Wright. "I should not be at all surprised," he wrote in the *Register*, "if some one were to propose the selling of the poor, or the mortgaging of them to the fundholders."[2] Indeed, worse names than selling or mortgaging might have been given to the treatment actually meted out to pauper children sent to work in the cotton-mills or apprenticed to chimney-sweeps, or to the "slave-gangs" sent to work in the fields under the authority of the parish overseers.

Whitbread was a well-meaning person.[3] He meant his reform to better the condition of the poor. But he was bitten with Malthusian doctrines, and anxious to cut down the growing burden of poor relief under the Speenhamland system of subsidising wages out of the rates. His Bill dealt with a wide range of questions. He proposed to simplify the absurdly complicated law of settlement, and to reform the system of levying rates. But at the same time he wished to introduce a system of plural voting at vestry meetings, on the ground that the existing vestry system, allowing equal rights to all ratepayers, meant that the poorer voters had the power to give away the money of others. Cobbett replied indignantly, stating the principle that relief is a right and not a charity. "It is *not* the money of others, any more than the amount of tithes is the farmer's money. The maintenance of the poor is a charge upon the land, a charge duly considered in every purchase and in every lease."[4] Moreover, if this system were right in local government, why not apply it to the election of Parliament? On this point, Cobbett trenchantly disposed of Whitbread's case.

Another part of the plan related to the hiring out of

[1] For Cobbett's later attitude on the question of negro slavery, see p. 257 and 423.

[2] *P.R.*, February 28th, 1807.

[3] For Whitbread, and for the treatment of pauper children, see Hammond, *Town Labourer*, *passim*. For a description of his Poor Law Bill of 1807, see Hammond, *The Village Labourer*, p. 179 ff.

[4] *P.R.*, August 29th, 1807.

pauper labour by the parishes, and this too Cobbett roundly denounced as an invasion of freedom. "Aye! you may wince; you may cry Jacobin and Leveller as long as you please. I wish to see the poor men of England what the poor men of England were when I was born; and from endeavouring to accomplish this wish, nothing but the want of the means shall make me desist." [1]

But Cobbett reserved his deepest scorn for that part of the project which proposed a system of public education for the poor. Whitbread had given countenance to the view that the poverty of the people arose from their vices, and these from ignorance, which could be cured by education. Wilberforce, the great Evangelical, and the object of Cobbett's extremest hatred,[2] had tried to get the word "religious" inserted before the word "education" in the Bill. Cobbett held them both in equal scorn. It was true enough, he said, that men might be helped to "rise in life" by book-learning; "it is very likely that they might have been, by such means, removed from the fields to the city; but, without allowing that that remove would have *raised* them in life, and positively denying that it would have added to their happiness, I think I may anticipate that Mr. Whitbread will concede, that *all* men cannot be so removed." [3]

"It is the lot of man, and most wisely has it so been ordained, that he shall live by the sweat of his brow. In one way or another every man must labour, or he must suffer for the failure in health or in estate. Some are to labour with the mind, others with the limbs; and to suppose what is, by Mr. Whitbread, called education, necessary to those who labour with their limbs, is, in my opinion, as absurd as it would be, to suppose that the being able to mow and to reap are necessary to a minister of state or an astronomer. The word *ignorance* is as much abused by some persons as the word *learning*; but, those who regard the latter as consisting *solely* in the acquirement of a knowledge of the meaning of words in various languages, which knowledge is to be derived only from books, will naturally regard the former as consisting *solely* of a want of the capacity to derive any knowledge at all from books. If the farmer understands well how to conduct the business of his farm, and if, from observation of the seasons and the soil, he knows how to

[1] *P.R.*, February 28th, 1807. [2] See page 259.
[3] *P.R.*, August, 1807.

draw from the latter as much profit as therefrom can be drawn; if the labourer be expert at ploughing, sowing, reaping, mowing, making of ricks and of fences, loading the wagon, threshing and winnowing the corn, and bestowing upon the cattle the various necessary cares: if this be the case, though neither of them can write or read, I call neither an *ignorant* man. The education of these men is a finished one, though neither may ever have looked into a book; and, I believe, Mr. Whitbread would be greatly puzzled to suggest even the most trifling probable benefit that either could derive from an acquaintance with the use of letters." [1]

All this, however, did not mean that Cobbett was hostile to education, but that he had, as we have seen in an earlier chapter, his own view of its proper scope and method. "Would I, then, advise every parent to prevent his children from learning to read and write? No: but, I would leave each parent to his own taste and his own means co-operating with the disposition and capacity of the child." [2]

It was public education, organised book-drill for everybody, to which Cobbett took objection. He had, as he had shown in the case of his own children and was to show later in his *Advice to Young Men*, a high standard for parents; but he could not abide the idea of general public education. Those who advocated public education seemed to him to be aiming at the indoctrination of the poor with principles of submission to authority, or, at best, with ideas of the new industrial order, which he saw submerging and destroying the peasantry of England. The kind of education that was being proposed would not, in his view, help the peasant or the labourer. It would merely unfit them for land labour, and destroy their individuality in the interests of the new capitalist system. "Some people must remain to labour; all men cannot attain to eminence in the world; and, therefore, that which is laudable in individuals, is, to say the best of it, foolish upon a national scale." [3]

Especially scornful was he of the political effects which, it was suggested, education would have upon the poor. It would teach them, forsooth, to read the papers; and a precious lot of good that would do them. Most of the papers set out, not to enlighten the people, but to defend corruption and obscure truth. Yet the men who carried Reform in

[1] *P.R.*, August, 1807. [2] *P.R.*, August 29th, 1807. [3] *Ibid.*

1832 and made the Chartist movement afterwards, were largely the men who had read the *Register*.

Apart from Whitbread's Poor Law project, Cobbett enjoyed himself, in 1807, tilting at another aspect of education. He delivered himself, in the *Register*, of a great attack upon the "Learned Languages" "which were once so serviceable to the monks and friars, and which are now kept as much in use as possible by all those who are desirous of making a mystery of what ought to be clearly and universally understood." [1] "Latin, French, Half-French, and Half-Latin, anything, so that it be incomprehensible to the people in general," [2] was what the privileged orders fostered and maintained. The "learned friends" of the close professional corporations came in for their full share of his scorn. At once, and for months on end, the *Register* was filled with long letters denouncing this subversive view, and justifying the dear, dead languages in the name of law, politics, art, literature, morals, religion, and what not. Cobbett had a famous time telling off his various correspondents, and using the question as a means of getting home some shrewd political blows.

Cobbett's objections extended, not only to Whitbread's proposals for popular education, but to all the manifestations of what he called "the comforting system." Decent maintenance, on a scale adequate to support a family in comfort, he regarded as a right of all who were willing to labour; but he could not bear the charity of the rich towards the poor. "Nothing does good but that which is *earned*. There are particular cases when acts of charity (properly so called) are useful; but I like not the system of *presents* and *rewards*. . . . The lending of cows to cottagers, and all that system of superintendence, including child-bed linen and the like, though arising, in most instances, from amiable motives, has, I am persuaded, never done any good; and, I make no doubt that, if the fact could be ascertained, fifty pounds expended in good cheer of the old fashion, would not only excite more gratitude, but would work more solid advantage to the receivers, than ten thousand pounds expended in *comforts* and spelling-books. The 'comforting' system necessarily implies *interference* on one side, and *dependence* on the other." [3] Cobbett could not bear "lady-visitors"; he repudiated charity as a solution of the social problem. "In short, I

[1] *P.R.*, August 15th, 1807. [2] *Ibid.* [3] *P.R.*, July, 16th, 1808.

am for giving the labourer a sufficiency, in the shape of *wages*, to maintain his family, and leaving him to live and manage his affairs entirely in his own way." [1] "A watched *pot*," he wrote, "*never boils.*" [2] And in answer to the objection that, if wages were to be enough to support a family, the single man would get more than he required, Cobbett made answer, "And why not? Would you have no soul of them all earn a penny more than what is barely sufficient to sustain life? Would you have them to be, in effect, slaves from the cradle to the grave?" [3] The "fodder basis," as it is called nowadays, found in him a relentless enemy.

While he was thus working out his social views, he was also gradually re-stating his attitude to the war against France. He was fiercely attacked, by Francis Jeffrey [4] among others, for making fun of the war, poking sarcasm at the Government and the generals, laughing derisively at British defeats. These things, in a sense, he did, objecting particularly to the placing of the army commands in the incompetent hands of the Royal Dukes, and to the military inefficiency arising from favouritism and corruption. But he was very far from becoming a pacifist; and he wrote, still in the *Register*, urging a more vigorous conduct of operations. His *Letters to William Roscoe*, in 1808, were devoted to a refutation of Roscoe's arguments in favour of the conclusion of peace. He would not even allow that war was, in itself, an evil. "First of all, I think it necessary to state to you my reasons for differing very widely indeed from you, as to the tendency of *war* in general, which I perceive you to consider as a pure, unmixed *evil*; and which I consider as being, not only necessary, as it notoriously is, in many cases, in the present state of the world, but also as conducive to the elevation of human nature, to the general happiness of mankind, and, of course, as being a *good*, though, like the greater part of other good things, not unmixed with evil." [5] He goes on to contrast the "horrors of war" with the far worse horrors of poverty caused by luxury "which it is the natural tendency of war to abridge."

Nor was Cobbett's warlike attitude confined to a general defence of war. 1807 was the year of the Orders in Council,

[1] *P.R.*, July 16th, 1808. [2] *Ibid.* [3] *Ibid.*

[4] Editor of the Whig *Edinburgh Review*. It was he who was so severe on Keats and the Lake Poets.

[5] *P.R.*, February 13th, 1808.

Great Britain's reply to Napoleon's Berlin Decrees of 1806. Napoleon sought to exclude British commerce from Europe: Great Britain retaliated by declaring all the ports under French control to be in a state of blockade. The military war had become openly also a trade war.

The new situation accentuated the existing causes of dispute between Great Britain and the United States. Ever since Cobbett's days in America there had been constant trouble arising out of Great Britain's maritime claims. British ships claimed the right to search foreign vessels on the high seas for articles of contraband consigned to France, and now practically all articles sent to any part of Europe were to be regarded as contraband. There was trouble, moreover, about the British claim to search ships for deserters from British ships, and to impress them as seamen. A man might be, by United States law, an American citizen, and by British law a British subject. In such cases British admirals claimed, and exercised, the right of search and seizure of the person. These claims were naturally resented; from 1807 relations became more and more strained, till at length, in 1812, Great Britain and the United States drifted into war.

Cobbett, in his writings, published while he was in the United States, had vigorously defended the attitude of the British Government and its naval commanders, and had taken to himself great credit for what he had achieved for his country by this unpopular defence. He had maintained this attitude after his return to England, and in 1807, despite the change in his political attitude, he still maintained it without the smallest reservation. Indeed, he based his defence on an unqualified assertion of the right of the stronger. Britain, by her naval strength, commanded the seas: *therefore* she had an absolute and conclusive right of search. The men she seized were, by British law, British subjects: *therefore* the right of seizure was plain and unrestricted. "The seas are *the dominion* of those who are able to maintain a mastery over all that swims upon them." [1] This has often been the tenor of British policy: it has never been more openly avowed.

On the war with France, too, Cobbett was quite definite. He opposed, indeed, the sending of repeated military expeditions to the Continent, and was disposed to acquiesce in

[1] *P.R.*, August 15th, 1807.

Napoleon's domination there, as of no great concern to Englishmen, as long as Great Britain held her command of the seas. The Continent could go to the devil in its own way; but there must be no talk of a dishonourable peace. "A war for a hundred years to come would be preferable to the subjugation of our country by France; and preferable, too, to a peace, which, in our opinion, would speedily lead to such subjugation." [1] The days of the anti-Jacobin crusade were gone; and Cobbett did not even desire to overthrow the dictator who had entered on the revolutionary inheritance. "You must be satisfied that the French are, by nature, disqualified for the enjoyment of what we call freedom—that, in short, a Napoleon, or some such master, they not only must have, but will have from choice." [2] But the continuance of the war still seemed to him necessary on national grounds alone.

Cobbett tilted particularly at those who wished to make peace on the ground of the injury that war was doing to British trade. He repeated his statement [3] that exports, so far from benefiting, mostly harmed the nation; and after the Berlin Decrees, he wrote, "It is to me evident enough that, in spite of all Napoleon's decrees, we shall still find an outlet for more of our manufactures than I think it good to export." [4] His eyes were on the rags of the people at home: textiles sent to Europe seemed to him so much robbery of the British poor. He openly expressed a desire for the diminution of Britain's "commercial prosperity." "Agriculture, *alone*, would not have made such a place as Manchester; but, supposing such a place to be a national good (which, however, I deny), it could not have been made, unless the people had first *eaten*." [5]

Cobbett, in fact, was standing up for the old agricultural England, against the new England of commerce and manufactures. Britain, he urged, could feed herself and, with a few small exceptions, supply herself with every necessity, without the need for importing anything. Exports made the few richer; but their tendency was to impoverish and pauperise the many. The agricultural labourers in especial were being driven to starvation and despair. "The commercial system and the funding system are inseparable." [6] What would it matter if the few were impoverished, if thereby

[1] *P.R.*, March 5th, 1808. [2] *Ibid.* [3] See *ante*, p. 102.
[4] *P.R.*, November 21st, 1807. [5] *P.R.*, December 5th, 1807.
[6] *P.R.*, December 12th, 1807.

the many could be restored to the means of healthy living by honest industry? The commercial case against the war, so far from being really a case against it, was a case in its favour. This was what Cobbett meant when he urged that war was a national benefit. It was bad for trade, and, on the whole, good for agriculture, or at least it could be good, if the funding system were not in operation.

In arguing this case, Cobbett drew largely on the pamphlet of William Spence, *Britain Independent of Commerce*, from which he cited long extracts in the *Register* of 1807. This was not the Thomas Spence well known as a pioneer of land reform, and founder of the Spenceans, a largely working-class, semi-Socialist group of Radicals connected with most of the advanced movements of the time, but a thoroughly respectable gentleman of family, who wrote on economic and mathematical questions. Cobbett followed Spence's view that Britain could live without commerce, and that her first care should be the full development of her agricultural resources.[1]

William Windham had been severely attacked in the press because he was reported to have said in the House of Commons, "Perish commerce, but let the Constitution live!" The words, "Perish commerce," were thereafter constantly dragged up against him by his opponents. Cobbett now adopted them, with an explanation of the incident, as a heading for the series of articles in which he analysed the place of commerce in the national life. He disclaimed any hostility to commercial men, though not to stock-jobbers or "spinning-jenny baronets": [2] it was the thing, the system, that he opposed. "England has long groaned under a *commercial system*, which is the most oppressive of all possible systems; and it is, too, a quiet, silent, smothering oppression that it produces, which is more hateful than all others." [3]

"Mr. Nokes's fine house and park and gardens and hot-houses and carriages, would they ever have existed had it not been for commerce? Certainly not. The race of Timkins would have scattered the profits of Mr. Nokes in a way so as to prevent its producing such effects; and, to those who see any degree of *national power* and *security* likely to arise from

[1] In *P.R.*, November 7th, 1807, Cobbett quoted at length from Spence's pamphlet, and a long controversy followed in the succeeding issues of the *Register*.

[2] *P.R.*, November 21st, 1807. [3] *Ibid.*

the use of silk instead of woollen, marble instead of stone, fallow land instead of corn-fields, pine-apples instead of cabbages and potatoes, coaches instead of wagons and carts, French valets instead of English labourers: to all such persons the decline of Mr. Nokes's commerce must, I allow, be matter of deep regret." [1]

I have dealt at considerable length with Cobbett's views at this time of his conversion to Radicalism, because a clear understanding of them is essential to a grasp of his later development. The essential question for him was the condition of the labouring people. This was the test by which he tried all political nostrums. His prejudices, strong, healthy prejudices, fit in with his general view. They are the prejudices of a countryman, a lover of agricultural pursuits, an assertive John Bullish independent yeoman of the old sort. It was fitting symbolism that Cobbett's birthplace was *The Jolly Farmer*. The jolly farmer, through all his vicissitudes, he remained—keen, vigorous, sometimes cruel, not easily moved to pity or sentiment, but energetic in the pursuit of rights, his own and those which he shared with others, and always positive in assertion and quick to resent contradiction. We have seen him so far in prosperity, successfully facing the world with his free opinions freely expressed. We have soon to follow him into adversity; for the opportunity was not long delayed for those whom he attacked to retaliate with the strong arm of the law.

[1] *P.R.*, November 28th, 1807.

CHAPTER XI

PROSECUTION AND SENTENCE

THE elections at Honiton and Westminster in 1806 and 1807 were Cobbett's first experience of public speaking. He seems to have enjoyed them, and to have learned at once the knack of holding an audience. It was not generally easy in those days to get an uninterrupted hearing at a political—least of all at an election—meeting; but this power Cobbett's qualities assured him from the first. He had a loud voice and a commanding presence, and he was pertinacious in the extreme. Even if his opponents began by shouting him down, they ended by hearing what he had to say. "If you wish to get out of the heat of the sun," he told the Honiton electors, "I recommend you to give me a hearing; for reply I will, before we part. [*Order was restored*]."[1] From this time he added to his other work occasional speeches at political dinners, county meetings of electors, and the like.

He did not, however, speak often, and he felt serious misgivings about this new activity, despite its attractions and the sense of power which it gave him. Major Cartwright sought to enlist his aid as a speaker. "I am of opinion," he replied, "that I am of most weight as a *spectator* and *comment maker*. This way my word and opinion pass for a good deal; but I am not clear that whatever good I could do as an *agitator* would not be more than counterbalanced by the loss of weight in the other character. I know it is the opinion of Sir Francis [Burdett], that to put me into Parliament would be to lessen my weight; and, really, I think that the same reasoning will apply to the other case."[2] The days of Cobbett's ceaseless political tours, in which he mingled his delightful observation of the countryside and his sad reflections on the condition of England with political agitation, were still in the future.

He was, moreover, in these years, very loath to stir from Botley, where the development of his lands was occupying

[1] *P.R.*, June 14th, 1806.

[2] Letter to John Wright, May 19th, 1808.

more and more of his time. Again and again, he refused to come up to London to attend some Reform function, urging the imperative need for his presence on his farm. The business side of his London enterprises fell more and more completely into the hands of Wright, and Cobbett's visits to town became less and less frequent.

He found time, however, in August, 1808, to pay a brief visit to Cornwall and Devonshire, and to attend certain proceedings in which charges of gross corruption were being made in connection with elections at Bodmin and Grampound. Though corruption of the worst sort was shown to exist, the persons charged were acquitted, because of the bad character and unreliability of the witnesses, themselves involved in the corrupt practices, who were brought forward against them. In two *Letters to the Electors of Westminster*, Cobbett commented forcibly on the proceedings. "Bribers and corrupters," he observed, "when hard pushed, frequently derive security from the infamy of their friends." [1]

He found time, also, in November, to attend a Hampshire county meeting of electors at Winchester, and to get in a little "democratical and Jacobinical talk." For, amidst all his preoccupations, he was constantly active in local politics, and keen to take his full part in the affairs of the county. On this occasion he again showed his capacity—and his own peculiar way—of dealing with those who interrupted the flow of his address. "In one part of my speech an attorney of the Rose [2] party, who stood just under the window, made an attempt to excite a clamour; but I fixed my eye upon him, and pointing my hand down right and making a sort of chastising motion, said, "Peace, babbling slave!" which produced such terror amongst others that I met with no more interruption." [3]

The *Register* during 1808 was largely filled with discussions of foreign policy. To rumours of peace negotiations Cobbett retorted by asserting that the only terms of peace possible

[1] *P.R.*, August 27th, 1808.

[2] George Rose (1744-1818) began life in the navy, which he quitted for a post in the Civil Service. He was a follower of Pitt, and contrived to accumulate in his hands, by way of sinecures, an immense quantity of the public money. In 1784 he entered Parliament, and held many offices under Pitt and his Tory successors. He was a constant object of Cobbett's anathemas, as a sinecurist and political wire-puller, influential throughout the southern counties. See his *New Year's Gift to Old George Rose* in *P.R.*, January 4th, 1817, and many other passages.

[3] Letter to Wright, November 25th, 1808.

for Great Britain were such as there was no chance Napoleon would accept. He was in favour of the war, though highly critical of its conduct. When the Spanish Revolution against the French and the puppet king, Joseph Bonaparte, broke out in June, he was at first incredulous of the news. When it was confirmed, he strongly supported the Spanish people, but protested vigorously against any attempt to turn the war into a struggle for the restoration of the deposed King Ferdinand. If the people of Spain were to have a despot, he urged, it mattered not who the despot was. The recognition of Ferdinand by the British Government infuriated him, and he became strongly critical of the Spanish operations as a whole, while he continued to plead the cause of the Spanish people against both sets of oppressors. The Convention of Cintra, by which Wellesley,[1] after defeating the French, allowed their army to be withdrawn from Portugal, he fiercely censured, urging that the defeat should have been pressed remorselessly home. Thereafter he attacked Wellesley bitterly, complaining that the inquiry into the Convention was a "fake." The evacuation of Corunna also roused his anger, and he was vehement in his attacks on the Ministers for their conduct of the war. The quarrel with America also engaged a considerable part of his attention.

The *Register*, however, was by no means monopolised by foreign affairs. Cobbett pursued more vigorously than ever his attacks on political corruption, and gave constant attention to the proceedings of the Reformers. The wrongs of Ireland, and the corruption and repression prevalent in the Irish administration, were also fully described. He engaged, too, in long controversy with Arthur Young on the question of "sugar *versus* corn," arising out of the proposal to encourage the use of sugar and molasses, in place of corn, in breweries and distilleries. Cobbett, curiously enough, defended the claims of the sugar-growers against those who held that the proposal would injure British farming. Arthur Young contributed to the *Register* on a number of occasions about this time, including a long defence of the enclosure movement, which, he urged, meant better production and greater prosperity both for agriculture and for the country as a whole.[2]

The events abroad, and the general course of the war,

[1] *I.e.*, the Duke of Wellington, not his brother, Marquis Wellesley, the Governor-General of India mentioned on p. 123.

[2] For Cobbett's views on Enclosures, see p. 193.

had at this time caused the newspapers to devote much attention to the affairs of the army. The Duke of York, who was Commander-in-Chief, was a good deal attacked in the Opposition papers on the score of incompetence; and the *Register* associated itself with his critics. The duke's fall from his high office in the following year arose, however, not directly out of these attacks, but from a gross scandal of a different kind. In October, 1808, a Major Hogan, who had previously resigned his commission, published a pamphlet in which he made the charge that promotions in the army were regularly obtained by corrupt means, and that he had himself been offered promotion in return for paying a large sum of money to a certain Mrs. Clarke. Now this lady, as every one knew, was the Duke of York's mistress. The pamphlet created an immense stir, and the newspapers strongly took sides for and against the major, some believing, and some discrediting, his sensational assertions.

Cobbett was at first sceptical. He advised all his readers to get and study the pamphlet, but he also demanded from its author further corroborative evidence of so grave a charge. When this drew no reply, for a time he treated the whole story as a falsehood; but on finding that Major Hogan was absent in America, and had therefore not seen his challenge, he revised his judgment, and demanded a full and searching investigation. At this point the matter was taken up in the House of Commons, where a Colonel Wardle,[1] in January, 1809, brought forward this case and a number of others no less serious, and called for a special inquiry into all the facts. Cobbett at once took the whole question up in the *Register*, making first careful inquiries as to the likelihood that Colonel Wardle would be able fully to substantiate his charges. The *Register* fully reported the debates in the House, and for months this question was foremost in the public attention. It was the same throughout the press: the Duke of York sensation was the political topic of the year. A special inquiry was speedily ordered; for it was impossible to burke investigation in face of such grave charges. The matter was referred to a committee of the whole House of Commons: Mrs. Clarke, whom the duke had now abandoned, herself gave evidence hostile to him, having been bribed apparently by Wardle and his friends. Finally, by a small majority, the Duke of York

[1] M.P. for Okehampton. His action cost him his seat, through a quarrel with the "patron" of the borough.

was acquitted of personal corruption; but the charges against Mrs. Clarke were shown to be true, and the smallness of the majority indicated the serious doubts of the duke's own innocence. His position had become impossible, and in March he resigned the office of Commander-in-Chief.

These events put the Tory Government in a very bad temper. The press had given very wide publicity to the whole affair, and some light had been shed on a great many scandals not directly connected with it. The corruption exposed in one case was only an outstanding instance of practices which were widely prevalent. The Opposition papers, having once scented blood, were well disposed to follow other trails which the Government had no desire to see pursued. Consequently, there set in a veritable orgy of attacks on the freedom of comment in the Opposition journals. The Hunts[1] were taking a vigorous line in *The Examiner*: Perry, the editor of the Whig *Morning Chronicle*, was repeating their words with rather less extreme comment; Cobbett, as usual, was raging in the *Register*. Against all these attacks were launched.

The Government had been looking for a means of silencing Cobbett for many months before they discovered a good ground on which to proceed. Spencer Perceval, who became Prime Minister on the resignation of the Duke of Portland in 1809, interested himself personally in the question, and was eager to proceed even on grounds which the law officers of the Government considered inadequate. But at length a suitable pretext was found. While British soldiers were doing the actual fighting in Europe, England was garrisoned partly by mercenary German troops. These were very unpopular, and Cobbett often railed against them in the *Register*. On June 24th, 1809, on reading his *Courier*—the leading organ directly under the control of the Government—he found the following passage:

"The mutiny among the local militia which broke out at Ely was fortunately suppressed on Wednesday by the arrival of four squadrons of the German Legion Cavalry from Bury, under the command of General Auckland. Five of the ringleaders were tried by a court-martial, and sentenced to receive five hundred lashes each, part of which punishment they received on Wednesday, and a part was remitted. A stoppage for their knapsacks was the ground of complaint

[1] That is, Leigh Hunt and his brother, not Henry Hunt, who was no relation.

that excited this mutinous spirit, which occasioned the men to surround their officers, and demand what they deemed their arrears. The first division of the German Legion halted yesterday at Newmarket on their return to Bury." [1]

This paragraph roused Cobbett to fury. He had not forgotten his soldiering days, or the cheating and ill-treatment to which he and his fellows had been often subjected. He had a very great affection for the British soldier, and a very great sympathy for his condition. His officers pilfered both at his, and at the public, expense. Cruelty, as well as cheating, was common in the service. Floggings, in particular, were indescribably brutal, so that, as Cobbett said, " At the flogging of a man, I have frequently seen seven or eight men fall slap upon the ground, unable to endure the sight, and to hear the cries, without swooning away. These were as stout, hardy, and bold men as anywhere to be found." [2]

If flogging was intolerably brutal, what was to be said of the flogging of British soldiers under the arms of German mercenaries? Cobbett made the passage quoted from the *Courier* the motto of his *Register* article for the week. " See the motto, English reader! See the motto, and then pray recollect all that has been said about the way in which Bonaparte raises his soldiers. Well done, Lord Castlereagh! This is just what it was thought your plan would produce. Well said, Mr. Huskisson! It really was not without reason that you dwelt, with so much earnestness, upon the great utility of the foreign troops. . . . *Five hundred lashes each!* Aye, that is right! Flog them! flog them! flog them! They deserve a flogging at every meal-time. 'Lash them daily! lash them daily!' What! shall the rascals dare to *mutiny*? and that, too, when the German Legion is so near at hand? Lash them! lash them! lash them! They deserve it. Oh, yes! they merit a double-tailed cat! Base dogs! What! mutiny for the *price of a knapsack*? Lash them! flog them! Base rascals! Mutiny for the price of a goat's skin; and then, upon the appearance of the German soldiers, they take a flogging as quietly as so many trunks of trees!" [3]

The passage went on to say that Napoleon's lashings and chainings of his troops, and the necessity for them, were often

[1] Quoted in *P.R.*, July 1st, 1809.
[2] Quoted in Smith's *Cobbett*, Vol. II., p. 92. [3] *Ibid.*

cited as showing that, in their hearts, the people of France hated their dictator, and would willingly rise against him. What became of that argument now? Did it apply to Great Britain as well? What would British "loyalists" say, "now that they see that our 'gallant defenders' not only require physical restraint, in certain cases, but even a little blood drawn from their backs, and that too, with the aid and assistance of German troops." [1]

In this passage, the Government at length found what it wanted, and the Attorney-General filed an information against Cobbett for sedition.

The story of this prosecution and its results is intricate, tangled, and, at certain points, difficult to unravel from the mass of falsehoods in which it has become involved. But the first stages, at any rate, are clear. For many months, no attempt was made to bring Cobbett to trial. It was then a common practice of Governments, when they desired to silence or emasculate press opposition, to start a prosecution and then to drop it if the editor in question modified his tone. Carefully as juries were packed for political trials in those days, there was always some danger of acquittal or disagreement; and it was usually the easier course for the Government, if it could, to silence its opponents without bringing them actually to trial. Whether this was the intention in Cobbett's case cannot be certainly known; but the long delay in proceeding seems to make it likely, and it is certain that some negotiations went on between Wright, Cobbett's business agent in London, and John Reeves,[2] the king's printer, who was an old friend of Cobbett's and whose friendship had to some extent survived the change in his political views, with a view to the dropping of the case. This, however, was not with Cobbett's consent. Indeed, on hearing of it from Wright, he replied, "I would rather be *gibbetted* than owe my life to the intercession, such as you speak of, and such as I am afraid you *half solicited*." [3]

[1] *P.R.*, July 1st, 1809.

[2] This was the same John Reeves who had founded "The Society for the Protection of Liberty and Property against Republicans and Levellers" in the early days of the French Revolution, and was active in the anti-Jacobin crusade. His society was subsidised by the Government, and he was rewarded for his activities with a lucrative place. But, politics apart, he was not a bad fellow.

[3] Letter to Wright, August 18th, 1809.

Cobbett from the first took the threat of prosecution very seriously. He knew that the Government had long been seeking means of shutting his mouth, and felt that they were hardly likely to let him escape. The "hell-fire miscreants" might probably confine him for two years; "but that does not kill a man, and may, besides, produce even good effects, in more ways than one." [1] He determined, against the advice of his friends, to defend himself, and set to work assiduously to get up his case.

But, as the months passed and there was no sign of his being brought to trial, he began to think that the Government had, after all, made up its mind to let him alone. His letters to Wright and others alternated between defiance and hope that the case would be allowed to lapse. "I really do not know which I ought to *wish* for: a *trial* or a *nolle prosequi*. My *character* and *fame* call for the former; but then my *health* and *my dearly beloved family* call for the latter, or for anything which shall preclude the chance of a villainous sentence." [2]

As soon as the proceedings were begun, Cobbett set energetically to work to put his house in order. He began paying all his debts in and around Botley, calling on Wright for considerable sums of money for this purpose. He announced that he would take steps to get his affairs in London equally straight, and to put everything on such a footing that his enforced absence might not involve him in ruin. He would make arrangements for his wife's brother, Lieutenant Reid, newly back from Corunna, to take charge of his farming work while he was in prison, if indeed that was to be his fate. But, even if the Government went on with the case, he began to entertain good hopes of an acquittal. "If we have an honest, I mean an *impartial* jury, I am no more afraid of Vicary [3] than I am of a fly." [4]

Early in the new year, there was more to reassure him. The Government prosecuted again both *The Morning Chronicle* and *The Examiner*, for an article supposed to reflect on the King, in stating that, "Of all monarchs since the Revolution, the successor of George III. will have the finest opportunity

[1] Letter to Wright, July 22nd, 1809.

[2] Letter to Wright, January 30th, 1810.

[3] Sir Vicary Gibbs, the Attorney-General.

[4] Letter to Wright, December 31st, 1809.

of becoming nobly popular." The words appeared first in *The Examiner*, and were reprinted in the *Chronicle*; but the case against Mr. Perry of the *Chronicle* came on first. He was acquitted, and the Government at once dropped the case against Leigh Hunt and his brother. Cobbett was immensely elated, and proposed a public celebration of the victory at the Crown and Anchor. But others fared less well. John Gale Jones, the Radical surgeon, was imprisoned by order of the House of Commons for an alleged breach of Parliamentary privilege; and, when Burdett protested that the House had not the right to arrest any save its own members, and reprinted his speech on the matter (said to have been written by Cobbett) in the *Register*, the House ordered Burdett to be imprisoned in the Tower during its pleasure. This was on April 6th, 1810.

Sir Francis Burdett was at this time the acknowledged political leader of the Reformers, and his committal created an immense stir. Moreover, Burdett did not tamely submit. He confined himself in his great house in Piccadilly, and defied the Government to come and arrest him. Vast crowds gathered round the house: a big riot seemed to be imminent. The Government marched all the available soldiers to the spot, called out the volunteers, and brought up to London all the troops stationed within a hundred miles. Burdett, declaring the Speaker's warrant to be illegal, called on the city authorities, who were largely hostile to the Government, to protect him from the lawless violence of the troops. The city police arrived, and ordered the soldiers away. Meanwhile, within the house a large body of defenders had gathered, and there was endless coming and going by a secret entry. Lord Cochrane arrived with a barrel of gunpowder, for the purpose of mining the front of the house. The council of war discussed plans for insurrection. Francis Place, according to his own story, knocked these ideas on the head. But his account shows that even he seriously considered the chances of a rising, and thought that, with more preparation, many of the troops might have been brought over. However, the conditions for a successful rising did not, in his view, exist, and he substituted a characteristic scheme of his own for swearing in all the Radicals as special constables, and using them to beat off the soldiers. The plan finally miscarried, as the troops rushed the house before Place was ready. Burdett was escorted to the Tower by a whole

army mobilised for the taking of one man. He remained there till the rising of Parliament in June.[1]

Cobbett had no direct concern with this amazing series of events, which have been related because of the light they throw on the political conditions surrounding his trial. In London at least, the Reformers had become powerful and dangerous to the Government. The small band of a few years before had grown large enough, and embittered enough, to consider seriously the prospects of armed resistance. This situation made the Government more determined than ever to put Cobbett out of the way, and at long last the trial went forward in earnest. The possibility of summoning him to the bar of the House for the offence of publishing Burdett's article in the *Register* had been considered; but it was realised that this would be the surest way of provoking trouble, since, as in the case of Gale Jones, the legality of the imprisonment would be questioned. It was better to proceed with the original charge. While, therefore, the offending article in the *Register* was ordered to be read aloud to the assembled House, Cobbett was not called to the bar. "So then," he wrote, "the honourable House have, at last, resolved to have the *Register* read to them. That is one sign of amendment, and, if they do but follow it up by a similar motion every week, it cannot fail to do them a great deal of good, if anything in the world can do them good."[2]

Cobbett's case was tried before Lord Ellenborough on June 15th, 1810. In spite of all dissuasions, he insisted on pleading his own cause. Nor would he take Francis Place's advice, to "put in the letters you have received from Ministers, members of the Commons, from the Speaker downwards, about your *Register*," . . . and "ask the jury whether a person so addressed must be considered as a common sower of sedition."[3] He would take his own line, encouraged by Perry's success in defending himself earlier in the year, and by the example of Horne Tooke, who had successfully defended himself in the famous treason trials of 1794, and for whom, on reading his defence, Cobbett conceived a great admiration. But in the event his confidence played him

[1] The story is more fully told in Wallas's *Life of Francis Place*, pp. 49 ff.

[2] Letter to Wright, March 28th, 1810.

[3] Quoted by Augustus de Morgan, *Budget of Paradoxes*, p. 119, and in Smith's *Cobbett*, Vol. II., p. 116.

false. He had not, like Horne Tooke, the advantage of a legal training; and an important part of his prepared defence consisted of citations from utterances like his own made at various times in the House of Commons. These Ellenborough, the Lord Chief Justice, who throughout went strongly against the accused, at once ruled out as "privileged." Cobbett was thrown out of his stride, and his defence was lame and inconclusive. Place, who always had the nastiest word to say about his fellow men, wrote that "Cobbett made a long defence, a bad defence, and his delivery of it and his demeanour were even worse than his matter. He was not at all master of himself, and in some parts where he meant to produce a great effect he produced laughter. So ludicrous was he in one part that the jury, the judge, and the audience all laughed at him. I was thoroughly ashamed of him, and ashamed of myself for being seen with him." [1]

This is typical Place exaggeration; but there can be no doubt that Cobbett's defence made a bad impression. The events at Burdett's house, moreover, had terrified loyal folks out of their wits, and the jury, given a vehement lead by the judge, took only five minutes to find him guilty. He left for Botley before the verdict, but was followed there by a sheriff's officer and brought back to London to give bail for his appearance in court when called upon to receive judgment.

Cobbett was thus convicted; but his sentence was still unknown. He hurried back to Botley to arrange his affairs before the call came. Now follows the episode in which it is hard to disentangle truth from falsehood. Somehow, negotiations were opened between him and persons representing the Government. It was suggested that, on terms, he might still avoid the very severe penalties—fine as well as imprisonment—which he would otherwise have to suffer. The chief condition proposed was that he should cease his attacks on the Government. What is not clear is whence came the first move in these negotiations. Probably they were initiated by some third party, perhaps by John Reeves, with whom Wright had attempted to arrange matters in the previous year.

At all events, it is clear that, this time, Cobbett countenanced the negotiations and himself took part in them.

[1] Wallas, *Life of Francis Place*, p. 117, n.—"I never saw Cobbett but once after his trial," Place adds. He called on me in a few days, but I was unable to congratulate him on any part of his conduct. I never spoke to him afterwards."

As he could not even consider writing the *Register* under restraint or modifying its policy to suit the Government, he determined, if he made any arrangement at all, to drop the paper altogether, and stick to his farm, abandoning politics as others, finding the times out of joint, had done before him. His wife apparently entreated him to yield: he feared that absence from his farm might lead to ruin. At length he decided to make his subjection, having got from Reeves good ground for supposing that this would end the whole matter, and that he would never be called up for judgment. His abandonment of the *Register* would, indeed, have been in itself a reverberating victory for the Government.

The necessary instructions were sent to Wright. The *Register* was to be immediately wound up. Cobbett's *Farewell Address* to his readers was actually drafted, and sent off to London. But Wright, being in London, had better opportunities than Cobbett for finding out what the situation really was. He became convinced that the Government was playing with Cobbett, that it meant to procure his submission and then to sentence him all the same. On June 27th Wright called on Reeves, and informed him that the *Register* would not be dropped unless he received a positive assurance that Cobbett would not be called up for judgment. He also wrote to Cobbett and urged him strongly not to make his surrender for nothing. Reeves's reply made it plain that the Government had made no firm promise: it hardly held out more than a hope that the sentence would be mitigated. Cobbett, on receiving this news, definitely made up his mind not to yield on such terms. Hastily, by special messenger, he sent Wright instructions not to end the *Register*, or print his farewell address, without a positive assurance from the authorities. This was not secured: Wright suppressed the farewell article, and the *Register* continued to appear.

This account differs in certain material particulars from accounts of the incident subsequently given by Cobbett himself. Wright, after his dispute with Cobbett, gave the whole story away, and it was used to discredit him when he came out of prison in 1812. At that time, he met the whole story with a categorical denial; but later, in 1816, a fuller, though garbled, version, clearly based on Wright's information, appeared in *The Times*.[1] Cobbett then replied, first, that,

[1] *The Times*, November 14th, 1816.

if such a proposition had been made, he had a perfect right to make it. "I was in the state of a soldier surrounded by an irresistible enemy; and has a soldier so situated ever been ashamed to ask his life and to accept it upon condition of *not serving again during the war*?" But he went on to state that "No proposition of any sort was ever made by me, or by my authority, to the Government." He then gives his own account of the incident, saying that he did indeed write to his attorney, Mr. White, authorising him to make the proposition, that he was moved so to do by the sufferings of his family; but that "the letter was hardly got to the post office at Southampton before the courage of my wife and eldest daughter returned. Indignation and resentment took the place of grief and alarm; and they cheerfully consented to my stopping the letter. Mr. Peter Finnerty was at my house at the time; a post-chaise was got; and he came off to London during the night, *and prevented Mr. White from acting on the letter.*" [1]

It is impossible literally to reconcile this account with the story revealed by his correspondence with Wright and by Reeves's letter. Clearly, the negotiations lasted at least over a period of some days. Cobbett's story of their rupture is the true one; but he did not tell everything. The unpublished manuscript of his *Farewell Article*, moreover, survived to be dragged up against him in a later trial, in which he and Wright were involved in 1819. It was written with his usual force, and was fully explicit in stating his determination. "I never will again, upon any account, indite, publish, write, or contribute towards, any newspaper, or other publication of that nature, so long as I live." [2]

He had never written, he said in the Address, for gain; and he had made up his mind to discontinue the *Register*, no matter what the pecuniary loss might be. "If the work were continued, *it could not be what it has been*"; and he would much rather stop it altogether than make any change in its sincerity. He would be accused, he knew, of deserting the cause; but *whose cause*? If the cause of the country, had not the country, by the voice of a jury, itself condemned him? Or was it the cause of the press? But had not a large part of the press fiercely demanded his prosecution? There

[1] *P.R.*, January 4th, 1817.

[2] The whole article is quoted in Melville's *Life and Letters of William Cobbett*, Vol. II., pp. 45 ff.

could be, in these circumstances, no just complaint of his action. "I lay down at the height, at the very pinnacle of its circulation [1] a work which has long found its way into every part of the civilised world." [2]

The *Register* was not destined to die, and Cobbett was not destined to abandon his profession of journalist. What a difference it would have made if he had abandoned it! He might still, indeed, have written the charming series of books —even the *Rural Rides*—of his later years. But, without the *Register*, Parliamentary Reform might have been put back, and the awakening of political consciousness among the mass of the people indefinitely retarded. It was fortunate that Cobbett, or the Government, or both of them repented of the projected bargain.

On July 5th, Cobbett was called up for judgment, and on July 9th sentence was pronounced. His printer, Hansard, received three months' imprisonment, his publishers, Budd and Bagshaw, each two months. Cobbett himself was sentenced to two years' imprisonment in Newgate, and to a fine of a thousand pounds, and at the end of his term he was to give bail in £3000, and to find two sureties in £1000 each, for his keeping the peace for a further seven years. Truly a crushing and vindictive sentence on a man, for saying what the greater part of the nation certainly believed to be just. But, of course, Cobbett's attack on the German Legion was only the pretext for his conviction: he was put away, and, it was hoped, silenced for the crime of plain speaking on many matters which the Government was loath to have so freely discussed. He is reported to have received his crushing sentence with a smile. He was at once removed to prison.

[1] At this time the *Register* sold about 6000 copies weekly, at 1*s.* each—a very large circulation for those days. See page 80.

[2] The whole article is quoted in Melville's *Life and Letters of William Cobbett*, Vol. II., pp. 45 ff.

CHAPTER XII

IN NEWGATE—THE LUDDITES

PRISONS, a hundred years ago, were vastly different from the prisons of to-day. We are accustomed to congratulate ourselves on the vast advances made in penal administration and to dwell on the vast good done by the early penal reformers —Jeremy Bentham and Sir Samuel Romilly among them— who at that time led the agitation for better conditions. The change, however, has not been all to the advantage of the prisoner. The jails of a hundred years ago were pestilential places, in which all sorts and descriptions of offenders were herded together, with scant regard for even the most obvious sanitary precautions. But solitary confinement was a rarity, and the ordinary prisoner had at least human companionship. It may be that some of the sanitarily imprisoned of to-day would willingly change their lot, and take the chance of jail-fever in prisons of the old sort.

Apart from the refinements of sanitary cruelty in which we moderns have made so marked an advance, the greatest difference between the old prisons and the new lies in the reduced power of money to affect the lot of the prisoner. To be sure, even now, a real gentleman convicted of a really gentlemanly crime on a sufficiently large scale or of adequate atrocity is not treated quite like a common or garden felon, and distinctions, favourable to persons with money, are made in the case of some, though not of all, political prisoners. But things are not what they were. A hundred years ago, a prisoner, with money enough behind him, could in most cases rely on converting his imprisonment into a mere detention within the prison walls, and could, at his own considerable expense, create for himself conditions of comparative comfort.

Thus, on entering Newgate, Cobbett was able to escape detention in the ordinary prison rooms—and even these, from his horrified description, sound preferable to the solitary prison cells of to-day—and to hire for his accommodation a considerable part of the head jailer's lodgings. Here, apart

from other prisoners, he was allowed to entertain as many visitors as he liked at all times between noon and ten o'clock at night. He could have books, meals, drink—anything he wanted from outside—supplied for his friends and guests. He could have his family, or such as he chose, to stay with him in his rooms for as long and as often as he liked. He could continue his literary work, and edit and manage the *Register* from the prison precincts. In fact, there was no restriction on his freedom save that he could not move beyond the prison walls.

For all these privileges, to be sure, he had to pay—and pay heavily; and even money would hardly have brought him such complete freedom, save in the one respect, had not his official custodian been that same Sheriff of London who had conspired with Francis Place and others to prevent Sir Francis Burdett's arrest. Sheriff Matthew Wood [1] was himself a keen Reformer, and did all he could to make the conditions of imprisonment easy. The jailer followed his lead, and Cobbett always stated that the prison authorities treated him with the utmost consideration. Cobbett's detention was irksome enough; but it was the mildest that well can be imagined.

Nevertheless, the blow which he had received was very severe. In order to carry on his work and have his family about him, he had to secure good accommodation. This cost him, according to his own statement, twelve guineas a week, or £1200 during his two years in prison. He had, moreover, to keep up two expensive establishments; for Botley must be maintained, if the result of all his maturing improvements there was not to be lost. He had to pay a fine of £1000, and legal costs amounting to £5000 in addition. He could hardly hope that his farm would go on as well as if he were there to conduct it, and there was a risk of heavy losses on this account. Cobbett went to prison with the sense that it would need all his efforts to stave off absolute financial ruin.

Moreover, as soon as he was sentenced, his creditors began to press hard upon him. There was a heavy mortgage on the property at Botley, which he had bought largely with

[1] Better known as Alderman Wood. He was a druggist and subsequently a hop merchant, who made a fortune, and served twice as Lord Mayor of London, from 1817 to 1819. He is best remembered as the leader of the partisans of Queen Caroline in 1820. See page 249.

borrowed money. He had settled his outstanding local debts; but now a hail of claims in connection with the *Register* and his other literary enterprises descended upon him. The extent of the claims seems to have been totally unexpected. Since his move to Botley, Cobbett had left the control of his business affairs, apart from his farming operations, almost entirely in John Wright's hands. When he wanted money, he wrote to his London assistant to send him what he needed; but he seems to have kept no effective check on Wright's transactions. Cobbett was as bad a business man as he was an excellent journalist; and, while Wright had nominally to account to him for all disbursements, this was done merely by letter and answer, with, apparently, no attempt at all ever to strike a balance. Wright being at least as slipshod as Cobbett in his methods, it is not surprising that their joint affairs had got, by this time, into a hopeless tangle. Even Wright's remuneration was not a fixed quantity. He was to be paid with a large share in the profits of Cobbett's subsidiary enterprises, the *Parliamentary Debates*, *Parliamentary History of England*, and *State Trials*; and not till an accounting at last took place while Cobbett was in Newgate was it discovered that all these ventures had been appearing at a heavy loss, while Wright, having no other source of income, had been paying himself a considerable salary "on account" of the non-existent profits. Howell, the compiler of the *State Trials*, was also to be paid by a share in the profits on all copies sold beyond 800; but, though less than 800 had been sold, Wright had paid him £1400 on account.

When bills of all sorts began to shower in, Cobbett made up his mind that all his affairs must be thoroughly sifted, and a complete settlement made of all legitimate claims. He demanded from Wright a full account, going back to the beginning of their connection, of all sums expended on his behalf. This Wright professed himself wholly unable to give, pointing to earlier letters of Cobbett, in which the involved condition of their financial arrangements was referred to, and the impossibility of their being understood by a third party admitted. Cobbett, in fact, had trusted Wright implicitly, and Wright, whether from mere negligence or for any worse reason, had very badly let him down. Large sums had been paid to "scribblers" and compilers for work done on the *Register* and other publications; there had been no

check on expenditure, which Wright had freely financed by borrowing, and by piling up huge accounts for printing and paper. The losses on the *Debates*, *History*, and *Trials* had been covered up by some curious jugglery. Collapse was bound to come sooner or later; perhaps Cobbett ought even to have thanked the Government for checking, at this stage, his headlong financial career.

It is neither easy, nor very profitable, to apportion to Wright and Cobbett their due shares in causing this egregious muddle. Clearly Wright ought to have been more careful, even if he was not really corrupt: clearly Cobbett ought not to have left matters so completely in his hands, and ought, even as things were, to have discovered the situation sooner. The truth was that the financial part of Cobbett's mind was fully occupied by his elaborate farming operations at Botley. He knew that the *Register* was a great financial success, and looked on it as a source on which he drew when he wanted ready money. Further, he did not trouble to inquire. Say, if you will, that he brought his financial tribulations, apart from the little bill for £6000 presented by the Crown, on himself by his own negligence.

This was not his own view of the matter. From speaking of Wright in the most affectionate terms—in one letter, written just after his admission to Newgate, he spoke of him as totally cast down by his employer's calamity—he turned round and abused him with all the violence of which he was capable. He at any rate was convinced—and remained so to the end of his life—that for years Wright had been deliberately cheating him, and both taking for himself money to which he was not entitled, and paying away large sums wrongfully to others whom he employed. His first act was to cause most of the staff of authors and compilers whom Wright had gathered together to be dismissed, and to make Wright himself, as he put it, work for his bread. Then he set to work to get a real clearing up of the financial position. Wright and he at length agreed to go to arbitration before a lawyer on the whole of the questions involved. This resulted in a judgment that Wright owed Cobbett £6500. This was, in Cobbett's view, much less than the truth; but, in any event, Wright was quite unable to pay. He could only hand over his share in the proprietorship of the ventures in which they were both concerned. This being done, Cobbett sold the *Debates*, the *Parliamentary History*, and the *State Trials*

to his printer, Hansard, who thereupon dropped Cobbett's name from the titles, and carried on the two former under his own name, and the last under the name of Howell, the editor. Cobbett's interest in these works, never much more than proprietary, therefore lapsed completely at this time.

Long before these difficult transactions were finished, Cobbett had dismissed Wright from his employment, and had taken the conduct of the *Register*, of which he retained the ownership, more completely into his own hands. He was fortunate in the possession of many friends, including men of means, who sympathised with him in his plight, and came handsomely to his help. His paper-maker, Joseph Swann of Wolvercote, in Oxfordshire, was a personal friend, and did not press for early payment. On all hands Cobbett found helpers, Sir Francis Burdett in particular placing a considerable sum at his disposal. With his friends' aid, Cobbett was able to pay the heavy charges of his imprisonment, to keep his estate at Botley unimpaired, and to look forward with hope that he would finally surmount all his financial difficulties. But his scale of living at Botley had been lavish, and it was not easy to retrench; while the hosts of friends and admirers who came to see him at Newgate, and were always offered good hospitality, must have made considerable calls on his purse. Steaks and porter were the order of the day among his Newgate visitors. Botley, in charge of a bailiff, became, according to one of the letters of his daughter Anne, "a dull hole." The host of visitors he had entertained came no longer; and there at least considerable retrenchments were effected. Mrs. Cobbett was particularly enjoined to have no wine at table. But it was not in Cobbett's nature to be economical.

He had, indeed, hoped—and hoped still—to build up the Botley property into a good inheritance for his children. He always put back into the land more than he took from it—sure sign of a good husbandman; but his personal expenditure was always, when he could contrive to get the money, on a lavish scale. At the time of his imprisonment, his political opponents, in press and pamphlet, charged him with feathering his nest and libelling all the world for gain. The Attorney-General took the same line at the trial itself. Cobbett vigorously retorted that he had as perfect a right to live by his pen as any other man to live by his calling, and that he could point to many instances both in America

and in England in which he had sacrificed to his convictions the prospect of gain. He had refused to become a hireling in the pay of the Government: he had often taken the unpopular line; he had faced ruin in America: had he not, when starting *The Porcupine*, refused the proffered advertisements of the vendors of patent medicines, and so turned good money away? Cobbett's answer was indeed complete, even if his way of making it mixed up things great and small in rather a curious fashion. His independent attitude was certainly not the line for a man intent on feathering his own nest.

All through the period of his conflict with the Government, Cobbett had been subject to a series of malicious attacks. The old story of the court-martial proceedings of 1792 was dug up again, and a garbled version, suppressing many of the material circumstances, was published and distributed broadcast at the Government's expense. A monstrous story about *Cobbett, Oppressor of the Poor*, was based on the fact that one of the boys employed by him at Botley had run away, after receiving his wages in advance, and been haled before a magistrate and imprisoned, at Cobbett's instance, it was said. Owing to a slip by the officers who arrested the boy, the arrest was illegal, and the boy's parents got £10 damages at the expense of Cobbett and the police. On this foundation was reared an extraordinary account of Cobbett's brutal treatment of his employees, though the boy's only reason for running away was, by his own statement, that he had to get up too early in the morning. These and other savoury stories were spread about lavishly in pamphlet form, and good orthodox gentlefolk, passing by Botley in their carriages, used to fling handfuls from their windows for the benefit of Cobbett's neighbours. The stories, however, did Cobbett no harm; and, in any case, he gave as good as he got.

When he was safely in prison, the violence of the attacks for the time somewhat abated. But it was no part of Cobbett's plan that he should be silenced. We have seen how he took the *Register* more completely under his own control. He had now, in jail, more time on his hands; for he could not be out and about his farm. Very well, where there had been but one *Register* a week, there should now be two. From July, 1810 to June, 1811, the *Register* appeared twice a week, on Wednesdays and Saturdays, the price of each number still

remaining at a shilling. Even so, Cobbett was always complaining that he had no space to deal with many urgent questions. Apparently, the experiment was not a financial success; for in June, 1811, he returned to the method of weekly publication. One shilling a week could be afforded by many who would have to think twice about the double cost.

The *Register*, during the period of Cobbett's confinement, fully maintained its interest. A larger proportion than before was written by the editor's own hand. Foreign policy, and particularly the growing troubles between England and the United States, continued to receive full attention; but the chief place was taken by a long series of articles dealing with the whole question of the national finances. The most important of these were subsequently collected into the famous book, *Paper against Gold*, which was among the best known of all Cobbett's works in his own day, and is still to be found by the diligent searcher in many second-hand bookshops.

Before we begin to make a closer examination than we have yet given of Cobbett's financial theories, let us see more clearly how he ordered his life in Newgate. He has left, in his *Advice to Young Men*, a vivid account both of his family's grief at his imprisonment and of his manner of living and conducting his affairs. His wife and children divided their time between Botley and the prison. Always, there were some of them staying with him at Newgate; always, there were some at Botley to make regular reports on the progress of the farm, to receive his instructions on farming matters, and to send for his use at least a weekly hamper of Botley produce. Though he had a reliable man in charge, Cobbett continued to conduct his farm from prison. He gave all orders for planting, sowing, reaping, purchase and sale of stock, in fact, everything of moment that had to be done. In order that he might do this, he had to be kept fully informed of every development. With his instinct for utility, he contrived to turn this need into an admirable instrument of education. His children, such as were at Botley, compiled a regular "journal of labours, proceedings, and occurrences, written on paper of shape and size uniform, and so contrived, as to margins, as to admit of binding." This journal was sent regularly to Newgate, and by its means Cobbett was kept fully informed, and able to give all the necessary instructions. Moreover, it taught the children to write, and gave

them a grounding in business-like habits. Each weekly hamper brought at least one letter from every child, no matter how young, and every letter was scrupulously answered by the father. "To every letter I wrote an answer, seal-up and sent to the party, being sure that was the way to produce other and better letters; for, though they could not read what I wrote, and though their own consisted at first of mere *scratches*, and afterwards, for a while, of a few words written down for them to imitate, I always thanked them for their '*pretty letter*,' and never expressed any wish to see them *write better*; but took care to write in a very neat and plain hand myself, and to do up my letter in a very neat manner." [1] This, of course, refers to the younger children.

Those of the children who came to stay in Newgate with their father got education in other ways. They were sent out in the morning, in order to give them exercise and diversion, to learn French and dancing. They helped Cobbett more and more with his work on the *Register*. "Long before the end of the time, I had *dictated many Registers* to my two eldest children." [2] "The calculations about the farming affairs forced arithmetic upon us: the *use*, the *necessity*, of the thing led us to the study." [3] "*Book-learning* was forced upon us." [4] "I was, indeed, by the fangs of Government, defeated in my fondly-cherished project of making my sons farmers on their own land, and keeping them from all temptation to seek vicious and enervating enjoyments; but those fangs, merciless as they had been, had not been able to prevent me from laying for their lives a store of useful information, habits of industry, care, sobriety, and a taste for innocent, healthful, and manly pleasures." [5] There was sound sense in Cobbett's educational methods.

His wife, at the time of his imprisonment, was in a condition from which that hard-worked helpmate had little respite. Ill as she was, she insisted on coming up to London, and on visiting him on his first evening in Newgate. She took lodgings near by, and there her confinement took place. It is hardly surprising that the child died. Thereafter, Mrs. Cobbett spent part of her time at Botley and part in Newgate with her husband, leaving Botley in charge of her sister when she was away. Cobbett's letters to his children are full of admiration for the courage with which she bore the blow.

[1] *Advice to Young Men*, par. 303. [2] *Ibid.*, par. 305.
[3] *Ibid.*, par. 305. [4] *Ibid.*, par. 302. [5] *Ibid.*, par. 305.

His love for her shows plainly in every line. But he never wrote to her on the affairs of the farm or on business. His letters were more intimate and personal, bidding her make herself easy about him, or entreating her not to wear so much flannel. "Pray, do leave off some of it. It rubs you, and it scrubs you, all to pieces. . . . I do not like to see you with *waistcoats* and *breastplates*; but the *Breeches* is the worst of all. Now, pray, mind what I say, about these nasty Breeches." [1]

Wright, after the quarrel, made savage attacks on Cobbett's reputation, and went about denouncing him to his political friends. Mrs. Cobbett was greatly upset by this; but Cobbett laughed at her fears. His friends, he told her, would believe in him still, whatever Wright said. Nor was Cobbett wrong. His friends, as we have seen, rallied round him in his adversity; and he made many new friends as a direct consequence of it. Baron Maseres, Cursitor Baron of the Exchequer, who visited him often in Newgate, came always in his full robes of office, in order to show his abhorrence of the sentence. And, in addition to private visitors, "during the two years I was visited by persons whom I had never seen before, from *one hundred and ninety-seven cities and towns of England, Scotland, and Ireland*, the greatest part of whom came to me as the deputies of some society, club, or circle of people in their respective places of residence." [2] The propaganda of Reform was producing its effect. Already, all over the country, societies pledged to the cause were springing again into life. They had been crushed out by the repression of fifteen years before; now they were rising again, and this time the popular voice was on their side.

These were plain signs of Cobbett's hold both on democratic feeling throughout the country and on the affections of the friends who knew him well. But the outstanding act of friendship came from a friend he had made in America. James Paul, after whom Cobbett's third son was named, was a Quaker farmer of Dublin, Pennsylvania, "a native American, from a Yorkshire father and mother; a man on whom I had never conferred a favour to the amount of the value of a pin; but under whose hospitable roof I and my wife had spent many and many a happy day." [3] To him Cobbett, in serious anxiety as to the future of his family—

[1] Quoted in Melville, *Life and Letters of Cobbett*, Vol. II., p. 66.
[2] *P.R.*, July 18th, 1812. [3] *P.R.*, April 10th, 1830.

for the whole position of his affairs was still uncertain—wrote on the third day after entering Newgate "requesting him, in case of my death, to send for and take care of my wife and children." "Having written this letter to Mr. Paul, I was quite tranquil on the score of provision for wife and children. I wanted not to wait for *an answer*: all that was necessary was, to make *sure of his getting my letter*." [1] Paul's answer came promptly. "Give thyself no trouble about Nancy and the children. If thee should die, which I hope thee will not for many years to come, thy dear family shall find a home under my roof, and shall be to me and to all of us *as our own kindred*." [2] "Such," writes Cobbett, "such was the friendship of James Paul." [3]

It was from a talk with another Quaker friend, Dickins, that there sprang the idea of the series of articles making up the *Paper against Gold*. Cobbett had come to the conclusion that, as long as the war lasted—and he saw no sign of its ending—there would be no real reform. "This nation is drunk, it is mad as the March hare, and mad it will be till this beastly frolic (the war) is over." [4] The only way was to be patient, to go on writing the truth in the hope that some day it would bear fruit. "My plan is to *write that now* which I can hold up to the teeth of my insolent enemies and taunt them with in the hour of their distress." "Aye," said he, "but the *worms* may be taunting you before that time." "No matter," said I, "for though fame, after the worms have been at work, is a foolish thing, recollect that I have *no other line to pursue*." [5] He made up his mind therefore to "trace the paper-money system to its deadly root." *Paper against Gold* was to be the title of his chief series of articles in the *Register*—a full examination of the paper-money system the main literary labour of his imprisonment.

There was a reason for selecting this topic at this particular time. The attention of all economists and of all who were interested in trading questions had long been called to the fact that there was a widening gulf between the value of bank-notes, even Bank of England notes, and of the bullion which was their nominal equivalent. In September, 1809, David Ricardo, the recognised leader among the business economists of the time, had begun, in the Whig

[1] *P.R.*, April 10th, 1830. [2] *Ibid.* [3] *Ibid.*
[4] *P.R.*, July 20th, 1822, reporting the conversation of 1811.
[5] *Ibid.*

Morning Chronicle, his series of letters entitled *The High Price of Bullion, a Proof of the Depreciation of Bank Notes*. At the same time, Cobbett in the *Register*, had begun, under the title *Jacobin Guineas*, a series of articles dealing with the same question, and especially with the illegal exportation of bullion to France, which was the subject of a famous trial, that of De Yonge, a Dutch financier resident in England. The Bank Restriction Act of 1797, passed as a war measure, had made the Bank of England's paper money inconvertible into gold, and Ricardo's and Cobbett's arguments alike showed, contrary to the received opinion, that since this date paper-money had steadily depreciated in value. At the same time, while the Bank of England was issuing its paper, with a monopoly in London, country banks, springing into existence in great numbers in order to finance the rapid development of the Industrial Revolution, were printing huge quantities of notes of their own, which passed current within the districts of issue. Serious and well-founded fears were entertained as to the stability of these concerns, and the depreciation of country paper, varying from case to case with the estimated stability of the various banks, was a constant theme of discussion. The Government newspapers, strongly critical of the worthless paper issued by some of the country banks, maintained that all was well with the Bank of England, that the national credit had never been so good, and that the effects of the Bank Restriction Act were completely misunderstood. The Government, however, was compelled, after the publication of Ricardo's articles, to agree to the appointment of a special Bullion Committee, which presented its report in September, 1810. Ricardo's conclusions were accepted, and the resumption of cash payments by the Bank of England was recommended as the indispensable remedy. Francis Horner,[1] who had been active in securing the appointment of the committee, moved in the House in 1811 a series of resolutions based on its report. The Government strongly opposed him, secured the rejection of his resolutions, and carried instead a series drawn up by Nicholas Vansittart, subsequently Chancellor of the Exchequer,

[1] Francis Horner, Whig M.P., lawyer and economist, was one of the founders of the *Edinburgh Review*. He wrote little, but was recognised as one of the leading financial authorities in Parliament. His fame chiefly rests on the Bullion Report, mentioned in the text, of which he was the principal author. He died in 1817, aged thirty-nine.

declaring against the resumption of cash payments, and denying that the restriction had any effect on the price of bullion or the depressed state of the foreign exchanges. The notes of the Bank of England were declared to be held in public estimation as fully equivalent to coin of the realm—a declaration which, as Cobbett pointed out, everybody knew to be untrue, as bank notes were at the time worth only about four-fifths of their face value in specie. The Government further took the new step, rendered necessary by certain cases in which creditors refused to take notes in payment, of making the notes of the Bank of England legal tender for debts of any amount.

Cobbett, before the report of the Bullion Committee appeared, wrote in the *Register*, beginning in July, 1810, a series of articles dealing with the position of the country banks. He pointed out that the attacks on these notes were illogical in the mouths of those who maintained that Bank of England notes were as good as gold, urging that the country notes had often some real basis in wealth behind them, whereas the Bank of England notes were only paper, with no basis at all in real wealth. Depreciation, he urged, was inevitable as long as the Bank Restriction Act remained in force; and he went further, arguing that the resumption of cash payments was an impossibility as long as the burden of the National Debt was weighing on the people. He thus linked up his case against paper-money with his favourite argument for ceasing to pay interest on the Debt, urging that a resumption of cash payments, by bringing prices down, would hugely increase the real burden of the Debt, so that the interest on it could not possibly be paid out of the taxes, and national bankruptcy must ensue. Resumption of cash payments, or, as we should say now, deflation, would mean making a huge present to the bond-holders; for the Debt, contracted in depreciated paper, would then have to be repaid in good hard money. To those who urged that, at all events, the reduction in prices resulting from deflation would benefit the common people, he replied that it would not; for wages would be reduced at least as much as prices. The farmer, receiving less for his stock or his sack of wheat, would not—could not—go on paying the same in wages. The whole argument has a very modern ring. We have re-enacted the whole drama of deflation in this country during the past few years, with precisely the consequences,

for both bond-holders and labourers, that Cobbett foretold more than a century ago.

Immediately after the publication of the Bullion Committee's Report, Cobbett followed up his scattered articles with a more formal treatment of the whole question. His letters on *Paper against Gold*, addressed to the inhabitants of Salisbury, where the failure of a country bank had just spread ruin, covered the whole field of finance from "Mr. Muckworm," the financier, to Mr. Pitt, who, as usual, played the part of Satan in Cobbett's inferno. It is impossible, of course, even to summarise his argument here: only its general trend can be indicated. The Bank of England and the National Debt, he pointed out, had a common origin: the bank had been started in 1694, by a group of financiers who had secured their privileged position by means of a loan to the Government. Bank paper and the National Debt had increased side by side at a corresponding rate. In other words, paper had been used to pay the interest on the Debt. Moreover, of late years at least, there had been a similar and startling correspondence between the increase in the Debt and in paper money on the one hand, and on the other the number of paupers claiming parish relief. Was this a mere accident, or did the rise of a large class of fund-holders, and a new governing class of stock-jobbers, necessarily bring with it an increase of pauperism? Cobbett urged that the connection was vital. He laughed at the argument that the increase of paper, indicating an increase in the number of transactions, was a sign of increased national prosperity. Promises to pay, he said, are not wealth, but debt: their increase proves nothing but an increase in the volume of indebtedness. If trade has increased, it is by no means to be taken as necessarily a sign of national prosperity; and, in any case, why should increased trade be financed by depreciated paper? He pointed scornfully to the influence exercised by financiers over the policy of Government; the constant consultations of Pitt, Addington, and Perceval with bankers and stock-jobbers; the panic into which the country was thrown in 1810 by the suicide of Goldsmid, the Jewish banker. The financiers, and not the Pitts and their successors, were, he said, the real rulers of the country. Pitt's sinking fund, whereby the money to pay off debts contracted at low interest was borrowed at high interest, was held up to ridicule: the dishonesty of a promise to pay

which was payable only in other promises to pay was vigorously denounced. In short, the increase of paper money, like the increase in the export trade, had benefited only the fund-holders and financiers, at the expense of the mass of the people. The "funding system" was bound up with the system of rotten boroughs and Parliamentary corruption: it was the real cause of the war; it was at the back of the obstinate resistance to Reform. It was nonsense to talk of putting things right merely by resuming cash payments at the Bank: cash payments could not be resumed without bringing the whole financial system down in ruins.

It is easy to see now that this indictment of Cobbett's is an intricate network of truth and error. Cash payments were ultimately resumed, though not for more than ten years after he wrote, and not without very great difficulty. National bankruptcy did not result, though deflation did immensely increase the real charge of the Debt. The immense increase of industry and commerce, in fact, enabled the burden to be borne; but it was none the less a burden, and an unjust burden, on that account. The fund-holders did grow fat at the nation's expense: only, contrary to Cobbett's anticipation, the capitalist classes grew fat enough to bear the burden. The poor suffered as he had predicted: before them were the evil days of the twenties, and, after their brief uprising in the thirties, the terrible sufferings of the Hungry Forties. All things considered, Cobbett was certainly far more right than wrong.

We saw, in an earlier chapter, how the reading of Tom Paine's *Decline and Fall of the English System of Finance* had first, in 1803, opened his eyes to the evils of the "funding system." What he wrote in *Paper against Gold* was only a development of the case he had then put forward, differently stated in relation to the circumstances of the time. His financial writings brought him much opposition, especially his advocacy of reducing, or ceasing to pay, the interest on the National Debt; but they also brought him many friends, and many of his strongest supporters in the Reform agitation, particularly among farmers, were brought into the movement by Cobbett's trenchant attacks on the "funding" and paper-money system. We may smile now at certain of his arguments; but was not their general tendency remarkably correct? Cobbett saw far more of the real truth of things than Ricardo, or any of the business economists.

The last few months of his imprisonment in Newgate brought certain of his prophecies to rapid fulfilment. In the first months of 1812 the seriousness of the internal position could no longer be disguised. Towards the end of 1810, George III. had finally lost his reason, and, after some delay and many disputes concerning the terms of the Regency, the Prince of Wales became Regent early in 1811. This led to negotiations for a new ministry; but the Prince Regent's conversations with the Whig leaders broke down, and the Tories under Spencer Perceval remained in office.

In May, 1812, while Cobbett was still in Newgate, and while the Luddite disturbances in the midland and northern counties were at their height, the Prime Minister, Perceval, was assassinated in the lobby of the House of Commons. His assailant, John Bellingham, was a Liverpool merchant, who acted solely under the impulsion of a private grievance. He had been ill-treated and imprisoned in Russia, and the Ministry had refused him redress. But, though this was the actual motive, the assassination caused a panic in the Houses of Parliament, the members connecting the event with the Luddite disturbances, and fearing the existence of a revolutionary plot. Bellingham was tried and executed within a few days, being given only forty-eight hours to prepare his defence. The time, however, was long enough to make it plain beyond doubt that the crime had no political significance.

Cobbett, in the *Register*, took up Bellingham's case,[1] and replied to the newspapers which had execrated the murderer. The people, he said, were glad at Perceval's death. They had actually cheered Bellingham when it was attempted to remove him from the House of Commons, where he had been arrested, and it had been necessary to provide a strong military guard in order to prevent a rescue. The Ministry, in its panic, had called out the soldiers all over the country. The plan of a public funeral for Perceval had been abandoned for fear of what the populace might do; the private funeral, even, had been accompanied by a body of soldiers for dread of the people. Cobbett examined Perceval's reactionary record, and, following his usual practice, made his death an occasion for candid comment on the tendencies of his policy and not for crocodile tears or execrations of the crime.

[1] *P.R.*, May 23rd and 30th, 1812.

The murder of the Prime Minister involved the creation of a new Government. Once more the Whigs had a chance of office; but negotiations again broke down, and the Tories resumed office under Cobbett's old antagonist, Hawkesbury, once Foreign Secretary in Addington's Government, and now become Earl of Liverpool. 1811 and 1812 were years of almost continuous ministerial crisis.

They were years also of acute industrial depression. In February, 1811, the United States, as a measure of retaliation against British interference with their trade with Europe, renewed the Non-Intercourse Act, and closed the American market to British goods. With European markets still closed by the Berlin Decrees and the Orders in Council, this created a terrible situation. All over the country, factories stood idle and the operatives who had gathered to the new industrial towns were faced with starvation. Employers, in a desperate effort to retain markets by cutting costs, both reduced wages drastically and speeded up the introduction of the new machines which made obsolete the old-time skill of the handicraftsmen and enabled the cheap labour of children to be substituted for that of adults. Hunger-riots, devoid for the most part of political significance, broke out in many parts of the north and midlands. In the autumn of 1811, the Luddite campaign of frame-breaking spread over the Midland counties. The hosiery workers went about the country in organised bands breaking the frames which menaced their means of life. From Nottingham and the Midland counties the riots spread into Yorkshire and Lancashire; and, in the early part of 1812, came news of riots from all parts of the country. Cobbett, in the *Register*, reported in a single number riots at Bristol, Carlisle, Manchester, and in Cornwall, Yorkshire, and other parts of Lancashire.[1] The whole north and west, as well as the midlands were in a condition of violent unrest.

These riots were not political. They were despairing revolts against starvation, directed for the most part against the new machines and the masters who were taking the leading part in their introduction. The Reformers, of course, appealed to the rioters to realise that in Reform lay their sole hope of redress; but few rioters stayed to listen. They wanted bread, not arguments. The Government, however, and the upper classes generally, worked themselves up

[1] *P.R.*, April 18th, 1812.

promptly into a panic. Early in 1812 an Act was passed, making frame-breaking a capital offence, and the discussion gave Lord Byron the one occasion on which he lifted up his voice in the House of Lords.[1] So far, however, was that voice from prevailing that the House of Lords' Secret Committee produced an alarmist report full of rumours of a coming general insurrection, organised by powerful forces operating throughout the country. Fresh emergency legislation was hastily rushed through Parliament. Magistrates were given fresh powers to search for arms and to disperse tumultuous assemblies, and their jurisdiction was extended beyond their own districts. Arrests and bloody executions brought comfort to the hearts of Liverpool, Sidmouth, Castlereagh, and the terrified upper-class in general, and, amid an orgy of repression, the rumours of insurrection died away, and the labourers slunk back to their hovels at the crack of the lash. In the midst of these fine doings, the United States had declared war on England, the tardy repeal of the Orders in Council having come too late to prevent calamity both at home and abroad.

Cobbett, in the *Register*, was from the first fully alive to the significance of the Luddite disturbances.[2] Commenting on the original outbreak in Nottingham during the autumn of 1811, he traced the riots to two causes—unemployment and the high price of bread. "Measures," he wrote, "ought to be adopted, not so much for putting an end to riots, as to prevent the misery out of which they arise."[3] The Government thought to deal with the situation by rushing soldiers into the troubled districts. This was no solution. There must be something done to give employment to persons formerly employed in the manufactures." He then went on to demand facilities for the re-absorption of those workers in agriculture, including, surprisingly, a reduction in the legal expense of enclosing land. But above all he demanded measures to bring down the price of bread; for "The reasonings of the belly are always more powerful than those of the brain."[4]

Realising fully the evil consequences of war with America,

[1] This incident is made use of in Toller's play, *The Machine-Wreckers*.

[2] For Cobbett's attitude to machinery and machine-breaking, see later, p. 210.

[3] *P.R.*, November 23rd, 1811.

[4] For Cobbett's attitude to machinery and machine-breaking, see later, p. 210.

and tracing the increased unemployment to the Non-Intercourse Act, the effect of which was further, by stopping the supplies of corn which had been sent to the troops in Spain and Portugal, to cause British supplies to be sent there, and so add to the scarcity at home, he demanded the unconditioned repeal of the Orders in Council.[1] "We have been trying this war of the custom-house for some years, and we find, not only that it is productive of great present distress, but that it is likely to transfer permanently a considerable part of our manufactures and commerce to other countries."[2]

In the early months of 1812, as we have seen, the riots, despite the violent military measures already taken for their suppression, spread rapidly through the north and midlands, and broke out also in Bristol and the west. It seemed to Cobbett high time to embark on a fuller consideration of causes and remedies. He had come round, by this time, to a definite view in favour of peace with France. In a series of *Letters to the Prince Regent*, dealing mainly with the dangers of the rupture with America, he urged that the people had been led into the war with France by misrepresentation and the suppression of free speech, that its only consequences had been to rob the French people of the democracy which they had sought to establish, and to subject them, and all the Continent, to a military despotism, and that the war had already resulted, in England, in the establishment of just such an autocracy, ruling by military force, as we were denouncing in France.[3] On a rumour of peace negotiations later in the year, he wrote that the war had been kept in being by the influence of financiers and others who profited by it, and that "there is not the smallest probability of our seeing a time more favourable to negotiation than the time present."[4] And, in his important *Letter to the Manchester Addressers*, he roundly declared that the war against France had been waged in the interests, not of the British people, but of autocracy and corruption at home. "The real cause of the war with France was, I am convinced, the *dread of a Parliamentary Reform in England*."[5]

In April, the *Register* became full of reports on the renewed riots. Cobbett dealt trenchantly with the newspapers, especially "the bloody old *Times*" and *The Courier*, which

[1] *P.R.*, November 30th, 1811.
[2] *Ibid.*
[3] *P.R.*, February 1st, 1812.
[4] *P.R.*, April 25th, 1812.
[5] *P.R.*, May 2nd, 1812.

attempted to represent them as the work of malevolent and disloyal agitators. But by this time his argument had taken on a political tinge, reflecting the extension of the riots and the assumption of some sort of leadership by the Reformers. Rioting and machine-breaking he did not defend; but he showed that these things sprang from misery, and asserted that the Reformers had a perfect right to draw the moral and demand from the Government measures of redress, especially the repeal of the Orders in Council and the opening of negotiations with France. He dwelt on the brutality which was being used in the suppression of the disturbances. "More troops! More troops!" seemed to be the one idea of the Government for dealing with the situation, as it had been the one idea of Burke and the anti-Jacobins in the early days of the French Revolution. In the *Letter to the Manchester Addressers*, Cobbett went at length into the whole disastrous history of repression and misrepresentation from 1789 onwards. In 1792, the Manchester Constitutional Society, the organisation of the Reformers in those days, had issued an Address against war with France, asking whom war would benefit, and what would become of the common people "when wages are sunk, and provisions rise." Cobbett took this as his text. The Reformers of 1792 had been right, as their successors were right in 1812. The Reformers, indeed, had no hand in causing the riots; but the riots were the necessary consequence of the war, which the Reformers opposed. "I will take the liberty to caution you . . . against the use of that abusive and contemptuous language towards the rioters, which has been employed by *The Times* and some other newspapers. Such language cannot possibly do any good; and it may do a great deal of harm. Its inevitable effect is to influence and embitter. To speak of them, as *The Times* has done, as an organised rabble, easily beaten by the soldiers; and to say, that it may be desirable that the spirit should break out in all places at once, so that the trouble of subduing it may be the sooner over; to talk in this light and swaggering manner is calculated to swell discontent into rage and despair. . . . Nothing in the way of conciliation should be neglected." [1] The right course was to relieve distress, not to shoot it down.

When, at the end of June, the Prince Regent sent his alarmist message to Parliament, and the two Houses set up

[1] *P.R.*, May 2nd, 1812.

their Secret Committees, Cobbett again took up the question in a series of articles on *The Luddites, or the History of the Sealed Bag*. This "sealed bag," laid before Parliament for the use of the Secret Committee, purported to contain papers showing the existence of a widespread and organised revolutionary conspiracy behind the riots. To judge from the reports—the evidence, of course, was not produced—these papers must have been woefully disappointing; for not a shred of proof did the reports reveal. The committees, however, were carefully packed by the Government, and duly reported in favour of special measures to suppress the supposed conspiracy. The Government newspapers went much further, demanding the suspension of the Habeas Corpus Act and the declaration of martial law through the country. "The vile *Times*" demanded that the rioters should be "put out of the protection of the law." [1] All the newspapers on the Tory side spread alarmist reports of mob violence.

Cobbett dealt particularly with the allegation that the riots were manifestations of a "treasonable conspiracy." "Far be it from me," he wrote, in his best style of irony, "to attempt to justify people in the commission of unlawful acts. I do not wish to justify the woman who, according to the newspapers, committed *highway robbery* in taking *some potatoes out of a cart at Manchester*, and, who, according to the newspapers, was HANGED FOR IT. I do not pretend to justify her conduct. But there is, I hope, no harm in my expressing my *compassion* for her; and, I further hope, that my readers would think me a most inhuman brute, if I were to endeavour to deprive her and her fellow-sufferers of the compassion of the public. . . . I cannot and I will not allow, that her forcibly taking some potatoes out of a cart at Manchester, was any proof of a *treasonable design* and of hatred against the whole form of our government." [2]

The Whig leaders, Grenville and Grey, much to Cobbett's anger, said not a word against the repressive measures put forward by the Government. "WATCH THE WHIGS!" was the *Register's* constant advice. The Opposition was left to Byron, Burdett, Whitbread, and a few other independents. Wilberforce, after a speech full of compassion, backed the repressive measures, and incurred Cobbett's especial dislike. He sat on the Secret Committee, which regarded the riots

[1] *P.R.*, July 4th, 1812. [2] *Ibid.*

as the result of a deep-laid plot, and the rioters as "set on" by evilly disposed persons, though it admitted that no evidence of the presence of agitators (except, presumably, the Government's own provocative agents and informers) could be found. The committee was deeply impressed.

"Deeply enough, no doubt; but there was, it seems, no evidence to prove a *setting on*; no evidence to prove a *plot*. And this is the circumstance that will most puzzle the ministry. They can find no *agitators*. It is a movement of the *people's own*." [1]

Still, evidence or no evidence, a plot there must be; for the Government must get its measures through. They were duly carried, still without opposition from the Whig leaders. Cobbett saw the last degradation in the powers given to magistrates to search everywhere for arms, and to "disarm the people."

"DISARM THE PEOPLE! Disarm the people of England! And FOR WHAT? No matter what. The fact is quite enough. The simple sentence stating this one fact will save foreign statesmen the trouble of making any inquiries relative to the internal state of England. It speaks whole volumes. . . . What can be added to this, in order to give Napoleon an adequate idea of our situation? Why, this: that LORD CASTLEREAGH is the man to propose the measure." [2]

There can be no doubt that the riots of 1811 and 1812, though they were suppressed and the whole popular movement driven back for a few years, had a big influence on Cobbett's attitude. Hitherto, he had written mainly with the agricultural labourers and the Westminster artisans in mind. The riots drew his attention to the great new industrial populations of the north and midlands, and showed the possibility of enlisting them in the struggle for Reform. Henceforward, there is a change in the manner of his writing: more of a distinctive working-class appeal is apparent. The change does not develop fully for a while yet; but the Luddite disturbances are its beginning. Cobbett, the political reformer, is beginning to change again into Cobbett the leader of working-class agitation. But for the full consequences of this change we must await the ending of the war and the coming of the fateful years of after-war unrest.

[1] *P.R.*, July 25th, 1812. [2] *Ibid.*

CHAPTER XIII

THE FALL OF NAPOLEON—RELIGIOUS OPINIONS—THE CORN LAWS

WHILE he was in jail, Cobbett, in appending his signature to his articles in the *Register*, regularly gave also his location. On July 8th, 1812, he wrote his last article from jail, and appended to it the words, "State Prison, Newgate, where I have just paid a thousand pounds fine TO THE KING; and much good may it do his Majesty." [1] He was released the following day, and entertained the same evening at a great dinner in celebration of his release. Six hundred guests, under the chairmanship of Sir Francis Burdett, sat down at the Crown and Anchor Tavern, always the gathering place for the Radical celebrations of the time. That very morning, *The Times*, in its own way, had also celebrated Cobbett's release by publishing a vicious attack upon him, including a garbled account of his offer to drop the *Register* before his imprisonment. The opening paragraphs of the suppressed *Farewell Address* to his readers were quoted, and Sir Francis Burdett and his other friends were warned to have nothing to do with such a double-dealer. This attack was also struck off in leaflet form, and handed to all the guests by men specially posted outside the Crown and Anchor. A waiter was also bribed to place copies of it, and of Cobbett's attacks on Burdett in his old anti-Jacobin days, under the soup-plate of each guest. Cobbett, thus suddenly faced with the garbled version of the story, met it, as we have seen, with a complete denial. He was believed, and the attempt to use his old strictures on Burdett against him only provoked laughter.

On the following day he set out for Botley, and his journey became a triumphal procession, the villages and towns through which he passed greeting him with peals of the bells and special addresses of congratulation. At Alton there was a public breakfast arranged, and at Winchester a second dinner to celebrate the release. Cobbett's daughter, Anne, who had been in Newgate with him during the last period of

[1] His friend, George Rogers, paid his fine for him.

his imprisonment, travelled down home with him in the carriage, and was mightily disappointed because she was excluded, on grounds of sex, from the celebrations. At Alton, her sister relates, one of the organisers of the breakfast insisted on rescuing her from so many gentlemen, and putting her, much to her chagrin, to breakfast alone with his wife. Mrs. Cobbett met her husband at Winchester with the rest of the family; but she and the girls returned home before the dinner, leaving Cobbett and his sons to follow afterwards.

At Botley itself he received an ovation from the villagers; but there was no peal of bells. Mr. Baker, the Botley parson, then in the throes of his disputes with Cobbett over Paine's *Age of Reason*, and subject to a regular baiting administered without mercy by the *Register*, refused the keys of the church. The villagers, however, took the horses out of the carriage, and dragged Cobbett to his home in triumph. His reception everywhere on his release was a great and significant tribute to his popularity.

He was, however, by no means at the end of his troubles. Although his friends had come forward manfully to help him, and the large sums which he had to find as sureties for his future good behaviour were readily advanced, their possible confiscation hung over him, and he felt compelled to transfer to another the ownership of the *Register*, and therewith a considerable share in the profits. But, despite his difficulties, he refused to buy security at the price of freedom. An offer was made to him, before he left Newgate, to remit his fine if he would refrain from writing in support of the Princess Regent, whose grievances against her husband were already becoming a subject of hot political controversy. Princess Caroline's case was taken up by all the Radicals as a stick wherewith to beat the Prince Regent and the Government. Cobbett refused immunity at the price of silence, and began the vigorous defence of the princess, which he continued until he took a leading part in the great "Pains and Penalties" case of 1820. The *Register* of 1813 was filled with an exhaustive defence, contained principally in the *Letters to James Paul*, of the princess's conduct, and a vehement rebuttal of the charges made against her in the course of the so-called "delicate investigation."

His popularity at this time is attested by the tone of the excellent parody of him in James and Horace Smith's *Rejected Addresses*, published in connection with the re-opening in

October of the new playhouse at Drury Lane, built to replace the old house which had been destroyed by fire. The good-natured banter to which the authors subjected Cobbett showed clearly on what his popularity was founded. The parody did full justice to his trenchant English style—his "plain, homespun, yeoman's prose," and to his defence of poor men's rights against the "cheap soup" benevolence of Wilberforce and his kind. His writing, "as plain as the pikestaff I used to carry when I was a sergeant"; his attitude of appealing to the "most thinking people," to be touched by arguments such as he himself understood: his very English prejudices for "plain wholesome patriotic beef or mutton broth," are exactly hit off as the sources of his power and his hold on the people. For independent evidence of Cobbett's position at this time there can be no better evidence than *Rejected Addresses*.

The Government papers attacked him savagely, and one Radical journal, Leigh Hunt's *Examiner*, on the ground that the negotiations of 1810 were a betrayal of the people's cause, joined in the outcry. But his position was in no wise shaken. He resumed at once his full place, which indeed, owing to the conditions of his imprisonment, he had hardly lost at all, in the agitation for Reform. Thus, in July, he energetically supported in the *Register* Henry Hunt's Radical candidature for Bristol.[1] The election, in which Hunt was beaten by the alliance of the orthodox parties, was a riotous affair. Troops were called out, and Cobbett made strong protest against their use in an election. Hunt had also to meet savage attacks on the ground that he was living apart from his own wife and with another woman. Cobbett, some years earlier, before he got to know Hunt, had warned Wright to have nothing to do with him. "There is one *Hunt*, the Bristol man. Beware of him! he rides about the country with a whore, the wife of another man, having deserted his own. A sad fellow! Nothing to do with him."[2] But now he fiercely contended that the separation might not be Hunt's fault, and that, in any case, the private life of a candidate had nothing at all to do with his capacity to serve the public.[3] Thus began a period of alliance between Cobbett and "Orator" Hunt, unfortunately broken at a later stage by more than

[1] *P.R.*, July 4th, 1812.
[2] Letter to Wright, April 10th, 1808.
[3] *P.R.*, August 1st, 1812.

one famous quarrel of which we shall have to speak in its place.

In October, Cobbett again offered himself tentatively as a Parliamentary candidate, this time to the electors of his own county of Southampton.[1] At the Hampshire county meeting he made a long speech offering himself as a candidate and again giving his famous pledge—now general among Radical candidates—against ever accepting one farthing of the public money. On this occasion, however, he put forward a full Reform programme, including strong opposition to the continuance of the war for the final crushing of Napoleon. In the *Register* he published a series of *Addresses to the Hampshire Electors*,[2] giving a full exposition of his programme. He did not, however, go to the poll, although he claimed that, at the meeting, the majority of votes was in his favour. The chairman gave the decision in favour of the Government nominees, and, as the Government's influence, wielded by "Old George Rose,"[3] was predominant in the county, Cobbett did not challenge a poll. Probably he had not money to spare for an expensive contested election. He contented himself with exposing the extent to which George Rose and his family battened on the public purse, and with making one more strong protest against the intimidation of tenants to vote at their landlords' behest. "To canvass individually, especially where the person canvassed is employed by, or is a tenant of, the person canvassing, or is, in any shape, within the reach of his power, is not only a very mean, but a very base act. I do, in short, look upon it as an act of *corruption* of the very worst kind; and, therefore, I have heard, with no common degree of indignation, of a land-owner at Southampton, who, in consequence of some of his tenants having, in opposition to his requisition, voted for Mr. Chamberlayne, has given those tenants *notice to quit*. This is an act of baseness for which a man ought to be held in universal abhorrence."[4]

Cobbett had become by this time very definitely in favour of peace. There seemed to him no reasonable prospect of an early termination of the war by means of a complete victory over Napoleon. Nor did he desire such a victory; for the support given to Ferdinand in Spain and other

[1] *P.R.*, October 10th, 1812.
[2] *P.R.*, October 10th, 17th, 24th, and 31st, 1812.
[3] See p. 147.
[4] *P.R.*, October 24th, 1812.

indications had shown him clearly that the effect of an Allied triumph would be merely the restoration of the old dynasties throughout Europe, and, at the best, merely the substitution of one kind of autocracy for another. He preferred Napoleon to the Bourbons, although he hated them both; for, if Napoleon had betrayed the republicans and democrats, under him some of the gains of the Revolution, and especially the land settlement which had given freedom and security to the peasants, had been preserved. The French people, Cobbett held, vastly preferred Napoleon to Louis the Eighteenth, and the preference was their affair, in which neither Great Britain nor any other country had right or concern to meddle. Nor was it to our interest to go on fighting indefinitely to restore the old balance of power in Europe. For the British people, the prolongation of war meant the further enrichment of the few at the expense of the many. The National Debt and the poor rates increased in almost exact proportion: the war swelled at once the class of stock-jobbers and *rentiers* and the class of paupers. Peace, to be sure, would not of itself bring back prosperity. It would do little enough for either trade or agriculture. There could be no real peace without Reform, and Reform must include not only a drastic change in the forms of political representation, but also a thorough purge of the financial system, including remission of war taxes and a liquidation of the burdens of the Debt.

When the news arrived, in November, 1812, of Napoleon's disaster in Russia, and of the utter destruction of the Grand Army in the retreat from Moscow, Cobbett, while admitting the magnitude of the reverse, refused to agree that it was fatal to Napoleon's position. With French sentiment behind him, he was strong enough to rise again even after such a fall. Cobbett was right. In 1813 Napoleon was able again to take the field with new and powerful armies. It seemed as if he must be right also in his view that there was no real prospect of a final Allied victory. When Metternich offered peace in that year on the basis of the preservation of Napoleon's power in an enlarged France, Cobbett strongly urged that peace should be made. He continued, too, his opposition to the long drawn out and desultory war between Great Britain and America, in which he contended that Great Britain was fighting for nothing worth a single blow. In a series of *Letters*

to the Earl of Liverpool[1]—Prime Minister since Perceval's assassination—he argued vigorously for immediate peace with the United States.

At length, in 1814, came Napoleon's downfall. The Russian disaster had sapped his strength in France, and his refusal of terms which would have excluded him from influence in the rest of Europe, while leaving France under his sway, had solidified his enemies against him. On all hands the Allied armies closed in; France was again invaded, as in the early days of the anti-Jacobin war. Resistance was at an end; the Allies entered Paris; Napoleon abdicated his power, but was allowed, chiefly through Austrian influence, exerted on behalf of his empress, to retain his title of Emperor, and to enjoy a Ruritanian sovereignty over the tiny Isle of Elba. Cobbett had not believed until the end that all was over: when the news came, he threw up his cap with the rest, but, as he told them, for a very different reason. The unthinking rejoiced merely because it was right and proper to rejoice at the tidings of victory: he rejoiced only because the ending of the war would at last make the way clear for pressing the issue of Reform. The war had been the great obstacle: it was impossible to press the things that really mattered as long as it was in being. But now—"to revile a man as a *Jacobin* will be senseless, and will excite ridicule amongst a people who have lost their fears. This is a great good. The *bugbear* is gone: the *hobgoblin* is destroyed. Reason will now resume her sway; and, in spite of all that can be done, I do not care by what means, the lot of those who do not now live on the taxes *must be bettered*."[2]

"The truth is," he wrote some months later, "that the fall of Napoleon is the hardest blow that our *taxing* system ever felt. It is now impossible to make people believe that immense fleets and armies are necessary. . . . The peace is, as I said it would be, a sort of *Revolution* in England. The people are sore. They were drunk last June and July. The drunken fit is over."[3]

Unfortunately, the drunken fit was not quite over. In March came the news of Napoleon's escape from Elba, and of his triumphant return to Paris. The trumpets were soon

[1] *P.R.*, November and December, 1814.

[2] *P.R.*, April 16th, 1814. [3] *P.R.*, January 21st, 1815.

blowing for another war. Cobbett strongly opposed this, holding that, as the French had shown their desire to have Napoleon rather than Louis XVIII., we should leave him in undisputed possession. He blamed Napoleon, indeed, for not throwing off the vain title of Emperor, and appealing to the French people as a republican leader seeking to restore the lost liberties of the Revolution. But, even as he was, Napoleon was preferable to Louis, to whom Cobbett in the previous year had addressed a very sensible series of letters, urging that, if he desired to remain in enjoyment of his throne, nothing must be done to disturb the revolutionary settlement or to prosecute its adherents. The advice had not been taken; and Cobbett was now fiercely opposed to the renewal of a "dynastic" war. He had urged, moreover, the year before, that there were powerful financial interests which keenly regretted Napoleon's downfall, because peace would reduce their opportunities for profit. These interests, he said, welcomed the renewal of hostilities, and saw in a new war the means of preventing Reform and maintaining the funding and stock-jobbing system unimpaired. Nothing suited them less than a Peace which was "a sort of Revolution."

Cobbett was by no means alone in his opposition to the renewal of the war. Petitions poured in from the manufacturing towns: in both Houses of Parliament the Government found organised opposition. Whatever the Tories and the financiers might say, the people were sick of war, and did not greatly care whether "Bony" reigned in France or not. They believed, far too readily, that peace would bring plenty and prosperity in its train.

The war, however, was renewed, and the amazing episode of "The Hundred Days," barely interrupted the labours of the Congress of Vienna. Napoleon, defeated at Waterloo, was driven to a second abdication, and removed, not to Elba, but to St. Helena. Louis XVIII. and his rout of *émigrés* returned to Paris, still having "learned nothing, and forgotten nothing." Cobbett addressed a *Letter to Lord Castlereagh* [1] in which he urged that, failing thorough and immediate Reform in Britain, the worst that the Allies could inflict on France would leave her the country best off in Europe. For Englishmen, peace brought no blessings. The linked

[1] *P.R.*, July 1st, 1815. This was *Letter VI.* of a long series addressed to Castlereagh during 1815.

problems of pauperism and the National Debt stared them in the face.

Before we begin to consider the effects of peace upon the country and on Cobbett's relations with his countrymen, we must go back a little and trace his history during the closing years of the war. The Reform movement suffered a set-back after the merciless suppression of the riots of 1811 and 1812. Discontent did not disappear; but it was forcibly driven underground. Moreover, the dramatic series of military events between the retreat from Moscow in 1812 and the battle of Waterloo in 1815 made foreign affairs the dominant political interest, and inevitably crowded the Reform question into the background. It is said that the sale of *The Political Register* fell off: *The Times* in 1816 even professed to be surprised to hear that it was still in existence. Agitation among the lower classes was suppressed: the upper classes gave their attention to other matters than Reform and the Debt. As each issue of the *Register* still cost a shilling, and as it was mainly read, not for its comments on the war, but for its exposure of abuses and its advocacy of Reform, it is not surprising if its circulation decreased.

Questions of war and peace occupied a large part of its space. Next to these, in 1813 at least, came the discussion about the Princess Regent. But at the same time a new subject of controversy made its appearance. Cobbett's view of Tom Paine had been greatly altered by his adoption of Paine's financial views and by his changed attitude to the French Revolution. In these matters he had become a Painite; but he was still separated from Paine by a wide gulf on the question of religion. Paine's deist tract, *An Appeal to Reason*, was second only to *The Rights of Man* in popular influence and in the hostility which it aroused. Radical booksellers and agitators were constantly being sent to jail for hawking it: charges of spreading blasphemous publications were almost as frequent as sedition charges. A fellow-feeling led Cobbett to sympathise with these prisoners, and he wrote strongly in defence of some of them, and especially of Daniel Eaton, the Radical editor of *Hog's Wash, or Politics for the People, addressed to the Swinish Multitude*, who was shut up in Lincoln jail while he was in Newgate. It was stated, he said, that Paine's writings were utterly subversive to the Christian religion and of all morality. If this was so, surely the right course was, not to imprison their

vendors, but to refute their arguments, and he, as a good churchman, was shocked, on looking into the question, to find that no answer existed to which even the friends of religion could point as satisfactory. He appealed, as we have seen, to the "Botley parson," as his own spiritual minister, to step into the breach; but Mr. Baker, after rashly accepting the challenge, backed out, and subjected himself to Cobbett's lasting ridicule. From reading Paine Cobbett was led to read other books critical of orthodox theology. They made an impression upon him. "The truth is (and I am not ashamed to avow it) that the reading of *Ecce Homo*,[1] which I have performed with great care, has given rise to *difficulties* in my mind. There are parts of that work which, I confess, I am quite unable to answer; and which, nevertheless, I must see answered before my mind can be settled upon the subject." [2]

By this time, indeed, Cobbett, on questions of religious controversy, was not at all certain where he stood. He remained a Churchman, with a vigorous dislike of dissenters, especially Methodists. "There are, I know, persons who look upon the Methodists, for instance, as *friends of freedom*. It is impossible they should be. They are either fools or tricksters, or so nearly allied thereto, as to be worthy of no consideration. Their heavenly gifts, their calls, their inspirations, their feelings of grace at work within them, and the rest of their canting gibberish, are a gross and outrageous insult to common sense, and a great scandal to the country." [3] And again, "At the Methodist meeting, there must be mischief; for there is openly taught the infernal doctrine, that a murderer may be one of the elect people of God, while an innocent person whom he has murdered may be doomed to eternal flames. . . . There is not a Methodist meeting in England, where the people are not told, that good works are of no avail in ensuring their salvation." [4]

Cobbett, in fact, strongly resented the persecution of deists and "infidel" followers of Paine, while other sects, which he regarded as ethically far more objectionable, were given freedom of preaching. He did not want to persecute

[1] *Ecce Homo! or A Critical Inquiry into the History of Jesus Christ*, published by Daniel Eaton in 1813.

[2] *P.R.*, December 4th, 1813.

[3] *P.R.*, June 12th, 1813. He wrote of Joanna Southcot in the same strain. *P.R.*, September, 1814.

[4] *P.R.*, August 21st, 1813.

the Methodists; but he wanted to stop the persecution of the "infidels," in which the Methodists most heartily joined. "I am not for inflicting legal penalties, even upon the men who thus corrupt the hearts of the people. If the law suffered every man to write and preach what he pleased, upon the subject of religion, this doctrine would soon disappear like mists before the sun. While *truth* is a *libel*, this doctrine will continue to gain ground, because it is so flattering to human vices." [1]

This attitude brought Cobbett into serious trouble with some of his readers. Early in 1813 a Bill was brought in to relieve Unitarians of certain of their legal disabilities, and in particular to repeal the law which made it an offence to write or speak against the doctrine of the Trinity. Cobbett denounced the Bill, and for months the *Register* was full of the controversy which ensued. He took the line that either all laws restraining freedom of religious criticism should be repealed, or matters should be left as they were. The doctrine of the Trinity was an essential tenet of Christianity. If it might be assailed, why should the Unitarians object to others assailing other tenets?

"What, then, you will say, perhaps, are people to believe what they cannot believe? *Cannot* believe! pray, what does that mean? The people, in whose behalf you bring forward the Bill, are, it seems, quite willing to be bound to a *belief in the Scriptures*: they believe, they are content to believe, that God came down, in the cool of the day, and walked in the Garden of Eden; that He came down and talked to Moses in a cloud; that the Red Sea opened and formed a sort of wall while the Israelites passed over; that the Sun and Moon stood still at the command of Joshua; that the walls of Jericho fell down at the sound of a trumpet; that five loaves and a few small fishes filled thousands of hungry people: all this, it seems, they are willing to believe as well as we Church people; and *why*, I should be glad to know, are they to be permitted openly to preach against the belief of Christ being God? Why do they not come, at once, and ask for leave to deny the *whole* as well as a *part*? They cannot *comprehend* how Christ can be God, by whom He was begotten. Oh, oh! And can they *comprehend* how the Devil came to take Christ up to the top of a high mountain, and to offer him all the kingdoms of the world? Can they comprehend

[1] *P.R.*, August 21st, 1813.

how all the animals got into one single ark? . . . No: they pretend not to *comprehend* these. They do, however, believe them as we Church people do: they do, like us, regard them as mystical; and *why*, I again ask, cannot they accompany us through the whole of our faith? . . . *Tender consciences*, indeed! . . . No, no: I am for no partial repeals: I am for a general Act, permitting every man to say or write what he pleases upon the subject of religion, or, I wish the whole thing to remain what it now is." [1]

Cobbett, in fact, had far more sympathy for thorough-going Rationalists than for Dissenters. He saw no reason to prefer the doctrines of the dissenting sects to those of the Church, and he preferred the Church in which he had been brought up to its rivals. The Methodists, in particular, he accused of fixing men's thoughts on the other world, so as to divert their minds from the evils of this world. He disliked, moreover, puritanism and what he regarded as cant. If he were to ally himself with any of the advocates of religious freedom, it should be with those who claimed full freedom of discussion in matters of religion, as he claimed full freedom in matters of politics. He and they were fellow-sufferers. He was prepared to back a general demand for freedom of speech; but attempts to secure immunity for particular sects he regarded as both vicious, and calculated to divert attention from more urgent matters. He took up the same attitude in respect of Roman Catholic claims, which, he said, merely served to divide the people by giving occasion for the "No Popery!" cry to be raised. "In short, the agitation of this Catholic question serves, and can serve only, to *amuse the people*, and to keep them divided. If I were to choose a people to hold in a state of complete subjection, it should be a people divided into several religious sects, each condemning the other to perdition. With such a people, furnished with a suitable set of priests, a Government endued with barely common sense might do just what it pleased." [2]

Cobbett himself had "difficulties"; but he was least inclined to abandon the robuster tenets of his faith. "The Devil is a personage of great import in the Christian system. Indeed, the system is founded upon the idea of such a being, the constant enemy of man, working night and day for his destruction. If it be asked, *why* God did not kill the Devil

[1] *P.R.*, May 15th, 1813. [2] *P.R.*, February 6th, 1813.

long ago, or, at least, keep him in hell amongst his own infernal crew, and so prevent him from tormenting and tempting weak mortals; if this be asked, I ask Mr. Fordham in return, why God suffers poor mortals to have the gout or the tooth-ache? Mr. Fordham may jeer at me as long as he pleases; but he will not prevail on me to give up the Devil, who, as I said before, is the very sheet anchor of the Christian system." [1]

It is often, as in this passage, difficult to tell how far Cobbett is serious in his defence of established doctrines. He has his tongue all the time half in his cheek; and the suspicion that he was not quite serious was what made his dissenting critics most angry. Probably, the ambiguity arose from his own uncertainty of his position. He was changing ground in religion, as he had in politics, and there is the same difficulty in tracing the actual course of his mind during the change.

Cobbett's attitude to popular education connects itself naturally with his attitude on religion. In 1813 in a series of *Letters to Alderman Wood* [2] he argued against the establishment of schools for the poor, as he had against Whitbread's project in 1807. If the poor could read, he urged, the first thing they would read would be the newspapers. Would they find truth there? The papers which set out to tell the truth were suppressed or browbeaten: those which told lies were subsidised and helped to circulate widely. Truth was no defence in an action for libel: was the press, under such conditions, likely to be a vehicle for the truth? Were not Radical books suppressed? Were not Paine's books suppressed, while orthodox answers to him circulated freely? It was better to rely on men's judgment of what they saw and felt, than on the perverted views which reading would mostly teach them. "It is not the *mere capability of reading* that can raise man in the scale of nature. It is the *enlightening* of his mind; and, if the capability of distinguishing words upon paper does not tend to enlighten him, that acquirement is to be considered as nothing of any value." [3] Cobbett, in fact, set out to judge by results. He did not believe popular education, controlled by reactionary forces, would do good.

[1] *P.R.*, November 20th, 1813.

[2] *P.R.*, December 11th and 18th, 1813.

[3] *P.R.*, December 11th, 1813.

He therefore opposed it, though most of his Radical friends were for it.

On the vital question of Enclosures, he took up much the same position. He strongly opposed the General Enclosure Bill of 1813, but he did not oppose all enclosures. What he insisted was that land should be enclosed only where the result would be to improve cultivation without doing at least equal harm in other ways. Unenclosed land, he pointed out, was not idle land. "It helps to rear, in health and vigour, numerous families of the children of labourers, which children, were it not for those wastes, must be crammed into the stinking suburbs of towns, amidst filth of all sorts, and congregating together in the practice of every species of idleness and vice. A family reared by the side of a common or a forest is as clearly distinguishable from a family bred in the pestiferous stench of the dark alleys of a town, as one of the plants of Mr. Braddick's wheat is distinguishable from the feeble-stemmed, single-eared, stunted stuff that makes shift to rear its head above the cockle, and poppies, and couch-grass, in nine-tenths of the broadcast fields in the kingdom." [1] He himself, under the Bill, would be entitled to enclose sixty or a hundred acres of very good land. "But . . . I will never give my consent to the enclosure of it, or any part of it, except for the purposes of the labourers." [2]

Plans for enclosures were, indeed, in his view very often unjustifiable attempts—and futile attempts—to get rich quick on the part of land owners and the larger farmers, who added acre to acre even when they had neither capital nor labour for proper cultivation. The race of farmers was changing: war profits were turning the yeoman and his family into gentlefolk. They sent, instead of taking, their produce to market: they furnished their houses in the grand style: they brought up their children to be ladies and gentlemen. And all this took place amid the utter misery of the labourers, and the ruin of many of the smaller farmers, who had been evicted from their holdings by landlords in search of high rents. And now, on the approach of peace, the whole agricultural community was asked to vote for a high protective tariff or prohibition of imports in order to keep up the price of corn.

In 1814, and again in 1815, Cobbett took his stand against the proposed measures to protect home-grown corn, which

[1] *P.R.*, July 31st, 1813. [2] *Ibid.*

he denounced as unhelpful to the farmer and the labourer, as well as pernicious to the community. The farmer, he sought to show, had no interest in high prices; for he lost the benefit in high poor rates and other charges. All alone, he presented to Parliament a petition against the Corn Bill of 1815, and his objections were rooted in a general belief in the free trade system. "I am of opinion that the trade in corn should *always be perfectly free*, let its price be what it may; and that the trade in all other products should be the same."[1] In order to appreciate the importance of this stand, it must be remembered that Cobbett was himself a considerable farmer, with a large personal interest in agricultural prosperity, as well as a profound sympathy for the agricultural part of the population. His advocacy of free trade, however, lost him much of his popularity among the farmers, as his downright handling of religious questions had already lost him some popularity among sectarian Reformers. These causes also contributed to the decline in the *Register's* vogue. Cobbett was finding that it was dangerous to be reasonable, and most impolitic to be right. But, if he was losing old friends, he was soon to make new ones.

[1] *P.R.*, June 4th, 1814.

CHAPTER XIV

THE FRUITS OF VICTORY

THE ending of the war in 1815 made a vital difference to the prospects of every cause in which Cobbett was concerned. With one brief interval, Great Britain had been more than twenty years at war, and during all that time it had been impossible to get more than intermittent attention for Parliamentary Reform, or for any question vitally affecting the condition of the people. The National Debt had mounted up to a vast sum: the circulation of paper money had hugely increased, and had been accompanied by a great rise in prices. Among the agricultural workers and in many of the towns, the growth of pauperism had kept pace with the increase in the Debt. While the Orders in Council were in operation, there had been widespread distress among the operatives in the new factory towns and many employers had passed through trying times, or even been driven to bankruptcy. The mushroom growth of private banks, without adequate resources behind them, and the rapid growth of new businesses unsupported by any reserves of capital, made industry peculiarly unstable and helpless to resist periods of adverse trade. At the same time, the progress of enclosures was driving the cottagers off the land into the towns: high rents and short tenancies were causing the growth of large farms, and depriving the yeoman farmer of his independence. The growth of machinery was rendering obsolete the craft skill of the hand-loom weavers and other once relatively prosperous workers, and was bringing into the labour market huge armies of women and children, who were driven to tend the new machines for incredible numbers of hours in the day, at a wage barely enough to keep body and soul together—and a falling wage at that.

Yet for considerable sections, and these the most influential, the war was a time of prosperity. The landlords vastly increased their rents: the larger farmers amassed fortunes: immense war wealth came into the hands of stock-jobbers and Government contractors of every sort. Sinecures and

pensions increased with gathering momentum: large classes lived as fund-holders on the National Debt, or made fortunes by speculation in the funds. Except during the worst times under the Orders in Council, manufacturers on the whole did well, and factory workers at wages appallingly low, and for a working day inhumanly long, could, as a rule, find employment of a sort, unless they belonged to the groups specially liable to displacement by the new machines. The lot of the rural labourer was bad enough, and he depended regularly on the "fodder-basis" of the Poor Law for the means of life; but his lot was by no means so miserable as it was soon to become, when the "fodder-basis" was gradually lowered towards absolute starvation point by justices anxious at all costs to bring down the rates.

Peace, so far from bringing prosperity, made the position very much worse. Europe no longer took from Great Britain the large supplies of munitions, war equipment, and other commodities which had been the real form of the money subsidies granted to our Allies. The European countries gradually re-established their own devastated industries, and were, in any case, too much impoverished to buy largely from Great Britain. Exports fell off sharply, and unemployment spread rapidly through the manufacturing districts. The desperate cutting of wages and the merciless lengthening of the working day and intensification of factory labour were alike ineffective in increasing the volume of orders. They only made the distress worse, by destroying the purchasing power of the workers at home.

The farmers and labourers also suffered disaster. Corn prices fell precipitately, and protective legislation was utterly ineffective to hold them up. Then, on a bad harvest in 1816, they rose sharply; but the farmers, on the low yield, made no more profit than at the low prices of the year before. Perforce, they cut wages, and set about reducing the standard of living which the Poor Law system had previously allowed. Rents fell more slowly: farming failures and sales of bankrupt stock were widespread.

There was, indeed, a general fall of prices, by no means confined to agricultural produce. But the fall in earnings was considerably greater. The Bank of England set to work, after the Peace, to reduce the volume of paper money in circulation, with a view to a return to gold payments and a restoration of paper to real equivalence with its nominal

value. This reduction had two immediate results. It hastened and intensified the fall in prices; and it immensely increased the real burden of the National Debt. For the debts, and the interest on the debts, contracted in depreciated paper, had now to be repaid in gold. Every fall in prices meant a proportionate increase in the real burden of the debt. This in turn meant high taxation. The Government, under severe pressure, did indeed remove certain of the war taxes, including the Income Tax; but, although the nominal amount of taxation was considerably lessened, the real burden was increased. The taxpayer in peace time had to pay taxes greater in purchasing power than he had paid during the war, and to do this, in most cases, out of a reduced income. The burden of heavy indirect taxation also pressed more intolerably than ever on the common people now that wages were down yet closer to starvation level.[1]

Cobbett had prophesied these results of peace. He had warned the people not to expect from the mere cessation of hostilities a return of prosperity, and had pointed out the results in human misery of deflation or a real return to the gold standard. He had, in *Paper against Gold*, and in many other writings, pointed out that the reduction of prices would mean an increase of burdens as long as no attempt was made to get rid of the huge volume of debt. He returned to the charge now, arguing that there could be no return of prosperity without a complete change of system. The country could not, without disaster, continue to pay the interest on the debt: it could not by any means, except by monstrous further use of the printing press, pay off the principal. There must be a complete change of system. The debt had been contracted in paper: it was only reasonable to reduce the amount to be repaid in proportion to the fall in prices. Moreover, it had been greatly swollen by fraudulent means, and huge amounts of it had gone to make ill-gotten fortunes for stock-jobbers and Government contractors. There could be no moral claim for the repayment of debt held by such persons or by speculators. It was, he held, possible at once to write down the moral liability of the nation to a fraction of the nominal amount of the debt. Those who had profited by the debt must be made to

[1] For a full account of the economic conditions of the years following the war, see especially W. Smart's *Economic Annals of the Nineteenth Century*.

disgorge to the last penny, and to repay themselves, in so far as any sort of repayment need be made.

But the return of peace not only gave Cobbett the chance to urge with greater force, and with plainer demonstration of their immediate truth, his views on the question of finance; it also prepared the way for a far more vigorous revival of the Reform agitation. In previous chapters we have followed his connection with the Reform movement from 1806 or 1807 onwards. He, Burdett, Major Cartwright, Lord Cochrane, Orator Hunt, and others had indeed laboured manfully; but at no time before 1815 was there either a real chance of forcing the question on the attention of Parliament, or anything like a strong popular movement behind them. The number of active Radical Reformers in the House of Commons could be counted on the fingers of one hand: the Whig party still steadily refused to commit itself: Westminster was practically the one constituency in the country with an organised democratic electorate. Incursions into other constituencies might create temporary excitement at election times; but, when the faithful band of agitators withdrew after the contest, they left little or nothing behind them. Cobbett and his friends might create an uproar, and get strong support, by denouncing corruption at a county meeting of the Hampshire or Wiltshire electors. But such meetings created no popular movement. The rural labourers did not concern themselves with politics: the Luddites, and the active spirits among the industrial workers generally, were far more concerned with their economic sufferings than with their political rights. The attempts of the Reformers to make their voices heard, and to take the rôle of leaders, in the Lancashire disturbances of 1812 had, despite Cobbett's powerful appeals, very scant success. The arguments of the belly were more urgent, as well as more powerful, than any political appeals.

Thus the Reformers, before 1815, got far more support when they attacked definite abuses—such as the granting of more and more pensions and sinecures—than for their proposals of political reform. Reform was scarcely regarded by any outside their own group as an urgent issue, or one that could be forced effectively to the front. Even Cobbett most often preferred to stress his financial points and his attack on the placemen, whenever he was appealing to a county meeting or a body of electors. He asserted, indeed,

his firm conviction that sinecures would never be abolished, or the funding system destroyed, without a Reform of Parliament; but he also openly recognised that the chance for Reform had not yet come. It would come only with one of two events—the end of the war, or a financial collapse.

The coming of peace wholly altered the political conditions. There were no longer the arguments of patriotism to keep men quiet, no longer the "bogey" of Napoleon to scare them off from all contact with those whom the ruling classes still denounced as "Jacobins," and "Levellers." Moreover, when the Peace, far from bringing prosperity in its train, brought a period of increasing misery, men could no longer attribute their sufferings to the war, and blame the French. They were disposed to look nearer home for the cause of their starvation. "The play is over," said *The Courier*, a Government organ, "*we may now go to supper.*" "No," replied Cobbett, "*you cannot yet go to supper.* You have not yet *paid for the play.* And, before you have paid for the play, you will find that there is no money left for the supper." [1] "Paying for the play," in taxation, in unemployment, in poor rates, all becoming more burdensome after the Peace, was a process which made men think about the condition of the country.

The year 1815, therefore, gave a new start to the Reform agitation. Men had by then had time to get over the intoxication of victory, and to begin counting its cost. There were few enough, outside the ranks of the war profiteers, who could feel pleasure or confidence in their position. It was not to the common people alone that Cobbett and his friends could appeal with some chance of being heard; for large sections of the middle and upper classes were also in a most uncomfortable plight. Cobbett still, in 1816, was addressing himself, not merely to one class, but to all except those whose interests were clearly bound up with "the Thing." He even appealed to the fund-holders, to realise that their one chance of saving something from the impending wreck of the funding system was to throw in their lot with Reform. To the country gentleman, as well as to the farmer, he constantly appealed, bidding them mark the signs of the times—the passing of their ancestral estates into the hands of stock-jobbers and contractors, the increasing burden of taxation and the poor

[1] *P.R.*, October 26th, 1816, and on several earlier and later occasions (*e.g.*, February 3rd, 1816).

rates, the huge burden of the debt, oppressive to all who had an interest in the land. His Squire Jolterhead was the typical patriotic country gentleman of the time.

"Suppose Giles Jolterhead, Esq., to have twenty farms, each of which yields him a gross rent of £200 a year; and that he pays, out of his rent of £4000 a year, £1000 in taxes towards the expenses of the Government debt. In consequence of an alteration in the value of the currency wheat falls from 14*s.* to 7*s.* a bushel. It is clear that his rents must fall from £4000 to £2000 a year; and, if he continue to pay £1000 a year towards the debt, it is clear, that his spending income is, in fact, reduced to £1000 instead of £3000 a year. Thus far this is the real state of the landlords in England. But, while they are thus reduced, by the very same means, the fund-holder's income is *raised*, and that, too, in the same proportion. Well, the situation of "Squire Jolterhead is truly distressing. He lays down his *hounds* and three out of four of his hunters, and packs off a couple or three servants to begin with. People ask him *why*. He 'likes *coursing* better.' But, the *Greyhounds* are still expensive. The Tax-gatherer comes thundering at the door; talks so loud (with his *hat* on all the while) that the servants hear his voice quite into the Hall. Away go the beautiful Greyhounds dancing and capering to the pippin-tree. Four or five more visits from the man with the ink-bottle at his button-hole send off a brace out of three gardeners, turn the close-shaven lawn into a rough bit of pasture, 'Madam *liking to see* sheep and cows grazing close to the windows.' Shooting is now become the 'Squire's sole delight. The Tax-gatherer still returns as regularly as old Time himself, and as Time, pertinacious and irresistible in his course. What is now to be done? Are the dappled Pointers, with noses keener than the air itself and staunch as a rock; are they, and are the little true-bred Spaniels, with ears and dewlaps sweeping the ground, and with sport-anticipating tongues that would almost 'create a soul under the ribs of death'; are all these too; are all the family favourites of a century, all to be destroyed 'at one fell swoop?' Is their death-warrant signed in the book of taxes? Is there no respite? 'Parliament will *surely do something for us!*'"[1]

Meanwhile Squire Cracklouse, the Army tailor, Squire Turpentine, the spirit contractor, Squire Garbage, the meat

[1] *P.R.*, March 2nd, 1816.

contractor, Squire Beanmeal, the biscuit and bread contractor, Squire Glanders, the horse contractor, and an infinite number of others are "all sallying out around him with gay equipages or numerous troops of hunters and followers." Squire Jolterhead in vain applies to the Government for posts for his sons, in vain asks that taxation shall be remitted. His hopes are raised for a moment by a Government plan enabling him to mortgage his estates to his rich neighbours in order to pay his taxes; but Madam, his wife, finds that this will mean that her sons will have no estates at all. A scene ensues, till there comes an interruption. "A terrible knocking at the door announces the approach of the Tax-gatherer, and the parties sneak into their chairs as quietly as mice." [1]

But the Squire Jolterheads were slow to heed Cobbett's warnings; and the Church, to which he also appealed, was by this time his inveterate enemy. He found more attentive listeners among the smaller merchants and tradesmen and among the skilled artisans of the big towns. Already in 1816 his tone shows that he was beginning to despair of the "better" classes, even where he still sympathised with them and felt that they were menaced equally with the mass of the people by the growth of "the Thing." The ceaseless cry for Corn Laws which he held to be useless or worse alienated his sympathies from the more prosperous farmers. In 1816 he was led gradually to make his primary appeal to the working classes and to those who were willing to make the cause of the working classes their own.

The change of appeal came gradually, culminating in the famous *Address to the Journeymen and Labourers*, with which, in November, 1816, Cobbett initiated the twopenny *Register*. Its principal cause was undoubtedly the outbreak of misery and distress into riots and acts of violence on a far more considerable scale than those of 1811 and 1812. From the spring of 1816 onwards the newspapers—the *Register* among them—became full of accounts of "risings," riots, burnings of property, and shootings and hangings of labourers, not in one part of the country, but everywhere. Spontaneously, misery broke out into revolt. "John Bull's Counterbuff," Cobbett called it.[2] He described the burnings as "acts not to be justified under any circumstances." But, he asked,

[1] *P.R.*, March 2nd, 1816. [2] *P.R.*, May 18th, 1816.

" when did hunger listen to reason ? " [1] and " who can blame the unhappy creatures for the mischief they do ? " [2] The riots were the pure product of misery : the rioters were driven by starvation. Nothing could justify the Government's immediate response—the rushing of troops and gentlemanly squadrons of yeomanry to the disturbed areas, the shooting down of the rioters, the " hanging of them by dozens." [3] The *Register* was destined to be filled for many months with accounts of the disturbances, and with attacks on the ever-increasing severity of the Government, its spies and agents, its Cossack yeomanry, its clergymen magistrates, in the work of suppression.

True, there were remedial measures, or at least measures of alleviation. The Government professed indeed to regard the calamity of popular starvation as inevitable, a necessary consequence of the cessation of war ; but, within the limits of this outlook, they were willing that something should be done to relieve distress. They urged employers to employ more workers—a course, as Cobbett pointed out, usually quite outside the employer's power. They urged the inception of useful works ; but there was no machinery for starting these, and Cobbett, rightly in the circumstances of the time, held that these plans were mere window-dressing. Last, but not least, the Government launched, under the presidency of the Duke of York, and the patronage of the Royal Dukes, Archbishops, front bench politicians and what not, a national society to raise a national fund for the relief of distress. At the inaugural meeting of this body the Reformers, led by Lord Cochrane, demonstrated in force. They insisted on deleting a paragraph in the first resolution proposed which described the war as the cause of distress, and tried, less successfully, to force the question of the debt and heavy taxation to the front. The *Register* reported the altercation fully and Cobbett,[4] fiercely attacked the whole scheme as a means of preventing the nation from realising the true cause of its miseries. " You will bear in mind how often I have told this deluded nation, that the ' *generosity,*' the ' *benevofence,*' of which so much is said, was no more than the odd *farthings tossed back to the people* out of the pounds, shillings,

[1] *P.R.*, May 18th, 1816.

[2] *P.R.* (American edition), May 18th, 1816. [3] *Ibid.*

[4] *P.R.*, August 3rd, 1816.

and pence which they paid in taxes." [1] Indirect taxation levied a crushing toll on the poor: direct taxation meant that the farmer or capitalist had less to spend on labour. "I now give twice as much of my crop towards paying the placemen, pensioners, etc., as I gave during the war; and, of course, what I pay to the Government I cannot have to lay out *in labour*. Hence the *increase* of misery since the close of the war." [2]

What the labourers wanted, according to Cobbett, was not charity but higher wages. "The labourers and journeymen being in a state of great misery, one would have thought that men, desirous to better their lot, would have set themselves to work to discover the means of giving them a *larger income*. But, instead of this, the project was to get from them a part of their present income, in order to collect it into a fund for their relief!" [3] He likened the attitude of the "benevolent," such as Wilberforce, to that of the couplet—

> "Open your mouth, and shut your eyes,
> And God will love you, and send you a prize." [4]

As the risings, despite the fierce repression everywhere employed against them, increased with the growth of the distress, Cobbett became more and more anxious. The rioting, he felt, led nowhere: in the long run, it was bound to be suppressed, and in any case there was no constructive force behind it. The employers could not provide work; and the turning of mob resentment against butchers and bakers he especially reprehended—for these men, too, were in the grip of the system, and were almost equally sufferers under it. He felt that the most important thing was to make the journeymen and labourers realise what he believed to be the real *causes* of their distress, and so turn their energies to the changing of the system on which their misery was founded. So, while he attacked relentlessly the policy of the Government in relying on repression and the savage joy with which the well-fed yeomanry rode down the half-starved and helpless mobs, he set deliberately to work to wean the people away from rioting, and to enlist them in the cause of Reform.

[1] *P.R.*, August 3rd, 1816. [2] *Ibid.*
[3] *P.R.*, September 7th, 1816. [4] *Ibid.*

It all seemed so simple to Cobbett. He wanted a Reform which would create a Parliament really representing, and really responsible to, the whole people. That Parliament, once elected, would straightway put an end to pensions and places, cut down the Army and Navy, sweep away the monstrous burden of debt, get rid thereafter safely of paper money and inflation, and bring back the good old England which he placed in a visionary past, before the coming of the Bank of England, the National Debt, the Pitt system, the stock-jobbers, and the hideous new factory towns. Parliamentary Reform, Radical Reform, was the one thing needful. He wanted, he was never weary of saying, *nothing new*;[1] he wanted only a return to the true spirit of the constitution, which borough-mongers, stock-jobbers, and Pittite politicians had destroyed. Indeed, he was not even certain at first that Universal Suffrage was necessary (Women's Suffrage was still, for most of the Reformers, quite beyond the horizon). Until, in November, 1816, old Major Cartwright convinced him of his mistake, he thought that the giving of the vote to all direct taxpayers would suffice for the ending of "the system." But, from that time, he treated Universal Suffrage, which he had previously advocated as desirable, as indispensable to the change he had in view. Annual Parliaments, based on annual elections, held all on the same day, he always regarded as the *sine qua non* of real political democracy.[2]

Major John Cartwright (1740-1824), the patriarch of the English Radicals, came of an old Northamptonshire family. He saw service in the navy, and devoted himself for a time to plans for improving its efficiency. He then retired, and became a major in the militia, devoting himself to farming and agricultural improvement, and taking part in the early agitation against the slave trade. About 1780 he began his long agitation for Parliamentary Reform, and was one of the protagonists in the movement for economical and political Reform in the years before the French Revolution. He was a warm partisan of that Revolution, and lost his commission in consequence. In 1791 he was the chief founder of the

[1] *E.g.*, *P.R.*, November 9th, 1816.

[2] For Cobbett's full scheme of Reform, see *P.R.*, June 15th, 1816, and for his declaration on Universal Suffrage, *P.R.*, November 23rd, 1816. See also his *Letters to Burdett*, *P.R.*, August to October, 1816, and many other articles about this time.

Society for Constitutional Information, or "Constitutional Society," which shared with the corresponding societies the honour of Government prosecution in 1794. Throughout the dark days of the war he maintained his zeal for Reform, taking an active part in every Radical movement of the time. He was arrested in 1813, but speedily released, and in 1820 he was fined £100 on a charge of sedition. His last years were spent in missionary tours by which he strove to organise the Reform agitation through the Hampden Clubs and similar bodies. Francis Place, who did not like him, said that he was "in political matters exceedingly troublesome and sometimes exceedingly absurd";[1] but he held a great place in the affection of the Reformers, who recognised his lifelong devotion to their cause. His books and pamphlets, of which the best known were *Take Your Choice!* his chief work on Radical Reform, and *England's Ægis*, his plan for army reorganisation, are dull, but closely reasoned and full of matter which his followers cast into a more popular form. "The old Major," as he was often called in his later years, was a lovable person, long-winded, and apt to be prosy, but indefatigable and far too straightforward and simple-minded for political success, or to find favour in Place's eyes.

Cobbett always spoke of Cartwright with very great respect, though he differed from him on occasion, as over the question of the Hampden Clubs.[2] When Cobbett came over to the Radicals, Cartwright became one of his chief mentors, and the coincidence of some of their views on the reform of the Army created additional bonds between them. Cartwright became, and remained, a frequent contributor to the *Register*, and from him Cobbett learnt, not only to believe in Universal Suffrage and the full Radical programme, but also many of the arguments which he turned in his articles to far greater advantage than "the old Major" was able to do.

Cartwright's associations were close, from early days, with the rising leaders of the working class. But, like Cobbett, he was not aiming at the creation of a purely working-class movement. In his view, as in Cobbett's, the workers' quarrel was not with their employers, but with the political system.

[1] Quoted in *D.N.B.*, article on Cartwright.

[2] See p. 214.

Reform, when it came, enfranchising the middle classes and leaving the workers voteless, provided no test of his forecasts; for he had not held that such Reform would be effective. His reliance, from 1816 at least, was mainly on the common people.

But how were the common people to be reached? It was true enough that in many places groups of working men were clubbing together to buy a copy of the *Register*, even at the 1s. 0½*d.*, to which the price had now been perforce advanced. But in this way only a small fraction could be reached; and, moreover, the publicans on whose premises these groups met to hear the *Register* read aloud were being severely threatened with the loss of their licences unless they put a stop to such seditious practices.[1] Somehow, the *Register*, which had become vastly more lively and interesting since the distress and unrest began, must be got more into the hands of the working classes. Cobbett decided to allow any one who chose to reprint his articles, or any other part of the paper, in leaflet or pamphlet form, for broadcast distribution, and any newspaper to reprint in its columns any article it chose, provided there was no garbling. This permission, unburdened by any charge on Cobbett's part, achieved something; but it had also unforeseen and unpleasant consequences. Fake *Registers*, purporting to be Cobbett's, but stating the Government case, were spread abroad; Cobbett's early writings were ransacked for Tory utterances, and reprinted as if they were new productions. Other means of popularising the *Register* had to be found, if the last state of affairs was not to be worse than the first.

The discovery of the right remedy was almost an accident. All through the autumn of 1816 Lord Cochrane and others were pressing Cobbett to write a really popular statement, directly addressed to the workers and suitable for broadcast distribution, of the case for Reform. Cobbett for a while hung back, and merely popularised his tone in the *Register*. But at length he wrote his *Address to the Journeymen and Labourers*, really the starting point of his great career as a working-class leader, and published it in the *Register* of November 3rd, 1816. Of this number he also printed a special cheap edition, excluding all news matter, and this he issued as an open sheet for general sale at the price of twopence,

[1] *P.R.*, November 16th, 1816, and in many other issues.

with low quantity rates for those who had a mind to distribute copies in their districts. It was at first intended that only the one number should be issued in this form; but the instantaneous and unparalleled success of the venture at once induced Cobbett to make it permanent. From November 3rd, 1816, the *Register* was issued in two distinct forms. The expensive edition continued with news matter as well as articles; Cobbett's own writings, with occasional contributions from others, were also published in the cheap form, and earlier numbers, containing his full statement of the case for Reform, were re-issued for wider distribution. The open sheet was soon abandoned, and the cheap *Register* thereafter appeared as a twopenny pamphlet side by side with the shilling edition. It soon earned for itself the name of Cobbett's *Twopenny Trash*, which he later used for another cheap publication.[1]

Not only the *Address*, but the cheap *Register* as a whole, was a huge success. The circulation went up by leaps and bounds, until it reached the unprecedented figure of 40,000 to 50,000 copies a week, a circulation many times larger than that of any other journal of the time. These figures are vouched for by independent testimony.[2] Moreover, the wider public thus reached affected not only the financial position of the *Register* and its editor, but also his way of writing. It gave him a new consciousness of writing that which the mass of the people, his own friends and fellows, the journeymen and labourers, would read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest. This feeling imparted a freshness, an additional vigour and directness, to his style, and made the numbers of the winter of 1816-1817 the finest of the whole long series.

The cheap *Registers*, including the re-issues of earlier numbers, actually began with the number of October 12th, 1816. From that date, in a series of articles and addresses, Cobbett sketched his programme, and placed it clearly, in strong, simple English, before the people. The issue of October 12th contained a *Letter to Sir Francis Burdett*, opening up the whole question of Reform, and seeking to answer the practical question "What *Good* would a Reform of Parliament now do?" Reform, Cobbett held, would at once bring about ten vital changes. "(1) It would do away with the

[1] See p. 313.

[2] *E.g.*, *Monthly Magazine*, January, 1817.

profligacy, bribery, and perjury of elections. (2) A Reformed Parliament would instantly put an end to that accursed thing called *Parliamentary Interest* and open the way to the appointment of persons to posts of trust by merit. Thus would the nation be sure to have the full benefit of all that it needed of the best talents and greatest virtues that it possessed. (3) A Reformed Parliament would, in the space of one single week, examine the long lists of Sinecures, Pensions, Grants, and other emoluments of individuals derived from the public purse," and would sweep away all unjustifiable expenditure under this head. " (4) A Reformed Parliament would, without a day's delay, set a Committee to work to inquire into the amount of the *salaries* of all persons in public employ." It would cut down the excessive salaries of those in high place, and dismiss many redundant officials; " but let the hard-working clerk and his family find food at the hands of national generosity. (5) It would reduce the Army, and sift the Navy, taking the same care to do justice to the lower ranks. (6) A Reformed Parliament would . . . want no *secret service money* ": it would sweep away the hosts of " horrid scoundrels " and informers; " there would be none of this disgraceful spy-work." (7) It would reform the Bar, by relieving it from its subservience to ministerial interests. (8) It would restore real freedom to the press, and give up all forms of influencing and subsidising the newspapers. " A Reformed Parliament would want nobody to assist it in binding the people. It would stand in need of no deception, no fraud, no falsehood." (9) It would drastically cut down the Civil List and reform the administration of the Crown Lands. And, last but not least, it would stop paying interest on the swollen debt, " except to those individuals who should be found to have a fair claim to such payments." It would thus be able to reduce the taxes. This would enable wages to be raised, and give back to real forms of property their lost security and value. By saving the nation from universal pauperism and financial collapse, it would *prevent revolution*, and bring back stability and the good old times. Such was Cobbett's vision of the immediate fruits of Universal Suffrage and Radical Reform.[1]

In the next issue, Cobbett retorted upon those who urged that Reform would create confusion, that it was, on the contrary, the only way of preventing confusion. He

[1] *P.R.*, October 12th, 1816.

sketched out the plan of a Bill, including a scheme of voting, and urged that the whole matter could be made as simple as the existing system was tortuous and disturbing.[1] Then came the *Address to the Reformers in General*, in which he urged the importance that the Reformers should stand together, and concentrate public opinion on the one great issue of Reform, not allowing other proposals, however good, or other grievances, however real, to be used to complicate or obscure the issue. "A great number of evils exist, but as all these evils would be cured by a reform, as far as they admit of a cure, it appears to me, gentlemen, that you should always, in your resolutions and petitions, confine yourselves to this great and single object."[2] The petitioners from the industrial districts not unnaturally mingled their demand for Reform with demands for the redress of pressing economic grievances. Cobbett, holding that there could be no redress without Reform, urged them to concentrate on the one great question.

This was, in large part, the purpose of his famous *Address to the Journeymen and Labourers*. He began by admitting fully the claim which the working-class leaders put forward. "Whatever the pride of rank, of riches, or of scholarship may have induced some men to believe, or to affect to believe, the real strength and all the resources of a country, ever have sprung, and ever must spring, from the *labour* of its people. . . . Elegant dresses, superb furniture, stately buildings, fine roads and canals, fleet horses and carriages, numerous stout ships, warehouses teeming with goods; all these, and many other objects that fall under our view, are so many marks of national wealth and resources. But all these spring from *labour*. Without the journeyman and the labourer none of these could exist: without the assistance of their hands, the country would be a wilderness." But, with this challenging overture, the *Address* was an essentially moderate document. It appealed to the workers, instead of turning vainly upon their employers, to consider the *causes* of their distress. It warned them against those who would persuade them that "because things have been perverted from their true ends, there is *nothing good* in our *constitution and laws*." "I know," said Cobbett, "of no enemy of reform and of the

[1] In *what manner* can a Reform of Parliament take place, *without creating confusion*?—*P.R.*, October, 19th, 1816.

[2] *P.R.*, October 26th, 1816.

happiness of the country so great as that man who would persuade you that we possess *nothing good*, and that *all* must be torn to pieces. . . . We want *great alteration*, but we want *nothing new*." All divisions on questions other than the one great question must be set aside: there must be no violence: every effort must be concentrated on petitioning for Reform of Parliament. These moderate proposals were seasoned with hard enough sayings about the Government, and the false comfortings of Bible Societies, charitable subscriptions, and the rest. But Cobbett's essential purpose was moderate: he put all his money on Reform.[1]

But it was one thing to urge the workers to concentrate on this issue: it was quite another to make starving men listen to political arguments, and refrain from hitting out blindly at the apparent cause of their miseries. Cobbett was widely read; but machine-breaking and bread-rioting continued. He determined to make a further and a more special appeal. On November 30th came *A Letter to the Luddites*, in which he put the case against machine-breaking, and against regarding machinery as the cause of working-class misery. "I am not one of those, who have the insolence to presume that men are *ignorant* because they are *poor*," he wrote. He therefore sought first to convince them that "as to the use of *machinery in general*, there cannot be any solid objection." Then followed a statement of the case, forcible but not different from the usual statements in its content, of the benefits of machinery in increasing wealth. "But," Cobbett admitted, "the great question to be decided is, whether machinery, *as it at present exists, does not operate to the disadvantage of journeymen and labourers, and is not one cause of the misery they now experience*?" *The Courier*, and other Government journals, were advocating the provision of hand-mills, flails, and other implements, in order to find more work for the unemployed. "This," said Cobbett, "is actually a bold step towards the savage state. . . . Aye, but it would find employment! . . . Why not employ them to fling stones against the wind? What *use* would their labour be to anybody? May they not as well be doing *nothing* as doing *no good*?" Then follows his main contention. "If, in consequence of using a machine to beat out his corn, the farmer does not expend *so much money* on *that sort* of

[1] All the quotations in this paragraph from *P.R.*, November 3rd, 1816.

labour, he has so much *more money* to expend on some *other sort* of labour." [1] The money saved by machinery will, he argues, always be released to be spent on labour in other ways. In short, he argues from his own agricultural experience, stating a case which, one would suppose, could bring but the coldest comfort to the handloom weaver, whose painfully acquired skill the new looms were making obsolete.

Still, we have abundant witness to the powerful effect of Cobbett's arguments. "At this time," wrote Samuel Bamford, the working-class Radical from Lancashire, "the writings of William Cobbett suddenly became of great authority: they were read on nearly every cottage hearth in the manufacturing districts of South Lancashire, in those of Leicester, Derby, and Nottingham, also in many of the Scottish manufacturing towns. Their influence was speedily visible; he directed his readers to the true cause of their sufferings—misgovernment; and to its proper corrective, Parliamentary Reform. Riots soon became scarce, and from that time they never obtained their ancient vogue with the labourers of this country." [2]

The riots, indeed, had begun somewhat to die down; but they had only given place to a more intense and organised agitation. The alarm of the Government was in no way diminished. From the first, they had believed, quite wrongly, that there was organised conspiracy and the threat of revolution behind the outbreaks. They wanted an excuse for more forcible measures of suppression: their fears made them believe any rumour of conspiracy and treason. "They sigh for a PLOT," wrote Cobbett. "Oh, how they sigh! They are working and slaving and fretting and stewing; they are sweating all over; they are absolutely pining and dying for a plot!" [3]

A Government equipped with a large secret service, full of informers and provocative agents, will never need to wait long for evidence—of sorts—of a plot—also of sorts. The Spa Fields meeting in December, 1816, provided the first occasion. The meeting was organised by the Society of Spencean Philanthropists, a tiny group of semi-Socialist land reformers who followed the tenets of Thomas Spence.[4]

[1] *P.R.*, November 30th, 1816.

[2] Bamford, *Passages in the Life of a Radical*, Vol. I., p. 8.

[3] *P.R.*, December 14th, 1816.

[4] Not to be confused with William Spence. See p. 144.

Spence, of working-class origin, was bred as a net-maker, became in turn book-keeper, private tutor, bookseller, and Radical journalist, advocating in his pamphlets and other writings the transference of land ownership to the parish, and the raising of all public revenue in the form of rent for the land. He wanted a Republic, based on the single-tax, "founded on the immutable basis of Nature and Justice," public ownership, or, as he called it, "parochial partnerships," in the land. He died in 1814; but his followers, the two Watsons, Thomas Preston, and others, carried on the Spencean propaganda, which had some influence in London Radical circles. Early in December, 1816, the Spenceans organised a public meeting in Spa Fields, and invited Henry Hunt to address it. Hunt agreed; but, when he saw the declaration which the Spenceans had drawn up for the meeting, he refused to accept it, and put in its place an address of his own on orthodox Radical Reform lines. Meanwhile, however, the police had secured a copy of the Spencean declaration. They professed to treat this as a treasonable document, and sought to implicate Hunt, being apparently unaware that he had substituted for it a declaration of his own. Cobbett was also accused of plotting secretly with Hunt and the Spenceans, though he was out of London and knew nothing about the meeting till after its occurrence.

Some of the Spencean leaders were not best pleased at Hunt's attitude. These held in Spa Fields a meeting of their own before Hunt's arrival, and left in a body before he spoke. Gathering to themselves certain disorderly elements, they marched off in procession through the city, and a riot broke out and was forcibly suppressed. It was a small affair, of no significance; but it gave just the chance that was wanted. At once the papers became full of sensational stories of a revolutionary plot, the existence of which the mild enthusiast, Preston, was said to have revealed to the authorities. Preston was reported in all seriousness to have revealed that "the plot had been going on for eight years, and that he himself had written to the late Mr. Perceval (Prime Minister till 1812) on the subject, urging him to adopt it, as the only means of saving the nation." [1]

This absurd cock and bull story gave Cobbett ample scope. "Now, when your laughing fit is over, let me ask you, whether you ever heard of a *Plot* and *Insurrection* like

[1] *P.R.*, December 14th, 1816.

this before? What, an eight years' Plot! a *good* Insurrection?"[1] The truth was clear enough. The word "plot" was the Government's own invention. It was the Spencean Society that had been at work for eight years, and it was Spence's PLAN, not PLOT, that the estimable Mr. Preston had submitted to the Prime Minister. But even this story was good enough, in the excited state of governing-class opinion. Dr. Watson, Preston, and others were solemnly put on trial for high treason. But even the juries of the time would not convict. The acquittal of Dr. Watson was followed by the release of the other prisoners in June, 1817.[2] The fact that certain of the prisoners became involved, some years later, in the famous Cato Street Conspiracy, indicates that all the Spenceans were not as harmless as Spence or Preston; but does not make any less silly the proceedings of the Government on this occasion.

The Spencean "Plot" served its turn. The trials were delayed for many months, and, while Hunt and Cobbett had shown that they had nothing to do with the Spenceans, the rumours of organised conspiracy now came thick and fast from the Government agents. Persecution was redoubled; more and more obstacles were placed in the way of meetings and of the sale of the *Register*. Lord Sidmouth at the Home Office busily collected evidence of the depravity and malice of the people. Early in 1817 he felt strong enough to move. The press energetically urged the need for stern measures to suppress "seditious utterances" as well as "riotous assemblies"; talk of what Cobbett called "Gagging Bills" was already becoming general.[3]

Cobbett was quick to realise that a new period of repression was beginning, and to see that it might well result in the collapse of the agitation, unless effectual measures were taken by the workers to deal with it. This made him especially anxious to prevent rioting and machine-breaking, to dissociate the Reformers from all manifestations of violence, and to direct all efforts to the constitutional agitation for Reform. He realised that the agitation had to be carried on under the most serious handicaps. The Combination Acts were still in force, and all forms of Trade Union organisation

[1] *P.R.*, December 14th, 1816.

[2] See *The Trials at Large of J. Watson and Others*, published in volume form in 1817.

[3] *P.R.*, January 11th, 1817.

were illegal. Moreover, the laws against Corresponding Societies, passed in the heat of the anti-Jacobin movement, might now be invoked against the Reform Societies which Major Cartwright and his friends were busily forming throughout the country. A great outcry was made against the London Union Society, which had been formed to advance the cause of Reform in 1812. This was now denounced as the head and forefront of the conspiracy, until it was shown that it had been practically defunct for some time past.[1] More influential was the London Hampden Club, originally formed by Cartwright and his friends about the same time. Cartwright, in the course of his missionary tours through the country, founded a large number of local Hampden Clubs between 1813 and 1817, and these bodies maintained some sort of informal correspondence, and even held, in 1817, a meeting of delegates in London. Such organisations seemed to Cobbett to be inviting measures of repression on the part of the authorities. He believed that their advantages were more than outweighed by the risks of suppression which they involved. Accordingly, he advised the Reformers to keep clear of them, and to rely on public meetings, demonstrations and petitions without the backing of any formal societies. "I advise my countrymen to have nothing to do with any *Political Clubs*, any secret *Cabals*, any *Correspondencies*; but to trust to *individual exertions* and *open meetings*. In speaking of the *Hampden Club* lately, I could only mean the one in London. There are very worthy and zealous men belonging to such clubs; but I shall be very difficult to be made believe, that they are thus employing themselves in the best and most effectual way."[2] And earlier he had expressed even greater scepticism about the parent Hampden Club in London. "Nothing good will ever be done by meeting and *talking* about what they are to *talk* about next time."[3]

Cobbett, with the *Register* behind him, was an organisation in himself. He felt quite equal to directing the Reform agitation through his "twopenny trash," without the need for clubs or societies. He had thus two reasons for being against the Hampden Clubs, one, that they threatened his own popular leadership, and the other, that they invited

[1] *P.R.*, March 1st, 1817. [2] *P.R.*, February 15th, 1817.
[3] *P.R.*, April 27th, 1816.

measures of repression which would by no means stop short with themselves. The repressive measures which he feared would inevitably include an Act to stop his freedom of writing—an Act or Acts designed with the main purpose of "putting Cobbett down."

His fears were speedily verified. Secret Committees were appointed, on the Government's initiative, by both Houses of Parliament. These duly produced Reports declaring the existence of widespread conspiracies directed from London, and extending into all parts of the country. The "leading malcontents," however, were said to have decided that "it is expedient for them to wait till the whole kingdom shall (according to their expression) be more completely organised, and more ripe for action. . . . The object . . . but too evident from the papers before the committee . . . is, by means of societies or clubs, established in all parts of Great Britain under pretence of Parliamentary Reform, to infect the minds of all classes of the community, and particularly of those whose situation most exposes them to such impressions, with a spirit of discontent and disaffection, of insubordination, and contempt of all law, religion, and morality, and to hold out to them the plunder and division of all property, as the main object of their efforts, and the restoration of their natural rights; and no endeavours are omitted to prepare them to take up arms on the first signal for accomplishing these designs."[1] According to the House of Commons Committee of Secrecy, the aim of the conspiracy was "a total overthrow of all existing establishments, and a division of the landed, and extinction of the funded, property of the country."[2]

Both committees quoted, with full evidence, statements made by Crown informers and agents as to the collection of arms, preparations for a general rising, secret direction of the movement by the leading Reformers. The political importance of the Spenceans was ridiculously exaggerated: the Spa Fields meeting was supposed to have been the abortive signal for a national insurrection. The Hampden Clubs were magnified into dangerous secret revolutionary societies.

[1] Report by the Secret Committee of the House of Lords, given fully in *P.R.*, March 8th, 1817.

[2] Report of the Committee of Secrecy of the House of Commons, given fully as above.

"Nothing short of a Revolution is the object expected and avowed." [1]

There were doubtless a few individuals who, like Arthur Thistlewood, later involved in the Cato Street Conspiracy, were prepared to contemplate the use of force; but all the evidence seems to point to the conclusion that the great mass of testimony on which these Secret Committees relied was manufactured by spies and provocative agents like the notorious Oliver.[2] But it was good enough for the committees and for Parliament. On March 4th, 1817, the Habeas Corpus Act was suspended, and "agitators" at once became liable to imprisonment without trial. Further Acts were hastily rushed through. It was made an offence punishable with death to attempt to seduce soldiers or sailors from their duty. Public meetings could only be held with the approval of the sheriffs, mayors, and magistrates; and any magistrate was empowered to command any meeting to disperse, or to order the arrest of any speaker uttering words "calculated to stir up the people to hatred or contempt of the Government." The penalty for resisting the authority of the magistrates was death. All public reading rooms, lecture halls, and places of assembly were placed under the superintendence of the magistrates, and needed licences from them. If reading rooms kept literature which the magistrates deemed to be "of an irreligious, immoral, or seditious tendency," the licences could be taken away.

This last provision was undoubtedly aimed directly at Cobbett's writings, which had been largely circulated through these reading rooms, and read aloud there to groups of workers who were unable to read. The blow to the sale of the *Register* was severe; but still more serious was the suspension of the Habeas Corpus Act. Cobbett realised that, if he went on writing he would find himself within a few weeks in jail, under conditions very different from those of his previous imprisonment. The means of writing would be denied him: he would be condemned to both prison and silence. He at once made up his mind to leave the country, and to continue his labours from a place where the long arm of the British

[1] Report of the Committee of Secrecy of the House of Commons, given fully as above.

[2] For a full account of Oliver, see Hammond's *The Skilled Labourer*, and for a general account of the system of espionage and provocation, Hammond's *The Town Labourer*. Mark Rutherford's *The Revolution in Tanner's Lane* gives an excellent picture of the conditions.

Government would be unable to reach him. In strict secrecy he made his preparations, telling not even his friends of his intention. He was well aware that, if the news leaked out, the Government would probably arrest him before he could get away. Moreover, he was still burdened with a heavy weight of debt, and he feared that, if his impending departure were known, certain of his creditors might, either for financial or for political reasons, take steps to have him detained. He therefore went in secret to Liverpool, and, leaving behind him *Mr. Cobbett's Taking Leave of his Countrymen*, sailed on March 27th, 1817, for the United States. His departure was hastened by an overture from Lord Sidmouth, made through an intermediary, that, if he would give up writing and retire to his estate, the Government would compensate him for his loss of income. He made no answer. He would not, of course, accept, and he felt that refusal would be at once followed by arrest. He chose rather to leave the country at once.[1]

In the *Taking Leave* Cobbett announced the temporary suspension of the *Register*, but announced also that publication would be resumed as soon as he reached the United States and could get copy back to England. The suspension lasted for three months. The *Farewell* was published on April 5th, and on July 12th the *Register* resumed publication, Cobbett contributing regularly from his refuge in the United States.

Cobbett has been much attacked, both by his contemporaries and by later writers, for his action in leaving the country. It was said to be an act of cowardice, and it undoubtedly alienated some of his friends. It is a matter of opinion. His defence was that he was more useful free than in jail. In England, he could not hope to be allowed to write freely, or indeed to write at all. In America, he would be free to use his pen in the interests of the people of England. He announced from the first that his exile was only temporary. He would never become a citizen of any other country: as soon as he could do more good by returning than by remaining away, he would return.[2] In little more than two years he was back, writing and agitating as vigorously as ever.

[1] *P.R.*, July 12th, 1817. See also *P.R.*, April 10th, 1830.

[2] *Mr. Cobbett's Taking Leave of his Countrymen*, April 5th, 1817.

CHAPTER XV

TWO YEARS' RESIDENCE IN AMERICA

COBBETT reached New York on May 5th, 1817, and remained in the United States for more than two years. It was seventeen years since, in his *Farewell Address to the People of America*, he had shaken the dust of the United States from his feet, and in the interval there had been a complete change both in his political opinions and in his attitude towards the Americans and their Republic. He had never lost touch with his old friends in the United States, and he had made many new ones, especially by his vigorous opposition to the British Government in the quarrel which had led to the war of 1812. The war had ended, as he prophesied that it would, in the giving up by Great Britain of all the points of substance. Cobbett's writings about Anglo-American relations were frequently reprinted in the United States: a considerable number of copies of the *Register* were regularly sold there; and, in January, 1816, he had published the first number of a special *American Political Register*, in which he gave a lively description of the state of British politics and parties. The *American Register*, published in New York by his nephew, Henry Cobbett, was not a financial success, and had been dropped before his visit; but it contains, in his articles on *The English Press*, *The English Parliament*, *The Royal Family*, and *The State of Parties in England*, some of his best political writing.[1] At the same time he published, for the readers of the English *Register*, an excellent description, under the title of *The American Packet*, of the condition of parties and politics in the United States.[2]

It is impossible to say whether this American venture was started in anticipation of a possible visit to the United States. In any case Cobbett, while he was actually in America, made no attempt to appeal to the American public, or to take any part in American affairs. He retired at once into the country, first to an inn on Long Island, and then to a farm,

[1] American *P.R.*, January to June, 1816. [2] *P.R.*, 1816.

Hyde Park near North Hempsted, of which he acquired a lease. He lost no time in settling down seriously to farming, and getting his new house and land in order. But he was even more prompt in resuming publication of the *Register* in England, despatching his first copy from Long Island on May 8th, 1817, only three days after his arrival. The *Register* thereafter appeared almost continuously until his return; but there were a few gaps, and occasionally numbers had to be improvised owing to the failure of his copy to arrive.

A *Register*, composed at a distance of several thousand miles from the events with which it dealt, and appearing, on an average, more than two months after the date of writing, could not have the freshness and actuality of Cobbett's usual political comment. The events about which he wrote were inevitably four or five months out of date, and he could not know the constant changes in the political and economic situation. He was driven back, therefore, in part on the development of his general theories; and the paper money question, now occupying a prominent place in public attention, was a frequent theme, both before and after the introduction of Peel's Bill of 1819 for the resumption of cash payments. On one question he was in a better position than those whom he had left in England to form a sound judgment —the recognition of the South American Republics which had proclaimed their political independence of Spain. On this theme he wrote often, urging the British Government to grant immediate and full recognition, on the ground both of the justice of the American claims and of the opportunities for developing trade with the new states. British recognition ultimately came in 1824; but Cobbett's articles helped to pave the way, and were a prelude to Lord Cochrane's daring exploits in the wars of liberation.

Greatest, however, of Cobbett's contributions to the *Register* during his exile was his *History of the Last Hundred Days of English Freedom* [1] In this series of trenchant articles, he recounted the whole story of the "Gagging Bills." "The Bey of Algiers proceeds against his 'disaffected' by chopping off their heads, and our ministers proceed against their 'disaffected' by shutting them up in prison during their pleasure, in any jail in the kingdom, and deprived of light, warmth, and all communication with relations and friends,

[1] *P.R.*, beginning July 26th, 1817. Reprinted (1921) in volume form, with introduction and notes by J. L. Hammond.

if they please. That is all the difference." [1] The fact that the Government could not depend on juries to convict was a clear sign of the state of public opinion. The suspension of Habeas Corpus was the last throw of the borough-mongers, a desperate resort to anarchy as a means of suppressing a real movement of the people. But the people, even in face of these things, must be patient. They must not resort to violence. The tyranny could not be long maintained: "the Thing" was bound to blow up soon.

But it was hard for starving men, or even for keen Reformers who had enough to eat, to be patient. One after another, leading Reformers were clapped in jail. There were, indeed, notable triumphs where cases were brought before juries; but this was a poor protection against a Government empowered to dispense with the forms of law. Moreover, Government agents, headed by the notorious Oliver, took the initiative in inciting the Reformers to acts of violence. Oliver and his fellow-informers toured the country, purporting to be travelling Radical delegates from London. They spread reports of active preparations for a general rising, and incited the people of each town to take arms, telling them that elsewhere the train was laid and the men ready to rise. The so-called "Derbyshire Insurrection" of June, 1817—in reality a pitiful local riot—was purely the product of Oliver's provocative ability. One-half of the story is excellently told in Mr. and Mrs. Hammond's *The Skilled Labourer*.[2]; full corroboration and much further detail can be found in Cobbett's contemporary articles in the *Register*,[3] and in his Petition to the House of Commons [4] in which Oliver's activities are fully described. For of those who escaped the vengeance of the law some came to America, and Cobbett was able to get their sworn depositions and so make conclusive the evidence against Oliver and others of Sidmouth's agents of provocation.

[1] *Last Hundred Days*, p. 11. *P.R.*, July 26th, 1817.

[2] Chapter XII. Mr. and Mrs. Hammond base their account on the documents preserved in the Home Office Papers; Cobbett's account, based on the narratives of working-class participants, fully bears out and considerably strengthens the conclusion, stated above, that the "Insurrection" was deliberately brought about by provocative agency.

[3] *P.R.*, January 10th, May 16th, May 23rd, 1818, and other references.

[4] *P.R.*, May 16th, 1818.

The *Register*, indeed, was full of horrible accounts of the loathsome methods of espionage and incitement practised during these years under Sidmouth's rule at the Home Office. At the time of the "Derbyshire Insurrection," the suspension of Habeas Corpus was about to expire. Cobbett roundly accused Sidmouth and his agents of having fomented the "insurrection" in order to plead justification for the continuance of the unconstitutional dictatorship of the Government. He quoted Machiavelli and Plato on the ways of tyrants. "In all places they have their spies and informers, to appear discontented and to hate the tyrants, in order that, under this disguise, they may *get trust* and *make discoveries*. They, above all things, *pretend a love to God and Religion*." [1] "There was not a man among them," he wrote of the House of Commons, "who did not know, and well know, that it was OLIVER, who was the immediate cause of the rising in Derbyshire. There was not a man amongst them who did not know, that the discontent was created by the tyrannical Bills, and that it was worked into a rising by OLIVER." [2] Yet Oliver's doings were made the excuse for further measures of coercion, and three of his Derbyshire victims, Brandreth, Turner, and Ludlam, were executed for their part in the riot, and many others transported for life or for long periods of years.

The "Derbyshire Insurrection" was not a measure of which Cobbett approved. He was against violence, and constantly urged patience and the use of pacific means. But this was on grounds of expediency, and he vehemently upheld the *right* of insurrection against rulers who abused and perverted the law. The late measures of the Government, in his view, had dissolved the social compact, and justified the use of force. Those who took to arms were acting foolishly, but they were doing no wrong. Cobbett quoted the authority of Blackstone and the defence by most respectable authorities of the insurrections of the seventeenth century to show that the enemies of Reform themselves recognised this right in theory, whatever they might say of it in practice. Only the weakness of the Reformers in case of an appeal to force against the overwhelming resources of the Government—only this, and the prospect of obtaining Radical Reform without force by the collapse

[1] *P.R.*, May 16th, 1818. [2] *P.R.*, May 23rd, 1818.

of the borough-mongering system, held him back from advocating its use.

He was therefore shocked by the attitude of many Reformers towards the Derbyshire victims. In his view, Burdett and the whole body of Reformers should have taken up their case, secured for them the best counsel, and used the trials as the means of forcing the whole system of espionage and provocation into the light of day. From his distant residence, he could do nothing to secure the adoption of his view; but it was also the view of Henry Hunt, at this time Cobbett's closest political associate. Hunt did his best to persuade Burdett and the Hampden Club luminaries to undertake the defence of Brandreth and his fellow-victims. But Burdett and the more respectable Radicals were mortally afraid of seeming to countenance any act of violence. They decided to leave the Derbyshire victims to their fate, and Thomas Cleary, the secretary of the Hampden Club, communicated their decision to Hunt in a letter which shows that he was personally ashamed of having to write it. Hunt went down to Derby for the trials and did his best; but the prisoners were defended by barristers assigned to them by the court, and their leading defender, himself a reactionary, took the surest course to secure a conviction, devoting most of his speech, not to an exposure of Oliver, but to a denunciation of Cobbett and other Reformers, by whose incendiary writings he claimed that the rioters had been misled.

These circumstances brought to a head the division between Burdett and Cobbett which had been developing for some time. Burdett had been ardent enough for Reform when nothing happened except that he made fine speeches in Parliament and headed triumphant processions through the streets of Westminster. His ardour began to cool as soon as the Reform movement became really a popular agitation, and as soon as it became involved with the hunger riots of the post-war years. He remained a Reformer—of sorts; but he began his descent of the slippery slope which led, through "Moderate Reform," back to the capacious arms of the Whig party. He fell out with Hunt and with Lord Cochrane, and Cobbett, in the *Last Hundred Days*, already showed strong suspicion of his political conduct. His refusal to help the Derbyshire prisoners completed his estrangement from the Radical Reformers, and caused Cobbett to begin attacking him openly.

Further ground for the attack was not wanting. Cochrane's decision to go fighting for the South American revolutionaries involved a vacancy at Westminster, where he was Burdett's colleague in the representation. Burdett and his committee, which Cobbett always called—with good reason —"The Rump," treated the seat as being in their gift. Cobbett argued fiercely that Major Cartwright, by virtue of his long and faithful service to the cause of Reform, ought to be the candidate. Burdett put forward Henry Brougham, the rising hope of the middle-class Whigs. When he found that Westminster would have none of Brougham, he substituted another nominee of his own, and refused to entertain the idea of supporting either Cartwright or Henry Hunt. At first, he pretended that Cartwright did not wish to stand, dwelling on his age and unsuitability. Cartwright, vigorous despite his years, at once contradicted this; and Burdett fell back on the argument that Cartwright would not hold the seat. Finally, the "old Major," realising that he could not succeed in face of Burdett's opposition, withdrew from the contest; but Hunt persisted and unsuccessfully fought the seat. Burdett got in, but was only second on the poll. Romilly, who stood as an official Whig, was first; Kinnaird, Burdett's nominee, was withdrawn by the Rump in order to save Burdett's seat. His old position as Parliamentary Leader of the Radical Reformers was gone for ever. He relapsed gradually into harmless and respectable Whiggery.[1]

The Westminster election had a sequel. Hunt, we have seen, stood, against the wish of the Burdett faction. It became their object to discredit him in Kinnaird's interests. But Cobbett, from America, was strongly supporting Hunt, and this made him a dangerous rival. Francis Place came to the rescue with an action of singular malevolence, not mentioned in Mr. Wallas's eulogistic *Life*. Many years before, when Cobbett did not yet know Hunt personally, he had written to John Wright a letter warning him to have nothing to do with him. We have quoted already from this letter—"he rides about the country with a whore, the wife of another man, having deserted his own."[2] This letter, which con-

[1] For Westminster affairs, see *P.R.*, January 3rd and 24th, and March 14th, 1818. For a different version, see Wallas, *Life of Francis Place*, strongly coloured in favour of Place, who supported Burdett against Cobbett and the extreme Radicals.

[2] Letter to Wright, April 10th, 1808.

tained also matter relating to Westminster, Wright had shown at the time to the Westminster Committee. It was now remembered and procured from Wright, apparently by Francis Place, who at all events handed it over to Cleary. Cleary read it in the course of a public speech, destroying Hunt's chances and the whole value of Cobbett's support.

When the news of this episode reached America, Cobbett was furious. He had been Hunt's close friend and associate for a number of years, and he had no recollection of the sentence, hastily added at the end of a hurried note ten years before. He at once denounced the whole letter as a forgery, and made a violent attack on Cleary.[1] This he followed up with a still more vicious attack on Wright, whom he accused in print of every sort of villainy and betrayal, and especially of financial dishonesty during their business association.[2] This incident had further unpleasant consequences after Cobbett's return to England.[3] Meanwhile, it completed his estrangement from the Westminster politicians. When Sir Samuel Romilly committed suicide in the autumn of 1818, and a bye-election became necessary, Hunt, who had taken no offence at the disclosure of the letter, and accepted Cobbett's explanation that it was a forgery, moved that Cobbett should be the candidate. The Burdettites, however, succeeded in forcing the adoption of John Cam Hobhouse. Place supported Hobhouse; Cobbett was, in his eyes, an "impudent mountebank."

But, if Westminster rejected Cobbett, Coventry had already chosen him as its candidate. He had been approached by the Radicals there in 1817, and had accepted the invitation. In the following year he addressed to the electors of Coventry a series of letters designed to be "a sort of political ABC," in which he outlined his policy, and, while blaming those who resorted to violence, defended the right of Englishmen to resist oppression by force of arms. In the middle of the year he was formally adopted at an enthusiastic public meeting.[4] In his absence in America, Hunt took charge of the proceedings.

There was thus plenty of incident, even apart from his writings, to keep Cobbett in the mind of the public at home.

[1] *P.R.*, November 28th, 1818. [2] *P.R.*, March 6th, 1818.

[3] See p. 243. [4] *P.R.*, June 12th, 1818.

The circulation of the *Register* did, indeed, to some extent diminish; but his publishers continued to sell very large quantities of the earlier numbers containing his famous addresses, and also of *Paper against Gold*, which became more and more popular, as the question of paper money was more and more actively canvassed. By the end of 1817, over 200,000 copies had been sold of the *Address to the Journeymen and Labourers*, and the sale was hardly beginning to slacken off. The *Register*, maintained at the price of twopence despite attempts to compel the publisher to pay stamp tax upon it, still sold very widely. Large profits went to reduce the heavy debts which Cobbett had left behind him.

He was thus very present in spirit among his countrymen all through those troublous years. Nor was he compelled to rely wholly on letters and newspapers for his knowledge of English events. One result of the bad times in England was that a stream of emigrants, including many substantial farmers, crossed the Atlantic, while the repression sent with them a steady trickle of political refugees. We have seen how Cobbett was able to collect from certain of these authentic particulars of Oliver's actions in connection with the "Derbyshire rising." He was constantly visited by Englishmen who, for political or economic reasons, had come to the United States. From them he got the latest news of English affairs, and to them he gave much useful advice about the means to success in America. He also wrote much about emigration. He would never advise any man to emigrate with a view to settling in the United States. It was, indeed, a land of prosperity. Poor rates were almost unknown save in a few towns. Living was far cheaper than in England. There was excellent land for farming. But the farmer, meditating emigration, must bear in mind that the price of labour was very high, and land near the towns expensive. A farmer, prepared to work hard and with active sons to help him, might do very well indeed; but he would have to work, and to put from him all ideas of luxurious living. Moreover, an English farmer, used to English ways and with the strong conservation of his class, would, as a rule, prosper only in the settled parts in the east. He would not adapt himself to the exigencies of life in the uncleared hinterland, where his English experience would be worse than useless to him. A certain Morris Birkbeck, an Englishman who had set up a farming colony in Illinois, was urging others to join him.

Cobbett strongly dissuaded his countrymen. If they would come to the United States, let them look around before they settled, and then let them settle as individuals, among the American population, in the eastern states. English colonies in the uncleared wilderness seemed to him both wrong in principle, and unlikely to succeed.[1]

And, after all, why should Englishmen emigrate at all? The borough-mongers' tyranny could not last for long: better times would soon return. It was all nonsense to say, with Parson Malthus, that population was pressing on the means of subsistence. Properly cultivated, which meant freed from the burden of taxation, England could easily feed all her sons. "I have, during my life, detested many men, but never any one so much as you," wrote Cobbett from America in an open letter to Malthus.[2] Though he might extol the happiness of the people of America, the fertility of the soil, the blessed immunity from borough-mongers, tithes and tax-gatherers, it was never for the purpose of drawing the sons of England to abandon their own country, but in order that they might make their own country fit to live in. Exile sharpened Cobbett's feeling—always abundantly strong—that there was no place like home. His praises of America were genuine enough; but their main object was to further the cause of Reform in England.

"And then," he wrote to Henry Hunt, "to see a free country for once, and to see every labourer with plenty to eat and drink! Think of *that*! And never to see the hang-dog face of a tax-gatherer! Think of *that*! No Alien Acts here. No long-sworded and whiskered captains. No judges escorted from town to town and sitting under a guard of Dragoons. No packed juries of tenants. No crosses. No Bolton Fletchers. No hangings and rippings up. No Castleses and Olivers. No Stewarts and Perries. No Cannings, Liverpools, Castlereaghs, Eldons, Ellenboroughs, or Sidmouths. No bankers. No squeaking Wynnes. No Wilberforces. Think of *that*! No Wilberforces!"[3]

[1] *Letters to Morris Birkbeck, P.R.*, February, 1819, reprinted in Part III. of *A Year's Residence*.

[2] *To Parson Malthus, P.R.*, May 8th, 1819.

[3] *P.R.*, October 3rd, 1818. Cross was the barrister who defended the Derbyshire prisoners in 1817. Colonel Fletcher of Bolton was the chief organiser and inspirer of the Government spy system in Lancashire, and the leader in the repressive measures adopted against the miners and cotton operatives. He was the chief among the

It was not to exalt America that he wrote these words, but to regenerate England. In particular, his American experiences turned him against tithes and the clergy. The bulk of the clergy in England had shown themselves among the most vindictive enemies of Reform. In one of the early cheap *Registers*, Cobbett had addressed them fiercely, claiming that he loved the Church and had defended the tithes, but that the conduct of the Church's ministers in upholding corruption was making the Church's fall certain.[1] Now, he contrasted the states of England and America. The American farmer had no tithes to pay. "But, my Botley neighbours, you will exclaim, 'No *tithes*! Why, then, there can be no *Churches* and no *Parsons*! The people must know nothing of God or Devil; and must all go to hell!' By no means, my friends. Here are plenty of Churches."[2] But the churches in America are supported voluntarily, by the people, by those who wish to support them. "Oh, no! *Tithes* do not mean *religion*. Religion means a *reverence for God*. And what has this to do with tithes? Why cannot you reverence God, without Baker and his wife and children eating up a tenth part of the corn and milk and eggs and lambs and pigs and calves that are produced in Botley parish! The Parsons in this country, are supported by those who choose to employ them. A man belongs to what congregation he pleases. He pays what is required by the rules of the congregation. And, if he think that it is not necessary for him to belong to any congregation, he pays nothing at all. And, the consequence is that all is harmony and good neighbourhood."[3] The tithes, Cobbett now thought, should be "taken for *public use*."[4]

Lancashire magistrates and a coalowner. For his activities, see Mr. and Mrs. Hammond's *The Town Labourer*. Castles and Oliver were both notorious Government spies and provocative agents. For Oliver, see p. 220 and note. Stewart is probably the Tory Attorney-General. Perry (see p. 150) was the Whig editor of *The Morning Chronicle*, a partisan of the new economics and the "feelosofical villains." Canning, Liverpool, and Castlereagh need no explanation. Eldon was Lord Chancellor, and Ellenborough, Lord Chief Justice. There was a whole family of "Welsh Wynnes," originally associates of the Grenvilles. Three at least were in Parliament at this time. The chief Wynnes were Sir W. W. Wynne, and his brother Charles Wynne, who became Tory President of the Board of Control. For Cobbett's *bête noire*, William Wilberforce, the great evangelical anti-slavery philanthropic coercionist, see p. 259.

[1] *P.R.*, December 28th, 1817.

[2] *P.R.*, January 23rd, 1819. See also January 30th.

[3] *Ibid.* [4] *Ibid.*

These articles were printed, with some others from the *Register*, in *A Year's Residence in the United States of America*, which Cobbett sent home to be published, in three parts, during his absence. The *Year's Residence* deserves our special notice, because it is the forerunner of the series of books with which Cobbett enriched English literature during the remaining years of his life. Hitherto he had been pamphleteer, journalist, political writer, pouring the vast wealth of his ideas into *The Porcupine*, the *Register*, and into purely occasional pamphlets and addresses. Many of these lived, and live now, because of the extraordinary force of his personality; but he had hitherto written nothing that could really be called a book—certainly nothing outside the sphere of purely political controversy. The *Year's Residence* is an extraordinary mixture, part diary, part farming treatise, part travel book, part political pamphlet, part just "etcetera"; but it is a book for all that, and, though Cobbett's first, amply characteristic and successful.

The *Year's Residence*, indeed, affords a very fair insight into a part of Cobbett's mind which has so far been little noticed in this book. All he wrote was full enough of his individuality; but in the turmoil of political struggles he found little opportunity to express a good deal of the best that was in him. His love of the countryside appeared; but his political writing had so far given him no chance to deal fully with that theme. The side of his nature which had made him settle down at Botley and give half his mind to farming concerns, always in the spirit of pioneering experiment, had found its outlet so far in the practical work of his farm. Now, in America, where political calls were less incessant, he found time not only to farm but to write about farming, both in the practical and in the philosophical sense. If he pined for home, exile, through the relief which it brought from peremptory political calls, brought him a new intellectual freedom, and set his mind to roam over new fields of adventure. The first sign of this new liberty appeared even in his account, written just after his arrival in America, of his journey through England from London to Liverpool on his departure—in reality his first "Rural Ride" and the opening of a new and most fruitful field of artistic achievement. In this first "Ride" we get the keen sense at once of beauty and of contrast, the lively description, the effective political "aside," as fully matured as in the later *Rural Rides* themselves. For

example, he writes thus of his journey through Warwickshire:

"The road very wide and smooth; rows of fine trees on the sides of it; beautiful white-thorn hedges, and rows of ash and elm dividing the fields; the fields so neatly kept; the soil so rich; the herds and flocks of fine fat cattle and sheep on every side; the beautiful homesteads and numerous stacks of wheat! Every object seemed to say: Here are resources! Here is wealth! Here are all the means of national power, and of individual plenty and happiness! And yet, at the end of these ten beautiful miles, covered with all the means of affording luxury in diet and in dress, we entered that city of Coventry, which, out of *twenty thousand inhabitants*, contained at that very moment upwards of *eight thousand miserable paupers*." [1]

Much of the *Year's Residence* was written in a similar vein—admirable description of the country, of the manners, pastimes, conditions of the people—everywhere, the sharply insinuated contrast between American independence and British privilege and pauperism. Not that he eulogised all things American: he always maintained his preference for his own people. Nor did he describe American conditions as wholly satisfactory. The American farm-houses, indeed, growing bigger with rising prosperity, offered a remarkable contrast to those of England. The American houses "large and neat," whereas in England "the *little* farm-houses are falling into ruins, or are actually become cattle sheds, or, at best, *cottages*, as they are called, to contain a miserable labourer, who ought to have been a farmer, as his grandfather was." [2] But, if the American farm-houses were fine, Cobbett was shocked by the lack of gardens, or of any attempt at beauty in the immediate surroundings of the homestead. The American farmer had been too busy clearing the waste to pay much regard to the amenities of life; but now, his first work done, he could turn to the making of beauty. Cobbett conceived at once the idea of a book to tell him how to set about it. "*How* I have got this broccoli I must explain in my *Gardener's Guide*; for write one I must. I can never leave this country without an attempt to make every farmer a gardener." [3] The idea took shape, and before leaving the United States he wrote and published *The American Gardener*,

[1] *P.R.*, July 12th, 1817.

[2] *Year's Residence in the United States*, p. 65. [3] *Ibid.*, p. 94.

which he subsequently re-wrote as *The English Gardener*, and republished in this country. "I cannot help," he wrote in the original preface, "expressing my hope, that this work may tend to the increasing, in some degree, of a taste for gardening in America. It is a source of much greater profit than is generally imagined; and, merely as an amusement, or recreation, it is one of the most rational and most conducive to health. It is a pursuit, not only compatible with, but favourable to, the *study* of any art or science. It tends to turn the minds of youth from amusements and attachments of a frivolous or vicious nature. It is indulged *at home*. It tends to make home pleasant; and to endear to us the spot on which it is our lot to live." [1]

The American Gardener was meant to help the American farmer to serve both beauty and utility: the *Year's Residence* was directed rather to the people of England. One whole book was devoted to an account and recommendation of the culture of *Ruta Baga*, better known as the Swedish turnip, or swede, which Cobbett found much in use as a feeding-stuff in America, and was largely instrumental in popularising in England. The book abounds in good farming hints. But it is also, as we have seen, an admirable travel-book, full of sound judgments and vivid impressions. The greatest vice Cobbett found in the Americans was drink. "It is not covetousness: it is not niggardliness: it is not insincerity: it is not enviousness: it is not cowardice above all things: it is DRINKING. Aye, and that too amongst but too many men, who, one would think, would loath it. You can hardly go into any man's house, without being asked to drink wine, or spirits, even *in the morning*. . . . Nor do the Americans sit and *lofe much after dinner*, and talk on till they get into nonsense and *smut*, which last is a sure mark of a silly and, pretty generally, even of a base mind. But, they *tipple*; and the infernal spirits they tipple, too! . . . Even little boys at, or under, *twelve* years of age, go into *stores* and tip off their *drams*! . . . There is no remedy but the introduction of *beer*, and, I am very happy to know, that beer is, every day, becoming more and more fashionable. At Bristol in Pennsylvania, I was pleased to see excellent beer in clean and nice pewter pots. Beer does not kill. It does not eat out the vitals and take the colour from the cheek. . . . Priests may make what they will of their devil; they may make him

[1] *American Gardener*, par. 11.

a reptile with a forked tongue, or a beast with a cloven hoof; they may, like Milton, dress him out with seraphic wings; or, like Saint Francis, they may give him horns and tail: but, I say that the devil, who is the strongest tempter, and who produces the most mischief in the world, approaches us in the shape of *liquid*, not melted brimstone, but wine, gin, brandy, rum, and whiskey." [1]

Against this tippling of wines and spirits Cobbett upheld the claims of clean and simple living. He records a talk he had with an American tavern-keeper. "At last he said: 'I am wondering, sir, to see you look so *fresh* and so *young*, considering what you have gone through in the world.' 'I'll tell you,' said I, 'how I have contrived the thing. I rise early, go to bed early, eat sparingly, never drink anythink stronger than small beer, shave once a day, and wash my hands and face clean three times a day, at the very least.' He said that was *too* much to think of doing." [2]

Despite his praise of beer, he was not much of a beer drinker. He wrote more keenly in praise of milk and of cider, and, when he was working hardest, milk was his favourite drink. Of his work in America—writing and farming—he said, "A man knows not what he can do till he *tries*. But, then, mind, I have always been up with the cocks and hens; and I have drunk nothing but milk and water." [3] He rejoices to tell of the good milk he gave his visitors, and to acclaim water as the Reformers' drink, in which they toasted their cause and their leaders at their political banquets. It was not merely drunkenness to which he objected: he denied the whole theory that drink "inspires wit." "It is not drunkenness that I cry out against: that is *beastly* and beneath my notice. It is *drinking*; for a man may be a good *drinker*, and yet no drunkard. He may accustom himself to swallow, till his belly is a sort of tub." [4]

Characteristically, this homily on drinking comes in the middle of a discourse on Swedish turnips, and gets itself mixed up with a great deal of varied criticism of men and things. The reader will have noticed the reference to the pronouncement on Milton and Shakespeare in a letter on the above; but he would hardly expect to find Cobbett's fullest subject of potatoes addressed to the editor of *The Agricultural Magazine*. Yet there it is. Cobbett is denouncing the cult

[1] *Year's Residence in the United States*, pp. 356-362.
[2] *Ibid.*, p. 82. [3] *Ibid.*, p. 255. [4] *Ibid.*, p. 256.

of the potato as a baseless fashion. The potato, he recognises, has its merits as "a pleasant enough thing to assist in sending down lusty Mrs. Wilkins's good half-pound of fat roast beef." [1] But he finds it extolled, not as a relish, but as a staple food, a cheaper substitute for bread, recommended to the poor and needy. This rouses his ire; he calls the potato "a root worse than useless." [2] The commending of it is a fashion, like the popular cult for Milton and Shakespeare. Both these poets then come in for a thorough trouncing, Milton for the absurdity and immorality of the theology in *Paradise Lost*, Shakespeare for his "bombast, and puns, and smut." From which congenial excursion into literary criticism Cobbett returns to say more about the "noxious weed" which the rich think good enough for the poor. Vastly diverting, indeed; and the more so because Cobbett's work shows again and again an intimate knowledge of Shakespeare, and a keen sense of the point and beauty of his best lines, which are often pressed into the service of his political argument. He knows Milton too; but Shakespeare he knows and quotes really well. Still, if the Shakespeare cult can be made a stick wherewith to beat down the potato crop, the stick comes well to hand in these days of increasing severity in Poor Law administration, of a falling "fodder basis" for wages and poor relief. Cobbett's own prose refutes his professed estimate of Shakespeare. It was not that he could not appreciate Shakespeare: it was that the pedants, who had hailed Ireland's forgeries as genuine, could not. The cult of Shakespeare and Milton was a fashion. Away with it, and away with the potato, the fashion-plate of current economic doctrines.

The *Year's Residence*, filled with this discursive description, illustration, and argument, makes the best of reading. In it, and in the other books which he wrote in America during his exile, Cobbett came to full maturity as a writer. He wrote hard during practically the whole of his stay; and he refused to return to England until he had finished the more pressing of the literary tasks which he had taken in hand. The suspension of Habeas Corpus was, we have seen, renewed once, in July, 1817; but when the period of renewal expired, it was allowed to lapse in January, 1818. Cobbett's friends then urged him to come back to England, on the ground that the most serious danger was over. "But, *here I am*, in safety, and being here, I will now finish several works,

[1] *Year's Residence in the United States*, p. 296. [2] *Ibid.*, p. 276.

which I have long since begun, and which, if I do not finish them now, I am sure I never shall." [1] This was actually written before the restoration of Habeas Corpus; but Cobbett continued to write in the same strain, refusing to be diverted, even by pressing calls from England, from the literary work on which he was engaged.

His preoccupation with his books doubtless in part accounts for his complete abstention from American politics during his sojourn in the United States. He made, indeed, an unsuccessful attempt to get the legal decisions under which he had been mulcted of large sums during his previous residence reversed, pleading with some justice that the actions taken against him had been irregular at law. He wasted some months at the beginning of 1818 in his appeal to the Pennsylvania legislature on this question; but this was his sole excursion of any length from his farm, and the sole interruption of his steady work at the books he had planned.

What, then, were these books? First, the *Year's Residence*, the three parts of which he handed over as free gifts to his three eldest sons, partly, no doubt, in order to prevent his creditors from appropriating the proceeds. Secondly, the *Grammar of the English Language*, in some ways his greatest work, of which I shall have more to say in a later chapter. This was finished in 1818, and published in both America and England in the same year. It was an immense and immediate success, as it amply deserved to be. But the author got little direct benefit from it for some time to come; for, under an arrangement made from America, he allocated a large part of the proceeds to certain of his principal creditors.[2] Thirdly, *The American Gardener*, of which I have spoken already. He also set to work on a new and thoroughly revised version of his book, *Le Maître Anglais*, for teaching French people English, and began a new book, *The French Master*, for teaching English people French. This, presumably, developed into the *Grammar of the French Language*, published some years later, in 1824. Other books he planned, but did not write, or did not finish, till later years, or not at all. A projected *History of the Laws and Constitution of England* was never published; *A History of*

[1] *Letter to Major Cartwright, P.R.*, January 24th, 1818.

[2] See *Letter to Tipper*, November 20th, 1817, quoted in *Melville*, Vol. II., p. 99.

the Church and of Religion in England presumably took shape later in the *History of the Protestant Reformation*; *A View of the Present State of the Income, Debt, and Expenditure of the Kingdom* never took shape as a book.[1] Yet another project, an *Account of the Life, Labours, and Death of Thomas Paine*[2] never advanced beyond a rough preliminary draft, based mainly on a translation of material supplied by a French woman admirer and friend of Paine's, whom Cobbett encountered in the United States. This draft, published by Mr. Moncure D. Conway, in his *Life* of Paine, is far too rudimentary a sketch to give any indication of what the completed work would have been. It was meant to be an amend for the scurrilous *Life of Tom Paine* which Cobbett had edited and published in 1796.[3] In the event, his amends took, as we shall see, another and a less fortunate form.

Thus busied with congenial labours, Cobbett found the time pass quickly enough in the United States. Though he was a loving husband and father, severed from most of his family, he was certainly not unhappy during his exile. He liked his work, and he became attached to his farm and house at North Hempsted. Criticism of them he fiercely resented. One, Thomas Fearon, a Reformer of sorts, made a visit to America prospecting mainly on behalf of potential emigrants. Fearon called on Cobbett, and gave an account of his visit in the inevitable travel book which he published on his return. The passage, with others, was quoted in some of the American papers and roused Cobbett to fury; for Fearon had spoken of "a path rarely trod, fences in ruins, the gate broken, a house mouldering to decay."[4] Elsewhere Cobbett himself had written that the house was "out of repair"; but Fearon's pity at his surroundings was too much for him. He replied fiercely that the path was "as beaten as the highway," the house "large and commodious . . . a better one than ever he entered, except as a lodger or a servant, or *to carry home work.*"[5] The point of this last was Cobbett's assertion that he had taken Fearon for a tailor. Much more

[1] For these projects, see *Letter to Benbow, P.R.*, December 6th, 1817.

[2] See *Letter to Cartwright, P.R.*, January 24th, 1818.

[3] See p. 60.

[4] Fearon, *Sketches of America*, p. 64, quoted in the *Year's Residence in the United States*, p. 602.

[5] *Ibid.*

in this strain, at the unfortunate Fearon's expense, the curious may find set out in the pamphlet *Fearon's Falsehoods*, reprinted as an appendix to the *Year's Residence*. It is difficult to believe that Fearon's account was true; for Cobbett loathed untidiness, and could certainly not have borne to live in surroundings of dirt and decay. But he could hardly make a hired farm in a brief period all he desired. Probably Fearon exaggerated in the one direction about as much as Cobbett in the other.

How long Cobbett would have stayed at North Hempsted writing, despite the calls of his admirers to come back to England, it is impossible to say. An " act of God " intervened to stir him from his place of refuge. On May 20th, 1819, his house was burnt down, and he and his household had to camp out in hastily improvised tents. This accident involved him in serious monetary loss. As soon as he had straightened matters out, he got rid of his farm, and moved to New York, where he was established in August. Here, however, he made but a short stay; for there was nothing now to keep him longer in America. In October he took ship for England, and on November 20th, 1819, he arrived at Liverpool.

Cobbett's last act in America was his curious and thoroughly characteristic disinterment of the mortal remains of Tom Paine. We have seen his anxiety to make amends for his earlier libels on Paine's character. Now, he conceived the idea of carrying Paine's bones to England, there to enshrine them in a mausoleum worthy of the great services which the author of *The Rights of Man* had done to mankind and to his native country in especial. Paine, as a Deist, had been refused Christian burial in America, even the Quakers denying his body admission to their burying-ground. He had been interred in a corner of his own farm at New Rochelle, not far from Cobbett's at North Hempsted. There was fear that his body would be disturbed there, in unhallowed ground. Cobbett got leave, dug up the coffin, and carried it to England, where, with some trouble, he brought it safely through the hands of the customs authorities. But his act of piety brought him only ridicule. No one in England seemed to want Paine's bones: the attempt to raise money for a mausoleum fell flat: the bones remained in Cobbett's possession to the time of his death, when they passed to his eldest son, only to become an unrealisable asset in the hands of the latter's creditors. At the time of his return in 1819, they only set

loose a concourse of rhymsters and cartoonists, who celebrated the exploit with extreme gusto. This was not wholly disinterested sprightliness of wit; for Paine's name was regularly made the political synonym for all forms of atheism, treason, and immorality, and the chance of linking Cobbett's with it was too good for any political opponent to miss.

> "O rascal, why my name afresh
> Dost thou lug forth in canting tones?
> The worms content were with my flesh;
> But thou hast robbed me of my bones,"

Paine was made to say, in one of these rhymes. To which Cobbett answered in the rhyme, "I'll see thee damned, I'll keep thy bones."

Byron also improved the occasion, in a quatrain sent to Tom Moore; but not for publication, for he had no desire to join in the anti-Reform clamour:—

> "In digging up your bones, Tom Paine,
> Will Cobbett has done well:
> You'll visit him on earth again,
> He'll visit you in hell."

CHAPTER XVI

THE SIX ACTS—QUEEN CAROLINE

COBBETT reached Liverpool on November 20th, 1819. Before leaving America, where his son, James Paul, remained to carry on bookselling and publishing as his agent, he sold all his property in the United States to John Morgan, his old London partner, who had returned to the United States in 1803. There is some reason to believe that this sale was made, at least partly, in order to protect his property from American creditors in the interests of his son. But actual payment was made, in cash, which Cobbett badly needed for the re-establishment of his fortunes in England. James Paul Cobbett actually remained in America until 1822, carrying on business on his father's behalf.

During Cobbett's absence, stirring events had been enacted at home. From the March of the Blanketeers in 1817 to the Peterloo Massacre in 1819, Great Britain was in a state of continuous and violent unrest. Peel's Act for the restoration of cash payments was passed early in 1819, and to the other factors making for unemployment and distress was added the process of deflation by the drastic cancellation of the vast quantities of paper money put out by the banks. The disturbances had reached their climax in August, when the yeomanry had brutally dispersed the great Reform meeting in St. Peter's Fields at Manchester, under conditions which earned for the event the name of "the Peterloo Massacre." Huge meetings all over the country had sent up petitions for Reform, and in many cases these had been dispersed with violence. Henry Hunt, arrested at the Manchester meeting, where he was the principal speaker, was out on bail, awaiting trial, and many others of the leading Reformers were in jail.

The general unrest, in which once more agents of the Government played their sinister part, only served to rouse the ruling classes to fresh acts of severity. The Radicals in Parliament and some of the Whigs attacked the Ministry for its conduct at Peterloo: the Ministry defended the action of the troops and magistrates, and justified the severest

measures against what it still regarded as a revolutionary conspiracy. Huge majorities in Parliament endorsed its policy. The Prince Regent issued a special Proclamation urging the necessity of drastic measures against the Reformers: the Parliament took up the congenial task of enacting fresh coercive legislation. A week after Cobbett's return to England, Sidmouth and his colleagues introduced the first of the notorious Six Acts. All six became law early in the following year.

Cobbett landed only a few days before Parliament assembled with the consideration of measures against the Reformers as its principal business. He received an enthusiastic welcome from the Radicals and a fusillade of abuse from the friends of the Government. At Liverpool, after his little trouble with the customs over the bones of Tom Paine, he was welcomed at a public dinner and addressed a huge concourse in the open air. Thence he set out for Manchester, where a public reception had been prepared for him. His approach and declared intention of addressing a public meeting, in the city where the Peterloo Massacre had so lately occurred, caused immense excitement. Manchester, not being a corporate town, had only the most rudimentary local government—the sheriffs and constables. These and other notables met in hasty conclave in order to settle what should be done. In a state of panic, they massed troops, yeomanry, and police to oppose his coming, and to overawe the huge crowds which had gathered to await him. Cobbett had stopped at Irlam for the night, intending to make his entry into Manchester in the morning. At Irlam he received a letter from the civic authorities of Manchester and Salford, warning him not to enter the town. Thinking discretion the better part, and fearing to provoke another massacre, Cobbett abandoned his Manchester meeting, and turned aside to Warrington, whence he set out on his journey towards London.

On the way he stopped at Coventry, his prospective constituency. There he addressed a public meeting, but was turned out of the hotel at which he had put up for speaking from the window a few words appointing the place for the meeting. When he reached London, the press and the caricaturists were already hard at work exploiting the bones of Tom Paine to his disadvantage. The "respectable" journals vehemently denounced him; but his friends here too gave

him a warm welcome. Henry Hunt, still Cobbett's friend despite the incident of the Westminster letter, took the chair at a public banquet held in his honour at the Crown and Anchor. The Reformers, except Burdett's friends, rallied round him. But he had plenty of troubles still to face. On leaving the public dinner he was arrested for debt, and had to be bailed out by Henry Hunt and Dolby, the publisher of the *Register*. If the twopenny *Register* could have continued unchecked, the large profits accruing from it would soon have cleared off the burden of debt. But fresh measures were preparing to complete the financial ruin begun by the imprisonment of 1810.

The Six Acts, moreover, struck directly at Cobbett as well as at the Reform movement as a whole. The first of them, an Act to prevent delays in the administration of justice, made more summary the procedure for dealing with alleged political offenders, and added to the punitive powers of the magistrates. The second, an Act to prevent the training of persons to the use of arms and to the practice of military evolutions, struck at the sporadic attempts made by a few bodies of Radicals to equip themselves for an armed conflict with the authorities. The third, for the more effectual prevention and punishment of blasphemous and seditious libels, stiffened up the laws, already stiff enough, against the Radical pamphleteers. The fourth, for the seizure of arms, gave magistrates wide powers to search private houses, and confiscate whatever could be used as a military weapon. The fifth, to prevent seditious meetings and assemblies, carried still further the restrictions imposed in 1817 on the right of public meeting, and placed all meetings more completely under the supervision and licence of the magistrates. The sixth, by which Cobbett and the other Radical journalists were specially aimed at and affected, was an Act " to subject certain publications to the Newspaper Tax."

The effect of the Six Acts was greatly to increase the rigour of the measures directed against the Reformers. The measures of 1817 had not been successful in suppressing cheap publications. Despite all endeavours to stop its sale, Cobbett's cheap unstamped *Register* and other similar publications had continued to be sold. Indeed, their number and influence had, on the whole, greatly increased. The last of the Six Acts mentioned above was expressly designed to destroy this form of popular appeal. Cobbett had been able

to publish the *Register* unstamped by omitting news items, and making it a weekly political pamphlet instead of a newspaper. Now this resource was taken away. In future, all pamphlets or papers published more often than once a month and costing less than sixpence, or containing less than two whole sheets of at least 21 inches by 17 inches of printed matter, excluding advertisements, were to be liable to the duty on newspapers. This stood at fourpence a copy, and meant raising the price of a penny paper to fivepence, or, in the alternative, increasing the size of the paper so as to bring it beyond the scope of the Act, and then selling it for at least sixpence.

This was a severe cut, both at the publishers and at the public. A fivepenny or sixpenny paper was quite beyond the means of the great mass of the people. The big circulation which Cobbett had secured for the twopenny *Register* was instantly cut away. At a higher price, the circulation was bound to fall to a mere fraction of what it had been, and with the fall would go most of the profit. Moreover, people, even if they could afford to do so, would not pay fivepence for a penny pamphlet. The Act virtually compelled Cobbett to impale himself on the other horn of the dilemma, by raising the price to sixpence and increasing the size so as to bring the paper outside the scope of the Act. But this also meant a heavy fall in profits; for the enlarged paper was expensive to produce for the restricted class of readers who could afford the sixpence.

Moreover, if the paper was produced unstamped, it could not, like the stamped periodicals, be sent through the post. The stamp included free postage: unstamped journals and pamphlets had to find other means of circulation, which often involved late arrival. It was also very difficult to distribute the unstamped *Register* in the smaller towns and country districts, where there was not a big enough demand for a parcel to be sent by coach to the local bookseller. For his richer readers, but for them alone, Cobbett at last got round the difficulty by publishing, side by side with the unstamped, a stamped edition of the *Register*, priced at 1s., and sent direct to subscribers through the post. His poorer readers either clubbed together to buy the unstamped edition, or went perforce without. The stamped *Register*, however, was not resumed till April, 1821, and its price precluded a large sale.

From 1820 onwards, Cobbett had to do a much larger part of his propaganda by word of mouth, touring the country and addressing those whom he would otherwise have reached mainly by the printed word. For all the rest of his life, the "taxes on knowledge," as this and the other impositions on the press came to be called, remained in being.

To be sure, Cobbett could, like Richard Carlile and Thomas Wooler, or like William Carpenter and Henry Hetherington at a later date, have merely defied the law, and gone on publishing the twopenny *Register* in its despite. It was by such persistence that cheap working-class journals at last won the right to circulate freely without tax, when, in 1834, Hetherington at last tired out the judges, and secured a ruling that the unstamped *Poor Man's Guardian,* so long published in defiance of law, was a strictly legal publication. But this decision of Lord Lyndhurst's, probably given in order to "dish the Whigs," came only after the Reform Act and in circumstances very different from those of 1819. It can be argued that Cobbett ought, like Carlile, to have made himself a martyr to the cause of a free press. He would have replied that he had other fish to fry, and that it seemed to him more important to keep the question of Reform constantly before a large audience than to make a protest which would certainly be unavailing, and would involve both his own ruin and the suppression of his journal. We may think the better of Carlile for making himself a martyr: I see no reason for disapproving of Cobbett for holding discretion the better part of propaganda.

But if he had no desire for martyrdom, he did not mean to be muzzled. Immediately on his return to London, he began his preparations for the issue of a daily newspaper, *Cobbett's Evening Post,* with which he proposed to enter into direct competition with the Whig and Tory dailies. The newspaper, duly announced in the *Register,* appeared in January, 1820, and was dead in three months, after causing further monetary losses to its proprietor. Cobbett afterwards declared that it had not been a failure, and that lack of time, rather than lack of circulation and prospects, was the cause of his dropping it. He proposed, indeed, to revive it in 1821, undeterred by his repeated failures in daily journalism. *Porcupine's Gazette* in America, *The Porcupine* in England, and now the *Evening Post* had all gone wrong. In fact, his style and what he had to say were better suited to weekly

comment than to a daily newspaper. Moreover, he had always too much on hand, and moved too much from place to place and from interest to interest, to devote himself successfully to the incessant work required for the single-handed establishment and conduct of such a paper.

On this occasion, he was also unlucky. The old King died on the very day on which his new venture appeared. This involved a General Election, and Cobbett was pledged to stand for Coventry, and bound to devote much of his time to the constituency. At the beginning of the year he had set to work to raise a special sum of money—*Cobbett's Fund for Reform*—to be used in securing the return of himself and other Radical candidates to Parliament. But the few hundreds raised in this way and a good deal more went on the contest; for Coventry, having a freeman's franchise and a huge proportion of out-voters, was a very expensive seat to fight. The *Evening Post* was neglected while the contest was in progress: financial stringency soon made its continuance impossible when Cobbett was able to give it rather more attention.

It had not been expected that the Coventry seat would be won. The two sitting members, Ellice and Peter Moore —both prominent Whigs—spent money freely, and were returned by a majority almost of four figures. Cobbett polled only 517 votes, though he headed the poll on the first day. The election was a rough and tumble affair, conducted with much violence and intimidation. He wrote an amusing description of it in an open letter to his son James, in New York.[1] He also took preliminary steps towards bringing forward a petition against the return of his opponents; but he could not raise the money needed, and the case had to go by default. The hostility of the respectable classes at this election helped to push him farther to the left, and to sharpen his dislike of the commercial classes as well as the gentry.

Coventry and the *Evening Post* between them completed his ruin, and, at the earnest persuasion of his friends, he consented to file a petition in bankruptcy. His debts had been grossly exaggerated by his opponents; but they hung like a millstone round his neck. Bankruptcy would rid him of them, and set him free to face the future. This meant, indeed, giving up Botley, to which he was much attached; but, even there, the attitude of the local gentry had done

[1] *P.R.*, March 25th, 1820.

much to spoil the place for him. He succeeded in getting the estate placed in Chancery for a period of years, with an option to re-purchase if his fortunes mended. He could even, it appears, have gone on living there; but this would have involved too great an expense. He and his family moved to a hired house at Brompton, with a few acres of ground attached. Botley, on which he had spent so much care and money, passed for ever out of his hands.

The total debts proved against him in the bankruptcy proceedings amounted only to £5000; but a number of creditors refrained from presenting their claims. Among these was Sir Francis Burdett, although by this time the dispute between the two men had become violent and bitter. Burdett had lent Cobbett £2000 in 1812, after his release from Newgate, and another £700 in 1816, besides £300 lent to Wright in 1810, of which Cobbett denied the receipt. Round these sums there later grew up a discreditable quarrel; but at this time Burdett put in no claim. He lost little by it; for Botley was fully mortgaged, and Cobbett's money was all gone.

The bankruptcy was, with most of the creditors, a matter of agreement; and Cobbett always stated that they had treated him well on the occasion. Even Lord Eldon, his fierce political enemy, went out of his way to oblige him by signing the decree out of the customary hours.[1] Freedom from past debts, which had been hanging round him for fully ten years, came as a great relief.

But his troubles were by no means at an end. He had still to deal with Cleary and with John Wright, whom he had attacked so imprudently, in one of his *Registers* written from America, on account of the reading of his letter about Hunt at the Westminster election. Before his return from the United States, Cleary had begun an action for libel against Clement, the publisher of the *Register*. This case came on in December, just after his return, and Cleary got £500 in damages. Wright, who had also begun an action against Clement, dropped it, and began one against Cobbett himself, and Cleary also entered a second action against Cobbett.

The latter action came on first, despite the efforts of Brougham, who was Cleary's counsel, to get it postponed until Wright's case had been taken. Cobbett, defending himself, now admitted that he had written the letter, but

[1] *P.R.*, April 10th, 1830.

made havoc of Cleary's character and behaviour in reading it on the hustings. Cleary got only forty shillings damages from the jury; and the case did his reputation much harm.[1] But the libels on Wright were a far more serious matter. Against both plaintiffs, Cobbett had entered a plea of justification. But, in the case of Wright, he withdrew this plea, probably realising that he could not possibly prove his charges of fraud and dishonesty, even if they were true, to the satisfaction of a court of law. He therefore fell back on legal technicalities. His son, and not he, was the proprietor of the *Register*: his sons had altered—he even suggested that they had actually written—the articles of which complaint was made. Thus Cobbett tried to escape liability. The Lord Chief Justice brushed the defence aside, and the jury gave the fortunate Wright £1000 damages.[2] Cobbett protested loudly that Wright should never get a penny; but finally, with his consent, his friend George Rogers of Southampton paid both the damages and the costs of the case. Cobbett was ever fortunate in finding friends to pay his fines for him.

"They have now, they say, *sunk* me in good earnest! Never was a man so often sunk! This is no sinking! This is what the sailors call merely '*shipping a sea*,' that is to say, taking a wave on board, which only gives the vessel a '*heel*,' but by no means prevents her from keeping on her course; and, gentlemen, you will see that this, like every other '*sinking*' that I have experienced, will be at last a *mounting* in place of a sinking." [3]

This was, indeed, not merely the worst, but the last, of Cobbett's misfortunes. From this "shipping a sea" he sailed into smoother waters. The years from 1820 onwards were probably the happiest of his life, years of adventure without tragedy, fighting without serious hurt, advancing literary achievement and political influence. Botley, indeed, he had lost, and all the care he had spent on building up there a fine farming estate for his children had gone for nothing. But the loss was not unmixed evil. It set him free from the heavy preoccupations of a large farm, to devote almost his whole time and energy to literary and political work. He could not, indeed, contrive to exist without some

[1] See full report in *P.R.*, December 9th, 1820.

[2] See full report in *P.R.*, December 16th, 1820. [3] *Ibid.*

agricultural occupation. The first house which he found in 1820 at Brompton soon failed to satisfy his needs: it was too small, and gave him too little scope. Early in 1821 the family moved to new quarters at Kensington, "walled in from all roads, distinct from all houses, four acres of rich land for cows and pigs, surrounded by nursery gardens." [1] Here he proposed to conduct a seed farm, and to carry on farming work in a small way. Anne Cobbett wrote to her brother James in America that it would be "quite enough for Papa's amusement, though not sufficient to drag him into any great expenses." [2]

Here, then, Cobbett settled down, gradually developing his seed farm, and doing also a growing trade in seeds imported from America, particularly his favourites the Ruta Baga, or Swedish turnip, the locust-tree, or acacia, and "Cobbett's corn," as he called the American maize, which he made great efforts to popularise in this country. At the same time, through his son John Morgan Cobbett, he took a new publishing office for the *Register* at 1 Clement's Inn, Strand.

This change was made necessary by yet another of Cobbett's many disputes with his fellow-Radicals. In June, 1820, William Benbow, who had previously been associated with Clement in publishing the *Register*, became the legal publisher, the paper being still issued from the same house, 269 Strand. This William Benbow was a man of considerable influence on the working-class movements of his time. Born about 1780, he was originally a shoemaker by trade. He educated himself, and acquired considerable literary skill. In 1817 we find him establishing himself in Manchester as a bookseller, and working in close association with Richard Carlile and the extreme wing of the Radicals. Cobbett, from America, addressed to him two letters describing his plans for his *English Grammar* and other writings.[3] Benbow, like many other Radicals, was then in prison owing to the suspension of the Habeas Corpus Act. When he emerged, he took up bookselling in London, and became first agent for the *Register*, and then its actual publisher. While he was with Cobbett he produced, and issued under Cobbett's auspices, the first

[1] *Letter to James Cobbett*, October 9th, 1820, quoted in *Melville*, Vol. II., p. 139.

[2] Quoted in *Melville*, Vol. II., p. 187.

[3] November, 1817. See p. 270.

versions of his widely read pamphlets exposing Parliamentary corruption, *A Peep at the Peers* and *Links of the Lower House*, re-issued later as *A Full View of the Commons*. After his quarrel with Cobbett, he continued bookselling and publishing on his own account, and opened a coffee-house which became a favourite meeting place for the working-class Radicals. He was an active member of the National Union of the Working Classes in 1830, and lived on to play a leading part in the Chartist movement, and to suffer a long sentence of imprisonment in 1840 as the reward of his lecturing tours in the north of England. He toured from town to town in a cart, lecturing and selling his pamphlets. Of these by far the most influential was his *Grand National Holiday*, published in 1831 or 1832, in which the project of the general strike was first seriously put forward. This was the basis of the Chartist proposal for a "Sacred Month," or general strike of the productive classes. Benbow, through his adult life, was an extreme Radical and free-thinker. He belonged to the extreme left of the Chartist movement, and was a strong adherent of the "physical force" section. At the time of his association with Cobbett, he was about forty years old, and known mainly as one who had suffered at the Government's hands in the cause of free speech and a free press. He was known to Cobbett before the latter left for America in 1817, and had apparently had some business dealings with him before.

When Benbow had been sole publisher of the *Register* for six months, Cobbett had become seriously dissatisfied. He complained that he could not get Benbow to pay over the money due to him, and a furious quarrel, similar in certain respects to Cobbett's earlier dispute with John Wright, broke out between them. It is quite impossible to find out how the blame was distributed. Cobbett's family, of course, took his side, and denounced Benbow as a scoundrel. Benbow, for his part, accused Cobbett of all manner of villainy, Probably it was again a case of impossible business habits on both sides, leading to inextricable financial complications. Cobbett accused his publisher of failing to account for £400 which he had received: Benbow denied the charge. This time Cobbett did not go to law. He took the whole publishing into his own hands, and in 1822 the printing as well. John Morgan Cobbett became the nominal publisher, and took actual charge of that side of the business.

Meanwhile, Cobbett had become a leading actor in one of the greatest political sensations of all time—the so-called "trial" of Queen Caroline. From 1806 onwards the affairs of the Prince Regent and his wife had given intermittent and serious trouble, and a great deal of the time of Parliament had been unproductively consumed upon them. In 1806 there had been a Parliamentary "secret investigation" into her conduct, known as the "delicate investigation." [1] This had resulted in absolving the lady from the more serious charges made; but Parliament then censured her for "levity of conduct." In face of the notorious habits of the prince, this caused considerable scandal, and Cobbett became her keen partisan. The trouble recurred in 1813, when the Princess Regent protested to Parliament against the restrictions placed by the Privy Council on her intercourse with her daughter, the Princess Charlotte. Cobbett again took up her case, and this time many of the Radicals, anxious to find a stick wherewith to beat the Prince Regent and the ministers, joined in the outcry. Nothing, however, was done, and in 1814 the Princess Regent, who had been living in London separately from her husband, went abroad. In 1817 the Princess Charlotte died. No further serious trouble occurred until 1820, when, on the death of George III., the Prince Regent became king. At once arose the question of his wife's position. At the King's demand, her name was omitted from the Prayer-Book, and the Government gave her no recognition as Queen, leaving her wholly out of the preparations for the King's coronation. Caroline, however, at once hurried back to England to claim her rights, and the main body of the Radicals and many of the Whigs, headed by Henry Brougham and Denman, took up her case.

Before the old King's death, the Prince Regent had been making preparations for the institution of proceedings for a divorce. The Government had acquiesced in this, and in 1818 a secret commission, later known as the Milan Commission, had been sent out to collect evidence against the Princess Regent. This commission had now made its report, and the King pressed his ministers to take drastic action. The Government agreed to do this, and steps were about to be taken at the time of Caroline's return.

In face of the new King's almost universal disrepute and unpopularity, it is not surprising that the lead of the Radicals

[1] See p. 182.

was enthusiastically followed. Caroline's arrival at Dover was a triumph; there, and on her journey to London, she was acclaimed by immense multitudes as an outraged queen. Denied a political outlet, the discontent of the people made Caroline into a national heroine. The measures of the King and the ministers threatened to cause more revolutionary feeling than all the misery and all the political agitation of the years following the Peace. The Government, alarmed, tried to negotiate with Caroline; but she insisted on two points, the recognition of her royal status and the insertion of her name in the Prayer-Book. The negotiations fell through. The House of Commons, on the motion of Wilberforce, passed a resolution offering to protect her honour—whatever that might mean—if she would agree to waive the latter point. The Queen refused. A secret committee of the House of Lords thereupon recommended a full investigation into her conduct, "in the course of a legislative proceeding," and on July 8th, 1820, Lord Liverpool, the Prime Minister, introduced a Bill of Pains and Penalties, to deprive Caroline of the title of Queen, and to dissolve her marriage with the King. In spite of the popular clamour, the Government pressed on with the Bill. The evidence gathered by the Milan Commission, full of sordid details, was produced before the House of Lords and spread broadcast throughout the country. Brougham made his famous defence, and called rebutting evidence. The Queen's chastity, and the King's life, were almost the sole subjects of the conversation of every class in the country. The newspapers were filled to overflowing with facts, counter-facts, leading articles, addresses, and manifestoes of every sort. Never was there a greater newspaper sensation: never an episode more damaging to Royalty and its claims.

Meanwhile the Bill was passing through its successive stages in the House of Lords. The second reading was carried by a majority of twenty-eight; on the third reading the majority fell to nine. It was plainly hopeless, in face of such a vote, to carry the Bill to the Commons, where the King's prestige would count for less, and the scandal and public outcry would become insupportable. Lord Liverpool had perforce to announce the withdrawal of the measure. Again negotiations were opened with the Queen's advisers; again they broke down. The Queen went in procession to St. Paul's, to return thanks for her deliverance, and pressed

more firmly than ever her claims to the full royal dignity. Parliament in 1821 voted her an annuity of £50,000; but her other claims were not conceded. On the day of the coronation, July 19th, 1821, she attempted to force her way into Westminster Abbey and claim her part in the ceremony. She was repulsed from the doors. A fortnight later, she was taken seriously ill, and on August 7th, 1821, she died, her case still unsettled. She was buried, at her own desire, at Brunswick, a great procession accompanying her body through London on its way to Harwich. With her death, the scandal gradually died away.

Cobbett was a prominent actor in all these events. From the moment of Caroline's arrival in England, he constituted himself her champion, despite the great reluctance of her official advisers, Bougham, Denman, and Alderman Wood, to accept his aid. Cobbett headed and directed the popular movement on the Queen's behalf. He was ceaselessly active in writing in her support: he organised and presented literally hundreds of "loyal" petitions and addresses to her from the Reformers in all parts of the country: he was constantly at hand to advise her. Many of the Queen's public replies to the loyal petitions and addresses were his; her famous letter of remonstrance to the King, returned by him unopened, but published in all the newspapers in August, 1820, was written by Cobbett. At the time, he disclaimed the authorship, replying to inquirers, "I believe it was written by Alderman Wood"; but the fact that he was the author became widely known, and was admitted by his sons, when they included the *Letter* in their collected edition of his *Political Works*.[1]

The constant burden of Cobbett's advice, which the Queen followed, was that she should abate nothing of her claims. Brougham and Denman had been opposed to her action in returning to England, and were throughout anxious to arrive at a compromise. Cobbett wanted no such thing. It seemed intolerable to him that George IV. should be allowed to put the insult even of a compromise upon the Queen, or that her rights should be in any way sacrificed. The Queen's case almost monopolised the *Register* for months on end: Cobbett could hardly think or write of any other subject.

What he wrote, in his personal letters as well as for

[1] See note by J. M. Cobbett in *Cobbett's Political Works*, Vol. VI., p. 32.

publication, leaves no doubt of the absolute sincerity of his attitude, and the letters of his family amply confirm this impression. He did not take up the Queen's case merely as a move in the political game, though he used it unmercifully to belabour "old corruption" through the profligate King and his corrupt ministers. He fully believed in Caroline's innocence, and regarded her as a woman deeply wronged. He took, moreover, a fancy to her, and she, apparently, to him. His daughter relates how he would dress himself out finely, far more finely than for any other occasion, in order to wait upon her. He became quite a dandy, putting on his best court manners for her benefit. He formed, certainly, a most exaggerated idea of her wisdom and virtues, attributing every fault to her misfortunes or to the bad conduct of her advisers. He spoilt their game, indeed, by creating too powerful a popular movement, making too loud a scandal, and so rendering impossible the compromise they desired. They also were fain to beat the ministers, but not with the rain of blows which Cobbett showered down. They believed that complete success was impossible: Cobbett's belief that the King and the ministers could be forced by the people to give way completely was never proved or disproved. The Queen's death solved the problem. A *Register*, bordered deeply in black, expressed Cobbett's sorrow.

In explaining this attitude, it is necessary to bear in mind two things, first, that Cobbett was very chivalrous in his attitude towards women, and secondly that he was a convinced monarchist. The creation of so great a scandal seems, perhaps, an odd way of showing his devotion to the cause of monarchy; but he believed George IV. to be in every way a bad king, as well as a dissolute man, and his monarchist views by no means prevented him from speaking his mind about an unworthy occupant of the throne. He protested again and again against attempts to identify the cause of Reform with Republicanism. When Richard Carlile, editor of *The Republican*, was jailed for blasphemy, he wrote against the conviction, but expressly dissociated himself from Carlile's views.[1] A king—a good king—seemed to him necessary to a good system of Government. But a bad king, a fountain-head of corruption, was to be denounced just like a bad minister. Cobbett's *History of the Regency and Reign of George IV.*, did not err on the side of leniency to the bad king.

[1] *P.R.*, February 2nd, 1822.

To say that Cobbett was fully sincere in his defence of the Queen does not mean that he was inclined to sacrifice the political advantages to be derived from the scandal for the Radical cause. "You will bear in mind," he wrote, in a *Letter to the Radicals* on the whole question, "that I always regarded the affair of the queen as an *incident* in the Great Drama, of which the workings of the Funds, or Debt, is the *plot*; a *great* incident, indeed; but still an incident: that is to say, a thing which might *assist* in producing the main event sooner than it would otherwise have come; just as a knock on the head may help out of the world a man perishing of a cancer; but, the absence of which knock on the head, or a failure in its effect, cannot save the life of the wretched being whom the cancer has doomed to die."[1]

The struggle which centred round the unfortunate Queen Caroline—a puppet in the hands of Destiny—certainly did serve in an extraordinary degree to rally the Reformers and to place them, for the moment, at the head of a huge popular agitation. The scandal, moreover, did serve to bring the ruling classes more thoroughly into contempt, and to throw discredit on the whole established order. To this extent, Cobbett was right in regarding the campaign on the Queen's behalf as an important incident in the wider struggle against oligarchy and corruption. But it is a moot point whether the momentary success was not purchased at the expense of partly side-tracking the Reformers' efforts. With the death of the Queen, the great popular movement of which they had obtained the leadership was destroyed, and they were left to win the real support of the people by methods slower, but more certain. Even had the Queen lived, the success of her cause would have destroyed the agitation, while its failure would also have brought dissolution to the movement. It could have lived only on an unsatisfied, but not hopeless, demand, and it is doubtful whether it could have held together long in any case. The wind of such popular movements, based on personal preferences with little of solid reason behind them, is apt to be short.

Nevertheless, the agitation, while it lasted, had a great effect in linking up the Reform organisations throughout the country, and bringing them, to some extent, under a common leadership. By his efforts on the Queen's behalf, Cobbett won for himself the effective leadership of the working-class

[1] *P.R.*, October 28th, 1820.

agitation for Reform. In organising and presenting the petitions from all manner of localities and groups, he created the nucleus of a national movement out of the numerous separate local bodies and cliques which had hitherto been working, for the most part, in isolation.

It is both interesting and instructive to glance through the files of *The Political Register* for the period during which the Queen's case was its main subject of comment. The character and source of the innumerable petitions and addresses fairly well shows the nature of the elements which were lining up behind Cobbett in the cause of Radical Reform. The largest number of these petitions and addresses came, not from any society, but from public meetings organised in the various towns. The townsmen of such a place, the Reformers of such another, presented a " loyal address " to Her Majesty. From what they said, and from the tenor of Cobbett's and the Queen's replies, these addresses seem to have come from meetings largely, but not exclusively, working-class in composition. Other addresses came from farmers, from county meetings of gentlemen, from bodies of traders. But the two largest sets of addresses coming from specialised groups were from " Female Reformers " and from what appear to have been trade union bodies. The numerous addresses from the " Female Reformers " of various towns, and Cobbett's repeated appeals, on this and on other occasions, to bodies of " Female Reformers," [1] seem to imply the existence of a Radical movement among women at this time on a far larger scale than has usually been supposed. Little is to be discovered from the addresses, or from Cobbett's appeals to the " Female Reformers," as to the working of these organisations ; but it is clear that there were many of them, mostly in the textile factory towns, such as Preston and Blackburn, and that they were vigorous bodies, whose articulateness on Reform issues seems to have caused neither surprise nor shocked reminders that " the woman's place is the home." The position of women in political and social movements was to become weaker and not stronger with the coming of the Victorian Age. Cobbett, indeed, in common with most of the Reformers of his day, was against Women Suffrage. In one of his many attacks on Jeremy Bentham, whom he much

[1] *E.g., Address to the Female Reform Society of Blackburn, P.R.*, October 23rd, 1819, and many Addresses from such bodies, printed in the *Register* in 1820 and 1821.

disliked, he referred to the great Utilitarian as "the advocate of Universal Suffrage, which he would extend even to *women*, and which, by such extension, he would, if he were attended to, render ridiculous." [1] But this was rather the attitude—common at the time—of one who had never thought of considering the question, than of a reasoning opponent. Cobbett certainly did not object to female Reformers or to their taking energetic action. Nor does it appear that the Female Reformers in any way resented his attitude, or were much concerned to demand the vote for themselves. Bentham, the theorist, might advocate Women Suffrage: it had not yet become a political question, or reached even the stage of popular agitation.

An exceedingly interesting group among the Addresses to the Queen consists of those which came from groups of workers in various trades and industries. Bakers, brass-founders, carpenters, coopers, shipwrights, watermen and lightermen, weavers, woolcombers—these were all among the groups sending her majesty the assurance of their loyal support. Although the Combination Acts were still in force, and the Addresses accordingly did not purport to come from organised trade societies, there can be little doubt that they were really trade union addresses; for many trade unions lived practically untouched through the period of prohibition, and many others, despite suppression and prosecution, were constantly being formed. The extent to which Cobbett was becoming the recognised leader of the working class in the political struggle is shown by the number of addresses of this sort which he was asked to present to the Queen on behalf of the groups of workers concerned.

One effect, by no means the least important, of his activity on the Queen's behalf, was to bring Cobbett into closer and more personal touch with the representatives of the industrial workers. In sending forward their "loyal addresses" to the Queen, the trade union bodies naturally said something of the distressed and oppressed condition of their members, and Cobbett was led to a closer examination than he had yet made of factory conditions and factory tyranny. Hitherto, he had treated the oppression of the industrial workers as a part of the general political oppression, and had made his appeal to them almost wholly a political appeal. Of strikes, save when they became directly involved with

[1] *P.R.*, December 12th, 1818.

the political struggle, he had found little to say. From the time when the Queen's case brought him into closer contact with the industrial workers, a change is to be noticed. The *Register* gives more space to accounts of strikes and industrial movements,[1] and Cobbett devotes more thought to the industrial aspects of Radicalism. He does not, indeed, alter in any way his opinion that Reform and the abolition of paper money are the keys to prosperity; but he gives fuller recognition to trade union efforts, and writes more forcibly, and with greater knowledge, about the effects of the factory system. A fuller examination of his views on industrial questions and of his attitude to the industrial workers is vital to the understanding of the position which he occupied during the last ten years of the struggle for Reform.

[1] See, *e.g.*, for the Glasgow strikes, *P.R.*, April 15th, 1820; for the Midland strike of stocking-weavers, *P.R.*, March 31st, 1821 and April 14th, 1821; for the Scottish weavers' strike, *P.R.*, September 25th, 1824, and for the London building trades turn-out, *P.R.*, August 27th, 1825.

CHAPTER XVII

FACTORY SLAVERY—COBBETT AND THE TRADE UNIONS

THE Combination Law of 1800, enacted partly as a measure of political repression and partly in order to prevent strikes in the factories, just passing through the worst savageries of the Industrial Revolution, remained in force until 1824. For twenty-five years all forms of trade union action were completely prohibited by law, and workmen were liable to be imprisoned for the mere act of forming, or belonging to, a trade union. This, however, as we have seen, did not mean that trade unions did not exist. The Act of 1800 was never completely enforced. The combinations formed by the workers in the new factory areas and by the miners were indeed repeatedly broken up, and their leaders sent to jail; but many combinations, especially in the older crafts in the towns, were suffered to exist, and even carried on collective bargaining with the employers throughout the period of prohibition. The Combination Law could always be invoked by the masters, and it was always dangerous to occupy any prominent position in a trade union. But the policy was rather that of inflicting exemplary punishments on obnoxious leaders than of enforcing, save in a few of the most distressed factory areas, an absolute prohibition of trade unions.

Cobbett, from the time when he first began to appeal to the industrial workers, opposed the Combination Law, and defended the right of trade union action. He appealed, against the Combination Law, to precisely the principle of "freedom of contract" which, on other occasions, the masters were eager to invoke. In his *Address to the Manchester Cotton Spinners*, written from America and published at the end of 1817, he made an eloquent defence of the right to strike. "The principle upon which all property exists is this: that a man has a right to do with it that which he pleases. That he has a right to sell it, or to keep it. That he has a right to refuse to part with it at all: or, if he choose to sell it, to insist upon any price that he chooses to demand: if this be not the case, a man has no property. If he be, by no matter what

power, *compelled by others* to give away, or sell, or barter, or sell at a price below what he wishes to sell at; in any of these cases, he ceases to have any property in the thing with regard to which the compulsion is exercised towards him. . . . The attempts to degrade and completely enslave the people of England have been *gradual*; but they have not been less efficient for being slow. When it was found that men could not keep their families decently upon the wages that the rich masters chose to give them, and that the men would *not work*, and contrived to combine, so as to be able to live, for a while, without work; then it was, for the purposes in view, found necessary to call this combining by the name of conspiracy; it was found necessary so to *torture the laws* as to punish men for demanding what they deemed the worth of their labour." [1]

Almost, we seem to hear the voice of the author of *The Servile State* proclaiming, in terms of property, the rights of free men. But if Cobbett upheld the right to strike, and always backed strikers against their oppressors, he usually, both before and after 1820, counselled them against strike action. Low wages and bad conditions were, in his view, for the most part not the master's fault: they arose from "the system," and would disappear only with "the system." He was accordingly inclined, like many later political leaders of the working class, to regard industrial movements, whose niceties he did not very clearly understand, as interruptions and diversions from the real task of securing political Reform. His limitations as a working-class leader appeared more plainly when, after the Reform Act, the workers turned for a time their main efforts towards industrial action. In these developments, and in the purely industrial movements which preceded them, Cobbett played no part. He never really understood the factory system, or felt comfortable when placed in proximity to its problems. He was by nature an agrarian leader, born into a time when agriculture was being dethroned by the factory and the machine.

This, indeed, appears as his weakness, as we look back upon his work and interpret it in the light of subsequent events. We see him groping blindly for a principle of action in the tangled skein of the new economic conditions, clutching at Parliamentary Reform because it appears the one strand that can be unravelled with a manful tug at the mass.

[1] *P.R.*, December 19th, 1818.

Industrially, the workers seemed so helpless in face of the economic power of the employers backed by the authority of a repressive Government. They could be starved into submission, imprisoned, if need were, shot down. How could they hope to achieve anything without a change of political system? Were not their employers, at least the smaller employers, caught with them in the toils of "the Thing"? The face of civilisation was rapidly changing; but Cobbett had not learned to regard the change as inevitable. He rebelled against it, and strove to drive back the new forces responsible for it.

His greatest weakness, in the expression of his industrial views, appeared when he fell to discussing the relations between workers and employers. He still persisted in regarding the new factory owner as an exception, a monstrous and deplorable exception. When he spoke of employers in general, he still thought mainly of the small master, employing a few men, but not greatly removed in wealth or social status from the skilled artisans who worked under him. He had scarcely visited the great factory districts of the north: he hardly knew, from positive observation, what the new factories were like. He was to remedy this defect during the later years of his life; but right up to 1830, it coloured his way of speaking and writing about class relationships.

This, however, did not prevent him from being very conscious of the evils of factory slavery, or from taking a strong line in favour of measures to protect the workers. Nor did his lack of faith in trade unions, which he largely shared with Francis Place and the group to whose efforts the legalisation of trade unionism is usually ascribed, prevent him from taking a strong line against the Combination Acts. "An institution to get the Combination Law repealed," he said to the London mechanics, "would, I fancy, be the most advantageous that you could, at this time, establish." [1] And, in his famous *Letter to William Wilberforce,* in which he contrasted the evils of white and black slavery, he gave a full account of the iniquities of the Combination Act of 1800, and pressed strongly for its repeal. He pointed out that, whereas the law professed to prevent combinations among masters as well as men, its provisions were, in fact, scandalously unequal. A workman could be compelled to give

[1] *P.R.*, November 15th, 1823.

evidence against himself: a master could not. A workman could be jailed by the decree of two magistrates, "without any trial by the peers of the party": the utmost rigour of the law against a master was a fine of twenty pounds. "I shall not ask how such a law came to be passed; for there is no man in his senses that does not clearly see the reason for passing it." [1] It is sometimes held, by those who accept uncritically the self-glorification of Francis Place, the "Radical breeches-maker," that there was no working-class agitation for the repeal of the Combination Laws, and that the workers were entirely apathetic on the question. This view rests on the unsupported statements of Place, who was quite as much of an egotist as Cobbett himself, and had just the same tendency to take the whole credit of any movement in which he played a part. The view based on Place's statements is simply not true. There was a working-class demand for repeal, and Cobbett's *Letter to Wilberforce*, widely circulated in the factory districts, had a considerable share in giving it form and direction. Place's and Joseph Hume's adroitness was, indeed, the direct means of securing the repeal of the Combination Acts in 1824, when even the leading ministers of the Crown seem to have been unaware of the effect of the Act they had allowed to pass without challenge. But this skilful manœuvre would never have stood the test of the employers' urgent demands for the reimposition of the ban on trade unions if there had not been real working-class understanding, prepared in advance by agitation, of the issues involved. Cobbett had helped to mobilise working-class feeling against the Combination Laws before the Act of 1824. He also lent his powerful support to the protest against their re-enactment in 1825.[2] The full freedom of combination secured in 1824 was not maintained, and the Act of 1825 again placed severe restrictions on trade union action. But the ban on combination in itself was not re-imposed. The way was prepared for the full legal recognition of trade unionism a generation later.[3]

The *Letter to Wilberforce* dealt with many other questions besides the Combination Laws. Its main purpose was to

[1] *P.R.*, August 30th, 1823.

[2] See *P.R.*, January 22nd, 1825 and August 27th, 1825.

[3] For the full history of the repeal movement, see Webb, *History of Trade Unionism*, Chap. II., and Wallas, *Life of Francis Place*, Chap. VIII., both coloured by too exclusive reliance on Place's statements.

throw into sharp contrast the humanitarian movement for the abolition of negro slavery and the callous attitude of the "humanitarians" towards factory slavery in Great Britain. Wilberforce, evangelical, abolitionist, purveyor of tracts and Bibles, member of Parliament for the rotten borough of Bramber, friend of Pitt, defender of all forms of coercion at home, aptly symbolised this contrast. The humanitarians were, for the most part, far too much afraid of Radicalism to have any feeling of humanity for the factory slaves, whose sufferings they justified and belittled in the name of the "dismal science" and of economic law. This seemed to Cobbett sheer hypocrisy. "You make your appeal," he wrote, "in Piccadilly, London, amongst those who are wallowing in luxuries, proceeding from the labour of the people. You should have gone to the gravel-pits, and made your appeal to the wretched creatures with bits of sacks round their shoulders, and with hay-bands round their legs; you should have gone to the roadside, and made your appeal to the emaciated, half-dead things who are there cracking stones to make roads as level as a die for the tax-eaters to ride on. What an insult it is, and what an unfeeling, what a cold-blooded hypocrite must he be that can send it forth; what an insult to call upon people under the name of free British labourers: to appeal to them on behalf of black slaves, when these free British labourers; these poor, mocked, degraded wretches, would be happy to lick the dishes and bowls, out of which the black slaves have breakfasted, dined, or supped. . . . Talk, indeed, of *transmuting* the wretched Africans into this condition! . . . Will not the care, will not the anxiety of a really humane Englishman be directed towards the Whites, instead of towards the Blacks, until, at any rate, the situation of the former be made to be *as good* as that of the latter?" [1]

"A very large portion," he urged, "of the agricultural labourers of England: a very large portion of those who raise all the food, who make all the buildings, who prepare all the fuel, who, in short, by their labour sustain the community; a very large part of these exist in a state of almost incessant hunger." [2] He went on to draw a picture of the factory operative, working intolerably long hours for very low wages, with these wages cut away by arbitrary and extortionate fines, subjected to a rigid and despotic discipline, unable to

[1] *P.R.*, August 30th, 1823. [2] *Ibid.*

leave his employer without due notice, but liable himself to be turned off at a moment's warning, and trodden down, besides, by monstrous legal inequalities such as the Combination Acts. "This is the happy state to enjoy which you seem to be almost afraid that the blacks are, as yet, not quite fit! The '*transmuting* of the wretched Africans into the condition' of these cotton-spinners; these *free* British cotton-spinners, the elevating of them, as you call it, might, indeed, be apt to turn their poor shallow brains. You are for giving them '*free scope* for their industry and for their *rising* in life.' You are for giving them an interest in defending the community. To be sure, these cotton-spinners have, living under this Combination Law, a very free scope for their industry; a great deal of chance of rising in life; and a monstrous deal of interest in defending the community." [1]

Cobbett, in fact, while he recognised the difficulties of the employer, and assigned an honourable place in society to the master of the old school, had no sympathy with the great new capitalists created by the factory system. He objected strongly to the new social consideration, the new influence in the State, which they were gaining: he had no desire for the "moderate Reform" which would install them in power instead of the old aristocracy. "Seigneurs of the Twist, sovereigns of the Spinning Jenny, great yeomen of the Yarn, give me leave to approach you"—so he began his ironical *Letter to the Cotton-Lords.*[2] "Parliament," he added, "seems to have been made for you, and you for it." [3] He stood for the old relation between master and man, not for the new one between boss and slave.

This bent of his mind enabled him, on occasion, to make his stand on the workers' behalf with even stronger appeal than if he had been, like the working-class leaders of the next generation, in and of the new industrial system. But it prevented him from assuming any continuous leadership in the industrial movement. What he was seeking to restore appealed to the desires and instincts of the people, but it gave them little guidance in the day-to-day industrial struggle. This limitation of his outlook, however, makes the position which he built up for himself among the workers all the more remarkable. The agitation over the Queen had given him back the influence which he had partly lost during

[1] *P.R.*, August 30th, 1823. [2] *P.R.*, July 10th, 1824.
[3] *Ibid.*

his absence in America. His writings after his return soon raised him to a position far more influential than he had ever enjoyed before, save perhaps during the few months which followed the publication of his *Address to the Journeymen and Labourers.* Moreover, his new position was more secure and lasting; for he had now shown his capacity, not only to make use of a special opportunity to the fullest extent, but to make a continuous appeal, and one which set men thinking hard enough to give rise to a sustained agitation. His popularity in working-class circles was now as great as in 1816, when he had issued the *Address to the Journeymen and Labourers* in the first of the twopenny *Registers.* Nor was it impaired in any serious degree by his failure to give a clear lead in industrial matters. There was, indeed, always a section that repudiated his leadership on this ground; but it was a relatively small section until after the passing of the Reform Act. While the Parliament was unreformed, those of the workers who pursued a conscious policy at all gave political Reform first place in their programmes. Only when Reform had left the workers excluded from the franchise did they set seriously to work to achieve an economic revolution by industrial action. Industrial movements before the Reform Act were mainly hunger-movements, or mere wage-struggles: only after 1832 did they acquire a revolutionary character. In the 'twenties, the half-starved factory workers did not always take Cobbett's advice in the conduct of their industrial affairs; but they readily accepted his political leadership even when they did not accept his views on the relations between master and man.

Cobbett, indeed, had little faith in the power of trade union action to raise wages or improve conditions. He admitted by implication that the Combination Laws, by preventing free and equal bargaining between masters and men, had the effect of depressing wages,[1] and he sometimes spoke as if it was in the power of the workers to raise wages by collective action.[2] But this was only when he was trying to persuade them that there was a better way open, in action designed to bring about a reduction of prices. The general tendency of his arguments shows that he held, almost as completely as the orthodox economists of the time, that wages

[1] *P.R.*, November 15th, 1823.
[2] *P.R.*, September 17th, 1825.

were determined solely by the supply of labour in relation to the demand. In 1821 the stocking-weavers, in Nottingham and other places, struck for higher wages. Their leaders, in a manifesto, pointed out that in Leicester a strongly organised trade union had been able to secure a collective agreement with the employers, whereby the standard rates were maintained. This agreement, however, was being evaded by the sending out of work into the counties in which no agreement was in force. This, the leaders, urged, showed the universal "necessity of union." Cobbett's reply was a blank negative. "No," he wrote, "it shows the inutility of all such agreements; it shows that they cannot be made binding on the parties; it shows that labour must be left for the demand for it." [1]

The employers, Cobbett argued, if they could pay the wages asked, and still make a profit, would pay them, rather than let their looms stand idle. "If by the *turn-out* you can *better your lot*, I am glad of it, whether your masters suffer or not; because the good of many is to be preferred to the good of a few." [2] But he did not believe that such betterment was possible. If wages were too low, the proper remedy was not to strike, but to demand that they should be brought up by poor relief to a decent living rate. Such relief was no charity, but a right, a burden imposed on the land from time immemorial and by natural law. He adjured the stocking-weavers to demand this right, and, in demanding it, to look beyond the immediate cause, low wages, to the real and underlying cause of their distress. This, he told them, was in the financial system, in high taxation to pay swollen debts, in the slump consequent on the policy of deflation, in the lack of Reform.

When, in 1824 and 1825, prices rose, and the continuance of low wages caused widespread distress and strikes in many of the industrial districts, Cobbett urged the workers, instead of demanding higher wages, which their employers could not afford to pay, to concentrate their attention on bringing prices down. The rise in prices, he believed, was due to the reversal of the policy of deflation, the renewed growth of paper money, the excessive issue of notes by the country bankers and the pouring out of small notes by the Bank of England under the Act of 1822. He urged the workers to use their legal rights by taking every note that came into

[1] *P.R.*, April 14th, 1821. [2] *Ibid.*

their possession straight to the bank, and demanding hard cash in exchange for it. He urged the trade unions to appoint a "gold-man," whose sole business would be to promote a run on the banks for gold. He himself always carried some loose gold on his journeys, exchanged it for notes wherever he stayed, and took these notes to the bank and claimed gold in exchange. A sufficient movement of this sort, he held, would speedily bring about a contraction of the note issue, and so effect a reduction in prices; and this would be vastly better than a rise in wages, because it would be of general benefit.[1] He approved of combinations: "very just and laudable," he called them; but he did not believe in them as instruments for securing higher wages. Combinations, though the fact was not apparent to those who formed them, were among the products of the evil "system."

"Amongst these effects (of the paper-money system) are the present *combinations of the working classes*. The main body of the persons, engaged in these combinations, know little about the *cause* of those *high prices* which cause them to combine. . . . They combine to effect a rise in wages. The masters combine against them. One side complains of the other; but, neither knows the *cause* of the turmoil, and the turmoil goes on. The different trades combine, and call their combination a GENERAL UNION. So that here is one class of society united to oppose another class. At last, in the case of the *shipwrights*, the Government has openly taken part with the masters, and, as the newspapers tell us, issued *a licence for sending a ship to be repaired at a port in the Baltic*!"[2]

Cobbett was always ready to take the side of strikers against any act of oppression by their employers or by the Government. But strikes for higher wages seemed to him to be usually dissipation of energies which ought to have been devoted to the larger issues of Parliamentary and financial Reform. They might easily, unless the workers were roused to a sense of the real causes of distress, result, he felt, in prolonging the "system." Every strike was to him the

[1] *P.R.*, September 17th, 1825.

[2] *P.R.*, August 27th, 1825. John Gast, leader of the London Shipwrights, had mooted in 1818 a plan, originally started in Lancashire, for a "General Union" of all trades. In July, 1825, he had started the *Trades Newspaper*, the first London trade union journal, largely devoted to the advocacy of "General Union."

occasion for a political sermon on the real causes of distress.

In deprecating conflicts between masters and men, Cobbett agreed with Francis Place and the Radical groups which had fallen under Benthamite influence. But he was by no means of one mind with them on the wider question of class relationships. Place and the Benthamites were always anxious to place the working-class movement under enlightened middle-class leadership. Cobbett sympathised with the desire, already growing among the industrial workers, to keep their movement in their own hands and under their own control. He believed that masters and men had both their place in the scheme of things: he did not believe that the men should accept the political leadership of their social superiors. It has often been suggested that he took up this attitude because he desired to keep the leadership entirely to himself, and to keep out hostile influences coming from middle-class sources. It is true that he loathed the Benthamites, and had enough egotism to regard himself as the best guide, philosopher, and friend that any movement could need. But there was more than this in his attitude, as appeared plainly at the time when the London Mechanics' Institute was formed in 1823. The credit for this foundation is usually given to Francis Place and to Dr. Birkbeck, by whose name the college into which the institute has developed has long been known. But in fact the initial work of propaganda was done by two men—Thomas Hodgskin, ex-naval officer and early Socialist writer and lecturer, and J. C. Robertson, a Scotch mechanic, who had been concerned in the institute at Glasgow, from which the London institute drew its inspiration. Robertson and Hodgskin, who in 1823 founded *The Mechanics' Magazine* to further their views, wanted to create an institute under exclusively working-class control, accepting the help of middle-class sympathisers such as Birkbeck, but keeping the direction entirely in working-class hands. In the event, Place and Birkbeck and their friends out-manœuvred Hodgskin and Robertson, who were driven off the committee; and the institute passed mainly under middle-class control.[1]

Cobbett was an original subscriber of five pounds to the fund for starting the Mechanics' Institute. His sympathies were entirely on the side of Hodgskin and Robertson. "I

[1] For a fuller account of this dispute, see my edition of Hodgskin's *Labour Defended.*

gave my five pounds as a mark of my regard for and my attachment to the *working classes of the community*, and also as a mark of my approbation of anything which seemed to assert that these classes were equal, in point of intellect, to those who have had the insolence to call them the '*Lower Orders.*' But, I was not without my fears, nor am I now without my fears, that this institute may be turned to purposes extremely injurious to the mechanics themselves. I cannot but know what sort of people are likely to get amongst them. . . . Mechanics, I most heartily *wish you well*; but I also most heartily wish you not to be *humbugged*, which you most certainly will be, if you suffer anybody but REAL MECHANICS to have anything to do in managing the concern. . . . Scotch Feeloosofers are, sometimes, *varey cleever* men; but, if you will suffer yourselves to be put into their *crucibles*, you will make but a poor figure when you come out. An 'Institution' to get the 'Combination Law' repealed would, I fancy, be the most advantageous that you could, at this time, establish. The '*expansion* of the *mind*' is very well; but, really, the thing which presses most, at this time, is the getting of something to *expand the body* a little more: a little more *bread*, *bacon*, and *beer*; and, when these are secured, a little 'expansion of the mind' may do *varey weele.*"[1] Cobbett did not like Dr. Birkbeck and his friends of the Benthamite school: he did not like Birkbeck's "brilliant enterprise to make us "*a' enlightened*'" and to fill us with "*antellect*, brought, ready bottled up, from the north of the Tweed."[2] As the institute passed under Birkbeck's control, he became hostile. But he was consistent, in that he had from the first refused himself to take any part in the management, on the ground that it should be left to the mechanics alone.[3] He continued, however, to keep an eye on its doings; and in 1826 he cast one of his series of articles in the *Register*, dealing with general political questions, into the form of a series of *Lectures for the Mechanics' Institute.*[4]

His hatred of the new "enlightenment," indeed, was always cropping up. In 1824 a proposal to erect in Manchester a statue to James Watt, "the great steam-engine projector," received much notice in the press. Cobbett

[1] *P.R.*, November 15th, 1823. [2] *P.R.*, March 26th, 1825.

[3] *P.R.*, January 14th, 1826.

[4] *P.R.*, January and February, 1826.

improved the occasion with a combined assault on the new engines and the new employers. *Cotton-Lords and Watt's What,* which appeared in the *Register,* threw cold water on the project. "A little while ago, there were GOD knows how many poor creatures crushed to death by the falling in of a roof of one of the hot places in which these Cotton-Lords shut their slaves up to work. Now, there comes an account of a parcel of poor creatures killed or maimed by the bursting of one of their infernal steam-engines." [1] If such things were to be used, full safety precautions ought to be taken, and the employer to be fully liable for all the human damage which his engines caused. In the same way, he ought to be liable for any injury to health caused by the sweltering atmosphere of the mills. To both these points Cobbett returned again and again. He did not say that the new inventions and processes ought not to be used, but that they ought to be humanised, and the employer subjected to severe legal penalties for any abuse.[2] The cotton-lords were in practice what the Scotch "feelosoofers" were in theories—hard, ruthless exponents of the new order who should be brought savagely to book.

We have seen already the attitude which Cobbett adopted to the Nottingham stocking-weavers, or framework knitters, in their dispute of 1821. An incident connected with this dispute throws a very clear light on his attitude towards employers as a class. He became exceedingly angry with a certain pamphleteer who, under the name of "Humanus," put forward the workers' case. "Humanus" argued that the low wages were largely caused by the presence in the trade of interlopers, bagmen or "Bag-hosiers," without capital or conscience, who entered into unfair competition with the "established and respectable manufacturers." This was probably not far from the truth; but Cobbett saw in it an attempt to justify an exclusive aristocracy of respectable employers, like those whom he termed "the rich ruffians" on another occasion, and to shut the way of advancement to poor folk who had capacity and the will and application to make their way in life.

The Bag-hosiers, said "Humanus," had "wriggled themselves into the business," in order to "snatch the bread

[1] *P.R.*, December 25th, 1824.

[2] For a long article on unhealthy factory conditions, see *P.R.*, January 15th, 1825.

from the mouth of the workmen, and the fair profits from the hands of the regular and honourable manufacturers." "What," exclaimed Cobbett, in high indignation, "do not all *young beginners*; all those who from being journeymen, become masters; all those who, from being labourers, become farmers; all those who, from being clerks, become merchants: do not all these *wriggle* themselves on, pray? . . . And did I not *wriggle* myself from a private soldier to a sergeant-major, and, if I had remained, with all my military notions, should I not have wriggled myself up to a general, in spite of all the birth and rank in the kingdom?" [1] "You," he continued, "are for an *aristocracy* in trade: you are for Lords of the Loom; you are for shutting out your own brother workmen, your own kindred and children. . . . You are for cutting off the chain of connection between the rich and the poor. You are for demolishing all small tradesmen. You are for reducing the community to two classes: *Masters* and *Slaves*." [2] The new class division seemed to Cobbett "unnatural." He preferred the older terms, "master and man" to "the new-fangled jargon of *Employer* and *Operative*." "When *master* and *man* were the terms, every one was in his place; and all were *free*. Now, in fact, it is an affair of *masters* and *slaves*, and the *word*, master, seems to be avoided only for the purpose of covering our shame." [3]

Here, as in many other passages, Cobbett puts forward a doctrine at once singularly like, and singularly unlike, the orthodox doctrines of "self-help" and the "reward of abstinence and enterprise." His philosophy is the philosophy of "self-help," but with a most significant difference. He wants a society in which careers are open to men of talent and initiative—his democracy is the democracy of the equal chance; but, unlike the orthodox economists, the "feelosophical villains," the Samuel Smileses, he realises that the new factory conditions, which divide men sharply into opposing classes, are, in fact, a plain denial of the equal chance. He hates the new great employer—the "lord of the loom." The small employer he respects, as a man who has often raised himself by his own abilities to a position of legitimate superiority. A fellow feeling makes him kind.

Here, as ever, he looks, not forward to a new democracy

[1] *P.R.*, April 14th, 1821. [2] *Ibid.* [3] *Ibid.*

to be won through class-struggle, but back to the lost conditions of a world which knew not the factory system and the vast accumulations of capital in single hands necessary for its effective operation. It was this looking back that made him nearly blind to the need for trade union action, and unfitted him in practice for the rôle of an industrial working-class leader. To-day, most people treat the Industrial Revolution and the new class-divisions resulting from it as an inevitable stage in social development. But have we the confidence to describe it as a step forward on the road of human happiness? Cobbett's backward look may have been in one sense a vain hankering after an irrecoverable and partly mythical past. But it also kept alive a keen criticism of the human values of the new industrial order—a criticism soon to be shouted down by the triumphant progressivism of the early Victorians, to be sustained in Carlyle's mouth as hardly more than a reverberating grumble, to be recaptured only in part, and in an essentially different form, in the writings of Ruskin and William Morris, and, in another part, even more fragmentary, in the contemporary social criticism of Mr. Belloc and Mr. Chesterton and of Mr. Penty.

The working class of the Victorian age, faced with the accomplished fact of the Industrial Revolution, and born into the new conditions of factory regimentation, had no ear for Cobbett's message. It died, to be born again only when the new system began to break up and the illusions of mechanical progress began to show clearly through the cracks of the Victorian philosophy. But the working-class of Cobbett's own day was actually in the throes of the Revolution. It had not been born into the factory, or reared wholly in the stinking industrial towns. It was largely made up of peasants driven off the land, craftsmen whose means of life and independence were being taken away by the new machines and the accumulation of capital, men and women who, like Cobbett, looked back to old times rather than forward with the philosophers of the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge. These workers, it is true, were up against the new conditions, as Cobbett, able to create his own independence, was not. They therefore paid little heed to his opinions on trade unions, strikes, and the relations between employers and workers. When they could, they organised: when they felt strong enough, or were goaded to desperation, they struck. But, while they did not take Cobbett's advice

on these matters, so much nearer their daily life than his, they heeded his philosophy and accepted his political leadership, because he was a man like-minded with themselves, interpreting their own instincts and deep-seated desires, feeling with them the horror of the new system, sharing in their desperate yearning for lost independence and the smell of the green country. They were the people, as he was the leader, of the transition. They were to pass, or their children were to pass, before long into acceptance of the new order, into making the best of it, or seeking to build upon it by making it their own: he was to give place soon to leaders who accepted the new order. But, meanwhile, Cobbett and the people *felt alike*: that was the secret of his ascendancy. If he failed to give a constructive lead to the working-class that was growing up around him, his failure was its failure too, and his like-mindedness with those whom he led positively strengthened his hold, and gave, as no policy based on the new conditions could have given, a sense of hope and self-confidence to the victims of the new industrial order.

CHAPTER XVIII

GRAMMAR AND HUSBANDRY

COBBETT'S sojourn in America from 1817 to 1819 was the beginning of what one of his biographers has called his "great literary period."[1] It gave him leisure enough from the daily preoccupation of political journalism to begin work on the numerous books which he wanted to write. His *Letters to Benbow*, written at the end of 1817, explain what he had in mind.[2] His purpose was educational. He wanted the poorer classes to learn for themselves the things necessary to their salvation. They had abundant intelligence: all they lacked was the means of applying it. Their resolutions and petitions showed plenty of common sense: those who drew them up lacked only the knowledge needed to make them "grammatically correct." Because of this lack they were hampered and despised. Cobbett wanted them to learn grammar as a tailor learns to cut out a gown, or a cobbler a shoe. He set to work to teach them, bidding them despise the pretensions of the so-called "learned languages," and use their wits to make themselves truly learned in their own.

This was the utilitarian purpose of Cobbett's *Grammar of the English Language*, which he wrote during his sojourn in America, and published in 1818. Never was a grammar so readable; and yet utility was not for a moment sacrificed to readability. Cobbett made mistakes; but he produced a thoroughly workmanlike treatise, still the best introduction to a knowledge of the language for the type of readers he had principally in mind. Cast in the form of letters to his son, James Paul, the book has throughout a freshness and directness seldom found in a text-book. Cobbett's way of illustrating grammatical rules and blunders with apt political sentiments and quotations was well calculated to appeal to his readers. "The working men, every day, gave money to

[1] By Mr. E. I. Carlyle, in his *William Cobbett*.

[2] See *P.R.*, November 29th, and December 6th, 1817.

the tyrants, who, in return, gave the working men dungeons and axes." [1] "Sidmouth *writes* a Circular Letter; Sidmouth *wrote* a Circular Letter; Sidmouth *will write* a Circular Letter. Again. The Queen *defies* the tyrants; the Queen *defied* the tyrants; the Queen *will defy* the tyrants." [2] "The nominative is frequently a noun of *multitude*; as *mob, parliament, gang*. . . . The gang of borough-tyrants *is* cruel, and *are* also notoriously as ignorant as brutes." [3] "The work of national ruin was pretty effectually carried on by the ministers; but more effectually by the paper-money makers than by them." [4] "*They*, one year, voted unanimously, that cheap corn was an evil, and the next year, *it* voted unanimously, that dear corn was an evil." [5]

Or this, illustrating the use of inappropriate adjectives. "Amongst a select society of empty heads, 'moderate reform' has long been a fashionable expression; an expression which has been well criticised by asking the gentlemen who use it, how they would like to obtain *moderate justice* in a court of law, or to meet with moderate chastity in a wife."

Such passages can give, of course, no real indication of the quality of Cobbett's book. That quality lies above all in making the student of grammar feel at home with his mentor, so that the lesson takes on almost the character of a personal talk. The letter form helps to achieve this result; but it is mainly due to Cobbett's own keen consciousness of his audience. He knew for whom he was writing. When he was a young man, he had needed just such a book as he now provided. He had, moreover, in his Philadelphian days and in the army, had plenty of experience of teaching, and had learnt just where the pitfalls lay. His *Letters to Benbow* showed that he knew exactly what he wanted to do. His *Grammar of the English Language*, still in print and still used to-day, showed that he knew how to do it.

Cobbett's *Grammar* was strictly utilitarian, and even largely political, in its purpose. He wanted the poor to learn grammar, because it would help them to achieve independence and freedom. For culture, as an end in itself, and above all, for the culture which based itself on the "learned languages," [7] he had no place in his scheme of things. But if the "learned

[1] *English Grammar*, par. 255. [2] *Ibid.*, par. 90.
[3] *Ibid.*, par. 244. [4] *Ibid.*, par. 187. [5] *Ibid.*, par. 181.
[6] *Ibid.*, par. 221. [7] See p. 140.

languages" were no use, French, as well as English, was of use, and could be readily learned by due application. The *French Grammar* followed in 1824, having been planned and partly executed some years earlier. And in the train of these two came other educational books, which were not school books, but manuals, by means of which the ordinary man could teach himself the things it was useful for him to know. In each case simplicity, liveliness of illustration, and readableness, made them admirably suited to their purpose of fostering a real popular learning which was not the learning of the schools.

But it was not enough to teach grammar. There were plenty of other things that the ordinary person both wanted and needed to know. The *Year's Residence in America* set Cobbett on another line of writing, the giving of practical instruction and advice in the things which he himself knew. The advice on the cultivation of Swedish turnips which occupied a considerable part of the *Year's Residence*, was the beginning of a long course of practical instruction to farmers and cottagers on agricultural methods and many kindred matters. We have noticed already *The American Gardener*, largely written in the United States, but not published until 1821, after Cobbett's return to England. To this succeeded his "new and improved edition of Jethro Tull's *Horse-Hoeing Husbandry*, published in 1822; *The Woodlands* (1825), a practical treatise on arboriculture, *A Treatise of Cobbett's Corn* (1828), dealing with the Indian corn, which he used many efforts to popularise in England, *The English Gardener* (1829), an enlargement and adaptation of the earlier American work, and various smaller publications. The *Register*, too, began in the early twenties to give many hints on farming, and to advertise the seeds and plants which Cobbett had for sale at his seed-farm in Kensington. Some of these he raised himself: some he imported from America. His services to agriculture and village industries obtained him, in 1823, the silver medal of the Society of Arts.

Closely connected with these purely agricultural treatises are his writings on "domestic economy." Foremost among these is *Cottage economy: containing information relative to the brewing of Beer, making of Bread, keeping of Cows, Pigs, Bees, Ewes, Goats, Poultry, and Rabbits, and relative to other matters deemed useful in the conducting of the affairs of a Labourer's Family; to which are added, instructions relative to the selecting, the cutting and the bleaching of the Plants of English Grass and*

Grain, for the purpose of making Hats and Bonnets; and also instructions for erecting and using Bee-Houses after the Virginian manner—deservedly one of the most popular of Cobbett's books. *Cottage Economy* first appeared in threepenny parts in 1821 and 1822, and was reissued in volume form in 1822. It was an immense and immediate success. Cobbett had the art, above any other writer, of conveying practical and homely information in such a way as to make the reading a delight. His personality, his likes and dislikes, his prejudices, political and individual, appeared everywhere. But they did not at all divert him from his main purpose. He saw the labourer's cottage becoming a miserable hovel, mainly because of low agricultural wages, but also in part, because the Industrial Revolution was undermining the very foundations of the old village life. Brewing and baking, formerly carried on in every cottage, were becoming lost arts with the rise of the capitalist brewer and miller. A large part of the rural degradation was due to the destruction of village industries, by the taking of work from the domestic workers into the new power-driven factories. Cheap and nasty factory products were both taking away the market for the productions of the domestic system, and invading the cottages, where home-made goods had previously been in use. This made low wages still lower, by knocking away the family basis of the old economic system. Instead of working usefully at home, the labourer's wife and children either stayed at home and starved, or were driven forth to seek their living in the factories, which were springing up everywhere. The small independent cottager, deprived of his supplementary industrial earnings, was compelled to vacate his little holding, and become a mere wage-labourer, or migrate to the town. The pleasant old English countryside was being torn up by the roots: the home was becoming a mere hovel, in which a wretched labourer and his family contrived barely to exist on a falling wage, eked out by poor relief which was being steadily cut down to lower and lower standards of living.[1]

Cobbett refused to accept these changes as inevitable. Nothing, indeed, short of Reform could bring prosperity to the labourer; but something could be done, even before Reform came, to check the decline of the village and the break-up of

[1] For the reduction in the standard of living allowed under the Poor Laws, see *P.R.*, September 21st, 1822, and *Letters to Lord John Russell* in August, 1824.

the family home. The purpose of *Cottage Economy* was simply this—to tell the labourer and the labourer's wife how to manage their domestic affairs, so as to make a stand against the desolation which was overtaking the countryside.

Perhaps the best known passage, nowadays, in the book is Cobbett's furious diatribe against tea, which he denounced as a wholly noxious, time-wasting, stomach-destroying compound with no nourishment in it. Against tea he upheld the virtues of beer—home-brewed, with none of the brewer's nasty chemicals in it—more nutritious and, if waste of time and firing were taken into account, vastly cheaper. Cobbett's praise of beer has caused some revellers to take him to their hearts. This is a misapprehension. He nowhere sings the praise of drink, and his most virulent abuse is reserved for the "beastly sin of drunkenness." [1] It is "small beer" that he praises, with stronger ale only for special occasions of festivity and rejoicing. And he insists always that beer is a drink for those who work, and not for sluggards.

But the praise of beer, which is rather abuse of the "teetotal" substitutes which were coming into fashion, occupies only one of Cobbett's chapters. The rest of *Cottage Economy* falls into two main parts—hints on cottage management, and a definite proposal for the revival of village industry. This letter is centred round his attempt to popularise in England the making, with English materials, of "Leghorn bonnets"—a matter to which he devoted much attention, and a theme of much controversy in *The Political Register*, and the press generally.[2] The straw of which these bonnets were made had previously been imported from Italy, even when the bonnets themselves were made in England. By some means, a Miss Woodhouse, resident in America, sent to the Society of Arts samples of the bonnets made there, of American straw; and proposals were made for importing into England the seed from which this straw was produced. Cobbett, however, discovered, both that the seeds were of a common meadow grass, already plentiful in England, and that the bonnets could be made best of wheat or rye straw, cut green and bleached. This opened up a prospect of revival for village hat-making in England; and Cobbett threw himself vigorously into the

[1] See *The Sin of Drunkenness* in his *Sermons*, and compare p. 230.

[2] *P.R.*, September 29th, 1821, and many other references.

task, giving wide publicity to his plans, and devoting a long section of his *Cottage Economy* to directions for carrying on the manufacture.[1]

Cobbett's farming books and *Cottage Economy* were intended as practical manuals to be of use to farmers and cottagers in their daily concerns. But farmers and cottagers had souls as well as bodies, and stood in need of spiritual as well as material advice. The country was flooded with cheap moral tracts: Methodists, Evangelicals, and many other groups were fighting for the souls of the people. Hannah More and Mrs. Trimmer were preaching piety and contentment to the poor. Other-worldliness, respect for social distinctions, patience under adversity—these were the lessons that were being spread broadcast. There was, for example, " Hannah More's account of the celestial death of the Evangelical Mouse, who, *though starving*, would not touch the master's cheese and bacon.[2] The " Old Bishop in petticoats," Cobbett called the lady.[3] The toleration of misery in this world and its justification as a means of preparing us for the life to come roused all his anger. It seemed to him the sheerest and most obvious hypocrisy. Hence his hatred of Hannah More, of Wilberforce, of the whole tribe of tract writers who sought to make one the cause of religion and the defence of the established order. He determined to answer them after their own kind, and in March 1821, appeared the first of *Cobbett's Monthly Religious Tracts*, collected together in 1822, under the title of *Cobbett's Sermons*.

These lay sermons contain some of Cobbett's best writing. Some of them are little moral tracts with no purpose that does not appear immediately on the face of them. Others had clearly in his mind, and carried for his, readers, a political as well as a moral message. The first, *Naboth's Vineyard; or God's Vengeance against Hypocrisy and Cruelty*, was directed against the false religious teachers, whose tracts had provoked him to write. Behind their incitements to pious contentment and other-worldliness, he saw an interested motive, the desire to further " some act of gainful fraud." " Hypocrisy, being a *false pretending*, may exist without any pretence to piety; but, it is always prone to assume a *religious* garb; that being the best calculated to deceive good, and therefore unsuspecting,

[1] These directions were expanded and revised in the later editions.

[2] *P.R.*, May 1st, 1819. [3] *P.R.*, April 20th, 1822.

persons." [1] The story of Naboth and Jezebel is used with effect to point to the uses of false religion in providing a cloak for hypocrisy and cruelty. Naboth was charged with blasphemy, because the king coveted his vineyard. Were not Tom Paine and many others persecuted and accused of blasphemy just because they stood in the way of the robbery of the poor by the rich? Blasphemy is a charge easy to make, difficult to disprove. It arouses men's passions, and makes them disinclined for a calm consideration of evidence. It is, therefore, a charge most useful to plunderers and exploiters.

The second sermon, on *The Sin of Drunkenness, in Kings, Priests, and People*, has, in the same way, a political meaning. It inevitably made readers think of George IV. and his associates, of the ways of the court, of the evil habits of many priests of the Established Church. "In estimating the religion of men, we ought to inquire, what is their *conduct*, and not what is their *belief*." [2] An inquiry into the conduct of the King, the court, and the priesthood was, in 1822, hardly calculated to increase their influence among the people. Sermons followed on *Bribery, Oppression, Unjust Judges, The Sluggard, Murder, Gaming, Public Robbery, The Unnatural Mother, Forbidding Marriage*—this, a hard hit at the Malthusians—and *Parsons and Tithes*. Hardly a sermon to which some social and political moral would not readily be attached by his readers; but equally none which did not convey a perfectly straightforward and legitimate moral lesson. Cobbett's *Sermons* made the orthodox tract-mongers very angry; but they gave no handle for denunciations of the excellent doctrines which they contained.

Even all these works, added to the continuous labour of *The Political Register*, of which Cobbett continued to write the greater part, were not enough to keep him fully occupied. He had sold *Cobbett's Parliamentary Debates* to Hansard in 1812: in 1820 he began a new periodical, *Cobbett's Parliamentary Register*, in which he gave, not full reports of the proceedings in Parliament, but a summary designed to include all the important events and speeches. The bulk of the full reports, he urged, made them useless for ordinary people. What was needed was a reliable selection and summary. The venture was apparently not a success: at all events it was dropped. Next, in December 1821, he proposed to revive

[1] *Sermons*, No. 1, p. 2. [2] *Ibid.*, No. 2, p. 27.

Cobbett's Evening Post, which, he said, had been discontinued in 1820, for reasons quite unconnected with its sale.[1] His plan now was to call it *The Gridiron*,[2] in reference to his famous challenge to the Government on the subject of the Debt.[3] This project never matured; but in 1822, Cobbett bought a substantial share in a daily newspaper, *The Statesman*, of which he acquired political control. In *The Statesman*, when the Houses were sitting, he wrote a daily summary, with comments, of the proceedings; and he also contributed other political articles. The first series of his parliamentary articles he collected, at the end of 1822, into a volume, *Cobbett's Collective Commentaries*, in which he also summarised in handy form the legislation of the session. He intended this to be the first of a series of annual volumes; but in the following year a difference arose between him and his fellow proprietor, and he severed his connection with *The Statesman*, and dropped his daily commentary. The quarrel was apparently unimportant: his main reason for leaving was that daily journalism tied him too much to London, and absorbed too much time and energy. It was incompatible with his desire to tour the country in the interests of better agriculture and parliamentary reform.

Cobbett was concerned, however, in 1823, in yet another journalistic venture—*The Norfolk Yeoman's Gazette*. It is probable that he took little or no part in the actual conduct of this short-lived weekly; but, while it lasted, he wrote for it, and his influence was behind it. It was, indeed, a direct product of his vigorous agitation at the time among the farmers in the county constituencies. In 1821, Cobbett had set out on his first "Rural Ride," and his first articles describing his country tours had appeared in the *Register*. At the beginning of 1823, he was specially active, riding through the counties and addressing everywhere crowded meetings of gentlemen, farmers, and artisans. An important political institution of the time was the county meeting of electors, summoned by the Lord Lieutenant, or his deputy, on the requisition of a number of electors, for the discussion of any political business that might be brought forward. In his own county of Hampshire, Cobbett, during his residence at Botley, had been very active in such meetings. Now, in 1822 and 1823, they were being everywhere called for the consideration of the agricultural

[1] *P.R.*, December 22nd, 1821. [2] *P.R.*, December 29th, 1821.
[3] See p. 280.

distress. Cobbett went from meeting to meeting, drawing the attention of his hearers to what he considered the real causes of suffering, and protesting vigorously against the attempt to find a remedy in dearer corn, to be obtained by higher taxation of imports. He urged free trade in corn, and traced the distress to corruption, high taxation, the National Debt, the operation of Peel's Act for the resumption of cash payments, and the withdrawal of the uncovered paper money. He did not want to see Peel's Act of 1819 repealed; but he urged that the fall in prices consequent on currency deflation ought to carry with it the repudiation of the greater part of the Debt, or at least a reduction of it corresponding to the fall in prices, and a repudiation of that part of it which represented no real sacrifice or service.

Among the county meetings held early in 1823, was one at Norwich, which resulted in the adoption of the famous "Norfolk Petition," often mentioned in Cobbett's writings. The petitioners, urged on by Cobbett, demanded (1) the application of Church property to the liquidation of the National Debt; (2) a reduction of the standing army, "to a scale of expense as low as that of the army before the last war"; (3) total abolition of all sinecures, pensions, grants and emoluments, not merited by public services; (4) sale of the Crown lands, and use of the proceeds towards liquidation of the Debt; (5) an "equitable adjustment" with regard to the Debt—*i.e.*, a partial repudiation or a reduction of interest. To these were added certain other less important demands.

The adoption of the programme by a duly summoned county meeting of electors to the unreformed Parliament was an event of very great social significance. The chief burden of the heavy taxation fell on the landed classes, who also felt the full effect of the fall in agricultural prices after the war. "Squire Jolterhead" might begin by petitioning for a new Corn Bill, to raise the price of agricultural produce; but increasing numbers of farmers and even landowners were beginning to agree with Cobbett that the real enemies were the fundholders and the supporters of parliamentary corruption. The Norfolk meeting, which Cobbett addressed, was symptomatic of the change in public opinion, even among the enfranchised classes.[1] Other meetings, in other parts of the country, were adopting similar resolutions, and swelling the chorus of

[1] For a full account of the Norfolk meeting and Petition, see *P.R.*, January 11th, 1823.

discontent. Norfolk, however, put the case most plainly, and was most completely captured by Cobbett and his friends.

The Norfolk Yeoman's Gazette was the organ of this Norfolk movement. Behind it was the young landowner, Sir Thomas Beevor, who had become an enthusiastic disciple of Cobbett, and, in the following year, proposed the raising of a special fund to ensure his return to Parliament.[1] Cobbett at the time rejected this proposal, as there was no immediate prospect of an election, and he thought the money might for the time be better spent in other ways. But he was anxious to get into Parliament. In 1823, he had considered standing for Peterborough [2]; in 1826, he actually did stand for Preston, and received some of the help which had been offered in 1824.

The Norfolk Yeoman's Gazette was only one of the ways in which, about this time, Cobbett endeavoured to work up a Radical movement among the smaller landowners and farmers. In 1821, he had issued in the *Register* a special *New Year's Gift to Farmers*,[3] followed by a political address, *To Farmers' Wives*.[4] His *Letters to Landlords* appeared in the *Register* later in the year. In January, 1822, he collected some of his writings into a pamphlet, *The Farmer's Friend*, which had a wide circulation. This was followed in March by *The Farmer's Wife's Friend*. These political appeals were appearing at the same time as he was multiplying in the *Register* his practical farming hints, and appealing to agriculturists also with his edition of Jethro Tull's *Husbandry*, with his *Cottage Economy*, and with other works. Cobbett first found his way to the hearts of the farmers by giving them sound practical advice: by the access thus gained to their minds, he furthered his political appeals. Thus were the foundations laid for the movement of 1823, and for the Norfolk petition. *Rural Rides*, and the visits and speeches which they recorded, gave additional force to this movement. Without abandoning his appeal to the unrepresented majority, Cobbett was again trying to work up a powerful reform movement among those who were electors, but were threatened with ruin by the course of national policy.

This movement was abortive; but for the time there was reason to entertain hopes of its success. As we have seen, Peel's Act of 1819 provided for the return, within three years,

[1] *P.R.*, January 10th, 1824. [2] *P.R.*, January 4th, 1823.
[3] *P.R.*, January 6th, 1821. [4] *P.R.*, March 10th, 1821.
[5] Beginning in *P.R.*, September 8th, 1821.

to a complete cash basis of payment. The uncovered note issue was to be withdrawn; and the Bank of England, on demand, was again to pay its notes in gold. Cobbett favoured a return to the gold basis, and hated paper money; but he foresaw that Peel's Act would cause general distress by immensely adding to the real burden of the Debt. In a challenge to the Government to carry through deflation, and return to a real gold basis without touching the Debt, he offered, if he were wrong in his predictions, to give Castlereagh leave "to put me on a gridiron and broil me alive, while Sidmouth stirs the fire, and Canning stands by making a jest of my groans."[1] Largely, he was right. The first stages towards putting Peel's Act into effect caused widespread distress, though the fall in agricultural prices cannot be wholly attributed to this cause. A good deal was due to the cessation of war, leading to an increase in continental production. The distress, however, was real enough; and the real burden of the debt charge on the agricultural classes was greatly increased. This was the foundation of the movement of which Cobbett put himself at the head.

In fact, the Government, realising the extent of the dissatisfaction, even among the loyal classes, spiked Cobbett's guns by a series of measures, which delayed or modified the proposals of 1819. The return to the cash basis was made more gradually than Peel had intended, and direct inflation was actually resorted to again for a time in 1822, when the Small Notes Act was passed. Thereafter, the growth of cheque banking radically changed the situation, and notes and gold alike gradually ceased to be the normal medium of exchange in business transactions. In the long run, moreover, the rapid increase of production and trade allowed the increased burden of debt to be borne without intolerable hardship. A growing part of the cost fell, not on landed property, but on other forms of wealth. The alliance of the agricultural owners and farmers with the people never developed.

Cobbett maintained, to the end of his life, that his predictions had been verified. A representation of a gridiron, with an extract from his article of 1819, was frequently set by him at the head of the *Register*,[2] with a renewed assertion of his opinions. He said often that the time was fast approaching

[1] *P.R.*, November 13th, 1819.

[2] *E.g.*, *P.R.*, February 17th, 1821; October 4th, 1823, and many other issues.

when he would hold his promised "Feast of the Gridiron,"[1] in celebration of the fulfilment of his prophecies. He could, indeed, claim to have been literally in the right; but the positive hopes which he entertained that financial crisis would make reform inevitable were never fulfilled. Cobbett got, to the end of his life, a good deal of support from individual landowners and farmers: he never repeated the succcess of 1823 in creating, for a few months, a strong Radical movement among them.

His views, indeed, were hardly likely, save under quite exceptional conditions, to be popular among the majority of farmers and landowners. It was not easy to persuade them that a Corn Bill would do them no good, because their interest was not in high prices, but in the removal of the imposts with which their lands and incomes were burdened. Moreover, Cobbett was strongly opposed, on social grounds, to the steady growth in the size of farms, the failure of the small farmer and cottager to hold their own under the changed conditions, the tendency of paper money to weight the scales on the side of the big farmer. It is noteworthy that he nowhere treats enclosures as the principal cause of this tendency, assigning it rather to the growth of paper money,[2] or to the destruction of village and domestic industries, which took away from the small farmer and the cottager an important auxiliary source of income.[3] But, whatever the cause, his attitude brought him into conflict with the more influential section of the farmers, while the poorer farmers and the dispossessed cottagers had no votes or influence, and were not to be met with at county meetings.

The plight of the poor, indeed, grew steadily worse after the termination of the war. In most of the agricultural districts, low wages were regularly supplemented by poor relief, and a considerable part of the labourers in many parishes were wholly dependent on the parish, which paid them a fixed amount in relief, and hired them out, as task-workers, to those farmers who could be induced or compelled to employ them. The parish then took the wages paid as part quittance of the sums expended on relief. The heavy burden of the poor-rates, being in effect only an indirect way of paying

[1] He also proposed in 1821 to call his projected daily evening paper *The Gridiron*. See p. 277.

[2] *P.R.*, May 26th, 1821.

[3] See *P.R.*, November 20th, 1824.

part of the wages, was easily enough borne while high agricultural prices were the rule. But when, after the peace, agricultural prices came down with a run, without a corresponding decrease in the prices of other commodities, the poor rates began to be felt as a heavy burden by farmers and landowners subject also to severe taxation for the payment of interest on the War Debt. They sought to recoup themselves at the expense of the labourers. Wages were cut down still lower; and the allowance system by which wages were supplemented out of the poor-rates, was gradually modified, so as to bring down the labourer's standard of life nearer still to the point of starvation.[1] The total resources of the labourer, including both wages and relief, were cut down drastically, far beyond any reduction justified by the fall in prices.[2]

Under these circumstances, there was a renewed outbreak of rick burning throughout the countryside. "The mail coach is said to have passed, in one night, *seventeen fires* in this county" (Suffolk), wrote Cobbett. "It is useless to inveigh against the *crimes* committed. That which ought to engage our reflection is the cause. The main cause, doubtless, is *unsatisfied hunger*."[3] There was some improvement of the position in the towns when the slump temporarily passed away; but the labourer got little benefit. He remained, even when the farmers got relief, in a condition of increasing misery, utterly at the mercy of the poor law authorities, who were also his employers. Occasionally, his despair broke out into agrarian crime. But he was too miserable to do much in the way of organisation, or to create any real movement. The poor law still kept the labourers just clear of mere starvation; but it also subjected them absolutely to the domination of their employers and of the landowners.

In the factory towns also there was misery enough and to spare. But conditions varied more from year to year, and the town workers, grouped together in large bodies, were more able to organise and to take advantage of any improvement in trade conditions. At the time of Cobbett's return from America in 1819, deflation had caused a serious slump, and distress was very prevalent. By 1823, there had been some recovery, and in 1824 the king's speech had congratulated the

[1] For a full account of the lowering of wages and poor relief, see Mr. and Mrs. Hammond's *Village Labourer*.

[2] See *P.R.*, September 21st, 1822.

[3] *P.R.*, April 20th, 1822.

country on the flourishing condition of industry. Cobbett then had denied the prosperity, or at any rate that the workers had shared in it. He was right, so far as the agricultural labourers were concerned—wrong, to some extent, about the factory operatives. But he was right also in prophesying early disaster. In 1824 and 1825 a great speculative mania spread through the country. Foreign loans boomed, new companies were launched, following the repeal of the law against joint-stock enterprise, countless new banks sprang up and new and old banks alike indulged in reckless advances and wholesale creation of paper money. At length the bubble burst. The banking house of Pole and Co. stopped payment early in December, 1825. This brought down several country banks connected with it. A general run on the banks then began, and for a time the Bank of England itself was in danger. *The Political Register*, for months on end, was filled with reports of banking failures, and of the intense distresses which they had caused. One merchant house after another went bankrupt. Every one was eager to get gold at all costs.

Gradually, in 1826, the panic passed. The Bank of England increased its note issue, and made advances freely, with Government backing, in order to help the traders and manufacturers through their troubles. Panic passed into stagnation, to be followed by slow and painful recovery. Meanwhile, the industrial workers were everywhere thrown in great numbers out of work. Riots took place in Scotland, in Lancashire, and elsewhere, and there was widespread fear of a revolutionary movement. No such movement arose. By the middle of 1827 there had been a substantial recovery, and the unrest was dying down. It was to revive again with the distresses of 1829, and to pass then into the last successful phase of the agitation for Reform.

To Cobbett, the financial crisis of 1815 and 1826 seemed like the fulfilment of all his prophecies. At last, he believed, the evil system was destroying itself. Universal bankruptcy and distress would compel the ministers to yield to the popular demand and to repudiate the Debt. The famous gridiron appeared often at the head of the *Register* in those days; and, on April 6th, 1826, Cobbett held, at the London Tavern, his long-deferred "Feast of the Gridiron," to celebrate the coming true of his predictions made in 1819. The principal toast of the evening was "The industrious and labouring people, and may their food and raiment cease to be taken from them by

the juggling of the paper-money system." [1] Similar "Feasts of the Gridiron" were held by Cobbett's followers in other parts of the country.[2]

Among those who attended the "Feast of the Gridiron" in London was Richard Carlile, then editor of *The Republican*, who happened at this time to be out of the prison in which he spent most of his days. Carlile (1790-1843) survives in memory as one of the greatest of fighters for the freedom of the press. The son of a shoemaker and exciseman, he became a journeyman tinsmith, and worked at his trade till 1817, when he began hawking Thomas Wooler's *Black Dwarf* and other Radical journals. Shortly after this he set up as a publisher and bookseller, and speedily got into trouble through re-issuing Paine's forbidden *Age of Reason*, and other writings on theology. For this he was sentenced to three years' imprisonment, and a fine of £1500. Unable to pay this, he was actually kept in Dorchester Gaol for six years. Before his imprisonment, he had joined with another Radical, William Sherwin, in starting *The Republican*, which he continued to edit from gaol. First his wife and then his sister, and then one after another of his volunteer shopmen, were sentenced to long periods of imprisonment for selling his publications; but he kept on steadily. In 1830, as we shall see, he was again sentenced for "incitement" in connection with the agricultural labourers' revolt,[3] and in 1834 he was imprisoned again, after a dispute about church rates. He kept on, however, publishing and lecturing to the end of his life; and, after 1834, the authorities let him alone.

Carlile's attendance at the "Feast of the Gridiron" now led to a dispute. Among his other enthusiasms, Carlile was a fervent advocate of "Birth Control." After the feast was over, and Carlile had been reported as one of the speakers, an indignant supporter of Cobbett's wrote to him to point out that Carlile was actively engaged in spreading pamphlets which recommended and explained the means of preventing conception. Cobbett had previously differed from Carlile, and expressed his difference, on the question of Republicanism; but he had repeatedly taken up his case when he or his friends were gaoled by the Government, for the publication of "seditious" or "blasphemous" writings. But there was

[1] See full report in *P.R.*, April 15th, 1826.

[2] For the Norwich feast, which Cobbett attended, see *P.R.*, April 1st, 1826.

[3] See p. 367.

nothing Cobbett hated so much as Malthusianism, and he was determined to dissociate himself publicly and at once from the advocacy of any doctrine that seemed to give countenance to the doctrines of "surplus population." In the *Register*, therefore, he delivered a violent attack on this "disciple of Malthus," who sought "to recommend to the wives and daughters of the labouring classes the means of putting Malthus's principle in practice . . . the horrible means of living and indulging without the *inconvenience*, as the monster calls it, of being mothers." [1] The Bolton Reformers, at their Feast of the Gridiron, had toasted Carlile as well as Cobbett. He excommunicated them with bell, book and candle, unless they would retract the toast. This they obediently did, protesting that they had been quite unaware of Carlile's wickedness when the toast was given.[2]

In this case, as in many others, Cobbett's acute hatred for the Malthusians, whose doctrines many Radicals, such as Place fully endorsed, found frank expression. He dismissed as pure nonsense the theory that the population was growing too fast. There was plenty for all, if only the land were properly cultivated, and the peasant given a fair chance. The large family was one of the things of old England in which Cobbett believed. But, above all, he hated the doctrine that sought to relieve the poor-rates by denying parenthood to the poor. It had even been proposed, as a means of fostering that "moral restraint" among the people to which Malthus attached so much importance, to reform the poor law, so as to refuse relief in respect of any child born to a pauper—that is, to any of the majority of the rural labourers—after the passing of the Act. Such projects made Cobbett see red. Carlile seemed to him merely an ally of the parsons and landowners who were reducing the scale of poor relief and for ever croaking about the intemperate breeding of the labouring classes.

[1] *P.R.*, April 15th, 1826. [2] *P.R.*, April 22nd, 1826.

CHAPTER XIX

CATHOLIC EMANCIPATION—THE PRESTON ELECTION

IN the last three chapters, each of which has been devoted to a particular aspect of Cobbett's work and opinions over a period of years, there has necessarily been some departure from strict sequence of time. In particular, I have so far left out altogether one most important aspect of his work during the 'twenties. About 1823, he began to interest himself seriously in the affairs of Ireland. It will be remembered that his first conflict with the Government, as early as 1803, had arisen out of certain articles in the *Register* dealing with Irish misgovernment. These were not written by Cobbett, however, and he never followed them up. He had at various times professed entire scepticism of the view that Catholic Emancipation would by itself provide a cure for Irish troubles, and had urged that the real causes of unrest lay rather in misgovernment and economic oppression. But he had never paid much attention to Irish affairs until his eyes were turned to them by the rise of the Catholic Association and the development of a vigorous national movement under the leadership of Daniel O'Connell. The Irish question, inextricably mingled in British politics with the general question of Catholic relief, had from the first its champions among the Radicals, notably Sir Francis Burdett, who brought forward many motions on the subject. But Ireland was relatively quiet for some years before O'Connell and his friends formed in 1823 the famous Catholic Association, which proceeded to levy a "rent" and to act in some respects as an unofficial Irish Government. At once fresh measures of coercion were adopted; but at the same time the Irish question assumed a new actuality in politics, and measures of Catholic relief began to be seriously discussed.

Cobbett had by this time become an enthusiastic advocate of Catholic Emancipation, and it was in this cause that he wrote his famous *History of the Protestant Reformation in England*, which is to this day among the most widely known and read, though not the best, of his books. He heard men

speaking of Catholics as of some sort of wild beasts, of the Pope, head of the largest and oldest Christian Church, as Anti-Christ. No words were too bad to be used about the Catholics; and yet Cobbett had found those of them he had met much like other people, neither better nor worse, holding for the most part the same views on vital questions of morality, certainly not the moral lepers he had been brought up to believe them. The hostility to the Catholics, especially among Methodists and other dissenters who claimed full emancipation for their own sects, seemed to him stupid bigotry. The Methodists, or at least their Central Committee or Synod, he had found to be worse enemies than the Catholics to the cause of popular freedom. He had quarrelled energetically with their efforts to inculcate in the people a spirit of otherworldly resignation in face of misery and oppression.[1] The Church of England too, in the persons of its ministers, he had found taking the lead in the resistance to all sorts of reform; and the parsons, in their capacity of magistrates, had been foremost in deeds of violence and oppression. He had no cause to love either the established or the unestablished. Nonconformists, still legally excluded from political power by the Test Acts, were in fact largely admitted by the annual passing of an Act of Indemnity. Alone among Christians, the Catholics were still an oppressed religious denomination.

Long before, during his residence in America, Cobbett had expressed the intention of writing a complete new *History of England*. The histories he read seemed to him to consist largely of worthless accounts of wars and court intrigues. What he wanted to write was a real history of the people. "The far greater part of those books, which are called *Histories of England*, are little better than romances. They treat of battles, negociations, intrigues of courts, amours of kings, queens and nobles: they contain the gossip and scandal of former times, and very little else. . . . The great use of history, is, to teach us how laws, usages and institutions arose, what were their effects on the people, how they promoted public happiness, or otherwise; and these things are precisely what the greater part of historians, as they call themselves, seem to think of no consequence." [2]

At some stage in his researches for his projected history,

[1] See especially *Sermon to Methodists*, *P.R.*, January 13th, 1821, and compare *P.R.*, February 26th, 1825.

[2] *History of Protestant Reformation*, Part I., par. 38.

he became acquainted with John Lingard's *History of England*, of which the first volume had appeared in 1819. Lingard's *History*, written by a devout and learned Catholic, threw important new light both on the condition of the Church in England before the Reformation, and on the Reformation itself—a most valuable corrective to the partisan Protestant statements which had passed unchallenged in previous histories. Cobbett was carried away by Lingard's book. He had hitherto accepted the traditional views about the corruption and degradation of the Church before the Reformation, and had never questioned the idea that the Reformation itself was a great spiritual movement, purifying religion and sweeping corruption away. He now discovered for the first time that the mediæval Church, and especially the monasteries, had performed most important social functions, that the tithes had been destined for the care of the poor as well as of the parson, that the monasteries had been centres of relief and social organisation as well as of gluttony and depravity, and that the Reformation had ruthlessly swept away the communal work of the mediæval Church without putting anything in its place. He met, moreover, with a portrait of Henry VIII. drawn by a hostile pen, and realised for the first time the part which his lusts and ambitions had played in the separation of England from the main body of the Catholic Church. He read how the lands and wealth taken from the monasteries had been appropriated by the king for his own purposes, squandered upon favourites, made the foundation of the fortunes of many of the great houses now foremost in resisting reform and extracting pensions and sinecures from the tax-ridden public. In a flash, he saw the so-called Reformation as the origin of "the Thing," the system of corruption and privilege which he was struggling to overthrow.

His indictment was, of course, absurdly one-sided. He swallowed Lingard whole, and pressed his conclusions far beyond Lingard's own. But his statement was hardly more unfair than the current impression which he set out to correct. He would bludgeon his countrymen into Catholic relief by showing them that their virulent anti-Catholic ideas rested on false assumptions and perversions born of bigotry and conceived in the heat of religious conflict. What mattered most was not to produce a perfectly fair and balanced account of the Reformation, but to correct, by shouting loud enough to force the attention of the reluctant, the false assumptions on

which intolerance was based. I do not mean that Cobbett argued thus to himself: it was his way to see clearly just that aspect of the truth that served his end, and to remain utterly blind to that which did not serve him. He was none of your "impartial historians"; but he was a first-rate controversialist and pamphleteer.

It is fortunate that he turned aside from his original scheme of a new and complete *History of England*. He had not the knowledge for this; and he could not have animated it all with that direct controversial purpose which was essential to all his writing. The *History of the Protestant Reformation*, on the other hand, exactly suited his genius, because he could make the whole study a polemic in favour of Catholic Emancipation, the most burning political question of the moment. Critics who have abused the book for its historical inadequacy and its one-sided presentation of facts are beside the mark. It is not a history, in the academic sense: it is a brilliant philippic.

Its practical effect was undoubtedly very great. Appearing in numbers in 1824 and 1825, it achieved a huge circulation. Apart from pirated editions and partial reprints, which were numerous, the numbers rapidly sold about 40,000 copies each. It was republished at once in Ireland and in America, and translated into French and other languages. Lingard's history had provided the basis of historical fact on which it was reared; but Lingard's book reached only a narrow circle. Cobbett, who characteristically, while paying tribute to Lingard, by no means acknowledged his obligation to him, at once appealed to thousands where Lingard had reached only the intellectual upper ten. His book did an immense service in giving to the agitation for Catholic relief just that basis in popular support which had previously been lacking to it. Parliament might have continued to debate the question without issue for many years longer but for O'Connell in Ireland, and Cobbett in Great Britain.

Of course, the book laid its author open to damaging attack and to virulent abuse.[1] He could be attacked on account of many historical inaccuracies, arising from his own lack of knowledge; for obvious partisanship; and for reading into the past interpretations based on his present political

[1] The large pamphlet entitled Cobbett's *Book of the Roman Catholic Church*, which had a wide circulation, is really a hostile compiler's unauthorised collection from Cobbett's writings of passages reflecting on the Papacy and the Catholics, reissued in order to discredit his *History*.

associations. But most of all he was accused of apostacy, and of setting out to damage the Church of England and convert the people to the "damnable doctrines of the Roman Church." Rumours were spread about that he had become a Papist: the clergy treated his book as a proselytising pamphlet of dangerous tendency and doctrine.

In fact, doctrine played no part at all in Cobbett's onslaught on the Reformation, which he conceived to have been an affair far less of doctrine than of politics, economics, and personal lust and ambition. He was not a Roman Catholic, and he had not the smallest intention of becoming one. He belonged to the Church of England because it was the church of *England*, and England was his country. His differences with dissenters and Roman Catholics were not doctrinal: he was a broad Christian who saw very little meaning in sectarian differences. He attacked the dissenters because he disliked their politics. He helped the Catholic cause because Irish Catholics were, like him, in opposition to "the Thing." He remained within the Church of England because he thought of it as the national Church, although it had been captured by sinecurist, tithe-hunting, anti-Jacobin parsons, just as the English state has been captured by borough-mongers, sinecurists, and stock-jobbers. It was his mission to rescue Church, as well as State, from the domination of "the Thing," and to re-found them both upon the popular will.

"I have made," he wrote, "no converts to the Catholic faith; but I have made many thousands of converts to the truth, respecting the cause of the Catholics. . . . It is TRUTH that I have in view to implant in the minds of my countrymen; and not only from an abstract love of truth; but, also, because a knowledge of that truth is particularly useful at this time. I cannot have any desire to make converts to the Catholic faith. I believe it to be a very good faith; because, as far as my experience has gone, it produces very good moral effects; but, my object is to show, that it has been vilified unjustly, and that we ought not, on account of it, to be aiding and abetting in the ill-treating of our fellow-subjects." [1]

In this passage, he shows clearly that his main idea in writing the book was to further the cause of Catholic Emancipation. But he made it serve other ends. Depicting the Reformation as above all else an act of spoliation, by which the revenues of the Church, largely devoted to the relief of the

[1] *P.R.*, January 8th, 1825.

poor, were confiscated for the benefit of the ruling class, he sought to find in that act the beginning of popular misery. There was no Poor Law in the Middle Ages: the establishment of the Poor Law in the reign of Elizabeth, of whom he had some hard things to say, was the direct and inevitable outcome of this spoliation. Pauperism, under which the mass of the labourers in his own day had been degraded to a condition of misery and enslavement, was the outcome of the Protestant Reformation.

It is no part of my purpose here to embark on any attempt to justify or refute this view, or to make any independent examination of the social consequences of the Reformation. This is a matter of lively controversy to-day, between scholars Protestant and scholars Roman or Anglo-Catholic, and the impartial historian, if he exists, has presented no conclusive verdict. Here, however, our concern is with Cobbett's mind and purpose, rather than with the final validity of his doctrines. In striking a blow for the emancipation of the Catholics, he also administered shrewd knocks to the Anglican clergy, whose tithes were no longer devoted in large part to the relief of the poor. He shocked too the complacency of the Anglican Church, and gave it a knock comparable to that which his exposure of political corruption gave to the state of the borough-mongers and the stock-jobbers. The element of truth in his assertions was at least great enough to serve his controversial purposes; and it was for these he chiefly cared.

It was in 1823 Cobbett first seriously took up the case of the Irish Catholics—in the year when O'Connell's Catholic Association began its work. The *History of the Protestant Reformation* thus appeared at the most opportune moment, and the impression which it made went to reinforce the fears inspired in the minds of ministers by the growth of O'Connell's agitation. In 1825 a Bill was passed to suppress the Catholic Association; but the effect of the agitation was seen when Burdett's Bill for the emancipation of the Irish Catholics was carried by a majority in the House of Commons. There seemed at last to be a chance that the Catholic claims would be granted; but the majority for it was secured only by important and very questionable concessions. The proposal to endow the Catholic clergy from State funds, first mooted by Pitt, in order to enlist them in support of the Government, was revived; and it was proposed to put the Irish franchise on an oligarchical basis by disfranchising the forty shilling

freeholders, whose influence was feared if emancipation was carried. These two subsidiary proposals were described as the two "wings" of the Emancipation Bill; and not only Burdett, but also Daniel O'Connell, was prepared to accept them as the conditions of Catholic relief. The forty shilling freeholders, it was alleged, had always been venal and had voted at the orders of their landlords: their disqualification would be no loss.

The "wings," however, caused a sharp division in the ranks of the Catholic Association. O'Connell for tactical reasons was willing to agree to them: many of his followers, including the powerful journalist, John Lawless, were not, and roundly denounced those who were ready to compromise as traitors to the Irish democratic cause. Cobbett fully associated himself with this view. The proposal to endow the clergy seemed to him a plain invitation to corruption: in the proposed disfranchisement of the forty shilling freeholders he saw a clear attempt to establish oligarchical ascendancy, and neutralise the democratic effects of emancipation. He had been working in close association with O'Connell, whom he had praised enthusiastically as the champion of popular liberties. But, when O'Connell compromised, he attacked him fiercely, and accused him of sacrificing the cause of the Irish people to his own personal aggrandisement, and of intriguing with the English politicians behind the backs of his own followers. Sir Francis Burdett was also for the compromise; and against him Cobbett launched a far more furious denunciation. He had long despised Burdett, and had accused him repeatedly of lukewarmness in the cause of reform, as well as of playing with the cause of the Catholics by a mere pretence of forwarding their claims. Now he redoubled the vigour of his attack.

The onslaught on O'Connell began early in 1825,[1] and soon waxed fast and furious. O'Connell was accused of inconsistency and vanity, and even of actual corruption. The Irish leader, instead of making a detailed reply, merely denied the charges, which he described as "foolish, but virulent attacks." Their author he termed a "comical miscreant," remarking that, if he was foolish and inconsistent, he could only answer, "in the school-boy phrase: 'The bed is large enough for both of us—share the blanket, friend Cobbett'." [2] Cobbett's reply

[1] See especially *P.R.*, March 5th and March 19th, 1825.

[2] *P.R.*, September 24th, 1825.

to the contemptuous rejoinder was a special issue of the *Register*, entitled *Big O and Sir Glory:* or *"Leisure to Laugh." A Comedy—in Three Acts*,[1] in which O'Connell—Big O—and the vain-glorious Sir Francis Burdett—Sir Glory—were vehemently, and a little heavily, satirised. Cobbett's talent was not dramatic, though he knew how to use little passages of dialogue with admirable effect in both speeches and writings. *Big O and Sir Glory* is not very amusing to-day, though it contains some excellent moments, particularly when Anna Brodie, Cobbett's personification of *The Times*, is on the stage. But at the time it had an immense public. It was reissued more fully in pamphlet form, and Cobbett gave free permission to all and sundry to stage it without acting rights. It is doubtful whether the permission was used: it is difficult to imagine *Big O and Sir Glory* as a real stage piece.

While these little disagreements were taking place, the cause of emancipation suffered yet another temporary defeat. The Emancipation Bill, having passed the Commons in May by a majority of twenty-two, was taken to the House of Lords, where the Duke of York, heir-apparent to the king, delivered a violent attack upon it, and pledged himself to oppose Catholic relief to the very end, "whatever might be his situation in life." The "protestants" took heart, and the Lords threw out the Bill. With it the compromise of the "wings" disappeared, and the Irish were soon reunited under the leadership of O'Connell. Cobbett ceased to prosecute the quarrel, which had arisen on this point alone. As we shall see, O'Connell paid tribute in later years to his services to the cause.[2]

In 1827 appeared Part II. of the *History of the Protestant Reformation; containing A List of the Abbeys, Priories, Nunneries, Hospitals, and other Religious Foundations in England and Wales, and in Ireland, confiscated, seized on, or alienated, by the Protestant "Reformation" Sovereigns and Parliaments*. This book was, as its name implies, merely a full annotated list, compiled under Cobbett's direction. He prefixed to it a longish introduction, in which he sought to analyse the extent of the spoliation which the "Reformers" had accomplished, and to draw the political morals of the book even more clearly than he had done in Part I., concluding that the whole of the confiscated Church property, or at least that

[1] *P.R.*, September 24th, 1825. [2] See p. 425.

which remained in public hands, ought to be applied to really public uses, above all, to the liquidation of the debt, and that the whole position of the Church ought to be reviewed in the light of the facts which he had revealed. He wanted the Church to be non-political and independent of the State, supported by the voluntary zeal of the believers and dispensing, like the Quakers, for whom he had a sincere respect, with "paid preachers and tithe-eating parsons," who did not even preach. The questions between Catholics and Protestants have here sunk more into the background: the social effects of the Reformation and the present perversion of the Church have become his principal concerns.

It is difficult to say what positive effect Cobbett's writings had in the achievement of Catholic Emancipation. The Irish had to wait until 1829 before an Emancipation Bill became law, and the Duke of Wellington, himself an opponent of the measure, carried it through, in face of considerable opposition inside his own party, with the object of quelling O'Connell's agitation. For the suppression of the Catholic Association in 1825 had availed the Government nothing, a new body arising at once to take the place of that which had been suppressed. O'Connell's election for Clare in 1828, though as a Catholic he could not take his seat, showed the Government the danger and the impossibility of holding Ireland down permanently by force. Clearly, if emancipation were not conceded, every Tory member in Ireland, outside Ulster at least, would even lose his seat. Emancipation came, because the popular movement in its support grew too strong to be resisted even by systematic coercion.

We have again departed from chronological order in rounding off the account of Cobbett's activity on the Catholic question. We must now return and pick up the story of his general activities where we left it, at the time of his great incursion into the Catholic controversy. In 1823 and the following years he keenly interested himself in certain secondary, but still important, public questions. He made a number of vigorous onslaughts on the Game Laws, and their tyrannical and inhuman enforcement by the landowning magistrates.[1] He continued his attacks on Brougham, Birkbeck, and the other Whig and Radical advocates of public and popular education.[2] He delivered himself of a remarkable diatribe on the project

[1] See *P.R.*, March 29th, May 17th, May 31st, 1823.

[2] See especially *P.R.*, February 5th, 1825.

to establish a body of Commissioners for the purpose of lighting the town of Newbury with gas. "Here," he said, "is this plain and homely market-town of Newbury, in Berkshire, which is now, as far as is necessary, very well paved and lighted with oil, about to be cursed, if the projectors could have their will, with the expense of *gas lights*, commissioners, clerks, and all the everlasting expenses entailed by such an establishment."[1] "Waust improvements!" he commented, scornfully, opening out a great attack on the growth of statutory local government bodies with power to levy rates. "Let the projectors have a Joint-Stock Company," without such powers, if they wanted to inflict their nasty gas on the people. Cobbett had no sympathy with "this Commissioner business." No power, he said," ought to be so cautiously exercised as that of giving to some men *the right of going to demand money from other men.*"[2] The rise of Local Government owed nothing to his advocacy.

The turnpike trusts, on account of their exorbitant charges, made also under statutory power, came often under his lash. In 1823, he began an attack upon them, both in the *Register*,[3] where he sought to work up a public agitation, and by promoting lawsuits against them wherever he saw a chance of convicting them of illegal exactions. He was presented with a cup by the citizens of Kensington and Chelsea for his efforts against the local turnpike trusts, which had incurred his particular resentment,[4] and his son, John Morgan Cobbett, fought a lawsuit with one of the Sussex trusts, which resulted in a drawn battle.

Another activity, which occupied much space in the *Register*, had no political bearing. He set out to improve the domestic fire-place. Against the barred grate with a space beneath to receive the ashes he upheld the American system, which allowed the fire to burn on an open hearth, without bars or ash-pan. This, he said, greatly economised fuel, by consuming the coal to the very limit of its capacity, instead of expelling cinders which were still capable of burning. It also, properly fitted, prevented smoking chimneys, and warmed a room far better. The *Register* printed a full-page illustration

[1] *P.R.*, April 20th, 1825. [2] *Ibid.*

[3] See especially *P.R.*, October 25th, 1823, November 11th, 1823, January 1st, 1825.

[4] *P.R.*, February 7th, 1824.

of the American stove,[1] and Cobbett for some time sang the praises of an ironmonger who made the stoves from a model which Cobbett had imported. But the ironmonger was rash enough to try to improve upon the model, and Cobbett cast him off. He exhibited the stoves at the *Register* office, and crowds called to see them. Many installed them in their houses; but they never became general. The common grate of the nineteenth century was still the barred grate which Cobbett disliked: the open hearth has only found its way into public favour, or rather the favour of the builders, in the twentieth century. Cobbett was much laughed at for his articles on *John Bull's Fireside*;[2] but the illustration in the *Register* looks much like some of the most up-to-date patterns in use to-day.

The proposal of the Norfolk squire, Sir Thomas Beevor, in 1824, to raise a fund in order to secure Cobbett's return to Parliament has been mentioned already.[3] The suggestion was then declined, on the ground that, as there was no prospect of an early election, nothing was to be gained by locking up good money to lie idle. By the end of 1825 an election seemed to be imminent, and Sir Thomas Beevor renewed his proposal and issued in the *Register*, with Cobbett's consent, a public appeal for funds.[4] Those who were prepared to help were invited to a meeting, to be held at the Freemason's Tavern in London, for the starting of the fund. Cobbett, in the issue of the *Register* containing the appeal, explained his reasons for desiring to be in Parliament, and the course which he would pursue if he secured election. He was anxious, he said, to be in the House, because he believed he could do good there, and point out the real remedies for the distresses of the country; but "on no account, will I expend for the accomplishment of that purpose, any portion of those earnings, which whether great or small, all belong to my wife and children."[5] He had had enough of bankruptcy; and, in those days, elections were not to be fought by men of moderate means out of their own resources.

"The measures that I should propose," he wrote, "would subvert nothing that is acknowledged by the laws and constitution of England: they would tend, not to pull down, but to uphold, the Government of King, Lords and Commons;

[1] *P.R.*, February 19th, 1825. [2] *P.R.*, January 15th, 1825.
[3] See p. 279. [4] *P.R.*, December 31st, 1825. [5] *Ibid.*

they would take away no lawful privilege or immunity; they would tend to destroy no lawful establishment; they would do injustice to no human being; and they would restore a fixedness as to property, and would also restore that harmony and good will between the rich and the poor, which has so long been banished from the land." [1]

Parliamentary reform and the abolition of paper money—these were still the two proposals in which Cobbett put his trust. They were not "revolutionary purposes": they were the only means "of putting a stop to the fatal progress of that hideous revolution, which is *now actually begun.*"

Sir Thomas Beevor's meeting was duly, or rather more than duly, held. At the time appointed, the Freemason's Tavern was so densely crowded that Beevor and Cobbett were unable to force their way into the principal room, where many of their leading supporters were already assembled. Failing in this, they decided to adjourn to Lincoln's Inn Fields, where, a cart and a chair having been produced, a temporary platform was made, and the meeting begun. Unfortunately, the crowd in the room at the Freemason's Tavern was unaware of the speakers' failure to force their way in, and remained there for some time, impatiently awaiting their arrival. At length, one of Cobbett's sons was voted to the chair, and news having been brought that the meeting was proceeding in Lincoln's Inn Fields, a great altercation arose on the question whether they should adjourn there, objection being made on the point of punctilio that they had received no proper intimation of the change of place. At length a messenger was despatched to Beevor, and, on his return with a request that the Tavern meeting should adjourn to the Felds, they finally joined the main body. Several thousands were now assembled. Cobbett delivered a long harangue in exposition of his political principles, and was received with acclamation. Henry Hunt, however, who had been among those who had made the fuss at the Freemason's Tavern, introduced a note of discord into the proceedings. When Cobbett had made his speech, Hunt reminded the meeting that long ago, in 1806, when he offered himself as candidate for Honiton, Cobbett had made an explicit declaration that never, directly or indirectly, would he touch one farthing of the public money. Hunt, while supporting Beevor's proposal, now called on Cobbett to repeat the declaration in order to reassure the meeting. Cobbett

[1] See p. 10.

replied that an oath taken in 1806 was as binding as any new oath could be, that there was no need of a fresh declaration, and that he most certainly would not repeat his oath. What he said left no doubt that the oath still held good, and Hunt did not pursue the question.[1]

In his report of the meeting, Cobbett referred angrily to Hunt's attitude, which he regarded as insulting, and told his readers that they need not look far for an explanation. A quarrel, indeed, had arisen between the two men some months before, and this quarrel had gone so far that a lawsuit of Hunt against Cobbett was at that moment pending in the courts. The circumstances out of which the quarrel originally arose are now unimportant. An unfortunate Irishman, named Byrne, had been imprisoned and publicly whipped for making a charge of indecent assault against a certain Irish Protestant bishop. Byrne, who was a Catholic, served his sentence and received his brutal punishment. Not till some years later did it appear, by the actual taking of the same bishop in a similar offence, that his charge had in all probability been true.[2] A public subscription was raised for Byrne in London, under the leadership of a certain Parkins. Cobbett helped in raising subscriptions for this fund, and some of the money passed through his hands. Byrne and Parkins quarrelled, Byrne accusing Parkins of withholding money due to him. Cobbett took Byrne's side, and paid him certain sums direct. But somehow it got spread abroad that Byrne and Cobbett had quarrelled—perhaps they had done so on some occasion—and that Cobbett was withholding money. Byrne went to law with Parkins: Henry Hunt, called on to give evidence, said that Byrne had complained that he could not get from Cobbett the money subscribed on his behalf. Cobbett indignantly denied this, and made a savage attack on Hunt, who brought a suit against Cobbett for libel. Byrne, informed of the case, signed an affidavit denying the truth of Hunt's statement. The case came into court, and the jury returned a verdict for Cobbett.[3]

This squabble, engendered by the readiness of both Hunt and Cobbett in imputing bad motives, and embittered by their rivalry for Radical leadership, doubtless accounts for Hunt's

[1] For a full report of the meetings, see *P.R.*, February 11th, 1826.

[2] For a brief account of the case, see *P.R.*, October 14th, 1822.

[3] See full report, with Cobbett's comments in *P.R.*, February 25th, 1826.

critical attitude at Sir Thomas Beevor's meeting. Hunt, however, did not definitely oppose the scheme to raise an election fund for Cobbett, and this was at once set on foot, over £1700 being raised during the next few months. A General Election was already imminent, and, on May 20th, Cobbett, through the *Political Register*, made his opening *Address to the Electors of Preston*, which had been selected, on account of its wide franchise and strong Radical organisation, for a trial of strength by the Reformers.

The contest at Preston, as described fully from day to day in the *Political Register*, the *Morning Herald*, and other newspapers, will amply repay the most careful study by those who wish to understand the electioneering methods of the days before the Reform Act. It was a spirited, but not, for a constituency having a wide suffrage, an exceptionally turbulent contest. It created no great scandal at the time; for, though Cobbett and the other defeated candidate both made strong complaints of intimidation and corruption, and some notice was taken of these in the press, most of the commentators evidently regarded the incidents they described as quite in the regular course of events.

There were two seats, and four candidates. First in the field was Edward Geoffrey Smith Stanley, subsequently fourteenth Earl of Derby, and Conservative Prime Minister in three administrations, but then a young Whig of twenty-seven years old, who had been already for six years member for the rotten borough of Stockbridge in Hampshire. Stanley had behind him the huge local influence of the Derby family, supposed from the beginning to be ample enough to ensure his return. He was, moreover, a Whig advocate of Parliamentary Reform, seeking a seat more convenient than Stockbridge as a basis for the denunciation of the borough-mongering system.

The fight, therefore, was really for the second seat. Two candidates came forward early in 1826, Cobbett, with the working-class Radicals and the Beevor group behind him, and Alderman John Wood, a prosperous merchant, also a Whig, but mainly a nominee of the manufacturing interest.[1] The Tories for some time had no candidate: but at the last moment they put forward a Captain Robert Barrie, a naval officer, and member of a family of bankers powerful on the Preston

[1] This Wood had no connection with the more famous Alderman Wood of London, already mentioned several times in this book.

Corporation. No two candidates stood together on a common platform; for Stanley refused coalition with either Wood or Barrie, both of whom sought his alliance. His supporters, in fact, voted some for Wood and some for Barrie, and a very few indeed for Cobbett, who had all three candidates determined above all to keep him out.

One reason for the choice of Preston was that the Catholics, who might be expected to support Cobbett, were there very numerous. In those days, before the Emancipation Act, they were not strictly entitled to cast their votes; but they could, and often did, vote if none of the candidates took objection, or demanded the imposition of the legal oath abjuring the Catholic faith. Stanley and Wood were both pledged, as advocates of emancipation, not to exact this oath, and Cobbett, of course, would not exact it. Barrie, arriving at the last moment, exacted the oath, and thus excluded all Catholics who were not ready to commit perjury by abjuring their faith. This greatly diminished Cobbett's chances of election, and he maintained that Barrie had been sent down, with Stanley's connivance, for this purpose alone.

The method adopted by the Mayor for conducting the election was remarkable, though not unknown at the time. There was, of course, only one polling station, to which all voters had to come. But voting was not a mere matter of coming to the station. Each candidate, before being allowed to vote, had to undergo any examination, bearing at all on his qualifications or on his description of himself on his voting form, to which the lawyers of any of the candidates chose to subject him. Thus, certain voters were disallowed for describing themselves as "gentlemen," when the Mayor did not consider them entitled to the dignity, though their qualifications were not challenged in any other particular. These were Cobbett's supporters, or perhaps Wood's, the mayoral influence being on the side of Stanley and Barrie —that is, of the great local landowner and of the local bankers.

Moreover, the voter could not obtain free access even to this formidable ordeal of examination. Voters were called up by "tallies"—which meant that each candidate was allowed to present in turn an equal number of voters. Thus for every four voters sent up by Cobbett, each of his opponents could send up four. Even if all the votes were allowed, this told heavily against his chances; for the voters of the other three

candidates were dividing six votes among them for every one vote he could bring forward. His voters mostly "plumped" for him only: the others' voters practically all cast two votes, the great majority voting either for Stanley and Barrie or for Stanley and Wood. Under this system, it did not matter how many supporters each candidate had, as long as each had enough to keep up his quota. The rate of polling, in view of the complicated formalities, was moreover so slow, that only a fraction of the voters would have time to poll at all, though the contest remained open for a full fortnight. In the early days, only about sixty voters a day were polled, out of an electorate of about five thousand. At this rate, the result was practically certain: for every vote Cobbett got Wood and Barrie would get about two and Stanley about four. The chances between Wood and Barrie would depend on the distribution of Stanley's second preferences.

Cobbett promptly sent in to the Mayor a protest against the system of voting by tallies. As the system had no legal sanction, this secured its abolition; but almost precisely the same result was next secured by other methods. Four alley-ways were constructed, leading to the polling-booth, and one of these was assigned to each candidate. Police were stationed at each alley-way, and one supporter of each candidate was admitted in rotation to the place of voting. This method was precisely the same in intention as the tally system; and Cobbett renewed his protests. But the Mayor would make no further change.

There was, however, one difference between the new system and the old. The tally had enabled each party organisation to choose which voters it would send up. The new method opened the way to physical violence and to fraud. One party could forcibly take possession of an alley-way assigned to one of its opponents, and so both poll double the number of its own men, and prevent the opponent from polling any. Or, alternatively, the Greens could dress themselves out in Blue rosettes and masquerade as Blue voters in the Blue alley-way. The new method of voting therefore encouraged free fights, and large corps of bludgeon-men took the field on behalf of the rival candidates. Voting was again and again suspended till something like order was restored. At the end of nine days, only about a thousand votes in all had been cast.

These were days before the Ballot Act. Each voter had

to give his vote publicly. Certain employers, partisans of Barrie, threatened with dismissal all who voted for Cobbett, or did not vote for their nominee. Some who voted for Cobbett and for Wood were actually dismissed. Again protests; but this was a matter on which there could be no immediate redress.

On the ninth day Cobbett, realising that he had no chance of election, announced his determination to present no more voters to the poll, but to send forward a petition to Parliament against the election. His supporters might vote if they chose, and for whom they chose. He saw nothing to pick among the candidates. Thereupon ensued a stand-up fight between the Blues, Barrie's party, and the Greens, Wood's party, for control of Cobbett's alley-way. The Greens, with a superior force of bludgeon-men and the aid of many of Cobbett's supporters, won the day, and so at length secured Wood's election. At the close of the poll, Stanley had received 3041 votes, Wood 1982, Barrie 1657, and Cobbett 995; but Cobbett had 451 "plumpers," against 92 for Wood, 71 for Barrie, and only 36 for Stanley. Nearly all Cobbett's votes till his virtual withdrawal on the ninth day were "plumpers": the rest of his votes were mostly those split with Wood subsequently by his supporters. It is impossible to say what would have occurred if the election had been fairly fought; but Henry Hunt's victory over Stanley at the bye-election of 1830 seems to show that Cobbett's position at the bottom of the poll did not reflect the real division of opinion. It seems, too, that after his withdrawal the artificial drags on the rate of voting were largely removed, and voters allowed to poll in much greater numbers.

An election conducted in such a fashion was inevitably acrimonious. Stanley, on the whole, sat tight and said little, sure both of his own following and of the second preferences of Barrie's and some of Wood's supporters. But the other three candidates engaged in a rare slanging match. Wood raked up Cobbett's old Tory utterances, and spread *The Book of Wonders*,[1] a hostile compilation of Cobbettiana, round the

[1] *The Book of Wonders* consisted of two parts. Part I. collected anti-Jacobin and reactionary passages from Cobbett's early writings, and many "deadly parallels" showing his change of attitude. It also told fully the story of Tom Paine's bones, and was plentifully illustrated with anti-Cobbett cartoons. Part II. contained a full report of the trial of Cobbett in 1820 for his libel on John Wright, who may have been the author of the whole work.

constituency. Barrie and Cobbett bawled insults at each other and at Wood at the tops of their voices, while their followers shouted each other down and fought set battles around the polling-station. The military were called in on several occasions to disperse the combatants, who included special constables bearing coloured truncheons in accordance with their party fancy. Cobbett seems thoroughly to have enjoyed the contest: indeed, after his defeat he described it as the most enjoyable time of his life, except that of his marriage. He was ever the combative man.

Though he withdrew from active participation in the contest, he remained in the North till it was over, and then came back through Lancashire, on a sort of triumphal procession, after a huge farewell meeting in Preston itself. Everywhere great crowds, addresses of welcome, enthusiasm among the factory operatives. In Manchester, where he was to have spoken, the authorities, keeping up the traditions of Peterloo, forbade the meeting, and Cobbett obeyed their prohibition. He would not, he said, "lead men to be hacked to pieces or to be trampled to death." He would not bid them come to his meeting unarmed, and he would not bid them come armed. He urged that there was nothing "inglorious," as some of his Radical critics contended, in this bowing to the threat of such force as was used at Peterloo.[1]

A "genteel mob," not to be balked of some disturbance, hustled Cobbett as he got into his carriage to drive from Manchester; and the *Morning Herald* expressed its concern that a rabble had been found to hustle "an old man, a stranger." Cobbett was highly indignant at such language. He was, indeed, sixty-three years of age; but he had no taste for being called an old man. "The caitiffs . . . now begin to comfort themselves with the thought that I am a 'POOR OLD MAN'; and that I cannot possibly last long. It is an '*old man*,' recollect, who can travel five hundred miles, make speeches of half an hour long twice a day for a month; put down the saucy, the rich, the tyrannical, make them hang their heads in his presence; an '*old man*,' recollect, that can be jostled out of his majority at an election; and that can return towards his home through forty miles of huzzas from the lips of a hundred and fifty thousand people; an '*old man*,' let Thwaites of the *Morning Herald* recollect, who could catch him by one of those things that he calls his legs, and

[1] *P.R.*, July 8th, 1826.

toss him over the fence from Piccadilly into the Green Park; an 'old man' that is not so ungrateful to God as to ascribe his vigour of body and of mind to his own merit; but certainly, who happens to know of no young man able to endure more hardship, or perform more labour than himself." [1]

The boast was true enough. Cobbett had a magnificent physique; and, both as writer and as speaker, he was at this time at the very height of his powers.

He had promised, we have seen, to present a petition against the Preston election. This, on the meeting of the new Parliament, he proceeded to do, finding the two sureties required for the payment of the necessary expenses. But, when the time came, one of these two backed out of his promise, and it was not legally possible to substitute another name for that of the defaulter. The petition was accordingly thrown out on this technical point without being heard.

Some indication of the expense of electioneering in the days before Reform may be gleaned from the fact that Cobbett's expenses at Preston amounted to £1843, as against the £1700 collected by Sir Thomas Beevor on his behalf. The rival candidates, he maintained, all spent very much larger sums than this. An election prolonged over several weeks, in which all the expenses fell on the candidates, and there was virtually no check on bribery and corruption, was bound to be a costly business in any constituency possessing at all a wide franchise. The power of the purse, and not public opinion, settled most contests, even in the "democratic" constituencies.

Cobbett had made another promise while he was at Preston —to circulate to every elector a pamphlet embodying a full description of the proceedings and sound advice on the use and misuse of political rights. He did not literally fulfil this promise; but he was much better than his word. On August 1st, 1826, appeared the first number of a work entitled *The Poor Man's Friend, or, A Defence of the Rights of those who do the Work and fight the Battles. Addressed to the Working Classes of Preston.* This first number dealt mainly with the proceedings at the late election; but in the subsequent numbers Cobbett presented in a general form his case for better material conditions as the prerequisite of freedom, and for the right to the means of decent life as both a natural and a legal right of every Englishman. "Poverty is, after all, the great badge, the never-failing badge of slavery.

[1] *P.R.*, July 8th, 1826.

Bare bones and rags are the true marks of the real slave. What is the object of government? To cause men to live *happily*. They cannot be happy without a sufficiency of *food* and of *raiment*. Good government means a state of things in which the main body are well fed and well clothed. It is the chief business of a government to take care that one part of the people do not cause the other part to lead miserable lives. There can be no morality, no virtue, no sincerity, no honesty, amongst a people continually suffering from want; and it is cruel, in the last degree, to punish such people for almost any sort of crime, which is, in fact, not crime of the heart, not crime of the perpetrator, but the crime of his all-controlling necessities." [1]

This was Cobbett's simple argument. He said later of the *Poor Man's Friend*, "This is my *favourite* work. I bestowed more labour upon it than upon any large volume that I ever wrote." [2] It deserves his praise. Written in the same style as the *Sermons*, it is admirably lucid, far less discursive than most of his work, with a polish of phrase that in no wise impairs either its simplicity or its vigour.

[1] *Poor Man's Friend*, 1st Edn., No. III., p. 50. (No. IV. in later editions.)

[2] Advertisement of *The Cobbett Library*.

CHAPTER XX

ADVICE TO YOUNG MEN

SHORTLY after his return from Preston, Cobbett set off on a further course of rural rides. Starting out in August, 1826, he rode through Hampshire and Wiltshire into Somerset and Devonshire, then back through Wiltshire into Gloucestershire, Herefordshire and Worcestershire, back through Gloucestershire, Oxfordshire and Wiltshire into Hampshire, and thence, by a devious route, through Surrey back to Kensington. All this in August, September, and October, 1826, " during which I have travelled five hundred and sixty-eight miles, and have slept in thirty different beds, having written three monthly pamphlets, called the *Poor Man's Friend*, and have also written (including the present one) eleven *Registers*. I have been in three cities, in about twenty market towns, in perhaps five hundred villages. . . . During the whole of this ride, I have very rarely been a-bed after daylight; I have drunk neither wine nor spirits. I have eaten no vegetables, and only a very moderate quantity of meat; and it may be useful to my readers to know that the riding of twenty miles was not so fatiguing to me at the end of my tour as the riding of ten miles was at the beginning of it. Some ill-natured fools will call this '*egotism*.' Why is it egotism? Getting upon a good strong horse, and riding about the country has no merit in it; there is no conjuration in it; it requires neither talents nor virtues of any sort; but *health* is a very valuable thing, and when a man has had the experience which I have had in this instance, it is his duty to state to the world, and to his own countrymen and neighbours in particular, the happy effects of early rising, sobriety, abstinence and a resolution to be active." [1]

"For the present," wrote Cobbett, at the close of his tour, " farewell to the country, and now for the Wen and its villainous corruptions." [2] The " poor old man " returned refreshed by his vigorous exercise to plunge again into the

[1] *Rural Rides*, dated October 26th, 1826. [2] *Ibid.*

political strife of London, and to pursue his abortive petition against the Preston election.

In January, 1827, Lord Liverpool was taken seriously ill, and on his resignation George Canning became Prime Minister in April. "Fair-weather Canning," "Aeolus Canning," had always been a particular object of Cobbett's dislike, and he was at this time strongly opposed to his policy of intervention in Europe on the side of Portugal against the Spaniards. But Canning's Ministry was joined by some of the Whigs, and obtained a measure of support from most of the Whig party; which did not feel strong enough to make a bid for a government of its own. Cobbett strongly censured this timidity, and attacked those among the Reformers who gave Canning their support. The new Prime Minister was opposed to Parliamentary Reform, and, while he favoured Catholic Emancipation, was pledged not to make it a Government issue. Only in his foreign policy did signs of a less conservative attitude appear. Nevertheless the moderate Reformers in many cases supported the new Government, and among those who took up this attitude was the senior member for Westminster, Sir Francis Burdett.

Burdett, who, after the Reform Act, became definitely a Conservative, had already become a very lukewarm and moderate Reformer. Cobbett, as we have seen, had for some time been conducting a strong attack upon him. Burdett's support of Canning gave occasion for redoubling the severity of his strictures on "Daddy Burdett," or "Old Glory"—Cobbett's favourite names for the former "idol of the people." The *Register* was the usual vehicle for these onslaughts; but in May, Cobbett found another means of challenging "Old Glory's" supremacy in Westminster. It was the custom of the Westminster Committee—"The Rump"—to hold an annual dinner to celebrate "the triumph of purity" at the Westminster election of 1807, when Burdett had first been returned for the city.[1] Cobbett, as one of those who had helped to secure his return, was always invited to this festival; and so was Henry Hunt, with whom he had by this time been completely reconciled. Cobbett and Hunt, with a strong party of friends, attended the Westminster dinner, at which Burdett presided. When the toast of Burdett was moved, Cobbett, posted in a position of vantage, with his friends around him, at once moved an amendment, referring to "Old

[1] Burdett had sat previously for Middlesex.

Glory's" new association with the Canning Ministry. Before long the celebration developed into a free fight between the Burdettites and the partisans of Cobbett and Hunt. Cobbett was torn down from the table on which he was standing, and lost a part of his waistcoat to a powerful corps of Burdettite stewards. But his supporters rallied round, and he regained his position of vantage. Every motion from the Burdettites was met with amendments from Hunt or Cobbett: every attempt at a speech from either side was met with roars of interruption from the opposition. Comparative tranquillity was sometimes restored for a few minutes; but then the uproar broke out again, and the free fight was renewed. At length Burdett and his leading supporters withdrew from the room, and the whole affair was broken up in disorder.[1]

This affair was symptomatic: the division between the moderate and the radical Reformers was becoming much more marked, and was coming to coincide more with a class-division between middle-class and working-class elements. The working-class groups were acquiring an independent organisation and attitude of their own, and repudiating the leadership of the older middle-class Reformers, who were veering more and more towards an alliance with the Whigs. What was true of Burdett was true also of John Cam Hobhouse, his fellow-member for Westminster, of Hume, of Brougham, and of most of the political leaders except Hunt and Cobbett.

The Irish agitation undoubtedly helped in producing this result. Many of the Irish leaders, including, as we have seen, Daniel O'Connell, were disposed to make, if they could, a compromise which would remove Catholic disabilities at the expense of disfranchising the forty-shilling freeholders. The more democratic elements among the Irish, backed by Cobbett, were fiercely against this compromise. Possessing a marked talent for organisation, the London Irish organised in 1828 an Association for Civil and Political Liberty, in which they joined forces with the working-class Radical elements. Henry Hunt was prominently associated with this movement, and Cobbett gave it publicity in the *Register*. When, in 1829, Catholic Emancipation was secured, and the forty-shilling freeholders lost their votes, this Association developed into the Society for Radical Reform. Out of this grew in 1830 the

[1] For Burdett's support of Canning, see *P.R.*, May 5th, 1827, and for a full description of the dinner, *P.R.*, May 26th, 1827.

National Union of the Working Classes, the direct ancestor of the Chartist London Working Men's Association of 1836.

The results of the rising consciousness of the working class did not, however, become apparent at once. In 1827, there was a revival of trade—a "hopeful but not confirmed convalescence" of industry after the crisis of 1826. This meant less unrest in the northern manufacturing districts, and prevented the small working-class Radical bodies from exercising a general influence. Certain classes of workers, it is true, profited hardly at all from the revival. The long agony of the handloom weaver in the North continued, as the power-loom drew more and more of them from the margin of production. The silk-weavers of Spitalfields presented, in June, a petition describing their hopeless situation, and asking for help.[1] But, on the whole, there was a marked improvement; and it was confidently predicted that better times were at last on the way. Cobbett did not cease to argue that the improvement was illusory, that there would soon be a still worse depression than the last, and that there could be no prosperity without Radical Reform and the removal of the Debt; but for the time, except among the politically-minded minority, unrest partially died down.

Canning's death in August, 1827, did not immediately affect the political situation; for his Ministry was carried on for a few months longer under the weak leadership of "Prosperity" Robinson, now Lord Goderich. Cobbett was not moved to such angry denunciation by Canning's death as he had been by those of Pitt and Castlereagh; but on this occasion, and also when Lord Liverpool fell ill, he vigorously reasserted his view that, so far from saying nothing but good about the dead, it was his duty to say exactly what he thought. Both Canning and Liverpool had been in his view enemies of their country's good and upholders of tyranny and corruption; and he said this with a touch of extra venom because of the adulation indulged in by most of the newspapers.[2]

Goderich did not long survive internal troubles in his Cabinet, and in January, 1828, the Duke of Wellington became Prime Minister, at the head of a Ministry composed of Canningites as well as orthodox Tories. Early in the year Lord John Russell carried his motion for the repeal of the Test and

[1] *P.R.*, July 7th, 1827.

[2] For Liverpool's illness, see *P.R.*, February 24th, 1827, and for Canning's death, *P.R.*, August 11th, 1827.

Corporation Acts, and a bill founded on the motion passed into law a few months later. This final sweeping away of the most important disabilities of Protestant Nonconformists roused the Catholics to fresh efforts, and cleared the way for full emancipation. This, however, was still delayed for a time, and, meanwhile, the disputes inside the Ministry became acute. A Bill proposing to transfer the representation of the corrupt and rotten borough of East Retford to the city of Birmingham was opposed by the Duke; but Huskisson, who was a member of the Cabinet, voted for it. Huskisson offered his resignation to the Duke, who, to his surprise, accepted it. All the Canningites then resigned, leaving a purely reactionary and Tory Government in power. One of the new ministerial appointments was that of Vesey Fitzgerald to the Board of Trade. Fitzgerald, a popular Irish landlord, who sat for Clare, had to seek re-election. O'Connell, who, as a Catholic, could stand and be elected, but could not take his seat, put up against the new minister, and signally defeated him. The Catholic Association, and the campaign for emancipation, both in Ireland and in England, at once went forward by leaps and bounds. The Clare election was a political sensation of the first class.

Cobbett, with many qualifications, backed O'Connell at Clare,[1] stating the while his doubts whether "Big O" really meant business. After the election, he strongly urged O'Connell to come to London and attempt to take his seat, and abused him roundly for hesitation and temporising. But, in fact, O'Connell was not prepared to force the pace too hard. The agitation and the election between them convinced the Duke of Wellington that emancipation was inevitable, and in 1829 the country had the curious spectacle of a Prime Minister who was a convinced opponent of emancipation leading a party, which largely shared his views, in placing on the Statute Book the full measure of Catholic relief he and they had so long opposed. But with emancipation went the disfranchisement of the forty-shilling freeholders, a concession to Tory opinion and an attempt to exclude the class of voters supposed to be most under the influence of the Catholic priests.[2] The Emancipation Act of 1829 kept Ireland quiet during the disturbances which rent England and Scotland from 1830 to 1832 and culminated in the passing of the Reform Act.

[1] *P.R.*, July 5th, 1828, and following number.

[2] *P.R.*, March 21st, 1829.

Cobbett wrote of Ireland in 1830, "*Still* as a mouse, while all England is stirring. Well, it is a *queer* devil! Just so in the time of the poor Queen!" [1]

Ministerial changes and the Catholic question, manipulation of the Corn Laws and controversy over the Debt and paper money, were the principal questions occupying public attention from 1827 to 1829. Cobbett took his full part in all these controversies; but he found time also to join Hunt in a few minor crusades and to embark on several fresh enterprises and activities of his own. In October, 1827, while keeping on his place at Kensington, whence he conducted a number of his trading enterprises, selling trees, seeds, books, and even butcher meat, he took over as well a small farm at Barn Elms in Surrey, just by Barnes, which he retained until 1831. Here he had again some arable land; but it was in very bad condition, and required very thorough turning over. Cobbett hit on an expedient which involved him in considerable controversy. Instead of using the plough, he determined to rely on human labour—the "spade culture" of which Feargus O'Connor and his Chartist followers later on made so much. Though trade was better, there was still much unemployment, and wages were very low. He devised a plan which, he thought, would help both him and the unemployed.

In the *Register* he inserted a notice. He had a certain amount of land which needed thorough digging over. Mechanical ploughing and even the use of the plough did away with human labour, and, for the time at least, caused unemployment. "Everything that can be done by wheels, by iron, by steel, by wood, by horses, has been done by them, as it were for the purpose of starving the labouring classes out of existence." [2] He would use hand labour. He therefore invited any man who wanted a spell of hard honest work to come to his farm. Work would begin at daylight and end at sunset (subsequently this was altered, so as to fix a quota of work to be done, after which the men were free to go—they worked more rapidly, and left earlier, that way). He would take on the men from day to day, and they were free to leave any day if they chose. He would pay them, not in money, but in kind, with two pounds of bread, half a pound of cheese, and two pounds of meat for each day's work. This was far more than their wages would buy; but it would not cost him more because he produced the things himself. They could

[1] *P.R.*, August 14th, 1830. [2] *P.R.*, December 15th, 1827.

sell the surplus of food for money for their lodging and other needs.[1]

This method, Cobbett reckoned, would cost him no more than using the plough, and it would give employment and good food to a considerable number of men. In the result, he reckoned that it cost him actually less, and that the work was better done than by the plough.

He was accused, in this experiment, of introducing a system of serfdom. This charge came not only from his political opponents, but also from at least one angry body of working men, members of a club which met at Newton's Head, a news house at Nottingham.[2] Cobbett replied that there was no slavery, for the men were free to leave at any time; that they were better fed than ordinary labourers; and that but for his expedient they would have found no work at all. He had no difficulty in getting all the men he wanted for the job. It is not profitable to pass judgment on the merits of the dispute. Cobbett's method was certainly open to abuse; but he was quite correct in what he said of its actual consequences.

While this altercation was in progress, he became involved in a more serious dispute. Since 1821, the *Political Register* had been published in two editions—a stamped edition at a shilling, sent through the post and paying fourpence in Stamp Tax to the Government, and an unstamped edition, sold through the booksellers and agents, and paying only the small tax on pamphlets. The matter in both editions had been the same, and had included reports of important meetings and some news, as well as comment, bearing on political events. During all these years the contents had not been challenged, although each number had been duly submitted and registered as a pamphlet; but now the Stamp Office wrote stating that it was illegal to publish any kind of news in a periodical not bearing a stamp. Cobbett disputed this interpretation of the law, which was indeed very doubtful. But he realised that a legal conflict with the Government would be very costly, even if he ultimately established his claim. He determined, therefore, to discontinue the unstamped edition altogether, although he realised that, with the price of the stamped edition at a shilling, this would mean a great diminution in the number of his readers. At length he hit on a better plan. In January, 1828, the unstamped *Register* ceased to appear; but Cobbett

[1] *P.R.*, December 1st, 1827. [2] *Ibid.*, 15th, 1827.

cheapened the production without decreasing the amount of matter, and reduced the price of the stamped *Register* to sevenpence.[1] As the paper had to be sold to news-agents for sixpence, of which the Government took fourpence in Stamp Tax, and a halfpenny in Paper Tax, this left only three halfpence for author, printer and publisher, including all overhead charges, or 2½d. on copies sold direct to subscribers through the post. This was a very narrow margin, and the profits were seriously reduced. The arrangement was, however, maintained till 1830, when Cobbett increased the size of the *Register*, raised the price again to a shilling, and met the popular demand by his new monthly periodical *Twopenny Trash*, which contained no news, and therefore escaped the ban of the Stamp Office. *Twopenny Trash*, however, under the Act of 1819-20, could only be published once a month, and thus did not fully supply the place of the cheap *Register*. In part, Cobbett met the need by issuing cheap pamphlets, usually articles reprinted from the *Register* in a form suitable for popular distribution.

In 1827, in addition to his other activities, Cobbett was keenly pursuing his attack on the extortions of the turnpike trusts, and securing reductions of charges in many cases where the law had been broken.[2] This work he largely delegated to his sons, who got useful legal practice pursuing cases against the trusts. In the following year, he joined Henry Hunt in a crusade against the misapplication of trust funds, by the Municipal Councillors of the City of London. Hunt had secured election as auditor of the city accounts, and had made some remarkable discoveries of peculation and extravagance in the course of his investigations. Production of detailed accounts was refused; and many sums of money had simply disappeared or been voted away for imaginary services.[3] Failing to get any satisfaction from the City Fathers, Hunt offered himself for election, against the official list of candidates, as Common Councilman for the ward of Farringdon Without. Cobbett, who was also a voter, seconded his efforts, and accompanied him to the meeting at which the election was held. There, in order to get better opportunity of speaking, Cobbett also offered himself for election, acting as his own

[1] See *P.R.*, November 24th and December 1st, 8th, and 15th, 1827.

[2] *P.R.*, August 11th and 18th, and December 1st, 1827.

[3] *P.R.*, May 10th and December 6th, 1828.

proposer and seconder in one, and successfully overruling the chairman's ruling that his nomination was not in order. Having said all he wanted to say, he withdrew his name before the voting. Hunt went to the poll, and got some support, but was defeated by the official caucus.[1] The report of the meeting is worth study for the light it sheds on the force of Cobbett's personality in a big meeting. He could do outrageous things, and carry the day by sheer force of character, or sheer impudence, as his opponents preferred to call it.

Cobbett and Hunt again acted together in the early stages of the movement, noticed already, to create a strong working-class Radical organisation in London. But he soon parted company with the Society for Radical Reform. As we have seen, he was no Republican. He wanted "Radical Reform of the Commons House of Parliament"; but he wanted to preserve both the Monarchy and the privileges of the House of Lords, which he conceived would be kept well in order by a really popular House of Commons. The leading working-class Reformers, on the other hand, were largely Republican in outlook. Cobbett, at a crowded meeting of the Society for Radical Reform, declared his views at length—he wanted "nothing new," but only the restoration of old English liberties. The chairman, Daniel French, retaliated with a strong Republican declaration, and added, according to Cobbett's statement, subsequently denied by the Committee of the Society, that what he wanted was "a universal confusion." Whatever his exact words may have been, he clearly made a revolutionary and Republican speech. The committee appears to have backed the chairman, and Cobbett, re-stating his views in the *Register*, at once resigned his connection with the Society.[2] He was never a man who could stay long in any organisation, or accept the limitations of collective work. He was too much of an egotist, and had too much of a temper.

But by this breach with the Society for Radical Reform, Cobbett by no means intended to cut his connection with the London working men. He at once planned a series of lectures to working men, at which he could speak his mind without regard to the views of any society. In November, he began a course of public lectures at the Mechanics' Institute, just

[1] *P.R.*, December 27th, 1828.

[2] *P.R.*, September 12th and 19th, 1829.

off Chancery Lane.[1] These were widely attended, and prepared the way for the more important course which he delivered in the Blackfriars Rotunda, at the height of the political excitements of 1830. But, as we shall see, the middle-class patrons of the Mechanics' Institute did not like them.

In the midst of these distractions, Cobbett was issuing in parts one of his greatest works—*Advice to Young Men.*[2] This was not intended mainly for a working-class public. The advice was addressed "to young men and (incidentally) to young women in the middle and higher ranks of life." It took the form, a favourite form with Cobbett, of letters to "a Youth, a Bachelor, a Lover, a Husband, a Father, a Citizen or a Subject." Its purpose was not primarily political, though it contains many political allusions. It is, in fact, a series of straight talks on the various concerns of life, simply and directly written, and plentifully illustrated with incidents from Cobbett's own life. It is egotistic, of course: all he wrote was that. But the egotism is pleasant, because the matter and manner do not bring Cobbett's good opinion of himself into sharp and constant contrast with his low opinion of all those with whom he had a difference of opinion. It is a good-humoured book, recalling the manner of his *Sermons*, but improving on them because there is less in it of desire to score off either political opponents or tract purveyors of the conventional type.

Cobbett was, in the fullest sense of the word, a self-made man. He had raised himself to his position of power—and power, he said, was always above all the object of his desire—entirely by his own efforts. He had taught himself to form opinions, to write, to speak, to play a part in public life, to be feared even where he was not respected. He had begun as a ploughboy: he had become the most powerful political writer in England. He was intensely proud of his achievement, and also intensely conscious that it was all his own. It seemed to him the result, not of any inborn gift or genius, but merely of will-power and steady application. Robust health was indeed the foundation of his success; but he attributed his health also to himself—to his sobriety, frugality, habits of early rising, love of exercise and the open air—qualities, these too, of the will. All that he had done, he maintained that

[1] *P.R.*, November 14th, 1829.

[2] For announcement and prospectus, see *P.R.*, April 25th, 1829.

others could do. *Advice to Young Men* was an appeal to youth to follow in the steps by which he had made William Cobbett what he was.

All this, and much more, he now set down. "It is the duty, and ought to be the pleasure, of age and experience to warn and instruct youth, and to come to the aid of inexperience. When sailors have discovered rocks or breakers, and have had the good luck to escape with life from amidst them, they, unless they be pirates or barbarians as well as sailors, point out the spots for the placing of buoys and of lights, in order that others may be not exposed to the danger which they have so narrowly escaped. What man of common humanity, having, by good luck, missed being engulfed in a quagmire or quicksand, will withhold from his neighbours a knowledge of the peril without which the dangerous spots are not to be approached." [1]

I have already had occasion to quote a number of passages from *Advice to Young Men* in the course of this book, and I do not propose either to quote largely from it here, or to attempt either summary of its contents or detailed comment. But, as it is the work in which, above all, Cobbett sets down his personal philosophy of life, apart from his political convictions, we must pause to consider what is the gist of the advice which he has to give. Men must work, both because it is their duty to themselves, their children, and their fellow-men, and because useful work is the key to happiness. "Happiness ought to be your great object, and it is to be found only in *independence*." [2] Genius, or natural talent, will accomplish little by itself: countless men have failed, though they had it, for lack of other qualities. "There must be something more than genius: there must be industry: there must be perseverance: there must be, before the eyes of the nation, proofs of extraordinary exertion. . . . These are the things, and *not genius*, which have caused my labours to be so incessant and so successful." [3] Frugality and simplicity of manners, too, are vital. "A great misfortune of the present day is, that every one is, in his own estimate, *raised above his real state of life*." [4] Gluttony and drunkenness are beastly and destructive vices: tea-drinking an insidious and time-wasting pest. So Cobbett's prejudices mingle always with his sound counsel.

Advice to Young Men is really a sort of novel, with Cobbett

[1] *Advice to Young Men*, Introduction. [2] *Ibid.*, par. 14.
[3] *Ibid.*, par. 6. [4] *Ibid.*, par. 21.

for the blameless, but by no means colourless, hero. It celebrates what he has done, tells the story of his life with as definite a purpose as *The Pilgrim's Progress*, records not merely his successful search for power, but above all his successful search for happiness. It is the book of a man happy in achievement, happy in his work, happy in his family life; celebrating all his happiness as the triumph of the virtues he possesses, passing by, or rather totally unconscious of his besetting vices, because they have not managed to make him unhappy, or to interfere at all with the steady contentment of his inner life. He can catalogue in cold blood the qualities that a man should seek in a wife. "The things which you ought to desire in a wife are, 1. chastity; 2. sobriety; 3. industry; 4. frugality; 5. cleanliness; 6. knowledge of domestic affairs; 7. good temper; 8. beauty." [1] But he could also conceive and expound these qualities as a portrait of his own wife, and make of them a real and living picture of married life and fellowship. Isolated sentences from the *Advice* have often a priggish sound: there never was a less priggish book; for it abounds everywhere in a sense of happiness and cheerful enjoyment of the good things of life. It takes a great man—a great personality—to moralise without sounding a prig. Cobbett could do it: his egotism, assertive rather than limiting, lustily abusive rather than censorious, helped him. A man who is really happy cannot be a prig.

Faults in any number one can find. Cobbett had none of the liberal virtues. He was not broad-minded or tolerant, or considerate or forgiving, or humble or charitable, or slow to anger or plenteous in mercy. His morality was of a fighting, self-assertive sort. He proclaimed duties as well as rights, but he made the duties means to the exercise of the rights, and not virtues for their own sake. He claimed for all men the rights which he claimed for himself; but he would have agreed with Walt Whitman.

> "What others give as duties I give as living impulses.
> Shall I give the heart's action as a duty?"

His whole emphasis is on "selfhood," not because he preaches selfishness, but because he wants each man, and each woman, to find happiness in the successful exercise of his own will, the successful development of his own powers, the

[1] *Advice to Young Men*, par. 89.

expression to the last drop of all the goodness he can squeeze out of himself. He would have men drive themselves hard. Recreation he approves; but let it be not of a lazy sort, like card-playing or play-going, but of good vigorous sort, like country dancing or the sports of the field. Education is good and useful; but it is best when a man teaches himself, not when he is taught by others. Hence his dislike of schools and projects of public education. The schoolmaster will pump knowledge into the child: learning at home can give, if it is done as Cobbett did it with his own children, the best impetus to the child to teach itself. And if we must send our children to school, let the school at least be small. Numbers corrupt: the big school is like "jails, barracks, factories," which corrupt not "by their walls, but by their condensed numbers." [1] He cannot bear education in the mass: it must be something individual, something done for and by each child and each adult.

"Be just, be industrious, be sober, and be happy." [2] Thus Cobbett sums up his advice, and he conceived that in his own life he had carried out these precepts. Just to individuals he had certainly not been; just to the common people and his conception of their rights he had been consistently from the time of his political awakening. Industrious he had been in an incredible degree, and sober always in the things of the body. But above all he had been happy, and had the art, in his best work, of communicating that sense of happiness in activity which was really the foundation of all his achievements.

[1] *Advice to Young Men*, par. 355. [2] *Ibid.*

CHAPTER XXI

RURAL RIDES

[*The greater part of this Chapter was written by the late Mr. F. E. Green. See Preface, p. v.*]

Advice to Young Men appeared in parts during 1829 and 1830. It was followed in October, 1830, by *Rural Rides*. This fascinating record of Cobbett's journeyings and lecturing tours through the country had already been published from time to time in the *Register*, from the first Ride of 1821 onwards. Whenever he could escape from business or political concerns in " the Wen," or from the claims of his farm at Kensington, Cobbett loved to ride off, usually accompanied by one of his sons, into the countryside. Mingling business with pleasure, he rode through the land, observing everywhere both men and things, surveying the condition of the country and the people; stopping frequently to make " Rustic Harangues " to the farmers and labourers, putting up for the night at some village inn or at the house of some friend, whose experiments with " Cobbett's Corn," or " Cobbett's American Trees," he was eager to observe. After a long day's ride, and perhaps a speech, he would sit down to record his impressions and comments for the benefit of his readers of the *Register*. Written thus in snatches, as a daybook of his travels, *Rural Rides* is astonishingly fresh and vigorous. It brings out what is best alike in Cobbett's mind and in his style of writing. It was when Cobbett was mounted that he rode into his kingdom.

On horseback, riding down into the Shires, out of the fog of the detested " Wen," Cobbett is at his ease. When the last stock-jobber's house in Kensington has been left behind, and he is in the open country and fairly on his way to Newbury, he feels at home. There is a chance of a run after a hare over the thyme-scented downs. The springy turf, the wooded coombes and picturesque hangars, the primrose-spangled lawns of the home counties fill him with the joy of life. He loves the sky and the open country, with the open-hearted love of an adventurer.

We must think of Cobbett—the Cobbett of *Rural Rides*—as a man of sixty or more, in robust health, ready to face a forty-mile ride in a downpour, and to take it jocularly as a cure for a cough on the chest. As he rides, he speaks of all he sees and thinks. Often he talks at the top of his voice, especially when his eye lights on a "rotten borough," or a field of potatoes, or a barren, "villainous heath" like Hindhead, or a paper-mill where the accursed money is made. He cries out with indignation when he passes a group of half-starved girls working in a field, "as pale as ashes, and as ragged as colts."

He may be too vehement, and talk too loud, for indoors. It was indoors, at the Crown and Anchor, that Heine heard him, and hated him for his "scolding Radical laugh." The bark of a mastiff is not pleasant indoors: out-of-doors it is one of Nature's voices. In the open Cobbett has elbow-room: he fits in with Nature's largeness. He shouts; but his eyes twinkle and his lips curve humorously as he gives vent to his tirades. And, he is always ready to break off his politics—to watch the cloud-shadows race across the downs, to listen to a linnet singing, to admire a fine field of Swedish turnips, or to stand breathless as a hare doubles against her pursuers.

On horseback, he was in no hurry. He was happy in himself, despite the misery he saw and denounced. His shouting does not offend, just because he is happy. Eviscerated editions of *Rural Rides* have been published, with the political allusions cut out. They fall flat; for the essence of Cobbett is in the mingling of observation and comment. He is not simply a describer of scenery or an agricultural investigator: he is, as some one called him once, "the political traveller," [1] the political equivalent of the commercial. And, to do himself justice, he must display samples of all his wares. What he has to say about the "unfeeling oligarchs," and "the monstrous Malthus" cannot be left out without losing the whole effect of his writing. To read such an edition is like booking a seat on the coach beside Mr. Weller, and waiting in vain for a single Wellerism.

He who would see the country thoroughly must go, Cobbett tells us, either on foot or on horseback. He did both.

They saw little, he maintained, who stuck to the turnpikes and slept only at the best inns. One must go along the lanes and through the fields, where men were at work and the

[1] He adopted the nickname. See *Tour in Scotland*, p. 59.

chimneys of farmhouses and cottages were smoking. Cobbett explored his country thoroughly, and *Rural Rides* remains, not only a delightful book, but by far the best and most graphic picture of agricultural conditions a hundred years ago.

Cobbett set out on his first ride in 1821, just after he had settled down in his new house at Kensington. "Dear Dick," he had written of his youngest son, "is to have his pony in a month to ride out with me." For himself, he secured a good horse, strong enough to carry his six feet, and bear him well though he sat "as heavy as a four-bushel sack of wheat." Little Richard, though but eight years old in 1822, soon grew manly enough to ride long distances on horseback, and accompany his father on many of his journeys. He loved to have his boy with him, and to talk to him endlessly as they rode. Cobbett needed an audience.

So Richard is there too as we accompany Cobbett on his pilgrimage through the Shires. It is easy to follow, on foot or on horseback, as the present writer[1] has done, where Cobbett rode over the Hampshire highlands; through the Vale of Avon; among the coombes and hangars of West Sussex; by the rich cornfields of the Isle of Thanet; through the hop-gardens of Kent and across the Surrey heaths. It is easy to see how little has been the change, since Cobbett rode, in the economic structure of English rural life.

Let us make for Hurstbourne Tarrant, or Uphusband, as Cobbett and the local folk preferred to call it. He was fond of making Uphusband his chief stopping-place, and staying there to do a bit of writing; for he was always sure of "free quarters," and a warm welcome from his old friend, George Blount, the Roman Catholic farmer of the Rookery Farm, Sometimes he would approach it by Burghclere and Kingsclere, sometimes by Newbury. And at Uphusband he would see how Blount was getting on with the "Cobbett corn," or acting on some other farming hint of his, and he would get up long before breakfast to write a chapter of one of his *Grammars*, or an article for the *Register*, perhaps describing his ride of the previous day.

So with little Richard at our side we ride into Hampshire from Berkshire, after visiting Jethro Tull's farm at Shalbourne.[2] Jethro Tull is one of humanity's great benefactors,

[1] Mr. F. E. Green. From this point to the end of the chapter is wholly his.

[2] In this free interpretation of Cobbett's *Rural Rides*, the reader must forgive any chronological inexactitude, for on occasions I have

Cobbett tells Richard, the man who goes to the *root* of all good farming—a real *Radical*—by insisting upon thorough cultivation, giving plants room to breathe by means of his famous drill, and stirring up the soil near the roots by horse-hoeing. He, Cobbett, would show this generation of farmers how to grow swedes, mangel-wirzels and cabbages in abundance by editing and publishing a new edition of *Horse-hoeing Husbandry*.

As we mount Inkpen Beacon Richard points to the sinister looking gibbet, 1000 feet above the sea level, and his father tells the story of the murder a hundred years old. We look out for a glimpse of the shimmering Channel and the Isle of Wight, whilst Cobbett points out the excellence of the sheep pasturage even at so high an altitude, and the stretches of downland which had once been under plough, growing corn. Beacon fires used to blaze on this hill-top to commemorate British victories on land and sea. What avail the victories of Trafalgar and Waterloo now to the labouring folk of England who fought in these battles and have been reduced to a state of beggary? cries Cobbett with passionate indignation. What have they got in exchange for beating the French? They have got a horde of whiskered gentry, of sinecurists, placemen, deadweights, stock-jobbers, pluralist parsons who take two or three livings and half pay or pensions as officers; impecunious German princes; a horde of tax-eaters who travel with their painted ladies from the Wen to Brighton, from Brighton to Cheltenham, and from Cheltenham to Bath.

"But, father," breaks in the intrepid Richard, for to him William Cobbett is no devouring political lion, but only as a loving big brother—"I thought you were all for beating the French. Mother tells me you had your windows broken for not wanting Peace—." "Tut, tut," says Cobbett with a wry face, "You will learn that man grows out of darkness into light. That is what they call my inconsistency, the lying jades, when I become wise. I know *now*, though I did not know *then*, that the borough-mongers wanted to beat the French, to save their seats, if not their necks, and to stifle Reform. The fund-holders thought of their interest, the landlords of their rent, and the parsons were afraid of losing

attempted to focus two or three rides, presenting the one picture, where the rides cover the same ground more than once. Here and there, it will be seen, where they can be used with most effect, Cobbett's own words have been transcribed without the use of quotation marks. —F. E. G.

their tithes as they have done in France." He casts a hostile glance at the home of the tithe-gathering parson as we descend into Coombe. The parsons hated Cobbett as they hated Reform; and he returned their abuse with interest.

At Hurstbourne Tarrant we get a warm welcome from Blount at the Rookery, a lovable man who places a plate of pork and bread on the top of his flat garden wall for any hungry Irish tramp to eat, and who wills that his tombstone shall be made big enough for boys to play marbles upon it.[1] We discuss the price of sheep at the Weyhill Fair, learn that Southdown lambs are as low as 8*s.*, that beef has been selling at 4*d.* a lb., mutton at 3½*d.*, and butter at 11*d.* and 1*s.*, and that wages are only 8*s.* a week. A load of faggots can be had for 10*s.*, and it is some comfort in a woodland district overrun with game that fuel is plentiful and cheap and rabbits can be snared. What man will not risk transportation when his family is clamouring for food?

As we enter Andover, the chief market town of northern Hampshire, Cobbett's eye begins to gleam with fire. This is the town of those "aristocrats" who were responsible for prosecuting and getting hanged at the Winchester Assizes two fine young fellows aged twenty-eight and twenty-seven respectively, not for *killing*, but for *shooting at* two gamekeepers. And these landowners had the hypocrisy to say at a meeting at Andover that they wished to keep up the price of corn only for the sake of the "poor devils of labourers who have hardly a rag to cover them." Oh, amiable, tender-hearted souls! Did not care a straw about *rents*! This was the only reason for their wanting corn to sell at a high price. *That* really beats everything. "There is in the men calling themselves 'English country gentlemen' something superlatively base. They are, I sincerely believe, the most cruel, the most unfeeling, the most brutally insolent; but I know, I can prove, I can safely take my oath, that they are the most base of all creatures that God ever suffered to disgrace the human shape."

Before we leave this district Cobbett points out that on Lord Carnarvon's estate at Burghclere fourteen farms have now got into the hands of one farmer.

We now turn our horses' heads towards Wiltshire. Cobbett rides towards the county with mixed feelings. It is the county of that "*gallon-loaf* miscreant" Bennett the M.P.,

[1] The large flat tombstone is to be seen in the churchyard to-day.

and in it is that most accursed Rotten Borough, Old Sarum. Yet it holds the Vale of the Avon and the lovely vale of the Wylye, where Cobbett in his youth spent a summer on a farm, and when he was in America he never ceased to talk to his children of the beautiful villages, the meadows and farms up and down this valley. To Cobbett it was always a source of pleasant meditative inquiry which part of his beloved rural England was most to his liking. Was it the wild district round Hurstbourne Tarrant, where you got a variety of down-land, woods and meadows, with clear chalky bridle-paths; was it the coombes and hangars of West Sussex or East Hants, or was it the pure austere downland when his eyes lighted upon the windy side of a great down where two or three numerous flocks of sheep were grazing, and lower down were the folds in the fields ready to receive them for the night? At any rate, there is no finer coursing ground than Everley, and to Everley we ride. And now Cobbett means to expose that monster Malthus by showing us that the labouring folk in the vale of the Avon can and do produce five times more food than they and their large families consume. And then these Scottish *feelosofers* talk of emigrating these worthy people because we are over-populated! Over-populated, yes, indeed, with *tax-eaters*; these are the fellows who ought to be emigrated, they and the black-coated tithe-gatherers. Hallo! what was that—a hare? I saw three hares in one day run away from dogs, he tells us, in this very district.

We begin to be doubtful about our way. They always tell you, says Cobbett, when you pull up to inquire, to go *right* over the down, where there is no path or track of any kind to indicate which route to take, or to go on straight ahead, where you are faced with a T at the cross roads. We pull up at a wicket gate at a cottage at Tangley. He asks a woman the way to Ludgershall, which is only four miles away. She has never been there, though she has lived at Tangley all her life. She rises in Cobbett's estimation; for is not Ludgershall a miserable rotten borough? No; but she has been as far as Chute, which is two and a half miles away! Well, well, Richard, you must not imagine for a moment that travelling from one spot to another makes you any wiser; in fact the facility of travel is one of the curses of the country and is destroying morals and happiness. (He does not record what effect continual travelling about has had upon his own morals.)

Cobbett discourses to Richard of the number of sheep

which used to pass hands at Weyhill Fair—hundreds of thousands. And now, look at the miserable size of the flocks; and this is all due to *the Thing*. He tells him of the argument his own father had in a booth with other farmers on the American War, and how he listened as a boy to his father strongly taking the part of the Americans.

Then we reach East Everley. Ah, here, declares Cobbett, is one of the best inns in the kingdom and kept by a *farmer*; plenty of stable room; no cribbing of oats and straw for his horse, and no skimping of eggs and cream on the table. And what delights him as much as anything, as he looks across the downs out of a southern window, is a rookery built in a tall clump of sycamores. The cawing of rooks is music to his soul. They are off to the stubble fields. Well, what if they do rob the pigs? Haven't they a perfect right to; a better right than the black-coated parson-justices, who would sue them for trespass if they could? Here to this comfortable inn he will be able to return some time and work at his *Poor Man's Friend*, and finish it perhaps in Herefordshire whilst riding to Bollitree. After a good night's rest we set off before breakfast for Milton, near Pewsey. Here, as Cobbett sits on his horse on Milton Hill, he marvels at the beauty of the Avon valley; it exceeds his highest expectations. Here, surely, after all is the most lovely of all the beautiful valleys known to him.

Here is the best way, he declares, to expose the folly, the stupidity, the inanity, the insuperable emptiness, the insolence and barbarity of the wretches who have the audacity to propose to *transport* the people of England, upon the principle of the monster Malthus, who has furnished the unfeeling oligarchs and their toadeaters with the pretence that man has a natural propensity to breed faster than food can be raised for the increase. The best way to expose this mixture of madness and blasphemy, now that the harvest is in, is to take stock of the produce and the mouths to feed in this valley which God has favoured with every good thing.

Thereupon, after breakfasting, he begins to count methodically the flocks of sheep, the corn ricks, and the head of cattle. Why, here are 4000 sheep and lambs visible in one fold; and here are 300 in one stubble. Why, in the parish of Milton alone, the labourers produce bread sufficient for 800 families, mutton for 580, and brew beer for 207. And what do the labourers get? At most 9s. a week. The

population is 500, and they produce food, drink and clothing for 2510 persons. In one farmyard he counts fifteen wheat-ricks; in another, Chisenbury Priory, he counts twenty-nine ricks and then looks round to see the people who were to get all the food. There were 9116 persons in the thirty parishes from Wootton Rivers to Salisbury; and they raised sufficient food and raiment for 45,580 persons, fed and lodged decently, and sufficient for 236,740 persons according to the scale on which the unhappy labourers of this fine valley are fed and lodged. Now for the "surplus populashon man." How many people live here compared to those who lived here in the past? Look at the size of the many churches. Why, the entire population could all be huddled into their porches! And these men are to be emigrated, are they? The workers who suffer these indignities are the worst used labouring classes on the face of the earth.

We have seen in the comments of Cobbett on the woman who never travelled more than two and a half miles from her home a similitude between his mind and Ruskin's; but, when we come to a study of churches, we find that, whilst Ruskin is concerned about the carvings, and the number of stained glass windows and the saints who figured in them, Cobbett is concerned about the people for whom the churches were built. "I will allow nothing to be good with regard to the labouring classes," he said in one of his rural rides, "unless it makes an addition to the victuals, drink or clothing. As to their minds, that is much too sublime a matter for me to think about."

Cobbett, however, had a bee in his bonnet over the sizes of country churches. He was wrong in his estimate of the population in England centuries ago; equally was he wrong in supposing the sizes of churches corresponded with the size of the population, especially with a population which stood in the empty nave instead of sitting in pews. But Cobbett was right in pointing out that the rural population had declined, and in showing that for the wagon load of food which the labourers produced and sent away to the towns they received very little back wherewith to mend their rags or fill their stomachs. After counting the corn ricks at Chisenbury, Cobbett falls into a meditative silence. He must be thinking of his friend Henry Hunt; for it was at Chisenbury that Hunt farmed and hunted. It was here that he had offered the Government his person, his fine horses and his worldly effects,

valued at £20,000, to repel the threatened invasion of 1801, and this villainous Government had now taken his person and thrown him into a dungeon for taking the chair at Peterloo. . . .

Soon after leaving Chisenbury we come to Enford, passing under the sign of the Swan which stretches across the village street and then to Netheravon, where Cobbett *has* to tell us how he once saw a flock of hares, as thick as sheep, on an acre of Mr. Hicks Beech's land. But game had lost some of its savour, he tells us, with a shadow passing across his bright eyes, since the hanging of men at the Winchester Assizes.

It is raining, and continues to rain, and when we reach the inn at Amesbury Cobbett throws off his wet coat, and, whilst his mutton chop is cooking, writes up his notes for the day, declaring that it has been the most enjoyable ride he has had—for has it not given rise to many wise reflections on his part; has not his eye feasted on many a delightful scene of pastoral life: and has he not confounded the monster Malthus and this abominable Emigration Committee!

The next morning on our way into Salisbury he observes that all the way down the valley the turnips look pretty well, but not many are grown. It is not a county of pulses, nor of oats, but of wheat, barley, wool and lambs. As to potatoes, he rejoices that the people are too sensible to grow many of this base root. Why wasn't that villain, Sir Walter Raleigh, hanged before he afflicted mankind with his abominable discovery? It is a pity we have to pass that *Accursed Hill*, that rotten borough of Old Sarum; but, after all, it gives Cobbett a chance to relieve his feelings. On meeting a man returning from work, Cobbett asked him how he *got on*. "Very badly," said the man. "How's that?" asks Cobbett, leading the man towards his, Cobbett's, hammer-stroke. "Hard times," answers the man. "They make it hard for us poor people." "Who is *they*?" thunders Cobbett. The man is silent. He does not know. "Oh, no, no! my friend," cries Cobbett, "It is not *they*; it is that Accursed Hill that has robbed you of the supper that you ought to find smoking on the table when you get home." And Cobbett, feeling he had spoken too roughly to this poor dejected assembly of skin and bone, gave him the price of a pot of beer and left him to wonder at his words.

In Salisbury Cobbett is not satisfied until he has addressed a company of farmers, and in his "rustic harangue", he tells

us, he does not fail to do his duty. Whilst dwelling upon the iniquities of Paper Money, Tithes and Taxes, he courageously tells the farmers they must not squeeze rents out of the bones of labourers. It was a ticklish job, as Cobbett remarked, for there had been some rick-burning in the neighbourhood lately; but he has to do his duty. This was the pill the farmers always had to swallow with Cobbett jam which, though abundant, was not always particularly sweet.

There are two towns we visit presently across the plain: Warminster and Devizes. On the way to Warminster Cobbett more than once breaks into pleasurable surprise at the beauty of Norton Bavant and Bishopstow, which villages are marred only by the fact that the "gallon-loaf fellow," John Bennett, has a mansion there. After all, *this* is the most beautiful spot in England, for does it not contain everything he delights in. Not only are there downs, but verdant meadows, watered by a trout stream, and corn land unencumbered by fences, which means good hunting, as the downs afford good coursing, and there are the villages themselves, well shaded in summer and sheltered in winter by lofty and beautiful trees. Yes, this beats the vales of the Avon, of Taunton, Glastonbury, Honiton, Dorchester and Sherbourne, as well as those of Evesham and of the Wye.

In spite of the richness and beauty of the land, what do we see? Good God, no less than thirty men digging in a large field. Is this one of Mr. Owen's communities of paupers? They are trenching and bringing the bottom soil on top; and that is wrong, especially when it is clay, chalk or gravel. Are they Quakers? No, the Quakers never work at hard manual labour; some Jews do, but not Quakers. Quakers buy and sell what others produce. They are, great Heavens, free-born Englishmen working for an overseer at 9*d.* a day. What "a state of prosperity we live in"; "the envy of the world"! Look at the parsonage-houses falling into decay. And what are the vicars *doing*? Why, employing some journeyman-parson to conduct the services in three or four churches and living at Bath, with their daughters showing off their fine dresses, at the expense of labourers and farmers who have to produce the tithes in crops and stock.

We arrive at Warminster, which as a town pleases Cobbett immensely. Warminster is a solid and good town. No gingerbread "places of worship," as they are called; no great swaggering inns and impudent swaggering fellows going about

with vulgarity imprinted on their faces and good clothes on their backs. No Jews and Quakers. Look at its corn-market. Isn't *that* a sign of honest dealing? Here farmers pitch their sacks of corn into the market, and get paid for it on the nail. No juggling with samples in the dark and dirty corners of af an inn; no buying a pig in a poke; but open, daylight dealing. Not only do they sell corn honestly in Warminster, but good meat. Cobbett declares he has roasted more sirloins of beef than any other man in England, and no joint he has ever put a knife into excels the joints at Warminster. Not that he is a great eater, but he is a great *provider*. Certainly he has a right to boast of abstemiousness or of frugality; for he has undertaken many a journey on nuts, milk and apples, and it was his habit if he went without food during the day to give away its cash value, which he estimated at three shillings, to the first famishing man or boy he accosted. We see him carrying out his recurring Lenten plan as we meet some unemployed weavers who are appeasing their hunger, poor devils, by nutting. Cobbett inquires of the state of their trade and parts with his three shillings.

If Warminster receives his praises. Devizes gets the full blast of his anathemas, for Devizes boasts of a jail large enough to house half of its population. This is indeed, a monument to commemorate the prosperity of a Jubilee Reign. Here are honest weavers and labourers wanting to work, aye, and actually working, for a sum less than is allowed to felons in the jail, allowing nothing for clothing, fuel and house rent! Verily, we are living in a "state of unexampled prosperity" because, forsooth! all the *Great Interests* are prosperous. The working people are not, then, "a Great Interest."

Sometimes, on the rides, Cobbett's abstemiousness reacts upon his temper, and he pulls himself up sharply because he spoke to little Richard crossly, and Richard's innocent look of wonderment wounds him to the quick. He has to tell Richard, if tempers suffer from the want of a breakfast, how much we ought to forgive poor folk who have not taken a bite all day.

We came across two lazy-looking vagabonds licensed to sell *tea, drugs and religious tracts*; the first to debilitate the body; the second to finish the corporeal part of the business; and the third to prepare the spirit for its separation from the clay. What a system to degrade, debase, enslave a people. Let us leave a district where ragged girls carry home bran and

wheat stubble for fuel, where their shoes are tied round their ankles with bits of rags, and ride to a woodland district, the Forest of Dean, where every cottage has a pig or two, and we will stretch our legs fondly under Mr. Palmer's hospitable table at Bollitree Castle in Herefordshire, where, by the way, Richard, he keeps a fine pack of hounds.[1]

We pass large flocks of goldfinches feeding upon the thistledown by the roadside, a sure sign of a dry season; and, as we ride into Hereford, we see a sight to delight the eyes of any Radical: a young woman, a pretty woman too, with two beautiful children driving a chaise-cart drawn by *an ass*. That is the way to defeat *the Thing* which imposes a tax upon every horse or pony. That is the sort of sensible wife to have, one who refuses to feed the cormorants who gorge on the taxes. Let us hope that her husband does not indulge in guzzling and drinking, and make his wife do all the saving whilst he talks about the low price of corn.

We are back again in the neighbourhood of Burghclere in the month of October. The foxhounds are throwing off at Parr wood, and Cobbett insists upon going, not to hunt, but to give Dundas the chance "on his own particular dunghill," to take his revenge for what Cobbett said of him at Newbury. Cobbett rides up to Dundas as he emerges from the wood where they lost the fox, but a devil of a word or a look could Cobbett get out of him.

Having thoroughly enjoyed his boyish escapade, Cobbett explains to Richard later that this is the Dundas who saw two Speakers in the House of Commons, when Pitt complained he could see none, so drunk were both of them. That is not the kind of man to model your life on, fox-hunter though he be; for fox-hunting necessitates early rising and abstemious habits if you mean to be first at the kill. Better go to plough, by God, than become either a pluralist parson or a parasite riding rough-shod over other people.

Cobbett had always an eye for a pretty girl, and he tells us how pretty are the girls in Sussex and in the Kent marches. At Titchbourne, he has to pull up his horse, and ask a handsome gypsy girl carrying a huckster basket on her arm if she will tell him his fortune. She is six feet high, with most beautiful features. She answers in the negative and at the

[1] It is interesting to note that little Richard took his bride from the Palmers' house.

same time gives Cobbett a look, which seems to say it was *too late*. If only he had been thirty years younger!

This incident recalls that, as he rode through East Woodhay on a Sunday evening, Cobbett declared with a merry twinkle in his eyes he had never seen so many couples out before in a village. He points out that the poor are forced to do their courting in the lanes because there is no room in their overcrowded cottages, and that this is a most *auspicious* evening, very dark and mild for negotiations of this nature.

. . . . . .

We are now riding out from Kensington again, making for Winchester and taking Farnham on the way; for Cobbett, with true peasant pride, wants to show Richard where his grandfather lived. Of course, we have to visit Thursley; from Thursley we ride down the heath to Tilford where Cobbett has to dismount and measure the girth of an old oak tree. Thence we proceed to Bourn, and Cobbett shows Richard where he got his education—riding on the sand-hills and then on to Wrecklesham.[1] Here is a dismal sight to behold. A party of labourers at parish-work digging holes one day and filling them up the next, and breaking up stones lest bile might be created in the stomach of the overfed tax-eaters who drive over them! And amongst them an old playmate of mine, Richard. My God, to think I should live to see this at Farnham. Cobbett's hand goes into his pocket: they shall have wherewith to purchase some bread and cheese and beer.

In coming up from Moore Park to Farnham town we stop opposite the door of a little old cottage, which once had a damson tree growing in front of it. There were a parcel of children playing before the house. There, Dick, says Cobbett with pride, when I was just such a little creature as that one in the doorway, I lived in this very house with my Grandmother Cobbett. Richard pulled up his horse, and gazed with astonishment at the tiny old cottage. Could it be possible? Was not his father a great man, who had kept an establishment of horses and dogs at Botley? But, observed Cobbett significantly, Richard said nothing.

We are now riding into Winchester, where Cobbett is determined to give the farmers a "rustic harangue." The Government may pass their Six Acts; but they can't keep me from dining with the farmers. So with them he sits down

[1] Descendants of the Cobbett family are still to be found at Wrecklesham.

to eat at the Swan, and delivers a speech with his customary vigour, ending up with a toast to "a Reduction in Tithes," which is drunk with gusto.

We, of course, take Richard to see the cathedral, and Richard exclaims, "Why, papa, nobody can build such places *now*, can they?" "No, my dear," replies his father. "That building was made when there were no poor wretches in England called *paupers*; when there were no *poor-rates*; when every labouring man was clothed in good woollen cloth; and when all had a plenty of meat and bread and beer."

From Winchester we make for Southampton, which is a town on which Cobbeett looks with kindly eyes; for does it not contain the homes of Mr. Rogers, who paid his £1000 fine,[1] and of his friend Mr. Chamberlayne, the member for Southampton. Mr. Chamberlayne is a landowner who lives on the other side of the Itchen, over which we cross by the bridge. Mr. Chamberlayne owns most of the land bordering Southampton Water, and his estate contains Netley Abbey. He is a landowner after Cobbett's heart. He is good to the labouring poor. He can remember when wages were 13*s.* a week for labourers, and he *has given these wages ever since*, in spite of falling prices. He has, it is true, got less money in his bags than he would have if he had ground men down, observes Cobbett, but his sleep ought to be sounder than that of the hard-fisted wretch who can walk over ten acres of lawns kept in order by a poor creature that is half-starved. If his sleep isn't sounder, then the Scripture is a bundle of lies. [2]

Mr. Chamberlayne's place, Weston Grove, being but a few miles from Botley, we, of course, run over to Cobbett's old parish, where he used to farm, for the sake of getting a glimpse of the Botley parson, in much the same spirit in which Cobbett rode up to Mr. Dundas. But the devil of a sight of him could we get, in spite of our bellowing and cracking of whips under his windows at this breakfast time. The cunning old fox will not budge. He was one of those wretched parsons who applauded the Power-of-Imprisonment Bill, and spat at Lord Cochrane at the Winchester meeting. Well, well, his time is coming surely enough. . . .

The turnips here are as fine a crop as Cobbett has ever

[1] See p. 181.

[2] A Mr. Chamberlayne owned the estate when I was a schoolboy trespassing in the beautiful woods after birds' nests, with the keepers pursuing me and firing, to scare me with their guns.—F. E. G.

seen. And so they ought to be, for (although he failed through his extravagance) was he not tutor to the Botley farmers in the cultivation of turnips? He has a good look at the trees he planted round his old homestead and is proud of their growth. We now put our horses towards Thursley in Surrey, a stiffish ride, but Mr. Knowles's at Thursley is almost as favourite a stopping-place with Cobbett as Mr. Blount's at Hurstbourne Tarrant. True, it is difficult to avoid that villainous track of heath known as Hindhead, but it can be done by by-paths. We ride over Buster Hill, three miles from Petersfield, and notice clouds gathering in a peculiar way which reminds Cobbett of the clouds which gathered over Penyard Hill in Herefordshire, which effect was called Old Penyard smoking his pipe, and signified rain.

We bait our horses at Liphook and overtake a man asking for relief. Cobbett is about to give the man money when he learns that the man is a Spitalfields weaver. Cobbett instantly puts on his glove and returns his purse to his pocket. "What," he exclaims, "you ask *me* for relief, you who are one of those who sent a base, crawling petition to the Prince Regent saying you were not men guilty of seditious practices in 1817 and 1819, and approve of all the infamous Acts passed in those years." The weaver explains they only expressed these sentiments in order to get relief. Oh, base dog, cries Cobbett, it is by such means ruin is brought upon nations; by such baseness, insincerity and cowardice. Go: I shall give my money to some more deserving man.

The unfortunate weaver lost his money, and Cobbett, true to his word, finding that he had three shillings and sixpence by fasting, gave a shilling apiece to three poor fellows getting in turf for their winter fuel. The sixpence he gave to a boy at the bottom of Hindhead, towards buying a pair of gloves.

We would have liked to visit Selborne, because Cobbett had heard that the parson there had observed the habits of birds and other wild things, and written an interesting book called *The History and Antiquities of Selborne*, or something of that sort; but this Selborne is a little out of our way. Cobbett tells us he would certainly have got this book before, but as *the Thing* was biting *so very sharply*, he has no time for antiquarian researches; but now with wheat at 39*s.* a qr., and South Down ewes at 12*s.* 6*d.*, *the Thing's* jaws have been so weakened he will certainly read the book if he

can get it. It is a pity that all parsons were not like this one, living as real shepherds to their flocks, and understanding wild life, instead of living elsewhere and preaching unsavoury political sermons.

We arrive at Thursley at five o'clock and get free quarters at the Knowles's. But our rides to Thursley have not always been so expeditious. Cobbett had so fierce an objection to Hindhead, the most villainous spot on God's earth, it was a barren heath, would grow nothing worth having, save turf for fuel and bracken for pig bedding, that he would take infinite trouble to avoid the austere, wind-swept heath. It was difficult to avoid riding over Hindhead as you came up from Hampshire making for Thursley; and he objected to that "sink-hole" of a Borough, Haslemere, which returned that celebrated "as clear as noon-day sun," Charles Long. Besides there was the Semaphore, which was an offensive sight to Cobbett; and on one occasion his guide, who promised to show him a way to Thursley from the Hampshire border without touching Hindhead, brought Cobbett out on the very top of Hindhead, and forfeited his tip! If Cobbett had not stood six feet, he would probably have heard more about it from the man. It was on this occasion that when, riding past an inn, he saw men drinking and idling away their time, he considered them the greatest fools on earth; but when he himself got wet through and saw men sitting smoking in their smock-frocks round a fire in another inn which Cobbett entered with chattering teeth, he re-considered his opinion and regarded them as looking as wise an assembly of men as he had ever seen, certainly much wiser than the *Collective Assembly*.

Once we arrive at Thursley by way of Chiddingfold, as we come up from North Chapel, where once post-chaises were kept, but now alas only "bumpers", or "commercial gentlemen" driving about in gigs, visit the inns. It is Sunday as we ride into Chiddingfold, and we meet the folk going to church. First we meet a lord in his carriage, who, Cobbett learns, is Lord Winterton. I thought I knew all the lords, says he, but I never heard of this one. He seems greatly afflicted with gout, but is a harmless sort of man. Then we meet one of those new charity schools of boys with pale faces, all dressed in uniforms and marching solemnly to church. A nice cheap way to pave your way to Heaven, after stripping the shirts off their backs, and snatching the food out of their mouths, to

send a subscription to that wine-merchant fellow in Mark Lane to *educate* the poor. A little less education, and a little more victuals would have done as well, mutters Cobbett, and he wants to share his breakfast, which he had not eaten, amongst them; however, to relieve his feelings he gave sixpence to a poor man of whom he had asked the way, which he knew, and whose directions he had determined not to follow.

Squire Leech, of Lea House, Witley, which is close to Thursley, is an English squire, to be proud of. *He knows how to plant trees.* But he should plant locust trees instead of ash, for the locust will make as good hop poles in five years as the ash will make in ten. Then look at the pines for ship-building; it will provide, besides, hurdle-stakes, fold-shores, and hedge-stakes.

At Thursley there are beagles and greyhounds, and Richard is beginning to get too interested in hunting. He even begins to talk scornfully of *coursing*! It is time I talked to him, says Cobbett, and so as we ride along the Godalming Road, which Cobbett regards as one of the prettiest roads for scenery in England, he discourses thus to Richard. There are all sorts of men, Richard, like dogs, and hunting men as a class are better than *shooters.* Hunting means early rising, and that is good. You do take risk as you ride after your quarry, but shooters take none, only the poor devils of ragged-trousered beaters who stand in danger of being shot by some stock-jobber or fund-holder who nowadays rents the shooting. Shooters, like anglers, are such liars. They are always boasting of their shots; and yet what sport can there be in these new-fangled *battues*? A butcher's trade! Listen to any conversation you like in the next inn we stay at, and you can pick out the shooters from the hunters, by the bragging that is going on. Hunters are always talking of the skill or endurance of their horses or hounds; shooters are always bragging of themselves. It is good to ride well and to be in at the death; but that is not ALL; that is not everything. Any fool can ride a horse and draw a cover; any groom, or stable-fellow, who is as ignorant as the horse, can do these things; but all gentlemen that go a fox-hunting (I hope God will forgive me for the lie) are scholars, Richard. It is not the riding, nor the scarlet coats, that make them gentlemen; it is their scholarship. After the "rustic harangue" Richard sat as mute as a fish. What he thought was not vouchsafed

to his father, who immediately began giving him a lesson in arithmetic.

The road into Guildford has a great fascination for Cobbett, and is not Guildford the cleanest town in England, and the town which contains the cleanest looking people and the most happily situated? Here are chalk and sand, hill and dale, a navigable river, and woods the most beautiful to behold. Nothing wild or bold, but exceedingly pretty, without any flat marshes to plague you with their skeleton agues. Though it is raining hard, this ride is most pleasurable, for the soil is good and the roads are good.

Here comes Tommy Onslow who lives near Merrow, and has the reputation for being a good landlord. I know he called me a d——d Jacobin, whilst he and his yeoman cavalry were doing their best to defeat my measures which would have enabled him to keep his four-in-hand. And now he is driving in a gig; and whilst his lordship is driving into Guildford in a one-horse gig, I'm hanged if Spicer, the stockbroker, who was Chairman of the Committee for prosecuting Lord Cochrane, is not rattling down the High Street in a spanking four-in-hand. Well, the man who headed the list for Surrey in support of the paper system was Lord Onslow, and now he must suffer for it.

We now enter the beautiful vale of Tillingbourne, which will lead us to Dorking and thence to Reigate. The turnips on both the chalk and the sand are excellent, and we pass a field of cabbage which must be yielding twenty-five tons to the acre. But here at Chilworth, to mar the beauty and peace of the valley, is this confounded paper mill. A gunpowder mill is tolerable; for gunpowder might be used to blow up villains: but a paper mill erected to make paper money is an abomination. Here, where there are beautiful hangars, green meadows, hop gardens, wooded hills, a series of lovely little lakes, here where the nightingales sing before they visit any other vale in England, to find amid such gifts of Providence the monstrous perversion of beauty by ungrateful man is too much to bear. However, let us enjoy the beauty of Mr. Drummond's garden with its yew hedge a quarter of a mile long, and Mr. Evelyn's woods at Wootton, with their wonderful variety of trees.

Reigate is a great resort of the *whiskered gentry*, Jews and stock-jobbers, who have twenty coaches to serve them every day going to and from London. These gentry pass through

Reigate too from Brighton on their way to Change Alley. The Turnpike Road on that soil of gravel and clay on the road towards London is especially made up for these money-changers to save their delicate spines. It is true they pay the turnpike men, but they get the money from the land and the labourers. It is time these degenerate dogs were swept away. This land towards Cranley is stiffish wheat and beans land, but towards Bletchingley it is lighter. But before we go on to Bletchingley, we will go and have a look at " Squire Charington's farm sale, " a common enough sight nowadays," at Bury's Court. The farm lies just across the Mole, which floods the road to Leigh in winter; and here is one of the prettiest flour mills in England. Why, here is a man with a fine flock of turkeys, and when I asked him how he reared so fine a flock, he told me he had read a book called *Cottage Economy*. When I think of the good I have done to my country, and the harm the rulers are doing, it makes my blood boil to think they are still in power. Well, here is " Squire " Charington's, as I suppose he is now called, for none of *his* sons go to plough, I wager!

Not a house but an occasional farm-house is to be seen east of Reigate; nevertheless that rotten borough of Gatton returns two members![1] Bletchingley is another rotten borough, fortunately out of sight of Godstone, which is a pretty village, with a large pond and violets as big as small pinks growing in the cottage gardens.

. . . . . .

We are now riding into Billingshurst in Sussex to breakfast at seven o'clock at the King's Arms, and it is the first of August. We spent the night at Horsham which is, like all Sussex towns, a clean town with clean people, but what clay this Wealden clay is! It is all part and parcel of that bottomless clay our poor horses had to scramble through between Ockley and Ewhurst, when the blackthorn was in bloom, where Cobbett gave his horse a feed of oats and himself a cooked rasher of bacon; well-wooded land which grows three things excellently: oaks, wheat and grass. How one would like to exchange this squirkey stiff soil for the chalk downs on which the horses' hoofs ring like the hammering of iron.

[1] Something of the value of Rotten Boroughs may be judged from the fact that in 1830 Lord Manson bought Gatton with its votes for two members for £100,000. This was a bad speculation; for the Reform Bill two years later robbed Lord Manson of his two members!

St. Swithin has reigned too long this summer and much hay is spoilt; the corn is backward: the barley and oats are green and the wheat only just beginning to change colour; but no blight. The beans are not good; they got lousy in the wet weather. Our landlady's little boy is sent out to get some cream; for this is a very decent public house. Now, says Cobbett, I was just such a chap at his age. I had a blue smock frock, the worse for wear, and patched with new bits of cloth. I wonder what he will become. If accident had not taken me from the plough, many a villain would have slept at peace by day and swaggered about at night. Billingshurst, resumes Cobbett, is a good distributing centre, judging by the coal and timber yards, and there are kilns for lime.

We leave Stane Street, the old Roman Road which strikes like an arrow through the heart of Sussex, making for its target Chichester. Cross the river Arun and ride towards Petworth, nine miles distant. The ground rises, and superb views of the Surrey and Sussex hills are visible. We pull up and Cobbett points out Leith Hill, Blackdown and the South Downs. He looks over a farmyard gate and observes that he introduced these black, thin-haired Sussex pigs into the United States when he fled from Old Sidmouth. His trip across the Atlantic benefited both nations; for, besides taking the black pigs to America and Swedish-turnip seeds, he was the means of introducing straw plat making in England, to supplement the Italian; and imported American apple trees as well as the locust tree.

Arriving at Westborough Green (Wisborough Green), we see a woman bleaching her home-spun and home-woven linen. Such a sight, cries Cobbett enthusiastically, I have not seen since I left Long Island. If we could only revive spinning and weaving in our cottages, and show the women how to make Leghorn bonnets out of home-grown grasses, and thus prevent the rich ruffians in the towns from making women and children work in slave groups, and stealing the produce of their labour, there would be no poor-rates to pay in Merry England.

Why, here is a man, actually breaking stones on the road with a sledge-hammer. Why aren't they employing you on the land instead of on the road, asks Cobbett? That I can't tell, Sir, answers the man. Why, here, says Cobbett, are farmers all behind with their hay, wanting labour, and you are only doing work to make it easier for those who ride in gigs or coaches.

It is going to be a wet night, predicts Cobbett.

Petworth is a solid little town with a magnificent house belonging to Lord Egremont and a beautiful park, inside of which acres of corn are growing. I wonder, says Cobbett, how long the present owner will keep the estate. Ever since Pitt began his reign of reckless finance and paper money, the old estates have passed rapidly into the hands of the Jews; and as for the poor, well, have not the wars with France stripped them of their commons, their kettles, their bedding and their beer-barrels?

From Petworth we set out for Singleton, climbing the South Downs at Duncton Hill. Some turnip hoers in a field assure us that there is not going to be rain before night; but Cobbett points to the white curled clouds called *judges' wigs*, beginning to poke up over the Downs. Besides, are not the sheep on the hill-side, like a string of pearls, turning their tails towards the wind, and the rabbits coming out of the woods to feed in the sun? Are not these sure signs of rain? Never mind, I want a cure for whooping-cough, and perhaps two or three hours spent amongst the clouds on the South Downs will be the remedy!

What a magnificent view it is from the top of Duncton Hill, with the clouds massing up from the south-west. As we face westwards all the land for miles to the right belongs to Lord Egremont, and all the land to the left across the billowy downs to the flat land past Goodwood, belongs to the Duke of Richmond; and on that tongue of rich brick earth of which Selsey Bill forms the tip, tasting the salt of the sea, they grow from six to eight quarters of wheat to the acre. This is country to delight the eye of the horseman. Why, from here to Hampshire, past Compton and the Marden is nothing but rolling downs; no hedges to impede you; no gates to open. If there were not so many villains left unhung who plunder the people and ruin the country, how I would like to settle here. These are Cobbett's thoughts, as he sits on his horse gazing westwards over the fair landscape, ignoring the threatening clouds overhead.

Why, I have seen, he resumes cheerfully, as the sound of approaching rain is heard in the woods and the salt of the sea is on our lips, I have seen in the month of July as many as four teams of large oxen, six in a team, all ploughing in one field in preparation for wheat, and several pairs of horses in the same field, dragging, harrowing, and rolling, and have seen,

on the other side of the road, from five to six quarters of wheat standing upon the acre, and from nine to ten quarters of oats standing alongside of it, each of the two fields from fifty to a hundred statute acres. That is what I call farming.

Besides the good land for farming at the foot of the Downs, are there not the beautiful woods of birch and beech in the coombes? And what is more delightful to behold than a coppice in spring bespangled with primroses and bluebells? The opening of the birch leaves is the signal for the pheasant to trumpet his song, for the blackbird to whistle, and the thrush to sing; and just when the oak-buds begin to look reddish, and not a day before, the whole tribe of finches bursts forth into song from every bough, while the lark carries his joyous sound to the sky.

Ruminating thus, Cobbett gazes seawards, and, in the middle distance across the saddle of the downs, watches a flock of seagulls following a plough, their fluttering white wings encircling the ploughman's head with a silver halo. A moist film covers Cobbett's eyes. Did he see a Vision of the Crucified One? . . . To dispel the surge of emotion he suddenly canters across to the ploughed field into the whispering rain now growing louder and louder. He dismounts and, stooping over the furrows glistening with the sweet sweat of the freshly turned earth, he crumbles a lump of it lovingly in his hands, and then wiping his fingers in the grassy headland, draws on his gloves, and with a sigh, mounts and gallops into the cloud of on-rushing rain.

Duncton is a very pretty village, and its fine apple trees lie sheltered from the boisterous south-west winds. The church is a very small one, twenty feet by thirty feet. But the living is a large one, and the parson does not reside in the parish. At Upwaltham is another small church, large enough, however, to hold its population of seventy-nine; but the rector says the rectory is not big enough to hold him. What impudence to say his home is but "*a miserable cottage.*" What right has a follower of Jesus Christ to talk about free houses to live in?

The gardens of the cottages are good and well kept, and there is a pig in every sty; and what delighted me, resumes Cobbett, is that a labourer of whom I asked the way between Upwaltham and East Dean came running to me from the shelter of the hedge with a lump of *household* bread in his hand, and a not very small piece of bacon. "You get bacon, then,"

I cried. "Oh yes, sir, we *will* have that," he answered. Yes, the men of Sussex *will* have a *meat* pudding of some sort or other; they will have a fire to sit by in the winter. I wager their rabbit pies are not all crust. That is because it is a woodland country. Wherever there are woods the men are better fed. They pick up, no doubt, a few rabbits. They are neither cribbed for room nor supervised as in the fat cornlands, for *fat* land usually means *lean* labourers, so greedy are the farmers to take in every inch of land for themselves. Think of breakfasting on a mess of cold potatoes as the forlorn wretches do at *Great Bedwin* and *Cricklade*. What a difference, good God! what a difference between this county and Gloucestershire.

At the Upwaltham toll gate I found a woman, he resumes, who had some *straw plat* lying on a chair. Her husband was making a hat for himself to wear at harvest. I told her how to get better straw, and how the grass or straw must be cut green. She must have a copy of my *Cottage Economy*; and, if any gentleman living near Chichester will call at the office of the *Register* in Fleet Street, my son will give him a copy of *Cottage Economy*, if he will deliver it to the woman and have the goodness to point out to her the Essay on Straw Plat.

It has been a real soaking day, but what does it matter? I've seen labourers eating bacon, a woman bleaching home-woven cloth; another working at straw plat, and a pig in every labourer's sty. I am wet through; but the corn all round here is a fine crop and Swedish turnips are grown in abundance. I strip off my coat, dry that by one fire, and dry my shirt on my back in front of another fire. We will see what that will do for the whooping cough. The Devil is said to be busy in a *high* wind; but he really appears to be busy now in this south-west wind, and the Quakers next market day, at Mark Lane, will be as busy as he.

. . . . . .

Cobbett had to revise his opinion that the West Sussex labourer was so much better off than the labourers in Hampshire and Gloucestershire, and that was when he came across the insiduous working of the Speenhamland system. Besides, was it not in Sussex that free-born English labourers had been yoked like horses to draught-work, and their leader with a bell hung round his neck? And yet the enlightened Protestants speak of the slavery of the feudal system in Catholic times. Could anything be worse than this, Joe Hume? The

Sussex farmers were so angry with me, says Cobbett, for giving full tongue to this monstrous degradation of my fellow-countrymen in the *Register*, that they wanted to throw me out at a meeting of farmers I attended at Lewes, until I rose from my seat to let them see what kind of man they had to put out.

It was on a short journey from Petersfield to Petworth in November, 1825, when Richard's horse seemed not fit for a ride to Worth, that we took this route and saw the beauties of the "*wauste improvements, ma'am,*" in full working condition. At Rogate, resumes Cobbett, I met a man hedging, and asked him what he got for it, and he said 1*s.* 6*d.* a day; that the *allowed* wages was 7*d.* a day for the man, *and a gallon loaf a week for the rest of the family.* If the man have full work, his 9*s.* a week does not purchase a gallon loaf each for a wife and three children, and two gallon loaves for himself, and there is fuel and clothing to buy and rent to pay. Why, the convicted felons have a pound and a half each of bread a day besides some meat. The honest labourer must be left to starve on Sundays. It is just 7*d.* for each working day, less than half what the meanest foot-soldier in the army receives; and he has clothing, candle, fire and lodging as well. Well may we call our happy state "the envy of surrounding nations, and the admiration of the world!"

A group of men, as we ride into Rogate, are standing by the ancient churchyard wall. Do you think, I said to them, that those who lie under those old mounds, ever worked for a pound and a half of bread a day? They looked hard at me and at one another, but said nothing. I could have told them that before the Protestant Reformation the labourers of Rogate received 4*d.* a day from Michælmas to Lady Day; 5*d.* a day from Lady Day to Michælmas, except at grass-mowing and harvest time, when they received 7*d.* a day, and bacon was then *not so much as a half-penny a pound.* I could have told them then a good deal more, but they will be able to read for themselves in my *History of the Protestant Reformation.*

My God! here is food for reflection in this part of Sussex. Look at the abbeys and priories stolen from the Church and the poor by that scoundrel the pious Harry. We are approaching the abbeys and priories of Cowdray, Easebourne and Shulbride, and a little farther off are Box Grove, Hardham, Arundel and Storrington. Think how the poor used to benefit from the tithes collected from them, and then think of our pluralist parsons.

Past the beautiful Trotton Common, with the leaping curves of the South Downs ever on our right, we reach Cowdray, which is now in the hands of one named Poyntz, who married a Miss Brown, whose ancester, Sir Anthony Brown, physician to the holy Harry, was granted the estate. This estate contains forty or fifty manors. We enter the park through the iron gate-way, which shows a gap stopped by a hurdle. Innumerable jackdaws and starlings occupy the ruins of the noble residence burnt down soon after it was built. Mr. Poyntz was living in the head-keeper's lodge. It will soon be in the hands of the Jews, I wager, resumes Cobbett as we ride away to Petworth. We find that the wall of this park measures nine miles. When we reach the town, we see further evidences of the advantages of enclosures—a Bridewell, bigger than the town-hall, with a wall round it twenty feet high!

We are now in Kent. I got clear of "the Wells," remarks Cobbett, out of the contagion of the Wen-engendered inhabitants, by rousing the boots and maids at any early hour, thereby making a great stir. I got the reputation of being "a d——d noisy troublesome fellow." However, I was determined to breakfast at some honest village after a canter on horseback, so I reach Goudhurst after seeing for the first time some common heath blooming by the roadside in the park of Lord Abergavenny. I don't grudge him his beautiful estate, and may he keep it from the unholy grasp of Jews and jobbers; but I cannot forget he is a sinecurist. At Frant, over the schoolhouse was a motto, "Train up a child as he should walk." But do they teach the children that it is wrong for Lord Abergavenny to roll in wealth whilst they, the poor children, lack bread? However, taxes are now coming out of the farmers' capital and the landlords' estate. It is a beautiful system. The *labourers* have given their all; they are stupefied; now the landlords as they deserve are feeling the pinch of the saddle.

There are some very fine hop-gardens at Horsenden before I got to Goudhurst where I heard the Dean was to preach a sermon on National Schools. Whilst waiting for his reverence's arrival I visited, says Cobbett, a Methodist meeting-house, where a well-fed sleek-looking schoolmaster with a tight skin was shaking the brimstone bag most furiously at thirty-six little fellows in smock-frocks and about as many girls. The Dean preached to 214 folk, and fifty-three National

school-children, in a church capable of holding 3000 people. No appeal to either reason or feeling; no attempt to show the use of schools. And we are supposed to send out subscriptions to one Joshua Watson, a wine-merchant in Mincing Lane, to promote Christian knowledge amongst flocks shepherded by deans, prebendaries, archdeacons, canons, bishops, reverends and right reverends. What a prince of godliness this wine merchant of Mincing Lane must be!

A Dean, a big church and a fine Sunday, and yet there were not *ten* labourers in that church. The labouring population have ceased attending church; for I can remember the day when, I am sure, five hundred men and boys in smock-frocks trooped into church, and so loud was the rattling of their nailed shoes on the stone floor, that the parson had to wait for them to be seated before he began the service.

However, let us jog along. Mr. Hodges' *ash* do very well. But what we want is an everlasting hop-pole. That I must discover, and Kent will make me as big a saint as Thomas. What is the loud talk about *houses! houses! houses!* as we ride into Bennenden. Why, it's a Methodist parson preaching in a cottage, "Do you know you have houses in the heavens, not made with hands?" Hm! the plump, rosy girls listening to this discourse on houses looked as if they would like to serve an apprenticeship in houses now, before they entered Heaven, houses with pig-sties and snug little gardens attached to them. The Methodist preachers are as foolish as the Church parsons. By the bye, I wrote some hymns for these Methodist preachers and published them in *Twopenny Trash*, and I give leave to any Methodist parson to put them into his hymn book. But here is something better, something that will cause a cottager to smile. Here at Bennenden are some bunches of straw lying upon the quickset hedge of a cottage garden. On inquiry, I found the cripple, who was making *Leghorn-plat*, had got the notion from a little book by Mr. Cobbett!

At Tenterden, which is a bright market town with a street in some places 200 feet wide, we meet a number of pretty girls coming out of church. These girls, exclaims Cobbett, are as pretty as the girls in the *Pays du Cœur* just across the water. And here is a church which could hold 2000 people, if worshippers all stood as they should stand or kneel upon a *level* before God; instead of that, though, they are partitioned off in deep boxes made of deal boards, which disfigure the noble

building. This reminds me, resumes Cobbett, with a chuckle, of a Frenchman who went to a Protestant church with me for the first time in Philadelphia. He saw everybody comfortably seated in pews whilst a couple of stoves were keeping the place as warm as a slack oven; "*Pardi!*" he exclaimed, "*On sert Dieu bien à son aise, ici!*"

We leave Tenterden at five o'clock in a fog so thick that the low-lying land looks like the sea out of which emerge the tops of trees. Quitting Appledore we cross a canal and enter Romney marshes. Miles of verdant plain stretch around us. To the south-west sky and sea become one with the English Channel. Behind us the hills of Kent merge into the brooding clouds. Seagulls follow the ploughman as he turns up the stubble, but most of the land is old pasture. Here graze large herds of Sussex cattle and immense flocks of marsh sheep. Most of the cattle are bred at the upland farms. They are calved in the spring; put into the stubbles for the first summer; then brought into the yard to winter on rough hay, or barley straw; and the next two summers they spend in the rough woods or in the "forests"; the two winters they live in straw; they then pass another summer in the "forest," or *at work*; and then they come here to be fattened. This marsh abounds in cattle and sheep, and the sight is most beautiful! On the ploughland they get more than five quarters to the acre and the green marshes are covered with meat, and yet the people live in wretchedness. Here is exemplified the truth of my observation: *rich land* and *poor labourers*. At Brenzett, it was with great difficulty I got a rasher of bacon for breakfast, and I could not get an egg. And yet out of the window I saw numberless flocks and herds fattening, and the fields loaded with corn. The few cottages one saw were miserable huts. Snargate contains five houses and a church capable of holding 2000 people, and yet vagabonds tell us we have a surplus population. Our system peoples Bagshot Heath, which produces nothing, with sinecurists, and depopulates Romney marsh, which yields us everything.

There are eighty-four men, women, boys and girls gleaning in a field of ten acres, and everybody complains bitterly of the times. We bait our horses at New Romney and go down to the sea beach. "Good God!" exclaims Cobbett suddenly in a loud voice. "What is this?" Oh, shades of Pitt, Percival and Dundas, "The *Martello Towers*, by . . ." And

then we are treated to another disquisition on the follies of Pitt and Castlereagh.

Look at them! I have counted along here thirty of these ridiculous things, each costing from five to ten thousand pounds, and there is a chain of them all the way to Hastings, costing millions; and they sold one the other day for £250! Everywhere on the hills barracks and masses of fortification tumbling into ruin. And what were they all *for*? To help the French Jacobins to help the English Jacobins. And what has been the good of it all? Ask the ghost of Pitt, who died of a broken heart; ask the ghost of Castlereagh, who cut his own throat; ask the ghost of the ruined Hampshire farmer, who blew out his brains with one of those pistols he carried in his yeomanry cavalry holster to be ready "to keep down the Jacobins and Radicals." Ask the Kentish farmer what has become of his smart uniform and his bright sword. Does he hang them up now in the parlour or kitchen? Not he; you will have to look in some cock-loft for them, where they hang soiled and rusty. And what were they afraid of? That the labourer, instead of spending his time burning ricks, might spend his time on a bit of ground, where he could keep a pig, to provide himself with a bit of bacon, or a cow to give his children a drop of milk, or produce a few onions, which he might eat behind the hedge as he rests from his labours, with a bit of a home-made cheese, and a drop of home-brewed beer? That was why Jacobinism had to be kept down. But the farmers are paying for their folly, and the *loyal* Cinque Ports are being handsomely squeezed!

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What a coast and county this is to gather illustrations of the folly and ruin of the age! Dover is an abominable place; and we give Ramsgate and Margate a wide berth, for they are full of stock-jobbing cuckolds. We breakfast at an inn at a hamlet in the rich corn-growing Isle of Thanet—the Garden of England—but no poor man's garden. Oh, no! the land is too rich to squander a rod of it on any labouring man possessed of a spade. Why, here, at the inn, I can get no corn for my horse, no bacon for myself, and I am surrounded with corn, resumes Cobbett, in high indignation. Wheat growing five quarters to the acre, and barns 200 feet long, and no corn for my horse. The cottages wretched in the extreme. The people ragged and dirty. No woods, no commons, no grassy lanes; a country of large farms and every inch

appropriated by the rich. At Monckton I saw *seventeen men working on the roads*; and yet the harvest was not all in! At Up Street I saw a board put up on a pole on which was written "Paradise Place. *Spring guns and steel traps are set here.*" A pretty idea of Paradise to set before heathen labourers. Take every inch of land, starve them, and then catch them when in search of food in steel traps! Let us return to Kensington by way of Canterbury and see how my little market garden of four acres is doing, and if the corn in a field at Earl's Court, which was turning pretty red a few weeks ago is harvested.

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This was not the only instance where Cobbett came across the use of spring guns and steel traps. Riding into the Eastern Counties in April, 1820, he was attracted at St. Ives, by a handbill which advertised farming stock for sale, and amongst the implements of husbandry were "*an excellent fire-engine, several steel traps and spring guns.*"

Whilst in Lincolnshire Cobbett notices the richness of the land at Holbeach, which parish he declares to be equal in value to the whole county of Surrey, if you leave out the little hop-garden of Farnham; but the Boston-Horncastle district of Lincolnshire has one grave defect. This is April, and I have only heard four skylarks singing and seen only one yellow-hammer. Oh! the thousands of linnets all singing together on one tree in the sand-hills of Surrey! Oh! the carolling in the coppices and dingles of Hampshire and Sussex and Kent. At this moment (five o'clock in the morning) the groves of my farm at Barn-Elm are echoing with the warblings of thousands upon thousands of birds. Milton is to be commended for not painting a paradise without the "song of earliest birds." The thrush begins just before it is light; next the blackbird; next the larks begin to rise; and from the long dead grass come the sweet and soft voices of the white-throats . . . . Yet though Lincolnshire is deficient in song birds, God has given man all he can ask for in richness of soil.

Cobbett is now addressing crowded audiences at Grimsby, Lincoln, Horncastle, Boston and Louth. Everywhere, he tells us, in spite of the fertility of the land, the labourers are miserable. The highest wages are 12*s.* a week for married men and less for single. Most farmers prefer to let the men fall upon the parish. A procession of fat sheep and hogs

passes the inn door at Spittal on their way towards the Wen to be consumed by the all-devouring jaws of the Jews; whilst we dine on a skinny hard leg of old ewe mutton. I saw three poor fellows, continues Cobbett, digging stones for the roads, who told me they never had anything but bread to eat and water to wash it down. One of them was a widower with three children, and his pay was 1*s.* 6*d.* a day; that is to say about three pounds of bread a day each for six days in the week; nothing for Sunday, and nothing for lodging, washing, candle-light or fuel! Just such was the state of things in France on the eve of the Revolution, and precisely the same were the *causes*. At Ely, in the presence of fifty farmers, a large farmer at the White Hart Inn told me he had *three* men cracking stones on the road as paupers, and each one of these men had been overseer of the poor of the same parish within seven years.

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In the spring of 1830, we visit with Cobbett the Midlands, and he is now on foot walking out from Leicester to Knighton, where he breakfasts, and then from Knighton Hill gazes at the scene around him. You have nothing to do but to walk through these villages, he declares, to see the cause of the increase of the gaols. Standing on the hill, you see the ancient and lofty and beautiful spires rising up at Leicester; you see the river winding down through a broad bed of the most beautiful meadows that man ever set his eyes on; you see the bright verdure covering all the land, even to the tops of the hills, with here and there a little wood, as if made by God to give variety to the beauty of the scene, for the river brings coal for fuel, and the earth gives the bricks and the tiles in abundance. But go down into the villages; invited by the spires, rising up amongst the trees in the dells, at scarcely ever more than a mile or two apart; invited by these spires, go down into these villages, view the large, and once the most beautiful, churches; see the parson's house, large, and in the midst of pleasure-gardens; and then look at the miserable sheds in which the labourers reside! Look at these hovels, made of mud and of straw; bits of glass, or of old cast-off windows, without frames or hinges frequently, but merely stuck in the mud wall. Enter them and look at the bits of chairs or stools; the wretched boards tacked together to serve for a table; the floor of pebble, broken brick, or of the bare ground; look at the thing called a bed; and survey the rags on the

backs of the wretched inhabitants; and then wonder, if you can, that the gaols and dungeons and treadmills increase, and that a standing army and barracks are become the favourite establishments of England!

Having delivered himself of these reflections, Cobbett walks on to Hailstone, where he finds the roundsman system in vogue, and has much to say on pluralist parsons drawing fat livings from several parishes. But, he says, the country folk are beginning to understand these things. If you want to hide anything in your past life, never live in a village, where the people seem to know everything about you, just as in the Wen your next-door neighbour will not know your name. *The people will make no noise as a signal for action. They will be moved by nothing but actual want of food.* They are shutting up male paupers in pounds in Bedfordshire and Buckinghamshire. To impound the labourers in cold weather will produce resistance; then will ensue the rummaging of pantries and cellars; and finally vast mobs intent on violence will gather together as the revolt spreads from parish to parish.

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Thus speaks and writes the prophet in the autumn of 1829, and the spring of 1830. Before the year was out ricks were blazing in the southern counties.

CHAPTER XXII

THE REFORM MOVEMENT—THE LABOURERS' REVOLT

THE three years from 1830 to 1832 were the busiest of Cobbett's life. Into them were crowded the final exciting phases of the struggle for Parliamentary Reform, the last revolt of the agricultural labourers in the southern and western counties, the prosecution of Cobbett himself by the Whig Government in connection with this revolt, lecture tours and rides extending as far as the northern counties and Scotland, and finally, two parliamentary contests, culminating in his election as member for Oldham. A full enough programme for the sixty-seventh to sixty-ninth years of a man's age, even if that man was Cobbett.

Suddenly, in the first months of 1830, the movement for political reform gathered fresh momentum. In town and country alike, there had been a recurrence of severe distress. The commercial convalescence of 1827 had not been confirmed: there had been a serious relapse and a general renewal of the prophecies of disaster. The burden of tithes, taxes and rates became heavier than ever: the manufacturers and farmers joined loudly in the cry for Reform. The working-class movement, which had reared up, under the inspiration of Cobbett, Owen, Hodgskin and other writers and speakers, a new generation of leaders, began suddenly to organise on a large scale and with a definitely political object. Cheap papers and pamphlets, published often in defiance of the "Taxes on Knowledge," multiplied exceedingly. *The Poor Man's Advocate* was started by John Doherty in Lancashire in 1829: Henry Hetherington's *Poor Man's Guardian* followed in London in 1830. William Carpenter's *Political Letters* began a new, and far more influential series: Richard Carlile's *Prompter* [1] turned its attention far more directly to working-class affairs. In 1832 Robert Owen's disciples started *The Crisis*, and Morrison and J. E. Smith *The Pioneer*, the Owenite organ of the new Builders' Union.

Side by side with this growth of journals went a huge

[1] This had taken the place of *The Republican*. See p. 284.

increase in organisation. At the head of the cotton spinners, Doherty floated, in 1829, the Grand General Union of the United Kingdom, followed in 1830 by the National Association for the Protection of Labour, the first systematic attempt to form a general combination of all the Trade Unions in the country. The Short-Time Committees, demanding factory legislation, spread rapidly in 1830 through the northern and midland counties. The Owenites formed the London Co-operative Trading Association (in 1829), and many other local bodies, and the British Association for Promoting Co-operative Knowledge, their chief propagandist organisation, became very active. Out of the Radical Reform Society,[1] shorn of most of its middle-class elements, grew the National Union of the Working Classes and Others, the political expression of the working-class Radicalism of London, and the direct ancestor of the Chartist movement. In 1831 William Benbow's pamphlet, *A Grand National Holiday*, sketched out the first project for a general strike of the whole of the "industrious classes."

These movements of organisation, especially in London, owed a great deal to the example of Ireland. The new Radical associations were based very largely on the model of Daniel O'Connell's Catholic Association, by far the most successful spear-head of popular agitation known to the times. O'Connell and his followers, having won Catholic Emancipation at the price of disfranchising the forty-shilling freeholders, were now, contrary to the hopes of the English political leaders, but in full accordance with Cobbett's prophecies, energetically pursuing their demand for the repeal of the Act of Union. This Irish agitation is inextricably mixed up with English Radicalism throughout these years. The demand for repeal of the Union regularly finds a place in the programmes of the English working-class Radicals: Irishmen play an important part in building up the Radical movement in England: Irish political leaders, like O'Connell and John Lawless, give a hand in the work of agitation in England in return for English support on the question of Repeal. That issue, and others relating to Ireland, occupy almost as much space in *The Political Register* as the Reform agitation or the "Labourers' War"; and the *Workmen's Advocate*, founded by James Watson in 1832, as the organ of the National Union of the Working Classes, divides its attention about equally between Repeal and English affairs.

[1] See *ante*, p. 308.

The rise of new working-class journals, sold for the most part at a penny or twopence and published, like *The Poor Man's Guardian*, "in defiance of authority" and the Stamp Taxes, so far from undermining Cobbett's influence, positively increased it. The *Register*, duly stamped, was indeed too expensive to reach a large working-class public, even with the aid of co-operative buying by societies, reading-rooms, and groups of working men. Nor was Cobbett prepared to emulate Carlile, Carpenter and Hetherington, by publishing without a stamp, "in defiance of authority," and passing his life in gaol as a result. In October, 1830, he actually doubled the size of the *Register*, and raised the price from *7d.* to 1*s.* a number, on the ground that it was impossible to find space for all the vital matters he desired to put forward. But he catered for the popular demand, first, by making more frequent the issue in pamphlet form of articles reprinted from the *Register*, and secondly by starting, in July, 1830, *Twopenny Trash*, an unstamped pamphlet which he could legally publish once a month, but not oftener, on payment of a small tax. In *Twopenny Trash*—he took the name from the abusive title bestowed by his opponents on the cheap *Register* of 1816—he made, month by month, an essentially simple and popular appeal, exposing abuses and setting out, in the plainest terms, the case for financial and parliamentary Reform, and chastising the Whigs, as well as the Tories, for their repressive policy in the "Rural War," and the Whigs for the insincerity of their democratic professions.

Moreover, Cobbett was not solely dependent for his influence upon his writings. Wherever he went, he was sure of a crowded and enthusiastic audience, and during these three years, from 1830 to 1832, he went ceaselessly about lecturing, or, when he was in London, engaged great halls, which were packed to the doors. In 1829, as we have seen, he made his first Northern Tour: in 1832 he toured through the Eastern Counties—at Cambridge the Vice-Chancellor of the University refused to allow him to speak—through the Midlands, and then through the Western Counties, and, in the autumn, through Kent, Sussex and Hampshire. Thereafter he was kept for some time in London by the political crisis, and by his trial for "inciting" the labourers to revolt. But late in 1831 he set off again for the north, and delivered his first series of *Manchester Lectures*, and many other harangues, to the industrial workers. Early in 1832, he was in Yorkshire,

passing thence to Birmingham, and through the Midland Counties. In the autumn, when the Reform Bill was at length safely passed, he set out again, delivered his second series of *Manchester Lectures*, and passed on into Scotland, whence he returned to fight his two election campaigns at Manchester and Oldham. He had intended, in 1831 and again in 1832, to visit Ireland; but this project had to be deferred, and his Irish tour did not take place till 1834. Apart from Ireland and Wales, he had been, during the three years of the great agitation, into every part of the country in which there was reasonable hope of rousing up a strong movement for Radical Reform.

Cobbett's lecturing activity, considered in relation to his other work, was indeed prodigious. For, whenever he was kept in London by business, he improved the occasion there. We have mentioned his lectures in 1829, at the London Mechanics' Institute. From this convenient place, like Hodgskin and others too Radical for the taste of Birkbeck, Brougham, and the rest of the Utilitarian improvers, he was shut out.[1] His denunciations of the Whigs did not suit Brougham and his friends of the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge: the tendency of the workers to create a movement of their own, wholly independent of Whig and middle-class influences, was most displeasing to those who wished the lower classes to accept unquestioningly the economics and the leadership of the "feelosofical villains" from Scotland and Manchester. Cobbett found a new home in the Rotunda in the Blackfriars Road, one of the two chief centres of working-class agitation in London. There he gave a series of lectures in September, 1830. In 1832, he lectured more than once under the auspices of the National Union of the Working Classes, and, in June, hired the Sans Souci Theatre, in Leicester Fields, for a series of lectures on *Men and Pledges*, in which he endeavoured to frame a programme and influence the choice of Radical candidates for the first Reformed Parliament.

Events, undoubtedly, of the greatest importance in furthering the cause of Reform in Great Britain were the French and Belgian Revolutions of 1830. If the French Revolution of 1789 put back Reform by stimulating the fears of the governing classes and causing a policy of repression, which British Radicalism was still far too weak to resist, the

[1] *P.R.*, February 26th, 1831.

French Revolution of 1830, of quite minor importance in itself, certainly helped to stimulate Radicalism in Great Britain. The Allies had restored Louis XVIII. in 1815, and he and his advisers had sense enough not to attempt the impossible task of upsetting the economic basis of the revolutionary settlement. But Charles X., who became king of France on Louis's death in 1824, was a mere bigoted and impracticable reactionary. By compensating the landowners at the fundholders' expense, he antagonised the moneyed classes: by an ultra-Catholic policy he estranged the Liberals: finally, by dissolving a hostile Chamber of Deputies and seeking to govern without one, he raised up insurrection in Paris. The insurrection was small; but it was too much for the Government to quell. Those who started the movement were republicans; but the Liberals, who had played no part in it, entered upon its inheritance. Charles X. fled the country; and the Liberals installed Louis Philippe, Duke of Orleans, of the younger branch of the Bourbons, as constitutional monarch under the strict control of the moneyed class. France became a "*bourgeois* monarchy." Belgium, which had been forcibly united to Holland by the Allies in 1815, took light from France. A Belgian insurrection broke out, and an independent Belgian State was successfully proclaimed, and established, with French military aid, against the attempts of Holland to subdue it. Poland also flared into revolt, and for a few months an independent Polish Government ruled at Warsaw.

The Polish insurrection was crushed in 1831; but the successful *coups* in France and Belgium demonstrated the collapse of the settlement of 1815, and of the Holy Alliance. They were not, indeed, in any real sense Radical movements. But what counted in England was their immediate effect, before there had been time to estimate their real character or political consequences. They were successful revolutionary movements in neighbouring countries, initiated at a moment when the people in Great Britain were seething with unrest, and largely penetrated by revolutionary feelings. "All England is stirring," wrote Cobbett in August, 1830, almost on the morrow of the revolution in France.[1] "I begin to see land," he wrote in October.[2] At last the effects of the long agitation for Reform were issuing in a real popular movement.

[1] *P.R.*, August 14th, 1830. [2] *P.R.*, October 30th, 1830.

Cobbett made the events in Europe the theme of his popular lectures at the Rotunda between August and October, 1830. They were reprinted in pamphlet form and widely sold, and they appeared in a volume, *Eleven Lectures on the French and Belgian Revolutions, and English Borough-mongering*, before the end of the year. Cobbett's whole aim was to point for his countrymen the moral of the events abroad. "The Revolution in France," he said, "was accomplished—not by the aristocracy—not by military gentlemen—not by gentlemen with whiskers or long spurs—not by gentlemen of any description, in fact—not even by the middle classes, but by the working people alone; by men who quitted their shops, who laid down their needles, and their awls, and their saws, and rushing out into the streets of Paris, said 'If there be no alternative but slavery, let us put an end to the tyrants." "I am pleased at the Revolution," he said, "particularly on this account, that it makes the working classes see their real importance, and those who despise them see it too." [1]

The French and Belgian Revolutions of 1830, whatever they became in effect, alike appeared at this stage to Cobbett and to the world in general as uprisings of the people against their rulers—popular movements destroying established orders and settlements, precedents to be welcomed or dreaded by the rival parties in Great Britain. On August 16th, Cobbett took the chair at a great dinner held to congratulate the people of France on their success.[2]: collections were started by the English Radicals to aid the French and Belgian Revolutionaries. Even after Louis Philippe had been established on the throne of France, Cobbett continued to prophesy the speedy coming of a Republic [3]; and he looked forward to the union of France and Belgium into a single State under popular control.[4] He desired a Republic for France, though he clung to his advocacy of a monarchy for Great Britain.

The revolutions abroad gave a fresh impetus to the movement of political organisation in this country. The Reform Societies and Political Unions which were springing everywhere into existence began to conceive of their mission as one of immediate action as well as of agitation. The Reform issue became the dominant political question of the hour. It became therefore urgent to formulate actual proposals, and

[1] *Lectures on the French and Belgian Revolutions.* Lecture I., p. 1.
[2] *P.R.*, August, 7th, 1830.
[3] *P.R.*, February 26th, 1831.
[4] *P.R.*, February 12th, 1831.

to decide how large an instalment of Reform to demand and insist upon as a minimum measure. But this was not an easy matter; for as soon as actual schemes had to be put forward, the divisions in the Reformers' ranks became evident. As long as it was enough to urge Reform in general terms, opponents of the existing régime could work together with comparatively little difficulty; but some wanted only to sweep away the rottenest of the rotten boroughs, and hand over their members to the counties and the growing towns, whereas others, including most of the leaders who had been long active in the movement, advocated annual Parliaments, vote by ballot, and manhood suffrage. Moreover, among those who theoretically favoured Reform of the latter type, there were many varieties of opinion. Some were willing at the outset to agree with the official Whigs on a programme of moderate Reform: some desired to stand out for something like their full claims, and accept nothing less: others favoured putting forward the full programme, only with the object of making a compromise later.

With the rise of Political Unions and similar societies throughout the country, the battle was everywhere joined on this issue. When a London Political Reform Society was started in July, 1830, Henry Hunt and the Radicals carried, against the desire of the committee, resolutions pledging the new body to the ballot and to manhood suffrage.[1] Cobbett, backing up Hunt, delivered in the *Register* a strong attack on the Benthamites and James Mill and their followers, whom he charged with desiring to hand the movement over to the moderates. He also roundly accused the Birmingham Political Union, the strongest of all the new bodies, of being in collusion with the Whigs against the Radicals.[2] This charge he frequently repeated at later stages in the agitation. The wide differences between those who desired to place political power in the hands of the new middle class and those who desired a leap to full political democracy were already being plainly shown.

George IV. had died in July, and Cobbett, following his usual custom, said exactly what he thought of him in the *Register*.[3] "As a son, as a husband, as a father, and especially as an *adviser of young men*, I deem it my duty to say that, on a review of his whole life, I can find no one good thing to speak of, in either the conduct or character of this king; and,

[1] *P.R.*, July 31st, 1830. [2] *Ibid.* [3] *P.R.*, July 3rd, 1830.

as an Englishman, I should be ashamed to show my head, if I were not to declare that I deem his reign (including his regency), to have been the most unhappy, for the people, that England has ever known." He began also to publish in parts his *History of the Regency and Reign of George IV.*, which he designed as the first instalment of a general popular history of England.[1] The death of the king involved a General Election, and the composition of the new House of Commons, despite the condition of the franchise, gave clear indications of the state of national feeling. Fifty seats changed hands, and the Whigs made great gains in the counties and in those towns which were not mere pocket boroughs. The new king, William IV., had old Whig associations, and was supposed to be a moderate Reformer by conviction. Troubles gathered rapidly about the Ministry of the Duke of Wellington. Negotiations had been set on foot for the passing by consent of a moderate measure of Reform, when the duke, apparently without consulting his colleagues, precipitated the crisis by an astounding and unequivocal declaration against Reform of any kind. The existing system of representation, he urged, "answered all the good purposes of legislation," to a greater extent than "any legislature in any country whatever." The system possessed, he said, "the full and entire confidence of the country"; and it would pass the wit of man to devise a better. Its supreme merit lay in a Parliament which "contained a large body of the property of the country, and in which the landed interests had a preponderating influence." Not only would his Government bring forward no measure of Reform: he would resist any measure that might be proposed by others. A few days later, on a financial motion concerning the Civil List, the Government was defeated in the House of Commons. Wellington resigned; and the king sent for the Whig leader, Earl Grey, who agreed to form a Ministry. The stage was at last set for the Reform struggle in Parliament itself.

From the moment when Grey accepted office, Cobbett ceaselessly warned the people against putting trust in the Whigs. For Grey himself, and for one or two of his colleagues, he had a sincere respect, which had endured through Grey's long leadership of the Whig opposition since the fall of the Ministry of All the Talents in 1807. He knew Grey to be an aristocrat by temperament, and a moderate by conviction:

[1] See p. 287.

but he believed him an honest man. For most of the Prime Minister's Whig colleagues he had no respect at all. Melbourne and the Canningites had backed the coercive measures of 1817 and 1819: Brougham, the new Lord Chancellor, was the leader of the "feelosofical villains" of the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge, and, though reputed a Radical, had been already very evasive about the lengths to which he would pledge himself to go towards Reform. Stanley, the Chief Secretary for Ireland, was Cobbett's old opponent at Preston. Moreover, the Ministry as a whole had an extraordinarily aristocratic flavour. Of the Cabinet, all the members save four were in the House of Lords, and of these four, one, Palmerston, was an Irish peer, one, Lord Althorp, heir to an earldom, one, Sir James Graham, a great landowner. Charles Grant was the only real commoner, and he ended by becoming a peer.[1] It seemed too paradoxical altogether to expect democratic measures from such a Government. "Watch the Whigs," was the constant advice of Cobbett through the whole progress of the struggle for Reform.

As a means of rallying Radical opinion to a common programme, and preventing Whig control of the Reform movement, Cobbett, in October, 1830, set out in the *Register* his *Plan of Parliamentary Reform*, which was also widely distributed in pamphlet form. It embraced five proposals.

"1. That a new Parliament shall be chosen every year.
2. That every man, having attained the age of eighteen, shall have a vote, and that no man shall have more than one vote.
3. That no man shall be excluded, whether pauper, soldier, sailor, or anything else, if he be of sane mind, and is not branded by sentence of a court of justice for some indelible crime which renders him incapable of giving evidence in a court of justice on civil matters.
4. That there be no pecuniary qualification for members, and that the only qualifications necessary shall be, that the member be a native of the county, that he have resided in it three years previous to being elected; and that each member be twenty-one years of age.
5. That the mode of choosing the members be by ballot."[2]

[1] He became Lord Glenelg in 1835.
[2] *P.R.*, October 30th, 1830.

This programme, in its essential features, was not of Cobbett's devising, but was the general programme of the Radical bodies of his day. It was, broadly speaking, the programme devised by Major Cartwright and an earlier generation of Radical Reformers. It had been thrust off the stage of politics by the repressions which accompanied the Anti-Jacobin wars; and it had emerged again at their close, and been eagerly taken up by the growing working-class societies, political and industrial, throughout the country. Manhood suffrage was the essential and governing demand. Annual Parliaments were deemed necessary as a bulwark against parliamentary corruption and a means of ensuring that the will of the people should prevail over the wills of their representatives: they were claimed, not as an innovation, but as a return to ancient parliamentary practice. The ballot was demanded in order both to prevent intimidation and corruption of voters, and to promote peace at elections. The abolition of pecuniary qualifications was to ensure actual representation of the common people, and not merely their "virtual representation," by Whig aristocrats and rich employers of labour. There was to be no pauper disqualification; for that would mean that a very large section of the workers would have no votes.

Other features were added to, or taken away from, the Radical programme from time to time; but these five points of Cobbett's, embodying a complete system of democratic representation in Parliament, are its essential and abiding features.

This programme, round which and round his own personality Cobbett was now seeking to rally Radical opinion—the "Cobbettites," as he now loved to call his followers—was very different from the moderate ideas of the leading Whig Reformers. Lord Grey and his associates had no intention of "shooting Niagara," of taking the plunge from the almost completely unrepresentative system of the existing Parliament to universal suffrage. Their intention was to enfranchise not the people so much as the property of the country. The middle class, as well as the working class, was very largely excluded from the franchise: it was the middle class that the Whig Reformers and even many of the middle-class Radicals, like Brougham, were intent to endow with a share of political power. Indeed, the Whigs as a whole, in so far as they really wanted Reform at all—and some of them did not—were

inclined to regard the problem as one, not mainly of extending the suffrage, but of redressing the balance of representation between different parts of the country, so as to give more members to the larger counties and the new towns, at the expense of the obviously corrupt rotten boroughs. Universal suffrage, resting on assumptions of civic rights common to the whole people, was a proposal of a quite different order from any that they were prepared to contemplate.

Moreover, even Lord Grey, one of the more advanced among the Whig leaders, made it plain enough that he did not really contemplate such a Reform as would transfer political power to a new class, even the middle class. He was an aristocrat of aristocrats: as the composition of his Cabinet showed, he believed in aristocratic leadership of the country. He conceived that, by enfranchising the middle class and altering the balance of representation, the Whig aristocracy would bind the middle class to itself, and secure a renewal of its leadership. Aristocrats would still be elected to Parliament and direct national policy: a grateful middle class would appoint them to this office.

In fact, with two important reservations, this did largely happen after the Reform Act. The Victorian Parliaments long remained, the Cabinets long remained largely aristocratic in composition, and political life retained its close connection with aristocratic "Society." But the middle class showed no exclusive gratitude to the Whigs: less completely, it leavened the Tories as well. And, while aristocrats remained at the head of affairs, they found themselves compelled to dance to the tunes played by the new class which had been enfranchised. If Pitt's Parliaments had been the puppets of landowners and stock-jobbers, Victorian Parliaments, and Victorian aristocrats, became the puppets of the capitalist manufacturers and bankers, and of the well-to-do middle class.

Cobbett and the Radicals, at the very opening of the Reform struggle, dimly foresaw this result. Cobbett himself greatly preferred the landowners to the "lords of the loom": his working-class followers certainly had no love for the employers under whom they were overworked and underfed in order that capital might accumulate rapidly, and huge fortunes be made out of the anguish of children. The working class Radicals wanted to enfranchise, not the middle class, but the whole people, except that woman suffrage was still beyond their range of vision.

The gathering of the Reformers' forces and the early struggles between middle-class and working-class groups took shape in the towns, and hardly touched the countryside, where the labourers' misery was rapidly growing as a result of trade depression, bad harvests, and the consequent tightening up of the system of Poor Relief. But, even before the fall of the Duke of Wellington, there were ominous rumblings of unrest in the agricultural districts. The farmers, urged by Cobbett and other agitators, and pressed down by taxation and the poor-rates, were in many counties pressing strongly for Reform. Demands similar to the Norfolk Petition of 1823[1] were being pressed forward, and in less Radical areas more moderate proposals were being adopted. But petitions for Parliamentary Reform meant little to the starving labourers, and in the autumn of 1830 the labourers at length made the most articulate protest that was in their power. First in Kent, then in Sussex, Surrey and Hampshire, then in counties farther west, there broke out an epidemic of fires and machine-breaking. Threshing-machines and other new agricultural implements, which were causing widespread unemployment by reducing the number of men required on the farms, were destroyed. Ricks, barns and houses belonging to unpopular landowners or farmers were burnt. In village after village the labourers gathered, throwing up leaders out of their own ranks, and marching in a body to destroy machines and press their demands. They visited the parsons to demand reduction or abolition of the tithes, which the farmers said prevented them from paying higher wages: from the landowners they demanded reduction or remission of rents; from the farmers, higher wages. Unpopular overseers, who had been cutting down Poor Relief, were chased out of the villages: rich men armed their retainers, and barricaded themselves in their houses. For a time large tracts of the countryside passed into the possession of the labourers.

This revolt was carried on by the labourers with a quite extraordinary absence of violence. They killed no one: even the harshest overseer was only ducked and trundled out of the village in a barrow. The gentry were unmolested, and many met the rioters and negotiated with them. Many farmers were in sympathy with the labourers, who espoused their cause by attacking tithes and high rents. Agricultural wages

[1] See p. 278.

it would slay no man, would visit none with the terrible punishment of transportation.[1] Cobbett was soon to be disillusioned. Whig political expediency demanded that the Government should show unequivocally its respect for order and property. And this very article of Cobbett's became the basis of a prosecution launched against him by the Whig Government, on the charge that he had incited the labourers to arson and revolt.

For he had not concealed his satisfaction that, as a result of the disturbances, wages were being raised and tithes reduced. "Out of evil comes good. We are not, indeed, upon that mere maxim, 'to do evil that good may come from it.' But without entering at present into the *motives* of the working people, it is unquestionable that their acts have produced good, and great good too. They have been always told, and they are told now, and by the very parson that I have quoted above, that their acts of violence, and particularly the burnings, can *do them no good*, but *add to their wants*, by destroying the food that *they would have to eat*. Alas! they know better: they know that one thrashing-machine takes wages from ten men; and they know also that *they* should have none of this food; and that *potatoes and salt* do not burn! Therefore, this argument is not worth a straw. Besides, they see and feel *that the good comes*, and comes *instantly* too. They see that they *do* get *some* bread, in consequence of the destruction of part of the corn; and while they see this, you attempt in vain to persuade them, that that which they have done is *wrong*. And as to one effect, that of *making the parsons reduce their tithes*, it is hailed as *a good* by ninety-nine-hundredths even of men of considerable property; while there is not a single man in the country who does not clearly trace the reduction to the acts of the labourers, and especially *to the fires*; for it is the terror of these, and not the bodily force, that has prevailed.... The accounts from Cambridgeshire say that, *since the terrible* fires that have taken place in that county, 'the magistrates have met, and resolved *immediately* to make inquiry into the actual *state* and *condition of the poor in every parish of this county*.' Very just, very wise; but never so much as *talked of*, much less *resolved on*, until the labourers rose, and the *fires* began to blaze."[2]

And so on, tracing, with perfect truth, the improvement in the labourers' position, and the new solicitude of farmers

[1] *P.R.*, December 11th, 1830. [2] *Ibid.*

and landowners for the poor, directly to the influence of the fires.

On this article Whigs and Tories united to base an attack on Cobbett—an attempt to depose him from the leadership of the working-class Radicals, and to shut his mouth by putting him in gaol. The first step was taken by a Tory, by name Trevor, who, on December 23rd, brought forward in the House of Commons a motion to the effect that Cobbett had been guilty, in the passage quoted above, of "a malicious and scandalous libel on the authorities of the State, incompatible with the proceedings of the Government, and a gross and unwarrantable attack on the members of the Church by law established, the tendency of which was subversive of the laws and conducive to anarchy and delusion." [1] Trevor accused Cobbett of saying that it was no crime in starving men to take food by force, and of deliberately encouraging the fires and instigating the revolt, which he professed to regard as the direct outcome of a conspiracy fostered by Cobbett and his Radical associates.

At the same time, the newspapers, both Whig and Tory, opened a furious campaign. Cobbett, as we have seen, had recently been lecturing in Kent and Sussex, actually in some of the districts in which the revolt was active. Every possible effort was made to trace the fires and marchings to his direct example: persons arrested in connection with the disturbances were cajoled and browbeaten into making confessions that they had acted under Cobbett's inspiration. One Thomas Goodman, a labourer, eighteen years of age, was with others convicted of setting fire to a barn near Battle, where Cobbett had recently lectured. He was in prison, and the gentry and clergy visited him. The Rev. H. J. Rush, Curate of Crowhurst, in Sussex, at length succeeded in extorting the following confession:—

"I, Thomas Goodman, never should of thought of douing aney sutch thing if Mr. Cobet had never given aney lactures; i believe that their never would bean any fires or mob in Battel nor maney others places if he never had given aney lactures at all." [2]

This was a good beginning, and *The Times* made much of it. There was a rush of father confessors to Goodman's cell, and a week later came a second version of his confession, authenticated this time by the signatures of three magistrates:

[1] *P.R.*, January 1st, 1831. [2] *Ibid.*

" I, Thomas Goodman, once herd of one Mr. Cobbit going a Bout gavering out lactueers; at length he came to Battel and gave one their, and their were a gret number of Peopel came to hear him and I went; he had A verrey long conversation concerning the states of the country, and telling them that they war verrey mutch impose upon, and he said he would show them the way to gain their rights and liberals, and he said it would be very Proper for every man to keep gun in his house, espesely young men, and that they might prepare themselves in readyness to go with him when he called on them and he would show them wich way to go on, and he said that peopel might expect firs their as well as other places—this is the truth and nothing But the truth of a deying man. Thomas Goodman." [1]

A third version of the confession was made public in February, improved by the addition of the following among other passages.

" Is conversation was all as sutch to inflame the Peopels minds they thinking that he would be a friend to them wich made A verrey great imprision on me and so inflame my mine and I from that time was determined to set stacks on fire and sone afterwards their was three firs in Battel . . . and some few days afterwards i was standing A talking to three more Persons there came A verrey gentle man on horseback and he rode up to us and said why you have had a fire hear i said yes we have he said well how do Peopel seame to like theas firs or do they seame eneways Alarmed at them i said yes they do but some of thim are verrey mutch harden in it and think their will be no more he said i am sorry that they should think so Becaus they have but gust made A beginning he ask Wither we had hird of any Person being taken in Battel that day on suspicion of theas firs i said i did not know he ask if we though the Poor Peopel would assist to find ther Persons out that Set theas places on fire if the farmers was to gave thim 2-shg a day we said we did not know and he seamed so verrey mutch Pleased a bout theas firs he stopt haf a nower his hole conversation was as sutch he war person well drest and verrey good horse new saddel and Bridel Wich made more imprission on my mind." [2]

The " dying man," having served the cause to good purpose, did not die, though many who were far less clearly implicated

[1] *P.R.*, January 8th, 1831. [2] *P.R.*, February 19th, 1831.

than he, and as young, were sentenced to death or transportation. His part in the concocting of these egregious confessions—a part played under duress—saved him his life. Others were less fortunate. Henry Cook, a ploughboy of nineteen, who had seriously damaged Mr. Bingham-Baring's [1] hat with a blow, and had been one of a mob who went round "extorting money," had no confessions to make, and was duly hanged. It was worse than treason to knock off the hat of a Baring. Cook was buried at Micheldever amid the solemn mourning of the whole parish. His name was often in Cobbett's mouth later—the hardest taunt he could fling at the Whig butchers. In all, nine persons were hanged, four hundred and fifty-seven transported—many of these died of their hardships—and about four hundred were imprisoned.[2] Such was Whig justice, Lord Grey's votive offering to law and order which proved the respectability and the moderate intentions of the Whig Reformers.

Cobbett could not be hanged or transported; but he and others like him might at least be silenced by imprisonment. The first on whom sentence fell was Richard Carlile, who had even less prudence, or, if you will, more courage, than Cobbett in speaking his mind. Carlile had addressed himself thus to the labourers on the subject of the fires:—

"You are much to be admired for everything you are known to have done during the last month. . . . Were you proved to be the incendiaries, we should defend you by saying, that you have more just and moral cause for it than any king or faction, that ever made war, had for making war. . . . Yours is a state of warfare, and your ground of quarrel is the want of the necessaries of life in the midst of an abundance. . . . Neither your silence nor your patience has obtained for you the least respectful attention from the Government. . . . It is only now that you begin to display your physical as well as moral strength, that your cruel tyrants treat with you, and offer terms of pacification. Your demands have been, so far, moderate and just; and any attempt to stifle them by the threatened severity of the new Administration, will be so

[1] A member of the family of financiers who, coming from Germany in the eighteenth century, accumulated huge fortunes and, in due time, four distinct peerages. There were five of them in the House of Commons in 1830.

[2] Hammond, *Village Labourer*, p. 308. See the full account of the whole revolt and of the trials in this book.

wicked as to justify your resistance even to death, and to life for life." [1] Carlile was more outspoken than Cobbett. His words cost him two years' imprisonment and a fine of £200. In other words, he was safely gaoled for the whole period of the Reform agitation.

Cobbett was clearly meant to suffer the same fate. But he was a much harder man than Carlile to convict, both because he was more careful and because he commanded the sympathy of a far wider public, including many middle-class people among his admirers. Carlile's trial was hurried on: Cobbett's was several times put off on various grounds. The Government's enemies said that there were difficulties in getting a suitably packed jury; but it also appears that the Ministers seriously thought of dropping the whole prosecution, and were held to it only by the personal intervention of the King, who had promised certain great gentlemen that Cobbett should be brought to book.[2] Be that as it may, the case, after being put off from month to month, so that Cobbett was unable to leave London for his expected lecturing tours in the country, was at last brought on in July. It was feared that crowds of his friends would assemble and cause a disturbance: the newspapers accordingly announced that the case had been again postponed; but even so the court was full.

The Examiner and *The Star* both described the trial after its conclusion as "a trial of the Government more than of Cobbett." [3] This was, indeed, its effect. Since his trial in 1810, at which he had been by no means successful as his own advocate, he had enjoyed abundant experience of public speaking under widely varied circumstances. He had learnt the oratorical value of good humour: he knew how to speak as pungently as he wrote. Again he chose to defend himself, with the aid only of his solicitor and of his legally trained sons. But, not content with a mere defence, he turned sharply on his accusers. He exposed plainly the methods which had been used, as in the case of Thomas Goodman, to rake up evidence against him. He showed how Goodman had been pardoned, whereas Henry Cook had been hanged. He repudiated the interpretation placed upon his writings, that he had instigated the revolt, and smashed to pieces the official

[1] Quoted from *The Prompter* in *The Working Man's Friend*, January 19th, 1833.

[2] *P.R.*, July 16th, 1831.

[3] See *P.R.*, July 16th and 30th, 1831.

idea that the revolt itself was an organised conspiracy and not a spontaneous movement. Speaking this time to the whole people of England—for the report of the trial went everywhere—he placed the Government under the charge of callous neglect of the people's miseries.

"What are my sins? What are the heinous sins I have committed? Calling upon the Government to repeal the hard-hearted laws—the hard-hearted laws that drive the labourers of the country to desperation. Let them restore the law. Let them do away with the old Game Laws and with the new Game Laws. Can you conceive of anything more horrible? We read yesterday of a magistrate having been appointed by the Lord Chancellor, whom the Lord Lieutenant charged with having been perjured or something or other. Figure to yourself the condition of a labourer brought before that magistrate, with power to that magistrate and another to sentence him to seven years' imprisonment for being out in the night to hunt a wretched animal, the magistrate himself being a preserver of the game perhaps. . . . But though they will adopt the measure I recommend, they still prosecute me for recommending it. Just so in the case of Parliamentary Reform. They are now reforming the Parliament. Many writers have been urging the necessity of Parliamentary Reform. I am one. They have lately found out, for it is a late discovery, what sort of reform they must have, and it is very like that I have for twenty years recommended. They are compelled to adopt it, though they do not like it. They are going to be married to this reform. They are going to be married in a halter. I furnished that halter, and for that they would cut me in pieces." [1]

Cobbett spoke for four and a half hours, and spoke well. Charles Greville, the diarist and Clerk to the Privy Council, said of him that "his insolence and violence were past endurance, but he made an able speech." [2] He flung the charge back at his accusers, and appealed to the jury, not for mercy, but to judge between him and them. "If," he said in conclusion, "if I am compelled to meet death in some stinking dungeon into which they have the means of cramming me, my last breath shall be employed in praying to God to bless my country, and to curse the Whigs to everlasting; and revenge I bequeath to my children and to the labourers of England."

[1] From *A Full and Accurate Report of Mr. Cobbett's Trial*, 1831.

[2] Greville, *Memoirs*, quoted in Melville, *Cobbett*, Vol. II., p. 234.

Cobbett's satisfaction was increased by the fact that certain of the leading Whig Ministers, whom he had called as witnesses, were compelled to listen to his eloquence. He attempted to question them, Melbourne especially, as to the reasons for the pardon extended to Goodman, whose confession had been used to incriminate him. The Lord Chief Justice disallowed the question—pardon was of the royal prerogative; but Cobbett made his point, and the Whig Ministers duly uncomfortable. Perhaps his greatest success was the calling as a witness of Lord Brougham; for the Whig Lord Chancellor had to admit that, as President of the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge, he had actually written to Cobbett during the disturbances and asked for permission to reprint and distribute his *Letter to the Luddites*, written in 1816, in which the case against machine-breaking was forcibly put. Brougham's colleagues had known nothing of this letter of the Chancellor's. It was utterly fatal to the Government's case; for it showed Cobbett in the light, not of an incendiary, but of a man to whom an influential member of the Government had appealed for help in coping with the trouble. After Brougham's evidence, the jury retired and considered whether they should stop the case. They allowed it to proceed; but it was generally recognised that a conviction was impossible. The Lord Chief Justice, however, summed up against Cobbett; and the jury, retiring to deliberate, was shut up all night, and dismissed in the morning without reaching a verdict. Even in that carefully packed body, there were six for acquittal and six against. The Government made no attempt at a second trial. The disagreement was "just better than an acquittal."[1] But the pamphlet report of the trial which was everywhere eagerly read, was as good as an acquittal—or even a conviction of the Government—for Cobbett and his friends.[2]

Cobbett's trial had been deferred until some time after the Special Commissions had done their work. The last labourers' revolt was over: there were no more marchings or deputations to parsons and squires. But the fires continued, though the press now paid little attention to them. All through 1831 and 1832 the *Register* continued to record burnings and destruction in many parts of the country. The lot of the labourers had

[1] Greville, *op. cit.*

[2] See *A Full and Accurate Report of Mr. Cobbett's Trial*, published by W. Strange in 1831. The *Register* contained no report: only an article of comment. See *P.R.*, July 9th, 1831.

been slightly bettered by the revolt, especially in the places where it had been strongest. But their plight was still terrible. The attention of Parliament and press had been diverted from the countryside to the towns; but the Reform struggle was carried on to the accompaniment of still blazing ricks and buildings over a land where men were "starving in the midst of plenty." [1]

[1] See *P.R.*, May 28th, 1831 (burning of woods and forests), June 25th, 1831, November 19th, 1831, January 7th, 1832, May 5th, 1832.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE REFORM ACT

THE Labourers' War and the repression which followed it coincided in time with the first phase of the parliamentary struggle for Reform. Cobbett's trial did not take place until July, 1831: in March, Lord John Russell had made his opening speech outlining the Government's proposals for Reform, and the text of the first Reform Bill, worked out by a special committee of the Cabinet, had been issued to the public.[1] The battle was thus fairly joined, at length on a definite issue from which there was no escape. Reformers, who had hitherto been discussing what sort of Reform they *wanted*, had now to take up a definite attitude towards an actual and detailed set of proposals, put forward with the full authority of the Government. And on this point there was room for wide differences of opinion.

The working-class Radicals and their allies were, as we have seen, united in advocating Short—usually Annual—Parliaments, Manhood Suffrage, and the Ballot. The Bill proposed by the Whig Government fell far short of these demands. No proposal was made for shortening the duration of Parliament: no provision was put forward for voting by ballot. The suffrage was to be extended, not to all the manhood of the nation, but only, broadly speaking, to the middle classes in town and country—£10 householders in the towns, leaseholders and tenant farmers in the countryside. The vast mass of the workers in town and country was to be left out, and in the few towns which had previously possessed a wide "scot and lot" franchise, voting rights were actually to be restricted under the Bill. The workers in their own societies, and in the Political Unions in which they had made common cause with the middle-class Reformers, were thus called upon, if they supported the Bill, to espouse the cause of their middle-class allies without any direct political gain to themselves.

On the other hand the Bill, while it fell far short of the

[1] Cobbett published Russell's speech in full in *P.R.*, March 5th, 1831, and the text of the Bill in *P.R.*, March 19th, 1831.

working-class demands, went much further than many of the Radicals had expected that the Whigs would be prepared to go. It did propose to make an end completely of the old system of rotten boroughs, to re-distribute representation in far closer accord with the numbers of the population in different parts of the country, to give considerable representation to the growing industrial towns, and to establish a uniform system of voting everywhere throughout the country. It ended, in favour of the middle class, the long dominance of the borough-owning aristocracy, and promised thereby to make an end of the system of aristocratic jobbery, through pensions, places and sinecures, against which the fiercest onslaughts of the Reformers had been directed. [1]

The question which now faced the Radicals was one of political expediency. Could they, by an agitation against the Whigs in which they would lose most of their middle-class backing, hope to compel the Government, or some alternative Government, to introduce a fuller measure of Reform, and to go further towards conceding the three main points of the Radical programme? Or would any sort of opposition to the Whig Bill, and any attempt to force the Government to amend it, merely ensure its defeat and play into the hands of the Tories, who were opposed to all Reform, or of the considerable Whig element which considered that the Bill went too far? Would opposition really help to improve the Bill? Or would it either ensure the total defeat of Reform, or cause moderate Whigs and moderate Tories to combine in carrying a sham Reform Bill which would only remove a few outstanding abuses without causing any change of system? And, if it was nearly hopeless to get the Bill amended in a Radical sense, then was it better to have the Bill as it stood, or to have no Reform at all, until by propaganda the real Radicals had grown strong enough to force through a Reform based on their own principles?

Seen in retrospect, these questions seem to answer themselves. The Radical movement was not nearly strong enough

[1] For example, in *The Black Book*, *The Extraordinary Red Book*, Benbow's *A Peep at the Peers* and *A Full View of the Commons*, and many other compilations showing pensions and sinecures due to political influence. The writings of Cobbett and Hone were full of such exposures, which were the surest means the Reformers had of raising popular outcry. The protest against corruption in high places united Reformers of different schools, whereas the formulation of definite plans of Reform divided them.

either to force Radical Reform through by constitutional agitation, or to secure its adoption by insurrection. If the main body of Radicals had opposed the Bill, it would never have been passed: at the most only a pale shadow of Reform would have been carried through either with the consent of the Tories, or in face of an opposition, moderate because assured that no vital change of system was involved. The Duke of Wellington and the Die-hards would have fought even such a Reform under those conditions; but Peel and most of the Tories might easily have acquiesced in it, and the House of Lords have been persuaded to accept it. Real Reform, even real middle-class Reform, might thus have been indefinitely postponed. It would have come sooner or later, because of the economic pressure behind it; but it might have been much longer in coming.

Moreover, even if the Radical leaders had refused to support the Whig Reform Bill, it is most unlikely that they would have carried with them more than a handful of followers. They would, in all probability, only have surrendered more completely to the middle class the leadership of the workers, and have made easier modifications in the Bill which would have lessened such democratic features as it did contain. The proposal, seriously considered at one stage by the Government, to raise the urban qualification for voters from £10 to £20,[1] would very likely have been carried through, and the Bill have been made still more definitely middle class than it was.

The main body of the Radicals did not take long in making up their minds. During the early months of 1831, while the Cabinet Committee was engaged in drafting the measure, they made every possible effort by petition, demonstration, and agitation, to secure the embodiment of their principles in the Bill. But even then they recognised that they could not hope to get all they wanted. "What will satisfy the country?" asked Cobbett at the end of January. "I have proposed universal suffrage, and have given reasons perfectly unanswerable with regard to the justice and also with regard to the tranquillising tendency of the measure. Now I believe that the nation might be satisfied; I do not say that it ought to be satisfied, but, from the love that men have for peace,

[1] For this controversy, see especially *P.R.*, November 5th, 1831, and subsequent issues. The Bristol Riots, and other signs of popular commotion, probably caused the abandonment of this project.

from their anxious desire to prevent confusion and anarchy, from their natural horror of civil strife and inevitable bloodshed, I think that the nation might be satisfied with parliaments of two, or even three years' duration; that it might be satisfied with the extension of the suffrage to all householders paying scot and lot. . . . But satisfied WITHOUT THE VOTING BY BALLOT, I am sure that the nation would not; and I am sure that an attempt on the part of the ministers, to exclude it, would raise against them a cry, such as never before reached the ears of affrighted public offenders." [1] Any man who opposed the ballot must be, Cobbett said, a friend of bribery and corruption, "*a real rogue.*" [2]

The Whig Bill, as we have seen, fell far short even of this modified Radical programme. But, once it had been put forward, Cobbett, and most of the Radicals with him, at once determined to make the best of a bad job. They did not cease to urge that their full programme alone really met the need; but they put their whole weight behind the Bill, with all its shortcomings. This change of front was not achieved without a struggle. It was necessary to persuade those who had been agitating for the full Radical programme to support a measure which meant, for many of them, exclusion from all direct share in political power. It was necessary to meet the arguments of those sections, dominant in some of the working-class societies, which held that the Bill should be opposed as a betrayal of the workers by the middle-class Reformers. This view might be true enough, and its truth might be admitted; but political expediency seemed to most of the Radicals to demand imperatively that the full support of the workers, as well as of the middle class, should be behind the Whig Bill.

Thus, when the Bill was made public, Cobbett at once changed his tone. It was no longer possible to alter the measure except in detail: it was necessary to take or leave it broadly as it stood. Cobbett was unhesitatingly for taking it, and from this time his agitation was for "the whole Bill," against the attempts to modify it in a reactionary direction, proceeding from within the Whig party as well as from without. His language underwent a remarkable change. In January, the ballot had been the cornerstone of real Reform: in April it had become a change, desirable in itself, but in no wise essential. Its absence would lead to some corruption and

[1] *P.R.*, January 29th, 1831. [2] *Ibid.*

intimidation, and would spoil the peace of elections, but " the ballot is only a mode of taking an election. It involves no principle of right; and . . . it may be introduced or not, and the Bill still remain what it is now, a thing to give cordial satisfaction to the people. But the demolition of the rotten boroughs, and the extension of the suffrage, these comprise the principle of the Bill; and in support of these, the pledges exacted from every Member ought to be as clear, as distinct, and as positive, as words can make them." [1] These words were written when matters were in full train for a General Election in which Reform was practically the sole issue.

In a sense, Cobbett can hardly have believed both what he wrote in January, and what he wrote in April, on the subject of the ballot. But he was convinced that it was above all necessary for all real Reformers to present a united front on the question of the Bill, and he could convince himself for the time that nothing else mattered provided that the Bill became law and the very real danger that it would be dropped or modified was successfully overcome. Difference on this issue was the real basis of the furious quarrel between him and Henry Hunt, which, having begun in a partial estrangement at the end of 1829, now assumed a new violence and a definitely political complexion.

When the Whig Government assumed office, its Chief Secretary for Ireland was Stanley, Cobbett's old opponent at Preston. The appointment involved a bye-election, and Henry Hunt went down to Preston as the Radical candidate. Cobbett supported Hunt—not very warmly—in the *Register* [2]; but he was undoubtedly jealous that Hunt should get into Parliament, while he was still outside. Hunt was elected—the first real representative in Parliament of the working-class Radicals, and a significant warning to the Whigs of the strength of Radical feeling in the country.[3]

Hunt in Parliament, as the sole spokesman of the extremists—for Sir Francis Burdett had now completely identified himself with the Whigs, and Joseph Hume and the few Benthamites in the House were essentially spokesmen of the middle class—held a pivotal position during the early stages

[1] *P.R.*, April 30th, 1831.

[2] *P.R.*, December, 1830, especially December 18th (result of election).

[3] Preston had, of course, a wide " scot and lot " franchise—considerably wider than it retained after the Reform Act.

of the Reform struggle. His views at once diverged from those of Cobbett. Hunt voted, indeed, for the Reform Bill during its various stages; but he spoke strongly against it, denounced it as a betrayal of the workers who had made Reform a practical question, and continued to preach the full Radical programme and to make hopeless attempts to get the Bill amended in the House. This attitude, of course, exposed him to use by the opponents of the Bill as an awful warning. While Lord Grey and his Whig colleagues were putting forward the Reform Bill in all sincerity as a final settlement, beyond which further advances towards democracy should not be made either then or in the future, Hunt was inveighing against the oligarchical tendencies of the Bill, and justifying his vote in its favour only on the ground that he regarded it as a first instalment of wider measures soon to follow. His attitude was perfectly honest; there was much to be said in its favour; but it seemed to Cobbett and to many of the Radicals criminally inexpedient—a wanton endangering of a measure than which no better was practicable for the time.

Neither Hunt nor Cobbett was by temperament disposed to mince his words. They had both the habit of invective, and they now turned upon each other all the eloquence they more often employed at the expense of Whigs and boroughmongers. For Cobbett, Hunt was the "Preston cock on the Preston dunghill," crowing loud out of mere empty vanity, and opposing the Reform Bill in order to bring himself into public notice.[1] According to Hunt, Cobbett was betraying the cause of the people, and selling them to the Whigs for his own advancement. Cobbett insulted Hunt as only he could insult. Hunt retaliated by dissociating himself publicly from men like Cobbett and Carlile in a speech in the House,[2] and by presenting to the House of Commons a petition, faked up by Cobbett's enemies, which purported to show that he scandalously underpaid and exploited his labourers. This charge was based on Cobbett's attempt, already described,[3] to find work for the unemployed on his farm, and on his method of payment in kind. It was clearly a trumped-up charge, which some Irish labourers, to whom he had given work under this scheme, were either paid, or led from political motives, to bring forward. The real ground of quarrel was that Hunt,

[1] *E.g.*, *P.R.*, February 12th and 19th, and March 12th, 1831.

[2] *P.R.*, March 12th, 1831.

[3] See p. 311.

backed by some of the more extreme working-class groups, and by many of the Irish in England, opposed the Whig Reform Bill, whereas Cobbett and most of the Radicals were for it.[1]

Meanwhile, the course of the Reform Bill in Parliament was by no means smooth. The second reading in the Commons was carried by a bare majority of one vote, and the majority included many who had every intention of helping to mutilate the Bill out of all recognition in committee. It was already plain that it could not be carried, even in the Commons, without an appeal to the country, and that the Whigs must either dissolve Parliament or drop the measure. The crisis soon came. General Gascoyne, member for Liverpool, moved that, before the House went into committee on the Bill, it should declare against any reduction in the number of English and Welsh members. As the Bill contemplated such a diminution, this was a direct challenge; and the division was regarded as crucial. General Gascoyne's motion was carried by 299 votes to 291, and Lord Grey advised the king to dissolve Parliament. William IV. had previously refused to do this; but the threat of the Government's resignation was effective. The Whigs appealed to the country. The Tories, flushed by success, had refused supplies, and Lord Wharncliffe had given notice of a motion in the House of Lords protesting against a dissolution. This, as an attack on the royal prerogative, angered the king, and he suddenly dissolved Parliament in person, thus gaining a popularity which his subsequent actions were soon to imperil. For the moment, he had the air of a reforming sovereign.

Everything now turned on the composition of the new Parliament. Even under the corrupt system then in existence, a majority of Reformers was regarded as certain; but what sort of Reformers would they be? Each section was eager to get a large representation in the House. The Benthamite middle-class Radicals, headed by Joseph Hume and Francis Place, started a society for securing and financing candidates of the type they wanted. Burdett, who acted with them at first, soon found them too Radical for his mellowing taste, and withdrew. Cobbett fiercely attacked the new society in the *Register*[2] and endeavoured to get more extreme Radical

[1] For a full account of their difference of attitude, see *P.R.*, March 12th, 1831.

[2] *P.R.*, June 11th, 1831.

candidates adopted, and to persuade the Political Unions to bind down their candidates by strict pledges which would exclude any compromise on the principles of the Bill as introduced in March. He did not stand himself, mainly because he could not afford the expenses of a contest. Early in 1830 the question of his standing had again been raised by his friends. He had refused, or rather put up terms so stiff as to amount to a refusal. He would not stand unless his supporters raised £10,000, first to get him into Parliament, and secondly, to maintain him while he was doing their work in the House. He would buy land with it, and give up the *Register*, in order to attend to his parliamentary duties. It was only fair, he thought, that he should be compensated for the heavy loss of income which he would incur.[1] A fund was actually opened; but nothing like the £10,000 was secured. Cobbett stood aside for Hunt at the Preston by-election, and he stood aside now in the General Election, which followed the defeat of the first Reform Bill on Gascoyne's amendment.

The General Election gave the Government a large majority, in which, however, Whigs still vastly predominated over Radicals, and the working-class Radicals had still only Hunt to represent them. Many leading Tories were defeated: nearly all the county members were pledged to vote for the Bill. In London, there were minor disturbances, and a mob smashed the windows of Apsley House, in disapprobation of the Duke of Wellington's attitude. But, on the whole, the country remained very quiet. The King, however, by this time seriously alarmed at the "revolutionary" instincts which Reform was rousing up, was making great efforts to persuade Grey to modify the Bill. They were unsuccessful. The Ministers realised that they must go through with the thing; and the new Bill, introduced at the end of June, differed only in detail from its predecessor.

The struggle in Parliament began again. The opposition, with diminished forces, now adopted tactics of obstruction: the progress in committee was very slow. Cobbett and the Radicals outside Parliament conducted an agitation which showed the dangers of delay: the rate of progress improved. Petitions for the full Radical programme began to come in from the impatient Political Unions: Hunt presented one from Westminster early in August.[2] The Whig-Radical

[1] *P.R.*, April 10th, 1830. [2] *P.R.*, September 3rd, 1831.

alliance was endangered by the delay: the Ministers were accused of lukewarmness in prosecuting the Reform. At length, in September, the Bill, substantially unamended, passed the Commons by 345 votes to 236,[1] and was sent to the House of Lords. There it speedily met its fate. On October 8th, the Lords rejected the Reform Bill by 199 votes to 158. The bishops were almost solid against the Bill. Twenty-one voted against it, and only two in favour. Cobbett took the opportunity for another tilt at the Church by law established.[2] Two of the royal dukes voted against the Bill; one, the Duke of Sussex, in its favour. The royal family lost its brief popularity, especially as the King's real attitude was now becoming more generally known.

The action of the House of Lords at length unchained popular excitement, hitherto subdued by the prospects of success by constitutional methods. It also settled quite definitely the working-class attitude, and ranged those who had hitherto held aloof definitely behind the Bill. Huge open-air meetings were everywhere organised by the Political Unions: serious riots broke out in certain places. Grey, in face of the King's opposition, did not press for the creation of enough new peers to ensure the passage of the Bill: he stipulated only, as a condition of his retaining office, that the King should agree to the introduction of a new Bill on the same lines as the last. The resolution of the ministry was widely doubted: the Radicals began to press for strong measures. The Political Unions and the Reform leaders had no hand in the riots; but the signs of popular exasperation undoubtedly did much to ensure the ultimate passage of the Bill.

In London, the crowds did not pass beyond window-breaking and a little hustling of the notables. But in Derby they sacked the city gaol, and were repressed only by military force. Nottingham Castle was burnt down, and here again order was restored by soldiers. Finally, the Bristol riots of October, in which the Mansion House, the three gaols, and the Bishop's Palace were all destroyed, and the city was for some time in the hands of the mob, gave the waverers a real and salutary fright. The Whigs had called up forces stronger than they, or the whole governing class, could hope to repress.[3]

[1] *P.R.*, September 24th, 1831.

[2] *P.R.*, October 15th, 1831.

[3] There is a good and full account of the Bristol Riots in *P.R.*, November 5th, 19th, and 26th, 1831.

Cobbett's comment on the riots was to liken them to the movements in the country which preceded the Paris Revolution of 1789. The French *noblesse* had obstructed Reform despite these warnings; and the Revolution had been the consequence of their folly. "Borough-mongers, look well at this; *Consider* it, as Solomon says of the field of the Sluggard. Oh, no! you will not: you will go on just as the French Noblesse did. Let it be borne in mind that . . . it was not till the one-half of the noblemen's and gentlemen's houses had been pillaged and burned, that the legal changes *began* to be adopted. The French Revolution did not *begin at Paris*. It came thither by degrees *from the country*: it was the *starving chopsticks* who set the Parisians to work: as long as the Noblesse and the swarms of tax-eaters found peace and safety in the country, they laughed at the *canaille* in great towns; but when their country-houses were burned, they fled from the country, and mostly into the service of the enemies of the people of France, who confiscated and sold and divided their estates. Let it be borne in mind, that all this took place, *only because a reform was not made in time!* To men of common sense, experience cannot speak plainer, and to fools it is useless for experience to speak." [1]

The Whig Government, intent on steering a middle course, and alarmed at the forces which had been aroused, adopted severe measures to deal with the disturbances. Many of the Whig leaders, including Lord Althorp and Lord John Russell, had been acting in close concert with the principal Political Unions, especially with that of Birmingham. But a Royal Proclamation was now issued, declaring that the Political Unions were arrogating to themselves powers inconsistent with the constitution and with the duties of subjects in the maintenance of law and order. The Political Unions were declared to be "unconstitutional and illegal," and all persons were enjoined "to refrain from entering into such unauthorised combinations, whereby they may draw upon themselves the penalties attending a violation of the laws, and the peace and security of our dominions may be endangered." [2] "Curious document!" wrote Cobbett. "Ah! ah! These are to be *put down*, though so *strongly recommended* by the Whig papers only twenty days ago! And though Lords Grey, John Russell and Althorp, were corresponding and exchanging

[1] *P.R.*, November 26th, 1831.

[2] See full text of Proclamation in *P.R.*, November 26th, 1831.

compliments with them, only about six weeks ago! now there is a KING'S PROCLAMATION against them, the language and tenour of which is most singular. . . . This proclamation looks like a compromise with the borough-mongers: it certainly excites great *suspicion*, and great *discontent*; and any attempt to *enforce* it, will complete the hostile feeling towards the Ministry, in whom, be it remembered, I never expressed *my* confidence." [1]

The King might proclaim, and the ministers threaten: it was out of his power or theirs to suppress the Political Unions. The Proclamation was a dead letter. It was mainly due, no doubt, to the riots, though the Unions expressly dissociated themselves from any act of violence; but it was also due in part to the suggestion, now seriously made by many Radicals, that, since the Lords had defied public opinion, the Political Unions should take power into their own hands, and proclaim a revolutionary Government. This was supposed by many to be the object of the National Political Union, formed in London in October 31st, to unite the local associations. Burdett, who was in the chair at this meeting, withdrew in protest against its policy, and in particular against the allotting of half the seats on its Council to working-class representatives. All manner of proposals, from a run on the Bank for gold to the proclamation of a republic were being discussed. Cobbett's own suggestion was that the Government should be compelled to make the King issue writs for a new Parliament as if the Bill had passed, and that an election should be held under the new conditions.[2] The most various rumours were spread abroad as to the Ministers' intentions; but the riots had made it clear that nothing less than the whole Bill would be accepted as a settlement. Negotiations with the "waverers" among the Lords for a compromise Bill fell through: the third Reform Bill, introduced in December, was for the most part a replica of those which had gone before. The main alteration was that the total number of Members was not now to be reduced, so that additional members could be allotted to the growing industrial towns. Cobbett declared that the new Bill was "better than the former one." He regretted that the suffrage was not made wider, and particularly "the exclusion of the chopsticks." He recognised, he said, the natural resentment of the workers still excluded from the franchise. "I am aware that, to ensure the cheers of men, justly angry with what is

[1] *P.R.*, November 26th, 1831. [2] *P.R.*, October 29th, 1831.

done, I ought to foster their discontent; but I am also aware that a short time will convince them that I am best consulting their good as well as the preservation of my own character, by giving all the support in my power to this measure of the Government." [1]

On December 16th, the new Bill passed its second reading in the Commons by 324 votes to 162. In the new year, it passed into committee, where for more than two months it was subjected to every sort of criticism and obstruction. At last in March it was sent to the Lords, having passed its final division by 355 votes to 239. The King had now agreed in the last resort to create peers; but he insisted that the Bill should first be again presented to the peers. It passed its second reading in the House of Lords by a majority of nine.

But the peers had not really abandoned their obstruction: they had only altered their methods. When Parliament reassembled in May, the Lords at once adopted a resolution postponing the disfranchising sections of the Reform Bill, until the rest of the measure had been considered—a clear hint of their intention to emasculate the Bill in committee. Grey at once called on the King to create enough new peers to pass the Bill, and, on his refusal, resigned office. Once more the Reform issue was flung back from Parliament to the people.

Then followed that strange attempt of the Duke of Wellington, the most determined of all the enemies of Reform in all its shapes, to get together a Tory Ministry, which should pass, against its own convictions, an emasculated Reform Bill. No Government could have taken office and refused Reform altogether. As in the case of Catholic Emancipation, the Duke was prepared to swallow his convictions and, lest worse should befall, carry through a measure of which he and his party most thoroughly disapproved. But on such an adventure neither Sir Robert Peel nor the majority of the Tories were prepared to set out. They realised, more clearly than Wellington, the state of the country: they heard the cries for "the Bill, the whole Bill, and nothing but the Bill": they understood that behind Francis Place's slogan, "To beat the Duke, go for gold," lay the real menace of far more drastic action. The King's carriage was pelted in the streets of London: there was an organised run on the banks.[2] Petitions came hailing in from all parts of the country. By the middle of May the Duke had realised the futility of his attempt, and

[1] *P.R.*, December 17th, 1831. [2] *P.R.*, May 19th, 1832.

advised the King to recall Lord Grey. In order to avoid the creation of peers, the King promised his personal influence to prevent the opponents of the Bill from voting in the Lords. At the King's personal request, the Duke and his followers retired from the House, and allowed the Bill to pass. The third reading was carried on June 4th, by 106 votes to 22, and on July 7th, the Royal Assent was given—by commission—and the Bill became an Act.

So ended the two years' struggle which was the culmination of the long agitation for Reform. The rotten boroughs were swept away and the new industrial towns enfranchised. £10 household suffrage was introduced in the towns, and £50 leaseholders, copyholders and tenants came to reinforce the freeholders in the county elections. But there was no shortening of the duration of Parliament, no voting by ballot, no enfranchisement for the great majority of the working class. Shopkeepers and employers in the towns, landowners and farmers in the country, shared between them the right to choose the rulers of England. The Scottish and Irish Acts which followed the English were on the same lines, save that in Ireland, much to Cobbett's anger,[1] the disfranchisement of the forty-shilling freeholders was maintained.[2]

The Whigs, headed by Grey himself, had from the first put forward their Reform as a complete and final settlement of the whole question: Cobbett and the Radicals regarded it as only the first instalment of a much larger Reform. The Whigs accordingly were most anxious, as soon as the Bill was passed, to persuade the Political Unions to disband, and to have the future conduct of affairs left in their hands. This suited neither the middle-class Radicals nor Cobbett and his friends, and the *Register* at once appealed to the Political Unions to hold together in order to ensure that Reform should bear fruit in positive reforms.[3] So far Cobbett was in agreement with the middle-class Radicals; but his views soon sharply diverged from theirs. A new Parliament—the first Reformed Parliament—had to be elected; and Cobbett's anxiety was to secure a strong body of candidates fully pledged to the carrying through of an advanced social and financial programme. He held still to his views about taxation and the Debt; and he had no confidence at all that the Whigs or even the

[1] *P.R.*, June 2nd and 16th, 1832. [2] See p. 292.
[3] *P.R.*, June 2nd and 9th, 1832.

Benthamites would do what he wanted. Many of the Political Unions, under their existing leadership, were, he held, mere tools of the Whigs. Their rank and file members must not allow them to be disbanded to suit the Government's convenience: they must now use, to enforce reforms, the organisations by which the initial Reform had been gained. He redoubled his attacks on the Whigs, "and on Whig influence in the Political Unions." "These bodies," he wrote, "will soon be distinguished into Government Unions and PEOPLE'S UNIONS. The Government will soon have its creatures to lead some of them; and care should be taken to denounce these creatures as soon as they are perceived." [1] He had determined to stand for the Reformed Parliament himself; and he was anxious to use the Political Unions so as to get a body of pledged Radicals at his back.

Negotiations had been for some time on foot with a view to find Cobbett a secure seat in the Reformed Parliament. He had thoughts at one time of standing again for Preston against Henry Hunt [2]; but in August, 1831, he had accepted an invitation to stand for Manchester,[3] and a few weeks later he had outlined his programme to the electors.[4] But now an invitation which offered a more assured prospect of success reached him from the electors of Oldham.[5] There he was asked to stand jointly with the popular Radical manufacturer, John Fielden, of Todmorden, who, though he owned one of the largest mills in the country, was prominent in the agitation for factory reform and later in the opposition to the new Poor Law of 1834. Cobbett accepted this invitation without giving up his contest at Manchester: two chances of election were better than one.

Cobbett had, indeed, not decided to stand for Parliament without some hesitation. He was sixty-nine years of age when the Reform Bill became law, and he felt the strain involved in entering on an unaccustomed and strenuous way of life. "As far as concerns my own personal tastes and interests, I shall undertake this arduous task with reluctance. By Michaelmas next I shall have *a farm*; and somewhere in

[1] *P.R.*, June 16th, 1832.

[2] He was considering this even as late as July. See *P.R.*, July 21st, 1832.

[3] *P.R.*, August 27th, 1831.

[4] *P.R.*, September 10th and October 1st, 1821.

[5] *P.R.*, July 21st, 1832.

my own native county. A FARMER I WILL LIVE AND DIE. But God has been pleased to give me great health and great strength yet: I am convinced that I am able to render the greatest services to my country; that country has a right to those services at my hands; and the more perilous her state, the more base it would be in me not to do my utmost to rescue her from her perils." [1]

Cobbett's decision to go forward at Manchester created some consternation. *The Courier* entreated the Government "to send some gentleman down, or Cobbett will be elected." [2] The prayer was heard, and at Manchester, Cobbett had strong candidates against him. But at Oldham his position was impregnable. He had, however, less success in pressing sound Radical candidates on other constituencies than in securing a safe seat for himself. In most places, the Whigs were strong enough to prevent Radicals from having any chance of success. Cobbett endeavoured to raise the Reform issue again by putting forward once more the full Radical programme of manhood suffrage, ballot, and annual Parliaments [3]; but this issue no longer roused the country. The old Reform movement had reached its goal: a new one had still to be created. Chartism was in the making; but Chartism arose as a force apart from Parliament, and drew most of its strength from those whom the Reform Act had left unenfranchised.

During the months preceding the General Election, Cobbett toured the country from end to end. A Southern Tour in the summer was followed by a tour in the Northern Counties, and that, after a course of lectures in Manchester, by his Tour in Scotland, from which he returned only in time for the contest at Oldham. Here, after a brief campaign, he and Fielden were elected by an overwhelming majority, their opponents withdrawing from the contest when they saw that it was hopeless. The votes were as follows up to the time of the withdrawal:—

Fielden	670
Cobbett	642
Bright	153
Burge	101
Stephen	3

Elected for Oldham, Cobbett announced his withdrawal

[1] *P.R.*, June 30th, 1832. [2] Quoted in *P.R.*, July 7th, 1832.
[3] *P.R.*, July 7th, 1832.

from the contest at Manchester. He had already polled more than a thousand votes; but it is unlikely that he would have been elected. The Whigs were strong in Manchester, then as to-day.[1] He set off for London, to enter upon his parliamentary duties, long a principal goal of his ambitions. "Now," he said, "I belong to the people of Oldham."[2]

[1] For an account of both elections, see *P.R.*, December 22nd, 1832.

[2] *P.R.*, January 19th, 1833.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE REFORMED PARLIAMENT—"THE TRADES UNION"

COBBETT'S election to Parliament made a great difference to his manner of life. He had the habits of the countryman—habits the virtue of which he was proud to proclaim. "Early to bed and early to rise" had been his maxim throughout his life. He would rise with or, in winter, well before the sun, and have done a good part of a day's work before town-bred folks were stirring. The habits of the Parliament men, beginning the day when honest folk had done their toil, and bringing up vital business for discussion after midnight, made him furious. He stormed and grumbled constantly against these parliamentary habits in the *Register*, and in the House made a number of ineffectual attempts to get the procedure altered. He drew a parallel—and a contrast—between the English Parliament and the Kiddadids—the large grasshoppers—of America. "The chafferings in the House are of little more consequence to us than is the ceaseless nightly din that the monotonous Kiddadids are now making in the woods of America. It is curious that these noisy things also begin their noise at sunset and cease it at sunrise; and so true are they as to this matter, that, in the most cloudy weather, you can tell the very moment of the sun setting by the beginning of their noise, and the very moment of the sun rising by the ceasing of their noise. It is a large, beautifully green grasshopper, an inch and a half high and two inches and a half long, and it makes its noise with the two ears or flaps hanging down by the sides of its head. It is perfectly harmless, lives upon the dews and the sweat that it gets from the leaves of the trees. Oh, how often have I wished that we, in England, were blessed with a set of Kiddadids! Their noise is perfectly monotonous; and you go to sleep amidst it, after a very little use, just the same as if there were no noise at all. The Kiddadid is no gormandizer and guzzler; it never yawns and snores and coughs and sneezes and belches enough to poison you; it is cleanly in its person, and in a dress always

fit to be seen: yes, often have I regretted that we had not a set of Kiddadids in England." [1]

This was written about the unreformed Parliament; but Cobbett's opinion about its successor was not very different. Elected when he was in his seventieth year, he was too old to change his habits, even if he had been willing to change them, without serious results on his health. He would not rise late, or mitigate the intensity of his day's work. He tried to add on his parliamentary duties to a day already long and strenuous, especially for a man of his years.

And he took his new duties very seriously indeed. When he said, "Now I belong to the people of Oldham," he meant what he said. Practically never was he absent from a division without good reason: he spoke frequently, and was constantly moving motions and amendments. But from the very moment of his election, his health suffered, and his absences owing to illness became more and more frequent. Colds and coughs attacked him with increasing violence: he lost his voice on several occasions: he was attacked by "the prevalent influenza." [2] Late nights, and long periods in London without a breath of the country air, did not suit him. When he was well, he was energetic as ever; but he, who had hardly known before a day's illness in his life, had now frequent spells of enforced abstention from public work, days which he spent, not in resting in bed, but in writing. Election to Parliament had no effect on his literary output.

Before his election, and before his adoption for Oldham, he had once more acquired a farm in the country. Late in 1831, he advertised in the *Register* for a suitable farm,[3] and shortly after this he acquired a long lease of Normandy Farm, Ash, not far from his birthplace, Farnham, in Surrey. Here he set to work on his long-cherished project, conceived in his Botley days, of making a property which he could leave to his children. The seed-farm at Kensington and the farm at Barn Elms, of which he had only a short tenancy, were given up; and the seed-business was carried on from Ash and from the *Register* office. But after 1832 his parliamentary duties interfered seriously with the attention he was able to give to his farm. There were to be in his life no years of quiet retirement, which he could devote to rural pursuits and the improvement of his property. He left Normandy Farm to

[1] *P.R.*, July 16th, 1831. [2] *P.R.*, April 20th, 1833.
[3] *P.R.*, November 19th, 1831.

his children; but it was not what he would have chosen to make it.

It had been Cobbett's intention to cease publication of the *Register* at the end of thirty years.[1] The first number had appeared in January, 1802; and this would have brought it to a close at the end of 1831. Thereafter he proposed to write and issue in parts, the full story of his life, and then to retire from politics and devote himself to farming and country pursuits.[2] But when the time drew near, the Reform agitation was at its height. It was impossible to stop publication at such a time, and the *Register* went on. More than once, Cobbett again conceived the idea of bringing it to a close, and again postponed the day. At length, he announced that it would end on his birthday, March 9th, 1835, again stating his intention to write the full story of his life.[3] But this date too passed, and the *Register* went on, while he never found escape enough from his daily preoccupations to write his autobiography. He died in full harness.

In 1830, he moved his office, transferring his business from Johnson's Court and 183 Fleet Street to 11 Bolt Court,[4] the house formerly occupied by Dr. Johnson. Here the office remained until after his death; and Cobbett loved to tell his readers that he was working in the very place where the great doctor had lived and worked.[5] Hence he issued, in 1833, his *French-English Dictionary*, proudly announcing that it came from the very room in which *Johnson's Dictionary* had been written.[6] When he was elected to Parliament, he took a large house in Westminster, 21 Crown Street, with "a door opening on the park . . . looking across the parade and over the Mall, and having in the background of the view the lofty column standing in Waterloo Place; but which, being as yet without any inscription, has merely the rumoured reputation of having been raised to immortalise the military renown of His late Royal Highness, the Duke of York."[7] But early in 1834, he sold this house, and moved to Bolt Court, probably because his expenditure was outrunning his means.

Not content with his work on the *Register*, Cobbett in

[1] *P.R.*, January 8th, 1831. [2] *Ibid.*

[3] *P.R.*, February 15th, 1834. [4] *P.R.*, September 25th, 1830.

[5] *P.R.*, December 31st, 1831. [6] *P.R.*, July 27th, 1833.

[7] *P.R.*, February 15th, 1834. Cobbett loved to make fun of the Duke of York, and to recall the episode of Mrs. Clarke. See p. 149.

these years several times conceived the idea of starting, or associating himself with, a new daily paper. This plan first cropped up in 1831,[1] and after his adoption for Oldham, he stated definitely that, if he were elected, he would either start a new evening daily paper, or make arrangements which would give him political control of such a venture.[2] These plans did not mature; but early in 1833 Cobbett made an arrangement with the Radical *True Sun*, whereby it was to give authorised reports, corrected by himself, of his speeches in Parliament,[3] and with James Watson, the Radical bookseller, for the reissue of his more important speeches in pamphlet form.[4] Even if he was little reported in the orthodox press, he got a good showing in the Radical journals.

In February, 1833, moreover, a new monthly, *Cobbett's Magazine*, was started by his sons.[5] Cobbett himself had little connection with this, and wrote for it only a few articles; but it was published from the *Register* office, and was therefore very generally supposed to be one of his works. This led to some difficulties; and in 1834, the name was changed, at his request, to *The Shilling Magazine*. The nature of the trouble is unknown; but it may well have been due to the fact that Cobbett's sons were by no means so Radical as their father. John Morgan Cobbett ended his life as a Conservative member of Parliament.

Cobbett himself, on the other hand, lost none of his Radicalism with advancing years. He had looked to Parliamentary Reform as the means not merely of raising the middle classes to political power, or of ending the more obvious forms of corruption and abuse, but of a complete change of system. Even before the election in which he won his seat, he saw that real Reform, as he understood it, would not come easily. The Whigs and the middle-class Radicals, most of whom were not Radicals at all in his sense of the word, had very thoroughly packed the new House of Commons. Those who could be relied on to work with him consistently could be counted on the fingers of one hand.[6] John Fielden, his colleague at Oldham, and George Faithful, his lawyer, who had been

[1] *P.R.*, May 14th, 1831.
[2] *P.R.*, November 17th, 1832.
[3] *P.R.*, February 2nd, 1833.
[4] *P.R.*, February 16th, 1833.
[5] *P.R.*, January 26th, 1833.
[6] J. S. Buckingham, Radical member for Sheffield, classified the first Reformed Parliament as consisting of 150 Conservatives, 408 Whigs, 96 Liberals, and 4 Independents. The 96 classed as Liberals

returned for Brighton, formed almost a party by themselves. A few of the Irish, among whom was often Daniel O'Connell, would support them on most issues; and on some they would get the backing of Thomas Attwood of the Birmingam Political Union, and his colleague, and of Joseph Hume, George Grote, the historian, the two Lytton Bulwers,[1] and other Benthamite and middle-class Radicals. But from the first it was clear that in Parliament Cobbett and his friends would be in a permanent and almost insignificant minority. In addressing the House of Commons, he would still have to speak in reality, almost as much as before the Reform Act, to the great mass of the unrepresented.

Whether because he realised this situation, or because it would have been contrary to his nature to do otherwise, Cobbett made no attempt to accommodate himself to the House of Commons. He bade it take or leave him as it found him. He took his seat firmly from the first day on the Treasury bench—historic preserve of Ministers and pundits. He opened out at once with a fierce attack on the proposal again to choose Charles Manners-Sutton, the reactionary speaker of the unreformed Parliament, as speaker of the new House of Commons. This seemed to him a clear indication that the Ministers, so far from contemplating any change of system, meant to persist in the old bad ways.[2] His very first speech, made against the election of Manners-Sutton, opened with the often quoted words, "It appears to me that since I have been sitting here I have heard a great deal of unprofitable discussion."[3]

Cobbett was duly routed, by 241 votes to 31, on the question of Manners-Sutton's election. In no wise discouraged, he took the first opportunity to move an amendment to the Address. This was in the form of a complete alternative Address, traversing the whole field of public policy, and insisting especially on the need for the abolition of tithes, the reduction of taxes, and the redress of the grievances of

included 17 Irish members, as well as all the middle-class Radicals, many of whom soon identified themselves fully with the Whigs. See Buckingham's *Parliamentary Review*, 1833, Vol. I., p. 31.

[1] Edward, afterwards Lord Lytton, the novelist, and his brother Henry, the diplomatist, afterwards Lord Dalling and Bulwer.

[2] *P.R.*, January 12th and February 2nd, 1833.

[3] *P.R.*, February 2nd, 1833.

the Irish people.[1] Cobbett gathered twenty-three votes in support of his amendment, but of these, twenty were the votes of Irish members. The middle-class Radicals voted against him, having put forward an amendment of their own.

From the first, Cobbett worked in close association with the more advanced members of O'Connell's Irish Party. He was with them in the demand for repeal of the Union, in the agitation against the Irish Church Establishment, in their opposition to coercion, in their claim for assistance to remedy the acute popular distress. He spoke and voted against the Irish Coercion Bill, which was one of the earliest measures brought before the Reformed Parliament,[2] and Irish debates always found him in his place ready to take an active part. In return, the O'Connells and a fair number of their followers, including the future Chartist leader, Feargus O'Connor, who sat in Parliament as member for Cork from 1832 to 1835,[3] usually supported him in his attacks on the Government, though he differed from Daniel O'Connell on a good many questions. He was, for example, a strong advocate of a Poor Law for Ireland, which O'Connell had opposed as a measure of pauperisation.[4]

But this intermittent Irish support was no substitute for the existence of a real group of Radicals in Parliament. Cobbett speedily lost any illusions he had cherished concerning the practical effect of the Reform Act. "For *what*," he wrote to the electors of Coventry, "did you petition for parliamentary reform? . . . For *what*, I say, was all this? Because you expected the Reform Bill to produce a lightening of the enormous taxes which press you to the earth; because you expected that it would produce measures to make England once more a happy land, and worthy of its name. You have found it to produce no such thing, but just the contrary. You have found it to produce very nearly a total abolition of every fragment of the constitution in Ireland: you have found it to produce a report from what they call their *poor-law commission*, broadly hinting at the establishment of a police-force

[1] *P.R.*, February 16th, 1833.

[2] *P.R.*, April 6th, 1833.

[3] O'Connor spoke in the House in defence of the unfortunate Dorchester labourers. *P.R.*, April 19th, 1834.

[4] See the *Letter to Daniel O'Connell*, printed at the end of the *Manchester Lectures*, in 1832.

in all the towns and villages in England: you have found it to produce not the smallest alleviation of taxation, but, on the contrary, a more severe mode of proceeding in the collection of the taxes: you have found a deaf ear turned to all the representations of the intolerable sufferings of the working people: you have found this hard-hearted Ministry refusing to make even the most distant promise that they will make any effort whatever to lessen those sufferings." [1]

Cobbett was realising, moreover, his own helplessness, with the few allies on whom he could rely, to make any real impression on Parliament. "What is wanted in the House," he wrote, "is this: ten men, who care not one single straw for all the noises that can possibly be raised against them; who would be just as insensible to the roarings and the scoffings as they would be to the noise of a parcel of dogs howling at the moon; who would preserve their good humour in spite of all the cheerings drawn forth by attacks upon them; and, above all things, who would constantly, steadily, and boldly, persevere into looking scrupulously into every grant of the public money, however small. . . . The reader is not aware of the boldness that is requisite in a case like this. Scores of men have, at different times, gone into that House with a firm determination to set all these disadvantageous circumstances at defiance; but, finding themselves unable to do that, they first sunk into silence; then next, they have slunk away from divisions; and, at last, they have actually turned about in their politics; they have feigned a conversion to the other side, finding that to do that required less courage than the performance of their duty required. This is the short history of the '*patriots*' in the House of Commons." [2]

Nominally, Cobbett represented Oldham: actually he was regarded as the parliamentary representative of the unenfranchised working class. This involved a vast mass of work. On one day, March 11th, 1833, he presented thirty distinct petitions from different parts of the country [3]: a week later he had thirty-five more awaiting presentation [4]: and a week after that, nearly sixty more.[5] These petitions involved correspondence, interviewing, and approaches to Ministers, as well as speaking in the House. The most willing of horses, even Cobbett began to feel the strain, made the heavier for

[1] *P.R.*, April 20th, 1833.
[2] *P.R.*, March 16th, 1833.
[3] *P.R.*, April 20th, 1833.
[4] *P.R.*, March 23rd, 1833.
[5] *P.R.*, March, 30th 1833.

the sense of being up against a blank wall of opposition. He saw that he must call forces outside Parliament to his aid; and he threw out the plan of a "Defence Association," through which the bringing of grievances before Parliament might be more effectually organised.[1] Nothing, however, came of this proposal.

More and more, Parliament came to appear to him as an institution organised, not for the proper conduct of public business or the expression of popular opinion, but positively against these objects. He wrote in the *Register* caustic descriptions of the manner in which the business was conducted and of the hopeless inadequacy of the accommodation for purposes of real discussion.[2] When the Houses of Parliament were partly burnt down in October, 1834, he had no tears for their destruction.[3] Perhaps, he suggested, the agency was "fire and brimstone from Heaven." He saw, in the *Morning Herald's* report of the burning, "that the mob (meaning the people of London), when they saw the progress of the flames, raised a savage shout of exultation." He was not surprised. "The *Herald* exclaims 'Oh, unreflecting people!' Now, perhaps the 'mob' exulted because the 'mob' was really a *reflecting* 'mob.' When even a dog, or a horse, receives any treatment that it does not like, it always shuns *the place* where it got such treatment. The 'unreflecting mob' perhaps remembered what manner of things had been done in this house now burning before its eyes." Then followed a long catalogue of the iniquities of Parliament, in which no distinctions were drawn between the "unreformed" and the "reformed."[4] *Plus cela change, plus c'est la même chose.*

Cobbett himself acted on the principles which he prescribed as rules of conduct for the "ten men" whose presence in Parliament he so ardently desired. He did not greatly trouble himself with the forms of the House, and he made no effort to avoid unpopularity. Indeed, he deliberately challenged all the odium that could be drawn upon him by a frontal attack on the Conservative leader, Sir Robert Peel. "Peel's Bill Peel," so nicknamed in the *Register* after his Bank Act of 1819,[5] had long been one of the incarnations of the

[1] *P.R.*, April 6th, 1833.
[2] *P.R.*, March 2nd, 1833.
[3] *P.R.*, October 25th, 1834.
[4] *P.R.*, November 1st, 1834.
[5] See p. 237.

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[4] *P.R.*, November 1st, 1834.
[5] See p. 237.

devil in Cobbett's eyes. He had not the same personal hatred for Peel as he had felt for Castlereagh or Pitt; but he regarded him as primarily responsible for the severe distresses of the common people. The return to a gold standard, without any liquidation of debt charges or reduction of other public burdens, had, in Cobbett's view, been the main cause of the semi-starvation of labourers and factory workers. Peel had taken from the poor, and given to the rich. On this ground of hostility, and not from any personal hatred,[1] Cobbett moved in the House of Commons a resolution in favour of a petition to the king for the removal of Peel from the Privy Council. Such a motion was not likely to secure many votes. "I really never expected anybody to vote for my motion, but Mr. Fielden and myself; and that would have been quite enough to satisfy me." In fact, besides the two tellers, four voted in favour, Thomas Attwood of Birmingham, the lifelong advocate of unlimited paper-money, and three Irish members.[2]

Cobbett's object was to get, not votes, but publicity for his demands for financial reform. He reprinted his and Peel's speeches in pamphlet form, under the title *The Flash in the Pan*, and secured discussion as well as odium by his move. But the overwhelming majority in Parliament were men who regarded the claims of property as sacred, and were even less likely than the nominees of the old borough-mongers to vote for any "equitable adjustment" or partial repudiation of the National Debt. Cobbett's real appeal, in this case as in many others, was not to his fellow-members of Parliament, but to working-class opinion.

Attwood, who voted with Cobbett on this occasion, held views on the currency question diametrically opposed to Cobbett's. Cobbett wanted to do away with paper-money, and with the Debt at the same time: Attwood, a banker by profession, regarded the generous issue of paper credit, based on productive capacity, as the means to economic expansion and prosperity. The two men had already held a public debate in Birmingham in August, 1832, under the auspices of the Birmingham Political Union. Attwood, long-winded as usual, had made an opening speech, lasting for four hours and a half, in exposition of his paper-money theories, so that

[1] This is made clear by the tone of Cobbett's *Legacy to Peel*, first published in 1835 in the *Register*, and by that of the dedication to Peel of the *Legacy to Labourers*, 1833-4.

[2] *P.R.*, May 18th, 1833.

the debate had to be adjourned to the following day, when Charles Jones of Birmingham opened with a speech on Attwood's side, before Cobbett got a word in. Cobbett's speech of two hours was moderate by comparison; and Attwood then took two hours more to reply. It says much for the patience of the 1400 people who attended the debate, that they not only sat it out, but voted by a majority in favour of Attwood's scheme. Truly our forefathers were made of sterner stuff than we.[1]

Cobbett and Attwood had also crossed swords during the election campaign of 1832, when the latter took strong objection to Cobbett's endeavours to get the Political Unions to bind their members down by pledges governing their action in Parliament.[2] But in fact Attwood, who subsequently took some part in the Chartist movement, usually voted with Cobbett in the House. He was active, for example, in endeavouring to secure the attention of Parliament to the prevalent distress in the country, and acted with Cobbett in April in an attempt, defeated by Government opposition, to secure the appointment of a special committee to report on the distress and propose remedies to Parliament.[3]

While Cobbett in the House of Commons was making his hopeless protest against the almost unanimous opposition of Tories, Whigs, and Benthamite Radicals, the tide of feeling in the country was again rising fast, and assuming new forms corresponding to the changed political conditions. The working-class Radicals, with some support from the Benthamites, protested fiercely against the reiterated assertions of the Government spokesmen that the Act of 1832 was to be regarded as a final settlement of the whole question of political representation. The demand for universal suffrage, vote by ballot and annual Parliaments, which had been temporarily renewed at the time of the Bristol riots, now began again. Stanley, the Whig Irish Secretary, made an important speech declaring finally and unequivocally against any further Reform: Cobbett answered him in the *Register*,[4] and reprinted his answer as a pamphlet. The Political Unions, shedding their Whig supporters, reopened the agitation for universal suffrage and the other points of the democratic programme.

[1] See report of the debate in *P.R.*, September 8th, 1832.

[2] *P.R.*, July 21st, 1832.

[3] *P.R.*, April 27th, 1833.

[4] *P.R.*, January 19th, 1833.

In the House, the Ministers were urged to take steps to dissolve these "unlawful assemblies." Lord Althorp refused to take measures against the Political Unions, which, he said, were not unlawful; but he expressed the view that "if they became very much extended over the country, they might become injurious to the peace and happiness of the country." Cobbett retorted that the Unions were "not only perfectly lawful, but in all respects thoroughly laudable." [1]

But, while the Political Unions might alarm timid members of the House of Commons, who interpreted the Radical Manifesto of the Cartwright Club [2] as the prelude to revolutionary attempts upon the new order just established, the sting had in fact been taken out of the political agitation. In the spring of 1833, huge meetings of working-class Reformers all over the country did indeed demand the dismissal of the Government,[3] and there was a general revival of agitation. A proposal was widely made to call a 'National Convention'—an anticipation, this, of Chartist action a few years later—and when a huge meeting called in London to discuss this project was held in defiance of police prohibition, and a policeman killed in the disturbance which followed, a coroner's jury showed the state of public feeling, and the unpopularity of the new police, by bringing in a verdict of "justifiable homicide." [4] The Government had to go to the High Court to get the verdict quashed.[5] A special committee appointed to investigate the affair generally exonerated the police, but convicted them of excessive zeal in breaking up the assembly.[6]

Feeling, indeed, ran high; but in face of the impossibility of exacting any further Reform from the self-satisfied Reformed Parliament, the agitation shifted into fresh channels. Trade Unionism, which had been growing rapidly since the repeal of the Combination Acts,[7] received an immense new impetus, and acquired further a fresh meaning and objective by the infusion of Socialist and Co-operative ideas under the inspiration of the disciples of Robert Owen. Disappointed in their political hopes, the workers turned to industrial organisation and action, and conceived the idea of a transformation of Society by use of their industrial power. The Owenite Co-operative movement, which had been spreading

[1] *P.R.*, June 29th, 1833.
[2] *P.R.*, March 8th, 1834.
[3] *P.R.*, May 25th, 1833.
[4] *P.R.*, May 25th, 1833.
[5] *P.R.*, June, 1st, 1833.
[6] *P.R.*, August 31st, 1833.
[7] See p. 257.

rapidly since the early twenties, was not then mainly a plan for cheapening prices to the consumer by collective buying and selling of goods: it was an attempt to change the basis of society by substituting everywhere the co-operative for the competitive principle. Co-operators combined less as consumers than as producers: if they began with retail trade, their object was to accumulate by that means a surplus which would enable them to acquire ownership of the means of production, and so take the control of industry into their own hands. As late as 1844, this idea was quite plainly set out in the statement of objects of the Rochdale Pioneers.

Co-operation of this sort, aiming at joint action by producers for the common ownership of industry, made a direct appeal to the workers now organising in Trade Unions for common protection and mutual aid. The younger Radical working-class leaders were mostly followers of Owen, firm believers in the co-operative principle. Hitherto, their practical energies had been largely absorbed in the agitation for political Reform. Disillusioned by the Reform Act, they turned now to the Trade Unions, and sought to make of them instruments for the practical achievement of their ideals. Already in 1830 John Doherty, the leader of the cotton operatives, had attempted to form a General Union of all trades [1]: in 1832 was founded the great Builders' Union, which rapidly adopted the full Owenite programme and established a "Grand National Guild of Builders," to eliminate the employer and contractor and undertake all manner of building work on co-operative lines and under the control of the workers themselves.[2] Early in 1834, under Robert Owen's direct influence, was formed the Grand National Consolidated Trades Union, an ambitious attempt to enrol all workers under one banner, not only for common defence, but for the achievement by industrial means of the Co-operative Commonwealth.

Cobbett, in earlier days, had scoffed at Owen's schemes for Co-operative Communities, or, as he called them, "communities of paupers." [3] These plans for self-contained communities to live apart in co-operative principles, were, of course, a long way distant from the schemes of Owen's followers for using the Trade Unions and Co-operative Societies as means

[1] See p. 351.

[2] For a full account of this movement, see R. W. Postgate, *The Builders' History*, Chapters III.-V.

[3] *P.R.*, August 2nd, 1817.

to the overthrow of capitalism and the establishment of workers' control, and Cobbett's scorn of Owen had worn off with time. He did not, indeed, either understand or try to understand the new Trade Union ideas, and the *Register* contains practically no reference to the schemes and theories which agitated the working-class organisations from 1832 onwards. But Cobbett was prepared to work with Owen, both in his struggle for factory reform, and in his encouragement of the rising Trade Union organisations. John Fielden, his fellow-member for Oldham, was closely associated with Owen in much of this work,[1] and Cobbett gave his full support.

"It is very well known," he wrote, "that the whole country is in a stir with what are called TRADES UNIONS.[2] This has become so formidable a matter, that it demands the attention of every one who meddles at all with public affairs. . . . I have long been contending that labour had not its just reward: that those who do the work have long been unfairly treated; and that, at last, it must, in some way or another, end in their being better treated. The working people have long been combining in one way or another to obtain better treatment: and at last they seem to have combined for some practical purpose. . . . The people hoped that a reformed Parliament would make a complete change in this respect; and they have been completely disappointed. Therefore, casting aside all disquisitions relative to forms of government, and political and constitutional rights, they have betaken themselves to what they deem the best method of insuring them sufficiency of food and of raiment in return for their labour. Many of the employers enter into the views of the workmen. . . . The Government newspapers have been recommending the Parliament to pass a *law* to put an end to these unions. Better call for a law to prevent those inconvenient things called *spring-tides*." [3]

It is clear, from this and other passages,[4] that, while Cobbett gave his full support to the new Trade Union agitation,

[1] *P.R.*, December 14th, 1833, in which Fielden appeals to Cobbett for help.

[2] A distinction was drawn between trade unions or clubs of workers in one trade, and "trades unions," aiming at general organisation on a class basis.

[3] *P.R.*, December 7th, 1833.

[4] See especially *P.R.*, April 26th, 1834, for Cobbett's views on employers' and workers' combinations. He defends the right of combination for both.

he thought of it as a means, not to a new industrial order based on the co-operative principle—that was outside his range of ideas—but to the securing of better wages and conditions for the working people. He was no more a Socialist at the end of his life than at the beginning: he belonged to the Old England and not to the New. But his whole sympathy went out to the workers in their struggle both against the employers' denial of the right of combination, and for an improvement of their position. This was seen in his firm support both of the agitation for an effective Factory Act, and of the unfortunate Dorchester labourers.

Side by side with the new gospel of Co-operative Socialism, a huge agitation for factory reform, strongest in the textile districts in the North of England, was being conducted by the workers with the aid of a considerable minority of sympathetic employers. In 1831 Michael Sadler, the Yorkshire Tory, had introduced his Ten Hours' Bill, urging that the inequality of the parties made it impossible to leave the contract of employment to unrestricted individual bargaining, and that legislative protection was essential. Sadler's Bill did not pass—he obtained only a Select Committee—and in 1832 he was defeated in the elections for the reformed Parliament by the Whig, Macaulay. Lord Ashley, subsequently Earl of Shaftesbury,[1] took up the cause in Parliament, and in 1833 the first really effective Factory Act was passed into law. But it was mutilated almost out of recognition. Sadler's Bill had proposed a maximum ten hours' day for all persons under eighteen years of age: the Act, which applied only to textile factories, only limited the hours to twelve.

One of Cobbett's speeches on the Bill remains famous to this day. It was a very short speech, the more effective for its brevity—brevity was not usually among Cobbett's virtues. The opponents of the Bill had argued that, as the profit of industry depended wholly on extracting the last ounce of productive capacity from the workers—Nassau Senior's notorious "last hour"[2]—any limitation of the hours of work would be fatal to industrial progress.

"Sir," said Cobbett, "I will make but one single observation upon this subject; and that is this: that this '*reformed*' House has, this night, made a *discovery* greater than all the discoveries that all former Houses of Commons have ever

[1] For a full account, see Hammond's *Shaftesbury*.

[2] Demolished by Karl Marx in *Das Kapital* (Vol. I., Chap. IX.).

made, even if all their discoveries could have been put into one. Heretofore, we have sometimes been told that our ships, our mercantile traffic with foreign nations by the means of those ships, together with our body of rich merchants—we have sometimes been told that these form the source of our wealth, power, and security. At other times, the land has stepped forward, and bid us look to it, and its yeomanry, as the sure and solid foundation of our greatness and our safety. At other times the Bank has pushed forward with her claims, and has told us, that great as the others were, they were nothing without 'PUBLIC CREDIT,' upon which, not only the prosperity and happiness, but the very independence of the country depend. But, sir, we have this night discovered, that the shipping, the land, and the Bank and its credit, are all worth nothing compared with the labour of three hundred thousand little girls in Lancashire! Aye, when compared with only an eighth part of those three hundred thousand little girls, from whose labour if we only deduct two hours a day, away goes the wealth, away goes the capital, away go the resources, the power, and the glory of England! With what pride and what pleasure, sir, will the right hon. Gentleman opposite, and the honourable member for Manchester behind me, go northward with the news of this discovery, and communicate it to that large portion of the little girls whom they have the honour and the happiness to represent!" [1]

Cobbett's sarcasm was unavailing. By 238 votes to 93, the honourable House decided that the hours of labour should be twelve and not ten.

While the Bill was before Parliament, the Trade Unions and the Ten Hours Committees which had been formed throughout the manufacturing districts to prevent its mutilation kept up an incessant agitation. This was maintained when the shadow of the Bill became law. Owen, travelling north, put himself at the head of the movement, and joined with Fielden and the Trade Union leaders to form the Society for Promoting National Regeneration, of which the first object was the general enforcement of the eight hours' day, and the method, agitation and deputation to employers, backed by the threat of strike action.[2]

Cobbett gave the new Society his cordial support.

[1] *P.R.*, July 20th, 1833.

[2] *P.R.*, December 7th, 1833, contains the Rules, Resolutions, and "Catechism" of this society.

"Rousseau," he wrote, "has very justly observed, that the man who is compelled to work all the hours that he is awake, is, whatsoever name he may choose to bear, to all intents and purposes a *slave*." [1] And he went on to use, in support of the eight hours' day, an argument often heard in these latter days of unemployment and distress. Were not the economists and the "feelosofers" forever talking of the market being over-supplied with labour, and explaining that this was the cause of the distress? Were they not forever launching new projects of emigration, in order to get rid of the surplus labourers? Did they not talk unendingly about the laws of supply and demand? Was not this "a favourite expression of Ricardo, who said that it was of no consequence whether any corn was grown in England, or not"? And, "this being the case, what impudence must that man have, who shall dare to lift his voice in condemnation of any persons who are combining for the purpose of *diminishing the hours of labour*, and thereby making labour not super-abundant '*in the market*'; making the *supply* not so far to outstretch the demand." [2]

The agitation for a shorter working day merged itself, in 1834, in the wider struggle which centred round the Grand National Consolidated Trades Union. The incredibly rapid growth of "the Trades Union," which absorbed into itself countless small local societies, and sent its missionaries everywhere through the country enrolling members, caused the governing classes, new as well as old, a thorough fright. The employers in Derby and other areas presented the "document," refusing to employ any man who would not sign a declaration renouncing all connection with "the Trades Union." The employment of police spies by the Government, frequent in the days of Oliver, Castles, and Edwards,[3] was revived, to be dragged into the light of publicity in the cause of the notorious Popay. Spies were sent to Trade Union meetings: in Cobbett's own constituency of Oldham, a Trade Union meeting was raided and the books of the Union seized by the police.[4]

William S. Popay was a policeman. So far, so good; but when he became a plain-clothes policeman, not so good. For he was then specially detailed by the Police Department

[1] *P.R.*, December 14th, 1833. [2] *Ibid.*
[3] See p. 226. [4] *P.R.*, April 19th, 1834.

to watch the activities of certain of the working-class organisations in London. He enrolled himself a member of the Camberwell and Walworth Branch of the National Union of the Working Classes, and became a regular attendant at their meetings. As happens so often in these cases, he did not confine himself to the rôle of observer. He drafted suitably strong resolutions for the Union, encouraged his fellow-members to plans of violence, urged the establishment of a gallery where they could learn to shoot, and duly reported to police headquarters all the plots which he helped to hatch. When his true position became known, and the Union too hot to hold him, he duly received the reward of his services by promotion to the post of deputy-inspector. His dupes thereupon addressed a petition to the reformed Parliament, protesting against the use of spies and provocative agents. Cobbett took the matter up energetically in the House, and secured the appointment of a Select Committee, of which he was made a member. The facts were not disputed, and the Committee brought in a Report reflecting strongly on the conduct of the police authorities, with the result that Popay was dismissed from the service. The superior officers responsible for the policy, however, were not punished, and Lord Melbourne, the Home Secretary, who was shown to have personally received and annotated Popay's reports, was suffered to pursue his methods unchecked. Popay was made a scapegoat. But the exposure did some good, in revealing plainly the strong sentiment existing against the methods of espionage freely practised by successive Governments from the time of Pitt. The practice did not cease, but it was kept within bounds. It also helped to swell the unpopularity, already great, of Sir Robert Peel's police.

"I have a rooted hatred," wrote Cobbett, "to this police establishment: I hate it, because it is of *foreign* growth, and because it is *French:* I hate it because it really tears up the Government."[1] "The facts brought to light of the proceedings of this spy really chill one's blood."[2] Cobbett himself prepared and published in the *Register*[3] an alternative Report covering a wider ground, and more definite in its condemnation than the Report, itself fairly critical, adopted by the majority of the Committee.[4] He also, after Popay's

[1] *P.R.*, August 17th, 1833.
[2] *P.R.*, August 10th, 1833.
[3] *P.R.*, August 17th, 1833.
[4] *P.R.*, August 10th, 1833.

dismissal, attempted to get further action to prevent the future use of such methods by the police.[1] But he had to be content with a partial victory, which only harassed Lord Melbourne, and put the Reformers more fully on their guard against spies in their midst.

The terror of the governing classes at the growth of working-class organisations expressed itself not only in police espionage, but also in direct and savage measures of repression. The most notorious case is that of the six unfortunate Dorchester labourers, sentenced to transportation in March, 1834, for the dreadful crime of administering illegal oaths. These poor men of Tolpuddle, in Dorsetshire, had formed, with the usual ceremonies of initiation, a branch of the Grand National Consolidated Trades Union among the agricultural labourers of their village, and had then asked for a rise in wages. These were the sole crimes alleged against them: for this they were sentenced to seven years' transportation by the humane ministers of British justice. At once the whole Trade Union movement roused itself to protest; for the sentence was both monstrously unjust and a dreadful precedent which might be used against every one of them. Cobbett presented to Parliament a petition from the London Trade Unions against the sentence[2], and through April petitions poured in from all parts of the country.[3] Feargus O'Connor was among those, who defended the Dorchester men's case in the House; Robert Owen headed a monster demonstration which attended a deputation of protest to Lord Melbourne.[4] The London Dorchester Committee, with William Lovett, the future Chartist leader, as secretary, set on foot a national agitation.

But the Whig Government was set on making an example. Lord Melbourne returned the petitions with the remark—implying rejection—that "His Majesty has not been pleased to signify any commands thereupon."[5] The unhappy labourers were rushed out of the country at express speed,[6] in order to make their punishment the less easily revocable. The Trade Unions sustained the agitation; but not until 1836 were the sentences remitted, and two years more elapsed before the "malefactors" were restored to friends and country.

[1] *P.R.*, August 24th, 1833. [2] *P.R.*, March 29th, 1834.
[3] *P.R.*, April 5th and 19th, 1834.
[4] *P.R.*, April 26th, 1834 (full report).
[5] *P.R.*, April 12th, 1834. [6] *Ibid.*

Such was the attitude of Reformed Parliament and Reform Government to the claims of Labour.[1]

While the Dorchester agitation was at its height, the Grand National Consolidated Trades Union was giving way beneath the blows showered upon it. Strikes in one place, lock-outs in others, accompanied by the presentation of the "document" by the employers, were too much for so inchoate and loosely knit an organisation to withstand. Before the end of the year it perished, and with it died the hopes of the workers in speedy emancipation by the use of the industrial weapon. Many fragments of "the Trades Union" survived as separate Societies; but they were greatly weakened, and driven once more into sectional isolation. The stage was cleared for the next great working-class adventure into political action—the Chartist movement. But already a new conflict had begun—the vain struggle of the starvelings against the principles of the new economics. The Reformed Parliament had "reformed" the Poor Law, and Cobbett had taken up the cudgel in his last crusade for the old England against the new.

[1] For further details of the Dorchester affair, see Webb, *History of Trade Unionism*, pp. 144-8, and the files of *The Pioneer*, for some time the organ of the Grand National Consolidated Trades Union.

CHAPTER XXV

THE POOR LAW STRUGGLE

THE first great enterprise of the Reformed Parliament was the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834, the principles of which, with some modification, still govern the British system of poor relief. At a single blow, the old system of relief was swept away, and a new one, consistent with the ideas of Malthus and the Benthamites, set in its place. The "Reform of the Poor Law" was the first important measure of nineteenth century Liberalism, pioneered and largely carried through by the new classes which Parliamentary Reform had brought to political power. It did not, indeed, go far enough for some of the Malthusians and philosophic Radicals, who would have preferred to see all relief denied to able-bodied persons, and even more deterrent measures applied to frighten the poor from bringing children into the world. But, in the main, it carried out logically the ideas of those who held that pauperism was a crime, and that the right method of dealing with it was deterrence ruthlessly applied. Its results were measured, not by the decrease in human suffering, but by the lessening of poor rates, which it set out to achieve.

No one can deny that the Poor Law, as it was before 1834, stood urgently in need of reform. The Speenhamland system, inaugurated by the Berkshire justices in 1795, had spread rapidly over the whole country. Everywhere, save in a few northern counties, it had become normal for the wages of labourers in agriculture to be subsidised out of the poor rates. This meant that the justices, or the overseers on their behalf, fixed a standard of life on which they held that the poor could subsist, and, if wages were below this level, made up the balance out of the rates. Relief was on a "fodder basis," proportionate to the numbers in the family, and thus offered, at least during the early years of the system, a direct inducement to the poor to have as many children as possible in order to get more relief.

This system was operating at a time when, despite repeated

Corn Laws, agricultural prices were fluctuating wildly. In 1812, at the height of the war scarcity, wheat stood at 126*s.* a quarter. In 1882 it had fallen to 44*s.* Other commodities and charges not having fallen in proportion, the farmers, reduced to serious difficulties, cut wages down ruthlessly. This hugely increased the burden of the poor rates, which the farmers and landowners had to pay. Accordingly, as we have seen, the justices and overseers steadily cut down the standard of life allowed to the poor under the Speenhamland system, until the greater part of the agricultural proletariat was barely existing on the verge of positive starvation. At the same time, agricultural distress caused the farmers to cut down the acreage sown. This meant less employment for the labourers; and more and more gangs of starving people of both sexes were hired out at low wages to any employer who would take them, or set to break stones by the roadside. As Cobbett constantly pointed out, no slave population could have been worse off than the rural population of England in the years following the peace.

The farmers suffered too. Tithes collected in kind or in cash became a tax more and more burdensome on the embarrassed cultivator. Rents fell far more slowly than prices; high taxation and interest on borrowed money weighed the farmer down. Village industries, too, were being destroyed by factory competition. The older squirearchy, half farmers and half landowners, lost on their farms, and were gradually compelled to reduce rents. Only the stock-jobbers, financiers and sinecurists, who had become country gentlemen on the grand scale, could securely maintain the great establishments which they had built up out of the profits of war. Save these last, every class in the countryside could protest with some truth that, though the plight of the labourers might be miserable indeed, little enough could be spared to help them.

But for these other classes there were compensations. Even if farming was in a bad way, many of them had other resources to fall back upon—investments in war loan, for example—or at least reserves enough to tide over the depression. The labourers had nothing. In many a cottage the click of the bobbin had been silenced by the water-wheel or the steam-engine of the town. The peasants had been robbed of their commons, stripped of almost every acre of land by the ruthless execution of the Enclosure Acts. Bread

had ceased to be baked at home, for they had no land on which to grow corn, no turfs or brushwood from the commons for fuel. Their geese and pigs were taken from them by the enclosures. "We steal the goose and give back the giblets," said a friend of John Thelwall's. "No," said another, "giblets are much too dainty for the common herd: we give them only the pen feathers."[1]

The advocates of enclosures had prophesied that they would bring higher wages as the outcome of more scientific and more productive farming methods. Instead, came general agricultural depression. Wages fell, pauperism grew, and the net of the "Speenhamland Act," as it was popularly called, caught in its meshes more and more of the unfortunate labouring people. No counties save Northumberland and Durham were untouched by the system of subsidising wages out of poor rates. And the standard of life allowed became even lower as the burden of the rates increased. Agricultural prices fell; but taxes kept the cost of living high. Candles, soap, salt, tea, beer, and many other commodities were heavily taxed at the consumer's expense. Cobbett estimated that of every £18 received, the labourer had to pay £10 in taxes.

Certainly, the system needed reform. But reform followed the principle, not of redressing rural grievances, but of cutting down the poor rates at any cost in human misery. The Act of 1834 only completed and systematised the new principles which, under the influence of the economists and the pressure of the farming and landowning interests, had already been introduced piecemeal. Proposals, such as those of the Radical, Samuel Whitbread, for an agricultural minimum wage enforced by law, were rejected: nothing was done to compensate the poor for what they lost by the enclosures: the answer to every protest was that wages were regulated by an iron law, which the indiscriminate granting of relief set at defiance.

At times, under pressure of this misery, the countryside flamed into revolt. In 1816 and again in 1830, as we have seen, there were widespread disturbances; but there were also lesser disturbances—especially fires and machine-breaking—constantly reported. These measures, sternly repressed though they were, often relieved the situation for the moment by enforcing concessions; but they could not arrest the

[1] Thelwall, *The Tribune*, Vol. II., p. 317.

general tendency towards ever harsher and more definitely punitive treatment. Relief had been regarded as a right:[1] under the influence of the new economic doctrines, and especially of Malthus and his disciples, it was no longer felt as a right; for to be born at all was regarded as an act of impertinence on the part of the poor. The theory of a "surplus population," pressing with ever-increasing menace on the limited means of national subsistence, dominated economic thought. Relief, under the Speenhamland system, was seen to offer an encouragement to the poor to increase and multiply. But, if multiplication meant misery, and relief meant multiplication, relief could not be a right. That system must be best and most moral which most deterred the poor from breeding.

Cobbett, as we have seen, made sustained protest against this horrible doctrine, denouncing again and again the "monster," Malthus, and all his disciples. But he could make little headway against a tendency which had powerful economic influences behind it. In 1818, against his protests, the system of voting in the vestries was altered so as to give extra votes to the larger ratepayers: in 1819 the system of Select Vestries, which virtually removed control from the open meeting of ratepayers to a small coterie of the richer inhabitants, was established by law in an adoptive form, which enabled any parish that chose to adopt it. The Select Vestry and the salaried guardian[2] or overseer were the chosen instruments by means of which the policy of cutting down relief scales and making more deterrent the conditions of relief were more and more widely applied. Cobbett fought against select vestries and attempts to make them general[3]: he exposed the inhuman policy which the salaried officers of the Poor Law were instructed to pursue: he fought unceasingly for the full recognition of the right to relief on a tolerable living scale, and against the Malthusian assumptions on the basis of which that right was denied.

The policy of the Malthusians, which had almost completely captured the minds of the governing classes of both parties,

[1] To prove the historical right of the poor to decent maintenance out of the produce of the land was the main purpose of Cobbett's *Poor Man's Friend* and the burden of his *History of the Protestant Reformation.*

[2] Introduced under Gilbert's Act of 1782.

[3] *P.R.*, October 1st, 1831, and many other passages.

was twofold. On the one hand, they advocated a deterrent Poor Law system, which, by gradually abolishing outdoor relief altogether, at least for the able-bodied, would serve to check the growth of population.[1] On the other hand, they sought to drain off the existing "surplus labour" by means of emigration. New projects of emigration were constantly being devised: the merits of this or that British colony were constantly sung by Emigration Boards and Select Committees.

The trouble about this policy was that the persons most likely to make successful emigrants were by no means those whom the "feelosofical villains" wanted to drive out of the country. The emigrant needed health and strength; and a long period of starvation at home, followed by a long voyage on an insanitary and fever-ridden emigrant ship, was no sound preparation for the arduous conditions of the wild, uncleared countries to which the Malthusians pointed—but did not lead—the way. Moreover, the agricultural emigrant sorely needed capital to start him in the new country to which he was bound. Had the governing classes been willing to feed the "surplus population" well at home, and start them off with capital in the colonies, emigration might have been a success. As matters stood, it was too often only a way of shooting the "surplus," dead or alive, on a rubbish heap, which had the crowning merit of distance.

It seems at first sight a paradox that Cobbett, the constant foe of the emigrationists, should have published, in 1829, *The Emigrant's Guide*. But, in the book itself, he made his attitude plain. "I have never *persuaded*, or endeavoured to persuade, any one to quit England with a view of exchanging it for another country; and I have always had great reluctance to do anything having that tendency. . . . I have always, hitherto, advised *Englishmen* not to emigrate even to the United States of America; but, to remain at home, *in the hope that some change* for the better would come in the course of *a few years*."[2] But, in his view, the position had become so bad, and he was so constantly bombarded with requests for advice from intending emigrants, that he at length felt it his duty to set forth both the dangers and the means of success.

[1] Malthus and others also opposed cottage-building, on the ground that it would only encourage the poor to breed.

[2] *Emigrant's Guide*, pars 1 and 2.

His book was at least as much a warning as an encouragement. "As far as relates to labourers in husbandry, to mechanics, and the like, who have to work for their bread, and who must expect to work for it everywhere, none but the *able* ought to go abroad. . . . Above all things, no man should remove to another country for fear of being compelled to *load a parish in this country*."[1] Principally, he considered emigration suited to men with at least some small substance. "I have not labourers in view, so much as persons in trade, and farmers, and manufacturers, who have some little money which they would rather not have taken from them by the tax-gatherer.[2] He would advise no man to emigrate to the English colonies: the United States offered far better prospects. Cobbett's *Guide* lent no support to those who sought to relieve the rates by getting rid of the starving poor. His advice remained to the end of his life[3] that which he had given in 1817 in his *Year's Residence in America*.[4] *Twopenny Trash* for March, 1831, was devoted to a vigorous denunciation of the plans for wholesale emigration to the colonies, then before the country.

This hostility to schemes of emigration was based, of course, on an entire denial of the Malthusian assumption that it was necessary to reduce population and check breeding. In 1831, Cobbett again resorted to the dramatic form he had used in *Big O and Sir Glory*[5], employing it this time against the Malthusians and their friends. *Surplus Population, A Comedy*, was first published in the *Register*, in May, 1831, and re-published in pamphlet form in 1834, when the controversy over Poor Law Reform was at its height. It is better fun, and more actable, than his earlier venture. Again, he gave permission to all and sundry to perform it in public: but a proposal to perform it at Tonbridge in 1835 was promptly vetoed by the authorities, who prevented the use of the local theatre.[6] It represents the landowning M.P., who professes Malthusian principles, mightily shocked at a proposal of one of his labourers to marry a pretty village girl, and employing his satellite, the Malthusian economist, to carry her off to be his mistress, lest she may add to the pauper population of the village. It ends with retribution falling on both the villains of the piece, the squire being drawn by the indignant

[1] *Op. cit.*, par. 21.
[2] *Op. cit*, par. 20.
[3] See *P.R.*, July 5th, 1834.
[4] See p. 225.
[5] See p. 293.
[6] *P.R.*, June 6th, 1835.

villagers through his own horse-pond. The following passage is a fair sample: the Malthusian satellite is conversing with the young woman who has conceived the monstrous idea of getting married.

"*Thimble:* So, young woman, you are going to be married, I understand?

Betsy: Yes, sir.

Thimble: How old are you?

Betsy: I'm nineteen, Sir, come next Valentine's Eve.

Thimble: That is to say, you are *eighteen!* [*Aside*] No wonder the country is ruined! And your mother, now; how old is she?

Betsy: I can't justly say, Sir; but I heard her say she was forty some time back.

Thimble: And how many of you has she brought into the world?

Betsy: Only seventeen, Sir.

Thimble: Seventeen! *Only* seventeen!

Betsy: Seventeen now alive, Sir; she lost two and had two still-born, and——

Thimble: Hold your tongue! Hold your tongue! [*Aside*] It is quite monstrous! Nothing can save the country but plague, pestilence, famine, and sudden death. Government ought to import a ship-load of arsenic. [*To her*]: But, young woman, cannot you impose on yourself '*moral restraint*' for ten or a dozen years?

Betsy: Pray, what is that, Sir?

Thimble: Cannot you keep single till you are about thirty years old?

Betsy: Thirty years old, Sir! [*Stifling a laugh.*]" [1]

Cobbett might rail and satirise; but in Parliament, both before and after Reform, the Malthusians had matters pretty much their own way. The administration of the Poor Laws was steadily tightened up: the conditions of relief were made more and more deterrent: the standard of life was cut steadily down. But the burden of the poor rates remained as heavy as ever, for population grew, and distress in the countryside became more and more general, while changes in agricultural methods steadily reduced the demand for labour. The call for more drastic methods of dealing with the problem, the outcry against the Speenhamland system of relief, the demand for a general abolition of out-relief, became

[1] *Surplus Population, A Comedy.*

louder. The "reform" of the Poor Laws is generally regarded as the achievement of the Reformed Parliament; but preparations for it were fully in train before the passing of the political Reform Act of 1832. In March, 1832, the Royal Commission on the Poor Laws was appointed, with the Bishop of London as chairman, and Sturges Bourne and Nassau Senior among the Commissioners. Cobbett called it "one amongst the memorable fooleries of this Whig Ministry."[1] The ultimate object of the Commission, he said, was the total abolition of the Poor Laws. "I know they can do nothing to the Poor Laws: the chopsticks will take care of that."[2] Brougham and Grey might appoint it, "with Sturges Bourne at its head, and a parcel of Scotch *feelosophers* at its tail and in its middle. . . . A Reformed Parliament will dismiss them pretty quickly. . . . My God! How soon will a reformed Parliament sweep away all this rubbish: or, how soon will such a Parliament be swept away itself?"[3]

Alas, for fond hopes. The "Reformed Parliament" was soon to take up the question of Poor Law reform far more energetically than its predecessors. In March, 1833, the Commissioners produced an interim report. Cobbett denounced it as a plan "to justify more severe measures against the working people; and to introduce, under pretence of protecting property, a sort of *Bourbon police* into all the villages and country towns. . . . I see no prospect of its not being *attempted;* but I know that it will fail."[4] The counties in which the lot of the poor had been improved by the justices after the troubles of 1830 were, he remarked, "particularly picked out (by the Commission) as those which stand most in need of *hired* justices, hired overseers, and a half-military police."[5] The improvement in the labourers' position was regarded with horror by the Commissioners, and "ascribed to intimidation."[6] He answered them in a pamphlet, *The Rights of the Poor*, devoted to a searching examination of the Commissioners' proceedings.[7]

But the Commissioners went on with their work, and their later reports, and the propaganda of their lecturers, who went about to spread their gospel, soon made the full extent

[1] *P.R.*, April 21st, 1832.
[2] *P.R.*, June 16th, 1832.
[3] *P.R.*, June 16th, 1832.
[4] *P.R.*, April 6th, 1833.
[5] *P.R.*, June 22nd, 1833.
[6] *P.R.*, June 22nd, 1833.
[7] See *P.R.*, July 13th, 1833.

of their projects apparent. "If the Scotch project be carried into effect," wrote Cobbett, "it will, in all probability, be the last act of the present system."[1] But no sooner was the Report ready, than a Bill based upon it was brought before the House. Cobbett termed it a "ridiculous and mischievous project," and still looked to the House to reject it. But he was alive to the danger. "We are to have, it seems, a new and more expeditious mode of discussing the clauses of this Bill. It seems intended to force us into a gallop, to which I have no objection; but, if the breath remain in my body, and the legs will bear that body up, never shall this Bill pass, without every man in England clearly understanding its objects, its tendency, and the feelings which it ought to produce in the minds of the working people."[2]

Cobbett, and with him a tiny minority, including some Tories as well as Radicals, fought the Bill at every stage; but the second reading was carried by 299 votes to 20, and at the beginning of July it passed its third reading in the House of Commons by 157 votes to 50. "Already," wrote Cobbett, "we hear the angry voices of the labourers in the fields and along the lanes. Already their menaces are heard; a dreadful convulsion I verily believe is at hand, unless the Lords shall *take time* to reflect on this Bill; and, if they take time, I am sure that their wisdom and their sense of justice will avert this dreadful calamity from the country."[3] There seemed, indeed, more hope for the poor in the aristocratic benevolence of Tory landowners than in the moralising Malthusianism of the Whigs and the middle class.

The "angry voices" of which Cobbett spoke were indeed being raised. Fires and rural disturbances had never completely died down after the crushing of the labourers' revolt of 1830. There had been a considerable outbreak in many districts in the winter of 1833-4.[4] Now, there was a further and more widespread renewal[5]—the beginning of the great campaign of resistance to the new Poor Law which, in some

[1] *P.R.*, March 1st, 1834.

[2] *P.R.*, June 7th, 1834. The full text of the Bill is quoted in this and the two following issues.

[3] *P.R.*, July 12th, 1834.

[4] See *P.R.*, for November and December, 1833, and February 1st and May 3rd, 1834.

[5] See *P.R.*, August 9th, November 22nd, 1834, and February 28th, 1835.

parts of the country, prevented its application for several years.

But the House of Lords, despite the vigorous efforts of a small minority, speedily passed the Bill, and on August 4th, 1834, it received the Royal Assent. "It does not become me," wrote Cobbett, "to speak of this *Act of Parliament*, as I spoke of the *Bill*; but, everything that I can lawfully do, I will do to prevent its being put into execution; and, if I have life and health, I shall move for its repeal."[1] In a series of *Letters to the Earl of Radnor*, republished in pamphlet form, he summed up the case against the *Act*, and gave leadership to the agitation in the country.[2]

What did the Act accomplish? In the first place, it created a strong centralised body to which the regulation of poor relief throughout the country was entrusted. The Poor Law Commissioners under the Act, known as "The Three Bashaws of Somerset House," or just as "The Three," were given power to regulate by order the whole system of relief. The actual administration of the Poor Law was taken away from the parishes, and placed under the new "Unions" created by the Act: the elected Guardians within the Unions were chosen by a system of plural voting, designed to give property great weight, and were, moreover, subject in all matters of policy to the edicts of the Commissioners. These in turn were governed by the Malthusian principles, proclaimed by the Royal Commission for their guidance. Relief was to be given on account, not of poverty, but only of actual "indigence," and the lot of those receiving relief was to be made worse than that of the lowest-paid classes of "independent labourers." The plain object of the Act was to get rid of the whole system of aiding wage-earners out of the rates, at any cost in present suffering to the poor.

No one will deny—and Cobbett did not deny—that the Speenhamland system was unsound. To subsidise rural wages out of the poor rates, and to drive the labourers in gangs to parish employment or farm them out in gangs to the leading ratepayers, were obviously evil, as well as uneconomic, practices. The question between Cobbett and the Poor Law reformers was not whether these methods ought to be ended, but how best to end them. The Commissioners and Parliament ended them, at the labourers'

[1] *P.R.*, August 16th, 1834.

[2] *P.R.*, August 9th and 23rd, 1834.

immediate expense, by merely withholding assistance, in the belief that wages would necessarily be forced up in time, at least enough to replace the lost "dole," and that meanwhile the misery would administer a salutary check to the increase of population, and the driving of the hopelessly "indigent" into the workhouses prevent them from breeding. The segregation of the sexes, in the new "Bastilles," as the workhouses were commonly called, which Cobbett strongly opposed, was a means to the prevention of "surplus population." Cobbett, on the other hand, urged that, with proper organisation, there could be abundant work for all, and that the right way was to leave the Poor Laws untouched, and, by lightening financial burdens and repudiating the Debt, to enable wages to be raised and employment increased, so as to make relief unnecessary. But for these measures only a tiny handful of Radicals were prepared to stand. For most, the sacredness of property was all in all.

Organised opposition to the Act soon began.[1] There was a General Election in 1835, and Cobbett and Fielden, who were re-elected without opposition for Oldham, addressed their electors almost wholly in opposition to the new Poor Law. Cobbett, tried too, and many others tried with him, to make this everywhere the main issue at the election.[2] Many candidates were compelled to declare their hostility to the new Poor Law: many seats were transferred from the Whigs to the Tories in protest against it. But the people could in most places choose only between Whigs and Tories; and the Tory leaders, Peel and Wellington, had helped the Whigs to pass the Act, and had certainly no intention of undoing it.

Lord Grey had resigned, after dissensions within his Cabinet, in July, 1834, and Lord Melbourne had taken his place at the head of the Whig Government. This had meant no real change in policy; but in November the King suddenly dismissed the Ministers, despite their majority in Parliament, and sent for Wellington, who formed a provisional administration. In the following month Peel took office at the head of a Conservative Government, but with a Whig majority against him in the House of Commons. Then followed the General Election mentioned above. The Tories won seats, but not enough. By April, 1835, Peel had been

[1] *E.g.*, in Marylebone, *P.R.*, November 8th, 1834.

[2] *P.R.*, January 17th, 1835.

defeated in the Commons, and Melbourne and the Whigs were back in office.

Cobbett, hot in his anger against the Poor Law Act, welcomed the fall of the Whigs, though he professed no love for their Tory rivals.[1] His language to Peel even became less bitter. He attacked him still, and made a forcible reply to Peel's "Tamworth Manifesto" in a *Letter to Sir Robert Peel*.[2] This he followed up with a series of Letters, published in collected form after his death under the title, *Cobbett's Legacy to Peel*, in which he traversed the whole field of public policy, setting before the new Tory Government and offering for their adoption the measures which he had long advanced. Before this, in January, 1835, he had dedicated ironically to Peel his *Legacy to Labourers*, in which he set out once more, in the simplest language, his view of the labourers' rights in the land, and of the strictly limited property in it enjoyed by the landowner. The landowner had no right, he urged, to drive the people off the land, or to enjoy his rents until the charges for maintenance of the common people, justified by ancient law and usage, had been fully met. Again he repeated his wish, not for innovations, but "that the institutions of England and her fundamental laws should remain unchanged."[3] Not he and his friends, but the Whigs and Tories, were the innovators. He had hoped that the "Reformed Parliament" would have swept away these innovations. Instead, it had set out to add to their number, as in "that great and terrible innovation, the Poor Law Bill."[4] He was prepared to support Peel against the Whigs—on conditions; but if your "measures do not include a repeal of the Poor Law Bill—complete and entire, how am I to justify myself in voting for you?"[5]

These *Legacies* were little books, much like prayer-books in appearance, in which Cobbett strove, conscious that his end was near, to express in few and simple words the essence of his political message. He meant them for labourers to read: they were the successors to *Twopenny Trash* and *The Poor Man's Friend*. He completed the series with *Cobbett's Legacy to Parsons*,[6] in which he summed up his final views

[1] See *P.R.*, August 30th, September 13th, and November 22nd, 1834.

[2] *P.R.*, December 27th, 1834. [3] *Legacy to Labourers*, p. 5.

[4] *Legacy to Labourers*, p. 7. [5] *Legacy to Peel*, p. 15.

[6] *Legacy to Lords*, sometimes classed as one of the series, is a much later compilation made by his son, William Cobbett, Jr., on the basis of some of his father's scattered writings.

on the relation of Church and State. Exposing the abuses connected with the Establishment—explaining its origin as he had done in the *History of the Protestant Reformation*, surveying its effects in relation to Dissenters, to religious instruction, to the condition of the Church itself, he concluded that the union of "Church and State" must be broken—"that a separation of the one from the other is not less necessary to the inculcation of true religion, than it is to the freedom, the peace, and the well-being of the Commonwealth."[1]

Of these little books, the *Legacy to Labourers* played an important part in providing with words and arguments the opponents of the new Poor Law. Petitions against it poured in to the House of Commons; and Cobbett played his part in presenting them.[2] In May he appealed to the opponents of the Act throughout the country to give him full details of the measures being taken to apply it, in order that the agitation might have adequate information behind it.[3] On June 10th, he wrote of the "Poor Law struggle," that "it really appears to be another 'RURAL WAR,' and threatens to be much more durable and mischievous than the last rural war. . . . Half a dozen counties are in a state of partial commotion: the gaols are opening their doors to receive those who are called the rebels against the Poor Law Bill."[4] To these "rebels" he gave his full support. The following week, the *Register* was again filled with news of the struggle; but a black-bordered page announced the death of its editor. Cobbett had written his last article: he had devoted it, as he had devoted the best part of his life, to the cause of the half-starved labourers and their claim to "a better share than they now have in the good things enjoyed by society at large."[5] The continuance of the struggle was left to other hands than his.

[1] *Legacy to Parsons*, p. 182. [2] *P.R.*, February 28th, 1835.
[3] *P.R.*, May 30th, 1835. [4] *P.R.*, June 13th, 1835. [5] *Ibid.*

CHAPTER XXVI

A TOUR IN IRELAND—THE END

THE foregoing account of Cobbett's part in the Poor Law struggle has perforce carried us on to the time of his death. But it remains to chronicle certain other activities of his last years. Although, as we have seen, he was often ill during the last three years of his life, he was by no means content to rest, or even to lessen his energies. Indeed, after his election to Parliament, he had more work to do, and as he would drop none of his earlier activities, he imposed an intolerable strain upon his reserves of strength. When he was well, he was out and about: when he was ill, he did not take to his bed, but sat at home and wrote. He contributed as largely as ever to the *Register*, and his production of books and pamphlets was no less. His *History of the Regency and Reign of George IV.*, begun in 1830, was indeed repeatedly put aside for work more pressing; and his intention to follow it up with a people's *History of England* was never fulfilled. But at last, in November, 1834, the *Regency and Reign*, which had been published intermittently in parts, was completed and issued in book form.

It is a disappointing book. Cobbett's genius was not suited to the writing of history. He excelled in controversy, in printed statement, in quick turns of phrase which stripped the coverings off the truth. These are qualities valuable to the historian. But he lacked others no less essential—above all, the power of sustained argument, of balancing accurately the relative importance of events and tendencies, of putting himself outside, and seeing objectively, the things which he described and analysed. But these lacks are not enough to explain his failure in this book. He failed mainly because he never gave his mind fully to it, picking it up only at odd moments when he had nothing more pressing to do, and therefore failing to make it a unity, and producing rather a mere chronicle than a living history.

The outstanding fault of the *Regency and Reign* is not that which most of Cobbett's critics have attributed to it—

its bias—its frequent imputation of base motives to those in power, its reference of everything to Cobbett's own views and standards of value. To object to it on these grounds is not to criticise, but to disagree. Every historian has a bias, and it is legitimate to prefer the bias of Cobbett to the bias of Macaulay or Trevelyan. What is wrong with the *Regency and Reign* is that it does not live up to its bias, does not successfully marshal its narrative behind its point of view. I fancy Cobbett wearied of writing it before he had done. Perhaps he realised that the writing of sustained books was not his strength: that his power lay in the pamphlet and the sketch, and not in any continuous narrative. This is borne out by the fact that, when he spoke in 1835 of the books which he meant to write, he said nothing of his long-cherished project of writing a popular *History of England*.[1]

Cobbett had always, in all his writings, a definite and practical purpose. His history was always pamphleteering. "History," he said, "like all other writing, is valuable in the proportion in which it is calculated to produce good effects; in proportion as it is calculated to stimulate men to useful exertion, or to make them shun that which is mischievous; in proportion as it is calculated to have a practical effect in the affairs and on the condition of men."[2] In accordance with this precept, he could use historical illustrations to excellent purpose; but he could not carry his precept into the writing of sustained history.

During 1834, Cobbett published, besides the *Regency and Reign*, a pamphlet on *The Malt Tax*, the repeal of which he was vigorously urging in Parliament, and *Four Letters to the Hon. John Stuart Wortley*,[3] in which he related, in controversial form, his proposals for "an equitable adjustment between the nation and its creditors." The interest on the Debt, he held as strongly as ever, ought to be reduced; if it was not, real recovery was impossible. But, if the rich refused to agree to an "adjustment," they must be made to pay themselves the interest which they insisted on maintaining. It was intolerable that the necessities of the poor should

[1] *P.R.*, May 23rd, 1835.

[2] *Regency and Reign of George IV.*, Preface.

[3] Afterwards the second Lord Wharncliffe, son of the Lord Wharncliffe prominent among the "waverers" in the House of Lords while the Reform Bill was under discussion. The son had written a pamphlet attacking Cobbett's proposals.

be taxed for such a purpose. "The industrious part of the people see that it is they who bear the burden of this diabolical debt; and that there is no faith, at any rate, in their paying *two hundred* per cent. on their *beer*, while you pay *five and twenty* per cent. on your *wine*; they see this; they are quite willing that you should keep your estates; but they are not willing to be reduced to potatoes, in order to pay the interest of this debt, and that their children should be made slaves of for the same purpose.[1]

It seemed to Cobbett that, in face of the failure of the reformed Parliament to improve the condition of the people, revolution was bound to come. "Will you," he wrote at the height of the industrial convulsions of 1833-4, "now that you see the whole fabric of this ancient government absolutely shaking to pieces; when you see this all-devouring monster with the Church half down its throat, having made the discovery at the end of a thousand years that tithes are an insupportable evil; will you, when you see the working millions all in a state of commotion, their habits of patient industry and of cheerful and willing obedience rooted out of their minds by their unbearable wants; will you, when you see the once-happy homesteads of England blazing from the hostile hands of those whose labour had filled them at the harvest; will you, when Nature herself seems to inspire every working man with a resolution no longer to bear the thought of his child in the cradle being doomed to be a slave, and to eke out his life upon potatoes and salt, that swarms of monopolists and usurers may wallow in luxury; will you, while you vote for the maintaining of a navy five times as expensive, and an army ten times as expensive, as the navy and army were during the last peace, and at the same time behold a Russian fleet in the Mediterranean, and Russia master of Turkey, and behold that "old England," which was once justly compared to a ready-loaded cannon, not daring even to pronounce the word war, except in a whisper; will you NOW still turn a deaf ear to this advice, and still call the adviser an "advocate for robbery?"[2]

Neither Whigs nor Tories would have anything to do with Cobbett's "equitable adjustment." They saw the power of the Trade Unions broken in 1834, and the waves of Chartism

[1] *Letters to Stuart Wortley*, p. 85.

[2] *Letters to Stuart Wortley*. Dedication to the Members of the Two Houses of Parliament.

break vainly a few years later against "Britain's commercial prosperity." Cobbett did not foresee the vast expansion of trade and industry which would enable the burden of the Debt to be borne without collapse; if he had foreseen it, he would not have liked it. He stood for the "old England" that was passing away.

These were the days of the first feverish movement of railway construction, soon to be followed by the first railway crisis of 1837. Cobbett saw the approach of the railways, and did not like them. Of the increasing crop of railway projects he wrote, lumping good and bad together: "I never thought about the matter before; but it is really a matter of great public interest. It is certain that much mischief may arise from these projects. They are unnatural effects, arising out of the resources of the country having been drawn unnaturally together into great heaps."[1] And again, eulogising Mr. Cort's book against railways, "The writer proves very clearly, I think, that these 'waust improvements' are likely to turn out to be monstrous losses to those who have been foolish enough to spend their money on them. However, it is not of much consequence, seeing that they are, generally speaking, in the hands of Jews, jobbers, and usurers."[2] Cobbett was not a modern: he did not "move with the times."

The *Register* faithfully reflects his parliamentary activities during the closing phase of his life. The Poor Law struggle is, at this time, his first preoccupation: but he is also working energetically against the attempts to restrict the sale of beer to the poor[3] and joining with the county Tories to demand the repeal of the Malt Tax.[4] In accordance with his pledge to his Oldham constituents, he supports the emancipation of the negro slaves in the British colonies, but strenuously opposes compensation to the slave-owners, and never misses an opportunity of contrasting Parliament's solicitude for the negroes with its indifference to the sufferings of the factory slaves at home.[5] He supports Corporation Reform, but is very doubtful of the wide powers proposed for the reformed

[1] *P.R.*, March 8th, 1834. [2] *P.R.*, April 26th, 1834.

[3] *P.R.*, August 3rd, 1833, *et passim.*

[4] *P.R.*, January 24th, 1835, *et passim.*

[5] *P.R.*, June 1st, June 15th, August 1st, 1833, and August 15th, 1834.

Corporations under the Municipal Corporations Bill.[1] He presses for real Church reform, but scoffs at the measures proposed by the Government, and at their veneration for the "rights of property," even when these are based on manifest abuse and misappropriation.[2] He constantly opposes Brougham's projects of public education, and all grants of public money for that purpose, denouncing with increasing vehemence the "Heddukashion" which he regards as the greatest enemy of true education. "Heddukashion" is the indoctrination of the poor with the ideas of Malthus and Ricardo: true education is the bringing out of men and women well equipped in character and training for the real work and play of life.[3] And he works steadily with the Irish in Parliament for redress for the starving people and repeal of the Act of Union.[4]

Out of this activity in the Irish cause came a renewal of his desire, often expressed, to visit Ireland. He made his plans in the summer of 1834,[5] and set off early in September. He would go, he said, among the "wild Irish," in order finally to disabuse his countrymen of their false view of their neighbours.[6] Regarding the Irish as a barbarous people, the English were led to connive at their repression.

Cobbett's impressions of his Irish visit, recorded week by week in the *Register*, appear never to have been reprinted. One day, perhaps, an editor will be found wise enough to include them, with the *Tour in Scotland*,[7] in a new edition of *Rural Rides*. Therewith they properly belong. They open with an account, in his best manner, of his journey from London to Holyhead, including a thumbnail sketch of the parts of North Wales through which he passed. "The *people* in Wales," he wrote, "are just what we see the milk-women in London. Low in stature, but strong; generally light in their dress; and not filthy in their houses. The young women have small, round faces; very fresh-coloured; very *pretty*; but it is all *hard*; it is *solid*; it may, in a picture, be *prettier*, perhaps; but it is not *like* the assemblage

[1] *P.R.*, June 6th, 1835.

[2] *P.R.*, February 21st, 1835, *et passim*.

[3] *P.R.*, September 21st and December 7th, 1833, April 19th, 1834, May 9th and June 6th, 1835.

[4] *P.R.*, May 17th, 1834, *et passim*. [5] *P.R.*, July 26th, 1834.

[6] *P.R.*, September 13th, 1834. [7] See p. 386.

of softness and sweetness that you see in the faces and in all about the girls in Sussex and Kent."[1]

Cobbett did not like North Wales. It was "arid" and unfertile. "I have, for *my part*, no idea of *picturesque beauty* separate from *fertility of soil*. If you can have *both*, as on the banks of Clyde, and on the skirts of the *bays* and *inlets* in Long Island, then it is delightful; but, if I must have *one* or *the other*, anybody may have the *picturesque beauty* for me."[2]

From Holyhead, Cobbett went to Dublin. The utter poverty that he saw filled him with horror. "I have this morning seen more than one thousand of working persons, men and women, boys and girls, all the clothes upon the bodies of all of whom were not worth so much as the smock-frock you go to work in," he wrote to Charles Marshall, one of his labourers at Normandy Farm.[3] The food of the labourers, oatmeal boiled in water, or butter-milk, or skim milk, the "begging-carts," drawn by women from house to house to collect broken victuals, the wretched hovels, filled him with anger. "You will, perhaps, think, that the land here is not like that at Normandy. Indeed, it is not; for one acre here is worth four of that. . . . Here are as fine beef and mutton as any in the world, and wheat and barley and oats in abundance."[4] It was not the poverty of the land that made the labourers poor.

Cobbett received a great public welcome to Dublin, huge crowds meeting him on his arrival and conducting him through the town. Daniel O'Connell had written urging the Catholic Association to hold a public reception in his honour, and inviting him to pay a visit to Derrinane Abbey, his own house. Cobbett declined the invitation, as it would have upset his plans for seeing the country; but he paid a public tribute to O'Connell as the champion of national and popular liberties.

In Dublin, Cobbett gave, on September 24th and the two following days, the lectures published as *Three Lectures on the Political State of Ireland*. They dealt wholly with the condition of the people, and the need for introducing into Ireland, not merely a Poor Law—there was none in existence—but the full Elizabethan Poor Law as it had existed in England before the Reform, with the *right* to relief as its

[1] *P.R.*, September 20th, 1834. [3] *Ibid.*
[2] *P.R.*, September 27th, 1834. [4] *Ibid.*

governing principle. From Dublin he then set out to see the country, going first to Kilkenny and Waterford, and thence to Clonmel, Cork, and ultimately, Limerick, and returning to Dublin only in November. Everywhere he was struck by the same contrast—the misery of the people and the richness of the land in which they dwelt. The small farmers, of whom there were many, were little better off than the labourers[1]: the mass of the people, under absentee landlords who drained away the produce of the land abroad, lived in the direst poverty.

"I have now been over about 180 miles in Ireland," he wrote from Waterford in October, "in the several counties of Dublin, Wicklow, Kildare, Carlow, Kilkenny, and Waterford. I have, in former years, been in every county of England, and across every county more than one way. I have been through the finest parts of Scotland. I have lived in the finest parts of the United States of America. And here I am to declare to all the world, that I never passed over any fifty miles, in my life, any fifty *unbroken miles*, of land so good on an average during the whole way, as the average of these 180 miles. Perhaps there are parts, *patches*, of England better than this land; but take England, one with the other, it is nothing like so good as this; and yet here are these starving people![2] Even *without poor-rates*," he added, "the people never could have been brought to this pass without the ever-damned *potatoes!*"[3]

Everywhere Cobbett was greeted with enthusiasm. In the towns through which he passed, addresses were presented to him, usually by the "organised trades," which seem to have been strong in Ireland, as well as by the general body of the inhabitants. He replied; but he had come, not to lecture, but to see for himself and report to his countrymen, and he addressed no formal meetings except in Dublin. On his return there in November, he gave one further lecture, in which he dealt with the Repeal of the Union[4]; on November 25th he landed in England, and wrote, from Chester, the last of the ten *Letters to Marshall*, in which he recorded his impressions of Ireland.[5]

It was his intention to collect the records of his Irish tour

[1] *P.R.*, November 1st, 1834.
[2] *P.R.*, October 18th, 1834.
[3] *P.R.*, October 25th, 1834.
[4] *P.R.*, November 15th, 1834.
[5] *P.R.*, November 29th, 1834.

into a book. He would call it, he said, *Ireland's Woes: A Warning to Englishmen.*[1] He would tell the truth about Ireland, in order both that Englishmen might take heart to redress Irish wrongs, and be warned not to allow their condition to be made as wretched as the condition of the Irish people.

"I dare say," he wrote to Marshall, "my letters have made you stare; but staring is not all that they ought to make you do: they ought to make you think about how you would like to have a naked wife and children: how you would like to have no shoes, or stockings, or shirt, and the mud spewing up between your toes when you come down the road to your work of a morning. They ought to make you think about what you shall *do, all of you,* to prevent this state of starvation, nakedness, and filth, from coming upon you. Do not think that it is IMPOSSIBLE that it should ever come upon you. Do not think this; for there is no *reason* for your thinking it. The countries are very close to one another. The county of Cork is but a very little way from Somersetshire. I am not so far from you now as I should be if I were at Morpeth in the county of Northumberland. The same Ministers and the same Parliament who keep this people in this state, after having got them into it, are the same Ministers and same Parliament who have the power of making laws, and of employing soldiers and policemen, in England. This miserable people have been brought to this state by little and little, and for want of beginning in time to *do the things which they ought to have done in their own defence;* to make use of the faculties which God has given them; that is to say, in legally and constitutionally, and according to the good custom of our wise and brave forefathers, petitioning the king and the Parliament, and otherwise legally doing that, which the laws of our country bid us do, sanctioned as those laws are by the laws of God."[2]

Cobbett never wrote his book on Ireland, and never reprinted his excellent *Letters to Marshall* from the *Register.* He came back into the heat of the political crisis following the King's dismissal of the Whigs. He set to work on his

[1] *P.R.*, November 1st, 1834.

[2] *P.R.*, November 8th, 1834. Cobbett is referring to his familiar argument that the poor had a legal and constitutional right, which no Parliament could abrogate, to relief and proper maintenance out of the produce of the land.

Legacy to Labourers, and then on the *Legacy to Peel* and the *Legacy to Parsons*. He wrote, too, his introductory essay to *The Doom of the Tithes*, published in book form after his death. He went through a General Election, and was returned again for Oldham in January, 1835. He took up the opposition to the enforcement of the new Poor Law with all his might. His health, which had again recovered while he was in Ireland, ebbed once more. His manifold labours in and out of Parliament pressed hard upon him.

Nevertheless, in the spring of 1835, he was full of plans for the future. It is pathetic to see him, three months before his death, looking forward with keen anticipation to a better future.

"This morning," he writes from Normandy Farm, "long before four o'clock, I heard the blackbirds making the fields echo with their whistle; and a few minutes after four, I, for the first time this year, heard the *cuckoo*, which I never heard before earlier than *May-day*. And now this cuckoo will, on Midsummer-day, cease to call us up in the morning, and cease its work of sucking the hedge-sparrow's eggs, depositing its own in the nest, making the poor hedge-sparrow bring it up until it be big and strong enough to eat the hedge-sparrow: in all which respects it so exactly resembles the at once lazy and greedy and ungrateful and cruel vagabonds, who devour the fruit of our labour, and who want to make us live on "*a coarser sort of food.*" But, my friends, I do verily believe that, before we shall hear the harbinger of summer again, the vagabonds, of whom it is the type, will have received *a souse*, such as they never received before."[1]

More and more the country calls him: he hates the necessity of coming to "the Wen." "Hating the smoke of London as I do; my ears, violated as they are by the rattle of the infernal hackney coaches; my eyes, blasted as they are by the sight of the seventy-five-thousand-pounds gateway, and by the hundred-and-fifty-thousand-pounds picture gallery, the expenses of which are extracted from the sweat of the working people, whom the aristocracy wish to reduce to a coarser sort of food . . . abandoning the sweet air, the singing of the birds, and the coming-forth leaves, I really sigh for the 12th of May, as much as any *maiden-bride* ever sighed for her wedding day."[2]

Still, he makes plans. He will have a new daily paper,

[1] *P.R.*, April 18th, 1835. [2] *P.R.*, May 2nd, 1835.

Cobbett's Evening Journal: he will edit it, but he will not assume the responsibility of ownership: as much as he can, he will stay in the country and write. And how much there is still to be written!

"I hate London, and neither can, nor will, live in it, for a constancy; and besides I have a very fine farm to attend to, and have there a *brick-floor* to sit on and write legacies to parsons. I have long promised A POOR MAN'S BIBLE; it is half done. I have promised a LEGACY TO LORDS, which is to appear by the Feast of St. Michael, old style; and this LEGACY TO LORDS will, I think, top up very well my MISCELLANEOUS LIBRARY, especially when I have written and published another comedy to be called "BASTARDS IN HIGH-LIFE." People blame me for talking of publications so long beforehand, and for having so many irons in the fire. But I always accomplish the thing at last; and, as to having several irons in the fire at a time, I always find it the pleasantest thing in the world. Somebody called me, a good while ago, the "monarch of the press." A monarch means a fellow that can do with his subjects just what he likes. It is well for the press that I am not its monarch; if I were, I would give one-half of it to the devil, on condition that he would take the other half away."[1]

Cobbett might plan; but the end was near. On June 13th he wrote as usual for the *Register:* on June 20th it appeared black-bordered, with the announcement by his eldest son of his death. "A great inclination to inflammation of the throat had caused him annoyance from time to time, for several years, and, as he got older, it enfeebled him more. He was suffering from one of these attacks during the late spring, and it will be recollected that, when the Marquis of Chandos brought on his motion for the repeal of the Malt Tax, my father attempted to speak, but could not make his voice audible beyond the few members who sat around him. He remained to vote on that motion, and increased his ailment; but on the voting of supplies on the nights of Friday, the 15th, and Monday, the 18th of May, he exerted himself so much, and sat up so late, that he laid himself up. He determined, nevertheless, to attend the House again on the evening of the Marquis of Chandos's motion on Agricultural Distress on the 25th of May, and the exertion of speaking and remaining late to vote on that occasion were

[1] *P.R.*, May 23rd, 1835.

too much for one already severely unwell. He went down to his farm early on the morning after this last debate, and had resolved to rest himself thoroughly and get rid of his hoarseness and inflammation. On Thursday night last he felt unusually well, and imprudently drank tea[1] in the open air; but he went to bed apparently in better health. In the early part of the night he was taken violently ill, and on Friday and Saturday was considered in a dangerous state by the medical attendant. On Sunday he revived again, and on Monday gave us hope that he would yet be well. He talked feebly, but in the most collected and sprightly manner, upon politics and farming; wished for 'four days' rain' for the Cobbett corn and the root crops; and, on Wednesday, he could remain no longer shut up from the fields, but desired to be carried round the farm; which being done, he criticised the work that had been going on in his absence, and detected some little deviation from his orders, with all the quickness that was so remarkable in him. On Wednesday night he grew more and more feeble, and was evidently sinking; but he continued to answer with perfect clearness every question that was put to him. In the last half-hour his eyes became dim; and at ten minutes after one p.m. he leaned back, closed them as if to sleep, and died without a gasp."[2]

So Cobbett died—a peaceful end to a stormy life. He was buried, where his forbears lay, in Farnham churchyard. His four sons, John Fielden, Daniel O'Connell, and many others, followed his body to the vault. It rained upon the company in the churchyard. After a while, Daniel O'Connell was observed to put on his hat. There were no speeches. The leading mourners, except the family, adjourned to the Bush Inn, and, in course, returned to London. Mrs. Cobbett and her children went back to Normandy Farm.

Meanwhile, the newspapers—most of them his old enemies—had passed their verdicts on the dead. *The Times*, in a first notice, said no word of praise, only congratulating Cobbett on having died in full use of his powers. He could not, it said, have given up his work, which had become not only his second, but perhaps his first nature. "The House of Commons, into which he ought never to have entered, and where he never made any figure, has perhaps hastened his death." The following day *The Times* had a second article, by way of

[1] Tea!—How were the mighty fallen! See p. 274.

[2] John Morgan Cobbett, in *P.R.*, June 20th, 1835.

amends. "Take this self-taught peasant for all in all," it wrote, "he was perhaps, in some respects, a more extraordinary Englishman than any other of his time. . . . By masculine force of genius, and the lever of a proud, confident, and determined *will*, he pushed aside a mass of obstacles, of which the least and slightest would have repelled the boldest or most ambitious of ordinary men. He ended by bursting that most formidable barrier which separates the class of English gentlemen from all beneath them. . . . The first general characteristic of his style is perspicuity, unequalled and inimitable. A second is homely masculine vigour. A third is purity, always simple, and raciness often elegant. His argument is an example of acute, yet apparently natural, nay, involuntary logic, smoothed in its progress and cemented in its parts, by a mingled storm of torturing sarcasm, contemptuous jocularity, and slaughtering invective. . . . He was a man whom England alone could have produced and nurtured up to such maturity of unpatronised and self-generated power. Nevertheless, though a vigilant observer of the age, and a strenuous actor in it, he lay upon the earth as a loose and isolated substance. He was incorporated with no portion of our political or social frame. He belonged neither to principles, to parties, nor to classes. . . . He was an English episode, and nothing more, as greater men have been; for what is Napoleon, while we write, but an *episode*?"[1]

A curious mingling, this judgment, of right and wrong. A curiously keen survey of the surface, and a curious failure of penetration. Cobbett seemed to *The Times* an episode, because he did not fit in neatly to the life of his times. There is truth here; but the importance, and the key to Cobbett's place in history, lies not in the fact, but in its causes. He did not fit in, not, as *The Times* supposed, because he struck no roots, but because the roots which he had struck, and struck deep in the soil of old England, were torn up by the hurricanes of the agrarian and industrial revolutions. He did not fit into the new social categories, because he was so strong an embodiment of the old. The peasantry, torn from the land by the enclosures, and thrust forcibly into the stinking factory town, did not fit either. But they were squeezed somehow into wage-slavery by the force of economic conditions and governmental repression. Cobbett could not be crushed as the lesser

[1] This, and many other notices, are quoted in *P.R.*, June 27th, 1835.

men with whom he sympathised and whom he resembled were crushed in the vice of the new factory system. He was buffeted by the winds of change; yet he managed to cling always to the soil in which his roots had taken hold. *The Times* could have, as the men of the reformed Parliament, and even the younger leaders of the new working class could have, no full understanding of such a man. For better or worse, they belonged to the new order: he made his fierce protests on behalf of the old. The protest, as he made it, was hopeless: he could not stay the forces making for violent economic change. But, apostle of the old order, he gave strength to the rising tide of protest within the new. He could not give to the new working class a constructive gospel: that could only be adumbrated as yet by the forerunners of Socialism. But to every movement of protest against the misery and cruelty of the times—at least, to every movement that could touch his imagination by positive contact—he could lend, and did lend, out of his abundant strength. No man helped more to build up the confidence of the workers in their own power, though many saw more clearly how, under the changed conditions, that power would have to be employed.

Cobbett's vision was limited. He could imagine only where he could find for imagination a positive basis in experience. The agitation against negro slavery left him cold, not only because he regarded as "hypocrites" those abolitionists who were blind to the horrors of factory slavery at home, but still more because he was blind to evils with which he was never brought into physical contact. The cause of the negroes did not move his imagination: the cause of the English labourers and factory-slaves did move him because he actually saw and felt what they suffered. He was not a theorist: he used theory only against the evils of which he had practical and immediate knowledge.

Thus, the ideas of the French Revolution failed to stir him, as they stirred Godwin or Shelley, or even the young Wordsworth. "Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity" had no power, as abstract ideas, to move his imagination. He was a Tory—or an anti-Jacobin Whig (it makes no difference)—until his return to England showed him the actual abuses which Whigs and Tories alike upheld. However revolutionary on occasion his sentiments might appear, the revolutionary *idea* was always alien to him. He remained to the last

an enemy of abuses, not the apostle of a " new moral world " or any new order based on abstract ideas. He used ideas as tools : he never accepted them as masters.

You may call this, as you will, his strength or his weakness. Whatever you call it, that is the kind of man Cobbett was—perhaps the only English peasant who, keeping the outlook of a peasant, has made himself complete master of the art of political writing. For this strength or weakness —imperviousness to ideas, you may call it, or firm basing of precept on positive experience—springs out of his peasant mind. You see it again in his attitude to education, which is not, as his critics have often supposed, hostility to education, but a constant posing of the practical peasant's " What for ? " in answer to all abstract appeals on behalf of education for its own sake. Cobbett had no use for enlightenment— " antalluct "—as such : he wanted to know the uses to which the enlightenment was to be put. Brougham's Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge argued in favour of education for its own sake, and at the same time for education as a means to industrial development. Cobbett brushed the first argument aside : the second seemed to him on the whole an argument against education of the type beloved of Brougham and the Utilitarians. He did not like industrial development : he regarded the argument for education for its own sake as merely a cloak behind which the factory lords hid their intentions to make all England a hideous Manchester of industrialism. Hannah More and the Dissenters wanted to teach the poor to read. They urged that this was good in itself, and that reading the Bible would make them more contented with their lot. Again, Cobbett brushed the first argument aside : it seemed to him a mere cloak for the second, and he did not want to make the poor contented.

But he did not oppose education. He only insisted, first, that learning anything useful, and not merely book-learning, was education ; and secondly, that men would get book-learning better by teaching themselves, or learning at home, than by submitting themselves to the discipline of those who would use education as an instrument for industrialisation or the inculcation of a slave morality. He opposed State education because he thought it would be used to serve these ends, and because, in his views, these were base ends. The next generation, having accepted the new capitalism, accepted

with it the new capitalist education, and strove, if it had visions of a different order, to reach its ideals through capitalism. Cobbett, belonging to the old order, was ready to accept neither capitalism nor capitalist education.

The Times was wrong in calling Cobbett an "episode": it would have been right if it had called him a survival. For, by the time of his death in 1835, the new England of capitalist industrialism was fully and securely established, though its potentialities remained to be developed by coming generations. And fate has made of Cobbett, through his vitally important part in the Reform agitation, one of the principal instruments of its political achievement. Doubtless, without working-class support, the rising middle class would in due time have forced the old aristocracy to a sharing of political power; but the process would have been more gradual, and the full establishment of capitalism, as a political as well as an economic system, would have been considerably delayed. Cobbett fought for the old England: he helped in fact to consolidate the new. His reward was that, though he could not affect the general movement of economic forces, he could and did contribute greatly to the building up, within capitalism, of a working-class confidence and consciousness which he himself understood but in part. The last great tribune of the agrarians was, by force of circumstances, also the first great tribune of the industrial proletariat.

I have found this writing of his life a fascinating task. The great egotist may be a hard man for his contemporaries to stomach; but he can make himself, as a great man without egotism hardly can, a representative figure. The history of William Cobbett is, in plain language, the spiritual history of the common people of his day—of their uprooting from the land of their fathers, of their un-ease and maladjustment under the new conditions thrust on them by the torrential flow of economic revolution. It is a history not of ideas, but of facts and feelings. Its culmination is precisely that which foolish folk so often deny to be possible—a change in human nature, or, at least, in the working of human nature under changed conditions of environment and control. Men did adjust themselves—painfully and with great loss of the divine spirit within them—to the new conditions of material existence. Peasants did settle down into factory workers and forget, with the conscious part of their beings, their peasant ancestry. But this culmination, on its way during Cobbett's

life, was not for him, though it manifested itself in the mediocrity and middle-class respectability of his children. Cobbett himself remained to the end a peasant to whom the " whirring of the wheels " was a sound unfamiliar and unwelcome. He saw Reform bring, not the fruits he had hoped, but the swifter onrush of the things he hated and did not understand. But he kept to the end, as the greatest possession of his spirit, his abounding faith in the common rightness of the common people. And, if we must find his message, there it is.

FOUR POSTSCRIPTS

I.—COBBETT'S WILL AND EFFECTS.—Cobbett died a poor man. His will, made in 1833, bequeathed all his property to his eldest son, William, who was named sole executor. Shortly before his death he had, without telling his family, sold a number of his copyrights to his publisher, Jesse Oldfield. This led to litigation, settled by the production of Cobbett's autograph letter confirming the sale. His total effects were sworn at under £1500. Normandy Farm he held only on a lease. His effects included the bones of Tom Paine, which had remained in his possession since he brought them to England in 1819. When William Cobbett, Junior, became bankrupt in 1836, the bones passed into the hands of the Receiver. They were subsequently sold to a dealer, and vanished from sight, till certain of them were recovered by Moncure Conway in 1900.[1]

II.—THE POLITICAL REGISTER.—Cobbett's sons made an attempt to continue the *Register* after his death. This resulted in William Cobbett, Junior's, bankruptcy in 1836. A subsequent attempt was made to revive the *Register*; but it perished finally in June, 1838, after intermittent appearances for some time before.

III.—COBBETT'S SEAT IN PARLIAMENT.—John Morgan Cobbett, the second son, who had already stood unsuccessfully for Coventry in 1833, contested Oldham in the by-election following his father's death. The Tory candidate beat him by a small majority. John Morgan Cobbett was hardly a Radical in any real sense of the word, and his policy did not satisfy some of his father's old supporters. Feargus O'Connor stood as an independent, but withdrew during the voting, after taking away enough votes to cause the younger Cobbett's defeat. In 1852 John Morgan Cobbett was elected for Oldham as an Independent. He retained his seat till 1865. In 1872 he stood again, as a Conservative, and was elected, holding the seat till his death in 1877. He married

[1] See Conway, *Life of Paine*, single volume edition, p. 327.

in 1851 the daughter of John Fielden, his father's fellow-member for Oldham.

IV.—COBBETT'S FAMILY.—Cobbett's wife and seven children survived him. Anne, the eldest (1795-1877) wrote *The English Housekeeper* and other works. Like the other two daughters, Eleanor (1805-1900), and Susan (1807-1889), she remained unmarried. The three eldest sons, William (1798-1878), John Morgan (1800-1877), and James Paul (1803-1881), all became barristers. William published several legal works (*e.g.*, *The Law of Turnpikes*, 1824), and tried to carry on the *Register*. John Morgan published *Letters from France* (1825) and other works. For his political career, see above. James Paul—he, John Morgan, and Richard were all named after close personal friends of Cobbett—published *A Ride of Eight Hundred Miles in France* (1824), *A Journal of a Tour in Italy, France, and Switzerland* (1830), and other works. He settled in Manchester, where he practised at the Bar, and, in 1837, stood for Bury as a Radical. He edited *Rural Rides* in 1853, and published legal works in later years. The fourth son, Richard Baverstock Brown (1814-1875), was articled to Cobbett's legal adviser, George Faithful, Radical M.P. for Brighton, and became a solicitor. He, too, settled in Manchester, and was concerned in the earlier phases of the Chartist movement there. Anne Cobbett, his eldest daughter, kept on her father's bookselling business for a good many years after his death.

A BRIEF BIBLIOGRAPHY OF COBBETT'S WRITINGS

THERE is a full bibliography of first editions of Cobbett's writings at the end of the second volume of Lewis Melville's *Life and Letters of William Cobbett.* I have not attempted to repeat this: the following gives only the titles, and, in some cases, a brief note on his principal writings. Melville includes some works which are not by Cobbett, *e.g.*, *A Peep at the Peers* (1820), which is almost certainly by William Benbow, then Cobbett's publisher, and certainly not by Cobbett; *Links of the Lower House* (1821), certainly not Cobbett's; as well as several pamphlets, composed of extracts from his works, but published by his political opponents to convict him of inconsistency. On the other hand, Melville omits a considerable number of pamphlets, some of which will be found in the Index to this book, and also the following more important works: *Report of the Important Discussion held in Birmingham between William Cobbett, Thomas Attwood, and Charles Jones* (Munsell and Co., Birmingham, 1832); *Four Letters to the Hon. John Stuart Wortley,* by William Cobbett, M.P. (11 Bolt Court, 1834); *Three Lectures on the Political State of Ireland, delivered in the Fishamble Street Theatre, Dublin,* by William Cobbett, M.P. (P. Byrne, Dublin, 1834). *A History of the Last Hundred Days of English Freedom,* first published in the *Register* in 1817, has been published in volume form since Melville compiled his bibliography (Labour Publishing Co., 1921). In one or two cases, the dates given below will be found to differ from Melville's.

[Many of the books were first issued in parts in pamphlet form. These are marked with a †. Works not included in Melville's bibliography are marked with an *.]

I

COLLECTED WORKS AND SELECTIONS

PORCUPINE'S WORKS. 12 volumes. London, 1801.

[This contains all 'Peter Porcupine's' pamphlets written in America up to 1800, that is, until his return to England, together with selections from his writings in *Porcupine's Gazette* and other American periodicals. The most important of its contents are as follows (the date in brackets showing when each work was first separately issued).]

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Vol. I.	*A Summary View of the Politics of the United States from the Close of the War to the Year* 1794 (not previously published)	
	Observations on Priestley's Emigration (1794)	56
	Account of the Insurrection in the Western Counties of Pennsylvania in 1794	
Vol. II.	*A Bone to Gnaw for the Democrats.* Part I. and Part II. (1795)	59
	A Kick for a Bite (1795)	59
	A Little Plain English, Addressed to the People of the United States (1795)	59
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Vol. III.	*The Political Censor* (monthly), Nos. 1-4 (1796)	59
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	Life of Thomas Paine (*Political Censor*, No. 5) (1796)	60
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Vol. V.-VII.	*Selections from Porcupine's Gazette* (1797)	64
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Vol. IX.	*Priestley's Charity Sermon for Poor Emigrants* (1801)	
Vol. X.	*The Trial of Republicanism* (1799)	
Vol. X.-XI.	*Selections from Porcupine's Gazette* (1798-1800)	64
Vol. XI.	*The American Rush-light* (fortnightly) Nos. 1-5 (1800)	66
Vol. XII.	*Farewell Advertisement* (1800)	67
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*BEAUTIES OF COBBETT. *Being Extracts from the 12 vols. of the Porcupine.* 1836.

SELECTIONS FROM COBBETT'S POLITICAL WORKS. Edited by John M. and James P. Cobbett. 6 vols. from 1835

[This consists mainly of articles from the *Political Register*, with some extracts from the earlier American writings. It does not include matter from Cobbett's later books.]

COBBETT. *Selections, with Hazlitt's Essay and other Critical Estimates.* Edited by A. M. D. Hughes. 1923

[Brief extracts, drawn from the whole field of Cobbett's works.]

There are a number of other volumes of extracts.

II

PERIODICALS

THE POLITICAL CENSOR. 1796-7. Philadelphia	59
PORCUPINE'S GAZETTE. 1797-1800. Philadelphia	64
THE RUSH-LIGHT. 1800. New York	66
THE PORCUPINE. 1800-1801. London	73

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COBBETT'S POLITICAL REGISTER (also known at various times as COBBETT'S WEEKLY REGISTER, and by other names. 1802-1835[1]. London 77, 79

LE MERCURE ANGLAIS (a French version of parts of the Register). 1803. London. 131

COBBETT'S PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES. 1804-1812.[2] London. 131

COBBETT'S SPIRIT OF THE PUBLIC JOURNALS. 1804-5. London 131

*COBBETT'S AMERICAN POLITICAL REGISTER. 1816. New York 218

COBBETT'S EVENING POST. 1820. London 241

COBBETT'S PARLIAMENTARY REGISTER. 1820. London 276

COBBETT'S MONTHLY RELIGIOUS TRACTS (continued as COBBETT'S MONTHLY SERMONS). 1821-2. London 275

COBBETT'S TWOPENNY TRASH. 1830-2. London 313

III

BOOKS AND PAMPHLETS

(Excluding those included in *Porcupine's Works*.)
(Pamphlets in Italics.)

The Soldier's Friend (Authorship doubtful). 1793. 42

LE TUTEUR ANGLAIS. 1795 53

A COLLECTION OF FACTS AND OBSERVATIONS RELATIVE TO THE PEACE WITH BONAPARTE. 1801 77

LETTERS TO ADDINGTON ON THE FATAL EFFECTS OF THE PEACE. 1802 77

LETTERS TO LORD HAWKESBURY, ON THE PEACE WITH BONAPARTE. 1802 76

Important Considerations for the People of this Kingdom. 1803 81

THE POLITICAL PROTEUS. A View of the Public Character and Conduct of R. B. Sheridan. 1804 133

LETTERS ON THE LATE WAR BETWEEN THE UNITED STATES AND GREAT BRITAIN. New York. 1815

THE PRIDE OF BRITANNIA HUMBLED. Letters to Lord Liverpool on the American War. New York. 1815

†PAPER AGAINST GOLD AND GLORY AGAINST PROSPERITY (first issued in parts, 1810-11). 1815 166

[1] See p. 436.

[2] The *Debates* were sold to Hansard in 1812.

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AN ADDRESS TO THE CLERGY OF MASSACHUSETTS. Boston. 1815	
MR. COBBETT'S ADDRESS TO HIS COUNTRYMEN. 1817	217
*A HISTORY OF THE LAST HUNDRED DAYS OF ENGLISH FREEDOM. In *P.R.*, 1817. Published in book form, 1921	219
A JOURNAL OF A YEAR'S RESIDENCE IN THE UNITED STATES. Part I., 1818. Parts II. and III., 1819	228
A GRAMMAR OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE. 1818	233 and 270
THE AMERICAN GARDENER. 1821	229
†COBBETT'S SERMONS. (See also under "Periodicals.") 1822	275
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†A HISTORY OF THE PROTESTANT REFORMATION Part I., 1824. Part II., 1827	286
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†THE POOR MAN'S FRIEND. 1826	304
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A TREATISE ON COBBETT'S CORN. 1828	272
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Facts for the Men of Kent. 1828	
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†ADVICE TO YOUNG MEN. 1829	315
THE ENGLISH GARDENER. 1829	272
THE EMIGRANT'S GUIDE. 1829	411
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†HISTORY OF THE REGENCY AND REIGN OF GEORGE IV. Vol. I. 1830	420
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Good Friday; or The Murder of Jesus Christ by the Jews. 1830	
Cobbett's Exposure of the Practice of the Pretended Friends of the Blacks. 1830	

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†ELEVEN LECTURES ON THE FRENCH AND BELGIAN REVOLUTIONS AND ENGLISH BOROUGH-MONGERING. 1830	355
A SPELLING BOOK AND STEPPING-STONE TO ENGLISH GRAMMAR. 1831	272
**Surplus Population, A Comedy.* 1831	412
A TOUR IN SCOTLAND. 1832	386
†COBBETT'S MANCHESTER LECTURES. 1832	353
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A GEOGRAPHICAL DICTIONARY OF ENGLAND AND WALES. 1832	
**Report of a Discussion between William Cobbett, Thomas Attwood, and Charles Jones.* 1832	396
**Mr. Cobbett's Answer to Mr. Stanley's Manifesto.* 1832	
**The Flash in the Pan.* 1833	396
**The Rights of the Poor.* 1833	414
A NEW FRENCH AND ENGLISH DICTIONARY. 1833	390
Letters to the Earl of Radnor. 1834	416
**Mr. Cobbett's Speech, and other Speeches, on his Motion for the Abolition of the Malt Tax.* 1834	421
*†FOUR LETTERS TO THE HON. JOHN STUART WORTLEY. 1834	421
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*†THREE LECTURES ON THE POLITICAL STATE OF IRELAND. 1834	425
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LEGACY TO PEEL. (*P.R.*, 1835). 1836	418
THE DOOM OF THE TITHES (*P.R.*, 1832). 1836	428
LEGACY TO LORDS (Edited by W. Cobbett Jr., 1863).	418

This list does not include a number of less important pamphlets, and numerous reprints of articles from the *Register*.

IV

COMPILATIONS

In addition to the Parliamentary Debates, Cobbett was responsible for the following compilations, though he had little or nothing to do with the actual writing of them:—

COBBETT'S PARLIAMENTARY HISTORY OF ENGLAND. 1806-1812	132

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COBBETT'S COMPLETE COLLECTION OF STATE TRIALS. 1809-1812 132

Both were sold, incomplete, by Cobbett in 1812, and finished under other auspices.

EDITIONS AND TRANSLATIONS

A DESCRIPTION OF SAINT-DOMINGO. By M. le Moreau de Saint-Mery. Translated from the French by William Cobbett. 1796

BURKE'S LETTER TO A NOBLE LORD. Edited, with a Preface, by William Cobbett. 1796

A COMPENDIUM OF THE LAWS OF NATIONS. By G. F. Van Martens. Translated and brought up to date by William Cobbett. 1802 54

A TREATISE ON THE CULTURE AND MANAGEMENT OF FRUIT TREES. By W. Forsyth. With Introduction and Notes by William Cobbett. 1802

THE EMPIRE OF GERMANY DIVIDED INTO DEPARTMENTS. By J. G. Peltier. Translated by William Cobbett. 1803

HORSE-HOEING HUSBANDRY. By Jethro Tull. Edited, with an Introduction, by William Cobbett. 1822 272

USURY; OR, LENDING AT INTEREST. By the Rev. J. O'Callaghan. Edited by William Cobbett. 1828

ELEMENTS OF ROMAN HISTORY, in English and French. The English by William Cobbett; the French by J. H. Sievrac. 1828

THE CURSE OF PAPER-MONEY AND BANKING. By W. M. Gouge, of Philadelphia. With an Introduction by William Cobbett. 1833

VI

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Anon. THE LIFE OF WILLIAM COBBETT, ESQ. Late M.P. for Oldham. Manchester. 1835

Carlyle, E. I. WILLIAM COBBETT. A Study of his Life as shown in his writings. 1904
[Painstaking and competent, but dull. It contains very full references to books dealing with Cobbett and his times.]

Huish, Robert. MEMOIRS OF THE LATE WILLIAM COBBETT. 2 vols. 1836
[Inaccurate, splenetic, and nearly useless on account of its carelessness.]

Melville, Lewis. THE LIFE AND LETTERS OF WILLIAM COBBETT IN ENGLAND AND AMERICA. 2 vols. 1913
[Valuable for the many private letters it contains, but superficial.]

Smith, Edward. WILLIAM COBBETT: A Biography. 2 vols. 1878
[Good, but somewhat uncritically laudatory]

" " WILLIAM COBBETT (in *Dictionary of National Biography*)

Watson, J. S. BIOGRAPHIES OF JOHN WILKES AND WILLIAM COBBETT. 1870
[Poor stuff.]

NOTE.—The following of Cobbett's books are still in print, and can be ordered through any bookseller:—

Rural Rides. 2 volumes. (Everyman's Library. J. M. Dent and Sons).
Rural Rides. 1 volume. T. Nelson and Sons.
Journal of a Year's Residence in America. Chapman and Dodd.
A History of the Last Hundred Days of English Freedom. Labour Publishing Company.
A Grammar of the English Language. (Several Editions.)
Cottage Economy. Hampshire House Workshops.
A History of the Protestant Reformation. (Several Editions, some garbled.)
Selections from Cobbett. Oxford University Press.

A NOTE ON BOOKS VALUABLE FOR THE STUDY OF COBBETT'S TIMES

GENERAL HISTORY.—Use the *Cambridge Modern History* and the *Cambridge History of British Foreign Policy* for the whole period. The larger English histories for the period seem all to be bad. Two volumes of *The Political History of England*, 1760-1801, by William Hunt, and 1801-1837, by G. C. Brodrick and J. K. Fotheringham cover the period—very badly. C. Grant Robertson's *England under the Hanoverians* (to 1815) is much better, but only touches slightly on home affairs for the period of Cobbett's activity. J. A. R. Marriott's *England Since Waterloo* is bad. The much smaller *British History in the Nineteenth Century* (from 1789), by G. M. Trevelyan, is the best general history available; but it is not full enough for our period. For America, Cecil Chesterton's *Short History of the United States* is useful.

AGRARIAN AND INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTIONS.—Mr. and Mrs. Hammond's three books—*The Village Labourer*, *The Town Labourer*, and *The Skilled Labourer*, are an admirable picture of working-class conditions during the period from 1760-1830. The first two at least should be read. For the Industrial Revolution, see also Arnold Toynbee's *The Industrial Revolution* and *La Révolution Industrielle*, by Paul Mantoux. For the Agrarian Revolution, Arthur Young's writings, E. C. K. Gonner's *Common Land and Enclosure*, and Lord Ernle's *British Farming, Past and Present*. For both, C. R. Fay's *Life and Labour in the Nineteenth Century* is useful. It pays special attention to Cobbett. So is G. H. Perris's *Industrial History of Modern England*. I have found W. Smart's *Economic Annals of the Nineteenth Century* very valuable for reference to the course of economic conditions. Hutchins and Harrison's *History of Factory Legislation* is useful.

WORKING-CLASS MOVEMENTS.—For the rise of Trade Unionism see Mr. and Mrs. Webb's *History of Trade Unionism*, and R. W. Postgate's *The Builders' History*, very valuable for 1830-1834. For political movements, see Max Beer's *History of British Socialism*, P. A. Brown's *The French Revolution in*

English History, E. G. Smith's *The English Jacobins*, and H. N. Brailsford's *Shelley, Godwin, and Their Circle*. Consult also Bamford's *Passages in the Life of a Radical*, Robert Owen's *Autobiography*, and G. J. Holyoake's *History of Co-operation*.

REFORM MOVEMENT.—For the earlier period, G. S. Veitch's *The Genesis of Parliamentary Reform* is useful. J. R. M. Butler's *The Passing of the Great Reform Bill* is a detailed study of the years from 1830 to 1832. There is no good account of the Reform Movement as a whole.

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Brougham, Lord:	*The Life and Times of Henry, Lord Brougham*, written by Himself.
Burdett, Sir Francis:	*Memoirs of the Life of Sir Francis Burdett* (1810).
Canning, George:	*George Canning.* By H. W. V. Temperley.
Castlereagh, Viscount:	*Life.* By Sir A. Alison.
Cochrane, Lord:	*The Autobiography of a Seaman.* By the Earl of Dundonald.
Fox, C. J.:	*Charles James Fox.* By J. L. Hammond. And the volumes by Sir G. O. Trevelyan.
Grey, Lord.:	*Lord Grey of the Reform Bill.* By G. M. Trevelyan.
Hunt, Henry:	*Memoirs of Henry Hunt.* By Himself.
O'Connell, Daniel:	*Life.* By John O'Connell.
Owen, Robert:	*Autobiography.*
	Life. By F. Podmore.
Pitt, William:	*Pitt.* By Lord Rosebery.
Place, Francis:	*Life.* By Graham Wallas.
Shaftesbury, Lord:	*Life.* By J. L. and B. Hammond.
Windham, William:	*The Windham Papers.* With an Introduction by Lord Rosebery.

MEMOIRS, ETC.

Creevey, P.:	*The Creevey Papers.*
Dalling and Bulwer, Lord:	*Historical Characters.*
Gilfillan, G.:	*A Second Gallery of Literary Portraits.* 1850.
Greville, C. C. F.:	*The Greville Memoirs.*
Hazlitt, W:	*Conversations of James Northcote.* 1830
Holland, Lord:	*Memoirs of the Whig Party.*
Martineau, Harriet:	*History of the Thirty Years' Peace.*
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