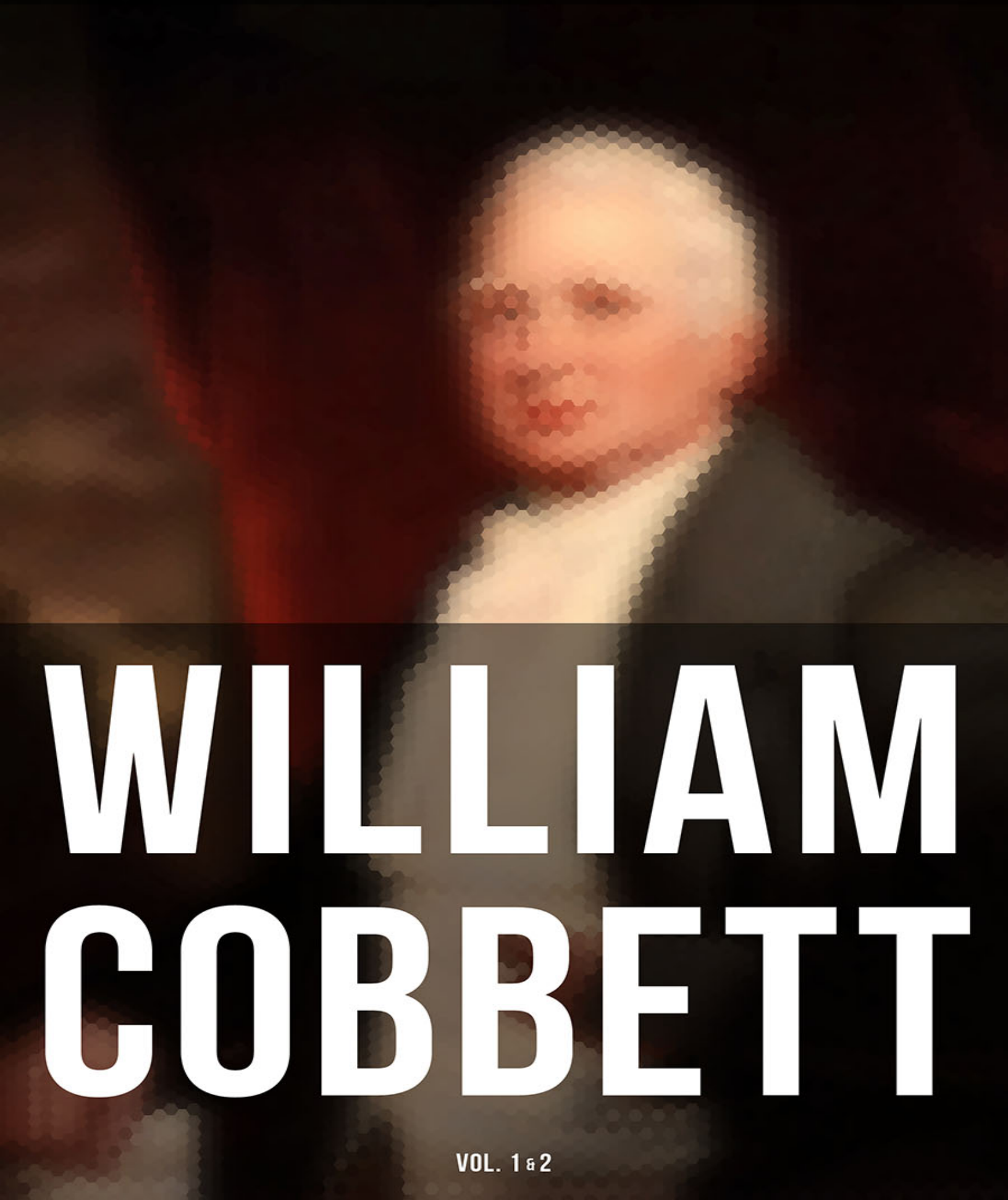
EDWARD SMITH



WILLIAM COBBETT

VOL. 1 & 2

Edward Smith

William Cobbett
(Vol.1&2)

The Life and Legacy of Britain's Radical Revolutionary

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CHAPTER I.

“I LOOKED BACK WITH PRIDE TO MY WAGGON-DRIVING GRANDFATHER.”

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William Cobbett was born in the parish of Farnham, in the county of Surrey, on the 9th of March, 1762.

The town of Farnham is a hop-garden. It had, in olden days, one of the most important corn-markets in the south of England. Before that, it was a great clothing mart; and, early in Parliamentary history, was called upon to send representatives to the “Collective Wisdom.” But, at last, the mercantile spirit proper, as was the case with many towns in Surrey, Kent, and Sussex, fled from Farnham; granaries took the place of workshops; and manufactures declined. With the extinction of the iron-furnaces of the Weald expired the once-flourishing trade of the south of England; and agriculture became the staple pursuit of the still-prosperous people, all over the fertile country which lies between the Thames and the English Channel. Corn-fields took the place of extensive sheep and cattle pastures; new grazing-downs succeeded to the burnt-up forests, whilst hops took the pick of the land, upon which they throve in a hitherto-unexampled manner. And Farnham, with its deep, rich, light-brown soil, found itself with a title to give to the best hops grown in England.

So Farnham is, to this day, a big hop-garden. In spite of a railway-station and 10,000 inhabitants, and the proximity of a garrison, the impression is, all around, the same. You enter the town from London, and the first church you come to is nearly surrounded with vines; the last building, at the other end of the long street, is an oast-house. You may take a lodging down by the river-side, and find a forest of hop-poles immediately outside your window, in the morning; or taking stand on any elevation, you will see all the uplands around, either in their luxuriant summer dress of vine, or else, so many square miles of poles placed tent-wise, taking their winter rest, looking like nothing so much as the encampment of a monstrous army.

They must have been clever enough in their generation, who planted and built hereabouts nearly two thousand years ago; but he who did the most on behalf of this part of Surrey was he who planted a small field of hops on the upland towards Crondell, somewhere about the year 1600. By the middle of the eighteenth century the hops of Farnham were already distinguished—“always at the top of the market;” and the agricultural writers of that day wax eloquent over the praises of the pleasing, fertile vale, and its “hazel-coloured,” loamy soil, and the yearly-increasing number of acres given up to hop-culture. Arthur Young calls the district between Farnham and Alton the finest in England.

The scenery around Farnham is not, in itself, unique; so far, that any well-cultivated English river-valley is like almost any other, with its low hills crowned along their summits with the evidences of prosperous farming. But, from the top

of one of these eminences, the eye soon discovers certain characteristics, which compel a deep impression upon the mind of singularity and beauty. The best view is, perhaps, to be obtained from Hungry Hill, near Aldershot; the most prominent object being Crooksbury Hill, rising from above the woods of Moor Park and Waverley Abbey. A very odd-looking hill, covered with tall Scotch firs, the like of which it would be difficult to name; a wide expanse of sandy heath, now partly cultivated, stretches for many miles beyond, until broken up into a tumultuous range of heath-clad hills; and these, again, succeeded by the distant blue outlines of the Sussex and Hampshire downs. The river Wey courses down the vale, passing through the lower part of Farnham town; and after spinning merrily through the meadows and hop-fields below, bends abruptly round in the direction of Guildford.

The inhabitants of this district, one hundred years ago, were almost out of the great World. The turnpike-road to Winchester and the south-west bounded their earthly aims; upon it was situated the weekly goal for the produce of their farms; and along it was, at a toilsome distance, either the great metropolis at one end, or Portsmouth and her marines at the other. With strong native prejudices, and a character for inflexible honesty, the farmers (generally speaking) lived remote, “equal enemies to improvements in agriculture and to relaxations in morals;” the smallest occupiers sharing the hardest toil with their labourers.

Before the great scarcity and dearness set in, in the last quarter of the century—when the clocks and the brass kettles began to disappear from the parlours, and the

visions of general pauperism began to appear—the spirit of the peasantry in the remoter parts of Surrey was high and independent—chill penury was then uncommon with the able-bodied. In the receipt of only seven or eight shillings a week of average money wages, such was the cheapness of food, and so light were the burdens which Prudence had to bear, that the labourer was healthy, cheerful, and contented; whilst he could often explain clearly enough, from his own observation and reflection, the merits or demerits of the different systems and practice upon the neighbouring farms.

Of this class was the grandfather of William Cobbett.

> “With respect to my ancestors, I shall go no further back than my grandfather, and for this plain reason, that I never heard talk of any prior to him. He was a day-labourer, and I have heard my father say, that he worked for one farmer from the day of his marriage to that of his death, upwards of forty years. He died before I was 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, cut from the neighbouring heath, and her evening light was a rush dipped in grease.”

George Cobbett, son of this old couple, appears to have much improved his condition in life; and he lived to see all his boys gradually rising in the world. William was the third (out of four), and he gives vivid sketches of their daily course of existence.

> “My father, when I was born, was a farmer. The reader will easily believe, from the poverty of his parents, that he had received no very brilliant education: he was, however, learned, for a man in his rank of life. When a little boy, he drove the plough for twopence a day, and 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.

“So much for my ancestors, from whom, if I derive no honour, I derive no shame.

“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 small birds from the turnip seed, and the rooks from the peas. When I first trudged a-field, 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 the 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!…”

“I have some faint recollection of going to school to an old woman, who, I believe, did not succeed in teaching me my letters. In the winter evenings my father taught 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 teach 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.”

No, the book-learning was not to come yet. That was to be left until the little world of his birthplace had become too small to hold him. Nearly sixty years after these simple times, Mr. Cobbett is riding in the neighbourhood, accompanied by one of his sons, and the two go out of their way to visit the spot where he received “the rudiments of his education.”

> “There is a little hop-garden in which I used to work when from eight to ten years old; from which I have scores of times run to follow the hounds, leaving the hoe to do the best that it could to destroy the weeds; but the most interesting thing was a sand-hill, which goes from a part of the heath down to the rivulet. As a due mixture of pleasure with toil, I with two brothers, used occasionally to disport ourselves, as the lawyers call it, at this sand-hill. One diversion was this: we used to go to the top of the hill, which was steeper than the roof of a house; one used to draw his arms out of the sleeves of his smock-frock, and lay himself down with his arms by his sides; and then the others, one at head and the other at feet, sent him rolling down the hill like a barrel or a log of wood. By the time he got to the bottom, his hair, eyes, ears, nose, and mouth, were all full of this loose sand; then the others took their turn; and at every roll, there was a monstrous spell of laughter. I had often told my sons of this while they were very little, and I now took one of them to see the spot. But, that was not all. This was the spot where I was receiving my education; and this

was the sort of education; and I am perfectly satisfied that if I had not received such an education, or something very much like it; that, if I had been brought up a milksop, with a nursery-maid everlastingly at my heels, I should have been at this day as great a fool, as inefficient a mortal, as any of those frivolous idiots that are turned out from Winchester and Westminster School, or from any of those dens of dunces called colleges and universities. It is impossible to say how much I owe to that sand-hill; and I went to return it my thanks for the ability which it probably gave me to be one of the greatest terrors, to one of the greatest and most powerful bodies of knaves and fools, that ever were permitted to afflict this or any other country."

In such manner the merry, sturdy, little life went on. At tying hop-poles, or scaring birds, almost as soon as he could barely stand, a trifling share was given to the family efforts; whilst the vigorous, healthy senses were already open to the keenest enjoyment of nature, and to the unexpected moments of fun which enter into the days of boyhood. Look at this, for example (written at nearly seventy years of age).

"When I was a very little boy, I was, in the barley-sowing season, going along by the side of a field, near Waverley Abbey; the primroses and blue-bells bespangling the banks on both sides of me; a thousand linnets singing in a spreading oak over my head; while the jingle of the traces, and the whistling of the plough-boys saluted my ear from over the

hedge; and, as it were to snatch me from the enchantment, the hounds, at that instant, having started a hare in the hanger on the other side of the field, came up scampering over it in full cry, taking me after them many a mile. I was not more than eight years old; but this particular scene has presented itself to my mind many times every year from that day to this. I always enjoy it over again, &c.”

Cobbett’s political writings, during his whole career, were largely illustrated by the incidents and occurrences of his life. This was the line taken by his own peculiar egotism, and we are indebted to it for numerous pictures similar to the above. Of this particular period there is only space here for the following capital story:—

“When I was a boy, a huntsman named George Bradley, who was huntsman to Mr. Smither, of Hale, very wantonly gave me a cut with his whip, because I jumped in amongst the dogs, pulled a hare from them, and got her scut, upon a little common, called Seal Common, near Waverley Abbey. I was only about eight years old; but my mind was so strongly imbued with the principles of natural justice, that I did not rest satisfied with the mere calling of names, of which, however, I gave Mr. George Bradley a plenty. I sought to inflict a just punishment upon him; and, as I had not the means of proceeding by force, I proceeded by cunning in the manner that I am presently going to describe. I had not then read the Bible, much less had I read Grotius and Puffendorf; I, therefore, did not know

that God and man had declared, that it was laudable to combat tyranny by either force or fraud; but, though I did not know what tyranny meant, reason and a sense of justice taught me that Bradley had been guilty of tyranny towards me; and the native resources of my mind, together with my resolution, made me inflict justice on him in the following manner:—Hounds (hare-hounds at least) will follow the trail of a red herring as eagerly as that of a hare, and rather more so, the scent being stronger and more unbroken. I waited till Bradley and his pack were trailing for a hare in the neighbourhood of that same Seal Common. They were pretty sure to find in the space of half an hour, and the hare was pretty sure to go up the common and over the hill to the south. I placed myself ready with a red herring at the end of a string, in a dry field, and near a hard path, along which, or near to which, I was pretty sure the hare would go. I waited a long while; the sun was getting high, the scent bad; but, by and by, I heard the view-halloo and full cry. I squatted down in the fern, and my heart bounded with the prospect of inflicting justice, when I saw my lady come skipping by, going off towards Pepperharrow; that is to say, to the south. In a moment, I clapped down my herring, went off at a right angle towards the west, climbed up a steep bank very soon, where the horsemen, such as they were, could not follow; then on I went over the roughest part of the common that I could find, till I got to the pales of Moor Park, over which I went, there being holes at

the bottom for the letting in of the hares. That part of the park was covered with short heath; and I gave some twirls about to amuse Mr. Bradley for half-an-hour. Then off I went, and down a hanger at last, to the bottom of which no horseman could get without riding round a quarter of a mile. At the bottom of the hanger was an alder moor, in a swamp. There my herring ceased to perform its service. The river is pretty rapid, I tossed it in, that it might go back to the sea, and relate to its brethren the exploits of the land. I washed my hands in the water of the moor; and took a turn, and stood at the top of the hanger to witness the winding up of the day's sport, which terminated a little before dusk in one of the dark days of November. After overrunning the scent a hundred times, after an hour's puzzling in the dry field, after all the doubles and all the turns that the sea-borne hare had given them, down came the whole *posse* to the swamp; the huntsman went round a mill-head not far off, and tried the other side of the river: '*No! d—her, where can she be?*' And thus, amidst conjectures, disputations, mutual blamings, and swearings a plenty, they concluded, some of them half-leg deep in dirt, and going soaking home at the end of a drizzling day."

The little life, that was destined to be such a cruel thorn in the sides of Authority, was very near being summarily extinguished about this time; on occasion of William getting out of his depth while bathing in the river Wey, and from which he was "pulled out by the foot, which happened to stick up above the water."

By the time of his reaching ten or eleven years of age he is already getting useful, in his way, and he takes his turn with his brothers of going the annual visit to Weyhill Fair with their father. The fair at Weyhill, though still considerable, is not what it was then; the hop-growers now run off to Worcester, or Burton-on-Trent; but in those days, long before the railways, Weyhill in October was the grand centre for sheep, hops, &c. There the yearly hirings took place, and there the bucolic gathering from all the neighbouring counties had an annual dissipation. We shall presently see that it was at one of these trips Cobbett made his first acquaintance with American politics. But the following incident—which has often been told, but cannot on that account be omitted here—presents his first recorded look-out upon life.

> "At eleven 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 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 pennyworth 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. 'Tale of a Tub,' price 3*d.* The title was so odd, that my curiosity was excited. I had the 3*d.*, 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 haystack. On the shady side of this, I sat down to read. The book was so different from anything 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 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 off I started to Kew, reading my little book. The singularity of my dress, the simplicity of my manner, my confident and lively air, and, doubtless, his own compassion besides, induced the gardener, who was a Scotchman, I remember, to give me victuals, find me lodgings, and set me to work. And it was during the period that I was at Kew, that the present King (Geo. IV.), and two

of his brothers laughed at the oddness of my dress, while I was sweeping the grass-plat 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 [24] years old, lost it in a box that fell overboard in the Bay of Fundy, in North America, the loss gave me greater pain then I have ever felt at losing thousands of pounds.”

How long the employment at Kew lasted, and how he got home again, does not appear. The life at Farnham was probably resumed before the approach of winter; for, either the year before this, or that immediately succeeding, he mentions being sent down from Farnham to Steeple Langford, in Wiltshire, with a horse; remaining at the latter place “from the month of June till the fall of the year.”

Cobbett must have been about fourteen years of age at the time alluded to in the following incident:—

“My father used to take one of us with him every year to the great hop-fair at Weyhill. The fair was held at Old Michaelmastide, 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. 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's name mentioned. Little did I then dream that I should ever see the man, and still less that I should hear some of his own countrymen reviling and execrating him."

Although we have learned, not only to look with complacency upon the results of the attempt to coerce the Colonies, but, also, to wonder that there could have ever been English statesmen so deluded as to expect anything but disaster from the contest; it has not been sufficiently observed, that the immediate effect was the partial ruin of the labouring poor in this country; that it is from that period that their prosperity has declined, and their comforts have become fewer and fewer. And what is more, before their impoverishment made it obvious to everybody, the common people and the tradesmen showed, by their abhorrence of the war, that they were, for once, gifted with a truer political sagacity than their precious rulers; and that there must have been some vague general anticipation of the consequences to them, and to their families. Prices rose, whilst wages remained stationary; and, from the very outset, the privations of the poor were aggravated to an intense degree. But from that date arose the thirst of the

labouring classes for political information, which has since resulted in their possessing so general a share in representation.

So, down at quiet Farnham, the people had hitherto been, “like the rest of the country people in England,” neither knowing nor thinking much about politics. The “shouts of victory or the murmurs at a defeat,” would now and then break in upon their tranquillity for a moment; but after the American war had continued for a short time, the people began to be a little better acquainted with subjects of that kind. Cobbett says, that opinions were pretty equally divided concerning the war, at first; whilst there grew up a good deal of pretty warm discussion, sometimes:—

> “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 friends and

relations, merely because they would not submit to oppression, and his cause was gained."

Old George Cobbett remained a staunch American in politics; but, as to whether he was right or wrong, his son admits that he never, at that period, formed any opinion. His own notions were those of his father, which would have been as warmly entertained if they had been all on the other side. The short autobiography of which the above forms a part, was written during the early part of his pamphleteering career in the United States; at which time he found it necessary to explain that he had not been nursed in the lap of aristocracy, and that he did not imbibe his then "principles or prejudices from those who were the advocates of blind submission." The story of this pamphlet will come in its proper place, when its author was upwards of thirty years of age.

Here we have, then, probably as much as we shall ever know, of William Cobbett's early years. The utter obscurity of his father's social status is, of itself, sufficient reason why there were no admiring friends to detect precocity, and to record its achievements: until the age of twenty his life was made up of the ordinary occupations of a country lad. Fairs, cricket-matches, and hare-hunts filled up the joyous periods of recreation; and it was not till the year 1782, that an incident occurred, which, bringing him into the bustling activity of town-life, had the same effect upon him, that a similar change of scene has had upon many an ardent,

healthy spirit; and which estranged him from the sequestered vale of life, for ever.

There can be little doubt, however, that a very great mental stimulus was acquired by the trip to Kew, and the reading of Swift's wonderful satire.[1] The poor ploughboy, very probably, read and reread the laughable story of Peter and Martin hundreds of times without understanding the real drift of it; but there was enough in the book, with its entertaining accounts of grotesque fashions and weak-minded characters, to furnish such an impressionable spirit as Cobbett's with an inexhaustible store of odd ideas concerning the world outside him. Readers of his works will notice his frequent quotation of Swift: "The celebrated Dean of St. Patrick somewhere observes, &c., &c." is the opening sentence of the autobiographical sketch; and the "Political Register," in after-years, continued to manifest evidences of the source and character of Cobbett's early reading. Cobbett's literary style, however, was not exactly that of Dean Swift; of which the former's ignorance, and even contempt, of Latinity is sufficient explanation. But his alternations of sweetness and acrimony—his ever-ready images—the picturesque manner of his describing individual characters—his constant tendency to satire—cannot but be ascribed, in great measure, to the little book whose loss "cost him greater pain than losing thousands of pounds."

So there is, now, some difference. A head and shoulders above the average of his mates, his mind is, likewise, on a higher level. Not so high, but as yet to be infinitely dark as to any purpose: a healthy spirit in a healthy body, there stood, working as hard and as cheerily as ever; but ready for

the first impulse—which impulse came, in no uncommon way; in no more romantic style than that which sets a ball rolling, upon the impact of the foot.

> “Towards the autumn of 1782, I went to visit a relation who lived in the neighbourhood of 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 brave Rodney’s victories over our natural enemies, the French and Spaniards, had long been the theme of our praise, and the burthen of our songs. 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 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 the dangers.

“I arrived at my uncle’s late in the evening, with my mind full of my sea-faring project. Though I had walked thirty miles during the day, and consequently was well wearied, I slept not a moment. It was no sooner daylight than I arose and walked down towards the old castle on the beach at 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 minutes on board the ‘Pegasus’ man-of-war, commanded by the Right Honourable George Berkeley, brother to the Earl of Berkeley.

“The Captain had more compassion than is generally met with in men of his profession; 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, to be tied to a girl that I did not like, than to be tied to the gang-way, 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 in vain attempted to convince Captain Berkeley, [2] 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. I was, in some sort, obliged to acquaint the Admiral with what had passed on board the ‘Pegasus,’ in consequence of which 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, 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 brakes 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.

“It was on the 6th of May, 1783, that I, 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.

"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.

“My generous preserver, finding my obstinacy not to be overcome, began to look out for an employment for me. He was preparing an advertisement for the newspaper, when an acquaintance of his, an attorney, called in 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.

“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 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.

“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 candles. 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 pitch-forks, 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, O save me from the desk of a pettifogging attorney!

“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 officious 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 that 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.

“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