

WALPOLE

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Walpole by John Morley

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JOHN MORLEY

WALPOLE

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WALPOLE

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JOHN MORLEY

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CHAPTER I

EARLY YEARS AND FIRST STAGES OF PUBLIC LIFE

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WALPOLE was born in August 1676. He came fifth among nineteen children born to Mr. Robert Walpole, a country gentleman of Norfolk, of good estate and ancient lineage. The founder of the family had come over with William of Normandy, and the stock had shown its vigour by an unbroken descent in the male line for no fewer than eighteen generations. Walpoles had been knights of the shire as far back as Edward II. Edward Walpole, grandfather of the future minister, sat in the Convention Parliament of 1660. He is said to have acquired a respectable character for eloquence and weight; he voted for the restoration of Charles II, and he was made a Knight of the Bath. Robert, his son, was in Parliament from the Revolution until his death in 1700. An active Whig in politics, he was a man of marked prudence and credit in his private conduct. A good name in those days was not incompatible with a jovial temper and much steady drinking. Mr. Walpole was fond of sport, fond of farming and business, and fond of plenty of company and plenty of Nottingham ale. He always took care of his money. An old book,

in which he set down all his expenses, showed that he knew how to live in London for upwards of three months for the moderate sum of sixty-five pounds seven shillings and fivepence.

Mr. Walpole sent his third son to Eton and to King's College at Cambridge, not because he valued education, even if education could now have been obtained in those famous foundations, but because he designed the young man to push his fortunes in the Church, then the usual field for a cadet of decent family. But the youth had higher destinies before him than fat livings and an easy bishopric. His elder brother died in 1698, and Robert the younger, becoming heir to the family estates, quitted the university, and settled down with his convivial father to learn all that pertains to the management of land and the enjoyment of country life. It is said that Robert the elder used to insist on making his son drink more than his just share, on the ground that no son should ever be allowed to have enough of his senses to see that his father was tipsy. Amid such surroundings, which, though compared with the more polished surface of modern manners they seem coarse and rough, yet were vigorous, hearty, and practical, Walpole reached his twenty-fourth year. His father vowed that he would make him the first grazier in the country. Higher destinies were in store for him. The young squire, under a homely exterior, covered a powerful understanding, a strong will, a good eye for men, and a union of solid judgment with commanding ambition, which fitted him to rule a kingdom, and to take his place among the foremost men in Europe.

In the summer of 1700 he married Miss Catherine

Shorter, a grand-daughter of Sir John Shorter, once Lord Mayor of London. The lady brought him beauty, good manners, and a fortune. Before the end of the year his father died at the early age of fifty, and Robert Walpole came into the estate. Nearly the whole of it lay in the county of Norfolk, and as it was then let, the rent-roll amounted to something over two thousand pounds a year. The property carried with it a couple of pocket boroughs, Castle Rising and Lynn. Mr. Walpole was at once (January 1701) elected for the first of them, rendered vacant by his father's decease, and he retained the seat until the death of King William. In 1702, on the accession of Queen Anne, he was returned for Lynn Regis; he continued to sit for the same borough without interruption until his fall from power forty years later. It is sometimes said that the advance of democracy has destroyed this stability of relation between representatives and constituents; but it is worth noting that two members of the existing House of Commons (1889) have held what are virtually the same seats without a break, one of them for fifty-nine years, and the other for fifty-four.

The moment of Walpole's entrance upon parliamentary life was one of critical importance in national history. The great question which had been opened and provisionally closed by the events of 1688, was whether the English monarchy should be limited and Protestant, or absolute, Catholic, and dependent on France. The work of the Revolution may seem at this distance of time to have been out of danger by the beginning of the eighteenth century. Even if it were true that the bulk of the nation had made up its mind, this is not always a