

CHAPTER I

BIRTH AND EARLY YEARS. 1749-1768

I

CHARLES JAMES FOX was born in Conduit Street, City of Westminster, on January 24, 1749. His near ancestry affords a striking instance of the intimate contacts that are sometimes made between far distant points of history. Stephen Fox, Charles's grandfather and the founder of the family fortunes, was born of humble yeoman stock in 1627, at the moment when Charles I. was highly displeased with his insubordinate Commons about a Petition of Right. Stephen was a man of parts and industry, became a loyal cavalier, fought for Charles II. at the Battle of Worcester; prospered at the Restoration, was made Sir Stephen, and disputes with Nell Gwyn the credit of having established Chelsea Hospital; to which, at least, he was able out of his savings to contribute a sum of thirteen thousand pounds. But he did more than this. At the age of seventy-seven he married a second time, and begot four children. The second of these, Henry, afterwards the first Lord Holland, married Georgiana Caroline, daughter of the second Duke of Richmond, and therefore the grandchild of Charles II. and Louise de Keroualle. Charles James was their third son, over a hundred and twenty years separating his grandfather's birth from his own. The Richmonds, acutely sensible of their illustrious descent, were much vexed by the alliance of their daughter with a commoner, but Henry Fox proved to be an amiable and devoted husband, which is by much the best that can be said of him. He is one of the classic knaves of English politics, and, like many knaves, he was by no means devoid of charm and character. His corruption had the peculiar merit of being an open profession. He raided the public

funds and traded the favours of office with superb effrontery. He boasted with genuine satisfaction that he was the best hated man in the country, which he deservedly was. Lord Chesterfield, with nicer perceptions, complained that the technique was clumsy, as attracting popular attention to practices that ought to be decently private. In reply to which Henry Fox could invite his critic's attention to a splendidly fertile bank balance.

He could, in fact, demonstrate by wide experience that honesty was by no means the best policy. He was well content to become rich by forfeiting a general esteem that he did not covet. No officer of the state has left a name less honoured or less honourable, but his career affords no more satisfaction to the moralist than that he was at last a somewhat disappointed man in getting a barony instead of an earldom. What he stole from the public he put affectionately to domestic uses. Had he been impeached for looting the treasury, no one could have pitied him; but his family life was one of serene attachments.

As a father he was indulgent without conditions, and Charles was his especial favourite. At the age of five the boy was his father's adored companion, and warmly encouraged to believe that anything he liked was good for him. When a garden wall was to be blown up with gunpowder, Charles was promised that he should see the operation, but somehow it was carried out in his absence. At the bidding of parental fondness the wall was promptly rebuilt in order that Charles might witness its second destruction. This, it is said, was a valuable example to youth of the propriety of keeping one's word, an engaging motive to attribute to Henry Fox. Agreeable follies of this kind were succeeded by graver laxities.

In the year of Charles's birth his parents acquired the tenancy of Holland House, the home of his boyhood and youth. Here he became a "very pert, very argumenta-

tive," and, as everyone allowed, a very charming child. Systematically spoiled in spite of Lady Caroline's dutiful protests, it says much for his natural quality that the wilful boy of his father's making developed into nothing of a prig. On one occasion he walked into the study when his father was preparing some official papers, and finding a despatch that he took leave to read not to his liking, put it on the fire, whereupon the Secretary of State without remonstrance proceeded to rewrite it from his notes. This was the youth who as a child had announced his intention of destroying a watch, to be met with—"Well; if you must, I suppose you must." There is a less likely story of Charles in petticoats, desiring to wash in a bowl of cream on the dinner table, and seeing it removed to the floor by parental orders so that he might sit in it.

At the age of seven Charles was asked whether he would stay at home until he was old enough for Eton, or go to a preparatory school. His choice was decided by his mother's inaccuracy on a point of Roman history; concluding that home tuition was unsuitable, he elected for M. Pampellone's academy for young gentlemen at Wandsworth, where he found "more boys of some station in life than usual in so small a number." In 1758 he was advanced to Eton, paternal anxiety as to his health being relieved by frequent requests that Charles might be excused his studies for the amusements of the town. He attended the coronation of George III. in 1761, a small and unnoted spectator who was to become exceedingly eminent among that sovereign's vexations. About the same time he broke his arm, an accident of which the press took notice, and Henry Fox was moved by the enquiries that followed to observe with his accustomed insight, "The boy is a great deal better beloved than his father is." Two years later the father considered that his son needed a more extended diversion, and took him

abroad for some months, being himself much diverted in the evenings at Spa by watching his idol at the age of fourteen manipulating a nightly allowance of five guineas at the tables. Charles returned to England a very promising young rake, but had the good sense to insist on going back to Eton, where Dr. Barnard the headmaster took an early opportunity of reminding him that his newly acquired social accomplishments were no charm against the birch. At the end of 1763 he was taken by his father to hear parliament debating the publications of John Wilkes, of whom we shall hear a good deal more, and on November 15 he saw Lord North rise to move "That the paper entitled the *North Briton*, No. 45, is a false, scandalous, and seditious libel," and much more to the same purpose. He may also have seen one Williams, a journeyman printer connected with the *North Briton*, taken to the pillory in a coach marked "No. 45," while the mob cheered him as a martyr and collected a sum of two hundred pounds for his benefit. Precocious as he was, Charles was not yet old enough to question his father's view of the enormities that were being committed by the ruffian Wilkes and his gang against the sacred figure of majesty; but his active and high-spirited young mind may already have begun to suspect that majesty was not behaving itself very well.

II

In the October term of 1764, he entered Hertford College, Oxford, being then just under sixteen years of age. The scholastic requirements of that establishment were not exacting, but his most inveterate enemies never denied that Fox was an eager worker, and already at the University he went a long way beyond necessity in application. At the end of his first term he writes: "I like Oxford well enough. I read there a great deal, and

am very fond of mathematics." And two months later to the same correspondent, an old tutor, "I am heartily obliged to you for your advice about French, which I will undoubtedly follow, as I am thoroughly convinced of its utility. I read here much, and like vastly—what I know you think useless—mathematics. I believe they are useful, and I am sure they are entertaining, which is alone enough to recommend them to me. I did not expect my life here could be so pleasant as I find it; but I really think, to a man who reads a great deal, there cannot be a more agreeable place. . . . If there were any way of sending you pamphlets, I would send you a new poem called *The Traveller*, which appears to me to have a great deal of merit."* His affection for Oxford could induce him to stay there through vacation, bettering his considerable knowledge of the classics, and spending his evenings with a friend in a bookseller's shop reading the English dramatic poets. In after years he could say that there was no play published in England before the Restoration that he did not know intimately. The habit of scholarship came to him easily and pleasantly, and he never lost it. When someone in his presence disputed the authenticity of a line in the *Iliad* because it was in a measure unknown to Homer, Fox disconcerted him by quoting twenty others to match it. We may

* Thirteen years later, Boswell noted in his journal: "Sir Joshua: 'I was glad to hear Charles Fox say it [*The Traveller*] was one of the finest poems in the English language.' Langton: 'Why was you glad? You surely had no doubt of this before.' Johnson: 'No; the merit of *The Traveller* is so well established, that Mr. Fox's praise cannot augment it, nor his censure diminish it.'" The next day Boswell, referring to the conversation, was told: "Yes, sir, I knocked Fox on the head without ceremony. Reynolds is too much under Fox and Burke at present." But Johnson admired Fox and liked him. In 1784 he said: "I am for the King against Fox; but I am for Fox against Pitt. . . . The King is my master; but I do not know Pitt; and Fox is my friend."

blush at the style, but there is no reason to doubt the veracity of the panegyrist who declared that "He was, indeed, capable of conversing with a Longinus on the beauty, sublimity, and pathos of Homer; with an Aristotle on his delineations of man; and with a pedagogue on his dactyls, spondees, and anapæsts." That this erudition was acquired by his own good-will rather than under tutorial discipline is shown in a remarkable letter that he received, during an absence abroad, from the head of his college, Dr. Newcome, afterwards Primate of Ireland. It is at once a pleasing tribute to Fox's industry, and a nice commentary on the educational ways then prevalent among young men of fashion. Dr. Newcome, though a little surprised on first receiving the news, thinks on reflection that his pupil has done wisely in deciding to take a long leave from Hertford. "Application like yours requires some intermission, and you are the only person with whom I have ever had connection to whom I could say this. I expect that you will return with much keenness for Greek and for lines and angles. As to trigonometry, it is a matter of entire indifference to the other geometricians of the college, who will probably continue some time here, whether they proceed to other branches of mathematics immediately, or wait a term or two longer. You need not, therefore, interrupt your amusements by severe studies, for it is wholly unnecessary to take a step onwards without you, and therefore we shall stop until we have the pleasure of your company. All your acquaintance here which I know, are well, but not much happier for your absence."

Fox remained at Oxford until the spring of 1766, paying frequent visits to London, taking a lively interest in parliamentary debates, and making the acquaintance of Edmund Burke, then thirty-seven years of age, who was now for the first time attracting the attention of the House as a powerful but, it was considered, a somewhat

too idealistic orator. The meeting was a momentous one for both men, but at present Burke could hardly be conscious of the admiration that his candour and brilliant sincerity were exciting in the lad of seventeen. And at this time there was a whisper in the Fox household that had in it more of augury than was then known. Lady Holland, as she now was, Henry Fox having received his peerage in 1763, returning from a call on Lady Chatham, told her husband that young William Pitt, then seven years old, was the cleverest child she had ever seen, and so strictly brought up and proper in his behaviour that "mark my words, that little boy will be a thorn in Charles's side as long as he lives." Lord Holland did not appreciate his wife's reflection on the childhood of their own son, but her ladyship was surprisingly in the confidence of destiny.

III

From September, 1766, until the end of 1768 Charles was travelling on the continent, chiefly in Italy, sometimes with his parents and sometimes with friends of his own age, among them Frederick Howard, Byron's Lord Carlisle, and that fervent prophet of the picturesque, Uvedale Price. On the tour he followed pleasure and study alike with pertinacity. "At present I read nothing but Italian, which I am immoderately fond of, particularly of the poetry." He kept his undertaking to his tutor, and many of his letters were now written in accomplished French. One of his chief enthusiasms at the time was for amateur acting, and his head was full of schemes for play production. A partner in these enterprises was Richard Fitzpatrick, the wit and soldier who was afterwards to hold office in the Ministry of all the Talents. "In general," says the third Lord Holland, "Mr. Fox was preferred in tragedy; but General Fitzpatrick was supposed yet more decidedly to have the superiority in genteel comedy."

In a letter to Fitzpatrick from Florence, Charles laments that in a recent performance he fell very short of his own expectations, and, though his spirit is not broken, he resolves to attempt less conspicuous parts in future. He adds that his brother, Stephen, acted well in the comedy, but that unfortunately he did not know his part in the tragedy, while Carlisle is not an excellent, but will make a useful actor, and another friend made a mess of his tragedy through carelessness, but was inimitable in the comedy, and is a great acquisition to the company. However, while they have the best manager-prompter in the world, they are in need of another actor or two, and, above all, of another actress. These observations seem to have referred to some performance in Italy, but also to have been made in preparation for future productions in England, whither Charles hopes to return early in August, 1768. On his homeward journey he called by appointment on Voltaire at Ferney, accompanied by Price. Voltaire was old and infirm, and seldom received visitors, but said he could not refuse an applicant bearing the illustrious name of Fox. He welcomed his young guests in the garden, where for a time he conversed with them while walking to and fro, refreshed them with chocolate, gave them a list of his works that he considered most likely to fortify their minds against religious prejudice, and dismissed them.

Lady Sarah Lennox,* Charles Fox's aunt, but only

* She was—but Thackeray has said it perfectly—"lovely black-haired Sarah Lennox, about whose beauty Walpole has written in raptures, and who used to lie in wait for the young Prince [afterwards George III.] and make hay at him on the lawn of Holland House. He sighed and he longed, but he rode away from her. Her picture still hangs in Holland House, a magnificent masterpiece of Reynolds, a canvas worthy of Titian. She looks from the castle window, holding a bird in her hand, at black-eyed young Charles Fox, her nephew. The Royal bird flew away from lovely Sarah. She had to figure as bridesmaid at her little Mecklenburg rival's wedding, and died in her own time a quiet old lady, who had become the mother of the heroic Napier."

four years older than he, wrote to a correspondent from Holland House in 1766: "Charles is at home; he improves every day, or rather the amiableness of his character appears every day, for 'tis all natural to him. You cannot imagine the comfort he is to both his father and mother, and his constant attention to them is really beyond what I can describe." The comfort, however, was not unqualified. The instruction so fondly given by his father at Spa had been handsomely bettered by Charles on his continental tour, and one friendly gossip asserts that "he returned one of the most egregious coxcombs in Europe." Samuel Rogers describes him as being at that time "a prodigious dandy, wearing a little odd French hat, shoes with red heels, etc.," and adds that he and Carlisle once "travelled from Paris to Lyons for the express purpose of buying waistcoats, and during the whole journey talked of nothing else." When Henry Fox, Lord Holland, died in 1774, he left what was for those days a vast fortune, and already in 1768 he had jobbed himself into a considerable magnificence of wealth. Henry Fox, in a *Political Sketch of the Years 1760-1763*, published by Lady Ilchester from MS. in her *Life and Letters of Lady Sarah Lennox*, makes a superb exposure of his own public standards. "The sudden and great rise in stocks [in 1762] has made me richer than I ever intended or desir'd to be. Obloquy generally attends money so got, but with how much reason in all cases let this simple account of my gains show. The Government borrow money at 20 per cent disct, I am not consulted or concerned in making the bargain. I have as PayMaster great sums in my hands, which, not applicable to any present use, must either lye dead in the Bank, or be employ'd by me. I lend this to the Government in 1761. A peace is thought certain. I am not in the least consulted, but my very bad opinion of Mr Pitt makes me think it will not be concluded: I sell out, and gain

greatly. In 1762, I lend again, a peace comes, in which again I am not consulted, and I again gain greatly." With pretty humour, his lordship writes in the same notes, "Pitt, like his mob, is never embarrass'd by any degree of shame." He was unlikely to grudge his son as many silk waistcoats as he chose to buy, but when the young man of nineteen turned up with gambling and other debts contracted in every town that he had visited, amounting, it is said, in Naples alone to sixteen thousand pounds, even his lordship may have suffered a moment's discouragement. But the pang was fugitive, the debts were paid, Charles's taste for the tables became an infatuation, and six years later his father had once more to rescue him, this time to the tune of a hundred and forty thousand pounds. At the age of sixteen he had been elected to Almack's Club, afterwards Brooks's. On his return to London he became one of its most indefatigable patrons, playing at a rate that is reserved in our own age for the more respectable medium of the stock exchange. For some years into his early manhood Fox belonged to a company that would sit at cards from ten o'clock in the evening until six the following afternoon, a waiter standing by to remind their drowsy wits whose the next deal was. At Almack's, Horace Walpole tells us, there was generally ten thousand pounds in specie on the table. The players "began by pulling off their embroidered clothes, and put on frieze great-coats, or turned their coats inside outwards for luck. They put on pieces of leather, such as worn by footmen when they clean knives to save their lace ruffles; and to guard their eyes from the light, and to prevent tumbling their hair, wore high-crowned straw hats with broad brims, and adorned with flowers and ribbons; masks to conceal their emotions when they played at Quinze. . . . They borrowed great sums of Jews at exorbitant premiums. Charles Fox called his outward room . . . the Jerusalem Chamber."

In games of skill, as whist and piquet, Fox was so good a player that it was said that if he had confined himself to these he might have averaged four thousand a year from his winnings, but in games of chance his luck was commonly out, and he could with great ease lose as much at a sitting. On one occasion Topham Beauclerk left him in the small hours of the morning after a disastrous night, and later in the day called in some anxiety as to what might have happened to his friend in desperation. He found him reading Herodotus; he expressed surprise, and Fox asked what else there was for him to do, since he had lost his last shilling.

The morality of all this must be decided by those who perceive more clearly than I do what are the standards by which it can be judged. Class distinction in England may still today have survived in some measure the onsets of democracy, but in Fox's time it was so absolute as almost to escape observation. The titled aristocracy, often of precarious origins, and a large group of great families who had acquired political influence, together formed a class that at once controlled government and constituted the world of fashion, a world that occasionally condescended to a poet or an actor-manager, and otherwise preserved a lofty superiority towards the rest of mankind save on such occasions as "the people" formed a useful figure in political debate. Talent might sometimes make its way without the aid of birth or connection, and the ruling class itself was not without men who paid more than lip service to popular claims. But socially, the nobility and the powerful political houses, Whig and Tory alike, formed a close corporation of a jealously exclusive nature. It was not wholly affectation that made Byron assume a greater respect for his coronet than for his art. Every party he attended in London was thronged with people who had inherited the belief that not to be born in the purple could hardly

be said to have been born at all. Within this charmed circle there was as much ability and native goodness as elsewhere; opportunity, indeed, no doubt, induced a politer and on the whole a more admirable mode than was prevalent in less favoured classes of society. But opportunity also embraced the means of indulgences denied to the common run of humanity. Nearly everyone in the world of power and fashion was rich. Inherited wealth was readily augmented on an impressive scale in an age of political corruption grosser than anything known to the statesmanship of this country before or since. The corruption was, indeed, a generally and openly accepted expedient. The first of the great Hanoverian ministers, Sir Robert Walpole, would have laughed with genuine astonishment if it had been seriously suggested that the purchase of support at the price of a peerage or a sinecure was improper, and his example was followed without scruple by the chiefs of both parties who succeeded him in leadership. There were exceptions, as we shall see, but the common practice meant that to belong to the upper classes was to be in an exceedingly favourable position for fattening your purse, and the advantage was one seldom neglected. The generation of this affluent world into which Charles Fox was born had one universal form of dissipation. It gambled almost to a man, and, it may be added, to a woman. "The ladies game too deep for me," wrote Horace Walpole. "The last time I was in town, Lady Hertford wanted one, and I lost fifty-six guineas before I could say an Ave Maria. I do not know a teaspoonful of news. I could tell you what was trumps, but that was all I heard." The journals of the time abound in stories of fortunes made and lost on a throw, and it was a common thing for a man of wealth to beggar himself one evening and borrow a hundred guineas with which to double his lost patrimony the next. This private recklessness was symptomatic

of the cynicism with which the public funds were for the most part treated by those who controlled them, and what was a commonplace then, if not impossible in our own time, would at least be a scandal that would not be tolerated for a week. We have our own corruptions, but the open elevation of bribery to a principle of government does not happen to be one of them. Robert Walpole's conviction that every man had his price was not all; the price did not even always buy support for the King's government, but was often paid to gratify purely personal attachments or to discharge private obligations. To say that these practices were open is, perhaps, not strictly accurate, since even then a minister rarely had the hardihood to say to the public that he was corrupt and be damned to them, though Henry Fox came as near it as no matter. The lampooners never quite reached the point of regarding breach of public trust as too venial an offence to be worth pillorying, but they brought little conviction to the exposure of abuses that everybody recognised and very few people minded. William Bodham Donne, in his masterly introduction to *The Correspondence of King George the Third with Lord North*,* remarks acutely, "The political press dealt in libels on persons, but not in any large or consistent principles on either side. The power of *The North Briton* and of Junius was that of the libeller only." This was particularly true of the censures directed against corruption. They afforded an easy method of attacking ministers, but they were seldom inspired by principles of any kind. To cry out upon a minister's ways was as far as possible from any real desire that he should mend them. Corruption was a condition of the political game, and it was exploited freely as prerogative by government and as a grievance by the opposition, but no effective body of opinion wanted to alter the rules.

* London, John Murray, 1867.

These circumstances have to be remembered when it is advanced as a merit in Charles Fox that in his public life he honourably disdained the common practices of his class and calling. It may seem to be an equivocal kind of honour that kept a man to scrupulous conduct among the temptations that then beset a political career, and allowed him in gaming to squander vast sums of money that his father had amassed by auctioning the spoils of office. Charles might have argued with cynical logic that what was ill-gotten was well wasted, but he no doubt reflected on the sources of his receipts as little as the inheritors of fortunes taken from the public by other though perhaps hardly less questionable methods. And in gaming as he did he was doing extensively what not to have done at all would have marked him in his society as merely odd.

IV

In March, 1768, Charles Fox was returned as member of parliament by the electors of Midhurst in the county of Sussex. That is to say, while he himself was absent in Italy, his father used his influence and whatever other inducements were necessary to engage the interests of the small pocket borough of that name in favour of the boy who was now just over nineteen years of age. The new member had a constituency, but no tangible constituents, the borough in question consisting of certain uninhabited acres that were farmed out by their holder in parliamentary just as they were in agricultural lots. Since the fall of the Stuarts the country, or its ministers, had been too busy keeping the succession securely in hand to give even a thought to parliamentary reform. Representation had long been established as a principle, but that the people should really be represented had not yet seriously occurred to anyone. The only authority represented by the new member for Midhurst was that of Lord

Holland's guineas. At the time he can hardly have suspected more than his father the share that he was to take in correcting the very abuses that had placed him where he was. When the new House assembled in May, 1768, he stayed on in Italy, and it was not until the following November that he took his seat. It will now be necessary to make a brief survey of the political world in which he was to play so conspicuous, so brave, and so thankless a part.