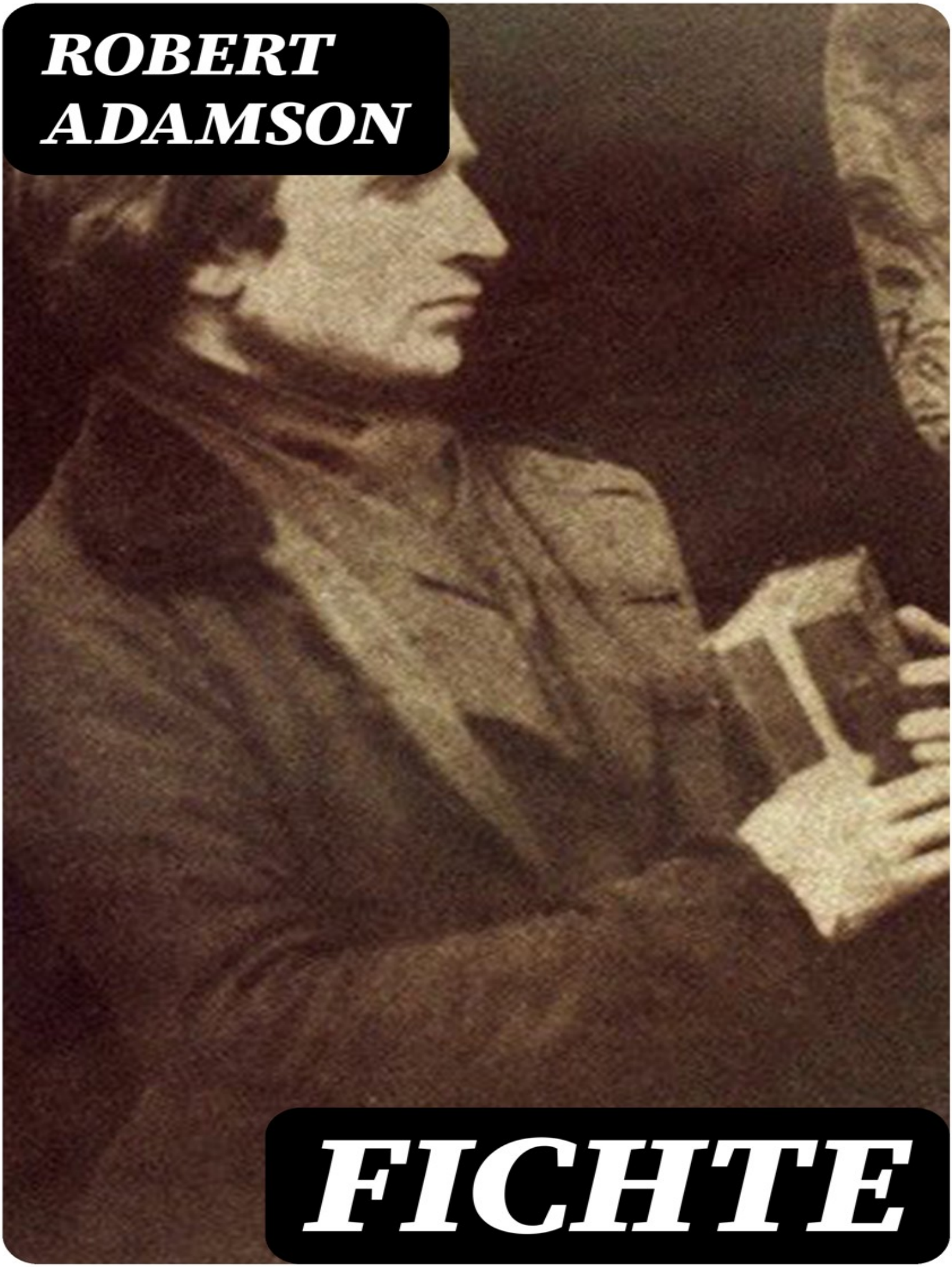
ROBERT ADAMSON



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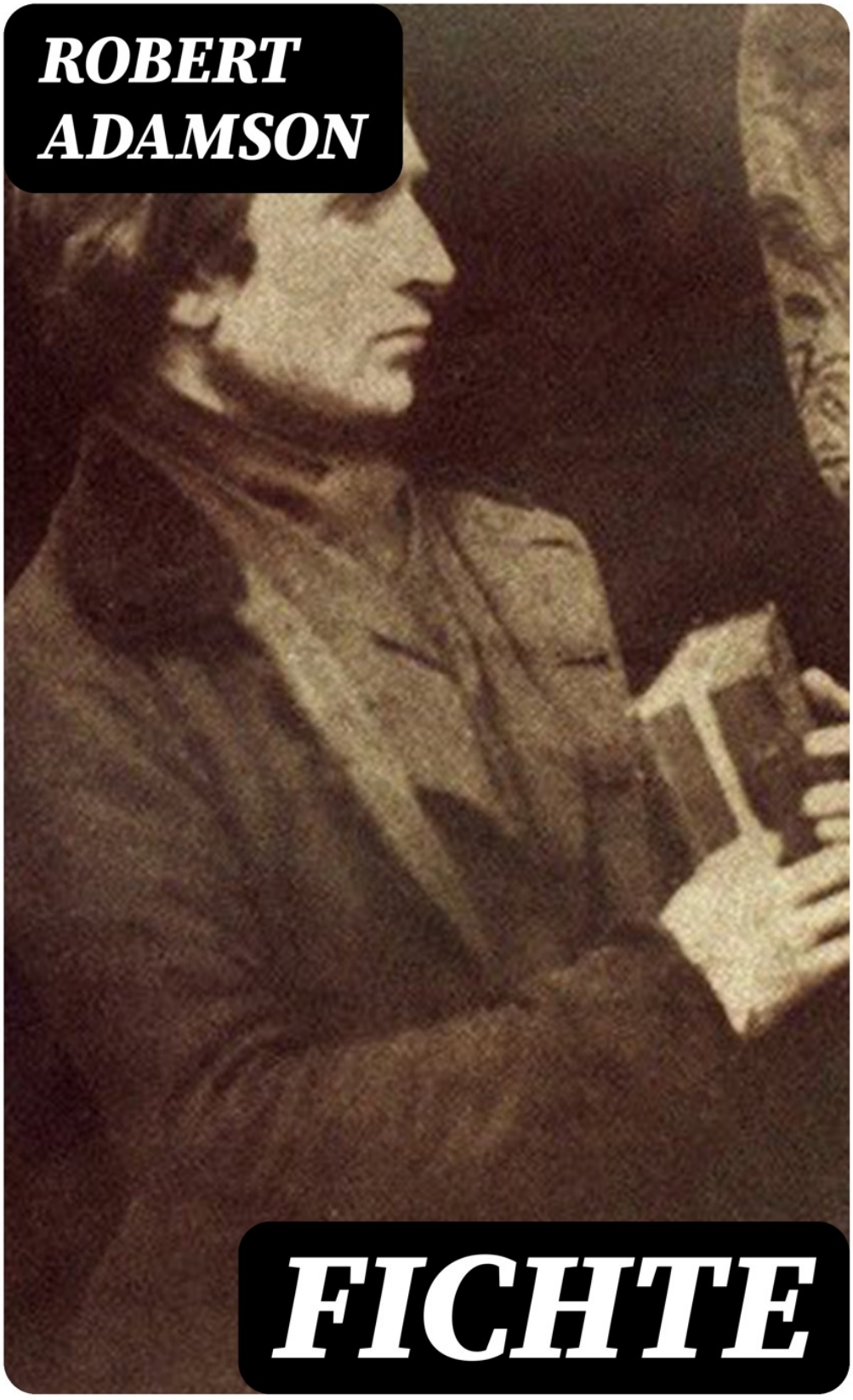
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Table of Contents

CHAPTER I.

Table of Contents

INTRODUCTORY.

It happens but rarely that the life of a philosopher has been so closely connected with the historical development of his people, that his name should be remembered rather on account of his practical activity than for his speculative researches. Yet if one does not misinterpret the evidence supplied in ample quantity by the numerous speeches, addresses, essays, memorials, and other documents which marked the celebration of the centenary of Fichte in 1862, circumstances in his case must have combined to bring about this result. Many occasional references were made by various speakers and writers to the philosophy of Fichte, and much was said of the speculative depth and richness of his writings, but all such remarks were manifestly external and by the way. The subtle metaphysician of the 'Wissenschaftslehre' had evidently, in the estimation of his admirers, been overshadowed by the patriotic orator of the 'Addresses to the German Nation.' There exists not now, there never did exist to any extent, a school of followers of Fichte; it may well be doubted if there are at present half-a-dozen students of his works. As a patriot, as representative of what seems noblest and loftiest in the German character, he lives, and will doubtless continue to live, in the grateful remembrance of his countrymen; as a metaphysician, he lives not at all beyond the learned pages of the historians of philosophy.

That such should be the case will not appear surprising when there are taken into consideration the nature of the historical surroundings of Fichte's career, and the relations in which he stood to them. His life coincided in time with the rise and partial development of the two events which have most affected the current of modern history,—the revolution in political ideas which originated in France, and the birth of intellectual activity in Germany. His life's work was the part he played in the furtherance of these movements, and the durability of his fame has of necessity depended on the significance of his contributions to them, and the way in which they have worked themselves out.

Although the revolution in political and social organisations and the rise of new forms of intellectual life in Germany differed widely in external features,—for they belonged to diverse spheres of practical activity,—they were in fundamental agreement, not only as regards their ultimate aim, but also as regards the idea on which they proceeded. Both were in character reconstructive; in both the foundation for the new edifice was sought in the common, universal nature of humanity itself. The new political idea of the French Revolution—an idea expressed clearly, though with some contradictoriness, in the *Contrat social*—was that of the human agent, endowed by nature with certain primitive and inalienable rights, as the unit in the organisation of the state. The individual, on this view, was no longer to be regarded as receiving all state-rights by historical accident; distinctions of rank among citizens were no longer to be accepted on mere ground of fact; the state itself was to be looked upon as the mechanism in and

through which the primitive rights of all individuals may receive due and adequate realisation; and the final standard of judgment as to the forms of the state organisation was placed in the reason of the individual The body politic thus appeared not as the accidental result of the conflict of individual, arbitrary volitions, but as the necessary product of the conjoint will of individuals with common characteristics, with primitive and equal rights. The individual was thought of, not as the embodiment of pure arbitrary caprice, but as the expression of a certain common nature, to the development of which he has an original, indefeasible right. A doctrine like this is liable to misuse, for the notion of rational liberty may easily degenerate, and historically did degenerate, into the apotheosis of mere power of will; and the positive element in it, the idea of the abstract rights of the individual, probably requires much modification: but it was an important advance upon the previous theory and practice of politics.

When one examines the general characteristics of the new intellectual productions of Germany, more especially in the sphere of philosophy, one is struck by the close resemblance in fundamental idea to that just noted. It was the essence of Kant’s endeavour, both in speculative and in ethical research, to show that the ultimate unit, the conscious subject, was not a mere atom, devoid of intrinsic characteristics, receiving all knowledge from without, and impelled to act solely by the natural relations between his individual impulses and things. In his view, the nature of the thinking subject was an indispensable factor both in knowledge and in action. In all knowledge, as he strove to

show, there is a common element which springs from the very essence of the subject as cognitive or conscious; in all action, the indispensable element is the conscious exercise of will under common, universal law. Thus in the Kantian philosophy, the ultimate standard, both of intellectual and of ethical judgment, was indeed the individual, but the individual only as containing a universal or common feature. On the basis supplied by this common element, philosophy might proceed to reconstruct what had been dissolved by the speculative atomism of Hume.

Although, from the nature of the matter, no similarly exact statement can be given for the essence of the intellectual efforts in the direction of pure literature, there was manifest in them in various degrees the same tendency towards expression of the universal common elements in human life, as opposed to the treatment of trivial, personal, and accidental aims and occurrences which had characterised much of the earlier eighteenth century literature. If evidence of this were otherwise wanting, it would be amply supplied by considering the excesses of the principle in the writings of the first Romantic school. Not every one could bend the bow of Kant and Fichte: the philosophic principle that the individual consciousness is the ultimate test of truth and goodness, became for weaker minds a practical precept of moral and intellectual scepticism. The universal element sank out of sight, and there remained only, as aim of life, the satisfaction of individual, personal caprice. ‘Wilhelm Lovell’ is but a reckless parody of the Kantian system; ‘Lucinde,’ a hideous misapplication of Fichte’s ‘Wissenschaftslehre.’

Now the historic results of these two movements have been, for Germany at least, very different in character. On the one hand, the rude shock given by the political revolution and its consequences to the amorphous organisation of the German States, absolutely forced upon the German mind a conception which otherwise might long have remained dormant—the conception of a united, single German power. History amply shows us that it is often by what we in our ignorance call the brutal necessity of facts that an idea gains for itself a place among the realities of life; and there can be no question that the unity of the German people, foreshadowed in eloquent language by her patriotic thinkers at the beginning of this century, has been wrought out, with much swaying and struggling, rather by the pressure of external forces than by the unanimous acceptance of the idea. However this may be, and however widely the united German empire may differ in inner characteristics from that patriotic state to which Fichte, in his famous ‘Addresses,’ summoned his countrymen, no German who feels the full significance of the unity of his nation can fail to look back with pride and gratitude to the eloquent thinker, who, with the thoroughness of a philosopher and the zeal of a patriot, drew in ideal form the outlines of that which has now been happily realised. The part which Fichte has played in this movement is a warrant of undying fame.

On the other hand, the speculative movement begun by Kant is yet far from having exhausted itself: it can hardly be said to have begun to produce its full fruits. The contributions made here by Fichte were of the highest

importance, and, as will afterwards become clear, they form an integral portion of the completed philosophic view, which in partial fashion was first presented by Kant. Nevertheless, Fichte's work as a philosopher was never, even for himself, a finished whole, and the permanent results of his activity have been absorbed in the more comprehensive elaboration of the Kantian principles which make up the philosophy of Hegel. It is not probable, therefore, that Fichte's system, as a system, will ever discharge a more important function than that which has already been its work in the history of philosophy. It has made clear much that was obscure in Kant; it has contributed to give a wider range to the method of philosophy characteristic of the Kantian system, and it has served to effect the transition from Kant to Hegel. More than this it has not done, and cannot do. Not without a certain historic justification, therefore, has it come about that the fame of Fichte depends more on his patriotic and practical efforts than on his speculative labours.

Ample materials for the life of Fichte are supplied by the biographical work of his son, I. H. Fichte, 'J. G. Fichte's Leben und literarischer Briefwechsel,' 2 vols., 2d ed., 1862. An interesting sketch, from these materials, has been long before the English reader in Dr W. Smith's 'Memoir of Fichte,' 3d ed., 1873. I. H. Fichte's work should be supplemented by Weinhold, 'Achtundvierzig Briefe von J. G. Fichte und seinen Verwandten,' 1862; and by Noack, 'J. G. Fichte nach seinem Leben, Lehren und Wirken,' which is somewhat ill-tempered but amusing.

The complete works of the philosopher fill eleven volumes. The last three, 'Nachgelassene Werke,' consisting

mainly of the notes of lecture courses, were published by I. H. Fichte in 1834-35. The other works, most of which had been separately published, were collected, arranged, and edited, also by I. H. Fichte, in 1845-46. The arrangement is systematic, but not free from faults. Several of the more important of the popular writings of Fichte have been translated with great elegance and skill by Dr W. Smith, to whom it is due that Fichte is more than a name in this country. Translations of some of the philosophic works have appeared in America, where the earnest study of German thought has been fostered by the unwearied and self-sacrificing zeal of Dr W. T. Harris, the editor of the ‘Journal of Speculative Philosophy.’ There is no English work upon Fichte’s system; in German the best expositions are those of Löwe, Fortlage, Erdmann, and Kuno Fischer.

CHAPTER II.

Table of Contents

YOUTH AND EARLY STRUGGLES.

BIRTH AND EDUCATION.

Table of Contents

JOHANN GOTTLIEB FICHTE was born on the 19th May 1762, at Rammenau, in Saxon Lusatia. The little village of Rammenau lies in the picturesque country, well wooded and well watered, between Bischofswerda and Camenz, not far from the boundary separating the district of Meissen from Upper Lusatia. Here, as the traditions of the Fichte family run, a Swedish sergeant in the army of Gustavus Adolphus, who had been wounded in a skirmish in the neighbourhood, was left by his comrades in the care of one of the kindly Lutheran villagers. Returning health did not lead the stranger to take his departure. He continued under the hospitable roof of his benefactor, married the daughter of the house, and, as all the sons had fallen in the bloody wars of religion, became heir to the small portion of ground belonging to the family. From this northern settler sprang the numerous family of the Fichtes, noted, even in a neighbourhood distinguished for simplicity of manners and uprightness of character, for their solid probity and sterling honesty.

The grandfather of the philosopher, the only descendant of the original stock remaining in Rammenau, cultivated the

tiny patrimonial property, and in addition carried on a small trade in linen ribbons, manufactured at his own loom. His son, Christian Fichte, was sent at an early age to the neighbouring town of Pulsnitz, and apprenticed to Johann Schurich, a wealthy linen-spinner and owner of a factory. After the fashion of diligent apprentices in all ages, Christian Fichte wooed and won the heart of his master's daughter, but not without much trouble was the consent of the wealthy burgher given to a marriage which he thought beneath his family rank. Only on condition that his son-in-law did not presume to settle in Pulsnitz was a reluctant permission given, and Christian Fichte enabled to bring his bride to the paternal roof. With her dowry he built a house for himself in Rammenau, still in the possession of his descendants, and established there his looms. On the 19th May 1762 was born their eldest child, Johann Gottlieb, who was quickly followed by six sons and one daughter.

From what may be gathered regarding his parents in Fichte's letters, it is plain that the marriage was not altogether productive of happiness. Madame Fichte seems never to have been able quite to forget that in uniting herself to a humble peasant and handicraftsman she had descended from a superior station. She had all the pride and narrowness of ideas which are natural possessions of the wealthier classes in a small provincial town. Her temper, obstinate, quick, and capricious, overmastered the weaker and more patient nature of her husband, and she was, to all intents and purposes, the head of the household. Her eldest son resembled her strongly in the main features of his character, though he had in addition solidity of principle and

reserve, and their wills came into frequent and painful collision. The mother, like many a Scottish matron in similar case, had the darling ambition to see her talented son invested with the dignity of clergyman, and for many years circumstances led him thoroughly to coincide with this wish. As he gradually altered his views, and felt himself less and less inclined for the clerical career, his relations with his mother became more and more strained and unpleasant. Fortune had removed him from the paternal home at an early age, and he was rarely able to visit his family; but after the final decision as to his career, even such occasional intercourse seemed to cease.

The rudiments of his education Fichte began to receive very early from his father, who, when the day’s work was over, would teach the lad to read and to repeat by heart proverbs and hymns, and would talk to him of his apprentice travels in Saxony and Franconia. Of even greater importance for his training was the curiously intense interest the boy displayed in listening to the weekly sermons in the village church. These sermons he would repeat aloud, almost word for word, in such fashion as to show that the effort was not one of mere passive retention, but of active imagination. Strength of memory, intense fondness for reading and for quiet imaginative meditation, and deep earnestness of moral character, marked him at an early age as a boy of remarkable gifts. An anecdote referring to this period of his life, when he was about seven years of age, is characteristic enough to deserve notice. His father had brought him as a present from the neighbouring fair a copy of the famous story of the Invulnerable Siegfried.

The delight in this book so overmastered him that his other tasks began to be neglected, and he determined to free himself from temptation by destroying the cause of the evil. Quietly and secretly he took the little book, and, after a hard straggle with himself, summoned courage enough to hurl it into the streamlet that flowed by the house. As he saw the little treasure carried away by the stream he burst into tears; but to his father's inquiry as to how the accident had happened he would give no explanation, preferring then, as often in later years, to endure misunderstanding and pain rather than to offer defence for what he felt was right. When, some time later, his father proposed to give him a similar book as a present, he earnestly entreated that it might be bestowed upon one of his brothers, and that he might not again be subjected to such temptation.

So gifted by nature, the boy might have grown up in his narrow surroundings, able and upright, notable perhaps among his fellows, but wasting powers fitted for greater things, had not a mere accident transferred him to a wider sphere of life, and given him opportunity for a fuller development. Freiherr von Miltitz, owner of an estate at Seven Oaks, near Meissen, chanced one Sunday in the year 1771 to visit the family Von Hoffmann in Rammenau, and arrived too late to hear the sermon by the village pastor, whom he much admired. On expressing regret, he was informed that the loss could readily be repaired, for there was in the village a little lad able to repeat verbatim any sermon that had been preached. The little Fichte was sent for, and so great an impression was made upon Von Miltitz that he at once proposed to the parents to undertake the

charge of the lad’s education if they would submit him to his care. No objection was raised on their side, and Fichte was forthwith removed by his patron to Seven Oaks.

The surroundings of his new home, the restraints of his new mode of life, at first weighed heavily upon the boy’s mind, and his kind protector judged it best to place him under the care of the Pastor Krebel at Niederau, near Meissen. Here he remained for nearly three years, affectionately cared for by the childless pastor and his wife, and receiving a thorough groundwork in elementary classics. In 1774 he appears to have been for a brief interval at the public school of Meissen, though there is some obscurity about this fact in his biography; and in October of that year he was entered at the famous foundation-school of Pforta, near Naumburg. His patron, Von Miltitz, had died in the early part of 1774, and we have no record to show by what means the expenses of Fichte’s education continued to be defrayed. From a chance expression in one of his letters of a later date, it would appear probable that his parents at least contributed, but undoubtedly they were not in a condition to undertake the whole charge.

The years spent at Schulpforta had a powerful influence on the development of Fichte’s character, in both a moral and an intellectual aspect. The school was even then regulated on the old monastic plan, and much resembled what in this country till recently used to be the system of the old foundation or endowed schools. The pupils were strictly secluded from the outer world; the order of daily life, of amusement, of costume, of study, was regulated by antiquated precepts. Each of the older scholars had a junior

intrusted to his care, and exercised almost unlimited control over his apprentice. The happiness of the juniors thus depended much upon the qualities of the older members, and, as is inevitable in any close institution, the traditions of the place were in many respects evil, and detrimental to the character of the scholars. Such a constrained life tended only to deepen and strengthen traits already sufficiently marked in Fichte's character. He was by nature reserved, yet opinionative—that is, little capable of altering any view of the truth of which he had become convinced, and altogether incapable of making any effort to remove misconception which might arise as to his action. The entire want of family life contributed to strengthen this habit of inner self-dependence, which could have found relief only in the manifold interests and duties, in the constant sympathy and co-operation with others, arising from the details of domestic intercourse. No substitute for this was found in Schulpforta The course of instruction, moreover, thorough but narrow—for it was almost entirely confined to the classical curriculum—was not that best suited to develop the neglected side of Fichte's character. In his life and in his works, what one notices as most striking is his incapacity for appreciating experience. In metaphysics, in psychology, in ethics, in politics, he constructs from within. Nature, in his system, appears merely as the negative limit of mind. Nor in his practical activity, as will appear, was he more fortunate. "Fichte," said Goethe, with much truth, "too often forgets that experience is not in the least what he has imagined it to be." It hardly admits of question that a more realistic education, a training in physical science such as his great

predecessor fortunately possessed, would have given greater weight and force to Fichte’s speculations, greater elasticity and prudence to his action.

It was some time before Fichte accommodated himself to the life at Schulpforta. He was at first unfortunate in the senior selected for him. The close restraint and the unbearable tyranny to which he was subjected preyed upon him, and, after having given warning to his senior in his *naively* honourable fashion that he would endeavour to escape from the school unless he were treated differently, he did begin a flight towards Naumburg, with the vague intention of making his way into the world of which he knew so little, and settling as a new Robinson Crusoe in some deserted island. Only the thought that by carrying out his exploit he would for ever cut himself off from his parents, induced him to return to the hated school A frank confession of his intention, and of the grounds for it, procured him not only pardon from the rector, but also relief from the tyranny of his former senior. He was placed under the charge of another pupil, and the years began to flow more happily for him. When at length he had reached the dignity of *Primaner*, he began to enjoy the greater liberty of study permitted to the senior scholars; and though the great works of recent German literature were carefully excluded from the school, he then obtained through Lieber, a newly introduced tutor, the successive numbers of Lessing’s ‘Anti-Goeze.’ The style and matter of this work made a deep impression on him, and in his enthusiastic fashion he resolved that the earliest opportunity should be taken to make himself known to the author, and acknowledge his gratitude to him. The

circumstances of his life and the premature death of Lessing, however, prevented this resolution from being carried into effect.

In October 1780, Fichte's school career closed; his final essay, 'Oratio de recto prseceptorum poeseos et rhetorices usu,' still existing in the archives of Schulpforta, received its meed of praise, and he was ready for the higher educational training of a university. In the Michaelmas term of that year he enrolled himself in the Theological Faculty at Jena—not, so far as we can judge, because his heart was entirely given to the theological career, but because no other seemed to present an opening to a poor and friendless student. The Jena lectures do not appear to have done much for him, and in the following year he transferred himself to Leipzig, where many of his Schulpforta comrades were settled. Here, in addition to certain lectures by Schütz on Æschylus, the course followed by him with greatest attention seems to have been that by Petzold on systematic theology. Fichte's mind, during this period, evidently dwelt on a problem which has sorely exercised many a student in like circumstances,—the relation between divine providence or foreknowledge and the voluntary determination of human action. Of the alternatives offering themselves as possible solutions, he chose with resoluteness and complete conviction that which we call technically the doctrine of determinism. The idea of the individual will as but a necessary link in the scheme of divine government, gave a certain consistency to his thoughts, and was expressed by him in various sermons preached in villages in the neighbourhood of Leipzig. From the pastor of one of these village churches he first learned

that his doctrine might be designated by the hateful title of Spinozism, and from the same friend he received the ‘Refutation of the Errors of Spinoza,’ by Wolff, through which he came to know the outlines of a system destined to play a most important part in the later development of his thought. On the whole, there seems little reason to doubt that so far as the young *candidatus theologiae* had formed opinions upon speculative and critical subjects, they accorded with the ‘Ethics’ of Spinoza and the ‘Anti-Goeze’ of Lessing.

EARLY STRUGGLES.

Table of Contents

The three years spent at Leipzig had been years of bitter poverty and hard struggle, which strengthened, and at the same time tended to harden, Fichte’s proud and reserved spirit. Even severer discipline was in store for him. The completion of his regular academic course still left him without a definite profession. Less and less inclined for the clerical life, and embittered by the reproaches and petulant urgency of his mother, he spent three years, eating his heart out, as tutor in various families around Leipzig. To his humble petition, in 1787, that the Consistory of Saxony would allot to him some small stipend such as was often given to poor Saxon students of theology, in order that he might complete his theological studies and present himself for the licentiate examination, an unfavourable answer was returned. Without a profession, without friends, without means, it seemed to him that his life had been wasted. At the deepest ebb of his fortunes he obtained through a former comrade, Weisse, an unexpected relief in the offer of

a house-tutorship at Zürich. Accepting joyfully, he set out on foot, and traversing for the first time German provinces outside his native Saxony, reached Zürich in September 1788.

His pupils at Zürich were the son and daughter of Herr Ott, the proprietor of a well-to-do inn, the Gasthof zum Schwerte. Herr Ott, though somewhat surprised at the character of the education which his new tutor proposed to bestow, was not altogether unwilling that his children should receive a training superior to their station, but his wife bitterly resented all attempts to go beyond the accustomed routine. Fichte found his task no easy matter, and assuredly the means he adopted for carrying it out would not readily have occurred to any other tutor in like circumstances. He noted with care in a daybook or journal all the errors in education committed by the parents of his pupils, and submitted the record weekly. His strength of character and resoluteness of purpose enabled him to bear down any active opposition to his plans; but the situation was forced and unpleasing, and at Easter 1790 he made up his mind to go.

During his residence at Zürich he had busied himself with many literary efforts, without in any one of them manifestly finding his *métier*. He read and translated much of the recent French literature, mainly Montesquieu and Rousseau, completed a translation of Sallust, with an introductory essay on the life and style of the author, and wrote a rather elaborate critical paper on Biblical Epics, with special references to Klopstock’s ‘Messias,’ a paper, which, at a later date, was timidly refused by the editor of the

‘Deutsches Museum,’ in Leipzig. At various times he preached, always with marked success, and exerted himself much to have a school of oratory founded at Zürich. For this, in which he had the promise of support from Lavater, he drew out a complete plan, and the document, published by his son, presents many features of interest.

More important for his after-career than these literary efforts were the friendships formed by him at Zürich, especially with Lavater and with Hartmann Rahn, the brother-in-law of Klopstock. Rahn was a highly cultured man, of wide experience of life, and his house was the centre of the literary reunions of Zürich society. Fichte, first introduced by Lavater, was soon received as an intimate and valued friend. Hartmann Rahn’s wife had been dead for some years, and his household affairs were managed by his daughter, Johanna Maria, at this time some thirty years of age, not specially distinguished for beauty or talent, but full of womanly gentleness and tact. Fichte felt himself from the first attracted towards Fräulein Rahn, whose sympathetic nature enabled her both to understand his restless and impetuous disposition and to supply what was wanting to it. Their friendship gradually gave way to a deeper feeling of mutual affection and esteem. Secretly at first—for Fichte’s pride made him think that an obscure tutor had little right to claim the daughter of a wealthy and influential citizen—they unfolded in letters their feelings for one another; but as the time of his departure from Zürich drew near, it became necessary to make known to Hartmann Rahn how matters stood. When Fichte left, he was formally, though privately, betrothed to Johanna Maria.