

Marx Hardy Machiavelli Joyce Austen  
Defoe Abbot Melville Montaigne Cooper Emerson Hugo  
Stoker Wilde Christie Maupassant Haggard Chesterton Molière Eliot Grimm  
Garnett Engels Schiller Byron Maupassant Schiller  
Goethe Hawthorne Smith Kafka  
Cotton Dostoyevsky Kipling Doyle Willis  
Baum Henry Nietzsche Dumas Flaubert Turgenev Balzac Crane  
Leslie Stockton Vatsyayana Verne  
Burroughs Curtis Tocqueville Gogol Busch  
Homer Tolstoy Darwin Thoreau Twain Plato  
Potter Zola Lawrence Stevenson Dickens Harte  
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**Advice to Young Men And  
(Incidentally) to Young Women in  
the Middle and Higher Ranks of  
Life. In a Series of Letters,  
Addressed to a Youth, a Bachelor,  
a Lover, a Husband, a Father, a  
Citizen, or a Subject.**

William Cobbett

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**COBBETT'S**  
**ADVICE TO YOUNG MEN,**  
**AND (INCIDENTALLY) TO**  
**YOUNG WOMEN,**  
  
IN THE  
**Middle and Higher Ranks of Life.**

IN A SERIES OF LETTERS, ADDRESSED TO  
  
A YOUTH, A BACHELOR, A LOVER, A HUSBAND, A FATHER,  
A CITIZEN, OR A SUBJECT.

BY WILLIAM COBBETT.



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## INTRODUCTION

1. It is the duty, and ought to be the pleasure, of age and experience to warn and instruct youth and to come to the aid of inexperience. When sailors have discovered rocks or breakers, and have had the good luck to escape with life from amidst them, they, unless they be pirates or barbarians as well as sailors, point out the spots for the placing of buoys and of lights, in order that others may not be exposed to the danger which they have so narrowly escaped. What man of common humanity, having, by good luck, missed being engulfed in a quagmire or quicksand, will withhold from his neighbours a knowledge of the peril without which the dangerous spots are not to be approached?

2. The great effect which correct opinions and sound principles, imbibed in early life, together with the good conduct, at that age, which must naturally result from such opinions and principles; the great effect which these have on the whole course of our lives is, and must be, well known to every man of common observation. How many of us, arrived at only forty years, have to repent; nay, which of us has not to repent, or has not had to repent, that he did not, at an earlier age, possess a great stock of knowledge of that kind which has an immediate effect on our personal ease and happiness; that kind of knowledge, upon which the cheerfulness and the harmony of our homes depend!

3. It is to communicate a stock of this sort of knowledge, in particular, that this work is intended; knowledge, indeed, relative to education, to many sciences, to trade, agriculture, horticulture, law, government, and religion; knowledge relating, incidentally, to all these; but, the main object is to furnish that sort of knowledge to the young which but few men acquire until they be old, when it comes too late to be useful.

4. To communicate to others the knowledge that I possess has always been my taste and my delight; and few, who know anything of my progress through life, will be disposed to question my fitness for the task. Talk of rocks and breakers and quagmires and quicksands, who has ever escaped from amidst so many as I have! Thrown (by my own will, indeed) on the wide world at a very early

age, not more than eleven or twelve years, without money to support, without friends to advise, and without book-learning to assist me; passing a few years dependent solely on my own labour for my subsistence; then becoming a common soldier and leading a military life, chiefly in foreign parts, for eight years; quitting that life after really, for me, high promotion, and with, for me, a large sum of money; marrying at an early age, going at once to France to acquire the French language, thence to America; passing eight years there, becoming bookseller and author, and taking a prominent part in all the important discussions of the interesting period from 1793 to 1799, during which there was, in that country, a continued struggle carried on between the English and the French parties; conducting myself, in the ever-active part which I took in that struggle, in such a way as to call forth marks of unequivocal approbation from the government at home; returning to England in 1800, resuming my labours here, suffering, during these twenty-nine years, two years of imprisonment, heavy fines, three years self-banishment to the other side of the Atlantic, and a total breaking of fortune, so as to be left without a bed to lie on, and, during these twenty-nine years of troubles and of punishments, writing and publishing, every week of my life, whether in exile or not, eleven weeks only excepted, a periodical paper, containing more or less of matter worthy of public attention; writing and publishing, during *the same twenty-nine years*, a grammar of the French and another of the English language, a work on the Economy of the Cottage, a work on Forest Trees and Woodlands, a work on Gardening, an account of America, a book of Sermons, a work on the Corn-plant, a History of the Protestant Reformation; all books of great and continued sale, and the *last* unquestionably the book of greatest circulation in the whole world, the Bible only excepted; having, during *these same twenty-nine years* of troubles and embarrassments without number, introduced into England the manufacture of Straw-plat; also several valuable trees; having introduced, during *the same twenty-nine years*, the cultivation of the Corn-plant, so manifestly valuable as a source of food; having, during the same period, always (whether in exile or not) sustained a shop of some size, in London; having, during the whole of the same period, never employed less, on an average, than ten persons, in some capacity or other, exclusive of printers, bookbinders, and others, connected with papers and books; and having, during

these twenty-nine years of troubles, embarrassments, prisons, fines, and banishments, bred up a family of seven children to man's and woman's state.

5. If such a man be not, after he has survived and accomplished all this, qualified to give Advice to Young Men, no man is qualified for that task. There may have been natural *genius*: but *genius alone*, not all the genius in the world, could, without *something more*, have conducted me through these perils. During these twenty-nine years, I have had for deadly and ever-watchful foes, a government that has the collecting and distributing of sixty millions of pounds in a year, and also every soul who shares in that distribution. Until very lately, I have had, for the far greater part of the time, the whole of the press as my deadly enemy. Yet, at this moment, it will not be pretended, that there is another man in the kingdom, who has so many cordial friends. For as to the *friends of ministers* and the *great*, the friendship is towards the *power*, the *influence*; it is, in fact, towards *those taxes*, of which so many thousands are gaping to get at a share. And, if we could, through so thick a veil, come at the naked fact, we should find the subscription, now going on in Dublin for the purpose of erecting a monument in that city, to commemorate the good recently done, or alleged to be done, to Ireland, by the DUKE of WELLINGTON; we should find, that the subscribers have *the taxes* in view; and that, if the monument shall actually be raised, it ought to have *selfishness*, and not *gratitude*, engraven on its base. Nearly the same may be said with regard to all the praises that we hear bestowed on men in power. The friendship which is felt towards me is pure and disinterested: it is not founded in any hope that the parties can have, that they can ever *profit* from professing it: it is founded on the gratitude which they entertain for the good that I *have done* them; and, of this sort of friendship, and friendship so cordial, no man ever possessed a larger portion.

6. Now, mere *genius* will not acquire this for a man. There must be something more than *genius*: there must be industry: there must be perseverance: there must be, before the eyes of the nation, proofs of extraordinary exertion: people must say to themselves, 'What wise conduct must there have been in the employing of the time of this man! How sober, how sparing in diet, how early a riser, how little expensive he must have been!' These are the things, and *not genius*,

which have caused my labours to be so incessant and so successful: and, though I do not affect to believe, that *every young man*, who shall read this work, will become able to perform labours of equal magnitude and importance, I do pretend, that *every young man*, who will attend to my advice, will become able to perform a great deal more than men generally do perform, whatever may be his situation in life; and, that he will, too, perform it with greater ease and satisfaction than he would, without the advice, be able to perform the smaller portion.

7. I have had, from thousands of young men, and men advanced in years also, letters of thanks for the great benefit which they have derived from my labours. Some have thanked me for my Grammars, some for my Cottage Economy, others for the Woodlands and the Gardener; and, in short, for every one of my works have I received letters of thanks from numerous persons, of whom I had never heard before. In many cases I have been told, that, if the parties had had my books to read some years before, the gain to them, whether in time or in other things, would have been very great. Many, and a great many, have told me, that, though long at school, and though their parents had paid for their being taught English Grammar, or French, they had, in a short time, learned more from my books, on those subjects, than they had learned, in years, from their teachers. How many gentlemen have thanked me, in the strongest terms, for my Woodlands and Gardener, observing (just as Lord Bacon had observed in his time) that they had before seen no books, on these subjects, that they could *understand!* But, I know not of anything that ever gave me more satisfaction than I derived from the visit of a gentleman of fortune, whom I had never heard of before, and who, about four years ago, came to thank me in person for a complete reformation, which had been worked in his son by the reading of my two SERMONS on *drinking* and on *gaming*.

8. I have, therefore, done, already, a great deal in this way: but, there is still wanting, in a compact form, a body of ADVICE such as that which I now propose to give: and in the giving of which I shall divide my matter as follows. 1. Advice addressed to a YOUTH; 2. Advice addressed to a BACHELOR; 3. Advice addressed to a LOVER; 4. To a HUSBAND; 5. To a FATHER; 6. To a CITIZEN or SUBJECT.

9. Some persons will smile, and others laugh outright, at the idea of 'Cobbett's giving advice for conducting the affairs of *love*.' Yes, but I was once young, and surely I may say with the poet, I forget which of them,

'Though old I am, for ladies' love unfit,  
The power of beauty I remember yet.'

I forget, indeed, the *names* of the ladies as completely, pretty nigh, as I do that of the poets; but I remember their influence, and of this influence on the conduct and in the affairs and on the condition of men, I have, and must have, been a witness all my life long. And, when we consider in how great a degree the happiness of all the remainder of a man's life depends, and always must depend, on his taste and judgment in the character of a lover, this may well be considered as the most important period of the whole term of his existence.

10. In my address to the HUSBAND, I shall, of course, introduce advice relative to the important duties of *masters* and *servants*; duties of great importance, whether considered as affecting families or as affecting the community. In my address to the CITIZEN or SUBJECT, I shall consider all the reciprocal duties of the governors and the governed, and also the duties which man owes to his neighbour. It would be tedious to attempt to lay down rules for conduct exclusively applicable to every distinct calling, profession, and condition of life; but, under the above-described heads, will be conveyed every species of advice of which I deem the utility to be unquestionable.

11. I have thus fully described the nature of my little work, and, before I enter on the first Letter, I venture to express a hope, that its good effects will be felt long after its author shall have ceased to exist.



## LETTER I

### TO A YOUTH

12. You are now arrived at that age which the law thinks sufficient to make an oath, taken by you, valid in a court of law. Let us suppose from fourteen to nearly twenty; and, reserving, for a future occasion, my remarks on your duty towards parents, let me here offer you my advice as to the means likely to contribute largely towards making you a happy man, useful to all about you, and an honour to those from whom you sprang.

13. Start, I beseech you, with a conviction firmly fixed on your mind, that you have no right to live in this world; that, being of hale body and sound mind, you have *no right* to any earthly existence, without doing *work* of some sort or other, unless you have ample fortune whereon to live clear of debt; and, that even in that case, you have no right to breed children, to be kept by others, or to be exposed to the chance of being so kept. Start with this conviction thoroughly implanted on your mind. To wish to live on the labour of others is, besides the folly of it, to contemplate a *fraud* at the least, and, under certain circumstances, to meditate oppression and robbery.

14. I suppose you in the middle rank of life. Happiness ought to be your great object, and it is to be found only in *independence*. Turn your back on Whitehall and on Somerset-House; leave the Customs and Excise to the feeble and low-minded; look not for success to favour, to partiality, to friendship, or to what is called *interest*: write it on your heart, that you will depend solely on your own merit and your own exertions. Think not, neither, of any of those situations where gaudy habiliments and sounding titles poorly disguise from the eyes of good sense the mortifications and the heart-ache of slaves. Answer me not by saying, that these situations '*must be filled by somebody*;' for, if I were to admit the truth of the proposition, which I do not, it would remain for you to show that they are conducive to happiness, the contrary of which has been proved to me by the observation of a now pretty long life.

15. Indeed, reason tells us, that it must be thus: for that which a man owes to favour or to partiality, that same favour or partiality is constantly liable to take from him. He who lives upon anything except his own labour, is incessantly surrounded by rivals: his grand resource is that servility in which he is always liable to be surpassed. He is in daily danger of being out-bidden; his very bread depends upon caprice; and he lives in a state of uncertainty and never-ceasing fear. His is not, indeed, the dog's life, '*hunger and idleness*;' but it is worse; for it is '*idleness with slavery*,' the latter being the just price of the former. Slaves frequently are well *fed* and well *clad*; but slaves dare not *speak*; they dare not be suspected to *think* differently from their masters: hate his acts as much as they may; be he tyrant, be he drunkard, be he fool, or be he all three at once, they must be silent, or, nine times out of ten, affect approbation: though possessing a thousand times his knowledge, they must feign a conviction of his superior understanding; though knowing that it is they who, in fact, do all that he is paid for doing, it is destruction to them to *seem as if they thought* any portion of the service belonged to them! Far from me be the thought, that any youth who shall read this page would not rather perish than submit to live in a state like this! Such a state is fit only for the refuse of nature; the halt, the half-blind, the unhappy creatures whom nature has marked out for degradation.

16. And how comes it, then, that we see hale and even clever youths voluntarily bending their necks to this slavery; nay, pressing forward in eager rivalry to assume the yoke that ought to be insupportable? The cause, and the only cause, is, that the deleterious fashion of the day has created so many artificial wants, and has raised the minds of young men so much above their real rank and state of life, that they look scornfully on the employment, the fare, and the dress, that would become them; and, in order to avoid that state in which they might live *free and happy*, they become *showy slaves*.

17. The great source of independence, the French express in a precept of three words, '*Vivre de peu*,' which I have always very much admired. '*To live upon little*' is the great security against slavery; and this precept extends to dress and other things besides food and drink. When DOCTOR JOHNSON wrote his Dictionary, he put in

the word pensioner thus: 'PENSIONER—*A slave of state.*' After this he himself became a *pensioner*! And thus, agreeably to his own definition, he lived and died '*a slave of state!*' What must this man of great genius, and of great industry too, have felt at receiving this pension! Could he be so callous as not to feel a pang upon seeing his own name placed before his own degrading definition? And what could induce him to submit to this? His wants, his artificial wants, his habit of indulging in the pleasures of the table; his disregard of the precept '*Vivre de peu.*' This was the cause; and, be it observed, that indulgences of this sort, while they tend to make men poor and expose them to commit mean acts, tend also to enfeeble the body, and more especially to cloud and to weaken the mind.

18. When this celebrated author wrote his Dictionary, he had not been debased by luxurious enjoyments; the rich and powerful had not caressed him into a slave; his writings then bore the stamp of truth and independence: but, having been debased by luxury, he who had, while content with plain fare, been the strenuous advocate of the rights of the people, became a strenuous advocate for *taxation without representation*; and, in a work under the title of '*Taxation no Tyranny,*' defended, and greatly assisted to produce, that unjust and bloody war which finally severed from England that great country the United states of America, now the most powerful and dangerous rival that this kingdom ever had. The statue of Dr. JOHNSON was the first that was put into St. PAUL'S CHURCH! A signal warning to us not to look upon monuments in honour of the dead as a proof of their virtues; for here we see St. PAUL'S CHURCH holding up to the veneration of posterity a man whose own writings, together with the records of the pension list, prove him to have been '*a slave of state.*'

19. Endless are the instances of men of bright parts and high spirit having been, by degrees, rendered powerless and despicable, by their imaginary wants. Seldom has there been a man with a fairer prospect of accomplishing great things and of acquiring lasting renown, than CHARLES FOX: he had great talents of the most popular sort; the times were singularly favourable to an exertion of them with success; a large part of the nation admired him and were his partisans; he had, as to the great question between him and his rival (PITT), reason and justice clearly on his side: but he had

against him his squandering and luxurious habits: these made him dependent on the rich part of his partisans; made his wisdom subservient to opulent folly or selfishness; deprived his country of all the benefit that it might have derived from his talents; and, finally, sent him to the grave without a single sigh from a people, a great part of whom would, in his earlier years, have wept at his death as at a national calamity.

20. Extravagance in *dress*, in the haunting of *play-houses*, in *horses*, in everything else, is to be avoided, and, in youths and young men, extravagance in *dress* particularly. This sort of extravagance, this waste of money on the decoration of the body, arises solely from vanity, and from vanity of the most contemptible sort. It arises from the notion, that all the people in the street, for instance, will be *looking at you* as soon as you walk out; and that they will, in a greater or less degree, think the better of you on account of your fine dress. Never was notion more false. All the sensible people that happen to see you, will think nothing at all about you: those who are filled with the same vain notion as you are, will perceive your attempt to impose on them, and will despise you accordingly: rich people will wholly disregard you, and you will be envied and hated by those who have the same vanity that you have without the means of gratifying it. Dress should be suited to your rank and station; a surgeon or physician should not dress like a carpenter! but there is no reason why a tradesman, a merchant's clerk, or clerk of any kind, or why a shopkeeper or manufacturer, or even a merchant; no reason at all why any of these should dress in an *expensive* manner. It is a great mistake to suppose, that they derive any advantage from exterior decoration. Men are estimated by other *men* according to their capacity and willingness to be in some way or other *useful*; and though, with the foolish and vain part of *women*, fine clothes frequently do something, yet the greater part of the sex are much too penetrating to draw their conclusions solely from the outside show of a man: they look deeper, and find other criterions whereby to judge. And, after all, if the fine clothes obtain you a wife, will they bring you, in that wife, *frugality*, *good sense*, and that sort of attachment that is likely to be lasting? Natural beauty of person is quite another thing: this always has, it always will and must have, some weight even with men, and great weight with women. But this does

not want to be set off by expensive clothes. Female eyes are, in such cases, very sharp: they can discover beauty though half hidden by beard and even by dirt and surrounded by rags: and, take this as a secret worth half a fortune to you, that women, however personally vain they may be themselves, *despise personal vanity in men.*

21. Let your dress be as cheap as may be without *shabbiness*; think more about the colour of your shirt than about the gloss or texture of your coat; be always as *clean* as your occupation will, without inconvenience, permit; but never, no, not for one moment, believe, that any human being, with sense in his skull, will love or respect you on account of your fine or costly clothes. A great misfortune of the present day is, that every one is, in his own estimate, *raised above his real state of life*: every one seems to think himself entitled, if not to title and great estate, at least *to live without work*. This mischievous, this most destructive, way of thinking has, indeed, been produced, like almost all our other evils, by the Acts of our Septennial and Unreformed Parliament. That body, by its Acts, has caused an enormous Debt to be created, and, in consequence, a prodigious sum to be raised annually in taxes. It has caused, by these means, a race of loan-mongers and stock-jobbers to arise. These carry on a species of *gaming*, by which some make fortunes in a day, and others, in a day, become beggars. The unfortunate gamesters, like the purchasers of blanks in a lottery, are never heard of; but the fortunate ones become companions for lords, and some of them lords themselves. We have, within these few years, seen many of these gamesters get fortunes of a quarter of a million in a few days, and then we have heard them, though notoriously amongst the lowest and basest of human creatures, called '*honourable gentlemen!*' In such a state of things, who is to expect patient industry, laborious study, frugality and care; who, in such a state of things, is to expect these to be employed in pursuit of that competence which it is the laudable wish of all men to secure? Not long ago a man, who had served his time to a tradesman in London, became, instead of pursuing his trade, a stock-jobber, or gambler; and, in about *two years*, drove his *coach-and-four*, had his town house and country house, and visited, and was visited by, *peers of the highest rank!* A *fellow-apprentice* of this lucky gambler, though a tradesman in excellent business, seeing no earthly reason why *he* should not have his *coach-and-four* also,

turned his stock in trade into a stake for the 'Change; but, alas! at the end of a few months, instead of being in a coach-and-four, he was in the *Gazette!*

22. This is one instance out of hundreds of thousands; not, indeed, exactly of the same description, but all arising from the same copious source. The words *speculate* and *speculation* have been substituted for *gamble* and *gambling*. The hatefulness of the pursuit is thus taken away; and, while taxes to the amount of more than double the whole of the rental of the kingdom; while these cause such crowds of idlers, every one of whom calls himself a *gentleman*, and avoids the appearance of working for his bread; while this is the case, who is to wonder, that a great part of the youth of the country, knowing themselves to be as *good*, as *learned*, and as *well-bred* as these *gentlemen*; who is to wonder, that they think, that they also ought to be considered as *gentlemen*? Then, the late *war* (also the work of the Septennial Parliament) has left us, amongst its many legacies, such swarms of *titled* men and women; such swarms of '*Sirs*' and their '*Ladies*'; men and women who, only the other day, were the fellow-apprentices, fellow-tradesmen's or farmers' sons and daughters, or indeed, the fellow-servants, of those who are now in these several states of life; the late Septennial Parliament war has left us such swarms of these, that it is no wonder that the heads of young people are turned, and that they are ashamed of that state of life to act their part well in which ought to be their delight.

23. But, though the cause of the evil is in Acts of the Septennial Parliament; though this universal desire in people to be thought to be above their station; though this arises from such acts; and, though it is no wonder that young men are thus turned from patient study and labour; though these things be undoubted, they form no reason why I should not *warn you* against becoming a victim to this national scourge. For, in spite of every art made use of to avoid labour, the taxes will, after all, maintain only *so many* idlers. We cannot all be '*knights*' and '*gentlemen*': there must be a large part of us, after all, to make and mend clothes and houses, and carry on trade and commerce, and, in spite of all that we can do, the far greater part of us must actually *work* at something; for, unless we can get at some of the taxes, we fall under the sentence of Holy Writ, '*He who will not work shall not eat.*' Yet, so strong is the pro-