



JOHN DE WYCLIFFE.

CHAPTER I.

WYCLIFFE AND THE WYCLIFFES.

THE reader who has once passed through the valley of Yorkshire to which the river Tees gives the name of Tees-dale, will not need description from us to call up the pictures which have there arrested his attention and delighted him. But the portion of that valley in which *we* feel the deepest interest, has never been touched by any of our high-roads since the old Romans laid down their great military pathway in that direction ; and since that remote time, has not been much traversed by the foot of the stranger. In many a nook of it, the pedestrian feels as one parted off from the rush and noise of the world. We pity him, indeed, if there be not moments in which he is disposed to think that the only motion in

the world must be that of the floating clouds, the graceful woods, or of the unseen elements around him ; and the only sounds, such as come from those elements, from the birds that people them, or from the swell and fall of distant waters. The hills about him lift themselves up as if to wall out the pomps and strifes of the world ; while the woods and verdure with which they are clothed on every side, and the overshadowed glens through which the Greta sends her shouting flood, or through which the Tees floats on, here over its shallow bed of rock or pebbles, there in a noble breadth and fulness, all are of a nature to dispose the new-comer to be still and thoughtful—to dream as the poet dreams.

On the banks of the Tees, at a point eleven miles northward from the good town of Richmond, and five miles distance below the point where that river glides along beneath the walls of Bernard Castle, there is a rocky wood-crowned height which commands a view of the Tees, and of much beside, that may well incline the meditative traveller to halt for a while. You there see the river floating into view from the right, round a high projecting meadow land, something more than a mile distant. Passing that point, its current turns in an opposite direction, and is seen on this side the descending cape around which it has passed, as if intent on making its way through some new channel to the source from which it came. But the high grounds on either side do their office like sentinels, pointing the

stream to its course : and it bounds along obediently in curves of the richest beauty, until you see its full, dark flood, rolling far beneath you, your gaze upon it, from your high wall of rock and wood, being like a glance from the loftiest ship-mast down into the deep sea. On the opposite side of the river, the grounds are mostly pasture lands, but broken up into a succession of undulating elevations, thickly wooded, and with intersections of rock near the water. To the left of the high-ground on which you stand, the river is shut in by a continuance of the steep and woody eminence beneath you, which terminates at about a furlong distance in another projecting point of rock, out of which a mansion, of moderate dimensions and irregular form, seems to grow castle-ways : while the rock on which the structure rests, descends with one surface towards the river, with the other into a deep ravine crossed by a bridge, over which you pass to reach the side entrance in the direction now facing you. In the midst of a space of bright greensward, some way below that rock-lifted dwelling, and almost on a level with the river, whose waters play upon its verdant edges as they pass, is a small church. It has no pretension to beauty. It is an elongated building, without spire or tower, with a flat lead-covered roof, and with rows of antique gothic windows, and porch on either side. But it is covered in part with ivy, and with the adjuncts of its place is a pleasant thing to look upon.

The scene before you, good reader, forms the centre

of the small parish of Wycliffe—the meaning of that word being simply the ‘Wye-cliffe,’ the ‘Water-cliffe,’ or the ‘Clift near the water:’ and the description given in that word, as pointing to the towering clift on which you stand, and to the waters which force their way so swiftly at its base, is most truthful. That small church upon the greensward is Wycliffe church. That house which seems to spring out of the rock at the summit of the meadow ascending steeply from the church, is a continuance of the mansion of the Wycliffe family. To that family pertained the lordship of the manor of Wycliffe, and the patronage of the rectory, from the age of William the Norman down to very recent times. Raby Castle, only a short distance at one point of an angle, and Bernard Castle, about the same distance at another point, suggest to us something of the manner in which this district was castle-kept in the bygone days of turbulence and oppression. The modern mansion, in the outward face of it, is nearly all modern; and in the aspect which is intended to be its best it is common-place enough. The Wycliffes ceased in 1606 to be inheritors of this property and lordship. The name of Tunstall then came by marriage into the place of Wycliffe; and in our own time, the name of Tunstall has given place to that of Constable.

That our reformer Wycliffe drew his first breath in the house which stood in the early years of the fourteenth century on the brow of that meadow slope, overlooking the river Tees, is, with us, a point believed and settled.

Our most respectable antiquary, John Leland, writing about a hundred and fifty years after the decease of Wycliffe, when making mention, in his notes on the places of this district, of the parish of Wycliffe, adds these words, 'unde Wigclif hereticus originem duxit.'¹ It must not be concealed, however, that our learned friend writes elsewhere after this wise. 'They say that 'John Wiclif, hereticus, was born at Spreswel, a poor 'village, a good mile from Richmont.'² And our learned modern, Dr. Whitaker, has given more heed than is due to this last saying.³ Leland, in hope of acquiting himself like a good workman in his topographical labours, travelled much, and at a time when travelling had but little of our own speed or convenience to commend it. But he took much upon hearsay—could not help so doing: and among his hearsays is this saying about Spreswel. An authority, which with us is decisive on this subject, assures us, that 'there neither is *now*, nor *was there ever*, a place of that name in Richmondshire.'⁴

¹ Collectanea, Tom. I. part II. p. 329.

² Itinerary, v. 9.

³ History of Richmondshire, I 197.

⁴ The Rev. James Raine, M.A., Librarian to the Dean and Chapter Library, Durham; a gentleman too well known among such as have given any attention to our Northern antiquities, to need commendation from us. The first sentence in Lewis, states that, 'Wiclif was born in the parish of Wiclif;' but at the foot of the page he cites the above statement from Leland about Spreswel, not being aware, it would seem, that if Spreswel was 'a poor mile village, a good mile from Richmont,' it must have been at least ten miles from 'Wiclif.'

Leland, whose acquaintance with Richmondshire was so defective, that he places the rise of the Tees in a field near Caldwell, some fifty miles from its real source, could not have spoken with the confidence of our correspondent on this subject. But Dr. Whitaker should have been better informed.

We should mention in this place, that in the time of Charles the first a clerk in a parish adjoining the parish of Wycliffe, Birkbeck by name, wrote a work intituled 'The Protestant Evidence,' a book of learning and ability ; and he there gives the tradition of the district concerning Wycliffe, as being the birth-place of the reformer, as a tradition which no man questioned. To the same effect is the suffrage of Dr. Zouch, rector of Wycliffe at the close of the last century. Dr. Zouch, the biographer of Sir Philip Sidney, thus writes on the back of the picture from which our engraving of the portrait of the Reformer is taken. 'Thomas Zouch, A.M., formerly 'Fellow of Trinity College, Cambridge, and Rector of 'Wycliff, gives this original picture of the great John 'Wycliffe, *a native of this parish*, to his successors, the 'rectors of Wycliffe, who are requested to preserve it, as 'a heir-loom in the rectory house.' This endorsing gives us the faith of Dr. Zouch on this article.

We have also ourselves learnt, that less than forty years since, there was an old man living in the parish of Wycliffe, who, though in humble condition, claimed to be a descendant of the Wycliffe family. He was tall, of

poor presence, and those who knew him often spoke of the strong resemblance between his features and those given in the portrait of the great Reformer. The Tunstalls so far acknowledged the claims of this person, as to assign him a small pension. He carried himself high, though poor; never put his hand to common labour. His turn was towards mechanics. He was the great regulator of time to the neighbourhood. He laid a sort of claim to the supervision of all clocks and watches, which he adjusted, repaired, and kept to the hour, by means of two watches of his own, which he always wore about with him, one in each pocket of his waistcoat, for the purpose. In this capacity he made his periodical calls upon his friends, had his gossip, took his refreshment, and then, with some stateliness of manner, bowed them good-day.

In brief, the name of Wycliffe is assuredly a local name—John de Wycliffe—John *of* Wycliffe: and this is the only locality in England from which it *could* have been derived. Nor is there the slightest reason to suppose that there was a second family in the very small parish of Wycliffe in circumstances to send a son to Oxford, and to sustain him there for a series of years at his own charges, as was manifestly the case with the Wycliffe who has his place at the head of the succession among us distinguished as protesters against Rome.

It is true, in the very slender information we possess concerning the pedigree of the Wycliffes of Wycliffe, in the fourteenth century, we find no mention of a John de

Wycliffe, except in the person, who, during the life-time of the reformer, was at the head of that family, and who appointed Robert de Wycliffe to the rectory, in 1362; and William de Wycliffe to it in the year following.¹ Not less barren of information in this respect is the subsequent history of the family. Often does it happen that no one dreams of putting upon record what every one is supposed to know. What is notorious to ourselves, must, of course, be notorious to all time to come. Beside which, strange as it may seem, that house upon the rock there, the birth-place of the greatest of our reformers, has been, from that age to our own, an asylum of Romanism. Wycliffes, Tunstals, Constables, all have gone one way.² Hence, to this day, the parish of Wycliffe, with its population of something less than two hundred souls, is about equally divided between the two religions. The changes of the last three hundred years seem to have swept by this little enclosure almost without touching it.

It was on the morning of the sabbath that we obtained our first view of this secluded spot from the clift that rises above its waters. The sun shed its full splendour on the woods, to which the autumn had given its many colours; and on the green earth, which, near the church, shone out as if overlaid with yellow gold. The bell gave forth its note to call the devout to worship; but

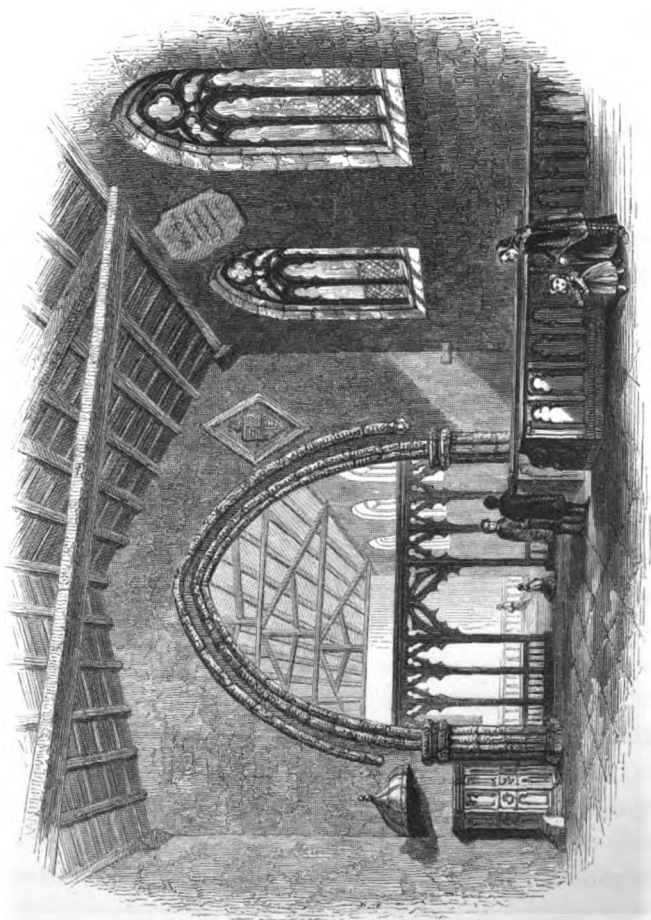
¹ Whitaker's *Richmondshire*, I. 197.

² Appendix A and C.

while one half of the village population bent their steps towards the parish church, we saw the other half, with their mass-books in their hands, on their way to the Romanist chapel perpetuated in the house which stands on the site of the ancient mansion of the Wycliffes. In a family holding thus steadily to the faith of the middle age, there would be no disposition to cherish the memory of relationship to a heretic so notorious as John de Wycliffe. The reaction in every thing social and religious, which came on immediately after the death of Wycliffe, and which continued for more than a century, placed a sea of troubles between the age of our Reformer and the age of Luther. Much that would otherwise have been preserved was thus lost. Had the great reformation succeeded at once, in place of being delayed to some hundred and fifty years later, the tendency would have been to hoard up whatever men knew about Wycliffe, and not to allow such knowledge to drop, vestige after vestige, into forgetfulness. His own family, as we have seen, were in this reaction. In feudal times, men of such position deprecated few things so much as to see the stain of treason on their escutcheon; and so, with many, if there might be a deeper stain than that, it would be the stain of heresy. Wycliffe himself, in his later life so wrote concerning this feeling, as to warrant the inference that he wrote, not only of what he had seen, but of that which had been an experience of his own. It is to the effect following, that he learnt to

wield our then half-formed mother tongue on such themes. ' There are three faults happening many times to wedded ' men and women. The first is, that they sorrow over ' their children if they are naked or poor, but they reckon ' it as nothing that their souls are unclothed with virtues. ' With much travail and cost, also, they get great riches, ' and estates, and benefices, for their children, and often ' to their great damnation ; but they incline not to get ' for their children the goods of grace, and of a virtuous ' life. Nor will they suffer them to retain such goods, as ' freely proffered to them of God ; but hinder it, as much ' as they may, saying, if a child yield himself to meekness ' and poverty, and flee covetousness and pride, from a ' dread of sin, and to please God, that he shall never be- ' come a man, never cost them a penny ; and *they curse ' him because he liveth well, and will teach other men the ' will of God, to save their souls. For they say, that by so ' doing he getteth many enemies to his elders, that he slan- ' dereth all their noble kindred, who were ever held true men ' and worshipful !*'¹ We may here venture to say, that we have read much in the manuscripts preserved from the pen of Wycliffe ; and that from the freedom with which he gives expression, almost perpetually, to personal feeling, we have often felt the total absence of any reference to his own family relationship, as suggesting that

¹ MS. On Wedded Men and Wives. Corpus Christi College, Cambridge.



Wycliffe Church in 1350.

his heretical course had exposed him to the kind of disownment set forth in this extract. Highly probable is it, that in the view of his kinsman, he was a man who, by his public teaching, though with the pretence of saving souls, had brought dishonour on his 'noble kindred, who 'were ever held true men and worshipful.'

We have said that little or nothing remains of the edifice in which Wycliffe was born: the same, however, may not be said of the font at which he was baptized, nor of the church in which he knelt as a youth in worship. Beyond doubt Wycliffe church is, in the main, older than the age of the Reformer. As in the case of many very ancient churches, you descend by steps to the pavement, the level of the soil on the outside being higher than the ancient level of the floor within the walls—from this cause, and partly, perhaps, from the flat-surfaced roof stretched upon them, they shew signs of damp. The windows retain some of their painted glass from times before the Reformation. Our puritan iconoclasts appear to have done some execution on certain emblems of idolatry which once formed a part of their ornament. But there is a figure of the Virgin and child that has suffered but little from mutilation. As we worshipped on that ancient floor, and within those ancient walls, we could not but remember whence those liturgical services had descended which the people about us were repeating in their native tongue; and could imagine the young Wycliffe as present there some five centuries ago, and

giving forth to the echo of those old walls the utterance of the same devout thoughts clothed in their pristine Latin.

The date of the birth of Wycliffe is fixed by all who have concerned themselves with his history, in 1324. It is certain that he entered as a student in Oxford in 1340 ; and for reasons that will presently be given, we may take this fact as decisive against fixing his birth in a later year, whatever might be our conjecture in favour of an earlier.

How Wycliffe passed his boyhood ; where he received his juvenile instruction ; in what manner he acquitted himself among his fellows in his earlier years—all these are matters about which the imagination may create its pictures, but of which we can really *know* nothing. He may have done his best to follow the swiftest in the chase among those hills and glens which still encompass the site of the old home of his fathers ; he may have plunged, in the summer season, into the waters which flowed then, as they flow now, beneath the outlook from his birth-place ; or in a more thoughtful mood, he may have rambled under the shadow of the lofty elms which spread themselves eastward from the mansion, far along the hill-top, and may have listened there, as we have ourselves listened, to the chorus of the waters beneath, and the rooks above ; and may have given freedom there, not unprofitably, to his young and budding thought upon the ways of men. To ourselves, it was not unpleasant to believe for the moment in such probable or possible things.