

MR. ROEBUCK, M.P.

BORN in India (in 1801), Mr. Roebuck was bred in England, and studied the law in the Temple with the intention of practising in the colony of Canada, where his apparently migratory father had eventually settled. But it was a busy and earnest time, in literature and politics, in London in 1820-30; and it would appear that the eager and ambitious young student, who had established an early reputation in "advanced" circles, became too interested in the affairs of the mother country to take more than an episcopal interest in Canada. The Canadas—ill governed, discontented, undeveloped—were in agitation just then against the views and decisions of the Imperial Parliament; and, wanting a man to do in London what Franklin had done years before for the "Federal Union," they decided upon the young Mr. Roebuck's stay in England, by pitching upon him as their agent—at first a subordinate one, subsequently as plenipotentiary. He remained, and went the Northern Circuit; but though the leaders of that circuit (Brougham and Denman) at the time were strong Liberals, Mr. Roebuck was a violent Radical; and, not getting into business, and finding his small presence and thin voice opposed to the progress of a young barrister, he seems to have given himself up to newspaper writing (he was a champion in the days of "the unstamped"), and to very effective Benthamite articles in the new, noisy, and greatly-abused, because so very Radical, *Westminster Review*. In the Reform agitation he made himself conspicuous for boldness of speech and philosophical views of statesmanship; and, when the bill at last passed, he stood for the generally Radical Bath, and was returned second on the poll. He remained in Parliament for five years; and, from the first, took up his peculiar position—sometimes sneeringly defined by his opponents as "Objector-General." He faced every sort of fact in politics; analysed all kinds of men; opposed and lectured Whigs and Tories; headed the rest of the Radicals in plain speaking; and, being still a young man, of no definite position, and with no obvious aims, he created, inside and outside Parliament, a mingled feeling of detestation, wonder, admiration, and amusement. In fact, he had become a House of Commons' character. But he was as independent with his constituents as with the House; an "unmanageable" man; and, not being yet understood, having only reached the stage of unpopularity, he was thrown out of his seat at the general election of 1837, polling only 910 votes where he had formerly polled 1138.

But such a man could not long remain out. He remained a public man, and took to meetings as he was denied the House. The Corn-law question was coming uppermost—the Colonial question was forcing itself on. Mr. Roebuck understood both; and, by the next general election, in 1841, he had reached popularity, had ceased to be regarded as an eccentricity; and even by the Whigs, who availed themselves of his precise but pungent pen in the *Edinburgh Review*, he was coming to be considered as "rising." Bath was

in one of its Radical humours in 1841; and the £10 householders returned him and Lord Duncan by a triumphant majority against the Peelite Tories. In that new Parliament Mr. Roebuck made himself more conspicuous than ever. There had been great electoral corruption. He pointed it out; he insisted on inquiry; he demanded committees; he even had members down at the Bar? He made 600 enemies out of the 658 members, but he

pleased the public, and made his own courageous independence thoroughly comprehended. From 1841 to 1847 he was an ardent and energetic Reformer. He became disgusted with Whig shortcomings, and was delighted with the realities of Sir Robert Peel, whom he accordingly warmly supported through all the memorable tariff changes up to Corn-law repeal. But he was moving, all this time, on Colonial Reform, on Church Reform, on Parliamentary Reform—daily, weekly, monthly—he was doing something to form and bring to a point public opinion on the many "shams" he ruthlessly laid bare. All this time he peculiarly preserved his individuality; for, though an earnest Radical and a profound politico-economist, he avoided the vulgar intulity of Chartism, and he deprecated the too material influence of the newly-risen Manchester school. He had likewise held aloof from the "Tory Socialist" school of Lord Ashley; and, being opposed at Bath at the election of 1847 by that then and still popular nobleman (now Lord Shaftesbury), he had to yield to the combined influence of aristocratic and philanthropic interests, and was beaten;—the press at the same time (thus indicating the high position Mr. Roebuck had at-



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tained in national estimation) severely condemning Lord Ashley for opposing such a man.

Mr. Roebuck remained out for two years; but a vacancy occurring in Sheffield, in 1849, by the appointment of Sir Henry Ward to the government of the Ionian Islands, he was returned by a thoroughly Liberal community without opposition, and the feeling at the time was, that a right thing had been done, inasmuch as Mr. Roebuck had been missed in the House of Commons. His health, however, had begun to fail, and during 1851-2-3 he was not much seen in Parliament. His constituents, re-electing him in 1852, generously besought him to retire for a time; and at his farm, in Hampshire, he spent this period in composing a "History of the Whigs," two volumes of which have been published, admirable as a political essay, and certain to live as the picture by an actor of the stormy drama of 1830-5. He was greatly missed again in the Session of 1853, when electoral corruption, exposed at the general election of the preceding year, was again the question, and when there was no man in the House of Commons to force Lord John Russell into the bold cure that the country demanded. Mr. Roebuck reappeared in his place at the latter end of the Session of 1854. When he made the motion for the Committee on the state of the army before Sebastopol, it was as much as anything else the conviction of his lofty patriotism and stern determination to get at the truth which caused the national cry for an investigation—the House of Commons giving way to that cry against all the entreaties and precedents of placemen.