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IN

# THE DAYS OF MY YOUTH.

BY

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# IN THE DAYS OF MY YOUTH.

## CHAPTER I.

### MY BIRTHPLACE AND PARENTAGE.

Dolce sentier, . . . . .  
 Colle, che mi piacesti,  
 Ov'ancor per usanza amor mi mena!

PETRARCH.

SWEET, secluded, shady Saxonholme! I doubt if our whole England contains another hamlet so quaint, so picturesquely irregular, so thoroughly national in all its rustic characteristics. It lies in a warm hollow environed by hills. Woods, parks, and young plantations clothe every height and slope for miles around, whilst here and there, peeping down through green vistas, or towering above undulating seas of summer foliage, stands many a fine old country mansion, turretted and gabled, and built of that warm red brick that seems to hold the light of the sunset long after it has faded from the rest of the landscape. A silver thread of streamlet, swift but shallow, runs noisily through the meadows beside the town and loses itself in the Chad, about a mile and a half farther eastward. Many a picturesque old wooden bridge, many a foaming weir and ruinous water-mill with weedy wheel,

may be found scattered up and down the wooded banks of this little river Chad; while to the brook, which we call the Gipstream, attaches a vague tradition of trout.

The hamlet itself is clean and old-fashioned, consisting of one long, straggling street, and a few tributary lanes and passages. The houses some few years back were mostly long and low-fronted, with projecting upper storeys, and diamond-paned bay-windows bowered in with myrtle and clematis; but modern improvements have done much of late to sweep away these antique tenements, and a fine new suburb of Italian and Gothic villas has sprung up between the town and the railway station. Besides this, we have a new church in the mediæval style, rich in gilding and colours and thirteenth-century brass-work; and a new cemetery, laid out like a pleasure-garden; and a new school-house, where the children are taught upon a system with a foreign name; and a Mechanics Institute, where London professors come down at long intervals to expound popular science, and where agriculturists meet to discuss popular grievances.

At the other extremity of the town, down by Girdlestone Grange, an old moated residence where the squire's family have resided these four centuries past, we are full fifty years behind our modern neighbours. Here stands our famous old "King's-head Inn," a well-known place of resort so early as the reign of Elizabeth. The great oak beside the porch is as old as the house itself; and on the windows of a little disused parlour overlooking the garden may still be seen the names of Sedley, Rochester, and other wits of the Restoration. They scrawled those autographs

after dinner, most likely, with their diamond rings, and went reeling afterwards, arm-in-arm, along the village street, singing and swearing, and eager for adventures—as gentlemen were wont to be in those famous old times when they drank the king's health more freely than was good for their own.

Not far from the "King's Head," and almost hidden by the trees which divide it from the road, stands an ancient charitable institution called the College—quadrangular, mullion-windowed, many-gabled, and colonised by some twenty aged people of both sexes. At the back of the College, adjoining a space of waste ground and some ruined cloisters, lies the churchyard, in the midst of which, surrounded by solemn yews and mouldering tombs, stands the Priory Church. It is a rare old church, founded, according to the county history, in the reign of Edward the Confessor, and entered with a full description in Domesday Book. Its sculptured monuments and precious brasses, its Norman crypt, carved stalls, and tattered banners drooping over faded scutcheons, tell all of generations long gone by, of noble families extinct, of gallant deeds forgotten, of knights and ladies remembered only by the names above their graves. Amongst these, some two or three modest tablets record the passing away of several generations of my own predecessors—obscure professional men for the most part, of whom some few became soldiers, and died abroad.

In close proximity to the church stands the vicarage, once the Priory; a quaint old rambling building surrounded by magnificent old trees. Here for long centuries, a tribe of rooks have held undisputed possession, filling the boughs with their nests and the air