

**PEEL**

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Peel by J. R. Thursfield

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**J. R. THURSFIELD**

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Twelve English Statesmen

P E E L



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BY

J. R. THURSFIELD

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## CHAPTER I

### FAMILY, BIRTH, AND EDUCATION

1788-1809

SIR ROBERT PEEL, twice Prime Minister of England in the first half of the present century, was born in 1788, the year before the assembling of the States-General in France, and died in 1850, the year before the opening of the first Great Exhibition of the Arts and Industries of all nations in England. Between these two epochs, the opening of the democratic age and the close of the long period of European peace, the political career of Peel is included. His childhood witnessed the beginning of the revolutionary wars, and he was nurtured by his father in the fear and admonition of Pitt. He first took office in 1810, having entered Parliament in the previous year; but it is to the period of European peace, which opened in 1815 and lasted until 1854, more than three years after his death, that the political history of his life belongs. He began life as the colleague of Liverpool and Castlereagh, of Sidmouth and Eldon, and his earlier sympathies were with the less liberal tendencies of that illiberal *régime*. He ended his career estranged from his own party, and associated with only a section of his personal friends and followers, who

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supported the Whig Government of 1846, and within a dozen years became finally absorbed into the Liberal ranks. His whole political life is, to the superficial observer and to the mere partisan politician, a succession of paradoxes, inconsistencies, and contradictions. He was himself the soul of honour, a very pattern of political integrity, a patriot devoted before all public or private aims to the peace, welfare, and good government of his country. Yet by his contemporaries he was perpetually assailed as a traitor to his party and his principles, a slave to expediency and opportunism, a consummate but unscrupulous master of the less reputable arts of parliamentary management. He supported the inept finance of Vansittart, and a few years afterwards he recanted his errors and gave effect to the sounder principles of Horner and the famous Bullion Committee of 1810. The inconsistency of his conduct in the matter of Catholic emancipation in 1829 and of free trade in 1846 is one of the tritest commonplaces of modern political history. Yet Peel is now adjudged by all to have been the ablest statesman of his time, the one statesman, perhaps, who by his ascendancy over the party of reaction and resistance could have piloted the State without disaster through the tremendous organic changes which were brought about by the restoration of peace, the growth of the industrial spirit, and the advance of democratic reform.

Sir Robert Peel was born on 5th July 1788, either at Chamber Hall, near Bury, the residence of his father, a wealthy manufacturer of the district, or at a small cottage in the near neighbourhood, the family mansion having been, according to the legend, under repair at