

THE STORY

FIRST PERIOD

CHAPTER I - THE SOUR FRENCH WINE

WHILE the line to be taken by the new railway between Culm and Everill was still under discussion, the engineer caused some difference of opinion among the moneyed men who were the first Directors of the Company, by asking if they proposed to include among their Stations the little old town of Honeybuzzard.

For years past, commerce had declined, and population had decreased in this ancient and curious place. Painters knew it well, and prized its mediaeval houses as a mine of valuable material for their art. Persons of cultivated tastes, who were interested in church architecture of the fourteenth century, sometimes pleased and flattered the Rector by subscribing to his fund for the restoration of the tower, and the removal of the accumulated rubbish of hundreds of years from the crypt. Small speculators, not otherwise in a state of insanity, settled themselves in the town, and tried the desperate experiment of opening a shop; spent their little capital, put up the shutters, and disappeared. The old market-place still showed its list of market-law's, issued by the Mayor and Corporation in the prosperous bygone times; and every week there were fewer and fewer people to obey the laws. The great empty enclosure looked more cheerful, when there was no market held, and when the boys of the town played in the deserted place. In the last warehouse left in a state of repair, the crane was generally idle; the windows were mostly shut up; and a solitary man represented languishing trade, idling at a half-opened door. The muddy river rose and fell with the distant tide. At rare intervals a collier discharged its cargo on the mouldering quay, or an empty barge took in a load of hay. One bold house advertised, in a dirty window, apartments to let. There was a lawyer in the town, who had no occasion to keep a clerk; and there was a doctor who hoped to sell his practice for anything that it would fetch. The directors of the new railway, after a stormy meeting, decided on offering (by means of a Station) a last chance of revival to the dying town. The town had not vitality enough left to be grateful; the railway stimulant produced no effect. Of all his colleagues in Great Britain and Ireland, the station-master