

Chapter 3

'Twas town, yet country too; you felt the warmth Of clustering houses in the wintry time; Supped with a friend, and went by lantern home. Yet from your chamber window you could hear The tiny bleat of new-yearned lambs, or see The children bend beside the hedgerow banks To pluck the primroses.

TREBY MAGNA, on which the Reform Bill had thrust the new honour of being a polling-place, had been, at the beginning of the century, quite a typical old market-town, lying in pleasant sleepiness among green pastures, with a rush-fringed river meandering through them. Its principal street had various handsome and tall-windowed brick houses with walled gardens behind them; and at the end, where it widened into the market-place, there was the cheerful rough-stuccoed front of that excellent inn, the Marquis of Granby, where the farmers put up their gigs, not only on fair and market days, but on exceptional Sundays when they came to church. And the church was one of those fine old English structures worth travelling to see, standing in a broad churchyard with a line of solemn yew-trees beside it, and lifting a majestic tower and spire far above the red-and-purple roofs of the town. It was not large enough to hold all the parishioners of a parish which stretched over distant villages and hamlets; but then they were never so unreasonable as to wish to be all in at once, and had never complained that the space of a large side-chapel was taken up by the tombs of the Debarrys, and shut in by a handsome iron screen. For when the black Benedictines ceased to pray and chant in this church, when the Blessed Virgin and St Gregory were expelled, the Debarrys, as lords of the manor, naturally came next to Providence and took the place of the saints. Long before that time, indeed, there had been a Sir Maximus Debarry who had been at the fortifying of the old castle, which now stood in ruins in the midst of the green pastures, and with its sheltering wall towards the north made an excellent strawyard for the pigs of Wace & Co., brewers of the celebrated Treby beer. Wace & Co. did not stand alone in the town as prosperous traders on a large scale, to say nothing of those who had retired from business; and in no country town of the same small size as Treby was there a larger proportion of families who had handsome sets of china without handles, hereditary punchbowls, and large silver ladles with a Queen Anne's guinea in the centre. Such people naturally took tea and supped together frequently; and as there was no professional man or tradesman in Treby who was not connected by business, if not by blood, with the farmers of the district, the richer sort of these were much invited, and gave invitations in their turn. They played at whist, ate and drank generously, praised Mr Pitt and the war as keeping up prices and religion, and were very humorous about each other's property, having much the same coy pleasure in allusions to their secret ability to purchase, as blushing lasses sometimes have in jokes

about their secret preferences. The rector was always of the Debarry family, associated only with county people, and was much respected for his affability; a clergyman who would have taken tea with the townspeople would have given a dangerous shock to the mind of a Treby church-man.

Such was the old-fashioned, grazing, brewing, woolpacking, cheese-loading life of Treby Magna, until there befell new conditions, complicating its relating with the rest of the world, and gradually awakening in it that higher consciousness which is known to bring higher pains. First came the canal; next, the working of the coal-mines at Sproxton, two miles off the town; and, thirdly, the discovery of a saline spring, which suggested to a too constructive brain the possibility of turning Treby Magna into a fashionable watering-place. So daring an idea was not originated by a native Trebian, but by a young lawyer who came from a distance, knew the dictionary by heart, and was probably an illegitimate son of somebody or other. The idea, although it promised an increase of wealth to the town, was not well received at first; ladies objected to seeing 'objects' drawn about in hand-carriages, the doctor foresaw the advent of unsound practitioners, and most retail tradesmen concurred with him that new doings were usually for the advantage of new people. The more unanswerable reasons urged that Treby had prospered without baths, and it was yet to be seen how it would prosper with them; while a report that the proposed name for them was Bethesda Spa, threatened to give the whole affair a blasphemous aspect. Even Sir Maximus Debarry, who was to have an unprecedented return for the thousands he would lay out on a pump-room and hotel, regarded the thing as a little too new, and held back for some time. But the persuasive powers of the young lawyer, Mr Matthew Jermyn, together with the opportune opening of a stone-quarry, triumphed at last; the handsome buildings were erected, an excellent guide-book and descriptive cards, surmounted by vignettes, were printed, and Treby Magna became conscious of certain facts in its own history, of which it had previously been in contented ignorance.

But it was all in vain. The Spa, for some mysterious reason, did not succeed. Some attributed the failure to the coal-mines and the canal, others to the peace, which had had ruinous effects on the country, and others, who disliked Jermyn, to the original folly of the plan. Among these last was Sir Maximus himself, who never forgave the too persuasive attorney: it was Jermyn's fault not only that a useless hotel had been built, but that he, Sir Maximus, being straitened for money, had at last let the building, with the adjacent land lying on the river, on a long lease, on the supposition that it was to be turned into a benevolent college, and had seen himself subsequently powerless to prevent its being turned into a tape manufactory - a bitter thing to

any gentleman, and especially to the representative of one of the oldest families in England.

In this way it happened that Treby Magna gradually passed from being simply a respectable market-town - the heart of a great rural district, where the trade was only such as had close relations with the local landed interest - and took on the more complex life brought by mines and manufactures, which belong more directly to the great circulating system of the nation than to the local system to which they have been superadded; and in this way it was that Trebian Dissent gradually altered its character. Formerly it had been of a quiescent, well-to-do kind, represented architecturally by a small, venerable, dark-pewed chapel, built by Presbyterians, but long occupied by a sparse congregation of Independents, who were as little moved by doctrinal zeal as their church-going neighbours, and did not feel themselves deficient in religious liberty, inasmuch as they were not hindered from occasionally slumbering in their pews, and were not obliged to go regularly to the weekly prayer-meeting. But when stone-pits and coal-pits made new hamlets that threatened to spread up to the very town, when the tape-weavers came with their news-reading inspectors and book-keepers, the Independent chapel began to be filled with eager men and women, to whom the exceptional possession of religious truth was the condition which reconciled them to a meagre existence, and made them feel in secure alliance with the unseen but supreme rule of a world in which their own visible part was small. There were Dissenters in Treby now who could not be regarded by the church people in the light of old neighbours to whom the habit of going to chapel was an innocent, unenviable inheritance along with a particular house and garden, a tanyard, or a grocery business - Dissenters who, in their turn, without meaning to be in the least abusive, spoke of the high-bred rector as a blind leader of the blind. And Dissent was not the only thing that the times had altered; prices had fallen, poor-rates had risen, rent and tithe were not elastic enough, and the farmer's fat sorrow had become lean; he began to speculate on causes, and to trace things back to that causeless mystery, the cessation of one-pound notes. Thus, when political agitation swept in a great current through the country, Treby Magna was prepared to vibrate. The Catholic Emancipation Bill opened the eyes of neighbours, and made them aware how very injurious they were to each other and to the welfare of mankind generally. Mr Tiliot, the church spirit-merchant, knew now that Mr Nuttwood, the obliging grocer, was one of those Dissenters, Deists, Socinians, Papists and Radicals, who were in league to destroy the constitution. A retired old London tradesman, who was believed to understand politics, said that thinking people must wish George the Third alive again in all his early vigour of mind; and even the farmers became less materialistic in their view of causes, and referred much to the agency of the devil and the Irish Romans. The rector, the Rev. Augustus Debarry, really a fine

specimen of the old-fashioned aristocratic clergyman, preaching short sermons, understanding business, and acting liberally about his tithe, had never before found himself in collision with Dissenters; but now he began to feel that these people were a nuisance in the parish, that his brother Sir Maximus must take care lest they should get land to build more chapels, and that it might not have been a bad thing if the law had furnished him as a magistrate with a power of putting a stop to the political sermons of the Independent preacher, which, in their way, were as pernicious sources of intoxication as the beerhouses. The Dissenters, on their side, were not disposed to sacrifice the cause of truth and freedom to a temporizing mildness of language; but they defended themselves from the charge of religious indifference, and solemnly disclaimed any lax expectations that Catholics were likely to be saved - urging, on the contrary, that they were not too hopeful about Protestants, who adhered to a bloated and worldly prelacy. Thus Treby Magna, which had lived quietly through the great earthquakes of the French Revolution and the Napoleonic wars, which had remained unmoved by the Rights of Man, and saw little in Mr Cobbett's Weekly Register ' except that he held eccentric views about potatoes, began at last to know the higher pains of a dim political consciousness; and the development had been greatly helped by the recent agitation about the Reform Bill. Tory, Whig, and Radical did not perhaps become clearer in their definition of each other; but the names seemed to acquire so strong a stamp of honour or infamy, that definitions would only have weakened the impression. As to the short and easy method of judging opinions by the personal character of those who held them, it was liable to be much frustrated in Treby. It so happened in that particular town that the Reformers were not all of them large-hearted patriots or ardent lovers of justice; indeed, one of them, in the very midst of the agitation, was detected in using unequal scales - a fact to which many Tories pointed with disgust as showing plainly enough, without further argument, that the cry for a change in the representative system was hollow trickery. Again, the Tories were far from being all oppressors, disposed to grind down the working classes into serfdom; and it was undeniable that the inspector at the tape manufactory, who spoke with much eloquence on the extension of the suffrage, was a more tyrannical personage than open-handed Mr Wace, whose chief political tenet was, that it was all nonsense giving men votes when they had no stake in the country. On the other hand, there were some Tories who gave themselves a great deal of leisure to abuse hypocrites, Radicals, Dissenters, and atheism generally, but whose inflamed faces, theistic swearing, and frankness in expressing a wish to borrow, certainly did not mark them out strongly as holding opinions likely to save society.

The Reformers had triumphed: it was clear that the wheels were going whither they were pulling, and they were in fine spirits for exertion. But if they were pulling towards the country's ruin, there was the

more need for others to hang on behind and get the wheels to stick if possible. In Treby, as elsewhere, people were told they must 'rally' at the coming election; but there was now a large number of waverers - men of flexible, practical minds, who were not such bigots as to cling to any views when a good tangible reason could be urged against them; while some regarded it as the most neighbourly thing to hold a little with both sides, and were not sure that they should rally or vote at all. It seemed an invidious thing to vote for one gentleman rather than another.

These social changes in Treby parish are comparatively public matters, and this history is chiefly concerned with the private lot of a few men and women; but there is no private life which has not been determined by a wider public life, from the time when the primeval milkmaid had to wander with the wanderings of her clan, because the cow she milked was one of a herd which had made the pastures bare. Even in that conservatory existence where the fair Camelia is sighed for by the noble young Pineapple, neither of them needing to care about the frost or rain outside, there is a nether apparatus of hot-water pipes liable to cool down on a strike of the gardeners or a scarcity of coal. And the lives we are about to look back upon do not belong to those conservatory species; they are rooted in the common earth, having to endure all the ordinary chances of past and present weather. As to the weather of 1832, the Zadkiel of that time had predicted that the electrical condition of the clouds in the political hemisphere would produce unusual perturbations in organic existence, and he would perhaps have seen a fulfilment of his remarkable prophecy in that mutual influence of dissimilar destinies which we shall see gradually unfolding itself. For if the mixed political conditions of Treby Magna had not been acted on by the passing of the Reform Bill, Mr Harold Transome would not have presented himself as a candidate for North Loamshire, Treby would not have been a polling-place, Mr Matthew Jermyn would not have been on affable terms with a Dissenting preacher and his flock, and the venerable town would not have been placarded with handbills, more or less complimentary and retrospective - conditions in this case essential to the 'where', and the 'what', without which, as the learned know, there can be no event whatever.

For example, it was through these conditions that a young man named Felix Holt made a considerable difference in the life of Harold Transome, though nature and fortune seemed to have done what they could to keep the lots of the two men quite aloof from each other. Felix was heir to nothing better than a quack medicine; his mother lived up a back street in Treby Magna, and her sitting-room was ornamented with her best tea-tray and several framed testimonials to the virtues of Holt's Cathartic Lozenges and Holt's Restorative Elixir. There could hardly have been a lot less like Harold Transome's than this of the

quack doctor's son, except in the superficial facts that he called himself a Radical, that he was the only son of his mother, and that he had lately returned to his home with ideas and resolves not a little disturbing to that mother's mind.

But Mrs Holt, unlike Mrs Transome, was much disposed to reveal her troubles, and was not without a counsellor into whose ear she could pour them. On this 2nd of September, when Mr Harold Transome had had his first interview with Jermyn, and when the attorney went back to his office with new views of canvassing in his mind, Mrs Holt had put on her bonnet as early as nine o'clock in the morning, and had gone to see the Rev. Rufus Lyon, minister of the Independent Chapel usually spoken of as 'Malthouse Yard.'