Chapter 19

Consistency? - I never changed my mind,

Which is, and always was, to live at ease.

IT was only in the time of the summer fairs that the market-place had ever looked more animated than it did under that autumn mid-day sun. There were plenty of blue cockades and streamers, faces at all the windows, and a crushing buzzing crowd, urging each other backwards and forwards round the small hustings in front of the Ram Inn, which showed its more plebeian sign at right angles with the venerable Marquis of Granby. Sometimes there were scornful shouts, sometimes a rolling cascade of cheers, sometimes the shriek of a penny whistle; but above all these fitful and feeble sounds, the fine old church-tower, which looked down from above the trees on the other side of the narrow stream, sent vibrating, at every quarter, the sonorous tones of its great bell, the Good Queen Bess.

Two carriages, with blue ribbons on the hamess, were conspicuous near the hustings. One was Jermyn's, filled with the brilliantly-attired daughters, accompanied by Esther, whose quieter dress helped to mark her out for attention as the most striking of the group. The other was Harold Transsome's; but in this there was no lady - only the olive-skinned Dominic, whose acute yet mild face was brightened by the occupation of amusing little Harry and rescuing from his tyrannies a King Charles puppy, with big eyes, much after the pattern of the boy's.

This Trebian crowd did not count for much in the political force of the nation, but it was not the less determined as to lending or not lending its ears. No man was permitted to speak from the platform except Harold and his uncle Lingon, though, in the interval of expectation, several Liberals had come forward. Among these ill-advised persons the one whose attempt met the most emphatic resistance was Rufus Lyon. This might have been taken for resentment at the unreasonableness of the cloth, that, not content with pulpits, from whence to tyrannise over the ears of men, wishes to have the larger share of the platforms; but it was not so, for Mr Lingon was heard with much cheering, and would have been welcomed again.

The rector of Little Treby had been a favourite in the neighbourhood since the beginning of the century. A clergy-man thoroughly unclerical in his habits had a piquancy about him which made him a sort of practical joke. He had always been called Jack Lingon, or Parson Jack - sometimes, in older and less serious days, even 'Cock-fighting Jack'. He swore a little when the point of a joke seemed to demand it, and was fond of wearing a coloured bandana tied loosely over his cravat,

together with large brown leather leggings; he spoke in a pithy familiar way that people could understand, and had none of that frigid mincingness called dignity, which some have thought a peculiar clerical disease. In fact, he was 'a character' - something cheerful to think of, not entirely out of connection with Sunday and sermons. And it seemed in keeping that he should have turned sharp round in politics, his opinions being only part of the excellent joke called Parson Jack. When his red eagle face and white hair were seen on the platform, the Dissenters hardly cheered this questionable Radical; but to make amends, all the Tory farmers gave him a friendly 'hurray'. 'Let's hear what old Jack will say for himself,' was the predominant feeling among them; 'he'll have something funny to say, I'll bet a penny.'

It was only Lawyer Labron's young clerks and their hangers-on who were sufficiently dead to Trebian traditions to assail the parson with various sharp-edged interjections, such as broken shells, and cries of 'Cock-a-doodle-doo'.

'Come now, my lads,' he began, in his full, pompous, yet jovial tones, thrusting his hands into the stuffed-out pockets of his greatcoat, 'I'll tell you what; I'm a parson, you know; I ought to return good for evil. So here are some good nuts for you to crack in return for your shells.'

There was a roar of laughter and cheering as he threw handfuls of nuts and filberts among the crowd.

'Come, now, you'll say I used to be a Tory; and some of you, whose faces I know as well as I know the head of my own crab-stick, will say that's why I'm a good fellow. But now I'll tell you something else. It's for that very reason - that I used to be a Tory, and am a good fellow - that I go along with my nephew here, who is a thoroughgoing Liberal. For will anybody here come forward and say, ‘A good fellow has no need to tack about and change his road?’ No, there's not one of you such a Tom-noddy. What's good for one time is bad for another. If anybody contradicts that, ask him to eat pickled pork when he's thirsty, and to bathe in the Lapp there when the spikes of ice are shooting. And that's the eason why the men who are the best Liberals now are the very men who used to be the best Tories. There isn't a nastier horse than your horse that'll jib and back and turn round when there is but one road for him to go, and that's the road before him.

'And my nephew here - he comes of a Tory breed, you know - I'll answer for the Lingons. In the old Tory times there was never a pup belonging to a Lingon but would howl if a Whig came near him. The Lingon blood is good, rich old Tory blood - like good rich milk - and that's why, when the right time comes, it throws up a Liberal cream.

The best sort of Tory turns to the best sort of Radical. There's plenty of Radical scum - I say, beware of the scum, and look out for the cream. And here's my nephew - some of the cream, if there is any: none of your Whigs, none of your painted water that looks as if it ran, and it's standing still all the while; none of your spinning-jenny fellows. A gentleman; but up to all sorts of business. I'm no fool myself; I'm forced to wink a good deal, for fear of seeing too much, for a neighbourly man must let himself be cheated a little. But though I've never been out of my own country, I know less about it than my nephew does. You may tell what he is, and only look at him. There's one sort of fellow sees nothing but the end of his own nose, and another sort that sees nothing but the hinder side of the moon; but my nephew Harold is of another sort; he sees everything that's at hitting distance, and he's not one to miss his mark. A good-looking man in his prime! Not a greenhorn; not a shrivelled old fellow, who'll come to speak to you and find he's left his teeth at home by mistake. Harold Transome will do you credit; if anybody says the Radicals are a set of sneaks, Brummagem halfpennies, scamps who want to play pitch and toss with the property of the country, you can say, 'Look at the member for North Loamshire ! ' And mind what you'll hear him say; he'll go in for making everything right - Poor-laws and charities and church - he wants to reform 'em all. Perhaps you'll say, 'There's that Parson Lingon talking about church reform - why, he belongs to the church himself - he wants reforming too.' Well, well, wait a bit, and you'll hear by-and-by that old Parson Lingon is reformed - shoots no more cracks his joke no more, has drunk his last bottle: the dogs the old pointers, will be sorry; but you'll hear that the parson at Little Treby is a new man. That's what church reform is sure to come to before long. So now here are some more nuts for you, lads, and I leave you to listen to your candidate. Here he is - give him a good hurray; wave your hats, and I'll begin. Hurray!

Harold had not been quite confident beforehand as to the good effect of his uncle's introduction; but he was soon reassured. There was no acrid partisanship among the oldfashioned Tories who mustered strong about the Marquis of Granby, and Parson Jack had put them in a good humour. Harold's only interruption came from his own party. The oratorical clerk at the factory, acting as the tribune of the dissenting interest, and feeling bound to put questions, might have been troublesome; but his voice being unpleasantly sharp, while Harold's was full and penetrating, the questioning was cried down. Harold's speech 'did': it was not of the glib-nonsensical sort, not ponderous, not hesitating - which is as much as to say, that it was remarkable among British speeches. Read in print the next day, perhaps it would be neither pregnant nor conclusive, which is saying no more than that its excellence was not of an abnormal kind, but such as is usually found in the best efforts of eloquent candidates.

Accordingly the applause drowned the opposition, and content predominated.

But, perhaps, the moment of most diffusive pleasure from public speaking is that in which the speech ceases and the audience can turn to commenting on it. The one speech, sometimes uttered under great responsibility as to missiles and other consequences, has given a text to twenty speakers who are under no responsibility. Even in the days of duelling a man was not challenged for being a bore, nor does this quality apparently hinder him from being much invited to dinner, which is the great index of social responsibility in a less barbarous age.

Certainly the crowd in the market-place seemed to experience this culminating enjoyment when the speaking on the platform in front of the Ram had ceased, and there were no less than three orators holding forth from the elevation of chance vehicles, not at all to the prejudice of the talking among those who were on a level with their neighbours. There was little ill-humour among the listeners, for Queen Bess was striking the last quarter before two, and a savoury smell from the inn kitchens inspired them with an agreeable consciousness that the speakers were helping to trifle away the brief time before dinner.

Two or three of Harold's committee had lingered talking to each other on the platform, instead of re-entering; and Jermyn, after coming out to speak to one of them, had tunred to the corner near which the carriages were standing, that he might tell the Transomes' coachman to drive round to the side door, and signal to his own coachman to follow. But a dialogue which was going on below induced him to pause, and, instead of giving the order, to assume the air of a careless gazer. Christian, whom the attorney had already observed looking out of a window at the Marquis of Granby, was talking to Dominic. The meeting appeared to be one of new recognition, for Christian was saying -

'You've not got grey as I have, Mr Lenoni; you're not a day older for the sixteen years. But no wonder you didn't know me; I'm bleached like a dried bone.'

'Not so. It is true I was confused a meenute - I could put your face nowhere; but after that, Naples came behind it, and I said, Mr Creestian. And so you reside at the Manor, and I am at Transome Court.'

'Ah I it's a thousand pities you're not on our side, else we might have dined together at the Marquis,' said Christian. 'Eh, could you manage it?' he added, languidly, knowing there was no chance of a yes.

'No - much obliged - couldn't leave the leetle boy. Ahi I Arry, Arry, pinch not poor Moro.'

While Dominic was answering, Christian had stared about him, as his manner was when he was being spoken to, and had had his eyes arrested by Esther, who was leaning forward to look at Mr Harold Transome's extraordinary little gipsy of a son. But happening to meet Christian's stare, she felt annoyed, drew back, and turned away her head, colouring.

'Who are those ladies?' said Christian, in a low tone, to Dominic, as if he had been startled into a sudden wish for this information.

'They are Meester Jermyn's daughters,' said Dominic, who knew nothing either of the lawyer's family or of Esther.

Christian looked puzzled a moment or two, and was silent.

'O, well - au revoir,' he said, kissing the tips of his fingers, as the coachman, having had Jermyn's order, began to urge on the horses.

'Does he see some likeness in the girl?' thought Jermyn, as he turned away. 'I wish I hadn't invited her to come in the carriage, as it happens.'