

Chapter 20

'Good earthenware pitchers, sir! - of an excellent quaint pattern and sober colour.'

THE market dinner at 'the Marquis' was in high repute in Treby and its neighbourhood. The frequenters of this three-and-sixpenny ordinary liked to allude to it, as men allude to anything which implies that they move in good society, and habitually converse with those who are in the secret of the highest affairs. The guests were not only such rural residents as had driven to market, but some of the most substantial townsmen, who had always assured their wives that business required this weekly sacrifice of domestic pleasure. The poorer farmers, who put up at the Ram or the Seven Stars, where there was no fish, felt their disadvantage, bearing it modestly or bitterly, as the case might be; and although the Marquis was a Tory house, devoted to Debarry, it was too much to expect that such tenants of the Transomes as had always been used to dine there, should consent to eat a worse dinner, and sit with worse company, because they suddenly found themselves under a Radical landlord, opposed to the political party known as Sir Maxim's. Hence the recent political divisions had not reduced the handsome length of the table at the Marquis; and the many gradations of dignity - from Mr Wace, the brewer, to the rich butcher from Leek Malton, who always modestly took the lowest seat, though without the reward of being asked to come up higher - had not been abbreviated by any secessions.

To-day there was an extra table spread for expected supernumeraries, and it was at this that Christian took his place with some of the younger farmers, who had almost a sense of dissipation in talking to a man of his questionable station and unknown experience. The provision was especially liberal, and on the whole the presence of a minority destined to vote for Transome was a ground for joking, which added to the good-humour of the chief talkers. A respectable old acquaintance turned Radical rather against his will, was rallied with even greater gusto than if his wife had had twins twice over. The best Trebian Tories were far too sweet-blooded to turn against such old friends, and to make no distinction between them and the Radical, Dissenting, Papistical, Deistical set with whom they never dined, and probably never saw except in their imagination. But the talk was necessarily in abeyance until the more serious business of dinner was ended, and the wine, spirits, and tobacco raised mere satisfaction into beatitude.

Among the frequent though not regular guests, whom every one was glad to see, was Mr Nolan, the retired London hosier, a wiry old gentleman past seventy, whose square tight forehead, with its rigid hedge of grey hair, whose bushy eyebrows, sharp dark eyes, and

remarkable hooked nose, gave a handsome distinction to his face in the midst of rural physiognomies. He had married a Miss Pendrell early in life, when he was a poor young Londoner, and the match had been thought as bad as ruin by her family; but fifteen years ago he had had the satisfaction of bringing his wife to settle amongst her own friends, and of being received with pride as a brother-in-law, retired from business, possessed of unknown thousands, and of a most agreeable talent for anecdote and conversation generally. No question had ever been raised as to Mr Nolan's extraction on the strength of his hooked nose, or of his name being Baruch. Hebrew names 'ran' in the best Saxon families; the Bible accounted for them; and no one among the uplands and hedgerows of that district was suspected of having an Oriental origin unless he carried a pedlar's jewel-box. Certainly, whatever genealogical research might have discovered, the worthy Baruch Nolan was so free from any distinctive marks of religious persuasion - he went to church with so ordinary an irregularity, and so often grumbled at the sermon - that there was no ground for classing him otherwise than with good Trebian Churchmen. He was generally regarded as a good-looking old gentleman, and a certain thin eagerness in his aspect was attributed to the life of the metropolis, where narrow space had the same sort of effect on men as on thickly-planted trees. Mr Nolan always ordered his pint of port, which, after he had sipped it a little, was wont to animate his recollections of the Royal Family, and the various ministries which had been contemporary with the successive stages of his prosperity. He was always listened to with interest: a man who had been born in the year when good old King George I came to the throne - who had been acquainted with the nude leg of the Prince Regent, and hinted at private reasons for believing that the Princess Charlotte ought not to have died - had conversational matter as special to his auditors as Marco Polo could have had on his return from Asiatic travel.

'My good sir,' he said to Mr Wace, as he crossed his knees and spread his silk handkerchief over them, 'Transome may be returned, or he may not be returned - that's a question for North Loamshire; but it makes little difference to the kingdom. I don't want to say things which may put younger men out of spirits, but I believe this country has seen its best days - I do indeed.'

'I am sorry to hear it from one of your experience, Mr Nolan,' said the brewer, a large happy-looking man. 'I'd make a good fight myself before I'd leave a worse world for my boys than I've found for myself. There isn't a greater pleasure than doing a bit of planting and improving one's buildings, and investing one's money in some pretty acres of land, when it turns up here and there - land you've known from a boy. It's a nasty thought that these Radicals are to turn things round so as one can calculate on nothing. One doesn't like it for one's self, and one doesn't like it for one's neighbours. But somehow, I

believe it won't do: if we can't trust the government just now, there's providence and the good sense of the country; and there's a right in things - that's what I've always said - there's a right in things. The heavy end will get downmost. And if church and king, and every man being sure of his own, are things good for this country, there's a God above will take care of 'em.'

'It won't do, my dear sir,' said Mr Nolan - 'it won't do. When Peel and the duke turned round about the Catholics in '29, I saw it was all over with us. We could never trust ministers any more. It was to keep off a rebellion, they said; but I say it was to keep their places. They're monstrously fond of place, both of them - that I know.' Here Mr Nolan changed the crossing of his legs, and gave a deep cough, conscious of having made a point. Then he went on - 'What we want is a king with a good will of his own. If we'd had that, we shouldn't have heard what we've heard to-day; reform would never have come to this pass. When our good old King George the Third heard his ministers talking about Catholic Emancipation, he boxed their ears all round. Ah, poor soul! he did indeed, gentlemen,' ended Mr Nolan, shaken by a deep laugh of admiration.

'Well, now, that's something like a king,' said Mr Crowder, who was an eager listener.

'It was uncivil, though. How did they take it?' said Mr Timothy Rose, a 'gentleman farmer' from Leek Malton, against whose independent position nature had provided the safeguard of a spontaneous servility. His large porcine cheeks, round twinkling eyes, and thumbs habitually twirling, expressed a concentrated effort not to get into trouble, and to speak everybody fair except when they were safely out of hearing.

'Take it! they'd be obliged to take it,' said the impetuous young Joyce, a farmer of superior information. 'Have you ever heard of the king's prerogative?'

'I don't say but what I have,' said Rose, retreating. 'I've nothing against it - nothing at all.'

'No, but the Radicals have,' said young Joyce, winking. 'The prerogative is what they want to clip close. They want us to be governed by delegates from the trades-unions, who are to dictate to everybody, and make everything square to their mastery.'

'They're a pretty set, now, those delegates,' said Mr Wace, with disgust. 'I once heard two of 'em spouting away. They're a sort of fellow I'd never employ in my brewery, or anywhere else. I've seen it again and again. If a man takes to tongue-work it's all over with him.'

'Everything's wrong,' says he. That's a big text. But does he want to make everything right? Not he. He'd lose his text. 'We want every man's good,' say they. Why, they never knew yet what a man's good is. How should they? It's working for his victual - not getting a slice of other people's.'

'Ay, ay,' said young Joyce, cordially. 'I should just have liked all the delegates in the country mustered for our yeomanry to go into - that's all. They'd see where the strength of Old England lay then. You may tell what it is for a country to trust to trade when it breeds such spindling fellows as those.'

'That isn't the fault of trade, my good sir,' said Mr Nolan, who was often a little pained by the defects of provincial culture. 'Trade, properly conducted, is good for a man's constitution. I could have shown you, in my time, weavers past seventy, with all their faculties as sharp as a penknife, doing without spectacles. It's the new system of trade that's to blame: a country can't have too much trade, if it's properly managed. Plenty of sound Tories have made their fortune by trade. You've heard of Calibut & Co. - everybody has heard of Calibut. Well, sir, I knew old Mr Calibut as well as I know you. He was once a crony of mine in a city warehouse; and now, I'll answer for it, he has a larger rent-roll than Lord Wyvern. Bless your soul! his subscriptions to charities would make a fine income for a nobleman. And he's as good a Tory as I am. And as for his town establishment - why, how much butter do you think is consumed there annually?'

Mr Nolan paused, and then his face glowed with triumph as he answered his own question. 'Why, gentlemen, not less than two thousand pounds of butter during the few months the family is in town! Trade makes property, my good sir, and property is Conservative, as they say now. Calibut's son-in-law is Lord Fortinbras. He paid me a large debt on his marriage. It's all one web, sir. The prosperity of the country is one web.'

'To be sure,' said Christian, who, smoking his cigar with his chair turned away from the table, was willing to make himself agreeable in the conversation. 'We can't do without nobility. Look at France. When they got rid of the old nobles they were obliged to make new.'

'True, very true,' said Mr Nolan, who thought Christian a little too wise for his position, but could not resist the rare gift of an instance in point. 'It's the French Revolution that has done us harm here. It was the same at the end of the last century, but the war kept it off - Mr Pitt saved us. I knew Mr Pitt. I had a particular interview with him once. He joked me about getting the length of his foot. 'Mr Nolan,' said he, 'there are those on the other side of the water whose name begins with N. who would be glad to know what you know.' I was

recommended to send an account of that to the newspapers after his death, poor man! but I'm not fond of that kind of show myself.' Mr Nolan swung his upper leg a little, and pinched his lip between thumb and finger, naturally pleased with his own moderation.

'No, no, very right,' said Mr Wace, cordially. 'But you never said a truer word than that about property. If a man's got a bit of property, a stake in the country, he'll want to keep things square. Where Jack isn't safe, Tom's in danger. But that's what makes it such an uncommonly nasty thing that a man like Transome should take up with these Radicals. It's my belief he does it only to get into parliament; he'll turn round when he gets there. Come, Dibbs, there's something to put you in spirits,' added Mr Wace, raising his voice a little and looking at a guest lower down. 'You've got to vote for a Radical with one side of your mouth, and make a wry face with the other; but he'll turn round by-and-by. As Parson Jack says, he's got the right sort of blood in him.'

'I don't care two straws who I vote for,' said Dibbs, sturdily. 'I'm not going to make a wry face. It stands to reason a man should vote for his landlord. My farm's in good condition, and I've got the best pasture on the estate. The rot's never come nigh me. Let them grumble as are on the wrong side of the hedge.'

'I wonder if Jermyn'll bring him in, though,' said Mr Sircome, the great miller. 'He's an uncommon fellow for carrying things through. I know he brought me through that suit about my weir; it cost a pretty penny, but he brought me through.'

'It's a bit of a pill for him, too, having to turn Radical,' said Mr Wace. 'They say he counted on making friends with Sir Maximus, by this young one coming home and joining with Mr Philip.'

'But I'll bet a penny he brings Transome in,' said Mr Sircome. 'Folks say he hasn't got many votes hereabout; but towards Duffield, and all there, where the Radicals are, everybody's for him. Eh, Mr Christian? Come - you're at the fountainhead - what do they say about it now at the Manor?'

When general attention was called to Christian, young Joyce looked down at his own legs and touched the curves of his own hair, as if measuring his own approximation to that correct copy of a gentleman. Mr Wace turned his head to listen for Christian's answer with that tolerance of inferiority which becomes men in places of public resort.

'They think it will be a hard run between Transome and Garstin,' said Christian. 'It depends on Transome's getting plumpers.'

'Well, I know I shall not split for Garstin,' said Mr Wace. 'It's nonsense for Debarry's voters to split for a Whig. A man's either a Tory or not a Tory.'

'It seems reasonable there should be one of each side,' said Mr Timothy Rose. 'I don't like showing favour either way. If one side can't lower the poor's rates and take off the tithe, let the other try.'

'But there's this in it, Wace,' said Mr Sircome. 'I'm not altogether against the Whigs. For they don't want to go so far as the Radicals do, and when they find they've slipped a bit too far, they'll hold on all the tighter. And the Whigs have got the upper hand now, and it's no use fighting with the current. I run with the -'

Mr Sircome checked himself, looked furtively at Christian, and, to divert criticism, ended with - 'eh, Mr Nolan?'

'There have been eminent Whigs, sir. Mr Fox was a Whig,' said Mr Nolan. 'Mr Fox was a great orator. He gambled a good deal. He was very intimate with the Prince of Wales. I've seen him, and the Duke of York' too, go home by daylight with their hats crushed. Mr Fox was a great leader of the Opposition: Government requires an Opposition. The Whigs should always be in opposition, and the Tories on the ministerial side. That's what the country used to like. 'The Whigs for salt and mustard, the Tories for meat,' Mr Gottlib the banker used to say to me. Mr Gottlib was a worthy man. When there was a great run on Gottlib's bank in '16, I saw a gentleman come in with bags of gold, and say, 'Tell Mr Gottlib there's plenty more where that came from.' It stopped the run, gentlemen - it did indeed.'

This anecdote was received with great admiration, but Mr Sircome returned to the previous question.

'There now, you see, Wace - it's right there should be Whigs as well as Tories - Pitt and Fox - I've always heard them go together.'

'Well, I don't like Garstin,' said the brewer. 'I didn't like his conduct about the canal company. Of the two, I like Transome best. If a nag is to throw me, I say, let him have some blood.'

'As for blood, Wace,' said Mr Salt, the wool-factor, a religious man, who only spoke when there was a good opportunity of contradicting, 'ask my brother-in-law Labron a little about that. These Transomes are not the old blood.'

'Well, they're the oldest that's forthcoming, I suppose,' said Mr Wace, laughing. 'Unless you believe in mad old Tommy Trounsem. I wonder where that old poaching fellow is now.'

'I saw him half-drunk the other day,' said young Joyce. 'He'd got a flag-basket with hand-bills in it over his shoulder.'

'I thought the old fellow was dead,' said Mr Wace. 'Hey I why, Jermyn,' he went on merrily, as he turned round and saw the attorney entering; 'you Radical! how dare you show yourself in this Tory house? Come, this is going a bit too far. We don't mind Old Harry managing our law for us - that's his proper business from time immemorial; but -'

'But - a -' said Jermyn, smiling, always ready to carry on a joke, to which his slow manner gave the piquancy of surprise, 'if he meddles with politics he must be a Tory.'

Jermyn was not afraid to show himself anywhere in Treby. He knew many people were not exactly fond of him, but a man can do without that, if he is prosperous. A provincial lawyer in those old-fashioned days was as independent of personal esteem as if he had been a Lord Chancellor.

There was a good-humoured laugh at this upper end of the room as Jermyn seated himself at about an equal angle between Mr Wace and Christian.

'We were talking about old Tommy Trounsem; you remember him? They say he's turned up again,' said Mr Wace.

'Ah?' said Jermyn, indifferently. 'But - a - Wace - I'm very busy to-day - but I wanted to see you about that bit of land of yours at the corner of Pod's End. I've had a handsome offer for you - I'm not at liberty to say from whom - but an offer that ought to tempt you.'

'It won't tempt me,' said Mr Wace, peremptorily; 'if I've got a bit of land, I'll keep it. It's hard enough to get hereabouts.'

'Then I'm to understand that you refuse all negotiation?' said Jermyn, who had ordered a glass of sherry, and was looking round slowly as he sipped it, till his eyes seemed to rest for the first time on Christian, though he had seen him at once on entering the room.

'Unless one of the confounded railways should come. But then I'll stand out and make 'em bleed for it.'

There was a murmur of approbation; the railways were a public wrong much denounced in Treby.

'A - Mr Philip Debarry at the Manor now?' said Jermyn, suddenly questioning Christian, in a haughty tone of superiority which he often chose to use.

'No,' said Christian, 'he is expected to-morrow morning.'

'Ah! -' Jermyn paused a moment or two, and then said, 'You are sufficiently in his confidence, I think, to carry a message to him with a small document?'

'Mr Debarry has often trusted me so far,' said Christian, with much coolness; 'but if the business is yours, you can probably find some one you know better.'

There was a little winking and grimacing among those of the company who heard this answer.

'A - true - a,' said Jermyn, not showing any offence; 'if you decline. But I think, if you will do me the favour to step round to my residence on your way back, and learn the business, you will prefer carrying it yourself. At my residence, if you please - not my office.'

'O very well,' said Christian. 'I shall be very happy.' Christian never allowed himself to be treated as a servant by any one but his master, and his master treated a servant more deferentially than an equal.

'Will it be five o'clock? what hour shall we say?' said Jermyn.

Christian looked at his watch and said, 'About five I can be there.'

'Very good,' said Jermyn, finishing his sherry.

'Well - a - Wace - a - so you will hear nothing about Pod's End?'

'Not I.'

'A mere pocket-handkerchief, not enough to swear by - a -' here Jermyn's face broke into a smile - 'without a magnifying-glass.'

'Never mind. It's mine into the bowels of the earth and up to the sky. I can build the Tower of Babel on it if I like - eh, Mr Nolan?'

'A bad investment, my good sir,' said Mr Nolan, who enjoyed a certain flavour of infidelity in this smart reply, and laughed much at it in his inward way.

'See now, how blind you Tories are,' said Jermyn, rising; 'if I had been your lawyer, I'd have had you make another forty-shilling freeholder

with that land, and all in time for this election. But - a - the verbum sapientibus comes a little too late now.'

Jermyn was moving away as he finished speaking, but Mr Wace called out after him, 'We're not so badly off for voices as you are - good sound votes, that'll stand the revising barrister. Debarry at the top of the poll!'

The lawyer was already out of the doorway.