

CHAPTER III PREPARING TO BUILD

IT is the year 1835. Sheffield, in an ecclesiastical sense, is astir. There has been a clerical invasion. Mounted on horses, by stage-coaches, and on foot, a great number of strangers have entered the town. They are cleanly shaven; rolls of white linen are round their necks; and each wears a dark coat, with a ponderous collar. They are travel-stained. The faces of many are weather-beaten. It is a gathering of Methodist preachers. They have come up to Sheffield, from all parts of the kingdom, to attend the Annual Conference. There are four hundred and eighty-eight in the town. The Napoleon-like Joseph Taylor is there, of whose preaching Adam Clarke said, "It is hot, and heavy, like a tailor's goose." The tall form of the scholarly Thomas Gallard may be seen sauntering through the streets. The oldest preacher in the body, James Wood, has put in an appearance. For sixty-two years he has been a preacher in the Methodist Connexion. The erect and dignified Richard Reece is on his way to Carver Street Chapel. Robert Newton and Jabez Bunting again clasp each other by the hand. No wonder that some of the preachers look anxious, and some are sad. We see them in groups, discussing the situation. The Connexion is in a disturbed state. Methodism is being weighed in the balance. No heart is sadder than the heart of the gifted and able John Stephens. His son, Joseph Rayner, has resigned his position as a preacher, and has not "quietly withdrawn." *The Christian Advocate*, edited by another son, is blowing a militant blast. Dr. Warren has taken up arms against the Connexion. A revolutionary body has met in Sheffield to demand certain changes at the hands of the Conference. Methodism is "beset behind and before," and heavy hands are laid upon her. Is it any wonder that the minds of many of the preachers are perplexed, and their hearts sad? The Conference is a long one. It is no time of jubilation. For twenty-one days the brethren sit in solemn conclave, and then depart.

Not many days after, another meeting, of a very different character, is held. It is not to consider questions of spiritual, but of political import. It is not to bind up the wounds of a stricken Church, but to give a new Colony a start – a Colony in which three sons of the Rev. John Stephens, to whom we have just referred, are to take a prominent part. The locality is London, and the place of meeting Exeter Hall. Colonel Torrens, M.P., is in the chair. The Duke of Wellington is not able to attend. His apology is read. There are no anxious faces here, nor sad hearts. It is a jovial gathering. A dinner is being given to Captain John Hindmarsh, R.N., whose "appointment as Governor of the new Colony of South Australia His Majesty has most graciously approved." Amongst those present is George Fife Angas,¹ to whom South Australia owes much. The "health of the Duke of Wellington, and other members of the House of Lords who supported the South Australian Colonisation Bill," is proposed. The members who supported the Bill in the Lower House are honoured in the same way, with "three times three." It is a most enthusiastic gathering. The cheering is "immense." All present seem to be of opinion that the new Colony about to be established in South Australia will be a great success. The chairman speaks of South Australia as a land "where the climate of Paradise appears to have survived the Fall." In words, more wise, he says: "Britons cannot compel all nations to receive British goods more freely, but they can plant new nations to become customers. They can open unlimited markets in the now boundless forest.... In the growing markets of Australia, England will find not only increasing supplies of the most valuable materials, but also an increasing demand for her fabrics." In conclusion, he says: "The Colony of South Australia may be considered as now established. Biddings have already been made for the whole – and for more than the whole – of the land required by Act of Parliament to

¹ See *Life of George Fife Angas*, by Edwin Hodder.

be disposed of before the first expedition shall depart. In a few weeks the first emigrants will be departing from these shores; they will go to eat pleasant bread in a pleasant land, - at all events the prayers of the present company will go with them.... Let their ways be ways of pleasantness, and all their paths be peace.”

After the lapse of more than sixty years, the descendants of the first emigrants can smile at some of these post-prandial remarks. If Colonel Torrens (after whom our city river is named) had been caught in a South Australian dust-storm, or had sat in a shepherd’s hut with the temperature 114 degrees in the shade, he would have had grave doubts as to whether “the climate of South Australia had survived the Fall.” Probably he would think that it had come under a double curse.

But we are in Exeter Hall, sixty-three years ago. Another speaker rises. He tells the company that the first batch of emigrants are “a body of men who, in numbers, in intelligence, in respectability, in everything which constitutes religious and moral worth, far surpass any body of Englishmen who ever thought of settling in a distant Colony since the days of William Penn.... Gentlemen,” he exclaims, “let us drink to the health, happiness, and prosperity of the emigrants to South Australia. May their community long flourish, a bright image of the moral, social, and political greatness of the parent country, unaffected by any of those evils which are inseparable from old societies.”

Another speaker is Mr. John Morphett. He rose to distinction in the new land, and lived to a grand old age. The writer remembers him as a tall, aristocratic-looking man. He became President of the South Australian Legislative Council, and was knighted by the Queen. He has gone the way of all flesh, but his memory is perpetuated in Morphett Street and Morphett Vale.

He responds on behalf of the emigrants. “In heart,” he says, “I am now a South Australian.”

The Governor-elect is now on his feet – no ordinary man. The memory of such brings a flush of pride to the cheek, and makes an English heart, though born in Australia, beat quick. He had fought under Nelson at the Nile and Trafalgar. Such was his gallantry that Nelson summoned him to the deck, and thanked him in the presence of the officers and crew. “As Governor of South Australia,” he says, “I will continue to do my duty.” The Aborigines are not forgotten. “My power as Governor,” he says, “will be of little avail without being seconded by the exertions of the colonists. I therefore call upon them to second me in this good work, and, above all things, to prevent the Aborigines from imbibing from them a taste for that bane of humanity – spirituous liquors; and I consider the most effective way the colonists can do this will be by setting them an example in forming one vast temperance society.”

Alas! such good advice, in relation to some of the colonists, was thrown away. The Aborigines suffered much from their contact with unprincipled and lecherous whites. They soon learned to drink, swear, gamble, and to commit baser sins. While as yet the first settlers dwelt in tents and bough-booths on the shores of Holdfast Bay, notices were fastened to the gum-trees offering a reward for information as to the persons who supplied drink to the Aborigines. To-day they are a weak, degraded, decimated race, doomed to speedy extinction.

The first batch of emigrants did not leave England so soon as Colonel Torrens anticipated. It was not till February 1836 that the two first vessels – the *John Pirie* and the *Duke of York* – left the old land for these shores. These vessels were sent out by private enterprise. They belonged to the newly-formed South Australian Company.