

CHAPTER - II

The outstanding facts and major formative influences of Disraeli's life.

Benjamin Disraeli's father, Isaac D'Israeli was of Italian Sephardi Jewish origin. His influence on the son was profound and Disraeli has portrayed him in two of his novels, Vivian Grey and Contarini Fleming. He was an intellectual after the eighteenth century pattern, with literary tastes, and on friendly terms with many of the literary personalities of the time such as Scott, Byron, Southey and Samuel Rogers. He was the author of several publications, and his "Essay on the Literary Character" was specially praised by Byron. Thus from his very childhood, Disraeli was familiar with the name of Byron, for whom he developed a most passionate admiration. Byron's works and his personality exercised a powerful influence in shaping Disraeli's mind and attitudes, especially in the 30's. "Byron was the symbol of adventure, liberation, romance and mystery. His extraordinary combination of literary genius, worldly cynicism, theatrical melancholy, aristocratic disdain and political liberalism, together with the rumour not only of a multitude of sexual triumphs but also of what used to be called 'nameless' vices, had made him even in his lifetime the

object of perennial fascination which he has remained ever since"¹
Disraeli paid his final homage to Byron by writing Venetia in
1836.

At the age of six, Disraeli was sent to school at Islington. It was here that he first became conscious of being a Jew, and different from the other boys, because he had to stand along with another Jewish boy at the back of the Hall during prayers.

In 1817, when he was about twelve years old, his father was advised by a friend to get his children baptised. This was a crucial decision, since it enabled Disraeli to contest for Parliament. As a Jew he would not have taken the oath of allegiance until 1858. After he became a Christian, he was sent to another school in Epping Forest which was meant for the sons of prosperous but unaristocratic parents. Probably Eton would not have welcomed a recently converted Jew. He studied Latin and Greek but his knowledge of the classics was regarded as deficient, though he did acquire some mastery over Latin. He read Lucian with relish and his influence is manifest in the two short tales, Ixion in Heaven and the Infernal Marriage.

His desire to lead, to assert his power and to influence others, led him to organise theatrical performances in the school. This was against the rules. The school monitor complained, there was a fight and Disraeli, though smaller and less strong, came

1. R. Blake, Disraeli, p. 51.

out victorious. However, the headmaster requested his father to take away his son from the school. The school experiences that Disraeli has ascribed to his heroes, especially Vivian Grey and Contarini Fleming, are to a large extent drawn from Disraeli's own childhood memories. "Like both his heroes, we may surmise, he was daring and impetuous, some times perhaps mutinous and pugnacious, keenly sensitive and warmly affectionate, a leader when he chose to lead, but somewhat isolated, and much given to reverie and castle building"¹.

He spent the next few years in his father's library, reading voraciously, but did not go to Oxford or Cambridge. In the Preface to the HUGHENDEN edition of his novels in 1870, Disraeli wrote:

"Born in a library and trained from early childhood by learned men who did not share the passions and the prejudices of our political and social life, I had imbibed on some subjects conclusion different from those which generally prevail, and especially with reference to the history of our country". He is referring here to the Utilitarian philosophy and the Whig interpretation of history which were the accepted orthodoxy of the day. He was also not interested in contemporary literature. His favourite reading consisted of the classics of Latin and Italian Renaissance and English literature of the eighteenth century.

1. M & B, Vol. I, p. 24-25.

A note in Sir Stafford Northcote's Diary dated July 11, 1880, throws an interesting light on Disraeli's literary tastes:

"After dinner we chiefly talked books; the Chief is always at his best in his library, and seemed thoroughly to enjoy a good ramble over literature. He was contemptuous over Browning (of whom, however, he had read very little) and the other poetasters of the day, none of whom he thought would live except Tennyson, who he said was a poet though not of a high order - - - - He was very laudatory of Theocritus. He used to be fond of Sophocles, and to carry him about, but did not much care for Aeschylus. Euripides had a good deal of fun in him. Lucian was a great favourite - - - - - He was very fond of Quintilian - - - Horace, of course, he delighted in, and Virgil grew on one"¹; - - -

It was perhaps the absence of a University education that made Disraeli deficient in scientific understanding. Hence the famous 'Ape and Angel' speech in the Sheldonian Theatre in 1860 and his general opposition to Darwin and his theory of Evolution.

His father persuaded him to become an apprentice to a firm of solicitors. He remained there for a while, but soon gave up the attempt. The story is told that "he was found reading Chaucer during business hours in the solicitor's office

1. Quoted in M & B, Vol. II, p. 1455.

and his business partners concluded that nature had not intended him to be a lawyer"¹, and that he should be allowed to devote himself to literature. Soon after in 1826, he published his first novel, Vivian Grey. The book created a storm, and Disraeli acquired a reputation for cynicism, double-dealing and insincerity which dogged him for the rest of his life.

In 1828, Disraeli published a novelette, 'Popanilla', a satire on contemporary society. He had also been seriously ill, suffering from some kind of nervous affliction, which the doctors were unable to diagnose properly. He has referred to this ailment in Contarini Fleming.

In 1830, he went on a grand tour of the Mediterranean countries and the Middle East. This journey was one of the formative experiences of his life and was directly responsible for shaping many of his later attitudes on critical issues of foreign and imperial policy, for example, the purchase of the Suez Canal shares in 1875, his consistent support of Turkey, and his admiration for the Turks. He was "enraptured with the Turks, took to wearing a turban, smoked a pipe six feet long, and spent his days outstretched on the divan"². He would go about with his thumbs stuck in the armholes of his gaudy waistcoat, prefacing each remark with a drawling "Allah-o-Akbar" (God is great) to remind every one of his Oriental experiences.

1. M & B, Vol. I, p. 44.

2. A. Maurois, Disraeli, p. 48.

His intoxication with the glamour of the East is manifest in many of his novels also. The oriental atmosphere of Contarini Fleming, Alroy, Tancred and Lothair was the direct outcome of this tour. The finest picturesque and romantic descriptions in these novels were also the recollection of these wanderings and musings. "His mystical belief in the mysterious heritage of his race, his romantic love of high-sounding historic names, his exotic imagination, all were heightened by the week which he passed in Jerusalem"¹.

By 1832, Disraeli had launched himself in London society as a dandy. He shone in feminine society and became popular because of his novels, his good looks, his exotic style of dress and amusing conversation. "He dressed with extravagant refinement, a coat of black velvet, ruffles, and black silk stockings, with red clocks"². In the summer of 1833, he became involved in an illicit love-affair with Henrietta, the wife of Sir Francis Sykes. He has immortalised his emotions and feelings in Henrietta Temple which he published in 1837. He met the influential Lord Lyndhurst a former Tory Lord Chancellor, at Henrietta's and "feminine machinery was set into motion to get him into Parliament"³. Throughout his life, as in the case of so many of his heroes, it was women who helped and encouraged him in all

1. R. Blake, Disraeli, p. 67.

2. A. Maurois, Disraeli, p. 28.

3. B.R. Jarman, The Young Disraeli, p. 233.

the crucial moments of his career. An uneasy relationship with his mother led to a craving for a mother-substitute. At first, it was his sister, Sarah, who gave him all the love and understanding that he so desperately needed. After the death of her fiance in 1831, she decided to devote her life entirely to her brother. In two of his novels Alroy and Endymion, Disraeli has painted the picture of a very devoted sister. Henrietta Sykes, his mistress, used to sign herself as 'your mother' in her love-letters. Disraeli's wife, Mary Anne, was twelve years older than him. She was a widow with a modest fortune and a house in London. He married her in 1838. It was whispered that Disraeli married her for money because during this period of his life he was perpetually in debt and harrassed by creditors. However, he was singularly happy in his married life. Mary Anne gave him all the love, devotion and idolatory that he craved for, and Disraeli dedicated Sybil to "one whose sweet voice has often encouraged, and whose taste and judgement have ever guided, its pages; the most severe of critics but - a perfect wife!"

Another devoted friend was Mrs. Brydges Williams, whom he met in 1851. She behaved like a fairy god-mother and bequeathed all her property to him when she died in 1863. There were other women also whose sympathetic appreciation had cheered and sustained him in the course of his early life, such as Mrs. Benjamin Austen, who copied out the manuscript of Vivian Grey in order to maintain the secrecy of the author, Mrs. Norton, Lady Blessington and Lady Londonderry.

After the death of his wife in 1872, Disraeli lavished his affection on Lady Bradford who was fifty-five, and her sister, Lady Chesterfield, who was seventy-one. He wrote eleven hundred letters to Lady Bradford between 1873 and 1881. "Disraeli's love of Lady Bradford, although essentially romantic, was wholly of the heart and sensibility, and devoid of passion"¹. And strangest of all and in a sense the most important of these friendships was that with the Queen. He called her 'The Faery', and "she expanded to the rays of Disraeli's devotion like a flower in the sun"². His success in the political arena was to a great extent due to the fact that a woman occupied the throne of England. "He made use of this susceptible woman as he could not have used a man, to boost his imperial policies, but no King-Emperor could have fired his oriental imagination like a Queen-Empress"³.

Disraeli's political career began in 1832. He fought five elections between 1832 and 1837 and was successful only in the fifth attempt. Apart from fighting elections, Disraeli also continued with his literary activities during this period. Alroy, though begun earlier, was published in 1833. Venetia and Henrietta Temple came out in 1836 and 1837. He also contributed some short stories to Lady Blessington's 'Book of Beauty'.

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1. Sir George Stapledon, Disraeli and the New Age, p. 152.
 2. L. Strachey, Queen Victoria, p. 211.
 3. E. Longford, Victoria R.I., p. 401.

There was one significant piece of political writing, A Vindication of the British Constitution (1837). It is worthy of notice because it had a literary outcome some seven years later. The political Trilogy is a fictional recast and a dramatic presentation of the political ideas contained in this essay. Two light satires, Ixion in Heaven and The Infernal Marriage were written between 1832 and 1834.

It was characteristic of Disraeli that all his successes in life were founded on previous failures. Peel's refusal to offer him a place in the Cabinet in 1841 was responsible for the formation of the Young England group and, with the publication of Coningsby (1844), for the birth of the political novel in England. "By a glorious fluke, Peel gave this chance, and Disraeli took it"¹. Sybil and Tancred followed in 1845 and 1847, and then there were no more novels for the next twenty three years. He wrote a remarkable political biography, Lord George Bentinck in 1851, and he contributed regularly to a political journal called the Press between 1853 and 1855; but after this he became immersed in political activity until 1870, when he again enjoyed some leisure and produced Lothair.

One quality in Disraeli stands above everything else - an obsessive, irrepressible desire to succeed, the determination to reach the top. He had written in a letter to Sharon Turner,

1. A. Quiller-Couch, Charles Dickens and other Victorians, p. 197.

a family friend, in 1828. "I am one of those to whom moderate reputation can give no pleasure - - - the scorn for a 'moderate reputation' is the quintessence of Disraeli, indeed the key to his character and career"¹. He first tried to acquire wealth and power by speculating in shares of mining companies of South America, but failed and found himself heavily in debt at the age of twenty. He then thought that he would acquire fame as a writer. He entertained high hopes when he published Contarini Fleming (1832) which he regarded as his masterpiece, but it was not well received. He wrote an epic poem on the subject of the French Revolution "The Revolutionary Epick" (1834) and imagined that he would rival Byron, if not Homer, Virgil, Dante and Milton but the poem was a failure. He then tried his hand at tragedy and set to work on Alarcos. In a letter to Mrs. Wyndham Lewis he wrote, "I have lost all heart for my tragedy. I always aim in all I do at the highest. I see no use in writing tragedies unless they be as fine as Shakespeare's"². He did try to imitate Shakespeare, but he failed to get it accepted for production on the stage. There is the story of the famous encounter with Melbourne at Mrs. Norton's in 1834. Melbourne met Disraeli for the first time and casually, asked him: 'Well now, tell me what do you want to be!' 'I want to be Prime Minister', replied Disraeli. Melbourne was somewhat taken aback by this answer but he coolly tried to put the young man in his place. 'No

1. R. Blake, Disraeli, p. 54.

2. M & B, Vol. I, p. 439.

chance of that in our time. It is all arranged and settled - - - Nobody can compete with Stanley - - - But you must put all these foolish notions out of your head; they won't do at all. Stanley will be the next Prime Minister, you will see'¹.

However, soon after getting elected into Parliament, Disraeli began to establish a reputation in the political field through sheer brilliance. He had courage and originality, unbounded cleverness, and that most dangerous though effective weapon - the power of sarcasm. The potato famine in Ireland compelled Sir Robert Peel to repeal the Corn Laws in 1846, leading to his resignation and to a split in the ranks of the Tories. Disraeli became the leader of the Opposition and his career in Parliament became a quick succession of honours after 1847. He bade farewell to fiction for almost 25 years and was plunged in active politics. He became the leader of the Protectionist party in the House of Commons, and in the next four years, he reconstructed the Conservative party with infinite tact and patience. He became Chancellor of the Exchequer in 1852 and again in 1858 and 1866. The Reform Bill of 1867 was one of his greatest triumphs. At last in 1868, he became the Prime Minister of England in spite of Lord Melbourne's gloomy warning. He had climbed to the "top of the greasy pole"². His industry, talent and surpassing ability had been ultimately recognised by the

1. Quoted from W.M. Torrens, Memoirs of Viscount Melbourne by R. Blake, Disraeli, p. 114.

2. Fraser, Disraeli and His Day, p. 52.

country at large, though he continued to face the bitterest opposition from his enemies both on personal and political grounds. Shaftesbury made this comment when he learnt that Disraeli had become Premier: "Disraeli, Prime Minister! He is a Hebrew; this is a good thing. He is a man sprung from an inferior station, another good thing in these days, as showing the liberality of our institutions, but he is a leper, without principle, without feeling, without regard to anything, human or Divine, beyond his personal ambition"¹. Gladstone disliked him intensely, while Disraeli referred to him as 'A.V.' (arch-Villain) in his letters to Lady Bradford. But the Queen had become one of his most ardent supporters and admirers.

In the General Election of 1874, the Tory party was returned with an overwhelming majority, and it was all due to the skill with which Disraeli had laboured to organise it. "He returned to office no longer the dubious commander of an insufficient host, but with drums beating and flags flying, a conquering hero, and as a conquering hero, Victoria welcomed her new Prime Minister"². During his period in Office Disraeli's government undertook several measures of social reform. Thus some of the aspirations of Sybil and Young England were translated into legislative action. Gorst expounding Disraeli's policy, wrote: "The principle of Tory Democracy is that all government exists

1. Quoted from G.W.E. Russell, Prime Ministers and Some Others by E.J. Feuchtwanger, Disraeli, Democracy and the Tory Party, p. 22.

2. Lytton Strachey, Queen Victoria, p. 207.

solely for the good of the governed: that Church and King, Lords and Commons and all other public institutions are to be maintained so far only as they promote the welfare and happiness of the common people"¹. In 1876, he was elevated to the House of Lords with the title of the Earl of Beaconsfield, and he continued to lead the Conservative party with his usual brilliance and ability.

His success was indeed phenomenal, considering the impediments that he had to face at every stage of his career. Like so many of his heroes, it was a triumph of the will. Yet Disraeli always remained an outsider because of his Jewish origin. He also held rather unorthodox and startling views on the subject of race, which he elaborated in his novels, specially in Coningsby and Tancred. "All is race, there is no other truth"², says Sidonia. Disraeli put forward the theory that the Semitic race is superior to all other races and Christianity is completed Judaism. He evolved a creed which was acceptable neither to the orthodox Jews nor the orthodox Christians but he believed in it with all sincerity. It suited him to blur as far as possible the differences between the Jewish and Christian faiths because he wanted to vindicate his own Jewish descent, and to proclaim that the Hebrews instead of being treated with contempt, ought to be specially favoured. He expressed his belief in race on other

1. Letter to The Times quoted by M and B, Vol. II, p. 709.

2. Tancred, p. 153.

occasions also. In an incident in China, in which Canton had been bombarded by the British, Palmerston had justified it and said, "An insolent barbarian wielding authority at Canton, had violated the British flag"¹. But Disraeli thought that China had a very ancient civilisation and the British should deal with it in a courteous manner and not treat the Chinese as barbarians. Similarly, during the Indian Mutiny in 1857, Disraeli insisted that it was a national revolt. He refused to join in the cries for vengeance on the mutineers and believed that most of the details of horrors were manufactured. To the Englishman, "the slaughter or rape of white women by black men was not merely savagery but sacrilege"². But Disraeli's reactions were very different. He made a particular study of India and her problems. "To one persuaded of the vital importance of race, this land of ancient races made a special appeal"³. In a letter to Lord Salisbury (Dec. 13, 1875), Disraeli wrote, "Nothing is more disgusting than the habit of our officers speaking always of the inhabitants of India - many of them descended from the great races - as 'niggers'. It is ignorant and brutal - and surely most mischievous. We ought to do something"⁴.

Disraeli's interest in religion was more political than personal. He believed in the union between the Church and the State, but unlike Gladstone and Peel he was not a stalwart

1. M and B, Vol. I, p. 1474.

2. Raymond - The Alien Patriot, p. 208.

3. M and B, Vol. I, p. 1484.

4. M and B, Vol. II, p. 772.

churchman. The Church held a fascination for him as a grand historical tradition and as a bulwark against the growing materialism of the age. Upto the 40's he was sympathetic towards the Oxford Movement and the Roman Catholics. In several of his novels, the leading characters are Roman Catholics. Their pageantry and their mysticism appealed to his romantic nature, but his views underwent a change when they began to develop Romeward tendencies. In Tancred he had intended to enlighten the church upon its "duties - - - as a main remedial agency in our present state", but this purpose seems to have fizzled out, and instead, he concentrated upon the close connection between Christianity and Judaism. The Papal aggression of 1850 convinced Disraeli of the essential Protestantism of the British character and alienated his sympathies with the Roman Catholics. Endymion and Lothair illustrate these feelings at great length. In spite of his deep concern for the sufferings of the poor Disraeli did not display any interest in the Evangelical Movement. The aristocratic families in his novels also do not have any Evangelical leanings, though Disraeli supported Lord Shaftesbury's factory legislation and his philanthropic activities and Shaftesbury was very sympathetic towards the Evangelicals. The most likely reason could be Disraeli's antipathy towards the middle class, for the strength of the Evangelical Party in the Victorian Age lay in the well-to-do middle classes. In his

unfinished novel Falconet, there is an obvious touch of satire in the description of an Evangelical household, supposed to have been modelled after Gladstone's family.

As a staunch Christian, Gladstone reacted very strongly to the Bulgarian atrocities, while Disraeli remained somewhat skeptical about them, and continued to support Turkey. "The more Turcophobe Gladstone became, the more Russophobe was Disraeli"¹. The Queen further complicated the situation, by displaying openly her partiality for Disraeli and her dislike for his rival, Gladstone. It was not only in their attitude towards religion that Disraeli and Gladstone differed from one another. During Disraeli's last term of office, their relations were characterised by a bitterness and animosity, rarely exhibited so openly in public life, and the antagonism was even more pronounced amongst their respective supporters.

In Endymion, Disraeli had covered the political background upto 1855, while Lothair is set between the years 1866 and 1868. He started yet another novel Falconet, of which he had written only nine chapters when he died in 1881. The hero of this novel was modelled after Gladstone, and Disraeli would have given us another brilliant political novel which would have taken us right up to the eighties.

1. R. Blake, Disraeli, p. 607.

His death in April 1881, was deeply mourned by the nation. The Queen sent a wreath of primroses, with the inscription, "His favourite flower", and in subsequent years, a Conservative League was founded with the title of the Primrose League. Glowing tributes were paid to him, even by his enemies. He was compared to Chatham and to Dr. Johnson.

"Unlike as Disraeli was in most respects to the great Tory of a hundred years before him, Dr. Johnson, he resembled him in being a unique figure of extraordinary - - - and perennial human interest; one of those men about whose personality and performance the curiosity of the world remains ever active"¹.

1. M & B, Vol. II, p. 340.