

hopes and fears of the inhabitants of South Europe. Through all the earlier part of Elizabeth's reign, the menace of the Spanish Empire brooded low on the southern horizon, and a responsive mutter of storm sounded now and again from the north, where Mary Stuart reigned over men's hearts, if not their homes; and lovers of secular England shook their heads and were silent as they thought of their tiny country, so rent with internal strife, and ringed with danger.

For Great Keynes, however, as for most English villages and towns at this time, secular affairs were so deeply and intricately interwoven with ecclesiastical matters that none dared decide on the one question without considering its relation to the other; and ecclesiastical affairs, too, touched them more personally than any other, since every religious change scored a record of itself presently within the church that was as familiar to them as their own cottages.

On none had the religious changes fallen with more severity than on the Maxwell family that lived in the Hall, at the upper and southern end of the green. Old Sir Nicholas, though his convictions had survived the tempest of unrest and trouble that had swept over England, and he had remained a convinced and a stubborn Catholic, yet his spiritual system was sore and inflamed within him. To his simple and obstinate soul it was an irritating puzzle as to how any man could pass from the old to a new faith, and he had been known to lay his whip across the back of a servant who had professed a desire to try the new religion.

His wife, a stately lady, a few years younger than himself, did what she could to keep her lord quiet, and to save him from incurring by his indiscretion any further penalties beyond the enforced journeys before the Commission, and the fines inflicted on all who refused to attend their parish church. So the old man devoted himself to his estates and the further improvement of the house and gardens, and to the inculcation of sound religious principles into the minds of his two sons who were living at home with their parents; and strove to hold his tongue, and his hand, in public.