

CATHARINE FURZE

BY

MARK RUTHERFORD

EDITED BY HIS FRIEND

REUBEN SHAPCOTT

T. FISHER UNWIN

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<i>First Edition</i>	. .	1893
<i>Second Impression</i>		1894
<i>Third</i>	„	1894
<i>Fourth</i>	„	1894
<i>Fifth</i>	„	1896
<i>Sixth</i>	„	1904
<i>Seventh</i>	„	1904
<i>Eighth</i>	„	1905
<i>Ninth</i>	„	1907
<i>Tenth</i>	„	1913

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CHAPTER I.

IT was a bright, hot, August Saturday in the market town of Eastthorpe, in the eastern Midlands, in the year 1840. Eastthorpe lay about five miles on the western side of the Fens, in a very level country on the banks of a river, broad and deep, but with only just sufficient fall to enable its long-lingering waters to reach the sea. It was an ancient market town, with a six-arched stone bridge, and with a High Street from which three or four smaller and narrower streets connected by courts and alleys diverged at right angles. In the middle of the town was the church, an immense building, big enough to hold half Eastthorpe, and celebrated for its beau-

tiful spire and its **peal** of eight bells. Round the church lay the churchyard, fringed with huge elms, and in the Abbey Close, as it was called, which was the outer girdle of the churchyard on three sides, the fourth side of the square being the High Street, there lived in 1840 the principal doctor, the lawyer, the parson, and two aged gentlewomen with some property, who were daughters of one of the former partners in the bank, had been born in Eastthorpe, and had scarcely ever quitted it. Here also were a young ladies' seminary and an ancient grammar school for the education of forty boys, sons of freemen of the town. The houses in the Close were not of the same class as the rest ; they were mostly old red brick, with white sashes, and they all had gardens, long, narrow, and shady, which, on the south side of the Close, ran down to the river. One of these houses was even older, black-timbered, gabled, plastered, the sole remains, saving the church, of Eastthorpe as it was in the reign of Henry the Eighth.

Just beyond the church, going from the bridge, the High Street was so wide that the houses on either side were separated by a space of over two

hundred feet. This elongated space was the market-place. In the centre was the Moot Hall, a quaint little building, supported on oak pillars, and in the shelter underneath the farmers assembled on market day. All round the Moot Hall, and extending far up and down the street, were cattle-pens and sheep-pens, which were never removed. Most of the shops were still bow-windowed, with small panes of glass, but the first innovation, indicative of the new era at hand, had just been made. The druggist, as a man of science and advanced ideas, had replaced his bow-window with plate-glass, had put a cornice over it, had stuccoed his bricks, and had erected a kind of balustrade of stucco, so as to hide as much as possible the attic windows, which looked over, meekly protesting. Nearly opposite the Moot Hall was the Bell Inn, the principal inn in the town. There were other inns, respectable enough, such as the Bull, a little higher up, patronised by the smaller commercial travellers and farmers, but the entrance passage to the Bull had sand on the floor, and carriers made it a house of call. To the Bell the two coaches came which went through Eastthorpe, and there

they changed horses. Both the Bull and the Bell had market dinners, but at the Bell the charge was three-and-sixpence; sherry was often drunk, and there the steward to the Honourable Mr. Eaton, the principal landowner, always met the tenants. The Bell was Tory and the Bull was Whig, but no stranger of respectability, Whig or Tory, visiting Eastthorpe could possibly hesitate about going to the Bell, with its large gilded device projecting over the pathway, with its broad archway at the side always freshly gravelled, and its handsome balcony on the first floor, from which the Tory county candidates, during election times, addressed the free and independent electors and cattle.

Eastthorpe was a malting town, and down by the water were two or three large malthouses. The view from the bridge was not particularly picturesque, but it was pleasant, especially in summer, when the wind was south-west. The malthouses and their cowls, the wharves and the gaily painted sailing barges alongside, the fringe of slanting willows turning the silver-gray sides of their foliage towards the breeze, the island in

the middle of the river with bigger willows, the large expanse of sky, the soft clouds distinct in form almost to the far distant horizon, and, looking eastwards, the illimitable distance towards the fens and the sea—all this made up a landscape, more suitable perhaps to some persons than rock or waterfall, although no picture had ever been painted of it, and nobody had ever come to see it.

Such was Eastthorpe. For hundreds of years had the shadow of St. Mary's swept slowly over the roofs underneath it, and, of all those years, scarcely a line of its history survived, save what was written in the churchyard or in the church registers. The town had stood for the Parliament in the days of the Civil War, and there had been a skirmish in the place; but who fought in it, who were killed in it, and what the result was, nobody knew. Half a dozen old skulls of much earlier date and of great size were once found in a gravel pit two miles away, and were the subject of much talk, some taking them for Romans, some for Britons, some for Saxons, and some for Danes. As it was impossible to be sure if they were Christian, they could not be put in consecrated

ground ; they were therefore included in an auction of dead and live stock, and were bought by the doctor. Surnames survived in Eastthorpe with singular pertinacity, for it was remote from the world, but what was the relationship between the scores of Thaxtons, for example, whose deaths were inscribed on the tombstones, some of them all awry and weather-worn, and the Thaxtons of 1840, no living Thaxton could tell, every spiritual trace of them having disappeared more utterly than their bones. Their bones, indeed, did not disappear, and were a source of much trouble to the sexton, for in digging a new grave they came up to the surface in quantities, and had to be shovelled in and covered up again, so that the bodily remains of successive generations were jumbled together, and Puritan and Georgian Thaxtons were mixed promiscuously with their descendants. Nevertheless, Eastthorpe had really had a history. It had known victory and defeat love, hatred, intrigue, hope, despair, and all the passions, just as Elizabeth, King Charles, Cromwell, and Queen Anne knew them, but they were not recorded.

It was a bright, hot, August Saturday, as we have said, and it was market day. Furthermore, it was half-past two in the afternoon, and the guests at Mr. Furze's had just finished their dinner. Mr. Furze was the largest ironmonger in Eastthorpe, and sold not only ironmongery, but ploughs and all kinds of agricultural implements. At the back of the shop was a small foundry where all the foundry work for miles round Eastthorpe was done. It was Mr. Furze's practice always to keep a kind of open house on Saturday, and on this particular day, at half-past two, Mr. Bellamy, Mr. Chandler, Mr. Gosford, and Mr. Furze were drinking their whiskey-and-water and smoking their pipes in Mr. Furze's parlour. The first three were well-to-do farmers, and with them the whiskey-and-water was not a pretence. Mr. Furze was a tradesman, and of a different build. Strong tobacco and whiskey at that hour and in that heat were rather too much for him, and he played with his pipe and drank very slowly. The conversation had subsided for a while under the influence of the beef, Yorkshire pudding, beer, and spirits, when Mr. Bellamy observed—

"Old Bartlett's widow still a-livin' up at the Croft?"

"Yes," said Mr. Gosford, after filling his pipe again and pausing for at least a minute, "Bartlett's dead."

"Bartlett wur a slow-coach," observed Mr. Chandler, after another pause of a minute, "so wur his mare. I mind me I wur behind his mare about five year ago last Michaelmas, and I wur well-nigh perished. I wur a-goin' to give her a poke with my stick, and old Bartlett says, 'Doan't hit her, doan't hit her; yer can't alter her.'"

The three worthy farmers roared with laughter Mr. Furze smiling gently.

"That was a good 'un," said Mr. Bellamy.

"Ah," replied Chandler, "I mind that as well as if it wur yesterday."

Mr. Bellamy at this point had to leave, and Mr. Furze was obliged to attend to his shop. Gosford and Chandler, however, remained, and Gosford continued the subject of Bartlett's widow.

"What's she a-stayin' on for up there?"

"Old Bartlett's left her a goodish bit."

"She wur younger than he."

A dead silence of some minutes.

"She ain't a-goin' to take the Croft on herself," observed Gosford.

"Them beasts of the squire's," replied Chandler, "fetched a goodish lot. Scaled just over ninety stone apiece."

"Why doan't you go in for the widow, Chandler?"

Mr. Chandler was a widower.

"Eh!" (with a nasal tone and a smile)—"bit too much for me."

"Too much? Why, there ain't above fourteen stone of her. Keep yer warm o' nights up at your cold place."

Mr. Chandler took the pipe out of his mouth, put it inside the fender, compressed his lips, rubbed his chin, and looked up to the ceiling.

"Well, I must be a-goin'."

"I suppose I must too," and they both went their ways, to meet again at tea-time.

At five punctually all had again assembled, the additions to the party being Mrs. Furze and her daughter Catharine, a young woman of nineteen. Mrs. Furze was not an Eastthorpe lady; she came

from Cambridge, and Mr. Furze had first seen her when she was on a visit in Eastthorpe. Her father was a draper in Cambridge, which was not only a much bigger place than Eastthorpe, but had a university, and Mrs. Furze talked about the university familiarly, so that, although her education had been slender, a university flavour clung to her, and the farmers round Eastthorpe would have been quite unable to determine the difference between her and a senior wrangler, if they had known what a senior wrangler was.

"Ha," observed Mr. Gosford, when they were seated, "I wur sayin', Mrs. Furze, to Chandler as he ought to go in for old Bartlett's widow. Now what do *you* think? Wouldn't they make a pretty pair?" and he twisted Chandler's shoulders round a little till he faced Mrs. Furze.

"Don't you be a fool, Gosford," said Chandler in good temper, but, as he disengaged himself, he upset his tea on Mrs. Furze's carpet.

"Really, Mr. Gosford," replied Mrs. Furze, with some dignity and asperity, "I am no judge in such matters. They are best left to the persons concerned."

"No offence, ma'am, no offence."

Mrs. Furze was not quite a favourite with her husband's friends, and he knew it, but he was extremely anxious that their dislike to her should not damage his business relationships with them. So he endeavoured to act as mediator.

"No doubt, my dear, no doubt, but at the same time there is no reason why Mr. Gosford should not make any suggestion which may be to our friend Chandler's advantage."

But Mr. Gosford was checked, and did not pursue the subject. Catharine sat next to him.

"Mr. Gosford, when may I come to Moat Farm again?"

"Lord, my dear, whenever you like; you know that. Me and Mrs. G. is always glad to see you. *Whenever you please*," and Mr. Gosford instantly recovered the good-humour which Mrs. Furze had suppressed.

"Don't forget us," chimed in Mr. Bellamy. "We'll turn out your room and store apples in it if you don't use it oftener."

"Now, Mr. Bellamy," said Catharine, holding up her finger at him, "you'll be sick of me at last.

You've forgotten when I had that bad cold at your house, and was in bed there for a week, and what a bother I was to Mrs. Bellamy."

"Bother!" cried Bellamy—"bother! Lord have mercy on us! why the missus was sayin' when you talked about bother, my missus says, 'I'd sooner have Catharine here, and me have tea up there with her, notwithstanding there must be a fire upstairs and I've had to send Lucy to the infirmary with a whitlow on her thumb—yes, I would, than be at a many tea-parties I know.'"

Mrs. Furze gave elaborate tea-parties, and was uncomfortably uncertain whether or not the shaft was intended for her.

"My dear Catharine, I shall be delighted if you go either to Mr. Gosford's or to Mr. Bellamy's, but you must consider your wardrobe a little. You will remember that the last time on each occasion a dress was torn in pieces."

"But, mother, are not dresses intended to keep thorns from our legs; or, at any rate, isn't that *one* reason why we wear them?"

"Suppose it to be so, my dear, there is no reason why you should plunge about in thorns."