

CLARA HOPGOOD

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CHAPTER I

ABOUT ten miles north-east of Eastthorpe lies the town of Fenmarket, very like Eastthorpe generally ; and as we are already familiar with Eastthorpe, a particular description of Fenmarket is unnecessary. There is, however, one marked difference between them. Eastthorpe, it will be remembered, is on the border between the low uplands and the Fens, and has one side open to soft, swelling hills. Fenmarket is entirely in the Fens, and all the roads that lead out of it are alike level, monotonous, straight, and flanked by deep

and stagnant ditches. The river, also, here is broader and slower; more reluctant than it is even at Eastthorpe to hasten its journey to the inevitable sea. During the greater part of the year the visitor to Fenmarket would perhaps find it dull and depressing, and at times, under a grey, wintry sky, almost unendurable; but nevertheless, for days and weeks it has a charm possessed by few other landscapes in England, provided only that behind the eye which looks there is something to which a landscape of that peculiar character answers. There is, for example, the wide, dome-like expanse of the sky, there is the distance, there is the freedom and there are the stars on a clear night. The orderly, geometrical march of the constellations from the extreme eastern horizon across the meridian and down to the west has a solemn majesty, which is only partially discernible when their course is interrupted by broken country.

On a dark afternoon in November 1844,

two young women, Clara and Madge Hopgood, were playing chess in the back parlour of their mother's house at Fenmarket, just before tea. Clara, the elder, was about five-and-twenty, fair, with rather light hair worn flat at the side of her face, after the fashion of that time. Her features were tolerably regular. It is true they were somewhat marred by an uneven nasal outline, but this was redeemed by the curved lips of a mouth which was small and rather compressed, and by a definite, symmetrical and graceful figure. Her eyes were grey, with a curious peculiarity in them. Ordinarily they were steady, strong eyes, excellent and renowned optical instruments. Over and over again she had detected, along the stretch of the Eastthorpe road, approaching visitors, and had named them when her companions could see nothing but specks. Occasionally, however, these steady, strong, grey eyes utterly changed. They were the same eyes, the same colour, but they ceased to be mere optical instruments and became instruments of expression, transmissive

of radiance to such a degree that the light which was reflected from them seemed insufficient to account for it. It was also curious that this change, though it must have been accompanied by some emotion, was just as often not attended by any other sign of it. Clara was, in fact, little given to any display of feeling.

Madge, four years younger than her sister, was of a different type altogether, and one more easily comprehended. She had very heavy dark hair, and she had blue eyes, a combination which fascinated Fenmarket. Fenmarket admired Madge more than it was admired by her in return, and she kept herself very much to herself, notwithstanding what it considered to be its temptations. If she went shopping she nearly always went with her sister; she stood aloof from all the small gaieties of the town; walked swiftly through its streets, and repelled, frigidly and decisively, all offers, and they were not a few, which had been made to her by the sons of the Fenmarket tradesfolk. Fenmarket pro-

nounced her 'stuck-up,' and having thus labelled her, considered it had exhausted her. The very important question, Whether there was anything which naturally stuck up? Fenmarket never asked. It was a great relief to that provincial little town in 1844, in this and in other cases, to find a word which released it from further mental effort and put out of sight any troublesome, straggling, indefinable qualities which it would otherwise have been forced to examine and name. Madge was certainly stuck-up, but the projection above those around her was not artificial. Both she and her sister found the ways of Fenmarket were not to their taste. The reason lay partly in their nature and partly in their history.

Mrs Hopgood was the widow of the late manager in the Fenmarket branch of the bank of Rumbold, Martin & Rumbold, and when her husband died she had of course to leave the Bank Buildings. As her income was somewhat straitened, she was obliged to take

a small house, and she was now living next door to the 'Crown and Sceptre,' the principal inn in the town. There was then no fringe of villas to Fenmarket for retired quality; the private houses and shops were all mixed together, and Mrs Hopgood's cottage was squeezed in between the ironmonger's and the inn. It was very much lower than either of its big neighbours, but it had a brass knocker and a bell, and distinctly asserted and maintained a kind of aristocratic superiority.

Mr Hopgood was not a Fenmarket man. He came straight from London to be manager. He was in the bank of the London agents of Rumbold, Martin & Rumbold, and had been strongly recommended by the city firm as just the person to take charge of a branch which needed thorough reorganisation. He succeeded, and nobody in Fenmarket was more respected. He lived, however, a life apart from his neighbours, excepting so far as business was concerned. He went to church once

on Sunday because the bank expected him to go, but only once, and had nothing to do with any of its dependent institutions. He was a great botanist, very fond of walking, and in the evening, when Fenmarket generally gathered itself into groups for gossip, either in the street or in back parlours, or in the 'Crown and Sceptre,' Mr Hopgood, tall, lean and stately, might be seen wandering along the solitary roads searching for flowers, which, in that part of the world, were rather scarce. He was also a great reader of the best books, English, German and French, and held high doctrine, very high for those days, on the training of girls, maintaining that they need, even more than boys, exact discipline and knowledge. Boys, he thought, find health in an occupation; but an uncultivated, unmarried girl dwells with her own untutored thoughts, which often breed disease. His two daughters, therefore, received an education much above that which was usual amongst people in their position, and each of them—an unheard of wonder in Fenmarket

—had spent some time in a school in Weimar. Mr Hopgood was also peculiar in his way of dealing with his children. He talked to them and made them talk to him, and whatever they read was translated into speech ; thought, in his house, was vocal.

Mrs Hopgood, too, had been the intimate friend of her husband, and was the intimate friend of her daughters. She was now nearly sixty, but still erect and graceful, and everybody could see that the picture of a beautiful girl of one-and-twenty, which hung opposite the fireplace, had once been her portrait. She had been brought up, as thoroughly as a woman could be brought up, in those days, to be a governess. The war prevented her education abroad, but her father, who was a clergyman, not too rich, engaged a French emigrant lady to live in his house to teach her French and other accomplishments. She consequently spoke French perfectly, and she could also read and speak Spanish fairly well, for the French lady had spent some years in Spain.

Mr Hopgood had never been particularly in earnest about religion, but his wife was a believer, neither High Church nor Low Church, but inclined towards a kind of quietism not uncommon in the Church of England, even during its bad time, a reaction against the formalism which generally prevailed. When she married, Mrs Hopgood did not altogether follow her husband. She never separated herself from her faith, and never would have confessed that she had separated herself from her church. But although she knew that his creed externally was not hers, her own was not sharply cut, and she persuaded herself that, in substance, his and her belief were identical. As she grew older her relationship to the Unseen became more and more intimate, but she was less and less inclined to criticise her husband's freedom, or to impose on the children a rule which they would certainly have observed, but only for her sake. Every now and then she felt a little lonely; when, for example, she read one or two books which were particularly her own;

when she thought of her dead father and mother, and when she prayed her solitary prayer. Mr Hopgood took great pains never to disturb that sacred moment. Indeed, he never for an instant permitted a finger to be laid upon what she considered precious. He loved her because she had the strength to be what she was when he first knew her and she had so fascinated him. He would have been disappointed if the mistress of his youth had become some other person, although the change, in a sense, might have been development and progress. He did really love her piety, too, for its own sake. It mixed something with her behaviour to him and to the children which charmed him, and he did not know from what other existing source anything comparable to it could be supplied. Mrs Hopgood seldom went to church. The church, to be sure, was horribly dead, but she did not give that as a reason. She had, she said, an infirmity, a strange restlessness which prevented her from sitting still for an hour. She often pleaded this ex-

cuse, and her husband and daughters never, by word or smile, gave her the least reason to suppose that they did not believe her.

CHAPTER II

BOTH Clara and Madge went first to an English day-school, and Clara went straight from this school to Germany, but Madge's course was a little different. She was not very well, and it was decided that she should have at least a twelvemonth in a boarding-school at Brighton before going abroad. It had been very highly recommended, but the head-mistress was Low Church and aggressive. Mr Hopgood, far away from the High and Low Church controversy, came to the conclusion that, in Madge's case, the theology would have no effect on her. It was quite impossible, moreover, to find a school which would be just what he could wish it to be. Madge, accordingly, was sent to Brighton, and was introduced into a new world. She was just beginning to ask herself *why* certain things

were right and other things were wrong, and the Brighton answer was that the former were directed by revelation and the latter forbidden, and that the 'body' was an affliction to the soul, a means of 'probation,' our principal duty being to 'war' against it.

Madge's bedroom companion was a Miss Selina Fish, daughter of Barnabas Fish, Esquire, of Clapham, and merchant of the City of London. Miss Fish was not traitorous at heart, but when she found out that Madge had not been christened, she was so overcome that she was obliged to tell her mother. Miss Fish was really unhappy, and one cold night, when Madge crept into her neighbour's bed, contrary to law, but in accordance with custom when the weather was very bitter, poor Miss Fish shrank from her, half-believing that something dreadful might happen if she should by any chance touch unbaptised, naked flesh. Mrs Fish told her daughter that perhaps Miss Hopgood might be a Dissenter, and that although Dissenters were to be pitied, and

even to be condemned, many of them were undoubtedly among the redeemed, as for example, that man of God, Dr Doddridge, whose *Family Expositor* was read systematically at home, as Selina knew. Then there were Matthew Henry, whose commentary her father preferred to any other, and the venerable saint, the Reverend William Jay of Bath, whom she was proud to call her friend. Miss Fish, therefore, made further inquiries gently and delicately, but she found to her horror that Madge had neither been sprinkled nor immersed! Perhaps she was a Jewess or a heathen! This was a happy thought, for then she might be converted. Selina knew what interest her mother took in missions to heathens and Jews; and if Madge, by the humble instrumentality of a child, could be brought to the foot of the Cross, what would her mother and father say? What would they not say? Fancy taking Madge to Clapham in a nice white dress—it should be white, thought Selina—and presenting her as a saved lamb!

The very next night she began,—

‘I suppose your father is a foreigner?’

‘No, he is an Englishman.’

‘But if he is an Englishman you must have been baptised, or sprinkled, or immersed, and your father and mother must belong to church or chapel. I know there are thousands of wicked people who belong to neither, but they are drunkards and liars and robbers, and even they have their children christened.’

‘Well, he is an Englishman,’ said Madge, smiling.

‘Perhaps,’ said Selina, timidly, ‘he may be—he may be—Jewish. Mamma and papa pray for the Jews every morning. They are not like other unbelievers.’

‘No, he is certainly not a Jew.’

‘What is he, then?’

‘He is my papa and a very honest, good man.’

‘Oh, my dear Madge! honesty is a broken reed. I have heard mamma say that she is more hopeful of thieves than honest people who think they are saved by works, for the

thief who was crucified went to heaven, and if he had been only an honest man he never would have found the Saviour and would have gone to hell. Your father must be something.'

'I can only tell you again that he is honest and good.'

Selina was confounded. She had heard of those people who were *nothing*, and had always considered them as so dreadful that she could not bear to think of them. The efforts of her father and mother did not extend to them; they were beyond the reach of the preacher—mere vessels of wrath. If Madge had confessed herself Roman Catholic, or idolator, Selina knew how to begin. She would have pointed out to the Catholic how unscriptural it was to suppose that anybody could forgive sins excepting God, and she would at once have been able to bring the idolator to his knees by exposing the absurdity of worshipping bits of wood and stone; but with a person who was nothing she could not tell what to do. She was puzzled to