

Clopton House

Elizabeth Gaskell

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"I wonder if you know Clopton Hall, about a mile from Stratford-on-Avon. Will you allow me to tell you of a very happy day I once spent there? I was at school in the neighbourhood, and one of my schoolfellows was the daughter of a Mr. W , who then lived at Clopton. Mrs. W asked a party of the girls to go and spend a long afternoon, and we set off one beautiful autumn day, full of delight and wonder respecting the place we were going to see. We passed through desolate half-cultivated fields, till we came within sight of the house – a large, heavy, compact, square brick building, of that deep, dead red almost approaching to purple. In front was a large formal court, with the massy pillars surmounted with two grim monsters; but the walls of the court were broken down, and the grass grew as rank and wild within the enclosure as in the raised avenue walk down which we had come. The flowers were tangled with nettles, and it was only as we approached the house that we saw the single yellow rose and the Austrian briar trained into something like order round the deep-set diamond-paned windows. We trooped into the hall, with its tessellated marble floor, hung round with strange portraits of people who had been in their graves two hundred years at least; yet the colours were so fresh, and in some instances they were so life-like, that looking merely at the faces, I almost fancied the originals might be sitting in the parlour beyond. More completely to carry us back, as it were, to the days of the civil wars, there was a sort of military map hung up, well finished with pen and ink, shewing the stations of the respective armies, and with old-fashioned writing beneath, the names of the principal towns, setting forth the strength of the garrison, etc. In this hall we were met by our kind hostess, and told we might ramble where we liked, in the house or out of the house, taking care to be in the 'recessed parlour' by tea-time. I preferred to wander up the wide shelving oak staircase, with its massy balustrade all crumbling and worm-eaten. The family then residing at the hall did not occupy one-half – no, not one-third of the rooms; and the old-fashioned furniture was undisturbed in the greater part of them. In one of the bed-rooms (said to be haunted), and which, with its close pent-up atmosphere and the long-shadows of evening creeping on, gave me an 'eirie' feeling, hung a portrait so singularly beautiful! a sweet-looking girl, with paly gold hair combed back from her forehead and falling in wavy ringlets on her neck, and with eyes that 'looked like violets filled with dew,' for there was the glittering of unshed tears before their deep dark blue – and that was the likeness of Charlotte Clopton, about whom there was so fearful a legend told at Stratford church. In the time of some epidemic, the sweating-sickness or the plague, this young girl had sickened, and to all appearance died. She was buried with fearful haste in the vaults of Clopton chapel, attached to Stratford church, but the sickness was not stayed. In a few days another of the Cloptons died, and him they bore to the ancestral vault; but as they descended the gloomy stairs, they saw by the torchlight, Charlotte Clopton in her grave-clothes leaning against the wall; and when they looked nearer, she was indeed dead, but not before, in the agonies of despair and hunger, she had bitten a piece from her white round shoulder! Of course, she had walked ever since. This was 'Charlotte's chamber,' and beyond Charlotte's chamber was a state-chamber carpeted with the dust of many years, and darkened by the creepers which had covered up the windows, and even forced themselves in luxuriant daring through the broken panes. Beyond, again, there was an old Catholic chapel, with a chaplain's room, which had been walled up and forgotten till within the last few years. I went in on my hands and knees, for the entrance was very low. I recollect little in the chapel; but in the chaplain's room were old, and I should think rare, editions of many books, mostly folios. A large yellow-paper copy of Dryden's 'All for Love, or the World Well Lost,' date 1686, caught my eye, and is the only one I particularly remember. Every here and there, as I wandered, I came upon a fresh branch of a staircase, and so numerous were the crooked, half-lighted passages, that I wondered if I could find my way back again. There was a curious carved old chest in one of these passages, and with girlish curiosity I tried to open it; but the lid was too heavy, till I persuaded one of my companions to help me, and when

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it was opened, what do you think we saw? – BONES! – but whether human, whether the remains of the lost bride, we did not stay to see, but ran off in partly feigned, and partly real terror.

"The last of these deserted rooms that I remember, the last, the most deserted, and the saddest, was the Nursery, – a nursery without children, without singing voices, without merry chiming footsteps! A nursery hung round with its once inhabitants, bold, gallant boys, and fair, arch-looking girls, and one or two nurses with round, fat babies in their arms. Who were they all? What was their lot in life? Sunshine, or storm? or had they been 'loved by the gods, and died young?' The very echoes knew not. Behind the house, in a hollow now wild, damp, and overgrown with elder-bushes, was a well called Margaret's Well, for there had a maiden of the house of that name drowned herself.

"I tried to obtain any information I could as to the family of Clopton of Clopton. They had been decaying ever since the civil wars; had for a generation or two been unable to live in the old house of their fathers, but had toiled in London, or abroad, for a livelihood; and the last of the old family, a bachelor, eccentric, miserly, old, and of most filthy habits, if report said true, had died at Clopton Hall but a few months before, a sort of boarder in Mr. W 's family. He was buried in the gorgeous chapel of the Cloptons in Stratford church, where you see the banners waving, and the armour hung over one or two splendid monuments. Mr. W had been the old man's solicitor, and completely in his confidence, and to him he left the estate, encumbered and in bad condition. A year or two afterwards, the heir-at-law, a very distant relation living in Ireland, claimed and obtained the estate, on the plea of undue influence, if not of forgery, on Mr. W 's part; and the last I heard of our kind entertainers on that day, was that they were outlawed, and living at Brussels.