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Mary Barton

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Elizabeth Gaskell

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CHAPTER I

A Mysterious Disappearance

'Oh! 'tis hard, 'tis hard to be working
The whole of the live-long day,
When all the neighbours about one
Are off to their jaunts and play.

There's Richard he carries his baby,
And Mary takes little Jane,
And lovingly they'll be wandering
Through field and briery lane.'

MANCHESTER SONG[1]

There are some fields near Manchester, well known to the inhabitants as 'Green Heys Fields',[2] through which runs a public footpath to a little village about two miles distant. In spite of these fields being flat, and low, nay, in spite of the want of wood (the great and usual recommendation of level tracts of land), there is a charm about them which strikes even the inhabitant of a mountainous district, who sees and feels the effect of contrast in these commonplace but thoroughly rural fields, with the busy, bustling manufacturing town he left but half-an-hour ago. Here and there an old black and white farm-house, with its rambling out-buildings, speaks of other times and other occupations than those which now absorb the population of the neighbourhood. Here in their seasons may be seen the country business of haymaking, ploughing, &c., which are such pleasant mysteries for townspeople to watch: and here the artisan, deafened with noise of tongues and engines, may come to listen awhile to the delicious sounds of rural life: the lowing of cattle, the milkmaid's call, the clatter and cackle of poultry in the old farmyards. You cannot wonder, then, that these fields are popular places of resort at every holiday time; and you would not wonder, if you could see, or I properly describe, the charm of one particular stile, that it should be, on such occasions, a crowded halting-place. Close by it is a deep, clear pond, reflecting in its dark green depths the shadowy trees that bend over it

to exclude the sun. The only place where its banks are shelving is on the side next to a rambling farmyard, belonging to one of those old world, gabled, black and white houses I named above, overlooking the field through which the public footpath leads. The porch of this farmhouse is covered by a rose-tree; and the little garden surrounding it is crowded with a medley of old-fashioned herbs and flowers, planted long ago, when the garden was the only druggist's shop within reach, and allowed to grow in scrambling and wild luxuriance – roses, lavender, sage, balm (for tea), rosemary, pinks and wallflowers, onions and jessamine, in most republican and indiscriminate order. This farmhouse and garden are within a hundred yards of the stile of which I spoke, leading from the large pasture field into a smaller one, divided by a hedge of hawthorn and blackthorn; and near this stile, on the further side, there runs a tale that primroses may often be found, and occasionally the blue sweet violet on the grassy hedge bank.

I do not know whether it was on a holiday granted by the masters, or a holiday seized in right of Nature and her beautiful spring time by the workmen, but one afternoon (now ten or a dozen years ago)[3] these fields were much thronged. It was an early May evening – the April of the poets;[4] for heavy showers had fallen all the morning, and the round, soft, white clouds which were blown by a west wind over the dark blue sky, were sometimes varied by one blacker and more threatening. The softness of the day tempted forth the young green leaves, which almost visibly fluttered into life; and the willows, which that morning had only a brown reflection in the water below, were now of that tender grey-green which blends so delicately with the spring harmony of colours.

Groups of merry and somewhat loud-talking girls, whose ages might range from twelve to twenty, came by with a buoyant step. They were most of them factory girls, and wore the usual out-of-doors dress of that particular class of maidens; namely, a shawl, which at midday or in fine weather was allowed to be merely a shawl, but towards evening, or if the day were chilly, became a sort of Spanish mantilla or Scotch plaid, and was brought over the head and hung loosely down, or was pinned under the chin in no unpicturesque fashion.

Their faces were not remarkable for beauty; indeed, they were below the average, with one or two exceptions; they had dark hair,

neatly and classically arranged dark eyes, but sallow complexions and irregular features. The only thing to strike a passer-by was an acuteness and intelligence of countenance, which has often been noticed in a manufacturing population.

There were also numbers of boys, or rather young men, rambling among these fields, ready to bandy jokes with any one, and particularly ready to enter into conversation with the girls, who, however, held themselves aloof, not in a shy, but rather in an independent way, assuming an indifferent manner to the noisy wit or obstreperous compliments of the lads. Here and there came a sober quiet couple, either whispering lovers, or husband and wife, as the case might be; and if the latter, they were seldom unencumbered by an infant, carried for the most part by the father, while occasionally even three or four little toddlers had been carried or dragged thus far, in order that the whole family might enjoy the delicious May afternoon together.

Some time in the course of that afternoon, two working men met with friendly greeting at the stile so often named. One was a thorough specimen of a Manchester man; born of factory workers, and himself bred up in youth, and living in manhood, among the mills. He was below the middle size and slightly made; there was almost a stunted look about him; and his wan, colourless face, gave you the idea, that in his childhood he had suffered from the scanty living consequent upon bad times, and improvident habits. His features were strongly marked, though not irregular, and their expression was extreme earnestness; resolute either for good or evil, a sort of latent stern enthusiasm. At the time of which I write, the good predominated over the bad in the countenance, and he was one from whom a stranger would have asked a favour with tolerable faith that it would be granted. He was accompanied by his wife, who might, without exaggeration, have been called a lovely woman, although now her face was swollen with crying, and often hidden behind her apron. She had the fresh beauty of the agricultural districts; and somewhat of the deficiency of sense in her countenance, which is likewise characteristic of the rural inhabitants in comparison with the natives of the manufacturing towns. She was far advanced in pregnancy, which perhaps occasioned the overpowering and hysterical nature of her grief. The friend whom they met was more handsome and less sensible-looking than the man I have just described; he seemed hearty and hopeful, and although his

age was greater, yet there was far more of youth's buoyancy in his appearance. He was tenderly carrying a baby in arms, while his wife, a delicate fragile-looking woman, limping in her gait, bore another of the same age; little, feeble twins, inheriting the frail appearance of their mother.

The last-mentioned man was the first to speak, while a sudden look of sympathy dimmed his gladsome face. 'Well, John, how goes it with you?' and in a lower voice, he added, 'Any news of Esther yet?' Meanwhile the wives greeted each other like old friends, the soft and plaintive voice of the mother of the twins seeming to call forth only fresh sobs from Mrs Barton.

'Come, women,' said John Barton, 'you've both walked far enough. My Mary expects to have her bed in three weeks; and as for you, Mrs Wilson, you know you are but a cranky sort of a body at the best of times.' This was said so kindly, that no offence could be taken. 'Sit you down here; the grass is well nigh dry by this time; and you're neither of you nesh*[5] folk about taking cold. Stay,' he added, with some tenderness, 'here's my pocket-handkerchief to spread under you to save the gowns women always think so much on; and now, Mrs Wilson, give me the baby, I may as well carry him, while you talk and comfort my wife; poor thing, she takes on sadly about Esther.'

These arrangements were soon completed; the two women sat down on the blue cotton handkerchiefs of their husbands, and the latter, each carrying a baby, set off for a further walk; but as soon as Barton had turned his back upon his wife, his countenance fell back into an expression of gloom.

'Then you've heard nothing of Esther, poor lass?' asked Wilson.

'No, nor shan't, as I take it. My mind is, she's gone off with somebody. My wife frets and thinks she's drowned herself, but I tell her, folks don't care to put on their best clothes to drown themselves; and Mrs Bradshaw where she lodged, you know, says the last time she set eyes on her was last Tuesday, when she came downstairs, dressed in her Sunday gown, and with a new ribbon in her bonnet, and gloves on her hands, like the lady she was so fond of thinking herself.'

*'Nesh'; Anglo-Saxon, *nesc*, tender. 'It seemeth for love his herte is tendre and neshe.' – CHAUCER, *Court of Love.*

'She was as pretty a creature as ever the sun shone on.'

'Ay, she was a farrantly* lass; more's the pity now,' added Barton, with a sigh. 'You see them Buckinghamshire people as comes to work here has quite a different look with them to us Manchester folk. You'll not see among the Manchester wenches such fresh rosy cheeks, or such black lashes to grey eyes (making them look like black), as my wife and Esther had. I never seed two such pretty women for sisters; never. Not but what beauty is a sad snare. Here was Esther so puffed up, that there was no holding her in. Her spirit was always up, if I spoke ever so little in the way of advice to her; my wife spoiled her, it is true, for you see she was so much older than Esther, she was more like a mother to her, doing everything for her.'

'I wonder she ever left you,' observed his friend.

'That's the worst of factory work for girls. They can earn so much when work is plenty, that they can maintain themselves anyhow. My Mary shall never work in a factory,[6] that I'm determined on. You see Esther spent her money in dress, thinking to set off her pretty face; and got to come home so late at night, that at last I told her my mind; my missis thinks I spoke crossly, but I meant right, for I loved Esther, if it was only for Mary's sake. Says I, "Esther, I see what you'll end at with your artificials,[7] and your fly-away[8] veils, and stopping out when honest women are in their beds; you'll be a street-walker, Esther, and then, don't you go to think I'll have you darken my door, though my wife is your sister." So says she "Don't trouble yourself, John, I'll pack up and be off now, for I'll never stay to hear myself called as you call me." She flushed up like a turkey-cock, and I thought fire would come out of her eyes; but when she saw Mary cry (for Mary can't abide words in a house), she went and kissed her, and said she was not so bad as I thought her. So we talked more friendly, for as I said, I liked the lass well enough, and her pretty looks, and her cheery ways. But she said (and at that time I thought there was sense in what she said) we should be much better friends if she went into lodgings, and only came to see us now and then.'

'Then you still were friendly. Folks said you'd cast her off, and said you'd never speak to her again.'

* 'Farrantly', comely, pleasant-looking. 'And hir hatir (attire) was wele *farand*.' – ROBERT DE BRUNNE.

'Folks always make one a deal worse than one is,' said John Barton testily. 'She came many a time to our house after she left off living with us. Last Sunday se'nnight[9] – no! it was this very last Sunday, she came to drink a cup of tea with Mary; and that was the last time we set eyes on her.'

'Was she any ways different in her manner?' asked Wilson.

'Well, I don't know. I have thought several times since, that she was a bit quieter, and more womanly-like; more gentle, and more blushing, and not so riotous and noisy. She comes in towards four o'clock, when afternoon church was loosing,[10] and she goes and hangs her bonnet up on the old nail we used to call hers, while she lived with us. I remember thinking what a pretty lass she was, as she sat on a low stool by Mary, who was rocking herself, and in rather a poor way. She laughed and cried by turns, but all so softly and gently, like a child, that I couldn't find in my heart to scold her, especially as Mary was fretting already. One thing I do remember I did say, and pretty sharply too. She took our little Mary by the waist and –'

'Thou must leave off calling her "little" Mary, she's growing up into as fine a lass as one can see on a summer's day; more of her mother's stock than thine,' interrupted Wilson.

'Well, well, I call her "little", because her mother's name is Mary. But as I was saying, she takes Mary in a coaxing sort of way, and "Mary," says she, "what would you think if I sent for you some day and made a lady of you?" So I could not stand such talk as that to my girl, and I said, "Thou'd best not put that nonsense i' th' girl's head, I can tell thee; I'd rather see her earning her bread by the sweat of her brow,[11] as the Bible tells her she should do, ay, though she never got butter to her bread, than be like a do-nothing lady, worrying shopmen all morning, and screeching at her pianny[12] all afternoon, and going to bed without having done a good turn to any one of God's creatures but herself."'

'Thou never could abide the gentlefolk,' said Wilson, half amused at his friend's vehemence.

'And what good have they ever done me that I should like them?' asked Barton, the latent fire lighting up his eye: and bursting forth he continued, 'If I am sick do they come and nurse me?[13] If my child lies dying (as poor Tom lay, with his white wan lips quivering, for want of better food than I could give him), does the rich man bring the wine

or broth that might save his life? If I am out of work for weeks in the bad times, and winter comes, with black frost, and keen east wind, and there is no coal for the grate, and no clothes for the bed, and the thin bones are seen through the ragged clothes, does the rich man share his plenty with me, as he ought to do, if his religion wasn't a humbug? When I lie on my death-bed, and Mary (bless her!) stands fretting, as I know she will fret,' and here his voice faltered a little, 'will a rich lady come and take her to her own home if need be, till she can look round, and see what best to do? No, I tell you, it's the poor, and the poor only, as does such things for the poor. Don't think to come over me with th' old tale, that the rich know nothing of the trials of the poor; I say, if they don't know, they ought to know. We're their slaves as long as we can work; we pile up their fortunes with the sweat of our brows, and yet we are to live as separate as if we were in two worlds; ay, as separate as Dives and Lazarus,[14] with a great gulf betwixt us: but I know who was best off then,' and he wound up his speech with a low chuckle that had no mirth in it.

'Well, neighbour,' said Wilson, 'all that may be very true, but what I want to know now is about Esther – when did you last hear of her?'

'Why, she took leave of us that Sunday night in a very loving way, kissing both wife Mary, and daughter Mary (if I must not call her "little"), and shaking hands with me; but all in a cheerful sort of manner, so we thought nothing about her kisses and shakes. But on Wednesday night comes Mrs Bradshaw's son with Esther's box, and presently Mrs Bradshaw follows with the key; and when we began to talk, we found Esther told her she was coming back to live with us, and would pay her week's money for not giving notice; and on Tuesday night she carried off a little bundle (her best clothes were on her back, as I said before) and told Mrs Bradshaw not to hurry herself about the big box, but bring it when she had time. So, of course, she thought she should find Esther with us; and when she told her story, my missis set up such a screech, and fell down in a dead swoon. Mary ran up with water for her mother, and I thought so much about my wife, I did not seem to care at all for Esther. But the next day I asked all the neighbours (both our own and Bradshaw's) and they'd none of 'em heard or seen nothing of her. I even went to a policeman,[15] a good enough sort of man, but a fellow I'd never spoken to before because of his livery, and I asks him if his 'cuteness[16] could find anything out

for us. So I believe he asks other policemen; and one on 'em had seen a wench, like our Esther, walking very quickly, with a bundle under her arm, on Tuesday night, towards eight o'clock, and get into a hackney coach,[17] near Hulme Church,[18] and we don't know th' number, and can't trace it no further. I'm sorry enough for the girl, for bad's come over her, one way or another, but I'm sorrier for my wife. She loved her next to me and Mary, and she's never been the same body since poor Tom's death. However, let's go back to them; your old woman may have done her good.'

As they walked homewards with a brisker pace, Wilson expressed a wish that they still were the near neighbours they once had been.

'Still our Alice lives in the cellar under No. 14, in Barber Street, and if you'd only speak the word she'd be with you in five minutes to keep your wife company when she's lonesome. Though I'm Alice's brother, and perhaps ought not to say it, I will say there's none more ready to help with heart or hand than she is. Though she may have done a hard day's wash, there's not a child ill within the street, but Alice goes to offer to sit up, and does sit up too, though may be she's to be at her work by six next morning.'

'She's a poor woman, and can feel for the poor, Wilson,' was Barton's reply; and then he added, 'Thank you kindly for your offer, and mayhap I may trouble her to be a bit with my wife, for while I'm at work, and Mary's at school, I know she frets above a bit. See, there's Mary!' and the father's eye brightened, as in the distance, among a group of girls, he spied his only daughter, a bonny lass of thirteen or so, who came bounding along to meet and to greet her father, in a manner that showed that the stern-looking man had a tender nature within. The two men had crossed the last stile, while Mary loitered behind to gather some buds of the coming hawthorn, when an overgrown lad came past her, and snatched a kiss, exclaiming, 'For old acquaintance' sake, Mary.'

'Take that for old acquaintance' sake, then,' said the girl, blushing rosy red, more with anger than shame, as she slapped his face. The tones of her voice called back her father and his friend, and the aggressor proved to be the eldest son of the latter, the senior by eighteen years of his little brothers.

'Here, children, instead o' kissing and quarrelling, do ye each take a baby, for if Wilson's arms be like mine they are heartily tired.'

Mary sprang forward to take her father's charge, with a girl's fondness for infants, and with some little foresight of the event soon to happen at home; while young Wilson seemed to lose his rough, cubbish nature as he crowed and cooed to his little brother.

'Twins is a great trial to a poor man, bless 'em,' said the half-proud, half-weary father, as he bestowed a smacking kiss on the babe ere he parted with it.

CHAPTER 2

A Manchester Tea-Party

'Polly, put the kettle on,
And let's have tea!
Polly, put the kettle on,
And we'll all have tea.'[1]

'Here we are, wife; did'st thou think thou'd lost us?' quoth hearty-voiced Wilson, as the two women rose and shook themselves in preparation for their homeward walk. Mrs Barton was evidently soothed, if not cheered, by the unburdening of her fears and thoughts to her friend; and her approving look went far to second her husband's invitation that the whole party should adjourn from Green Heys Fields to tea, at the Bartons' house. The only faint opposition was raised by Mrs Wilson, on account of the lateness of the hour at which they would probably return, which she feared on her babies' account.

'Now, hold your tongue, missis, will you,' said her husband good-temperedly. 'Don't you know them brats never goes to sleep till long past ten? and haven't you a shawl, under which you can tuck one lad's head, as safe as a bird's under its wing? And as for t'other one, I'll put it in my pocket rather than not stay, now we are this far away from Ancoats.'[2]

'Or, I can lend you another shawl,' suggested Mrs Barton.

'Ay, anything rather than not stay.'

The matter being decided the party proceeded home, through

many half-finished streets, all so like one another, that you might have easily been bewildered and lost your way. Not a step, however, did our friends lose; down this entry, cutting off that corner, until they turned out of one of these innumerable streets into a little paved court, having the backs of houses at the end opposite to the opening, and a gutter running through the middle to carry off household slops, washing suds, &c. The women who lived in the court were busy taking in strings of caps, frocks, and various articles of linen, which hung from side to side, dangling so low, that if our friends had been a few minutes sooner, they would have had to stoop very much, or else the half-wet clothes would have flapped in their faces: but although the evening seemed yet early when they were in the open fields – among the pent-up houses, night, with its mists and its darkness, had already begun to fall.

Many greetings were given and exchanged between the Wilsons and these women, for not long ago they had also dwelt in this court.

Two rude lads, standing at a disorderly looking house-door, exclaimed, as Mary Barton (the daughter) passed, 'Eh, look! Polly Barton's getten* a sweetheart.'

Of course this referred to young Wilson, who stole a look to see how Mary took the idea. He saw her assume the air of a young fury, and to his next speech she answered not a word.

Mrs Barton produced the key of the door from her pocket; and on entering the house-place it seemed as if they were in total darkness, except one bright spot, which might be a cat's eye, or might be, what it was, a red-hot fire, smouldering under a large piece of coal, which John Barton immediately applied himself to break up, and the effect instantly produced was warm and glowing light in every corner of the room. To add to this (although the coarse yellow glare seemed lost in the ruddy glow from the fire), Mrs Barton lighted a dip[3] by sticking it in the fire, and having placed it satisfactorily in a tin candlestick, began to look further about her, on hospitable thoughts intent. The room was tolerably large, and possessed many conveniences. On the right of the door, as you entered, was a longish window, with a broad ledge. On each side of this, hung blue-and-white check curtains,

*'For he had *geten* him yet no benefice.' – *Prologue to Canterbury Tales.*

which were now drawn, to shut in the friends met to enjoy themselves. Two geraniums, unpruned and leafy, which stood on the sill, formed a further defence from out-door pryers. In the corner between the window and the fireside was a cupboard, apparently full of plates and dishes, cups and saucers, and some more nondescript articles, for which one would have fancied their possessors could find no use – such as triangular pieces of glass to save carving knives and forks from dirtying table-cloths. However, it was evident Mrs Barton was proud of her crockery and glass, for she left her cupboard door open, with a glance round of satisfaction and pleasure. On the opposite side to the door and window was the staircase, and two doors; one of which (the nearest to the fire) led into a sort of little back kitchen, where dirty work, such as washing up dishes, might be done, and whose shelves served as larder, and pantry, and store-room, and all. The other door, which was considerably lower, opened into the coal-hole – the slanting closet under the stairs; from which, to the fire-place, there was a gay-coloured piece of oil-cloth laid. The place seemed almost crammed with furniture (sure sign of good times among the mills). Beneath the window was a dresser, with three deep drawers. Opposite the fire-place was a table, which I should call a Pembroke,[4] only that it was made of deal, and I cannot tell how far such a name may be applied to such humble material. On it, resting against the wall, was a bright green japanned tea-tray, having a couple of scarlet lovers embracing in the middle. The fire-light danced merrily on this, and really (setting all taste but that of a child's aside) it gave a richness of colouring to that side of the room. It was in some measure propped up by a crimson tea-caddy, also of japan ware. A round table on one branching leg, really for use, stood in the corresponding corner to the cupboard; and, if you can picture all this, with a washy, but clean stencilled pattern on the walls, you can form some idea of John Barton's home.

The tray was soon hoisted down, and before the merry clatter of cups and saucers began, the women disburdened themselves of their out-of-door things, and sent Mary upstairs with them. Then came a long whispering, and chinking of money, to which Mr and Mrs Wilson were too polite to attend; knowing, as they did full well, that it all related to the preparations for hospitality; hospitality that, in their turn, they should have such pleasure in offering. So they tried to be

busily occupied with the children, and not to hear Mrs Barton's directions to Mary.

'Run, Mary, dear, just round the corner, and get some fresh eggs at Tipping's (you may get one apiece, that will be fivepence), and see if he has any nice ham cut, that he would let us have a pound of.'

'Say two pounds, missis, and don't be stingy,' chimed in the husband.

'Well, a pound and a half, Mary. And get it Cumberland[5] ham, for Wilson comes from there-away, and it will have a sort of relish of home with it he'll like, – and Mary' (seeing the lassie fain to be off), 'you must get a pennyworth of milk and a loaf of bread – mind you get it fresh and new – and, and – that's all, Mary.'

'No, it's not all,' said her husband. 'Thou must get sixpennyworth of rum, to warm the tea; thou'll get it at the "Grapes". And thou just go to Alice Wilson; he says she lives just round the corner, under 14 Barber Street' (this was addressed to his wife); 'and tell her to come and take her tea with us; she'll like to see her brother, I'll be bound, let alone Jane and the twins.'

'If she comes she must bring a tea-cup and saucer, for we have but half-a-dozen, and here's six of us,' said Mrs Barton.

'Pooh, pooh, Jem and Mary can drink out of one, surely.'

But Mary secretly determined to take care that Alice brought her tea-cup and saucer, if the alternative was to be her sharing anything with Jem.

Alice Wilson had but just come in. She had been out all day in the fields, gathering wild herbs for drinks and medicine, for in addition to her invaluable qualities as a sick nurse and her worldly occupations as a washerwoman, she added a considerable knowledge of hedge and field simples; and on fine days, when no more profitable occupation offered itself, she used to ramble off into the lanes and meadows as far as her legs could carry her. This evening she had returned loaded with nettles, and her first object was to light a candle and see to hang them up in bunches in every available place in her cellar room. It was the perfection of cleanliness; in one corner stood the modest-looking bed, with a check curtain at the head, the whitewashed wall filling up the place where the corresponding one should have been. The floor was bricked, and scrupulously clean, although so damp that it seemed as if the last washing would never dry up. As the cellar window looked

into an area in the street, down which boys might throw stones, it was protected by an outside shutter, and was oddly festooned with all manner of hedge-row, ditch, and field plants, which we are accustomed to call valueless, but which have a powerful effect either for good or for evil, and are consequently much used among the poor. The room was strewed, hung, and darkened with these bunches, which emitted no very fragrant odour in their process of drying. In one corner was a sort of broad hanging shelf, made of old planks, where some old hoards of Alice's were kept. Her little bit of crockery-ware was ranged on the mantelpiece, where also stood her candlestick and box of matches. A small cupboard contained at the bottom coals, and at the top her bread and basin of oatmeal, her frying-pan, teapot, and a small tin saucepan, which served as a kettle, as well as for cooking the delicate little messes of broth which Alice was sometimes able to manufacture for a sick neighbour.

After her walk she felt chilly and weary, and was busy trying to light her fire with the damp coals, and half-green sticks, when Mary knocked.

'Come in,' said Alice, remembering, however, that she had barred the door for the night, and hastening to make it possible for any one to come in.

'Is that you, Mary Barton?' exclaimed she, as the light from the candle streamed on the girl's face. 'How you are grown since I used to see you at my brother's! Come in, lass, come in.'

'Please,' said Mary, almost breathless, 'mother says you're to come to tea, and bring your cup and saucer, for George and Jane Wilson is with us, and the twins, and Jem. And you're to make haste, please.'

'I'm sure it's very neighbourly and kind in your mother, and I'll come, with many thanks. Stay, Mary, has your mother got any nettles for spring drink? If she hasn't I'll take her some.'

'No, I don't think she has.'

Mary ran off like a hare to fulfil what, to a girl of thirteen, fond of power, was the more interesting part of her errand – the money-spending part. And well and ably did she perform her business, returning home with a little bottle of rum, and the eggs in one hand, while her other was filled with some excellent red-and-white, smoke-flavoured, Cumberland ham, wrapped up in paper.

She was at home, and frying ham, before Alice had chosen her

nettles, put out her candle, locked her door, and walked in a very foot-sore manner as far as John Barton's. What an aspect of comfort did his house-place present, after her humble cellar! She did not think of comparing; but for all that she felt the delicious glow of the fire, the bright light that revelled in every corner of the room, the savoury smells, the comfortable sounds of a boiling kettle, and the hissing, frizzling ham. With a little old-fashioned curtsey she shut the door, and replied with a loving heart to the boisterous and surprised greeting of her brother.

And now all preparations being made, the party sat down; Mrs Wilson in the post of honour, the rocking-chair, on the right-hand side of the fire, nursing her baby, while its father, in an opposite arm-chair, tried vainly to quieten the other with bread soaked in milk.

Mrs Barton knew manners too well to do anything but sit at the tea-table and make tea, though in her heart she longed to be able to superintend the frying of the ham, and cast many an anxious look at Mary as she broke the eggs and turned the ham, with a very comfortable portion of confidence in her own culinary powers. Jem stood awkwardly leaning against the dresser, replying rather gruffly to his aunt's speeches, which gave him, he thought, the air of being a little boy; whereas he considered himself as a young man, and not so very young neither, as in two months he would be eighteen. Barton vibrated between the fire and the tea-table, his only drawback being a fancy that every now and then his wife's face flushed and contracted as if in pain.

At length the business actually began. Knives and forks, cups and saucers made a noise, but human voices were still, for human beings were hungry and had no time to speak. Alice first broke silence; holding her tea-cup with the manner of one proposing a toast, she said, 'Here's to absent friends.[6] Friends may meet, but mountains never.'

It was an unlucky toast or sentiment, as she instantly felt. Every one thought of Esther, the absent Esther; and Mrs Barton put down her food, and could not hide the fast-dropping tears. Alice could have bitten her tongue out.

It was a wet blanket to the evening; for though all had been said and suggested in the fields that could be said or suggested, every one had a wish to say something in the way of comfort to poor Mrs Barton, and a dislike to talk about anything else while her tears fell

fast and scalding. So George Wilson, his wife, and children set off early home, not before (in spite of *mal-à-propos*[7] speeches) they had expressed a wish that such meetings might often take place, and not before John Barton had given his hearty consent; and declared that as soon as ever his wife was well again they would have just such another evening.

'I will take care not to come and spoil it,' thought poor Alice, and going up to Mrs Barton, she took her hand almost humbly, and said, 'You don't know how sorry I am I said it.'

To her surprise, a surprise that brought tears of joy into her eyes, Mary Barton put her arms round her neck, and kissed the self-reproaching Alice. 'You didn't mean any harm, and it was me as was so foolish; only this work about Esther, and not knowing where she is, lies so heavy on my heart. Good-night, and never think no more about it. God bless you, Alice.'

Many and many a time, as Alice reviewed that evening in her after life, did she bless Mary Barton for these kind and thoughtful words. But just then all she could say was, 'Good-night, Mary, and may God bless *you*.'

CHAPTER 3

John Barton's Great Trouble

'But when the morn came dim and sad,
And chill with early showers,
Her quiet eyelids closed – she had
Another morn than ours.'

HOOD[1]

In the middle of that same night a neighbour of the Bartons was roused from her sound, well-earned sleep, by a knocking, which had at first made part of her dream; but starting up, as soon as she became convinced of its reality, she opened the window, and asked who was there?