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Mary Barton (Wordsworth Classics)

Elizabeth Cleghorn Gaskell

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Elizabeth Gaskell's first novel depicts nothing less than the great clashes between capital and labour, which arose from rapid industrialisation and problems of trade in the mid-nineteenth century. But these clashes are dramatized through personal struggles. John Barton has to reconcile his personal conscience with his socialist duty, risking his life and liberty in the process. His daughter Mary is caught between two lovers, from opposing classes - worker and manufacturer. And at the heart of the narrative lies a murder which implicates them all. Mary Barton was published in 1848, at a time of great social ferment in Europe, and it reflects its revolutionary moment through an English lens. Elizabeth Gaskell wrote her first novel about the world in which she lived - Manchester at the height of the industrial revolution. As the wife of a Unitarian minister she was solidly middle-class; but she also had close contact with the working classes around her, sympathised with them, and represented their extreme distresses in her fiction. She is radical in taking on their dialect, imagining the realities of their lives, and placing a working woman at the centre of her fiction. If to our eyes her vision remains limited, it was an honest vision, for which she was much criticised in her own time, by her own class.

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