

## NORTH AND SOUTH

Elizabeth Gaskell

"We found him i' th' brook in the field beyond there,"

" Th' brook !—why, there's not water enough to drown him ! "

"He was a determined chap. He lay with his face downwards. He was sick enough o' living, choose what cause he had for it."

Higgins crept up to Margaret's side, and said in a meek piping kind of voice—" It's not John Boucher ? He had na spunk enough. Sure ! It's not John Boucher ? Why, the are a' looking this way ! Listen ! I've a singing in nay hea and I cannot hear,"

They put the door down carefully upon the stones, and all might see the poor drowned wretch—his glassy eyes, one half-open, staring right upwards to the sky. Owing to the position in which he had been found lying, his face was swollen and discoloured; besides, his skin was stained by the water in the brook, which had been used for dyeing purposes. The fore part of his head was bald; but the hair grew thin and long behind, and every separate lock was a conduit for water. Through all these disfigurements, Margaret recognised John Boucher. It seemed to her, so sacrilegious to be peering into that poor, distorted, agonised face that, by a flash of instinct, she went forwards and softly covered the dead man's countenance with her hand—kerchief. The eyes that saw her do this followed her, as she turned away from her pious office, and were thus led to the place where Nicholas Higgins stood, like one rooted to the spot. The men spoke together, and then one of them came up to Higgins, who would have fain shrunk back into his house.

" Higgins, thou knowed him ! Thou mun go tell the wife. Do it gently, man, but do it quick, for we canna leave him here long,"

" I canna go," said Higgins. " Dunnot ask me. I canna face her."

" Thou knows her best," said the man. " We'n done a deal in bringing him here—thou take thy share."

"I canna do it," said Higgins. " I'm welly felled wi' seeing him. We wasn't friends ; and now he's dead."

" Well, if thou wunnot, thou wunnot, Some one mun though. It's a dree task; but it's a chance, every minute, as she doesn't hear on it in some rougher way nor a person going to make her let on by degrees, as it were."

"Papa, do you go," said Margaret in a low voice.

" If I could—if I had time to think of what I had better say ; but all at once"— Margaret saw that her father was indeed unable. He was trembling from head to foot.

" I will go," said she.

" Bless yo', miss, it will be a kind act ; for she's been but a sickly sort of body, I hear, and few hereabouts know much on her."

Margaret knocked at the closed door ; but there was such a noise, as of many little ill-ordered children, that she could hear no reply; indeed, she doubted if she was heard ; and, as every moment of delay made her recoil from her task more and more, she opened the door and went in, shutting it after her, and even, unseen to the woman, fastening the bolt.