

PROLOGUE

Annie Gibson was born on the fifteenth of May 1820, in the front bedroom of her parents' new house in Salem Street, one of eight narrow terraced houses built for the operatives at Hallam's Mill. You had to be tough to survive in those mean little streets and squalid alleys. More than half the babies born in Bilsden did not live to see their fifth birthday. Annie did - but then, Annie Gibson was a survivor.

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SALEM STREET: 1820 TO 1830

The handcart creaked and groaned as it trundled slowly along Florida Terrace and the man pushing it laughed aloud as he guided it on its erratic course. "Nearly there now, love," he said encouragingly to the woman walking by his side.

"I'm all right, John," she insisted, but her face was white and sweat beaded her forehead. She held one hand protectively over her belly, as if to keep her unborn child safe. As he slowed down, she added sharply, "Nay, get a move on, will you! We'll not be there till after dark at this rate." This was a gross exaggeration, for they were only moving a few streets, although it seemed like a different world here, away from the stinking yards and alleys of Claters End.

John Gibson knew better than to argue with his wife. Lucy was not well, but she hated anyone to fuss over her, so she got a bit sharp occasionally. He had begged her to stop work and take things easy, this time, for the baby's sake, but she wouldn't. If she went on at Hallam's Mill, they could buy a few more things for their new home and anyway, she'd have plenty of time to rest once the baby was born.

When he had met her after work today, he had noticed how haggard she was looking, her red hair faded and brittle, her skin sallow and her body over-thin, except for the curve of her swollen belly. Only her eyes were alive, green and alert. She had lovely eyes, did his Lucy. If anything happened to her . . . He banished the thought, as he banished all unpleasant thoughts. Nothing was going to happen to her. He wouldn't allow anything to happen to her!

As they slowed down to turn the corner into Boston Street, he let the cart run to a halt

against the wall. "Heavy work," he said. "Mind if I rest a bit?"

Lucy looked at his face, pale from the long hours inside the mill, and thought how much she loved this rough lad of hers. When he leaned against the wall and put his arm round her, she sagged against him gratefully, feeling his bristly chin next to her cheek, for he was not much taller than she was. John had been a bit of a favourite with the women before she met him. Perhaps it was his curly brown hair and wide grin that had attracted them. He'd not looked at another woman in that way since they'd got wed, though. She wouldn't have stood

for it, any more than she'd have stood for him drinking himself stupid on Saturday nights and getting into fights, like he used to.

"Eh, what a day this is!" he said and gave her a hug, his pulse quickening as always at the touch of her body. It was worth working hard for a wife like her and he was proud of his record as a provider. He was always one of the last to be put on to short time in the mill nowadays and he reckoned he'd be in line for the chargehand's job in a year or two, when old Ben got past it. All they needed now to complete their happiness was a live baby, not a limp little corpse like the last one. He pushed that sad memory away quickly.

After a few moments, Lucy nudged him. "Come on, my lazy lad! I shan't feel right till we're settled in."

By the time they were halfway along Boston Street, Lucy was panting again from her exertions. She forgot her tiredness, however, as she looked at the houses they were passing. How envious she used to feel of the lucky people who lived here, for they not only had whole houses of their own, but private back yards behind them! Well, there was no longer any need to feel envious, for soon she too would have a house and yard of her own - and not just any house, either.

She and John had been lucky enough to get one of the brand new houses in Salem Street. It was kind of young Mr Frederick to speak up for them, though he wouldn't have done so if John hadn't been such a good worker. He was sharp as they came, Mr Frederick, for all he was only seventeen, and would make a hard master for the mill when old Mr Hallam died.

They were all hard, were the cotton masters, and didn't she know it, for she'd been working in the spinning mills herself for over eleven years now, ever since she was a child of ten.

They passed the water tap, with its little queue of women and children. The water was turned on all the time in Boston Street. That'd be grand, that would. No need to skimp when you could get a clean bucketful at any time of the day or night. Lucy smiled at John, a radiant smile, weary as she was, for they were almost there. Salem Street was just around the corner.

It had been touch and go whether the new row of eight houses would be finished in time for Lucy Gibson to have her child there, or whether she'd have to bear it in the damp room where she had already lost one baby. But the builder was more interested in making money than in doing a good job, and Thomas Hallam was desperate for more accommodation for his operatives, so work on the little terrace went on apace. And if the timber could have been more carefully jointed or the bricks more evenly laid, who was going to complain? Certainly not the lucky families waiting to move in! Specially chosen, they were, for it was one of the best terraces in the Rows, a single-sided street facing the mill wall, with a good big private yard behind each house and a shared patch of dirt in front.

As they turned the corner into her new street, Lucy let out a long exhalation of pure happiness. "We'll do better here, love, I know we will." She paused for a moment to look possessively at the houses and to enjoy the feel of the weak April sunlight on her face after working in the noise and clatter of the mill.

"We've not done that badly so far, lass," said John, surprised.

"Aye, I know, but I want us to do better still," Lucy insisted, both hands on her belly, because the baby had started kicking vigorously. "Eh, but he's lively today! Takes after his father, he does." She threw John a look of happy complicity.

He grinned back at her. "His mother can be a bit lively at times, too!"

The cart was a tight fit at the corner, where the two privies barred part of the entrance to Salem Street, for its wheels pulled to the right and it wasn't easy to manoeuvre, but a bit of

tugging and they were through.

"I wouldn't like to live in this end house," commented Lucy, "right next door to the privies like that. Still, it'll be nice to have two privies, won't it? Not so much queuin' up, eh?" Without waiting for John, she hurried towards Number Three, her weariness forgotten in her pleasure at taking possession of their new home.

The door was slightly ajar and she stopped to take a deep breath before pushing it open and stepping inside reverently, as if she were treading on holy ground. It was a good house, all of twelve feet wide with bigger windows than usual. The front door opened straight into the largest of the four rooms, which had a nice level floor paved with two-foot square flagstones. "I'll soon have that floor clean and my rag mats down," she said aloud.

John followed her in, carrying one of their bundles and she turned towards him, her eyes filled with tears. "Eh, John!" she said huskily.

He put the bundle down and held out his hand. "Come on, my lass, let's 'ave a good look round before we start. There's no rent agent breathin' over our shoulders this time."

Between the front room and the kitchen at the rear a flight of steep wooden steps led up to the two bedrooms. The stairwell was cramped and dark, but the house seemed the height of luxury to two people who were more used to sharing a room with several others than having four rooms all to themselves.

After they'd walked proudly round their new domain, Lucy left John to bring the rest of the things in and stood gloating over the kitchen. The fire grate was nice and wide, with a brick ledge at each side to stand things on and a good strong metal bar across the middle, about two feet above the hearthstone, to hang the pot hooks on. The triangular space under the stairs would make a fine cupboard to keep her things in. It was a good job John had some tools and knew how to use them. He'd soon build her a set of shelves.

Hearing voices outside, Lucy went to see who John was talking to and found him with another young couple, whose children were rushing up and down the narrow front yard, shrieking and tumbling around like a litter of puppies. The mill wall had already cast its shadow

over the sour earth and the broken glass in the top of it was glinting in the late sunlight.

"This is Mick and Bridie O'Connor, love, who're movin' into Number Five."

Irish, thought Lucy, as she nodded at the couple. How had they got a house? She looked at them searchingly, for the Irish were not well thought of and what your neighbours were like could make a huge difference to your life, when walls were thin and houses small. She liked what she saw, however.

Bridie O'Connor was a short, stocky woman, with dark hair and a broad smile. As she got to know her, Lucy was often to marvel at Bridie's energy, for nothing seemed to get her down. Mick was tall, with a ruddy complexion and bright blue eyes. It soon became obvious that for all his great size, his wife ruled him with a rod of iron and her children too, though Danny, the eldest was a handful, always into mischief.

It was not long before Lucy learned their story. The O'Connors had been brought over from Ireland a few years previously, when the owners of the new mills were so short of operatives that they were bringing in workers from anywhere they could find them.

That made a bond between the two families, for Lucy herself had been brought in as a terrified child of ten, when her parents died and she was left on the parish in a distant village. She would rarely discuss that time, even with John, for the mill owners had been far less tender with their child apprentices in the early days than they were now. She had survived, she said, and that was enough. But she would never, she always added, let her own children go into the mill.

"Let my Mick give you a hand with those things, Mr Gibson. You'll not want your wife doin' any heavy liftin' in her condition." Bridie smiled at Lucy, for she too was expecting a child, though she did not look to be very far on yet. "Is it your first?" she asked, more to make conversation than anything else.

"Sort of. We lost one last year," said Lucy.

Bridie squeezed her hand in quick sympathy. "Ah, 'tis hard on a woman. I lost one meself three years back. She only lived a few hours, God rest her poor little soul!"

They turned in common accord to watch the men carry the Gibsons' few bits and pieces of furniture inside, and Bridie shooed away her children when they tried to follow. "Little devils!" she said fondly. "We'll be movin' in ourselves later today. Charlie's lendin' us his handcart. We've just come over to pick it up."

"Charlie?"

"Aye, Charlie Ashworth, him as was injured in that accident afore Easter, God bless him. The poor fellow's been given the end house, Number Eight. They didn't think he'd survive, but he's comin' along nicely now. A doctor came and sewed up his wounds with a needle and thread, just think of that, will ye! D'ye know Charlie?"

"No, but I heard about the accident." Lucy shuddered. There were dreadful accidents sometimes in the mills. A girl had been killed right next to Lucy, years ago, caught by her hair in the machinery and scalped within seconds. Lucy had had nightmares about it for months. Charlie Ashworth's accident had also been horrendous, but it was the men who shuddered as they spoke of it, for it was every man's worst nightmare. It was a miracle he was still alive. If anything ever happened to her John . . . She banished the thought quickly.

Over the next day or two the other houses were taken possession of, the last people arriving on the Tuesday, when Lucy was at work. She was too tired when she got home that night to do more than nod at them and exchange a few words with Bridie, standing on her doorstep watching the children play and waiting for Mick to come home.

By the end of the following week, Lucy could no longer work with her usual efficiency, and the chargehand sent her home. Her wages were paid meticulously, right up to the hour she'd been summoned to the office, and she was told she'd be welcome back when she'd weaned the child, for old Tom Hallam knew the worth of all his workers.

When John came hurrying home that night, worried because she'd had no one to look after her, his meal of cabbage and potatoes with a little fat bacon was bubbling in a pan and Lucy was sitting with her feet up in front of the fire. The most she would admit to was that she did feel 'a bit peaky-like' and was glad to stop work. During the next few days she potted about

the house, trying to get everything straight before the baby arrived. She found it comforting to have Bridie only two doors away and they soon became firm friends.

Bridie, never one to be reticent about herself, told Lucy all the details of how she and Mick had left their village in Ireland, because the new owner wanted the land for other uses and his agent was starting to evict people. It was Bridie who had forced Mick to look further afield than the next village for a job, and the big, gentle chap, who loved to feel the sun and wind on his face, found himself putting his cross on an agreement to go and work in a cotton mill in Lancashire. All they knew was that this place was across the sea in England and that the mills spun cotton wool into thread and yarn. At that time they'd not been long married and had only the one child. They'd thought they were living in luxury in Bilsden, what with the regular work, always something to eat and a clean room to themselves.

Mick had gradually grown used to the work and found himself a niche tending the dray horses and doing odd jobs round the mill, but he never grew used to living in a town or working indoors. He tried to take his pleasure from seeing how well his Bridie was and how his children were thriving on the regular wages. "Sure, we'd have lost more of 'em if we'd stayed there," Bridie would say, crossing herself, and he would nod. But just occasionally, Mick would turn gloomy and bad-tempered for no obvious reason, and then he would vanish without a word for the whole of the next Sunday, to tramp the moors and "breathe in some daicent air that don't choke a man".

When Lucy went into labour, it was Bridie who came in to sit with her, leaving her own children with Alice Butterworth in Number One. It was Bridie who sent her Danny for the local midwife and shooed John out to work, for what man would dare to lose a day, just because his wife was having a baby?

And after all, it was not until the middle of the afternoon that an exhausted Lucy at last produced the child, to her disappointment only a girl and not very big.

"An' what're ye lookin' so glum about, woman?" asked Bridie softly once the midwife had gone. "'Tis a fine, healthy daughter you've got there!"

"I wanted a son," admitted Lucy, in a tired voice.

"More fool you! It's best to have a girl first, as I should know havin' had three boys in a row. That way, she can help you look after the others. That Danny of mine is a little devil, so he is, and I can't trust him to look after any of 'em, not even for a minute."

Lucy couldn't help smiling. Bridie could always cheer her up.

"Now what'll you be callin' the little darlin'?"

"Annie, after my mam," said Lucy, leaning back tiredly. She fell into a light doze and Bridie, keeping an anxious eye on her, was pleased to see some of her colour returning. Lucy dozed on and off for the rest of the afternoon, waking occasionally with a start to check that the tiny creature in the box next to her bed was still alive. Reassured by the baby's soft, snuffling breaths, she would drift off to sleep again, relieved that her ordeal was safely over.

John came rushing home from work at seven that night and Bridie only just managed to grab his arm and stop him from pounding up the stairs.

"Whisht now, do ye want to wake them up?"

"Them?"

She smiled warmly. "Aye, them. Your wife an' daughter."

He gulped and swallowed hard. "Lucy - she's all right?"

"Sure, she's fine. They both are."

"Thank God!" His eyes were bright with tears. He sniffed and swallowed again. "A daughter, you said?"

"Aye. Pretty as a flower, she is, with red hair like her mam." Bridie frowned at him. "Now, ye won't be after upsettin' Lucy because it's not a son, will ye? She's tired out, poor thing."

Doesn't give birth easily, she thought to herself. I'm glad I'm not that way. Sure, it's a cruel hard world for us women!

"It's my Lucy as I care for," said John. "So long as she's all right, I'm not mithered whether it's a boy or a girl, though I'd like to have a son one day." He pulled away from her and moved purposefully towards the stairs.

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Annie Gibson was the first child to be born in Salem Street. Bridie's fourth son followed her into the world three months later and after that the babies came thick and fast.

Lucy never did go back to work in the mill. Before Annie was even weaned, she found herself pregnant again, though she lost that baby in the fourth month. Another pregnancy, hard on its heels, produced the lusty son she'd longed for, but somehow it was Annie who remained her favourite. By the time Annie was ten, there had been two further miscarriages and one more living daughter. And Annie, young as she was, had become her mother's right hand.

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Twenty-five years before, the town of Bilsden had been a small village, nestling in a narrow Pennine valley to the north-east of Manchester, and streets like Salem Street unheard of. In the early days, small mills had been built along the river, their machinery driven by its rushing waters. Then steam power had freed the cotton men from so close a dependence upon the whims of nature and they began to buy up nearby farmland to build larger and larger mills.

As the mills proliferated, housing had to be built for the operatives and the village developed into a town that grew bigger each year. Within a decade, the Rows had crept out across the valley floor like living scars and Bilsden was a bustling town, its streets teeming with the stunted bodies of those who served the Great God Cotton.

Fine new houses were built on the slopes above the town by those upon whom the Great God had smiled, for the moors around Bilsden were beautiful still, in their own stark way. But the valley of the Bil grew steadily filthier, the river polluted by the effluent from the processing and dyeing of cotton, and most of the greenery stamped out of existence. Now, day after day, the steam engines burnt up offerings of best coal and covered everything around them with a pall of black smoke and smuts, all in the name of Cotton. And not even the rich could escape from this dark rain.

Old Tom Hallam boasted in his declining years about the part he had played in such

progress. He had been the first man to build a cotton mill in the district, in the days when Bilsden was only a cluster of houses and farm workers' cottages around the parish church of St Mark. Folks had thought him mad with his great water wheel, and had counselled him against the venture, but he'd proved them wrong, by George!

In the library of his large new mansion on the very top of the hill they called the Ridge, Tom had a window specially built to look out over the valley for, unlike his wife, he loved its smoky bustle. He did not enjoy the view from the windows which looked out across the grey-green stretches of moorland or across his well-tended gardens, but he saw that his family was protected from the cold moorland winds above and the unpleasant sights below by high stone walls topped with broken glass to keep out intruders.

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By 1830, old Tom Hallam was dead and the houses in Salem Street were showing distinct signs of wear and tear, though its inhabitants still considered it a cut above most other streets in the Rows. Only seven out of the eight houses were occupied in March, for Grandpa Burley at Number Seven had died suddenly the previous week and his wife had gone to live with her eldest daughter over in Rochdale. The house wouldn't stay empty for more than a day or two, though. There were many families living in one or two rooms down at Claters End who'd give their eye-teeth to move in, if only Mr Frederick Hallam's hard-eyed rent agent would let them.

Annie Gibson, skipping solemnly up and down the paved pathway in front of the houses with a piece of rope her dad had brought home for her, made a game of counting the number of people who lived in the street. Her thick red plaits bobbed against her back and her skirt flew up and down in time to her jumping, showing a pair of thin legs covered with coarse black stocking that her mam had knitted for her. Five people in Number One, she said to herself, five Butterworths. She wrinkled her nose distastefully at the proximity of the privies. Six people in Number Two - George and Polly Dykes and their

three young children, and now Grandpa Dykes as well. She didn't like George and Polly, who often kept the whole street awake on Saturdays with their drunken singing and shouting.

Her mam didn't like them either. She said Polly was a slattern and should be able to manage on George's wages, instead on spending half her time at the pawnshop.

Annie waved to her mam as she passed Number Three and nodded at Widow Clegg who was coming out of Number Four, because her mam always told them to be polite to the neighbours. Widow Clegg was at least a hundred years old. She was tall, with a bony face and straight black hair dragged back in a tight bun. She took in lodgers and she also laid out dead people and helped women who were having babies. She'd helped Annie's mam when Tom and Lizzie were born. Annie wished she hadn't bothered, for their Lizzie was the bane of her life. She was forever making a nuisance of herself and tagging along when she wasn't wanted.

The children of the Rows were in a constant state of feud, with territory strictly marked out between the different groups, which were usually based on the streets in which they lived. The Salemites and the Bosties had clear lines of demarcation along the ginnel between their two rows of backyards. You were allowed to walk along your side of the ginnel to get to your own house, but if you crossed over, you were in for trouble.

Lizzie was always transgressing such rules, and then Annie or Tom would have to rescue her, because you couldn't let anyone bash your little sister, however much she deserved it. Tom was only eight, but he was a good fighter, able to beat lads older and bigger than himself. He couldn't play out much with Annie, though, because he had to go to Sergeant Brown's day school. John and Lucy wanted to make sure that their only son had a better start in life than themselves.

Annie had begged to be allowed to go to school, too, but her dad said it wasn't worth it for a girl, because she'd only go and get herself married. Besides, she was needed at home, to help her mam. The schooling caused a lot of bickering between Annie and Tom, though not in front of her dad. He wouldn't stand for any quarrelling in the house, her dad wouldn't.

As she came to Number Five, Annie stopped frowning and smiled. The O'Connors lived here, a whole house full of them. Her lips moved as she counted them up, still skipping in time

to the numbers. Danny was nearly twenty now, a man grown. She liked Danny, who always had a cheerful word for everyone. Most folk as old as him were married and too busy to talk to their neighbour's children, but Danny had told her that marriage was not for him. He was going to make something of himself and he didn't want a wife and children keeping him poor. He was taking lessons in reading and writing from the priest.

He worked at Hallam's, like her dad, but only until saw his way forward. She knew that he'd been fined the previous week for arguing with the overseer, because she'd heard her dad telling her mam about it in bed one night. Mr Frederick himself had said that it was not to happen again, or else Danny would be out. Her dad said Danny wouldn't last much longer if he didn't mind his step.

When the new baby came, there would be thirteen O'Connors in the little house. Annie had asked Bridie if she hadn't got enough children now, but Bridie had just laughed and said that babies were the Lord's will. Annie's mam was expecting another baby, too. Women were always having babies. Annie just hoped that the Lord wouldn't send them another girl. One sister like Lizzie was enough for anyone!

She skipped quickly past Number Six, because she wasn't supposed to play in front of that house. Her mam said Sally Smith wasn't respectable and when Annie had pressed for an explanation, she said that it was because of Sally's gentleman friend, who came to see her every Tuesday and Thursday. Annie would have liked to press for further explanation of this, because the gentleman friend had a nice smile and so did Sally, but her father had said that was enough of that, thank you, just remember to keep away from Number Six.

Number Seven was empty now. Poor house! It looked sad. Poor Grandpa Burley, too! What did it feel like to be dead?

In Number Eight lived Barmy Charlie, only her dad said they had to call him Mr Ashworth, which wasn't fair because no one else did. And he was barmy! He had funny turns. He talked to himself as well, and sometimes he even started singing at the top of his voice as he walked down the street. You couldn't help laughing at him then. His clothes were funny too. He liked to

dress in bright colours and he wore the daftest things! Annie had seen him once with a red and yellow woman's shawl wrapped round his shoulders.

Charlie traded in junk of all sorts, and he had the biggest yard in the street, over twice the size of Annie's back yard. Charlie's was piled high with things and he'd built a lean-to along one wall to keep the rain off. There were clothes, pieces of broken furniture, papers, rags - he collected just about anything. When folks got wed, they often bought stuff off him for their houses. She'd love to have a good look round his yard, but he didn't allow children inside it and he had a big dog that barked at you and showed its teeth if you went too near. Every now and then, Charlie would take a pile of stuff away on his handcart to sell, but it didn't seem to make much difference to the piles in the yard.

On his bad days he stayed home and drank, mourning his lost manhood, he said, lost in that damned mill. On such days the women kept their children away from that end of the street and everyone tried to ignore Charlie's drunken singing, crying and shouting. Sometimes he sang all day, till his voice was hoarse and all that came out was a croak. It made Annie's throat ache even to think of it. She'd asked her dad what lost manhood meant and been told to mind her own business. It wasn't fair. No one ever explained anything interesting!

So, she said to herself as she skipped back down the street in a complicated pattern of movements, that made thirty-one people living in Salem Street, with three more babies on the way. And she knew all of them. Hers was a nice street. She'd hate to live somewhere like Claters End, where whole families were crowded into one room and rough drunken men shoved you aside as they walked past. In Salem Street each family had a proper house and its own yard. It was the best street in the Rows, her dad said, and she didn't want to live anywhere else.