

The Bale of Silk

It was an afternoon in late November and the shadows were already darkening the alley. Trade was slow. I was shutting up the shop and stacking bales of fabric at the back, when I heard the shop door scraping open.

She was framed by the gaslight in the street behind her. "Mind if I come in Mrs Dixon", she said in a Northumberland lilt. I was surprised that she knew my name already. About forty, she looked, a big woman in a proper wool cape and a serviceable gown. I'd notice that of course, being in the trade. A seamstress I was, like my mother before me.

They were good years. We had more work than we knew what to do. Mrs Grey even took on some girls for the rougher work, while I did all the fine stitching for our new customers. Then it all changed. They stopped the silk trade down in London and the bales of silk had to come all the way from France. Prices went up and only the big shops could afford to keep the stock. Little places like us had been going down ever since. It was all we could do to keep going with mending and repairs.

So, when I sized up the woman in the doorway, I was careful not to tell her I was already closed. Instead I turned up the little lamp and offered her the best chair. Oh, she flattered me, saying as how she had heard of the quality of my work and the reputation of my silks. I was desperate for any work, for my little girl, my Tilly. That tot was my one joy, the more so since Jeb, my man, had died of the influenza the winter before. There had been precious few treats lately.

In that country brogue of hers, she told me that she was looking for some black silk for her lady. They lived North, in the town of Berwick. I showed her everything in the shop, and I could see she'd fallen for a beautiful, dark, glazed silk, with a sheen like water. Mrs Grey had bought it from samples shown to her by a traveller. It was the very highest quality with raised patterns in the self-same fabric. The best and the most expensive, for those ladies rich enough to go into mourning - like our Queen. It was an investment for Mrs Grey, who hoped, that by selling a few profitable yards at a time, she would be able to keep the business going.

The woman told me that she had been charged with finding both fine silk and a skilled seamstress for her lady and her five daughters. I was not told how the master had died, only that the story was a sad one. She added that her lady was rarely seen about these days in the town, but there were engagements she was obliged to honour.

I was to take the bale and travel to Berwick the next morning. She handed me a ticket for the coach leaving the Turnpike at seven the next morning. She would arrange lodgings for me in Berwick and accompany me to her lady's residence. I was to work every day until the garments were finished. If things went well and my work was satisfactory, I would receive two guineas and my journey home on the train that runs between Berwick and Newcastle. A fortune!

We parted warmly; well that was how it seemed to me. Only after the woman had gone did I realise that I did not even know her name. And how had she had heard about the shop? Why did I never ask? I must have been under some kind of spell. Now the questions came rapidly; now it was too late.

It was evening by the time I had wrapped the bale in clean cloth and prepared all my best threads ready for the morning. I flew home, and hugging my little one, I told her she was to go to my sister Bessy until I returned. Then she would eat roast chestnuts, get new boots, and maybe even a real dolly.

I do not wish to dwell on that journey by stagecoach. I sat uncomfortably on the bench behind the driver, while the fine people rested warm inside. It was a long, cold winter day. Seven long hours and more it took, pushed up against my precious bale of silk. We stopped at a hostelry in a place called Belford where the horses were changed. My fellow passengers enjoyed refreshments. I chewed on the meat I had brought from home.

It was already mid-afternoon as we entered Berwick. I could see the lamplighter firing up the gas lamps on the bridge as we clattered across. A chill, damp mist was coming off the river. In the gloom I made out the shapes of the boats in the harbour and the chandlers' stores which lined the docks. We drove through the centre of the town and passed the grand town hall police station, the commercial banks and the fine shop windows. The buildings were in a grey unfriendly stone, or so it seemed to me. Among a number of more ordinary notices for "Plain and Fancy Drapers", I made out a smart "Silk Mercer's" awning. And one draper's sign I still remember. It was for Messrs Paxton and Purves, proclaiming "Finest of its kind between Newcastle and Edinburgh." For the first time I wondered why, in this prosperous town with its own merchants and traders, had I been sent all the way from Newcastle?

I had no time to ponder this as the driver pulled the horses into a courtyard and shouted, "Journey's end. All alight now." A man appeared from the shadows and slouched towards me. He grasped the bale and swung it over his shoulder, before shrugging for me to follow him. I was hobbling, stiff and cold from my journey, but he paid me no heed. He turned into a narrow street, ill-lit and smelling of rubbish or worse. He knocked at the door of a low terraced dwelling. A sign declared the proprietress of this lodging house to be a Miss E Simpson. A woman, perhaps Miss Simpson, opened the door a crack, and then wider as she recognised the man. By the light of her sputtering candle I could see she was about five and fifty, haggard, her gown of coarse grey fabric, and grubbier than I would have expected for a landlady. Her features lifted as she saw me in the gloom, although her eyes remained small and sharp. "Come in dear", she wheezed in her coarse dialect. She took my arm and pulled me into a cramped, dim hallway. "My silk", I called out as the door slammed, followed by footsteps on the cobbles. "Don't fret dearie, he'll be back in the morning." All in the same oily tones.

We went up to a cramped room under the eaves, where the landlady lit a candle stub on a small washstand. Then she left without a word. I looked around, and even in that dimness I could see that the only other item of furniture in the room was a small bed with a

counterpane of coarse cloth. I was hungry, tired and cold. Sleep would not come, and my thoughts raced during that wretched night. How had I found myself in this gloomy border town? Who were these people? Where was my precious bale of silk? Did Mrs Grey, my employer, know my whereabouts? How would she view the taking of her bale of silk? Anxieties crowded in on me, and more than anything else, I longed for my little girl to be pressed next to me, breathing lightly as she did every night. As the town hall clock struck midnight I opened the window to clear the stale air in the room, but the stench outside was even worse, and I quickly closed it.

Early next morning I went downstairs, hoping to see the woman from yesterday, who would escort me and the silk to her lady. Instead, three or four other lodgers, dockside men, were sitting at a wooden table, breakfasting on herring and tea. At her stove, the landlady turned to me. Gone were the gentle airs of yesterday as she wiped her hands on a sacking apron. "Be gone now. Outside is a cart to take you back to where you came from," she said harshly. The men looked up, and one even laughed at me before returning to his greasy plate.

Then, Miss Simpson, if that's who she was, pushed me out into the street where a carter was waiting. "Get her away from here quick", she muttered. I recognised the fellow from yesterday as he hoisted me into the back of a cart. Even at that early hour I could smell the ale on his breath. The cart was shabby, and the horses poor, broken things. And so I left the town of Berwick, sitting atop a pile of dead pheasants and partridges slung into the bottom of the cart. These poachings were on their way to the markets in Newcastle. I do not wish to recall that long and terrible journey as I lurched on top of those cold things. I only remember the driving rain, the hunger and my growing fears about what awaited me. We stopped but once at a rundown alehouse where the carter took more liquor, the horses were given bran, and I was flung some stale crusts.

I understood all now, the lure, the promises, the trickery. What now my future? Would Mrs Grey believe how I had been duped by these wicked folk? What would happen to my home, my work, my Tilly? There were laws now for mothers the courts called unfit. They could take her away. I had seen it. My heart was heavy, my thoughts dark as we drew near the familiar sights, my world so different now.

And so it was. As we approached the Town Moor of Newcastle where the freemen graze their cows, I was pushed off the cart without a word. I limped through the city and made my way down to the little draper's shop beneath the bridge. Through the open door, I saw Mrs Grey. She was sat inside talking to a constable. They were waiting for me.