

A New World

Thomas Turner, fifteen, slipped out of the bed he shared with his younger brothers and sisters, and pulled in his clothes tighter about him. The day was just dawning and the February sunlight was struggling to penetrate the thin curtains of the room. As he made for the door, a fit of coughing made him pause: his mother, his father - maybe both? Consumption filled the air. He trod softly, felt for the handle and breathed a silent prayer that he would not wake them. He had plans. He needed to be alone.

Reaching the foot of the narrow staircase, Thomas lit a candle to reveal a large untidy room: in truth, despite the presence of a kitchen table and a simple stove, more of a workshop than a living space. The candle flickered in the half-light, illuminating faintly the paraphernalia of the poor cotton weaver; a large loom, with heavy hanging-stones used to keep the 'harness' steady, dominated. Shears, piles of shuttles, picking sticks, and tubs of flour and water, littered the floor. These were the tools that had kept the wolf from the Turner family's door... *but*, he thought, *for how much longer?*

The house stood on the edge of the moor, one of only a scattered handful of similar dwellings that now constituted the village. Every cottage housed a weaver. And every weaver was afraid. Thomas tiptoed to the door, careful not to trip or make a noise that might rouse his family. He heard another cough, then silence.

He pushed the door open and took in the view - for the very last time, perhaps. Below him, he made out the brick chimney of the new mill, rising tall through the hanging smoke and the mist, a threatening, accusing finger pointing at those who lived on the surrounding hills. The town was growing, other mills were planned, and as the cotton cloth rolled faster and faster off looms many times bigger than the one at his back, Thomas and his kin stared oblivion in the face. He took a deep breath, returned to the room, and rummaged through his father's things for a pencil and a scrap of paper. The sun was rising fast and he needed to be on his way, to put distance between himself and his family. A floorboard creaked upstairs as he started to write a rough, but clear, message:

'My Dearest father and mother,

When you awake I will be gone. You know what we have spoke of, and now I must take my destiny into my own hands. It is finished here, and I am yet another mouth to feed.

I will love you always and may one day return a rich man.

Your loving son,

Tom'

Wiping a tear from his eye he shouldered the bag that he had hidden and stood on the step. A short while later, from the valley, he heard his mother's voice, and quickened his pace; west, towards Liverpool, and the coast.

America was calling.

500 words