The writers discussed in this book may have been loath to accept that the collective poor were an articulate and a powerful body. But they did not shrink from the reality of the alienation between the classes, which, like the gulf between Dives and Lazarus, appeared to be sowing the seeds of a terrible retribution on the rich of mid-nineteenth-century Britain. In *North and South* (1854–5), Gaskell drew her readers’ attention to the ominous implications of the parable. She set up a conversation between Bessy, the former factory girl who is racked by the pains of a fatal pulmonary disease, and the middle-class Margaret, in which Bessy accepts the inevitability of God’s punishment on the classes of wealth. Bessy is justly qualified to speak on behalf of the neglected poor. For her suffering, which, showed Gaskell, would have been prevented if the owner of her mill had installed a wheel to draw the cotton fluff out of the carding-room, exemplifies the supplanting of the claims of brotherhood by the claims of cash.

Bessy tells Margaret,

> Some’s pre-elected to sumptuous feasts, and purple and fine linen, – maybe yo’re one on ‘em. Others toil and moil all their lives long – and the very dogs are not pitiful in our days, as they were in the days of Lazarus. But if yo’ ask me to cool yo’r tongue wi’ the tip of my finger, I’ll come across the great gulf to yo’ just for th’ thought o’ what yo’ve been to me here. (Penguin edn, pp. 201–2)

In so identifying Margaret with ‘purple and fine linen’, Bessy casts her in the role of Dives; and she portrays herself as the Lazarus figure, with her reference to the dogs in the parable that ‘came and licked’ the sores of the diseased beggar. She draws a parallel, therefore, between the gulf that separates the affluent classes from herself and the gulf that separated Dives from Lazarus; and to her this parallel signifies that she will
enter Heaven after death, while Margaret will be cast into the flames of Hell. In the parable, Dives asks Abraham to allow Lazarus to ‘dip the tip of his finger in water, and cool my tongue; for I am tormented in this flame’. Abraham refuses, on the grounds that Dives had received his ‘good things’ on earth while Lazarus had suffered. But Bessy, whose agony on earth has been considerably lightened by Margaret’s visits, wishes to exempt her friend from the full measure of the punishment meted out to Dives. She promises, therefore, to cross the gulf between Heaven and Hell and to cool Margaret’s tongue with the tip of her finger, ‘just for th’ thought o’ what yo’ve been to me here’.

Margaret derives small comfort from Bessy’s promise, however, preferring to believe that she will not enter Hell. ‘It won’t be division enough, in that awful day, that some of us have been beggars here, and some of us rich’, she tells her, adding, ‘we shall not be judged by that poor accident, but by our faithful following of Christ.’ She then demonstrates her own following of Christ by rising to find some water and, ‘soaking her pocket-handkerchief, she laid the cool wetness on Bessy’s forehead’ (North and South, p. 202). By cooling the flame of Bessy’s fever, which is the poor girl’s torment on earth, she reciprocates Bessy’s offer to palliate the anguish of her own burning in Hell. Both women thus show themselves ready to cross the gulf between the classes and to meet, as far as they are able, on equal terms.

Margaret had initiated their friendship by her visits to Bessy; and by so doing she engendered a reciprocating spirit of trust and helpfulness from the poor. If the rich of mid-nineteenth-century Britain became equally willing to follow the word of Christ, believed Gaskell, they would foster a better relationship with the poor and so diminish the alienation between the classes. The outcome of Margaret’s benevolence offers fictional evidence for Gaskell’s conviction that, as the author writing under the pseudonym of Χριστοφέρος wrote, ‘the poor, seeing the higher classes interesting themselves on their behalf, will be prompted to put forth their energies to aid them in the generous act’ (Condition of the Labouring Poor Considered, with Suggestions for their Amelioration, Physical and Moral, 1851, p. 37).

Through Margaret’s insistence on the need to follow Christ