One Day at Arle

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ONE day at Arle −− a tiny scattered fishing hamlet on the north−western English coast −− there stood at the door of one of the cottages near the shore a woman leaning against the lintel−post and looking out: a woman who would have been apt to attract a stranger's eye, too −− a woman young and handsome. This was what a first glance would have taken in; a second would have been apt to teach more and leave a less pleasant impression. She was young enough to have been girlish, but she was not girlish in the least. Her tall, lithe, well−knit figure was braced against the door−post with a tense sort of strength; her handsome face was just at this time as dark and hard in expression as if she had been a woman with years of bitter life behind her; her handsome brows were knit, her lips were set; from head to foot she looked unyielding and stern of purpose.

And neither form nor face belied her. The earliest remembrances of the coast people concerning Meg Lonas had not been over−pleasant ones. She had never been a favorite among them. The truth was they had half feared her, even as the silent, dogged, neglected child who used to wander up and down among the rocks and on the beach, working harder for her scant living than the oldest of them. She had never a word for them, and never satisfied their curiosity upon the subject of the treatment she received from the ill−conditioned old grandfather who was her only living relative, and this last peculiarity had rendered her more unpopular than anything else would have done. If she had answered their questions they might have pitied her; but as she chose to meet them with stubborn silence, they managed to show their dislike in many ways, until at last it became a settled point among them that the girl was an outcast in their midst. But even in those days she gave them back wrong for wrong and scorn for scorn; and as she grew older she grew stronger of will, less prone to forgive her many injuries and slights, and more prone to revenge them in an obstinate, bitter fashion. But as she grew older she grew handsomer too, and the fisher boys who had jeered at her in her childhood were anxious enough to gain her good−will.

The women flouted her still, and she defied them openly; the men found it wisest to be humble in their rough style, and her defiance of them was more scornful than her defiance of their mothers and sisters. She would revenge herself upon them, and did, until at last she met a wooer who was tender enough, it seemed, to move her. At least so people said at first; but suddenly the lover disappeared, and two or three months later the whole community was electrified by her sudden marriage with a suitor whom she had been wont to treat worse than all the rest. How she treated him after the marriage nobody knew. She was more defiant and silent than ever, and gossipers gained nothing by asking questions. So at last she was left alone.

It was not the face of a tender wife waiting for a loving husband, the face that was turned toward the sea. If she had hated the man for whom she watched she could not have seemed more unbending. Ever since her visitor had left her (she had had a visitor during the morning) she had stood in the same place, even in the same position, without moving, and when at last the figure of her husband came slouching across the sands homeward she remained motionless still.

And surely his was not the face of a happy husband. Not a handsome face at its dull best, it was doubly unprepossessing then, as, pale and breathless, he passed the stern form in the door−way, his nervous, reluctant eyes avoiding hers.

"Yo'll find yo're dinner aw ready on th' table," she said to him as he passed in.

Everything was neat enough inside. The fireplace was clean and bright, the table was set tidily, and the meal upon it was good enough in its way; but when the man entered he cast an unsteady, uncomprehending glance around, and when he had flung himself into a chair he did not attempt to touch the food, but dropped his face upon his arm on the table with a sound like a little groan.

She must have heard it, but she did not notice it even by a turn of her head, but stood erect and steadfast until he spoke to her. She might have been waiting for his words −− perhaps she was.

"Tha canst come in an' say what tha has to say an' be done wi' it," he said at last, in a sullen, worn−out fashion.

She turned round then and faced him, harder to be met in her rigid mood than if she had been a tempest.

"Tha knows what I ha' getten to say," she answered, her tone strained and husky with repressed fierceness. "Aye! tha knows it well enough. I ha' not much need to tell thee owt. He comn here this morning an' he towd me aw I want to know about thee, Seth Lonas −− an' more too."

"He comn to me," put in the man.

She advanced towards the table and struck it once with her hand.

"Tha'st towd me a power o' lies," she said. "Tha's lied to me fro' first to last to serve thy own eends, an' tha'st gained 'em −− tha'st lied me away fro' th' man as wur aw th' world to me, but th' time's comn now when thy day's o'er an' his is comn agen. Ah! thou bitter villin! Does ta mind how tha comn an' towd me Dan Morgan had gone to th' fair at Lake wi' that lass o' Barnegats? That wor a lie an' that wor th' beginnin'. Does ta mind how tha towd me as he made light o' me when th' lads an' lasses plagued him, an' threeped 'em down as he didna mean to marry no such like lass as me −− him as wor ready to dee fur me? That wor a lie an' that wor th' eendin', as tha knew it would be, fur I spurned him fro' me th' very neest day, an' wouldna listen when he tried to straighten out. But he got at th' truth at last when he wor fur fro' here, an' he browt th' truth back to me to−day, an' theer's th' eend fur thee −− husband or no."

The man lay with his head upon his arms until she had finished, and then he looked up all white and shaken and blind.

"Wilt ta listen if I speak to thee?" he asked.

"Aye," she answered, "listen to more lies!"

And she slipped down into a sitting posture on the stone door−step, and sat there, her great eyes staring out seaward, her hands lying loose upon her knee, and trembling.

There was something more in her mood than resentment. In this simple gesture she had broken down as she had never broken down in her life before. There was passionate grief in her face, a wild sort of despair, such as one might see in a suddenly−wounded, untamed creature. Hers was not a fair nature. I am not telling the story of a gentle, true−souled woman −− I am simply relating the incidents of one bitter day whose tragic close was the ending of a rough romance.

Her life had been a long battle against the world's scorn; she had been either on the offensive or the defensive from childhood to womanhood, and then she had caught one glimpse of light and warmth, clung to it yearningly for one brief hour, and lost it.

Only to−day she had learned that she had lost it through treachery. She had not dared to believe in her bliss, even during its fairest existence; and so, when light−hearted, handsome Dan Morgan's rival had worked against him with false stories and false proofs, her fierce pride had caught at them, and her revenge had been swift and sharp. But it had fallen back upon her own head now. This very morning handsome Dan had come back again to Arle, and earned his revenge, too, though he had only meant to clear himself when he told her what chance had brought to light. He had come back −− her lover, the man who had conquered and sweetened her bitter nature as nothing else on earth had power to do −− he had come back and found her what she was −− the wife of a man for whom she had never cared, the wife of the man who had played them both false, and robbed her of the one poor gleam of joy she had known. She had been hard and wild enough at first, but just now, when she slipped down upon the door−step with her back turned to the wretched man within −− when it came upon her that, traitor as he was, she herself had given him the right to take her bright−faced lover's place, and usurp his tender power −− when the fresh sea−breeze blew upon her face and stirred her hair, and the warm, rare sunshine touched her, even breeze and sunshine helped her to the end, so that she broke down into a sharp, sharp sob, as any other woman might have done, only that the repressed strength of her poor warped nature made it a sob sharper and deeper than another woman's would have been.

"Yo mought ha' left me that!" she said. "Yo mought ha' left it to me! There wur other women as would ha' done yo, there wur no other man on earth as would do me. Yo knowed what my life had been, an' how it wur hand to hand between other folk an' me. Yo knowed how much I cared fur him an' what he wur to me. Yo mought ha' let us be. I nivver harmed yo. I wouldna harm yo so sinful cruel now."

"Wilt ta listen?" he asked, laboring as if for breath.

"Aye," she answered him, "I'll listen, fur tha canna hurt me worser. Th' day fur that's past an' gone."

"Well," said he, "listen an' I'll try to tell yo. I know it's no use, but I mun say a word or two. Happen yo didna know I loved yo aw' yo're life −− happen yo didna, but it's true. When yo wor a little lass gatherin' sea−weed on th' sands I watched yo when I wor afeared to speak −− afeared lest yo'd gi' me a sharp answer, fur yo wor ready enow wi' 'em, wench. I've watched yo fur hours when I wur a great lubberly lad, an' when yo gettin, [sic] to be a woman it wur th' same thing. I watched yo an' did yo many a turn as yo knowed nowt about. When yo wur searchin' fur drift to keep up th' fire after th' owd mon deed an' left yo alone, happen yo nivver guessed as it wor me as heaped little piles i' th' nooks o' th' rocks so as yo'd think 'at th' tide had left it theer −− happen yo didn't, but it wor true. I've stayed round th' old house many a neet feared summat mought harm yo, an' yo know yo nivver gave me a good word, Meg. An' then Dan comn an' he made way wi' yo as he made way wi' aw th' rest −− men an' women an' children. He nivver worked an' waited as I did −− he nivver thowt an' prayed as I did; everything come easy wi' him −− everything allus did come easy wi' him, an' when I seed him so light−hearted an' careless about what I wor cravin' it run me daft an' blind. Seemt like he couldna cling to it like I did, an' I begun to fight agen it, an' when I heerd about that lass o' Barnegats I towd yo, an' when I seen yo believed what I didna believe mysen it run me dafter yet, an' I put more to what he said, an' held back some, an' theer it wor an' theer it stands, an' if I've earnt a curse, lass, I've getten it, fur −− fur I thowt yo'd been learnin, [sic] to care fur me a bit sin' we wor wed, an' God knows I've tried to treat yo fair an' kind i' my poor way. It worna Dan Morgan's way, I know −− his wur a better way than mind, th' sun shone on him somehow −− but I've done my best an' truest sin'."

"Yo've done yo're worst," she said. "Th' worst yo could do wor to part us, an' yo did it. If yo'd been half a mon yo wouldna ha' been content wi' a woman yo'd trapped with sayin' 'Aye,' an' who cared less for yo than she did fur th' sand on th' sea−shore. What's what yo've done sin' to what yo did afore? Yo cannot wipe that out and yo cannot mak' me forget. I hate yo, an' th' worse because I wor beginnin' to be content a bit. I hate mysen. I ought to ha' knowed" −− wildly −− "he would ha' knowed whether I wor true or false, poor chap −− he would ha' knowed."

She rocked herself to and fro for a minute, wringing her hands in a passion of anguish worse than any words, but a minute later she turned on him all at once.

"All 's o'er between yo an' me," she said with fierce heat; "do yo know that? If yo wor half a mon yo would."

He sat up and stared at her humbly and stupidly.

"Eh?" he said at last.

"Theer's not a mon i' Arle as is not more to me now than tha art," she said. "Some on 'em be honest, an' I canna say that o' thee. Tha canst get thee gone or I'll go mysen. Tha knows't me well enow to know I'll ne'er forgie thee for what tha's done. Aye" −− with the passionate hand−wringing again −− "but that wunnot undo it."

He rose and came to her, trembling like a man with the ague.

"Yo dunnot mean that theer, Meg," he said slowly. "You dunnot mean it word fur word. Think a bit."

"Aye but I do," she answered him, setting her white teeth, "word fur word."

"Think again, wench." And this time he staggered and caught hold of the door−post. "Is theer nowt as'll go agen th' wrong? I've lived wi' thee nigh a year, an' I've loved thee twenty −− is theer nowt fur me? Aye, lass, dunnot be too hard. Tha was allus harder than most womankind; try an' be a bit softer like to'rds th' mon as risked his soul because he war a mon an' darena lose thee. Tha laid thy head on my shoulder last neet. Aye, lass −− lass, think o' that fur one minnit."

Perhaps she did think of it, for surely she faltered a little −− what woman would not have faltered at such a moment? −− but the next, the memory of the sunny half−boyish face she had clung to with so strong a love, rushed back upon her and struck her to the heart. She remembered the days when her life had seemed so full that she had feared her own bliss; she remembered the gallant speeches and light−hearted wiles, and all at once she cried out in a fierce impassioned voice: "I'll ne'er forgie thee," she said −− "I'll ne'er forgie thee to th' last day o' my life. What for should I? Tha's broke my heart, thou villian −− tha's broke my heart." And the next minute she had pushed past him and rushed into the house.

For a minute or so after she was gone the man stood leaning against the door with a dazed look in his pale face. She meant what she said: he had known her long enough to understand that she never forgave −− never forgot. Her unbroken will and stubborn strength had held her to enmities all her life, and he knew she was not to be won by such things as won other women. He knew she was harder than most women, but his dull nature could not teach him how bitter must have been the life that rendered her so. He had never thought of it −− he did not think of it now. He was not blaming her, and he was scarcely blaming himself. He had tried to make her happy

and had failed. There were two causes for the heavy passion of misery that was ruling him, but neither of them was remorse.

His treachery had betrayed him, and he had lost the woman he had loved and worked for. Soul and body were sluggish alike, but each had its dull pang of weight and wretchedness.

"I've come to th' eend now surely," he said, and, dropping into her seat, he hid his face.

As he sat there a choking lump rose in his throat with a sudden click, and in a minute or so more he was wiping away hot rolling tears with the back of his rough hand.

"I'm forsook somehow," he said −− "aye, I'm forsook. I'm not th' soart o' chap to tak' up wi' th' world. She wor all th' world I cared fur, an' she'll ne'er forgie me, for she's a hard un −− she is. Aye! but I wur fond o' her! I wonder what she'll do −− I do wonder i' my soul what she's gettin' her mind on!"

It did not occur to him to call to her or go and see what she was doing. He had always stood in some dull awe of her, even when she had been kindest, and now it seemed that they were too far apart for any possibility of approach at reconciliation. So he sat and pondered heavily, the sea air blowing upon him fresh and sweet, the sun shining soft and warm upon the house, and the few common flowers in the strip of garden whose narrow shell walks and borders he had laid out for her himself with much clumsy planning and slow labor.

Then he got up and took his rough working−jacket over his arm.

"I mun go down to th' Mary Anne," he said, "an' work a bit, or we'll ne'er get her turned o'er afore th' tide comes in. That boat's a moit o' trouble." And he sighed heavily.

Half−way to the gate he stopped before a cluster of ground honeysuckle, and perhaps for the first time in his life was conscious of a sudden curious admiration for them.

"She's powerful fond o' such like bits o' things −− posies an' such like," he said. "Thems some as I planted to please her on th' very day as we were wed. I'll tak' one or two. She's most fond on 'em −− fur such a hard un."

And when he went out he held in his hand two or three slender stems hung with the tiny pretty humble bells. Who knows whether some subtle influence at work in soul or body, or even the air he breathed, did not prompt the novel mood. . . . . .

He had these very bits of simple blossoms in his hand when he went down to where the Mary Anne lay on the beach for repairs. So his fellow−workmen said when they told the story afterwards, remembering even this trivial incident.

He was in a strange frame of mind, too, they noticed, silent and heavy and absent. He did not work well, but lagged over his labor, stopping every now and then to pass the back of his hand over his brow as if to rouse himself.

"Yo look as if yo an' th' missus had had a fallin' out an' yo'n getten th' worst o' th' bargain," one of his comrades said by way of rough jest.

They were fond of joking with him about his love for his handsome taciturn wife. But he did not laugh this time as he usually did.

"Mind thy own tackle, lad," he said dully, "an' I'll mind mine."

From that time he worked steadily among them until it was nearly time for the tide to rise. The boat they were repairing had been a difficult job to manage, as they could only work between tides, and now being hurried they lingered longer than usual. At the last minute they found it must be moved, and so were detained.

"Better leave her until th' tide ebbs," said one, but the rest were not of the same mind.

"Nay," they argued, "it'll be all to do o'er again if we do that. Theer's plenty o' time if we look sharp enow. Heave again, lads."

Then it was that with the help of straining and tugging there came a little lurch, and then it was that as the Mary Anne slipped over on her side one of the workers slipped with her, slipped half underneath her with a cry, and lay on the sand, held down by the weight that rested on him.

With his cry there broke out half a dozen others, and the men rushed up to him with frightened faces.

"Are yo hurt, Seth, lad?" they cried. "Are yo crushed or owt?"

The poor fellow stirred a little and then looked up at them pale enough.

"Bruised a bit," he answered them, "an' sick a bit, but I dunnot think theer's any bones broke. Look sharp, chaps, an' heave her up. She's a moit o' weight on me."

They went to work again one and all, so relieved by his words that they were doubly strong, but after toiling

like giants for a while they were compelled to pause for breath. In falling the boat had so buried herself in the sand that she was harder to move than ever. It had seemed simple enough at first, but it was not so simple, after all. With all their efforts they had scarcely stirred her an inch, and their comrade's position interfered with almost every plan suggested. Then they tried again, but this time with less effect than before, through their fatigue. When they were obliged to pause they looked at each other questioningly, and more than one of them turned a trifle paler, and at last the wisest of them spoke out.

"Lads," he said, "we canna do this oursens. Run for help, Jem Coulter, an' run wi' thy might, fur it wunnot be so long afore th' tide'll flow."

Up to this time the man on the sands had lain with closed eyes and set teeth, but when he heard this his eyes opened and he looked up.

"Eh!" he said, in that blind, stupid fashion. "What's that theer tha's sayin' Mester?"

"Th' tide," blundered the speaker. "I wor tellin' him to look sharp, that's aw."

The poor fellow moved restlessly.

"Aye! aye!" he said. "Look sharp −− he mun do that. I didna think o' th' tide." And he shut his eyes again with a faint groan.

They strove while the messenger was gone; they strove when he returned with assistance; they strove with might and main, until not a man among them had the strength of a child, and the boldest of them were blanching with a fearful, furtive excitement none dared to show. A crowd had gathered round by this time −− men willing and anxious to help, women suggesting new ideas and comforting the wounded man in rough earnest style, children clinging to their mothers' gowns and looking on terror−stricken. Suddenly, in the midst of one of their mightiest efforts, a sharp childish voice piped out from the edge of an anxious group a brief warning that struck terror to every heart that beat among them.

"Eh! Mesters!" it said, "th' tide's creepin' up a bit."

The men looked round with throbbing pulses, the women looked also, and one of the younger ones broke into a low cry. "Lord ha' mercy!" she said, "it'll sweep around th' Bend afore long an' −− an' −− and she ended with a terror in her voice which told its own tale without other words.

The truth forced itself upon them all then. Women began to shriek and men to pray, but, strange to say, the man whose life was at stake lay silent, though with ashen lips about which the muscles were tensely drawn.

His dull eyes searched every group in a dead despair that was yet a passion, in all its stillness.

"How long will it be," he asked slowly at last −− "th' tide? Twenty minutes?"

"Happen so," was the answer. "An' lad, lad! we canna help thee. We'n tried our best, lad" −− with sobs even from the uncouth fellow who spoke. "Theer is na one on us but ud leave a limb behind to save thee, but theer is na time −− theer is na −− "

One deep groan and he lay still again −− quite still. God knows what weight of mortal agony and desperate terror crushed him in that dead, helpless pause.

Then his eyes opened as before.

"I've thowt o' deein'," he said with a queer catch of his breath. "I've thowt o' deein', an' I've wondered how it wor an' what it felt like. I never thowt o' deein' like this here." Another pause and then −−

"Which o' yo lads'll tell my missus?"

"Ay! poor chap, poor chap!" wailed the women. "Who on 'em will?"

"Howd tha noise, wenches," he said hoarsely. "Yo daze me. Theer is na time to bring her here. I'd ha' liked to ha' said a word to her. I'd ha' liked to ha' said one word; Jem Coulter −− " raising his voice −− "canst tha say it fur me?"

"Aye," cried the man, choking as he spoke, "surely, surely." And he knelt down.

"Tell her 'at if it wor bad enow −− this here −− it wor not so bad as it mought ha' been −− fur me. I mought ha' fun it worser. Tell her I'd like to ha' said a word if I could −− but I couldna. I'd like to ha' heard her say one word as happen she would ha' said if she'd been here, an' tell her 'at if she had ha' said it th' tide mought ha' comn an' welcome −− but she didna, an' theer it stands." And the sob that burst from his breast was like the sob of a death−stricken child. "Happen" −− he said next −− "happen one o' yo women foak say a bit o' a prayer −− yo're not so fur fro' safe sand but yo can reach it −− happen one o' yo ha' a word or two as yo could day −− such like as yo teach yo're babbies."

Among these was one who had −− thank God, thank God! −− and so, amid wails and weeping, rough men and little children alike knelt with uncovered heads and hidden eyes while this one woman faltered the prayer that was a prayer for a dying man; and when it was ended, and all rose glancing fearfully at the white line of creeping foam, this dying man for whom they had prayed lay upon his death−bed of sand the quietest of them all −− quiet with a strange calm.

"Bring me my jacket," he said, "an' lay it o'er my face. Theer's a bit o' a posie in th' button−hole. I getten it out o' th' missus's garden when I comn away. I'd like to hold it i' my hand if it's theer yet."

And as the long line of white came creeping onward they hurriedly did as he told them −− laid the rough garment over his face and gave him the humble dying flowers to hold, and having done this and lingered to the last moment, one after the other dropped away with awe−stricken souls until the last was gone. And under the arch of sunny sky the little shining waves ran up the beach, chasing each other over the glittering sand, catching at shells and sea−weed, toying with them for a moment and then leaving them, rippling and curling and whispering, but creeping −− creeping −− creeping. . . . . .

They gave his message to the woman he had loved with all the desperate strength of his dull yet unchanging nature; and when the man who gave it to her saw her wild, white face and hard−set lips, he blundered upon some dim guess as to what that single word might have been, but the sharpest of them never knew the stubborn anguish that, following and growing day by day, crushed her fierce will and shook her heart. She was as hard as ever, they thought; but they were none of them the men or women to guess at the long−dormant instinct of womanhood and remorse that the tragedy of this one day of her life had awakened. She had said she would never forgive him, and perhaps her very strength made it long before she did; but surely some subtle chord was touched by those heavy last words, for when, months later, her first love came back, faithful and tender, with his old tale to tell, she would not listen.

"Nay, lad," she said, "I amna a feather to blow wi' th' wind. I've had my share o' trouble wi' men foak, an' I ha' no mind to try again. Him as lies i' th' churchyard loved me i' his way −− men foak's way is apt to be a poor un −− an' I'm wore out wi' life. Dunnot come here courtin' −− tak' a better woman."