

# The Storyteller

## THE LITTLE MAIDEN BY THE SEA

'Just one speck upon the ocean and one white speck upon the shore!' soliloquised the literary man who had come down to Little Morley for his Easter holiday. 'Old Betton was correct in describing this place as "phenomenally quiet." It is grand! simply grand, having all this stretch of sky and sea and sand all to myself. For the first time in my life I feel that I have left humanity behind, and my soul is alone with its Creator. How happy I ought to be! How happy, indeed, I am! And yet, in this vast solitude, one somehow longs more than ever for a kindred soul to share the beauty of it all and sympathise.'

He looked again at the two white specks which had at first attracted his attention. The distant sail upon the sea quite failed to interest him, but instinctively he turned his steps towards that other note of white upon the shore.

The little wearer of that snowy Tam o' Shanter had some days ago awakened his interest and fired his imagination. Ever since the morning of his arrival at Little Morley, when he found her alone—the only living thing upon that long stretch of sand and pebbles by the sea—his thoughts, unbidden, had been weaving fancies round her. His ignorance as to her name, age, rank, and occupation only added to the enchantment of a lovely face, a girlish figure, a resolute bearing, and her evident love of solitude.

As soon as he arrived at what he judged to be a suitable distance, he sat down upon the stones, leaned his back against a breakwater, and gave his imagination a long rein.

Her back turned towards him, she was entirely unconscious of his presence, and he was obliged to content himself with a general impression. So he began by studying her outward garb.

She wore a white woollen Tam o' Shanter over her short dark curls, a warm black cloak with a fur collar (the early April winds being still occasionally very cold), a blue serge skirt and neat brown shoes and stockings.

With an artistic eye he noted how the coloring of her clothes harmonized with her surroundings, and he wondered if she chose them herself, or if her mother dressed her. He found himself wondering all sorts of things, but it was her age which puzzled him most of all, and until he could decide whether she were nearer twelve years old or thirty, he could not place her satisfactorily in his thoughts.

Her short hair, her very youthful face, and the lightness of her step suggested the child; but there was a certain repose of manner and dignity of carriage which baffled him. The long, free stride, the poise of the head, the resolution—almost, he fancied, the courage of her bearing, bespoke the woman who had faced difficulties and troubles, and had faced them nobly. She might be thirty with a past, or she might be thirteen with a future. Yet it was unnatural for a child—and he inclined to the supposition that she could be little more than a child—to come down alone to the sea day after day, and he so still for hours watching the waves and sky. Morning and evening she came, as though she were performing a task, and he read firmness, decision, heroism into her even steps. She always chose the same part of the beach, and settled herself down under shelter of a great black breakwater, crowned with dripping, golden seaweed.

Three boys were building a sand castle perilously near the in-coming tide, and he wished that she would essay to do some childish thing that he might assist her. But she never came armed with a bucket or a spade. She carried two books and something glistening—exactly what he was not able to discern—twisted around the fingers of the other hand.

'She ought to have some one to play with, or some one to look after her. Where is her mother or her elder sister?' demanded the literary man aloud, but the thud and ripple of the waves as they broke upon the shore was the only answer he received.

'It is not good for one to be so much alone,' he thought. His own solitary condition was due to the fact that the friend who had told him about the place succumbed to an attack of influenza at the last minute and was unable to accompany him; and having once arranged his plans it had seemed better to him to get to the sea alone than not to get there at all. Moreover, he wanted a little quiet time in which to work out a story which for years had been simmering in his brain; a simple story, treating of healthy English Catholic life, with a heroine, who amidst many difficul-

ties and trials, humbly submitted her way unto the Lord; accepting the little things of life and living nobly amongst them; such a heroine as he had never been privileged to meet, though he believed that there must be many such girls trained in our convent schools—Children of Mary—who even in the struggling, go-ahead twentieth century, follow meekly and wisely in the footsteps of Our Lady.

As he was meditating upon the character of his heroine, with his eyes upon the little girl by the sea, a distant clock struck five. She rose, collected her possessions, and set forth homewards, leaving him lost in admiration at the beautiful way she held herself.

He sat on, thinking and wondering, until the setting sun and the chill evening air practically recalled him to an everyday world. Then he went for an hour's brisk walk along the beach, taking a short cut back across fields yellow and white with new spring blossoms to his dinner of fried ham and eggs at the Red Lion Inn, where he was putting up.

'Are you going to the Good Friday concert on the pier at Longer Morley to-morrow evening?' inquired his landlady, who, pitying his loneliness, indulged him with the local news whilst she cleared away his meals. 'They say the singing will be something beautiful. I hope you'll go, sir. It will be a nice change for you.'

His smile was not entirely devoid of sarcasm. After being accustomed to the best of everything in London he fully expected that the music provided by the local talent of Longer Morley would be a change for him! Yet, all the same, he said that very likely he might go, and delighted the good hostess of the Red Lion Inn by purchasing from her an eighteen-penny reserved stall on the spot.

His little girl was not upon the beach next day, and he hoped that she was perhaps reserving herself for the evening concert. It would give him great pleasure to recognise her, differently dressed, sitting among the audience. He wanted to picture her under the influence of some other environment. But no! when he arrived upon the pier, and took an eager survey of the inmates of the concert-room, he saw in an instant that she was not among them.

The room, as yet, was but a quarter full. He stood near the door anxiously watching the passers-by until the concert was about to begin; then, with a sense of extraordinary disappointment, for which he found it unreasonable to account, he took his place in the one row of red plush seats and devoted his attention to the decoration of the room. The effect of color was distinctly pleasing—the crimson curtain on either side the stage, the many windows disclosing views of the sea, the painting of the wood-work in two delicate shades of blue. And his seat was comfortable. If the music was not more than ordinarily commonplace he thought he might as well remain for an hour or so.

It did not seem probable that there would be any name he knew upon the programme. The piano solo and the baritone song were not calculated to distract his thoughts from the subject which engrossed them; but then—No. 3, Miss Rosamond Athelstane, 'Ave Maria,' by Joseph Lynde, filled him with totally unexpected joy and surprise.

It was impossible not to recognise the slight graceful figure, although she looked considerably taller in her long white gown, and although her curls were lost under a large black picture hat, which made an exquisite setting for the sweet child face below. His little maiden of the sea! and yet how wonderfully transformed. He had never imagined that she sang. Oh! how divinely! with what ease! the quality of her voice, the repose of manner, the sympathetic rendering of the song! Here was the true note of sympathy for which he had so often listened in vain.

'Undoubtedly,' he thought, 'she must be a Catholic.' He could not otherwise account for her singing with such touching reverence.

His heart went out towards her amidst that uproar of applause. She bowed, returned and bowed again, and finally was persuaded to repeat her song.

From the magnificently evident delight of the old lady sitting next him, the literary man concluded that she must be his little maiden's mother. The programme quivered in her slender fingers during the singing, and when the song was done she tore off her gloves and rings and clapped as he had never guessed an elderly lady was capable of clapping. He contrasted her nervousness and excitement with her daughter's appearance of angelic calm.

'Miss Athelstane is by a long way too self-possessed,' remarked some one behind him, as soon as she had left the platform; 'no one gets on nowadays who isn't nervous.'

'Good quality, but lacks finish,' said some one else. And the literary man glared round angrily at the people who dared to give their unbiassed opinion of her voice.