

BEST AFTER STORMS: A STORY OF MARY ANNING, (1799-1847)

By Joan Lennon

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OUTSIDE the window, lightning ripped across the blackness of the night. Thunder battered their ears, and when it faded, they could hear the roaring of the ocean, flinging itself hungrily at the cliffs.

Peggy trembled, thinking thoughts of peril on the sea, but Mrs Lark paid no attention. She was a local woman, and used to storms. Her hands were steady as she shielded the candle flame and bent down to check on the figure lying so still in the bed.

“Do you think she’s frightened?” whispered Peggy.

Peggy’s real name was Margaret, but nobody called her that. She’d lately come to Lyme Regis and was learning how to be a nurse. Mrs Lark said she’d do well enough once she stopped being so fanciful. But it was hard, trying not to imagine herself in the place of every patient.

“Frightened of a storm?” said Mrs Lark. “Mary Anning? Not a bit of it. Look—she’s smiling.”

Peggy looked, and it was true. The sick woman in the bed had the sweetest smile on her face.

What do you suppose she’s thinking about? Peggy wondered but, reminding herself to act like a proper nurse, she didn’t say it out loud.

OF COURSE I’m not frightened of a storm! I’ve lived my whole life within the sound of the sea. I remember so many wild nights, over the years—and one in particular.

Such a storm that was! I’d been awake for hours, wondering what was being washed away while I was stuck in my bed, waiting for the daylight to come and the wind to drop. Sometimes the waves would batter the coast for days and you would get to the

point where you'd give anything for a bit of peace. The wailing of the wind could get to sound like nails on slate or mad people, rattling the windows and trying to get in.

"Please don't be a storm like that," I whispered to the darkness.

And, for a wonder, it wasn't! The morning came, washed clean, with a blue sky and flying white clouds and a salt sea tang in the air. Perfect for hunting monsters.

It's always best after storms.

But first there were the chores. I riddled the fire, brought in fresh coal, water from the pump. The chickens never liked it when the wind was up, but Belinda the old brown hen always obliged. I was in such a hurry I almost dropped her warm speckled egg on to the cobblestones. Caught it just in time!

My dear dog Tray was excited too. He pressed himself up against my leg as I laid out the breakfast things and I could feel his warm little body trembling.

"Soon, boy. Chores almost done and then, we'll go. I promise!"

A weak voice called down from upstairs, "Mary? Bring me back some laudanum from the shop before you go to the shore. Will you? There's a good girl..."

Tray whimpered. I sighed.

"Never mind," I told him. "We'll run the whole way."

But of course we didn't. Too many eyes watching. Too many wagging tongues and judging frowns. Running wasn't proper behaviour for a girl. Neither was hunting monsters!

As I came into Mr Lloyd's shop I was glad I'd walked so demurely, for I saw that Mrs Crouch was there, talking to a stranger. Mrs Crouch was the worst gossip in a town full of gossips. She had such an edge to her tongue it's a miracle she didn't cut her own mouth. I did my best to school my face.

"A penny's worth of laudanum, and put it on the slate, if you please, Mr Lloyd," I said.

And then I just had to stand there and wait for him to slowly, carefully, measure out the medicine.

Mrs Crouch rents out her upstairs rooms to poorly souls sent to Lyme Regis for the bracing sea air. Even if she didn't need the income, I think she would have them anyway—a never-ending audience for her tale-telling and slanders.

I could hear her whispering about me now.

“That’s Mary Anning, you know. She was hit by lightning when she was a baby. It killed three women standing there—including the one holding her!—but didn’t damage a hair of her head. Was the making of her, in fact, for I remember what a scrawny hopeless little scrap she was before it happened and afterwards she was as pink and round as a healthy piglet!”

A piglet? Thank you VERY much!

Whisper, whisper.

“Well, they *do* say she can see things that other folk can’t... No, not like a witch. I’m quite sure... Bones. Not people’s bones, no...”

Mutter, murmur.

“Well, I’m a God-fearing woman. You’ll not find anyone who’ll tell you any different. But they do say...”

I didn’t need to be hearing the rest. Nobody tells anyone they’re God-fearing unless they’re meaning that someone else *isn’t*.

Did the stranger pull her skirts aside ever so slightly as I left?

“Who cares, eh, Tray?” I whispered, bending down to stroke his head.

So I see things other folk don’t—I *see* the bones I find—I don’t *conjure* them! Do they think I’m out in the dark clambering about the cliffs and along the shore putting the beasts into the rocks? My beautiful monsters—do they think they’re all witchcraft and magic? This is the nineteenth century, for pity’s sake!

Don’t think about it, I tell myself so many times a day. *Don’t think about the illness at home, or the worry about the rent, or even where the penny for the laudanum is supposed to come from.* These are thoughts to be pushed behind doors in my mind, especially with the shore calling.

I ran indoors, put the bottle within reach and then we were off! We left behind the town and the watchers and the stale, sad smell of the sick room. The shore stretched away and there was no one judging me here so I let my bonnet hang by its strings down my back—the wind could do what it liked with my hair. I hitched up my skirts and jumped from stone to shingle to sand to stone in my tackety boots, hunting along the low tide line. Tray rushed ahead and then back to me a dozen times a minute, his ears flapping like sails in the wind and a smile of pure delight all over his dear face.

If I'd found nothing at all it would still have been a joy just to be there, but the storm had left gifts for me beyond the salt tang in the air and the clean spray against my face. I spotted a stone of just the right shape—I cradled it in my hand and tapped it with my hammer, so that it split perfectly to reveal the fossil of an ammonite.

I'd found bigger specimens before, but this one was so beautifully complete. Not very long ago, people still believed they were serpent stones—coiled snakes petrified by some saint or other. They used to carve snake heads on to them to up the price.

“You’re a beauty,” I told the ammonite. “You’ll fetch a pretty penny just as you are.” Which made me think about all the pennies’ worth of debt on Mr. Lloyd’s slate. *No! I won’t think about that. Not here. Not now.*

I was vaguely aware of Tray barking and a flock of gulls taking off, sending flying shadows across the shore. I took a few more taps at the ammonite with my hammer but then decided to stow it in my basket instead. It was a job to do carefully, at home.

The rumble took me by surprise.

Stupidly, I looked out to sea, thinking there must be some sudden, savage wave smashing into the shore. I stared, reaching my hand down to Tray to grab him by the scruff in case we needed to make a run for it...

He wasn’t there. He wasn’t there! The rumble was behind me, from landward, and now it was a roar. I spun round as the beach ruckled itself under my feet and the scattered pools shivered -and then I saw it. A river of rock, sliding down the side of the cliff and across the flat surface of the shore on its way to the sea and, just ahead of its leading edge, streaking towards me in a blur of black and white fur, was my Tray.

Save yourself, Mary! something screamed in my head, but my legs would not bend.

“Tray... Tray!” And then he was in my arms and I staggered back into the white foam at the edge of the water. I squeezed my eyes tight shut. For a long moment I don’t think either of us breathed—until a wave came crashing in, drenching my legs in icy water, and I opened my eyes with a yelp.

The slide had stopped, just at the sea’s edge. The scree had pooled almost at my feet. And a whole new segment of cliff face was visible.

Of course the sensible thing to do then would have been to splash through the shallows, back towards the town, carefully skirting the debris for fear of starting another

slide. I considered doing just that. But the raw new limestone surface drew me like a moth to a candle.

“Always best after storms,” I murmured, setting Tray down. “Gently does it.”

We crept forward, slithering a little where the scree was still loose. It was all I could do to stop staring at the cliff face and pay attention to where I was putting my feet. How long had that rock been hidden from the sky? That rock and all it contained...

Closer and closer, trying not to stumble, the danger growing greater with every step. A sudden gust of wind or a gull landing at the top of the cliff could bring it all down on our heads. *This is mad, Mary—you should stop now—you should go back, quiet as a mouse... You really should —*

And there it was. Looking at me out of the stone, its unblinking eye fixed on me, as if in astonishment.

“What—have you never seen a girl before?” I asked it. “I thought dragons ate girls!”

Not that I thought for a moment this was a dragon. It was something much more exciting than that.

Tray whined and I stroked his soft ears. In all honesty, I was calming myself as much as I was calming him. I had to be sure it wasn't just my eyes playing tricks on me. Not just wishful thinking.

“Gently does it, lad. Gently does it. Nothing to worry about.” I looked into Tray's loving eyes, drew his silken ears through my fingers one more time and straightened up.

The great skull was clearly visible, poking out of the limestone. And, as I had hoped, I could see where there was more.

Take a breath, Mary, I told myself. Take a breath...

I could see where the entire body of the creature stretched out beneath a thin layer of stone—spine, limbs, tail—each bone was there to be brought clear of the encasing rock and into the light. Carefully, though. Oh so carefully. I could see it even before I'd hit a single blow with my hammer—the shape in the rock, like a body under a sheet. Something from the deep time, long ago, when this great beast and the others like him were as common as cart horses and cows are today.

I gathered Tray up and hugged his warm little squirmy body tight in my arms and let him lick my face. “We’ve found a beautiful monster. That’s right, my boy. We found him.”

And I knew, however many other finds there would be—and there would be, of course, because I was the girl who saw things other folk didn’t—that *this* was a moment I’d remember for the rest of my life.

“NEARLY morning,” said Mrs Lark. “Storm’s blowing itself out.”

“Time for more medicine, do you think?” asked Peggy, but Mrs Lark shook her head.

“Leave it. She seems to have moved beyond the pain now.”

The wind rattled the shutters a little but otherwise the room was very still.

“It’s so unfair,” said Peggy.

“What—dying? Comes to all of us, girl.”

“No, not that. It’s what the local ladies were talking about in the shop, when I went down there yesterday—Mary Anning should be famous, by rights, they were saying, but those gentlemen scientists took advantage of her and never gave her credit. Did you know she was the one who found all those bones in the rocks and worked out what animals they were? They were from ever so long ago, Mrs Lark—from even longer ago than Adam and Eve. But because she was only a woman and, well, *common*, the scientists and the collectors all acted as if she didn’t do anything. Those rich old men with their big beards, making it seem they were the only ones. It’s just not fair.”

“I think she’s maybe moved beyond that now, too,” murmured Mrs Lark but Peggy didn’t reply, for at that moment Mary Anning opened her eyes. They were calm and clear. She reached out her paper-thin hand and put it on Peggy’s sleeve.

“Gently does it,” Mary whispered. “Nothing to worry about. It’s always best after a storm.”

She smiled, and for one bright moment, Peggy thought she’d never seen anyone look so happy before.

“It’s over,” said Mrs Lark. She drew the sheet up to cover Mary Anning’s face. Then there was nothing but the shape of her bones to be seen. It was all that remained of the life that was gone.

But, somehow, Peggy could not be sad.

AUTHOR'S AFTERWORD
WHY I CHOSE MARY ANNING

For many years, I've been crazy about dinosaurs *and* 'the dinosaur woman', Mary Anning. I even dedicated the first of my Victorian detective books to her as an unsung nineteenth-century heroine. It is such a thrill to find even the smallest, most bashed-about fossil from all those millions of years ago, yet Mary Anning discovered complete skeletons of huge ichthyosaurs, plesiosaurs and pterodactyls. At the other end of the size scale, she was also one of the first people to realise that coprolites *aren't* ancient fir cones, but fossilised poo. She received little recognition in her own time, but is now called the Mother of Palaeontology (the study of prehistoric life).