

The Life to Come

and other stories

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Introduction and other editorial matter
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Edward Arnold

The Rock

We had been talking for some time, and she was so full of kindness and of insight that at last I ventured to ask about her husband.

“Did you ever question him? I hope so,” she added, seeing that I hesitated.

“I went down to see him last month. We went for a sail.”

“Did he charge you anything?”

“I did pay him a little.”

“And I suppose you talked to the people?”

“The excitement is over. They resent him no longer. They—I won’t say understand, for nobody could understand. But they have accepted him.”

“I hoped for that,” she said gravely. “They are simple and manly again, and he will be one of them. You saw the rock?”

“Oh yes. He showed me the rock.”

On the north coast of Cornwall there is a promontory, high and fantastic, stretching for half a mile into the sea. In places it is crowned with broad boulders, in places its backbone is so narrow that one can see the water on either side, foaming against precipices that are polished black. Great moors are behind it, full of cairns and stone circles and the chimneys of deserted mines. Nearer at hand lies the farmers’ country, a fertile strip that follows the indentations of the cliff. And close under the promontory itself is a little fishing village, so that many types of civilization, fruitful and fruitless, can be encompassed in a single gaze.

The rock of which she was speaking is hidden from all of them, for it lies very low in the water. It is some two hundred yards from the extreme point and resembles a square brown desk, with a slope towards the land. A wave will break on the high part, seethe down the slope, and then be merged in the

surrounding blue, to break yet again at the foot of the promontory. One day, during their holidays, he sailed too near this rock, capsized, and was washed up onto it. There he lay, face downwards, with the rising tide frothing over him. She was up on the headland, and ran to the village for help. A boat put out at once. They rowed manfully—they were splendid fellows—and they reached him just as his hands relaxed and he was sliding head foremost into death. So much is known to all of us, and it was the crisis of his life. But, in a story about his life, it is not the crisis.

She began to speak, but waited a moment for the maid to clear away the tea. In the waning light her room seemed gentle and gray, and there hung about it an odour (I do not write "*the* odour") of Roman Catholicism, which is assuredly among the gracious things of the world. It was the room of a woman who had found time to be good to herself as well as to others; who had brought forth fruit, spiritual and temporal; who had borne a mysterious tragedy not only with patience but actually with joy.

"When he got to land," she said, "he would not even shake hands with them. He kept on saying, 'I don't know what to do. I can't think. I shall come to you again,' and they replied, 'Oh, that'll be all right, sir.' You can imagine the scene, and it was not till the evening that I realized his difficulty. You—how much would you give for your life?"

I stared blankly.

"I hope that you will never have to decide. May you always have your life as a right. Most of us do. But now and then a life is saved—as one might save a vase from breaking—and then the proprietor must think what it is worth."

"Is there not a tariff for rescues?" said I, inclined to be irritable and dense.

"In calm weather—it was quite calm and they did not run the slightest danger—the tariff appears to be fifteen shillings a rescuer. For two pounds five my husband could have been clear of all obligation. We neither of us felt two pounds five enough. Next morning we left, full of promises. I think they still believed in us, but I am not sure."

She paused, and I ventured to say: "But a sum that was

great to *them*—that was the point. The question is purely practical.”

“So all our friends said. One suggested a hundred pounds, another the present of a new boat, another that, every Christmas, I should knit each man a comforter. You see, there are no such things as purely practical questions. Every question springs straight out of the infinite, and until you acknowledge that you will never answer it.”

“Then what did *you* suggest?”

“I suggested that I should settle that bill myself, and never show him the receipt. But he refused and, I think, rightly. Nor do I know what I should have done.”

“But what did those three men want?” I persisted. “You cannot drive me from it: that’s the point.”

“They would have accepted anything: they were in want of nothing. Until we tourists came they were happy and independent. We taught them the craving for money—money obtained by rowing half a mile upon the tranquil sea. The minister, with whom we corresponded, implored us to be quick. He said that the whole village was anxious and greedy, and that the men were posing as heroes. And there were we, finding the world more glorious every day, the air more delicate, music sweeter, birds, sky, the sun—everything transfigured because he had been saved. And our love—we had been married five years, but now it never seemed to have been love before. Can you tell me what these things are worth?”

I was silent. I told myself that this was fluid, unsubstantial stuff. But in my heart I knew that she and all that she said was a rock in the tideway.

“For a time he was merely interested. He was amused at the problem, and the sensations it aroused in him. But at last he only cared for the solution. He found it one evening in this little room, when a sunset, more glorious than today’s, was flaming under the wych-elm. He asked me, as I ask you, what such things were worth, and gave the answer: ‘Nothing; and nothing is my reward to the men who saved me.’ I said: ‘It is the only possible reward. But they will never understand it.’ ‘I shall make them understand it in time,’

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he told me, 'for my gift of nothing shall be all that I have in the world.'"

Again the story becomes common property. He sold up his goods—everything—every cherished trifle that he had—and gave the value of them to the poor. Some money was settled on her, and that he could not touch, but he gave away the rest. Then he went down to that village penniless and asked for charity from his rescuers.

His sufferings had been terrible. He drew out all their disappointment and pettiness and cruelty; she covered her face when she spoke of it. I was glad to tell her that this had passed: they had come to treat him as an idiot and then as a good fellow, and now he was working for one of them. As I moved from her room I said, "No one but you will ever understand it." But her eyes filled with tears and she cried: "Don't—don't praise me for that. For if I had not understood, he might be with us now."

This conversation taught me that some of us can meet reality on this side of the grave. I do not envy them. Such adventures may profit the disembodied soul, but as long as I have flesh and blood I pray that my grossness preserve me. Our lower nature has its dreams. Mine is of a certain farm, windy but fruitful, halfway between the deserted moorland and the uninhabitable sea. Hither, at rare intervals, she should descend and he ascend, to shatter their spiritual communion by one caress.