

Mary Anning

A shillin' on the shore

A well dressed stranger is skimming the sand with his stick, as Mary cleans off an ammonite fossil with her small muddy hands.

I seen you lookin, is it the ammo you wants? I seen you lookin, you won't get nothin just poking your stick to and fro, you needs to get your ands dirty, see? It be the only way. Tide'll be in soon, sea's swellin up, I feel it, won't get no more finding done today... best take this un... a shillin. I'll shine it up good too, I do the cleanin and the shining, the visitors like them nice to take back to London, show their friends, this 'un's a good one for showin. That's where they mostly come from, up London, come here for the good air, sea air, good for the health, they say. Well, so's eatin good for the health and a shillin will put bread in the mouth, no trouble.

Got a bit before the tide comes, see this un's scraping up nice. You from London, then? One day, I should like to see London or somesuch, Exeter maybe. I heard they got places with things dug up, all in cases, just to look at like, can't imagine things just to look at, things is for usin...or for sellin, don't care what folks do with 'em after that. I should think my father would have done well there, he made cabinets, things to put other things in. He be gone now, gone two year ago, couldn't leave us nothin' but debt, no bread for us nor the baby in mother's belly. Only thing he could leave, he left to me and our Joe, he know'd this shore, where the creatures and monsters were hid, brought us up ere at low tide to find bones in the cliff, ever since we were babes ourselves.

Mother, She be cut up bad by 'im goin. You think she be more used to death, all those other babies she buried. She don't let no one see it but us, though. She frets when we do come ere to hunt for the bones and the curiosities, but she do mind less when we brings back money too. Joe's been hunting further up today, we split up, find more that way. He's good too, Joe, he'd be better if he had more stomach for it. He sees the sense in findin and sellin, but he got no heart like mine, it's the money right enough, but I feels this shiver and I knows it not the cold, cos I been cold most of my life, it's different like blood moving like a sea wave through you, when you sees something in the rock. Only time I ever saw 'im excited was when he found the fish monster. It were like he seen a ghost and I supposed he had. Story went that I found it, but it were Joe, though I did dig and prise parts from the rock, so

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we be square on that. He's a right to be overcome too, eighteen feet long by the time we got it out. Everyone come to see, ichthyosaurus, they said it be, fetched a pretty penny too, by the time we put it right and laid it in a case with cement. I put it all together, there I am better than Joe, I just know how a creature should look, where the bones belong and what they be. One of them clever men what came to see it, he asked me "Child, how do you know to recognise these bones?" I says "Can't say, sir" He says "How do you know to which species they belong?" I says "Can't say, sir" Then he says "it must truly be a gift" and I says "Can't say, sir." Then he walks off, I should have mentioned my father learning me, I suppose, but somehow, it just feels as natural to me to know them bones and fossils, like people recognising their own kin, I just know, maybe I was born knowin. And, I know from books I seen, if they have it right or wrong too, even thinkin' men what wrote them.

We burned all the wood father left in his workshop, burnt or sold, anything we could to keep the fire goin'. Then all we know was to get out at low tide and search the shore. My father never cared what people thought, I be like him. One day I find a beauty, a curiosity I knowd I could sell, I see this gentleman, seemed dressed like a reverend, but not from round here, lookin like he'd like to see it. So I says "a shillin, sir." But, he don't answer, but scuttles off. I put it down cos I want to wave at Joe on the other side. When I comes back, it's gone and in its place, there's a shillin' I see it glitterin up from the sand at me. I takes it right enough, but I looks over to see him walkin off and I wonder why he wouldn't have no talk with me.

Tide's comin now, we don't want to get cut off. The sea's master here, it'll wash out more fossils when it feels like it, or wash us in, it don't care. Maybe that's why father never worried about sendin us out, he knew I wouldn't try to cheat the sea. "You'll be alright Mary," he said, the Annings always are." See, sir, said I'd make it shine, worth a shillin' now. Better move now. I'll be back at low tide, you want more, I be here, I be always here.