

Beloved Brats
A Historical Short Story Collection

By

Maryse Dawson

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A Life Worth Living

1852

“You are a rebellious, ungrateful wench! I have no choice left but to send you to Uncle Silas. He will know how to change your mind.”

The mention of his name sent shivers of fear down eighteen-year-old Ariana Denvorn’s spine. “But, Aunt!” she implored. “You cannot mean for me to stay there! Just because I refuse to marry Gawan, it does not mean that I have to be sent away.”

“Silence!” spat Aunt Catherine. “I will hear no more on the matter. You are to leave at first light.” She stormed out of Ariana’s bedroom and slammed the door behind her.

Uncle Silas was an ogre. That was the only word for him. She’d met him twice before and on both occasions, he had frightened her with his over-zealous attitude and fiery temper. No. She could never stay with him.

There was only one thing for it. She would run away!

Orphaned at twelve, she had been put under the charge of her aunt. At first, Ariana had felt comforted living under the same roof as her mother’s sister, but soon, the rot had begun to set in. Catherine was nothing at all like her soft-hearted mother. No. She was a nasty, mealy-mouthed witch of a woman who used Ariana as an unpaid servant. Now she had reached eighteen, her aunt expected her to marry Gawan Thomas, their neighbour’s son. Although she liked Gawan as a friend, she certainly didn’t love him and not in a million years did she ever want to marry him!

The thought of being sent to Uncle Silas filled her with dread. She knew how he would change her mind over Gawan and the thought wasn’t a pleasant one. He was Catherine’s brother-in-law and he possessed a nasty nature akin to Catherine’s.

She wrung her hands together whilst pacing the room. What would she do for money and where could she go? She sat down on the bed and thought hard. She could head towards Dorchester. She would surely find some sort of work there. She looked down at her hands and turned them over, looking at the work-worn skin. She was no stranger to hard work. Catherine used her like a skivvy. Any job she found in Dorchester would be far preferable than living with her or Uncle Silas. She shuddered and quickly jumped to her feet. The sooner she departed, the farther away she could get.

* * *

Ariana arrived in Dorchester with only one coin left in her pocket and a small bundle containing her clothes. It had taken her three days to reach the bustling market town and now she was hungry and her feet were killing her. She sat down on a large boulder outside the town gates and carefully pulled off one of her boots. She winced when she discovered two blisters. If she didn’t cover them now, they would only get worse. Untying her bundle, she pulled out a small handkerchief and, using her teeth, managed to tear off two small strips. Carefully, she placed them inside the boot as padding and slipped her foot back inside. She wiggled her foot and sighed. That was better. She did the same with the other one and then re-tied her bundle back up.

Her stomach rumbled, reminding her she hadn't eaten in hours. Getting to her feet, she entered the town gates and looked around for a baker. Her nose led her to one just behind the market stalls. She closed her eyes and sniffed the mouth-watering aromas.

Digging her hand into her pocket, she pulled out her last coin. It wasn't much but it would buy some bread, which would at least fend off her hunger until she could find a job and earn more coin. She entered the small shop and bought herself a small loaf. Whilst she was there, she asked if there were any jobs and she was told there was nothing available.

Much later, after asking around, she found there was no work at all. One of the blacksmiths had looked her up and down before offering her a coin for a quick romp in the back. She may be desperate but she wasn't that desperate! She left hurriedly.

She sat down by the village pond and ate the last of her loaf. So much for her plans. What the hell she was going to do now, she had no idea. She sat and pondered her predicament whilst watching the stall holders sell their wares to the local folk. They had no problem making money. Her only hope was to try the surrounding farms. Surely, one of the farmers would have some work for her, even if it was just cleaning out the pigs! She'd do anything rather than return to Aunt Catherine.

Suddenly, she saw two men fighting. They were obviously drunk, swinging their fists at each other and falling all over the place. Most people ignored them, just stepping out of the way and leaving them to their vices. Ariana couldn't help but laugh when one of them tripped over a stool and fell to the ground. His opponent fell on him and tried to bash him but missed completely. A tall man, most probably the town sheriff, picked them both up by the scruff of their necks and led them away. Something fell out of one of their pockets and in the man's drunken haze, he didn't even notice. She frowned. No one else had noticed it, either. Cautiously, she made her way over and nonchalantly picked it up before disappearing behind the stalls. She looked down and was amazed to see it was a small purse. She opened it and found several coins inside. Normally, she would have handed it back to him, but under her current circumstances, she was intent on keeping it for herself. She went back over and sat down by the pond again. That had been easy.

A sly thought entered her mind. Perhaps she could get something else like that. She looked at the last stall on the market place. It was selling jewellery. If she could get a couple of items, she'd be able to sell them to buy food. Not here in Dorchester, as that would be far too risky, but in another village, she'd have no problem. She studied the woman selling the jewellery. She was on her own. All she had to do was wait until she turned her back and she could grab one of the bracelets.

Half an hour later and Ariana had done just that. Hiding in the town stables, she smiled to herself and looked down at her stash. One silver bracelet and two rings! It had been easier than she thought. She'd pretended to study the jewellery and when the woman's back was turned she'd quickly stuffed a handful into her pocket. When the woman turned back to serve her, she pretended she didn't like anything enough to buy it and quickly walked away before the woman noticed anything amiss.

It had been nerve wracking but now she had enough to see her through the next few days. She leaned her head back against a beam and closed her eyes. When she opened them, they settled on a horse near the exit. He was saddled and ready to be ridden. What caught her attention the most, though, were the backpacks. She looked around furtively. There was no one in sight. Quick as lightning, she found herself unbuckling one of the bags.

* * *

Charles Purnell had just been saddling his horse getting ready to ride back home when he'd spotted a girl stealing off the jewellery stall. It was so quick he would have missed it, if he hadn't been staring at her already. She was uncommonly pretty and his eyes had been drawn to her beauty. To his amazement, when the stall holder's back was turned, she'd put a handful of jewelry straight in her pocket.

Talk about brazen! He watched for a few more minutes to see if the stallholder would notice but she hadn't. Then the girl had simply walked away.

Anger rippled through him. He hated thieves, having been the victim on one occasion himself. He stood there pondering whether to apprehend her himself or call the town sheriff, when she began to walk straight towards him.

He stepped back out of sight, deciding that the best thing he could do was wait until she walked past him and grab her. Hiding behind a low fence in the stables, he watched through a knot hole to see what she would do. She walked into the interior, and after glancing around cautiously, she pulled out her wares and a big smile lit up her face. He raised an eyebrow. She looked even prettier when she smiled.

She put her stolen goods safely away and leaned back against a beam. Just as he was about to step out, she walked straight over to his horse. He frowned, wondering if she would actually have the gall to steal his mount? But no, her hands crept up straight to the back packs, her fingers already unfastening the buckles. She was an opportunist all right. His face grim, Charles headed straight for her.

Swiftly, before she had a chance to realise what was happening, he grabbed her from behind, his large hands encircling her arms and chest. She shrieked with shock and tried to struggle out of his grasp but he had too strong a hold on her.

"Caught right in the act, you little thief!" he growled, lifting her clean off the floor.

"Get your hands off me!" she cried, her hands clawing at his whilst trying to break free. She threw her head back, bucking like a wild creature.

"Be still, damn you!" Charles commanded, but it made no difference. She was a wild one. He carried her struggling form over to one corner and was rewarded with an elbow in his side. Slightly winded, he managed to manhandle her face down to the floor. He captured her arms behind her back and placed his knee on the curve of her bottom.

"Unhand me!" she said from beneath her curtain of hair. "I didn't take anything!"

"Of course, you didn't! I just imagined it. Obviously!"

Ignoring her protests, he raised her skirts, revealing two hidden pockets lying on her petticoats. He delved into them. She didn't make it easy for him, kicking her legs and trying to roll from side to side but he persevered until he had emptied them. By the time he had finished, he was not surprised to see there was a small stash of rings, bracelets, a money pouch and a brooch. He removed his knee and rolled her over onto her side. Her eyes flashed angrily at him.

"These are all yours, are they?" he asked, knowing full well they weren't.

"Aye!" she spat. "And you have no right to manhandle me like this!"

"So, if I were to stand up in the town square and ask who they belonged to, no one would answer?"

She pulled a face and stared at him mutinously. He cupped her petite face with his hand and leaned nearer. "If I were you, I'd change that attitude very quickly, else I give you a lesson in manners."

Her eyes widened at his threat and then, before he knew what was happening, she'd sunk her teeth into his hand.

"Why you little..." He pulled his hand away and stared at it. She was already scrambling to her feet, intent on escape, but he was too quick for her. He stuck out his boot and she went tumbling to the floor.

"Leaving so soon? I think not!" He grabbed hold of her skirt at the waist and hauled her towards him whilst standing on his feet. "For someone in a whole lot of trouble, you're extremely unrepentant."

She went to kick him but he was prepared and neatly side-stepped her. "Now that was an extremely foolish thing to do."

* * *

Ariana shrieked and tried to push against the man's chest but it was all useless. He was livid that she'd bitten him, but she'd been desperate to get away. Lord knew what his intentions were, now he'd caught her stealing. Visions of Uncle Silas popped into her head and she struggled even harder.

"For the love of God, desist!" he snapped. Suddenly, she found herself face down over his lap.

"What are you doing?" she cried.

"What I should have done in the first place! Giving you a damn good thrashing!"

"W-what?"

She suddenly felt her skirts and petticoats thrown over her back and a blast of cold air to her nether regions. Then his hand began to fall in quick sharp strikes against her exposed bottom. It stung like the very devil.

"Aooooow! Oooooouch! Stop!" she protested, trying to break free.

Smack! Smack! Smack! Smack!

"I know not your reasons for stealing those items, but you will replace every last damn one of them."

Four more smacks followed his harsh words.

Her bottom was on fire. How dare he spank her like this! Her face screwed up when his hand hit the tender sit spots and the top of her thighs. At this rate, she wouldn't be sitting comfortably for a week or so. The man was an ogre.

Smack! Smack! Smack! Smack!

"Please stop! I'm truly sorry. I should never have stolen."

"Or bitten!" *Smack! Smack!* "Biting is the act of an animal. Are you an animal?" *Smack! Smack!*

"No!" she gasped. "Please, forgive me!"

Smack! Smack! Smack! Smack!

Finally, he stopped but his hand remained on her heated flesh. "Why did you steal? And I want the truth!"

She closed her eyes and swallowed hard. "I needed some money. I have nothing to eat and nowhere to live. I tried in the town to get a job, but there are none. I am not usually given to such low actions," she added quietly.

* * *

Charles looked down at the rosy red bottom beneath his hand. He could hear the sincerity in her tone; either that or she was very good at lying. "If I release you, do you promise not to run?"

"Aye." Her small voice rose up.

He pulled down her skirts and let her up off his lap. She rubbed her bottom with her free hand, her face wincing when she made contact.

"What is your name?" he enquired.

"Ariana."

"I am Charles Purnell. Where do you hail from?"

"Brownjohn's Copse."

He frowned, having only vaguely heard of it. "Yet you have no place to live. What happened?"

She toed the floor with her boot and looked down. "I ran away."

He stared at her downturned head. "How old are you?"

"Eighteen. Old enough to look after myself!" she replied defiantly.

"Don't take that tone with me. I only wish to help. Who did you run from?"

She looked at him sharply. "If I tell you, do you promise not to take me back there?"

"Aye."

She looked at him assessingly before revealing the name. "I escaped from my Aunt Catherine. I have lived with her since my parents died but she has treated me badly. When I objected to being married off to a local lad, she said she was going to send me to my Uncle Silas' house. He is a horrible man and I would be better off dead than suffer life under his roof."

Her voice rose at the end and her hands were clenched into fists by her sides. Whoever this Silas was, he most certainly affected her.

He stood up and placed his hands on her shoulders. "Calm yourself. If you speak the truth then I will see to it that your uncle has no say in the matter, or your aunt, for that matter. You are eighteen and can do as you please." An idea suddenly occurred to him. "Would you like to work for me?"

Her eyes shot to his. "As what?"

"I take it you can read and write?"

"Aye."

"Good. I have a ward, a four-year-old girl called Bronwen. She was my sister's child who is sadly no longer with us. It is about time she had a governess. I think you could fill that position if you so wish." He knew he was taking a gamble but there was something about Ariana that intrigued him.

"How do I know you are any better than my aunt and uncle? You just spanked me!"

"Aye and for good reason. I will also do so again, should you do anything so foolish. I am not a hard man but I cannot abide thieving or lying. You would do well to heed that!"

A range of emotions crossed her face before she replied. "Very well. I will take you up on your offer."

"Good. Then it is decided. Now, first things first. We will hand back these items if we can find the owners. If not, I will give them to the village church to add to their funds. Are we agreed?"

She nodded. An hour later, she was settled on the front of his horse as he made for home.

* * *

Four months later, Ariana was well and truly settled into her new life. Charles had a modest home in a small hamlet outside Dorchester, where she was given a lovely bedroom overlooking the large gardens. Bronwen, her new charge, was adorable and made teaching very easy indeed.

Charles worked in his study most of the time and, if not, spent many days away, usually in London, but he did take luncheon with them. She had grown to like him within days of living there, and lately, she had found herself having deeper thoughts and feelings for him. But she knew it would never lead to anything. Charles was handsome and from a higher society so would never be interested in someone from such humble beginnings as herself, but it didn't stop her from dreaming.

She couldn't quite believe her good fortune and sometimes had to pinch herself. To come from a life full of drudgery and loathing to this was amazing. She was treated with civility, which was something she just wasn't used to. Her odious Aunt Catherine was now just a distant memory.

Bronwen came running into her chamber, breaking into her thoughts. "Ariana, is it time for lessons yet?"

Ariana smiled and lifted her up onto her lap. "Yes, it is, and I have decided that today we will learn all about butterflies and caterpillars."

She stood up and carried Bronwen into the nursery where a corner had been devoted to learning. Bronwen had her own little desk and chair next to a larger set for Ariana. Seating herself beside Bronwen, Ariana opened a large picture book and, together, they began to pore over the contents.

* * *

A little while later, Charles found them both studying the book together. For a moment, he paused, staring at their downturned heads. Ariana had turned out to be as lovely on the inside as she was on the outside. He'd fallen head over heels in love with her. She was like a breath of fresh air compared to the usual women he encountered. He'd known for the past month that he was in love with her but wondered how she would react if she knew? He'd caught her staring at him on a couple of occasions and had dared to hope that perhaps she might feel the same, but so far, he hadn't broached the subject.

Bronwen was blossoming under her tuition and it was clear they had a mutual love for one another. Some of the women he'd brought back to his home had uttered the right words when they were introduced to his ward, but in their eyes, he could see the irritation. Not many people wished to take on someone else's child.

He cleared his throat, announcing his arrival. Bronwen looked up, her eyes lighting up with delight. "Uncle!" she cried before leaping into his arms. He swung her around in a circle. "Bronwen. You have grown in the two days I have been away!"

"Have I?" she enquired.

"Oh, indeed. At least this much!" He held up his two fingers together indicating an inch's growth. Bronwen shot him a toothy grin. He looked over her head at Ariana to find her smiling over at them both.

He kissed the top of Bronwen's head. "Now go and see Agatha. She will take you to the kitchen where I have a surprise waiting for you."

“I love surprises!” Bronwen rushed over to the door where Agatha, her nursemaid, was patiently waiting. Charles waited until they’d gone before closing the door and turning back to Ariana.

She was neatly putting the book away and tidying Bronwen’s desk. He walked over to her. “Ariana, there is something I wish to discuss with you.”

She paused and looked up at him. “Oh?”

He took her hand in his and pulled her over to the window. Pointing his finger down at the stables, he asked her a question. “When you first arrived here, what did I tell you not to do?”

She glanced outside and looked to where he was pointing. Her face flushed guiltily when she realized what he meant. She licked her lips before replying quietly. “How did you find out?”

* * *

Ariana could feel her heart begin to pound whilst she waited for his answer. His nearness never failed to make her breathing erratic.

“Tam told me. Now don’t get all defensive against him. It is his job to oversee the running of Bramley Hall. When he found Sheridan gone from the stables, he knew you’d taken her.”

Her face set mutinously. “I only went out for a short ride.”

“You defied me, Ariana.” His voice was clipped and full of accusation.

She crossed her arms defensively. “What harm did it do? Nothing! I was fine!”

“I told you never to go out on your own and always to take an escort. You were very lucky no harm came to you.”

She rolled her eyes. “I am a grown woman. I went out for a simple ride. Is it such a crime?”

“Aye, it is, and when I smack your bottom in a minute, you can reflect upon your actions and remember to obey me in future.”

Her stomach sank. “You are going to spank me?”

She watched as he settled on her chair and, holding his hand out to her, commanded, “Aye, I am. Come here!”

Her eyes darted to the door. Dare she run for it? But then where would she go? Taking a deep breath, she ventured forward. He immediately grasped her wrist and pulled her straight down over his lap. She closed her eyes and waited for the first smack. Now she was going to get punished, she regretted defying him. But it was too late for regrets.

She felt him lift her skirts and petticoats. He untied her bloomers and pulled them aside, so her bare bottom was on view. She chewed on her bottom lip, wondering why a jolt of desire shot straight through her. It was so intimate.

Suddenly, his hand came crashing down on both cheeks. She gasped and tried to throw her hand around to protect her bottom but he just slapped it aside.

“Do that again and I shall administer the cane!”

Ariana’s eyes widened. The cane? Oh, Lord, his hand was hard enough on its own. She quickly placed her hand back on the floor and braced herself for the next smack.

Charles set up a steady rhythm, smacking one cheek and then the other until she could hardly breathe. She cried out that she was sorry but it made no difference. He carried on spanking her, his deep voice scolding throughout. Warning her of vagrants and ne’er-do-wells.

Finally, he stopped. She lay panting across his lap, acutely aware of his firm thighs beneath her own. His hand settled on one buttock and his touch sent tremors of desire rushing through her.

She loved his dominance. He treated her with respect on every occasion except when she had stepped out of line. For that, she admired him.

He removed his hand and she felt him tying her bloomers, before he lowered her skirts and petticoats and allowed her to stand. She rubbed the tender skin through her skirts, pulling a face whilst doing so.

“I assume you won’t do it again?” he asked.

She shook her head, her eyes settling on his. “No, upon my word, I promise to heed you in future.”

“Good. Now that matter is settled, I have something of import to tell you.”

He stood up and walked over to the window. “The last two days, I have been in Brownjohn’s Copse.”

Ariana’s eyes widened. “You’re not going to send me back there, are you?”

* * *

He sought to reassure her. “No. Never. I made the trip to secure your future. You cannot move forward if you are forever worrying about your aunt or uncle seeking you out.”

“How was my aunt?”

Charles paused. “Irritated and somewhat obnoxious. But you can rest assured that she will never call upon you again.”

He watched the relief register on her face and added, “You will be safe here...with me.”

Her eyes grew soft so he asked, “Do you like it here?”

“Aye, I love it. It is a life I never thought available to me.”

“Do you like me, Ariana?”

She nodded shyly and, in that moment, he knew she felt the same as he did. “Then, Ariana Denvorn, will you marry me?”

Her mouth opened with shock. “Truly? You wish to marry me?”

“Aye, I have come to love you.”

“But you just spanked me?” she accused. “How can you say you love me yet chastise me?”

“It is the very reason I love you that I wish to keep you from harm. So...your answer?”

She fluttered her eyelashes shyly. “Aye, I will marry you, Charles Purnell.”

He held out his arms and she slipped into his embrace, burying her head in his chest. It felt so right to hold her close against him. He pulled back and, raising her face to his, kissed her on the lips. She sighed softly. “I love you, Charles, and I thank the day our paths crossed, even if I did get a sore bottom.”

He smiled and patted her backside. “A sore bottom, well deserved, my love!”

His lips found hers once more, sealing their love for one another and a future filled with promise.