

Sea-change

Sea-Change is set in the Industrial Revolution, in a small village where, up till now, families have remained for centuries. It focuses on the differing viewpoints of a father and daughter, and how an industrial revolution can cause equal change to people's way of life. I started the story from Nicholas' perspective, as I had previously never branched out from main characters my own age in my writing, and really enjoyed the challenge. This story is set partly in a hamlet beside the Mersey river, and partly in the fast-growing city of Liverpool. Although the characters and plot are entirely fictional, Oglet was a real village up the Mersey from Liverpool, that shrunk in the Industrial Revolution to contain only a couple of farms today. Speke is also a real place, as was the Salt Refinery, which closed in the 1840s.

New Year's Eve, 1837

Nicholas

The old man paced the shingle, boots crunching into the gritty residue strewn beneath the banks. Clouds, seething in a thunder-thick whirlpool above, spat rain onto his bare head, gnawing at his face, and the gulls' spiteful screams tore his ears like knives. Unrelenting. Wave after savage wave hurled itself against the shoreline, clawing and grasping at the weeds clinging to the rock.

It was bitter today.

"Bitter? I'm not bitter!" Words he had shouted less than an hour ago still swirled in feral currents around his mind. "I can't believe you, that's all. Abandoning home like the prodigal son, that's what you're doing!"

Worse — she wasn't after a fortune to squander, and had told him with firm politeness of their plans. David, she mentioned blithely, had got a job at the new Lime Street Station in Liverpool. Paid better than the Salt Refinery, and right in the city centre as well. *Close to the sea, Pa!* Besides, it was near enough to Oglet that they could come and visit — only half a day if you rented a horse and cart.

"And I suppose you'll be able to afford that often?" Nicholas spat, but she had borne the squall with meek but determined obstinance. Like mother, like daughter. But Rebecca and he would never have left Oglet, not when the family had been there for as long as memory could sustain.

First it had been the Hughes, then the Taylors. Young families were being sucked away by the glassy promises of Liverpool, lured by siren-songs disguising themselves in the screeches of mechanisms and machines. Oglet was being brushed off the map, house by house, leaving only the fields and the Mersey behind. It was a riptide revolution, a newfangled sea of metal-woven cotton and steam. And as with all riptides, Nicholas thought, nothing good would come of it.

"I thought I'd find you here, Nick." A deceptively youthful voice broke the surface of Nicholas's musings.

"Afternoon, Meg," he replied, scuffing his boots along the stone wall with forbearance. Meg Baker was not a day younger than seventy, but fresh-faced with the walk from over near Speke.

"I heard about Ruth..."

Nicholas' frown knits together the silence.

"News travels fast 'round a hamlet. But don't stay bitter at her, will you? She's doing what she thinks is best."

Nicholas swore. "That en't what's best for us nor Oglet."

"You mayn't like it, but it's Change. And Change rolls in with each tide, and it don't stop."

"Change sucks us away with each tide!" Anger surged inside him like brine from the waves. "It's a sea, dragging us into trouble."

Still Meg faced him on square. "New ideas en't trouble if you don't let 'em be. You're *scared* of it, of this 'sea' as you call it, you who's named after the patron saint of sailors, of all people! It en't the sailor's job to push the sea away, even if it's dangerous. He goes with it, and tries to guide the boat into new and clearer and calmer waters. Now you think over that, will you?"

"Drown you, Meg Baker! Ruth's the one in the wrong! Leaving me behind, throwing me away like... like jetsam!"

But Meg's words had sunk deep into the old man, and as he watched her disappear up the narrow path the words reverberated around his mind like church bells.

Change rolls in with each tide...

Ruth

A New Year's coming, and we're on the brink of a new world. The young woman stared out down the Mersey towards the sea. Lime Street Station was a year old and finished at last, and the Roberts Loom had long since woven its way into factories. *A New Year, and a new life.*

She breathed in the silence of the night, disturbed only by an owl's hoot, the soft snores from David in the bed behind her, and the pale, distant whispering of the water. This was her last night in Oglet. Her last evening of starling-chatter and stars, her last time running her hands over the splintering window-frame and gazing down-river. Her last night in the dark, before a many-tongued, gas-lit, utterly new but utterly beautiful world.

When Ruth and David had visited Lime Street Station in the bright spring, Ruth had been enthralled by the stonework and the glass and the metal. She was entranced by the circus of colours and people that found themselves there, the energy that Oglet never had, but most of all, the speed and smoke and screech of the trains. David had felt it too, and, hands grasped and eyes uplifted, their honeymoon had mingled with courtship of the bewitching pleasures of a New Era. Then David had got a job in the Station office. It had been a dream at first, a fantasy aspiration to live in the centre of this new-found life. A fire-light fancy to talk over, eyes

reflecting the flames in greed and adoration. But now it was all going to come true, a happily-ever-after fairytale they'd write for themselves forever on.

Still, an illogical guilt drawstringed through her. Every time she looked at Nicholas, at his now-pale eyes or his wrinkling hands, some invisible force pulled the regret closer and closer to her heart. She had always been his joy, the long-awaited, long-prayed-for Isaac to ageing parents. His little girl to tickle under the chin and chase on the beach and point out where the distant sea danced. And now she was his only family as well.

Like Oglet, Nicholas never changed. Ruth was the one who had, who'd shifted with the seasons. Irrate and confused at first, when Rebecca had died. Then numb and icy. When David had come, Ruth had blossomed again, and now still she sprouted the joy of new ideas. Yes, Nicholas never changed his views. He was set firm on dissuading her from leaving, and he'd raged until he blew himself out of the house and down to the shore. But when he'd returned this evening, he didn't storm, or shout, or even bring up Ruth's leaving. When she mentioned it, he'd purely shrugged, "Well, Shrimp, if you have to."

Pa's changed somehow, Ruth thought, closing the windows, but it en't a bad thing. New year, and a new life.

Five Years Later: *May 1843*

Ruth

Ruth had been back to Oglet before, for brief holidays spent on misty morning walks to the Mersey. Sitting by the banks and gazing into the hopeful distance beyond the shimmering water, feet trailing in subaqueous swirls like the clouds overhead. Smiling. She had almost forgotten how beautiful it was. Nearly perfect; the only downside, Ruth had always thought, was that the rolling fabric of salt and freshwater never had quite the same lure of timeless innovation that the waves and wilderness of the sea had. Ruth had thought that when they'd moved she would be able to gaze down-river like always, only exploring new sights of far greater water, of the Irish sea. But the new tenement block they were renting in was named "Dockside" only interpretively, it seemed. The smog shrouded what the high brick buildings did not.

James and Edward, new arrivals in the five long years, spent hours in the Oglet water each time, waddling on chubby legs and laughing. They had never seen water so clear, not when the factories belched smoke and dyed the water grey with muck.

Each time they went to Oglet was pre-planned, marked out by David with black ink in the diary. Preceded by fastidious searching in his schedule, letters asking leave, meticulous searches for the cheapest horse and cart. And the days would trudge past until finally, the money-box was emptied and off they'd all go.

But they hadn't visited for several months. Ruth's gradually swelling belly inevitably gave birth to ill health and sleepless nights and David worrying for the safety of a newborn in a horse and cart. So he'd made a note of a week in July, circled it out, labeled it free and scratched his pen on thin, white paper. Just like every other time.

Today was different. Ruth had been bouncing Becca and keeping an eye on the boys' rough-and-tumble in the yard, when the post had brought Meg's familiar country scrawl.

"Dear Ruth,

Please cum back as soon as you can. Mr Evans needs you.

Yours sinserely,

Meg Baker".

"Oh well," David said when she showed him. "They're old, it's probably just an over-reaction on the part of two senile brains." And he smiled and put his arm around her shoulders. Ruth looked down.

"But darling," she muttered. "I *know* Meg. She wouldn't message unless something really had gone wrong. And Pa's old now. What if he can't look after himself anymore? I'm worried, David."

Squeezing her hand softly like he always used to, he opened the moneybox.

Nicholas

The old man shifted the bolt and slid the door open slowly, ignoring the biting pain that had remained persistently in his hip since he'd tripped last week. Two waist-height hugs presented themselves proudly, and, as he reached for the doorframe, a young woman reached out to support his arm.

"Hallo Ruth!" he smiled weakly, and prayed she wouldn't notice how his shirt was misbuttoned, not after all the time he'd spent forcing his shaking fingers to do the job.

Ruth! Ruth was here! When Meg had come with the bread and meat that his aching joints could no longer collect from the village, she'd mentioned the possibility of Ruth coming, though how she knew he couldn't guess. It had been too long since they'd visited; Christmas was a stale memory five whole months past now.

"G'morning!" Ruth spoke cheerfully, her chattering as incorrigible as a seagull's, but the split second of shock in her eyes drove a barbed hook deeper into his heart than fingers could remove. "I met Meg on the way here and she told me 'bout your fall and everything. Well, you just sit down and I'll make a nice cuppa tea and... oh Pa..." He watched her fingers rub tears away determinedly. "You know why I've come, don't you? I thought we could work around it at first, but I can't see no other way... You'll have to leave Oglet."

Nicholas reluctantly nodded the head that was wrinkled more than the sea was with waves.

"Yes, Shrimp. I understand. Change rolls in with the tide. And it's time I stopped clinging to rocks that'll only crush me under them. It's the sailor's job to guide the ship, however battered and old, into new and clearer and calmer waters."

The old man sat on the shingle, hands feebly grasping the sides of the log to balance him. Boot by boot, Meg had guided his creaking steps over the field and down to the banks of the Mersey-side. The breeze clutched at his skin and his coat, but the gulls' cries had faded in his ears this year. Waves grasped the earth softly, and the weeds at long last relinquished themselves to the spinning, weaving threads of water.

Fate was bitter today.

Yes, fate was bitter but family was loving. David would come home tomorrow to a warm loaf and a steaming mug of tea that Ruth had magicked up, all with Becca on her hip, while the boys drowned their Pa in a thousand hugs. Then Ruth would sing their home into harmony, the mermaid she was, luring and wooing and daring all at once. And Nicholas? He'd sit and smile from the rocking chair, and picture the waters where memories mingled with a salt-water ocean of dreams.

But for today, here he was by the river. Here he was for the last time.

"Change rolls in with the tide, and I'll swim along with it." The old man thought, staring out into the blurry blue. *"But I'll never see the Mersey from Oglet shore again."*