

THE LITTLE MERMAID

Hans Christian Andersen

Far out at sea the water is as blue as the petals of the loveliest cornflower and as clear as the purest glass, but it is very deep, deeper than any anchor cable can reach, many church towers would have to be placed on top of each other to stretch from the sea-bed to the surface.

Down there the sea-folk live.

Do not believe, though, that there is nothing but the bare, white sand on the sea bed; no, the most marvellous trees and plants grow there that have such pliant trunks, stems and leaves that the slightest movement of the water causes them to move as if they were alive. All the fishes, great and small, slip between their branches, just as birds up here do in the air. At the very deepest spot lies the sea-king's palace, the walls are of coral and the tall pointed windows of the clearest amber, but the roof is of mussel shells that open and close as the water passes – it looks so lovely, for in each of them lie gleaming pearls, a single one of which would be a prize gem in a queen's crown.

For many years the sea-king down there had been a widower, but his old mother kept house for him, she was a wise woman, but proud of her high birth, so she always wore twelve oysters on her tail while all the other fine folk were only allowed to wear six. Otherwise, she deserved much praise, especially because she was so fond of the small sea-princesses, the daughters of her son.

There were six lovely children, but the youngest one was the most beautiful of them all, her skin was as clear and delicate as a rose petal, her eyes as blue as the deepest sea, but like the rest of them she had no feet, her body ended in a fish's tail.

All day long they could spend playing down in the palace, in the great halls where living flowers grew out of the walls. The great amber windows would be opened, and then the fishes would swim in to them, just as the swallows fly in to us when we open the windows, but the fishes swam right up to the small princesses, ate out of their hand and let themselves be stroked.

Outside the palace there was a large garden with bright-red and dark-blue trees, with fruit that shone like gold and flowers that blazed like fire in the constantly moving stems and leaves. The earth itself was the finest sand, but blue as a flare of sulphur. There lay a mysterious blue sheen over everything down there – it would be easier to believe one was high up in the air and could only see sky above and beneath one than that one was down on the sea-bed. When the sea was calm, one could make out the sun, it seemed to be a purple flower with its entire light streaming out of the calyx.

Each of the small princesses had her own little plot in the garden where she could dig and sow as she wanted; one gave her flower plot the form of a whale, another preferred hers to look like a little mermaid, but the youngest princess made hers completely round like the sun, and only had flowers that shone red like it did.

She was strange child, quiet and thoughtful, and while the other sisters added the most remarkable things they had taken from stranded ships as decoration, all she wanted to have, apart from the rose-red flowers that resembled the sun high up above, was a beautiful marble statue, it was of a fine-looking lad, carved out of clear white stone and left on the sea-bed after a ship had foundered. At its base she planted a rose-red weeping willow, it grew splendidly and hung with its fresh branches over the statue, down towards the blue sea-bed, where its shadow appeared to be violet and in motion, just like the branches; it looked as if the tree-top and its roots pretended to be kissing each other.

Nothing made her happier than to hear about the human world above them; the old grandmother had to tell all she knew about ships and cities, people and animals and what seemed especially delightful to her was that up on the earth the flowers had a scent, for they did not

down on the sea-bed, and that the forests were green and the fish that could be seen among their branches could sing so loudly and sweetly that it gladdened the heart; it was the small birds that grandmother called fish, for otherwise the sisters would not be able to understand her, as they had never seen a bird.

‘When you complete your fifteenth year,’ grandmother said, ‘you will be allowed to rise up out of the sea, sit in the moonlight on the rocks and watch the big ships that sail past – you will see forests and cities!’ During the following year one of the sisters turned fifteen, but the others, well, each one was a year younger than the other, so the youngest had no less than five years to wait before she would venture to come up from the sea-bed and see how things are in our world. But each one promised the other to relate what she had seen and found most delightful on that first day; for their grandmother did not tell them enough, there was so much they wanted to know about.

None was as full of longing as the youngest one, the very princess who had the longest time to wait and who was so quiet and thoughtful. Many a night she would stand at the open window and gaze up through the dark-blue water, where the fishes swished their fins and tails. She could see the moon and the stars, their gleam was admittedly somewhat pale, but through the water they looked much larger than they do to our eyes; if what looked like a black cloud passed beneath them, she knew that it was either a whale swimming above her, or possibly a ship with many people on board; they certainly didn’t think there might be a lovely little mermaid standing below them stretching her white hands up towards the keel.

Now the oldest princess was fifteen years old and was to venture above the surface of the sea.

When she came back, she had hundreds of things to tell, but the most delightful, she said, was to lie in the moonlight on a sandbank in the calm water, and to see close to the coast the great city, where the lights twinkled like hundreds of stars, to hear the music and the noise and clamour of carriages and humans, see the many church towers and spires, and to hear the bells ringing out; precisely because she could not come up there, she longed most of all for all this.

Oh! how the youngest sister was all ears, and when later that evening she stood by the open window and gazed up through the dark-blue water, she thought of the great city with all its noise and clamour, and she believed she could hear the church bells sounding down where she was.

The following year the second sister was allowed to rise through the water and swim wherever she wanted. She swam up just as the sun was setting, and it was that sight which she felt was the loveliest. The whole sky had looked as if it was of gold, she said, and the clouds, well, their loveliness she could not describe enough! red and yellow, they had sailed over her head, but far swifter than them, like a long white veil, a flock of wild swans had flown over the water where the sun stood; she swam towards it, but it sank and the rosy gleam on the surface of the sea and the clouds was extinguished.

The following year a third sister came up there, she was the boldest of them all, so she swam up a broad estuary that flowed into the sea. She saw lovely green slopes with vines, castles and manors peeped out between magnificent forests; she heard how all the birds sang and the sun shone so strongly that she often had to dive down under the surface to cool her burning face. In a small bay she met a whole flock of small human children; completely naked, they ran about and splashed in the water, she wanted to play with them, but they ran away in fear, and a small black animal appeared, it was a dog, but she had never seen a dog before, it barked so terribly at her that she was scared and made for the open sea, but she could never forget the magnificent

forests, the green hillsides and the charming children who could swim on the water, even though they didn't have any tail.

The fourth sister was not as bold, she stayed out in the wild mid-ocean, and said that it was precisely this that was the loveliest – one could see many miles around one on all sides, and the sky above was like a great bell-jar. She had seen ships, but far off, they looked like gulls, the amusing dolphins had turned somersaults, and the huge whales had spouted water up out of their blowholes, so it had looked like hundreds of fountains around her.

It was now the fifth sister's turn; her birthday happened to be in the winter and so she saw what the others had not seen on their first visit. The water looked quite green and great icebergs were swimming around in it, each of them looked like a pearl, she said, and yet they were far bigger than the church towers humans built. They appeared in the most remarkable shapes and glittered like diamonds. She had sat down on one of the largest and all the sailing ships, in fright, gave her a wide berth, where she sat letting the wind play with her long hair; but later in the evening the sky became overcast, there was thunder and lightning, while the black sea lifted the great blocks of ice high up and let them gleam in the red lightning. The sails were taken in on all the ships, and they were in fear and dread, but she calmly sat on her swimming iceberg and watched the blue stroke of lightning zigzag down into the gleaming sea.

The first time any of the sisters came above the surface of the water, each of them was always fascinated by the new, beautiful things she saw, but since they now – as grown-up girls – were allowed to go up there whenever they wanted, things lost their appeal, they longed to be back home, and after a month they said that it was most beautiful of all down where they lived, and so nice to be home.

On many an evening the five sisters interlocked arms and rose in a row above the water; they had beautiful voices, more beautiful than any human's, and when a storm blew up, so that they thought the ships were bound to go under, they would swim in front of the ships and sing so beautifully of how delightful it was on the sea bed, and tell the sailors not to be frightened of coming down there; but the sailors were unable to understand the words and thought it was the storm, nor did they ever get to see any of these delights, for when their ship sank, those on board drowned, and only came down to the sea-king's palace as corpses.

When the sisters gathered in the evening, arm in arm, and ascended through the sea, their little sister was thus left behind all on her own, and it was as if she would cry, but a mermaid has no tears and so she had to suffer all the more.

'Ah, if only I was fifteen years old!' she said, 'I know that I will grow really fond of the world above us and of the people who build and live up there!'

At last, she reached the age of fifteen.

'There, now we've got you off our hands,' her grandmother, the old queen mother, said. 'Come here, let me deck you out like your other sisters!' and she placed a garland of white lilies in her hair, but each petal in the flower was half a pearl; and the old lady had eight large oysters attach themselves to the princess's tail to indicate her high rank.

'It hurts so much,' the little mermaid said.

'Yes, one has to go through a great deal of trouble to look nice!' the old woman said.

'Oh! she would so much have liked to shake all this finery off her and laid the heavy garland aside; her red flowers in the garden suited her much better, but she didn't dare rearrange things.

'Goodbye,' she said and rose so light and clear, like a bubble through the water.

The sun had just set as she lifted her head above the surface of the water, but all the clouds were still gleaming like roses and gold, and in the midst of the pale-red sky the evening star

shone with such brightness and beauty, the air was mild and fresh and the sea absolutely still. On it was a large ship with three masts, with only a single sail up, for there was not a breath of wind, and here and there in the ropes and on the beams the sailors were sitting. There was music and singing, and as the evening grew darker, hundreds of many-coloured lamps were lit, so it looked as if the flags of every nation were waving in the wind. The little mermaid swam right up to the cabin window, and each time the swell lifted her up, she could look through the mirror-clear windows where the many people stood in fine array, but the handsomest even so was the young prince with the large black eyes, he couldn't have been much older than sixteen, it was his birthday, which was why there was so much of a to-do. The sailors were dancing on deck, and when the young prince came out, more than a hundred rockets shot up into the air, they lit everything up as if it was broad daylight, so the little mermaid was very frightened and dived under the surface, but soon she stuck her head up again, and then it was as if all the stars in the sky fell down to her. She had never seen such pyrotechnics before. Great suns span round, wonderful fire-fishes soared into the blue sky, and everything was reflected by the clear, calm sea. On board the ship everything was so bright that one could see every little rope, and the people too. Oh, how handsome the young prince was, and he clasped people's hands, laughed and smiled, while the music rang out in the wonderful evening.

It grew late, but the little mermaid was unable to take her eyes off the ship and the handsome prince. The many-coloured lamps were put out, no more rockets soared into the sky, there were no more cannon shots, but deep down in the sea there was a humming and droning, whereas she sat on the surface rocking up and down, so that she could look into the cabin; but the ship picked up speed, one sail after the other unfurled, now the waves became stronger, large clouds appeared, and there was lightning in the distance. Oh, there was going to be a terrible storm! so the sailors reefed in the sails. And the large ship careered along at great speed on the wild waves, the water rose to form what looked like great black mountains that would crash down over the mast, but the ship dipped like a swan down between the high waves and let itself be lifted up on the towering waters. The little mermaid found this ride enjoyable, but the sailors did not, the ship creaked and groaned, the thick planking bent at the buffeting of the waves, the mast broke in two as if it was a reed, and the ship rolled over on its side and water began to pour in. Now the little mermaid realised that they were in danger, she had to take care herself to avoid the beams and fragments of the ship that were floating on the water. At one moment it was so pitch-black that she couldn't see the slightest thing, but when a flash of lightning came, everything was so clear once more that she could make out all of them on the ship; everyone lurched around as best he could; she looked especially for the young prince, and when the ship came apart, she saw him sink down into the depths of the ocean. To begin with, she was quite pleased, for now he would be coming down to her, but then she remembered that humans cannot live in the water, and that he would not come down to her father's palace, only his corpse. No, he could not be allowed to die; so she swam in among the beams and planks that drifted on the sea, completely forgot that they might have crushed her, she dived deep beneath the surface and rose up high again between the waves, and finally she managed to reach the young prince, who was hardly able to swim any longer in the stormy sea, his arms and legs were beginning to go limp, his beautiful eyes to close – he would have died if the little mermaid had not come to his aid. She held his head above water, and then let the waves bear her and him wherever they wanted.

When morning came the bad weather was over; not a shred of the ship was to be seen, the sun rose red and gleaming out of the water – it was as if this brought life to the prince's cheeks, but his eyes remained closed; the mermaid kissed his lovely high forehead and stroked back his

wet hair; to her he looked like the marble statue down in her little garden, she kissed him again, and wished for him to be allowed to live.

She now saw the mainland ahead of her, tall blue mountains with white snow gleaming on their summits as if swans were lying there; down by the coast there were lovely green forests, and in front of them lay a church or an abbey, she did not know for sure, but it was definitely a building.

Lemon and orange trees grew in the garden, and in front of the gate stood tall palm trees. The shore formed a small bay here where the water was completely still but very deep, all the way to the cliff where fine silver sand had been washed up, she swam over there with the handsome prince and laid him down on the sand, but made sure that his head lay high up in the warm sunshine.

Now the bells in the large white building started to chime, and many young girls came walking through the garden. Then the little mermaid swam further out behind some boulders that stuck up out of the water, placed sea-foam of her hair and breast so that no one could see her small face, and then she watched to see who came out to the poor prince.

It did not take long before a young girl came to the spot, she seemed to be quite shocked, but only for a moment, then she fetched some others, and the mermaid saw how the prince recovered and that he smiled to all of those around him, but not out to her, for he did not even know that she had saved him; she felt so sad, and when he was led into the large building, she dived sorrowfully down into the water and sought her way home to her father's palace.

She had always been quiet and thoughtful, but now she was even more so. Her sisters asked her what she had seen the first time up above, but she did not tell them anything.

Many an evening and morning she rose up to the spot where she had left the prince. She saw how the fruit in the garden ripened and was picked, she saw how the snow melted on the high mountains, but she did not see the prince, and therefore she was always even sadder when she returned home. Her only consolation was to sit in her little garden and embrace the beautiful marble statue that looked like the prince, but she did not tend her flowers, they grew as in a wilderness, out over the paths and twined their long stems and leaves in among the branches so that it became quite dark.

Finally, she couldn't bear it any longer, and told one of her sisters, and soon all of them had got to hear of it, but only her other sisters and a couple of other mermaids who only told their closest friends. One of them knew the identity of the prince, she had also seen the festivities on the ship, knew where he came from, and where his kingdom lay.

'Come, little sister!' the other princesses said, and with their arms round each other's shoulders they rose in a long row out of the sea in front of the place where they knew the prince's palace lay.

It had been built of a light-yellow gleaming type of stone, with large marble staircases, one went straight down to the sea. Magnificent gilt domes rose up above the roof, and between the columns that went round the entire building there were marble statues that looked as if they were alive.

Through the clear glass in the tall windows one could glimpse the most magnificent halls that were hung with precious silk curtains and tapestries, and all the walls were adorned with large paintings that were a sheer joy to look at. In the middle of the largest hall there was a large splashing fountain, its jets shooting up towards the glass dome in the ceiling, through which the sun shone on the water and on the lovely plants growing in the large pool.

Now she knew where he lived, and she went there many an evening and night on the water; she swam much closer to the land than any of the others had dared – she even went right up into the narrow canal, under the magnificent marble balcony that cast a long shadow over the water. Here she sat and gazed at the young prince, who thought he was completely alone in the bright moonlight. Many evenings she saw him sail about with music in his magnificent boat with its fluttering flags; she peeped out through the green rushes, and if the wind caught her silver-white veil and anyone saw it, they thought it was a swan lifting its wings.

Many a night, when the fishermen were out at sea with their blazing torches, she heard them say many good things about the young prince, and it pleased her that she had saved his life when he was drifting half-dead on the waves, and she thought of how firmly his head had rested on her breast, and how fervently she had kissed him then; he knew nothing about that, couldn't even dream about her.

She came to like human beings more and more, and she wished more and more to be able to rise up among them; their world seemed to her to be much bigger than hers; for they could fly across the ocean on ships, climb high mountains way above the clouds, and the countries they owned stretched with their forests and fields farther than the eye could see. There was so much she wanted to know, but her sisters could not answer everything, so she asked her old grandmother and she was familiar with the higher world, which is what she rightly called the lands above the sea.

'When humans do not drown,' the little mermaid asked, 'can they stay alive for ever, don't they die like we do down here in the sea?'

'Oh yes,' the old woman said, 'they too have to die, and their lives are even shorter than ours are. We can live until we are three hundred years old, but when we cease to exist, we become foam on the water, do not even have a grave down here among our dear ones. We do not have an immortal soul, we will never live again, we are like the green rushes, once they have been severed they can never grow green again!' Humans on the other hand have a soul that lives for ever, lives even after the body has become earth; it rises up through the clear sky up to all the shining stars!

Just as we rise up to the surface of the sea and see the lands of the humans, they rise up to unknown lovely places, those we will never get to see.'

'Why did we never get an immortal soul?' the little mermaid asked sadly, 'I would give up all the three hundred years I have to live in just to be a human being for one day and then be part of the heavenly world!'

'You mustn't spend your time thinking of such things!' the old woman said, 'we have a much happier and better life than the human beings up there!'

'So I am to die and float like foam on the sea, not hear the music of the waves, see the lovely flowers and the red sun! Is there nothing I can do to gain an eternal soul!'

'No!' the old woman said, 'only if a human were to fall so in love with you that you were more to him than his father and mother; if all his thoughts and love were centred on you, and he would let the priest place his right hand in yours and promise to be faithful now and in all eternity. Only then would his soul flow over into your body and you would partake in human happiness. He would give you a soul and yet retain his own. But that can never happen! For what is so lovely here in the ocean – your fish's tail – they find ugly up there on the earth, they don't understand it at all, there one has to have two clumsy props that they call legs in order to be considered beautiful or handsome!'

Then the little mermaid sighed and looked sadly at her fish's tail.

Thank You for previewing this eBook

You can read the full version of this eBook in different formats:

- HTML (Free /Available to everyone)
- PDF / TXT (Available to V.I.P. members. Free Standard members can access up to 5 PDF/TXT eBooks per month each month)
- Epub & Mobipocket (Exclusive to V.I.P. members)

To download this full book, simply select the format you desire below

