

THE LITTLE MERMAID

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 plashing 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.

‘Let’s be content,’ the old woman said, ‘let’s jump and leap in the three hundred years we have to live in, that’s quite a long time after all, and then one can even more contentedly rest in one’s grave. This evening there is to be court ball!’

It was also more magnificent than anything ever seen on earth. The walls and ceiling of the great dance hall were of thick but clear glass. Several hundred huge mussel shells, rosy red and green as grass, stood in rows on either side with a blue-burning fire that lit up the entire hall and gleamed out through the walls so that the sea right outside looked quite illuminated; one could see all the innumerable fish, great and small, that swam towards the glass wall, on some of them the scales gleamed a purple-red, on others they seemed to be silver and gold. A broadly running stream ran through the middle of the hall, and on it mermen and mermaids danced to their own delightful singing. The humans on earth do not have such beautiful voices. The little mermaid sang the most beautifully of them all, and they applauded her, and for a moment she felt happy in her heart, for she knew that she had the loveliest voice of anyone on earth and in the sea!

But soon she began to think once more of the world above her; she couldn’t forget the handsome prince and her sorrow at not owning – as he did – an immortal soul. So she slipped away from her father’s palace, and while everything was singing and enjoyment inside, she sat out in her own little garden and was sad. Then she heard French horns sounding down through the water, and she thought ‘now he is out sailing, the one who I love even more than father and mother, the one who fills all my thoughts and in whose hand I wish to place all my life’s happiness. I will risk anything to win him and an immortal soul! While my sisters are dancing inside my father’s palace, I will go to the sea-witch – I’ve always been so afraid of her, but she can perhaps advise and help me!’

Now the little mermaid left her garden and went towards the roaring whirlpools behind which the witch lived. She had never gone that way before, no flowers grew there, no sea-grass, only the bare grey sandy bottom stretched towards the whirlpools, where the water, like roaring mill-wheels,

whirled round and tore everything they caught hold of down with it into the depths; she had to pass between these crushing, whirling masses of water to get to the region of the sea-witch, and here there was for quite some distance no other way than over the hot, bubbling mud the witch called her peat-bog. Behind it lay her house in the middle of a strange forest. All the trees and shrubs were polyps – half-animal and half-plant – they looked like snakes with hundreds of heads growing out of the earth; all the branches were long, slimy arms, with fingers like pliant worms, and joint by joint they moved from their root to the outermost tip. Everything in the sea they could catch hold of they twined round tightly and never let go again. The little mermaid remained standing quite terrified outside there; her heart pounded with fear, she had almost turned back, but then she thought of the prince and of the human soul, and that gave her courage. She bound her long, fluttering hair around her head so that the polyps couldn't grab hold of it, folded both her hands over her breast, and flew – as fish can fly through the water – in among the horrible polyps which stretched out their pliant arms and fingers after her. She saw that wherever they had seized something, hundreds of small arms held it as with bands of steel. Humans who had perished at sea and sunk down to the depths, peeped out from the polyps' arms as white skeletons. They held onto ships' rudders and chests, skeletons of land animals and a little mermaid that they had caught and strangled – that was what seemed to her to be almost the most dreadful.

She now came to a large slimy place in the forest where large, fat water-snakes tumbled and showed their vile white-yellow bellies. In the middle of this clearing a house had been built of the white bones of shipwrecked human beings, there the sea-witch sat, allowing a toad to eat from her mouth, just as human allow a small canary to eat sugar. The horrible fat water-snakes she called her small chickens and she let them romp around on her large, spongy breast.

'I know what you want alright!' the sea-witch said. 'it's very stupid of you! but you shall have your will even so, for it will bring you great misfortune, my lovely princess. You want to get rid of your fish's tail and have two props instead to go around on just like human beings, so that the young prince can fall in love with you and you can have him and an immortal soul!' And just then the witch cackled so loudly and horribly that the toad and the grass snakes fell to the ground and tossed around there. 'You've come at precisely the right time,' the witch said, 'tomorrow when the sun rises I couldn't have helped you before another year had passed. I will prepare a drink for you; before the sun rises you must swim with it to where there is land, sit down on the shore there and drink it, then your tail will split and contract into what humans call a nice pair of legs, but it will hurt you, it is as if a sharp sword passed through you. Everyone who sees you will say you are the loveliest human child they have ever seen! you will keep your floating walk, no dancer can float as you can, but each step you take will be like treading on a sharp knife that made your blood flow. Are you prepared to suffer all this? – for then I will help you.'

'Yes!' the little mermaid said with a trembling voice, and she thought of the prince and of winning an immortal soul.

'But remember this,' the witch said, 'once you have assumed human form, you can never become a mermaid again! you can never dive down through the water to your sisters and to your father's palace, and if you do not gain the love of the prince, so that he forgets his father and mother for you, unless you fill all his thoughts and he lets the priest place your hands in each other's so that you become man and wife, you will not gain an immortal soul! the first morning after he has married someone else, your heart will break, and you will become foam on the water.'

'This is my wish!' the little mermaid said and was deathly pale.

'But you must also pay me!' the witch said, 'and what I am asking for is no trifle. You have the loveliest voice of all those here on the sea-bed, and you count on entrancing him with it, but that voice you must give to me. I must have the best thing you own for my precious drink! I must give you of my own blood for the drink, so that it can be as sharp as a double-edged sword!'

‘But if you take my voice,’ the little mermaid said, ‘what am I left with?’

‘Your beautiful appearance,’ the witch said, your floating walk and your eloquent eyes – with those you’re sure to be able to captivate a human heart. Well, have you lost your courage! Stretch out your little tongue, I will cut it off as payment, and you shall have your powerful drink!’

‘So be it!’ the little mermaid said, and the witch fetched her cauldron to boil the magic potion. ‘Cleanliness is next to godliness!’ she said and scoured the inside of it with the grass snakes, which she bound into a knot; now she made a deep scratch in her breast and let her black blood drip down in it. The steam formed the queerest shapes that were scaring and frightening. Every second the witch added new things to the cauldron, and when it boiled away it was as if a crocodile was crying. Finally the drink was ready – it looked like the clearest water!

‘There it is!’ the witch said and cut the little mermaid’s tongue off – she was mute now, unable to either sing or speak.

‘If the polyps should seize you as you pass through my forest on your way back,’ the witch said, ‘just throw a single drop of this drink onto them and their arms and fingers will burst into thousands of pieces!’ but the mermaid had no need of this, the polyps retreated in fear when they saw she was carrying the gleaming drink that shone in her hand as if it was a twinkling star. So she soon came through the forest, the bog and the roaring whirlpools.

She could see her father’s palace; the lamps had been put out in the large dance hall; they were surely all asleep inside, but she did not dare to try and find them, now that she could not speak and would be leaving them for ever. It felt as if her heart would break from sorrow. She stole into the garden, took one flower from each of her sisters’ flower beds, sent thousands of finger-kisses towards the palace and rose up through the dark-blue waters.

The sun had not yet appeared when she saw the prince’s palace and went up the magnificent marble staircase. The moon shone wonderfully clearly. The little mermaid downed the fiery, sharp drink and it was as though a two-edged sword went right through her fine body, she fainted and lay as if dead. When the sun was shining over the sea, she woke up and felt a searing pain, but right in front of her the handsome young prince was standing, he fixed his jet-black eyes on her, so she lowered hers and saw that her fish’s tail was gone and that she had the most attractive small white legs any young girl could have, but she was completely naked, so she wrapped herself in her long tresses. The prince asked who she was, and how she had come to be there, and she looked at him so gently and so sorrowfully with her dark-blue eyes, for she could not speak, you see. Then he took her by the hand and led her into the palace. Every step she took was, as the witch had said to her earlier, as if she was treading on pointed needles and sharp knives, but she put up with this gladly; with the prince’s hand holding hers she rose as light as a soap-bubble, and he and everyone else marvelled at her elegant, floating walk.

She was dressed in priceless clothes of silk and muslin, she was the most beautiful of all those at the palace, but she was mute, unable to sing or speak. Lovely slave-girls, dressed in silk and gold, came forward and sang for the prince and his royal parents; a song more beautiful than all the others and the prince clapped his hands and smiled at her, then the little mermaid felt sad, for she knew that she herself would have sung far more beautifully! she thought, ‘Oh, if only he knew that in order to be with him I have given away my voice for all eternity!’

Now the slave-girls danced graceful, floating dances to the loveliest music, then the little mermaid lifted her beautiful white arms, raised herself on tiptoe and floated across the floor, danced as no one had ever danced before; at her every movement her loveliness became more apparent, and her eyes spoke more profoundly to the heart than the singing of the slave-girls.

Everyone was enchanted by this, particularly the prince, who called her his little foundling, and she danced more and more even though every time her foot touched the ground it was as if she was

treading on sharp knives. The prince said that she was to be with him always, and she was allowed to sleep outside his door on a velvet cushion.

He had a man's costume sewn for her, so that she could follow him on horseback. They rode through the fragrant forests where the green branches brushed her shoulders and the small birds sang behind fresh-green leaves. She climbed with the prince on the high mountains and although her fine feet bled, so that the others noticed it, she merely laughed at this and followed him until they saw the clouds sailing beneath them as if they were a flock of birds flying off to foreign lands.

Back at the prince's palace, when the others were asleep, she went out onto the broad marble staircase, and it cooled her burning feet to stand there in the cold sea-water, and then she thought of them down there in the depths of the ocean.

One night her sisters came arm in arm, they sang so sorrowfully as they swam across the water, and she waved to them, and they recognised her and told her how sad she had made them all. Every night after that they visited her, and one night, far out, she saw her old grandmother, who had not been up to the surface of the sea for many years, and the sea-king with his crown on his head – they stretched their arms out towards her, but did not dare come as close to the shore as her sisters did.

Day by day the prince became more dear to her, he was fond of her as one can be fond of a good, dear child, but it never occurred to him to make her his queen, and she had to become his wife, otherwise she would never get an immortal soul, but on his wedding morning would become foam on the sea.

'Aren't you fonder of me than all the rest!' the eyes of the little mermaid seemed to say when he took her in his arms and kissed her lovely forehead.

'Yes, you are dearest of all to me,' the prince said, 'for you have the best heart of them all, you are the most devoted to me, and you resemble a young girl I once saw but will surely never find again. I was on a ship that was wrecked, the waves washed me ashore near a sacred temple where several young girls were in service, the youngest of them found me down on the shore and saved my life, I only saw her twice; she was the only one I could ever love in this world, but you resemble her, you almost replace her image in my soul, she belongs to the holy temple, and therefore my good fortune has sent you to me – we shall never be parted!' – 'Alas, he doesn't know that I have saved his life!' the little mermaid thought, 'I carried him over the sea to the forest where the temple stands, I sat behind the foam and waited to see if anyone would come. I saw the beautiful girl he is more fond of than me!' and the mermaid sighed deeply – she was unable to cry. 'The girl belongs to the sacred temple, he has told me, she will never come out into the world, they will not meet again, I am with him, I see him every day, I will take care of him, love him, sacrifice my life to him!'

But now the prince is to be married and have the lovely daughter of the king of the neighbouring country! people said, that is why he is equipping a ship so magnificently. The prince is travelling to see the lands of the neighbouring king, is the official explanation, but it is to see the neighbouring king's daughter. He is to have a large retinue with him; but the little mermaid shook her head and laughed; she knew the prince's thoughts much better than all the rest. 'I must travel!' he had said to her, 'I must see the beautiful princess, my parents insist on it, but they do not wish to force me to bring her home as my bride! I cannot love her! she does not look like the beautiful girl in the temple that you resemble. If I ever had to choose a bride, it would rather be you, my speechless foundling with the eloquent eyes!' and he kissed her red lips, played with her long tresses and placed his head close to her heart, so it dreamt of human happiness and an immortal soul.

'But you are not frightened of the sea, my mute child!' he said when they stood on board the magnificent ship that was to take him to the lands of the neighbouring king; and he told her about storms and dead calms, about strange fish in the ocean depths and what the diver had seen there, and she smiled at his account, for she of course knew far better than anyone else about the sea-bed.

In the moonlit night, when everyone was asleep, except for the mate, she sat by the railing of the ship and stared down through the clear water, and she seemed to see her father's palace, highest up stood her old grandmother with her silver crown on her head and stared up through the swift currents at the keel of the ship. Then her sisters broke the surface of the sea, they stared sorrowfully at her and wrung their white hands, she waved to them, smiled and wanted to tell them that things were going well and successfully for her, but the ship's boy came closer and the sisters dived down, so he thought that what he had seen had merely been white foam on the water.

The next morning the ship entered the harbour of the magnificent city of the neighbouring king. All the church bells rang out, and trumpets sounded from the high towers, while the soldiers stood with fluttering flags and glinting bayonets. There were festivities every single day, balls and parties in succession, but the princess was not present yet, she was being brought up far away from there in a sacred temple, they said, where she was learning all the royal virtues. Finally, she arrived on the scene.

The little mermaid was most eager to see her beauty, and she had to admit that she had never seen a fairer creature. Her skin was so fine and transparent, and behind the long, dark eyelashes there smiled a pair of black-blue faithful eyes!

'It's you!' the prince said, 'you who saved me when I lay like a corpse on the shore!' and he embraced his blushing bride. 'Oh, I am far too fortunate!' he said to the little mermaid. 'The best thing I could ever have hoped for has been fulfilled for me. You will rejoice in my good fortune, for you are more fond of me than all the others!' And the little mermaid kissed his hand, and she seemed to feel her heart break. His wedding morning would bring her death and turn her into foam on the sea.

All the church bells rang out, the heralds rode through the streets and announced the engagement. Fragrant oil burned in precious silver lamps on all the altars. The priests swung incense and the bride and bridegroom joined hands and received the bishop's blessing. The little mermaid stood in silk and gold and held the bride's train, but her ear did not hear the festive music, her eye did not see the holy ceremony, she thought only of her death-night, of all that she had lost in this world.

That very same evening, the bride and bridegroom boarded the ship, the cannons were fired, all the flags waved, and a fine tent of gold and purple had been raised in the middle of the ship, with the loveliest of cushions – there the wedding couple were to sleep in the still, cool night.

The sails swelled out in the wind, and the ship glided lightly and without any great motion out across the clear water.

When it grew dark, many-coloured lamps were lit and the sailors danced merry dances on deck. The little mermaid had to think of the first time she surfaced from the depths and saw the same magnificence and happiness, and she whirled round in the dance too, floated like the swallow floats when it is being pursued, and everyone expressed their great admiration, never had she danced so wonderfully; it felt like sharp knives in her fine small feet, but she did not notice it – it was nothing compared to the pain in her heart. She knew this would be the last evening she would see the man for whom she had abandoned her home and her family, given up her lovely voice and suffered endless torment every day, without him having any idea of this. This was the last night she would breathe the same air as he did, see the deep ocean and the star-studded sky, an eternal night without thought or dream awaited her, she who had no soul and would never be able to gain one.

And there was joy and merriment on board until way after midnight, she laughed and danced but with the thought of death in her heart. The prince kissed his lovely bride, and she played with his black hair, and arm in arm they retired to the magnificent tent.

It grew quiet and still on board, with only the mate still on duty, the little mermaid laid her white arm on the railing and looked eastwards towards the approaching dawn, the first rays of the sun, she

knew, would kill her. Then she saw her sisters rise up out of the sea, they were pale, as she was; their long beautiful hair no longer fluttered in the wind – it had been cut off.

‘We have given it to the witch, so that she can bring help and prevent you from dying this night! She has given us a knife – here it is! Can you see how sharp it is? Before the sun rises, you must plunge it into the prince’s heart, and when his warm blood spatters onto your feet, they will once more become a fish’s tail and you will become a mermaid once again, be able to come down into the water to us and live your three hundred years before you are turned into dead, salty sea-foam. Hurry! Either he or you must die before the sun rises! Our old grandmother is grieving so much that her white hair has fallen off, just as ours did at the witch’s scissors. Kill the prince and come back! Hurry, can’t you see the red streak in the sky? In a few minutes the sun will rise and you will have to die!’ and they let out a strangely deep sigh and sank down into the waves.

The little mermaid pulled by the purple curtain from the tent, and she saw the lovely bride sleeping with her head on the prince’s breast, and she bent down, kissed him on his handsome forehead, looked up at the sky where the dawn grew stronger and stronger, looked down at the sharp knife and once more fixed her eyes on the prince, who named his bride by name in his dreams, she alone was in his thoughts, and the knife shook in the mermaid’s hand, but then she flung it far out across the waves, which gleamed red when it fell, so it looked like drops of blood trickling up out of the water. Once more she gazed at the prince with half-glazed eyes, rushed off the ship down into the sea, and felt her body dissolve into foam.

Now the sun rose out of the sea. Its rays fell so gently and warmly on the deathly cold sea-foam and the little mermaid did not feel death, she saw the bright sun, and up above her there floated hundreds of transparent, lovely creatures; through them she could see the ship’s white sails and the sky’s red clouds, their voice was a melody, but so spiritual that no human ear could hear it, just as no earthly eye could see them – without wings they floated in their own lightness through the air.

‘Who am I coming to!’ she said, and her voice sounded like those of the other beings, so spiritual than no earthly music can reproduce it.

‘To the daughters of the air!’ the others replied. ‘A mermaid has no immortal soul, can never gain one unless she wins the love of a human being! Her eternal being depends on a foreign force. The daughters of the air do not have an eternal soul either, but by good deeds they are able to create one for themselves. We fly to the warm countries where the sultry plague-air kills people – there we fan cool air on them. We spread the scent of flowers through the air and send refreshment and cure. When we have striven to do all the good we can for three hundred years, we are granted an immortal soul and take part in the eternal happiness of humans. You, poor little mermaid, have striven to do the same with all your heart as we do, you have suffered and endured, have lifted yourself up to the realm of the spirits of the air, now through good deeds you can create for yourself an immortal soul in three hundred years’ time.’

And the little mermaid lifted her clear arms towards God’s sun, and for the first time she felt tears. On board the ship there was noise and life once more, she saw the prince with his lovely bride searching for her, sadly they stared at the bubbling foam, as if they knew she had thrown herself into the waves. Unseen, she kissed the bride’s forehead, smiled at him and rose with the other children of the air up onto the rosy cloud that sailed through the sky.

‘In three hundred years’ time we will sail thus into the kingdom of God!’

‘We can also enter in earlier than that!’ one of them whispered.

‘We can float unseen into the homes of humans who have children, and each time we find a good child that gladdens its parents and earns their love, God shortens our time of probation. The child is unaware of us flying through the living room, and when we smile with joy at it, one year is taken away from our three hundred, but if we see a naughty and wicked child, then we have to cry tears of sorrow, and each tear adds a further day to our time of probation!’ -

A fairy tale by Hans Christian Andersen. Translated into English by John Irons in 2014 for the Hans Christian Andersen Centre at the University of Southern Denmark.



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