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## *The Little Mermaid*

**F**ar out at sea the water is as blue as the petals of the loveliest cornflower and as clear as the purest glass, but it's very deep, deeper than any anchor line can reach. Scores of church towers would have to be set on top of each other to reach from the bottom up to the surface of the water. Down there live the sea folk.

Now, you mustn't think that there's nothing but a bare white, sandy bottom. No, the most wondrous trees and plants grow there, with such supple stems and leaves that at the slightest ripple in the water they move as if they were alive. All the fish, big and small, flit through the branches like the birds up here in the sky. At the very deepest spot stands the sea king's castle. The walls are made of coral, and the tall, arched windows are of the clearest amber. But the roof is made of seashells that open and close with the flow of the water. How lovely it looks, because in each of them lie dazzling pearls, any one of which would be a great jewel in the crown of a queen.

For many years the sea king had been a widower, though his old mother kept house for him. She was a wise woman, but proud of her noble birth, and that's why she had twelve oysters on her tail. The other nobles were only allowed to wear six. Otherwise she deserved high praise, especially because she was so fond of the little sea princesses, her granddaughters. All six were lovely children, but the youngest was the most beautiful of all. Her skin was as clear and soft as a rose petal, her eyes as blue as the deepest sea. Yet like the others she had no feet. Her body ended in a fish tail.

All day long they would play in the castle, in the great halls where living flowers grew out of the walls. When the big amber windows were opened, the fish swam in, just like the swallows fly

in to us when we open our windows. The fish swam right up to the little princesses, ate out of their hands, and let themselves be petted.

Outside the castle there was a great garden with fiery red and dark blue trees. The fruit gleamed like gold, and the blossoms like a blazing fire as they constantly fluttered their stalks and leaves. The ground itself was of the finest sand, but blue like flaming sulfur. A wondrous blue glow hovered over everything down there. You might almost think you were high up in the air and could see nothing but sky both above and below, rather than being at the bottom of the ocean. In calm seas you could catch sight of the sun. It looked like a crimson flower from whose chalice all light streamed.

Each of the little princesses had her own small plot in the garden where she could dig and plant as she liked. One of them gave her flower bed the shape of a whale, another thought it better if hers looked like a little mermaid. But the youngest made hers perfectly round, like the sun, and planted only flowers that shone just as red. She was an odd child, quiet and pensive. While the other sisters adorned their gardens with the most wondrous things they had gathered from sunken ships, the only thing she wanted, other than the scarlet flowers that looked like the sun above, was a beautiful marble statue. It was a lovely boy carved from clear, white stone, which had come to the sea floor with a shipwreck. Next to the statue she planted a crimson weeping willow that grew so gloriously, draping its fresh boughs over the statue and down to the blue sandy bottom, casting a violet shadow that was in constant movement, like the boughs. It looked as if the treetop and the roots were pretending to kiss.

She had no greater joy than to hear about the human world up above. Her old grandmother had to tell her everything she knew about ships and cities, humans and animals. She thought it especially strange and lovely that up on earth the flowers had a fragrance, while those on the sea floor did not. And the forests were green, and the fish that could be seen among the branches could sing so loudly and beautifully that it was sheer delight. It was the little birds that their grandmother called fish, because otherwise they wouldn't understand her, since they had never seen a bird.

"When each of you turns fifteen," said their grandmother, "you'll be allowed to go up to the surface of the sea, sit in the moonlight on the rocks, and look at the great ships sailing past. You'll see forests and cities!" In the coming year one of the sisters would turn fifteen, but the others . . . Well, each was a year younger than the other, and the youngest of them still had a full five years before she could venture up from the bottom of the sea to find out what it looked like in our world. But each promised to tell the next what she had seen and what she found to be most lovely on her first day. Their grandmother hadn't told them enough, and there was so much they wanted to know.

None of them was as full of yearning as the youngest sister, the one who had the longest to wait and was so quiet and pensive. Many a night she would stand at the open window and gaze up through the dark blue water where the fish were flapping their fins and tails. She could see the moon and stars. Even though their glow was quite pale, through the water they looked much bigger than they do to our eyes. If a black cloud seemed to pass beneath them, she knew that it was either a whale swimming above her or a ship full of people. It probably never occurred to them that a lovely little mermaid was standing below, stretching her white hands up toward the keel.

Then the oldest princess turned fifteen and could venture up to the surface of the sea.

When she returned, she had hundreds of things to tell them. She said that loveliest of all was lying in the moonlight on a sandbar in the calm sea and looking at the great city close to shore where the lights sparkled like hundreds of stars, listening to the music and the noise and commotion of the coaches and people, seeing all the church towers and spires, and hearing the bells ring. The very fact that she couldn't go there made her yearn for it all the more.

Oh, how the youngest sister listened! And later that evening as she stood at the open window and gazed up through the dark blue water, she thought about the great city with all its noise and commotion, and then she imagined she could hear the sound of the church bells reaching down to her.

The following year the second sister was allowed to rise up through the water and swim wherever she liked. She reached the

surface just as the sun went down, and that was the sight she found the loveliest of all. The whole sky looked like gold, she said, and the clouds, well, their loveliness she couldn't possibly describe! Red and violet, they had sailed above her. But even faster, like a long white veil, flew a flock of wild swans over the water in front of the sun. She swam toward it, but it sank, and the rosy glow was extinguished by the surface of the sea and the clouds.

The next year the third sister went up above. She was the most daring of them all, and that's why she swam along a wide river that flowed into the sea. She saw lovely green hills with grapevines, castles, and manor houses that peeked out from the magnificent forests. She heard all the birds singing, and the sunshine was so hot that she often had to dive underwater to cool her burning face. In a little bay she came upon a whole flock of tiny human children; quite naked, they ran around and splashed in the water. She wanted to play with them, but they ran off in fright, and a little black animal appeared. It was a dog, but she had never seen a dog before. It barked at her so fiercely that she was frightened and retreated to the open sea. But she would never forget the magnificent forests, the green hills, and the enchanting children who could swim in the water even though they had no fish tails.

The fourth sister was not as daring. She stayed out in the wild sea and claimed that it was the loveliest place of all. You could see for miles around, and the sky overhead was just like a great glass bell. She saw ships, but far away; they looked like black-backed seagulls. The amusing dolphins had turned somersaults, and the enormous whales had sprayed water out of their nostrils so it looked like hundreds of fountains all around.

Then it was the fifth sister's turn. Her birthday was in the winter, and that's why she saw what the others had not seen on their first time. The sea had turned quite green, and all around floated great icebergs. She said each of them looked like a pearl and yet was much bigger than the church towers that humans built. They appeared in the most wondrous of shapes and glittered like diamonds. She sat down on one of the largest, and all the sailing ships tacked in terror around the place where she sat, as she let the wind blow through her long hair. But toward evening the sky was covered with clouds. Lightning flashed and thunder roared while

the black sea lifted the icebergs high in the air, making them gleam with red lightning. On all the ships they took in the sails, while fear and horror reigned. But she sat calmly on her drifting iceberg and watched the blue lightning bolts zigzag down to strike the gleaming sea.

The first time one of the sisters went up to the surface she was always delighted by everything new and beautiful that she saw. But now that they were grown and allowed to go there whenever they liked, it no longer interested them. They longed for home, and after a month's time they would say that down below was the most beautiful place of all, and that's where they felt most comfortable.

Many an evening the five sisters would link arms and in a row rise up to the surface of the water. They had lovely voices, more beautiful than any human's. Whenever a storm was raging and they thought ships might be wrecked, they would swim before the ships and sing wondrously about how beautiful it was at the bottom of the sea, telling the sailors not to be afraid to go there. But the men couldn't understand their words. They thought it was the storm, and they never had a chance to see all the loveliness below because when the ship sank they would drown and come only as dead men to the sea king's castle.

In the evening, when the sisters would rise up, arm in arm, through the sea, their little sister would be left behind, all alone, to gaze after them. She felt as if she could cry, but a mermaid has no tears, and so she suffers even more.

"Oh, if only I were fifteen!" she said. "I'm sure that I will come to love the world up above and the human beings who live there!"

Finally she turned fifteen.

"Well, now we'll have you off our hands," said her grandmother, the old dowager queen. "Come here and let me dress you up like your sisters!" She put a wreath of white lilies on her hair, but every flower petal was half a pearl, and the old woman made eight big oysters clamp onto the tail of the princess to show her high birth.

"Ow, how that hurts!" said the little mermaid.

"Yes, but we do have to suffer a little for our finery," said the old woman.

Oh, how gladly she would have shaken off all that splendor and removed the heavy wreath. The red flowers in her garden suited her

much better, but she didn't dare change things now. "Farewell!" she said and rose as easily and brightly as a bubble up through the water.

The sun had just gone down as she raised her head out of the sea, but all the clouds were still glittering like roses and gold, and in the midst of the pale pink sky gleamed the evening star, so lovely and clear. The air was mild and fresh, and the sea perfectly still. She saw a big ship with three masts. Only a single sail was raised, because not a gust of wind was blowing, and the sailors sat in all the rigging and on the yards. There was music and song, and as the evening grew darker, hundreds of colored lanterns were lit; they looked like the flags of every nation fluttering in the air. The little mermaid swam right up to the cabin window, and each time the waves lifted her in the air she could see through the mirrorlike panes at all the elegantly dressed people. Yet the most handsome of all was the young prince with the big dark eyes. He was probably no more than sixteen. It was his birthday, and that was the reason for all the splendor. The sailors danced on deck, and when the young prince stepped outside, more than a hundred rockets shot up into the sky. They lit up like bright daylight so the little mermaid grew quite frightened and dove down underwater, but she soon poked her head up again, and then all the stars in the sky seemed to be falling toward her. Never had she seen such fiery magic. Huge suns spun around, magnificent fire-fish swung in the blue sky, and everything was reflected in the clear, calm sea. On board the ship itself everything was so bright that you could see even the smallest line, not to mention all the people. Oh, how handsome the young prince was! He shook hands with all the men, laughing and smiling, as the music resounded through the lovely night.

It grew late, but the little mermaid couldn't tear her eyes away from the ship or the lovely prince. The colorful lanterns were put out, and rockets no longer rose up into the sky, nor were there any more cannon volleys, but deep down in the sea there was a droning and rumbling. And all the while she sat in the water, bobbing up and down so that she could look into the cabin. But the ship began picking up speed, one sail after the other catching the wind. Now the swells grew stronger, huge clouds gathered, lightning flashed in the distance. Oh, a terrible storm was coming! That's why the sailors were reefing the sails. The big ship pitched at a racing speed

on the wild sea. The water rose up like great black mountains that threatened to pour over the mast, but the ship dove like a swan, down between the high waves, letting itself be lifted up again on the towering swells. The little mermaid thought the pace amusing, but the sailors did not. The ship creaked and crashed, the thick planks burst at the powerful thrusts the sea made at the ship. The mast snapped in half as if it were a reed, and the ship lurched onto its side as water rushed into the hold. Now the little mermaid saw that they were in danger. Even she had to watch out for debris and beams from the ship that were drifting around in the water. For an instant it was so pitch-black that she couldn't see a thing, but when lightning flashed it was once again so bright that she could make out everyone on board. Each person was managing as best he could. She looked in particular for the young prince, and when the ship broke apart she saw him sink down into the deep sea. She was at once filled with great joy, because now he would be coming down to her, but then she remembered that humans couldn't live in the water and that he couldn't come down to her father's castle, except as a dead man. No, he mustn't die. So she swam in among the timbers and planks floating in the sea, completely forgetting that they could have crushed her. She dove deeper underwater and then rose up high among the waves and at last reached the young prince, who couldn't swim much longer in the raging sea. His arms and legs had begun to tire, his beautiful eyes had closed; he would have died if the little mermaid hadn't come. She held his head above water and let the waves carry her with him, wherever they liked.

By morning the storm had passed. There was not a scrap of the ship in sight. The sun, red and glowing, rose up out of the water and seemed to bring life to the cheeks of the prince, but his eyes remained closed. The mermaid kissed his beautiful, high forehead and stroked back his wet hair. She thought he looked like the marble statue down in her little garden. She kissed him again and wished that he might live.

Now she saw before her dry land, with tall blue mountains. On the crest glistened white snow as if swans were resting there. Down near the shore stood lovely green forests, and in front of them a church or a cloister, she wasn't quite sure, but it was some kind of building. Lemon and orange trees grew in the garden, and before

the gate stood tall palm trees. Here the sea formed a little bay that was perfectly still but very deep all the way up to the dunes where fine white sand had washed ashore. That's where she swam with the handsome prince and placed him on the sand, taking great care that his head lay high up in the warm sunshine.

Then the bells began ringing in the big white building, and scores of young girls came walking through the garden. The little mermaid swam farther out behind several high rocks that were sticking up out of the water. She put sea foam on her hair and breast so that no one could see her little face, and then she waited to see who would come for the poor prince.

It wasn't long before a young girl approached. She seemed to be quite frightened, though only for a moment. Then she summoned more people, and the mermaid saw that the prince began to revive and that he smiled at everyone standing around him. But he didn't smile at the mermaid, nor did he know that she had saved his life. She felt so sad, and when he was led inside the big building, she sorrowfully dove down into the water and made her way home to her father's castle.

She had always been quiet and pensive, but now she was even more so. Her sisters asked her what she had seen on her first time up above, but she told them nothing.

Many an evening and morning she would rise up to the spot where she had left the prince. She saw how the fruit in the garden grew ripe and was picked; she saw how the snow melted on the high mountains. But she did not see the prince, and so she always returned home sadder than before. There her only solace was to sit in her little garden and throw her arms around the beautiful marble statue that looked like the prince, but she neglected her flowers. As if in a wilderness they grew out over the pathways, weaving their long stalks and leaves into the branches of the trees so that it was quite dark.

Finally she could bear it no longer and told one of her sisters, and then all of the others instantly found out about it, but no one else, apart from a couple of other mermaids who didn't tell anyone except their closest girlfriends. One of them knew who the prince was. She had also seen the splendor aboard the ship and knew where he came from and where his kingdom lay.

"Come, little sister!" said the other princesses. With their arms around each other's shoulders they rose up out of the sea in a long row, right in front of the place where they knew the prince's castle stood.

The castle was built of gleaming, pale yellow stone, with great marble staircases, one of which reached all the way down to the sea. Magnificent gilded domes rose above the rooftop, and between the columns that surrounded the whole building stood marble images that looked alive. Through the clear panes of the tall windows they could look into the most splendid halls hung with costly silk curtains and tapestries, and all the walls were adorned with enormous paintings that were a pleasure to see. In the middle of the largest hall splashed a great fountain. The spray reached high up toward the glass dome in the roof through which the sun shone on the water and on the lovely plants growing in the huge basin.

Now she knew where he lived, and that's where she went, swimming through the water on many an evening and night. She swam much closer to land than any of the others had dared. She even went all the way up the narrow canal, beneath the magnificent marble balcony that cast a long shadow over the water. Here she would sit and gaze at the young prince, who thought he was quite alone in the clear moonlight.

Many an evening she watched him sail with music aboard his splendid ship, where the flags fluttered. She would peek out from the green reeds, and if the wind caught her long silvery white veil and anyone saw it, they thought it was a swan lifting its wings.

Many a night, when the fishermen lay anchored at sea by torchlight, she heard them say so many good things about the prince. It made her happy that she had saved his life when he was drifting on the waves half dead. And she remembered how firmly his head had rested on her breast and how fervently she had kissed him. He knew nothing of this, could not even dream about her.

She grew more and more fond of human beings; she wished more and more that she might rise up among them. Their world seemed to her much larger than her own. They could fly across the sea in ships, climb the highest mountains far above the clouds, and the lands they owned, with forests and fields, stretched much farther than she could see. There was so much she wanted to know, but

her sisters couldn't answer all her questions. That's why she asked her old grandmother, who was very familiar with the world above, which she quite rightly called the lands above the sea.

"If humans don't drown," said the little mermaid, "can they live forever? Don't they die like we do down here in the sea?"

"Of course they do!" said the old woman. "They have to die too, and their lifetime is much shorter than ours. We can live three hundred years, but when we cease to exist, we become nothing more than foam on the water without even a grave down here among our loved ones. We have no immortal soul, there is no more life for us. We're like the green reed: Once it is cut, it will never be green again! Humans, on the other hand, have a soul that lives forever, lives on after the body has turned to dust. It rises up through the clear air, up to all the shining stars! Just as we rise up from the sea to look at the land of the humans, they rise up to the lovely unknown places that we will never see."

"Why weren't we given immortal souls?" asked the little mermaid sadly. "I would give all three hundred years of my life to be a human for just one day and then have a share in the heavenly world."

"You mustn't go around thinking about that," said the old woman. "We're much happier and better off than the humans up there."

"So I'm going to die and drift like foam on the sea, no longer hear the music of the waves, or see the lovely flowers and the crimson sun? Is there nothing I can do to win an eternal soul?"

"No," said the old woman. "Only if a human were to love you so much that you were dearer to him than his father or mother. If he clung to you with all his thoughts and love and had the priest put his right hand in yours, promising faithfulness now and for all eternity, then his soul would flow into your body, and you too would share in the happiness of humans. He would give you a soul and yet keep his own. But that will never happen! That which is so lovely here in the sea—your fish tail—they consider hideous up on earth. They don't know any better. Up there you have to have two clumsy pillars that they call legs in order to be beautiful."

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

"Let's be happy," said the old woman. "We should leap and bound for the three hundred years that are ours to live. Surely that's long enough, and later you can rest in your grave, all the more content. Tonight we're going to have a royal ball!"

And there was such splendor as has never been seen on earth. The walls and ceiling of the great ballroom were made of thick but clear glass. Hundreds of enormous seashells, rose-red and grass-green, were lined up on either side. A fire burning blue lit up the entire hall and shone through the walls so that the sea outside was illuminated. Countless fish were visible, big and small, swimming toward the glass wall. On some of them gleamed purplish red scales, on others they looked like silver and gold. Down the middle of the hall flowed a wide, rippling stream on which the mermen and mermaids were dancing to their own lovely songs. No humans on earth have such beautiful voices. The little mermaid sang more beautifully than anyone else, and they clapped their hands for her. For a moment she felt joy in her heart, because she knew that she had the most beautiful voice of anyone on earth or in the sea! But soon she started thinking once more about the world up above. She couldn't forget the handsome prince or her sorrow at not possessing, as he did, an immortal soul. That's why she slipped out of her father's castle, and while everything inside was song and merriment, she sat sadly in her little garden. Then she heard the sound of hunting horns echoing down through the water, and she thought, "Now he's probably sailing up there, the one I love more than my father or mother, the one my thoughts cling to and in whose hand I wish to place my life's happiness. I would risk everything to win him and an immortal soul! While my sisters are dancing inside my father's castle, I'll go to the sea witch, the one who has always terrified me; maybe she can offer help and advice."

Then the little mermaid left her garden and set off for the roaring maelstroms; beyond them lived the witch. She had never gone that way before, where no flowers grew, nor sea grass. Nothing but the bare, gray, sandy bottom stretched toward the maelstroms where the currents, like roaring mill wheels, swirled around and pulled everything they seized down into the depths. She would have to pass between these crushing whirlpools in order to reach the territory of the sea witch. For a long section there was no other path than over

hot bubbling mire; the witch called it her peat bog. Beyond it stood her house in the midst of a peculiar forest. All the trees and shrubs were polyps, half animal and half plant. They looked like hundred-headed snakes growing out of the ground. All their branches were long slimy arms, with fingers like slithery worms; they rippled, joint by joint, from their roots to their very tips. They wrapped tightly around anything in the sea that they could grab and they never let go. The little mermaid was quite terrified as she stood there at the edge. Her heart was pounding with fear. She almost turned around, but then she thought about the prince and a human soul, and that gave her courage. She tied up her long fluttering hair so the polyps wouldn't be able to catch her by grabbing hold of it. She pressed both hands to her breast and flew off, the way a fish can fly through the water, in among the hideous polyps that reached out their supple arms and fingers toward her. She saw how each of them was holding something that it had caught. Hundreds of tiny arms were wrapped around it, like strong iron bands. Humans who had perished at sea and sunk into the deep peered out, as white bones, from the arms of the polyps. Rudders and sea chests were held in their grip, the skeletons of land animals, and a little mermaid they had caught and strangled—for her that was the most terrifying of all.

Then she came to a great slimy clearing in the forest where huge fat water snakes romped, showing off their disgusting yellowish-white bellies. In the middle of the clearing a house had been built from the white bones of shipwrecked humans. There sat the sea witch, letting a toad eat from her mouth, the way humans let little canaries eat sugar. She called the hideous fat water snakes her little chickens and let them swarm over her big spongy breasts.

"I know what you want!" said the sea witch. "How stupid of you! But I'm going to grant you your wish, because it will bring you misfortune, my lovely princess. You want to get rid of your fish tail and instead have two stumps to walk on like a human being, because then the young prince will fall in love with you, and you can win him along with an immortal soul!" With that the witch began laughing so loudly and horribly that the toad and the water snakes fell to the ground, tumbling all around. "You've come just in time," said the witch. "By tomorrow, when the sun comes up,

I wouldn't be able to help you until another year had passed. I'm going to make you a potion to take with you. Before the sun comes up, swim to land, sit down on the shore, and drink it. Then your tail will split in two and shrink to what the humans call charming legs, but it will be painful. It will feel like a sharp sword is passing through you. Everyone who sees you will say that you're the loveliest human child they've ever seen! You'll keep your graceful movements; no dancer will ever glide as you do, but every step you take will feel like you're treading on a sharp knife and make your blood flow. If you're willing to endure all that, then I'll help you."

"Yes," said the little mermaid in a quavering voice, thinking about the prince and about winning an immortal soul.

"But remember," said the witch, "once you've taken human form, you can never be a mermaid again. You can never come back into the water to your sisters or to your father's castle. And if you don't win the love of the prince so that he forgets his father and mother and clings to you with all his thoughts and lets the priest place your hand in his so that you become husband and wife, then you won't get an immortal soul! On the first morning after he marries another, your heart will burst, and you will become foam on the water."

"That's what I want," said the little mermaid, and she was as pale as death.

"But you also have to pay me!" said the witch. "And it's not a small thing that I demand. You have the loveliest voice of anyone here at the bottom of the sea. You're probably thinking of using it to charm him, but your voice you must give to me. I want the best thing you possess in return for my precious potion! My own blood I have to give you to make the drink as sharp as a double-edged sword."

"But if you take my voice," said the little mermaid, "what will I have left?"

"Your lovely figure," said the witch, "your graceful movements, and your expressive eyes; surely you can use them to captivate a human heart. Well, have you lost your courage? Stick out your little tongue. I'll cut it off as payment, and then I'll give you the powerful potion."

"Agreed," said the little mermaid, and the witch put on her kettle to brew the magic potion. "Cleanliness is a good thing," she said and scoured the kettle with the water snakes, which she tied into a knot. Then she made a cut on her breast and let her black blood ooze out. The steam formed the strangest shapes, fearsome and dreadful. The witch kept putting new things into the kettle, and when it was boiling properly, it sounded like a crocodile crying. Finally the potion was ready, and it looked like the clearest water.

"There you have it!" said the witch and cut off the little mermaid's tongue so she was now mute and could neither sing nor speak.

"If the polyps happen to grab you on your way back through my forest," said the witch, "toss a single drop of the potion at them, and their arms and fingers will burst into a thousand pieces!" But the little mermaid didn't have to do that. The polyps shrank from her in terror when they saw the shining potion that glowed in her hand, just as if it were a sparkling star. In this manner she quickly passed through the forest, the bog, and the roaring maelstroms.

She could see her father's castle. The torches had been extinguished in the grand ballroom, and no doubt everyone was asleep inside, but she didn't dare go to them, now that she was mute and about to leave them forever. Her heart felt as if it would break with sorrow. She slipped into the garden, took a flower from each of her sisters' flower beds, blew thousands of kisses toward the castle, and rose up through the dark blue sea.

The sun had not yet come up when she saw the prince's castle and mounted the magnificent marble staircase. The moon was shining wondrously bright. The little mermaid drank the fiery bitter potion, and it felt as if a double-edged sword passed through her delicate body. She fainted and lay there as if she were dead. When the sun was shining over the sea, she awoke and felt a searing pain, but right in front of her stood the handsome young prince. He fixed his coal-black eyes on her, making her lower her own, and she saw that her fish tail was gone. She had the most charming little white legs that any young girl could have, but she was quite naked—that's why she wrapped herself in her long, thick hair. The prince asked who she was and how she happened to come there,

and she gave him a look that was so tender and yet so sad, with her dark blue eyes; not a word could she say. Then he took her by the hand and led her into the castle. Each step she took, as the witch had warned her, felt as if she were treading on pointed awls and sharp knives, but she gladly endured it. Hand in hand with the prince, she moved as lightly as a bubble, and he and everyone else marveled at her graceful, gliding walk.

She was given precious garments of silk and linen. In the castle she was the most beautiful of all, but she was mute; she could neither sing nor speak. Lovely slave girls, dressed in silk and gold, appeared to sing for the prince and his royal parents. One sang more beautifully than all the others, and the prince clapped his hands and smiled at her. Then the little mermaid grew sad; she knew that she used to sing much more beautifully. She thought, "Oh, if only he knew that in order to be with him I had to give up my voice for all eternity!"

Now the slaves were dancing a graceful swaying dance to the most glorious music. Then the little mermaid raised her beautiful white arms, stood up on her toes, and floated across the floor, dancing as no one had ever danced before. With every movement her loveliness became ever more apparent, and her eyes spoke deeper to the heart than all the songs of the slave girls.

Everyone was delighted, especially the prince, who called her his little foundling. She kept on dancing and dancing, even though every time her feet touched the ground it felt as if she were treading on sharp knives. The prince said that she would stay with him forever, and she was allowed to sleep outside his door on a velvet cushion.

He had men's clothing sewn for her so that she could go out riding with him. They rode through the fragrant forests where the green branches slapped at her shoulder and the little birds sang from behind the fresh leaves. With the prince she climbed up the steep mountains, and even though her delicate feet bled so that the others noticed, she merely laughed and followed him until they saw the clouds sailing below as if they were a flock of birds heading for foreign lands.

Back home at the prince's castle, when the others were asleep at



night, she would go out to the wide marble stairs to cool her burning feet by standing in the cold seawater. Then she would think about everyone below in the deep.

One night her sisters came, arm in arm. They sang so sorrowfully as they swam through the water. She waved to them, and they recognized her and told her how sad she had made them all. Every night after that they visited her. One night she saw, far in the distance, her old grandmother who had not been to the surface for many years, and the sea king wearing his crown on his head. They stretched out their hands toward her but didn't dare come as close to land as her sisters.

Day by day the prince's affection for her grew. He loved her the way you might love a good, dear child, but it never occurred to him to make her his queen, and she had to become his wife or she would never have an immortal soul. On the morning after he was wed, she would become foam on the sea.

"Aren't you more fond of me than of all the others?" the little mermaid's eyes seemed to say whenever he took her in his arms and kissed her beautiful forehead.

"Yes, you are dearest of all to me," said the prince, "because you have the best heart of any of them, you are more devoted to me, and you look like a young girl I once saw but will probably never find again. I was on a ship that went down. The waves carried me to land near a holy temple where many young girls were in service. The youngest of them found me on the shore and saved my life. I saw her only twice. She was the only one I could love in this world. But you look like her; you have almost replaced her image in my soul. She belongs to the holy temple, and that's why my good fortune has sent you to me. We will never part!"

"Oh, he doesn't know that I saved his life!" thought the little mermaid. "I carried him across the sea to the forest where the temple stands. I sat behind the foam and watched to see if any humans would come. I saw the beautiful girl that he loves more than me!" And the mermaid sighed deeply; she could not cry. "The girl belongs to the holy temple, he said, and she'll never come out into the world. They will never meet again. But I'm here and see him every day. I will care for him, love him, offer him my life!"

Everyone said that now the prince was supposed to marry and take as his wife the lovely daughter of the neighboring king. That's why he was outfitting such a magnificent ship. People said the prince was going to visit the lands of the neighboring king, but it was actually to visit the neighboring king's daughter. He would take a large entourage with him. The little mermaid shook her head and laughed; she knew the prince's thoughts much better than anyone else. "I have to go!" he had told her. "I have to see the beautiful princess. My parents demand it, but they would never force me to bring her home as my bride. I cannot love her! She doesn't look like the beautiful girl in the temple, the one you resemble. If ever I should choose a bride, it would more likely be you, my mute foundling with the expressive eyes!" And he kissed her red lips, played with her long hair, and placed his head on her heart, making it dream of human happiness and an immortal soul.

"You're not afraid of the sea, my mute child, are you?" he said when they stood on board the magnificent ship that would carry him to the neighboring king's lands. And he told her about storms and becalmed seas, about strange fish in the deep and what his diver had seen there. She smiled at his tales because she knew better than anyone else about the bottom of the sea.

In the moonlit night, when everyone else was asleep except the helmsman who stood at the wheel, she sat near the railing of the ship and stared down into the clear water. She thought she could see her father's castle. At the very top stood her old grandmother with a silver crown on her head, staring up through the turbulent currents toward the ship's keel. Then her sisters rose up to the surface. They stared at her in sorrow and wrung their white hands. She waved to them, smiling and wanting to tell them that she was well and happy, but the cabin boy was approaching, and her sisters dove down, so he continued to think that the white he had seen was foam on the sea.

Next morning the ship sailed into the harbor of the neighboring king's magnificent city. All the church bells were ringing, and trumpets blew from the tall towers while soldiers stood with fluttering banners and flashing bayonets. Each day there was a celebration. Balls and banquets followed one after the other, but the princess was still not in attendance. They said she was being brought up far

away in a holy temple where she was learning all the royal virtues. At last she arrived.

The little mermaid was eager to see her beauty, and she had to admit that she had never seen a more enchanting figure. Her skin was delicate and glowing, and behind her long dark lashes smiled a pair of deep blue loyal eyes.

"It's you!" said the prince. "You're the one who saved me when I lay like a corpse on the shore!" And he pulled his blushing bride into his arms. "Oh, I'm much too happy!" he said to the little mermaid. "The best thing of all, what I never dared hope for, has been granted to me. You'll rejoice at my happiness, since you are more fond of me than all the others." And the little mermaid kissed his hand, feeling as if her heart were already breaking. The morning after his wedding would bring her death and turn her into foam on the sea.

All the church bells rang, and the heralds rode through the streets proclaiming the betrothal. On all the altars burned fragrant oils in precious silver lamps. The priests swung vessels of incense, and the bride and groom joined hands and received the bishop's blessing. The little mermaid stood there in silk and gold, holding the bridal train, but her ears did not hear the festive music, her eyes did not see the holy ceremony. She was thinking about her death night, about all that she had lost in this world.

That very same night the bride and groom went on board the ship. Cannons roared, all the flags waved, and in the middle of the ship a costly tent of gold and purple had been raised, with the loveliest cushions. That's where the bridal couple would sleep in the cool, quiet night.

The sails billowed in the wind, and the ship glided easily and smoothly over the clear sea.

When it grew dark, colorful lamps were lit and the sailors danced merry dances on deck. The little mermaid couldn't help thinking about the first time she came to the surface and saw the same splendor and joy. She too began whirling along in the dance, darting like a swallow does when it's being pursued, and everyone cheered in admiration. Never had she danced so gloriously. It felt as if sharp knives were cutting into her delicate feet, but she didn't notice; the pain in her heart was much sharper. She knew that this

was the last evening she would see the one for whom she had abandoned her family and her home, given up her lovely voice, and suffered endless daily torments, although he never knew. This was the last night that she would breathe the same air as he did, see the deep oceans and the starry blue sky. An eternal night without thought or dream awaited her, since she had no soul and could not win one. Everything was joy and merriment on the ship until long after midnight. She laughed and danced 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 the ship; only the helmsman stood at the wheel. The little mermaid rested her white arms on the railing and looked to the east for the red of dawn. She knew that the first ray of sunlight would kill her. Then she saw her sisters rise up from the sea. They were as pale as she was, and their beautiful long hair no longer fluttered in the breeze; it had been cut off.

"We gave it to the witch so she would help us and you wouldn't have to die tonight. She gave us a knife. Here it is! See how sharp it is? Before the sun comes up, you must stab the prince in the heart. When his warm blood drips on your feet, they'll grow together into a fish tail and you'll be a mermaid again and can come back into the water with us and live out your three hundred years until you turn into dead, salty sea foam. Hurry! Either he or you must die before the sun comes up! Our old grandmother is grieving so that her white hair has fallen out, just as ours fell to the witch's scissors. Kill the prince and come back! Hurry! Do you see that red stripe in the sky? In a few minutes the sun will come up and you must die!" And they uttered a strange, deep sigh and sank into the waves.

The little mermaid pulled aside the purple drapes of the tent and looked at the lovely bride sleeping with her head on the prince's breast. She bent down and kissed him on his beautiful forehead, looked up at the sky where the red of dawn was shining stronger and stronger, looked at the sharp knife, and then fixed her eyes once more on the prince, who in his dreams called his bride by name. She was the only one in his thoughts. The knife trembled in the mermaid's hand—but then she flung it far out into the waves. They shone red where it fell, and it looked as if drops of blood

were trickling up from the water. One more time, with her eyes half glazed, she looked at the prince. Then she threw herself from the ship into the sea, and she felt her body dissolve into foam.

Now the sun rose out of the sea. Its rays fell so gentle and warm on the deadly cold sea foam, but the little mermaid did not feel death. She looked at the bright sun, and above her hovered hundreds of lovely, transparent creatures. Through them she could see the white sails of the ship and the red clouds of the sky. Their voices were melodious, but so ethereal that no human ear could hear them, just as no earthly eye could see them. Without wings they floated through the air, carried by their own lightness. The little mermaid saw that she had a body like theirs; it was rising higher and higher out of the foam.

"Who am I joining?" she said, and her voice rang like those of the other creatures, so ethereal that no earthly music could reproduce it.

"The daughters of the air!" the others replied. "A mermaid has no immortal soul and can never have one unless she wins the love of a human being! Her eternal life depends on an outside power. The daughters of the air have no eternal souls either, but through good deeds they can create one for themselves. We fly to the warm countries where the sultry, pestilent air is killing human beings; there we fan a cool breeze. We spread the scent of flowers through the air and bring relief and healing. After three hundred years of striving to do what good we can, we will be granted immortal souls and share in the eternal joy of humans. Poor little mermaid, you've tried with all your heart to do the same as we have. You've suffered and endured, raising yourself up to the world of the sylphs. Now, through good deeds, you too can create an immortal soul for yourself in three hundred years."

And the little mermaid raised her clear arms up toward God's sun, and for the first time she felt tears.

On the ship there was life and commotion once more. She saw the prince with his beautiful bride looking for her. Mournfully they stared out at the frothing foam, as if they knew that she had thrown herself into the waves. Invisible, she kissed the bride's forehead, smiled to the prince, and then rose up with the other children of the air into the crimson cloud that was sailing in the sky.

"In three hundred years we will float like this into God's kingdom."

"We might come there even sooner," one whispered. "Invisible, we float into human houses where there are children. For each day that we find a good child who makes his parents happy and deserves their love, God shortens our time of trial. The child doesn't know when we might fly through the room, and if we then can smile with joy at the child, one year is subtracted from the three hundred. But if we see a naughty and bad child, then we have to weep tears of sorrow, and every tear adds another day to our time of trial."