

Hans Christian Andersen

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In the middle of the sea the water is very, very blue. You can see through it. Below the water is a strange world of beautiful trees and plants. Fish swim in and out of them. This is the home of the Sea King. His palace is here, under the water.

After the Sea King's wife died, his old mother looked after him. She loved the Sea King's six children, and they loved their grandmother, too. These children were beautiful mermaid princesses. The youngest princess was the most beautiful: her eyes were as blue as the sea and her face was as white as snow. But mermaids do not have feet. The top half of her body was the body of a girl, and the bottom half was the body of a fish.

Sometimes the old grandmother told stories to the mermaid princesses. 'There are many people in the world,' she said. 'Some people live in the sea and some live on the land. The land people are different. They have feet.'

'Tell me everything,' the youngest mermaid said.

'These people are men,' her grandmother said. 'They have ships and they have great cities. There are mountains and gardens with beautiful flowers. Fish fly through the sky and sing beautiful songs!' (These 'fish' were birds, but she called them fish. The little princesses did not know about birds.)

'On your fifteenth birthday, you can swim to the top of the sea,' their grandmother said. 'You can sit there at night and see the ships. And you can learn about men.'

The youngest sister wanted to swim to the top of the sea more than the other sisters. On many nights, she stood by the open window, and looked up through the blue water. She saw a ship above her. 'That's a very big fish,' she thought.

The next year, the oldest sister was fifteen and she swam to the top of the sea. She came back and said to her sisters, 'I saw many things. I saw a

lovely big city. It was near the sea and there were a lot of lights. People sang and talked. I wanted to go there but I stayed in the sea.'

'Tell me about the city again,' the youngest princess said. The next night she stood near her open window and looked up through the sea. 'I can hear singing,' she thought.

The next year another sister was fifteen and she went to the top of the sea. The next day she came home.

'It was very beautiful,' she told her sisters. 'The sky, the land - it's the most beautiful place in the world.'

Then the third sister was fifteen and she went to the top of the sea. She was not afraid of anything, and she swam up a river. She saw mountains and woods and houses. 'The birds sang and children jumped into the water. Then a little dog ran after me and I was afraid. I left the river and came back to the sea. I'll always remember the lovely woods, the houses and the pretty children,' she said.

The next sister went, but she stayed in the sea. She came back home and said to her sisters, 'I saw ships on the water. They were as beautiful as big white birds.'

The next year, another sister was fifteen. But it was winter and there was snow everywhere on the land. She was cold and came back home very quickly.

The five sisters were very happy. They sometimes went to look at ships, cities and men. But they came home and forgot these things. 'Our home is more beautiful than anything above the water,' they said. When the weather was bad, they went up again, hand in hand. They swam in front of the ships and sang to the people on them.

'We live under the sea and we're very happy! Don't be afraid. Come down to us,' they sang.

The youngest princess had to stay in her father's palace. She wanted to cry, but mermaids cannot cry.

'Oh, I want to be fifteen!' she thought. 'I want to see the land and the people. I want to swim to the top of the sea!'

One day her grandmother said, 'Today is your fifteenth birthday. Now you can go to the top of the sea.'

The little mermaid swam up above the water that night. She saw a big ship on the sea, and there were hundreds of lights on the ship. She looked through the windows and saw a lot of men in rich clothes. The most beautiful man was a young prince with big blue eyes.

'I want to stay here,' the little mermaid thought. 'I want to look at this beautiful prince.'

But there was a strong wind, and the sea was suddenly dangerous. Water went into the big ship.

The little mermaid liked the bad weather, but the people on the ship were afraid. Suddenly the ship broke into two halves and it started to go down.

'Now the prince can come to my city in the sea,' the little mermaid thought. 'I want him to visit my palace. But can men live in water? He'll die! I don't want him to die!'

She swam quickly to the prince and put her hands under his head. His head was above the water, but he did not open his eyes.

Morning came, and the little mermaid touched the prince's face. 'Don't die!' she cried. She looked at the land. It was winter and there was a lot of snow on the mountains. There was a wood near the sea, and a big church in the wood. The little mermaid swam to the land with the prince. She left him near the church, then she went back to the sea.

A young girl came out of the church. She saw the prince and was afraid. 'Is he dead?' she thought.

She called other people from the church and they helped the prince. From the sea, the little mermaid saw the prince open his eyes. He was not dead!

'What happened?' the prince asked. 'I can't remember anything.' They took him into the church.

The little mermaid was very sad. 'He doesn't remember me,' she thought. She swam back to her father's palace under the sea.

'What did you see?' her sisters asked her, but the little mermaid did not answer.

She often went back to the church and looked for the young prince. Now it was spring. There was no snow on the mountains and there were flowers in the woods. But she never saw the prince.

Then she told her story to one of her sisters. 'I'm sad because I love the prince,' she said.

The sister told the story to the other princesses and they told their friends. One friend knew about the prince. 'He lives in a palace near the sea,' she said.

'Come, little sister!' said the princesses. And the six mermaids swam to the top of the water in front of the prince's palace.

It was a great white palace with beautiful rooms. 'This is the home of my prince,' the little mermaid thought.

She went there every night. She looked in at the young prince through the windows, and she listened to his servants. 'The prince is a good man,' they said.

She liked the people on the land. 'I want to live here,' she thought. 'I want to go on a ship. I want to walk in the gardens and woods.'

'I want to know everything about the land people,' she said to her sisters.

'We don't know anything about them,' her sisters said. 'Ask grandmother.'

'Do men live for a long time?' she asked her grandmother. 'No, they die. Their lives are shorter than ours. We live for 300 years, then we change into sea water. We never live again. Land people have souls. Their bodies die, but their souls go to a beautiful place in the sky. Then they're very happy.'

'I don't want to live for 300 years,' the little mermaid said. 'I want to be a land person. I want a soul. I want my soul to go to that beautiful place in the sky. Tell me, how can I get a soul?'

'Sometimes a man loves somebody more than he loves his father and mother,' her grandmother answered. 'He marries her and she can stay with him. Then she gets a soul. But you can't live on the land! The people on the land are afraid of mermaids. And you can't walk without feet!'

The little princess looked sadly down at her body. 'I'm beautiful,' she thought, 'as beautiful as the people on the land. But I haven't got any feet. A friend told me about an old woman. She knows about magic, so perhaps she can help me.'

There were a lot of ugly plants with long arms near the old woman's house. There were dead people in their arms, and the little mermaid was afraid. But she remembered the prince and swam past them. She found the old woman.

'What do you want?' the old woman said. 'You want to have two feet and live on the land? You want the prince to love you and give you a soul? I can help you, but you'll be very unhappy. Here's a magic drink. Take it to the land, then drink it. You'll have feet, but they'll hurt. Do you understand? Do you really want to be a land person? You can never be a mermaid again.'

'I do want to be a land person,' the mermaid answered. She wanted her prince and she wanted a soul.

'Then marry your prince, or you'll die,' the old woman said. 'You can't go back to your sisters. You'll change into seawater. And there is one more thing. On the land, you won't speak or sing.'

'But how will the prince love me then?' the princess asked.

'The prince will love your beautiful face. And you can speak to him with your eyes,' the old woman answered. 'He'll love you. Do you want the magic drink?'

'Yes,' said the little mermaid.

She swam to the prince's palace and drank the magic drink. Her legs, her arms, her head... everything started to hurt. She fell down and slept. When she opened her eyes again, the beautiful prince was there.

'Who are you? Where do you come from?' the prince asked her. She looked at him with her blue eyes, but she could not speak. The prince took her into the palace. She walked beautifully and everybody looked at her. But her feet hurt and she wanted to cry.

At the prince's palace, he gave her lovely clothes. She was beautiful. But she could not speak or sing. This made her sad. 'I want the prince to hear my beautiful songs,' she thought.

The little mermaid walked through the woods with her prince. She went to the mountains and to beautiful gardens with him. Her feet hurt, but she could not speak. And she could not cry. At night, she went down to the sea near the prince's palace and put her feet in the cold water. 'Where are my sisters?' she thought.

One night, she sat with her feet in the water, and her sisters came. 'Everybody in our father's palace is sad because you left us,' they told her.

Every night after that the five sisters came. One night they brought their old grandmother. One night they brought their father, the great Sea King. But these two old people could not swim near the land so they could not speak to the little princess.

The young prince loved the little mermaid. 'You are very beautiful,' he said.

The little mermaid was afraid. 'He loves me but will he marry me? I have to marry him. I don't want to die!' she thought. 'Do you love me?' her eyes asked the prince. He kissed her.

'Yes, I love you,' said the prince. 'You're a good, kind child, and you love me. But I can't marry you. I was on a ship one day and the ship went down. The sea threw me onto the land near a church. A girl came out of the church and helped me. I only saw her for one day, but I want to marry her.'

'He doesn't remember me,' the little mermaid thought sadly.

'I'm going to visit a beautiful princess,' the prince said to the little mermaid one day. 'My father and mother want me to see her. But I won't marry her - I don't love her. You're my best friend. Come with me on the ship.'

He kissed her on her mouth and took her in his arms. The little mermaid was very happy.

At night, on the ship, everybody was asleep. The little mermaid sat and looked down into the sea. She saw her sisters. They looked sad. 'I'm very happy,' she thought, 'but I can't tell my sisters that. I can't speak.'

The next morning the ship came to a great city, and they went to see the princess.

'She's the girl from the church!' the prince cried. 'I want to marry her.' And he kissed the princess's hand.

The little mermaid looked at him sadly. 'He'll marry the princess,' she thought, 'and then I'll die.'

So the prince married his princess. The little mermaid stood near them and watched. But she saw and heard nothing. 'Now he can never marry me,' she thought. 'Now I'm really going to die.'

That night, the prince and the princess went onto the ship. There were lights everywhere, and everybody was very happy. But the poor little mermaid was sad.

'I left my home. I can't speak and sing. My legs hurt, and the prince will never be my husband,' she thought. 'I have to die now, so this is my last night.'

When everybody was asleep, her sisters came out of the sea. 'We went to the old woman,' they told her. 'Kill the prince before tomorrow morning, then you won't die. You'll lose your feet and you'll be a mermaid again. But be quick! We're waiting for you.' They swam away.

The little mermaid went into the prince's room. He was asleep. 'No!' she thought. 'I love him! I can't kill him.' She kissed him and left.

'I'll die,' she thought. Then she jumped into the sea. She saw the ship and the sky above her. Then she heard a sound. There were people in the sky! She looked at her body. She was not a mermaid - her body was the same as the people in the sky! She flew up and up into the sky.

'Who are you?' she asked people.

'We're the children of the sky,' was the answer. 'We aren't land people or sea people. We help other people. We bring rain and flowers to dry lands. We make sad people happy. We do good things for 300 years, and then we go to a great and beautiful country in the sky. You, little mermaid, are also a good person. You helped the prince. Now you can make other people happy. Now you are a sky person.'

The little mermaid looked down at the ship. She saw the prince with his pretty young wife. They looked sadly down at the sea. Where was she? Was she in the sea? She went down near to the prince but he could not see her.

'I'll do good things for 300 years,' she thought. 'Then I can stay in that beautiful place up in the sky and I will always be happy.'

'Sometimes it isn't 300 years,' said a sky sister. 'We go into children's houses. Nobody can see us, but we're there. Sometimes we find a bad child, and then we stay here for another year. But one day we'll live in that beautiful place in the sky.'

- THE END -

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