

The Little Mermaid

In the open sea, the water is utterly blue, like the petals of pretty cornflowers, and transparent as crystal—but oh, how deep it is there! No anchor can reach the bottom: to touch the seabed, one would have to stack many, many church steeples atop one another before they could poke out of the water. At the very bottom live the mermaids.

Do not imagine that down there on the seabed lies nothing but bare white sand; no, there grow most astonishing trees and flowers with such flexible stems and leaves that they stir like living beings at the slightest movement of the water. Among their branches dart little and big fish, exactly as birds do here among us. In the deepest place stands the coral palace of the Sea King, with large pointed windows made of purest amber and a roof of shells that open and close according to the tide; it looks exceedingly beautiful, since in the center of each shell lies a pearl of such beauty that even one alone would adorn the crown of any queen.

The Sea King had been widowed long ago, and his household was managed by his old mother—a woman wise but very proud of her lineage; she wore on her tail a whole dozen oysters, whereas noblemen were permitted to wear only six. Altogether, she was a worthy personage, especially because she loved her little granddaughters very much. All six princesses were exceedingly pretty little mermaids, but the youngest was the loveliest of all, tender and transparent as a rose petal, with deep blue eyes like the sea. Yet even she, like the other mermaids, had no legs, only a fish's tail.

Day after day, the princesses played in the enormous halls of the palace, where living flowers grew along the walls. Through the open amber windows, fish swam in, just as swallows sometimes fly into our rooms; the fish would swim up to the little princesses, eat from their hands, and allow themselves to be stroked.

Beside the palace lay a great garden; there grew many fiery-red and dark-blue trees with eternally trembling branches and leaves; their fruits sparkled like gold with this motion, and their flowers like little flames. The ground itself was strewn with fine bluish sand, like sulfur fire; over everything on the seabed lay some strange bluish shimmer—one might rather think oneself hovering high, high up in the air, with the sky not only above one's head but also beneath one's feet. In calm weather, one could also see the sun; it looked like a purple flower, from whose cup light poured forth.

Each princess had her own little spot in the garden; there they could dig and plant whatever they wished. One made herself a flower bed shaped like a whale, another wanted hers to resemble a little mermaid, while the youngest made hers round like the sun and planted it with equally bright red flowers. Strange child, that little mermaid: so quiet, so thoughtful... Her other sisters adorned themselves with all sorts of trinkets fetched from shipwrecks, but she loved only her red, sunlike flowers and a beautiful white marble boy who had fallen to the seabed from some doomed ship. The little mermaid planted beside the statue a red weeping willow, which grew marvelously; its branches draped over the statue and bent down onto the blue sand, where their violet shadow trembled: the treetop and the roots seemed to play and kiss each other!

More than anything, the little mermaid loved listening to tales about the people living up above, on earth. Her old grandmother had to tell her everything she knew about ships and cities, about humans and animals. What especially fascinated and amazed the little mermaid was that flowers on earth had fragrance—unlike here in the sea!—that forests there were green, and that the fishes living in the branches sang wonderfully. Grandmother called the birds "fishes," otherwise her granddaughters would not have understood her: after all, they had never seen birds in their lives.

"When you turn fifteen," grandmother would say, "you too will be allowed to rise to the surface of the sea, sit by moonlight upon the rocks, and watch the huge ships sailing past, the forests and the cities!"

That year, the eldest princess was just turning fifteen, but the other sisters—and they were all born a year apart—still had to wait, and the youngest longest of all—a full five years. Yet each promised to tell the other sisters what she liked best on her first day: grandmother's tales scarcely satisfied their curiosity; they wished to know everything in greater detail.

No one longed so much for the surface of the sea as the youngest, quiet, thoughtful little mermaid, who had to wait the longest. How many nights did she spend at the open window, gazing into the blue of the sea, where whole schools of fish stirred with their fins and tails! She could make out through the water the moon and the stars; they certainly did not shine as brightly, yet they appeared far larger than they seem to us. Sometimes something like a great cloud would glide beneath them, and the little mermaid knew that either a whale was passing overhead or a ship with hundreds of people; they never gave a thought to the pretty little mermaid standing there in the depths of the sea, stretching her white hands toward the ship's keel.

But then the eldest princess turned fifteen, and she was permitted to rise to the surface of the sea.

What tales there were when she returned! Best of all, according to her, was lying in calm weather on a sandy shoal, basking in the moonlight, admiring the city spread along the shore: there, like hundreds of little stars, lights glowed, music could be heard, noise and rumble of carriages, towers with spires were visible, bells were ringing. Yes, precisely because she could not go there, this spectacle attracted her most of all.

How greedily her youngest sister listened to these tales. Standing evening after evening at the open window and gazing into the sea's blueness, she thought of nothing but the great noisy city, and it even seemed to her that she could hear the bells ringing.

A year later, the second sister also received permission to rise to the surface of the sea and swim wherever she wished. She emerged from the water just as the sun was setting, and found that nothing could be more beautiful than this sight. The sky shone like molten gold, she reported, and the clouds... well, here words failed her! Tinged in purple and violet hues, they raced swiftly across the sky, but even faster than they flew toward the sun, like a long white veil, a flock of swans; the little mermaid too had begun swimming toward the sun, but it sank into the sea, and a rosy evening glow spread across sky and water.

Another year passed, and the third princess rose to the surface of the sea; she was the boldest of all and swam into a wide river flowing into the sea. There she saw green hills covered with vineyards, palaces and houses surrounded by lovely groves where birds sang; the sun shone and warmed so intensely that she repeatedly had to dive back into the water to cool her burning face. In a small bay, she saw a whole crowd of naked little humans splashing in the water; she wanted to play with them, but they took fright at her and ran away, and instead, some black beast appeared and began barking at her so terribly that the mermaid grew scared and swam back into the sea; this beast was a dog, but the mermaid had never yet seen dogs.

And so the princess kept recalling those wonderful forests, the green hills, and the delightful children who could swim even though they had no fish tails!

The fourth sister was not so bold; she stayed mostly in the open sea and reported that this was best of all: wherever one looked, for many, many miles around—nothing but water and sky overturned above the water like an enormous glass dome; in the distance, great ships sped by like seagulls, playful dolphins

leaped and somersaulted, and huge whales spouted hundreds of fountains from their nostrils.

Then came the turn of the next-to-youngest sister; her birthday fell in winter, and therefore she saw for the first time what the others had not: the sea was greenish, great icebergs floated everywhere: just like pearls, she reported, but so enormous, taller than the highest church steeples! Some were of very fanciful shapes and sparkled like diamonds. She seated herself upon the largest; the wind tossed her long hair, and sailors fearfully steered their ships well clear of the mountain. Toward evening, the sky became covered with clouds, lightning flashed

Lightning flashed, thunder rolled, and the dark sea began hurling icy blocks from side to side, glittering in the lightning's glare. On the ships, sails were furled; people rushed about in fear and terror, while she calmly floated upon her ice mountain, watching fiery zigzags of lightning tear through the sky and plunge into the sea.

Indeed, each of the sisters was delighted by what she saw for the first time: everything was new to them and therefore pleasing; but, having received permission, like grown-up girls, to swim wherever they wished, they soon grew accustomed to it all, and within a month began saying that everywhere was fine, yet home was best.

Often in the evenings all five sisters would link arms and rise to the water's surface; they all possessed voices more wonderful than any found among humans on earth, and so, when a storm arose and they saw ships in danger, they would swim toward them, sing of the wonders of the underwater kingdom, and beg the sailors not to fear descending to the depths; but the sailors could not make out the words; to them it seemed merely the noise of the storm; besides, they would never have been able to see any wonders on the seabed: if a ship perished, people drowned and arrived at the sea king's palace already dead.

The youngest mermaid, however, while her sisters rose hand in hand to the sea's surface, remained all alone, watching them depart, ready to weep—but mermaids cannot cry, which made her sorrow even heavier.

"Oh, when shall I turn fifteen?" she said. "I know I shall love greatly both that world above and the people who live there!"

At last her fifteenth year arrived!

"Well, we have raised you too!" said her grandmother, the queen dowager. "Come here; you must be adorned just like your other sisters!"

And she placed upon the mermaid's head a crown of white pearly lilies—each petal half a pearl—then, to denote her high rank as princess, ordered eight oysters to be fastened to her tail.

"But this hurts!" said the mermaid.

"For beauty's sake one must endure a little!" replied the old woman.

Ah, with what pleasure the mermaid would have cast off all these ornaments and the heavy crown: the little red flowers from her garden suited her far better, but there was nothing to be done!

"Farewell!" she said, and lightly and smoothly, like a transparent water bubble, rose to the surface.

The sun had just set, yet the clouds still glowed with purple and gold, while in the reddish sky marvelous clear evening stars were already kindling; the air was soft and fresh, and the sea lay smooth as a mirror. Not far from where the mermaid emerged stood a three-masted ship with only one sail raised: for there was not the slightest breeze; sailors sat in the rigging and on the masts, music and songs drifted from the deck; and when darkness fell completely, the ship was illuminated by hundreds of multicolored lanterns; it seemed as though flags of all nations fluttered in the air. The mermaid swam right up to the cabin windows, and when the waves gently lifted her, she could peer inside. There were many gorgeously dressed people, but finest of all was a young prince with large black eyes. He could not be more than sixteen; that day his birthday was being celebrated, which explained such merriment aboard the ship. Sailors danced on deck, and when the young prince appeared, hundreds of rockets soared skyward, making it bright as day, so that the mermaid grew quite frightened and dove beneath the water, but soon popped her head out again, and it seemed to her that all the heavenly stars had fallen into the sea. Never before had she seen such fiery spectacle: great suns whirled like wheels, magnificent fiery fish twisted their tails in the air, and all this reflected in the calm, clear water. The ship itself was so brightly lit that every rope could be distinguished, let alone the people. Oh, how handsome the young prince was! He shook people's hands, smiled and laughed, while the music thundered on and on in the silence of that wondrous night.

It was growing late, yet the mermaid could not tear her eyes from the ship and the handsome prince. The multicolored lights went out, rockets no longer shot into the sky, cannon shots ceased, but the sea itself began to groan and moan. The mermaid rocked upon the waves beside the ship, continually peering into the cabin, while the ship sped faster and faster, sails unfurling one after another; the wind strengthened, waves surged, clouds thickened, and lightning flashed. A storm

was beginning! The sailors hastened to furl the sails; the huge ship tossed terribly, while the wind drove it across the raging waves; around the ship rose high watery mountains threatening to close over its masts, yet it dived between those water walls like a swan, then soared again upon the wave crests. The storm merely amused the mermaid, but the sailors fared badly: the ship creaked, thick timbers splintered, waves swept across the deck, masts snapped like reeds, the ship heeled over, and water rushed into the hold. Then the mermaid understood the danger—she herself had to beware of logs and debris tossed about by the waves. For a moment it suddenly grew so dark one could not see a thing; but then lightning flashed again, and the mermaid once more saw everyone aboard the ship; each saved himself as best he could. The mermaid searched with her eyes for the prince and saw him sink beneath the water as the ship broke apart. At first the mermaid rejoiced greatly that he would now come down to their realm, but then she remembered that humans cannot live in water and that he could reach her father's palace only dead. No, no, he must not die! And she swam among logs and planks, utterly forgetting they might crush her at any moment. Sometimes she had to dive to the very depths, sometimes soar upward with the waves; but at last she reached the prince, who was already nearly exhausted and could no longer swim in the stormy sea; his arms and legs refused to serve him, his beautiful eyes closed; he would have died had the mermaid not come to his aid. She lifted his head above the water and let the waves carry them both wherever they wished.

By morning the storm had subsided; not a splinter remained of the ship; the sun shone again upon the water, and its bright rays seemed to restore living color to the prince's cheeks, yet his eyes still did not open.

The mermaid brushed the hair from the prince's forehead and kissed his high, beautiful brow; he seemed to her like the marble boy who stood in her garden; she kissed him once more and wholeheartedly wished that he might live.

At last she spotted solid land and high mountains reaching toward the sky, upon whose peaks snows gleamed white like flocks of swans. Right by the shore a wonderful grove turned green, and higher up stood some building, resembling a church or monastery. Orange and lemon trees grew in the grove, and tall palms stood by the building's gates. The sea indented the white sandy shore with a small bay where the water was very calm yet deep; here the mermaid swam and laid the prince upon the sand, taking care that his head lay higher and directly in the sunlight.

At that moment bells rang in the tall white building, and a whole crowd of young girls poured into the garden. The mermaid swam farther away behind high rocks protruding from the water, covered her hair and bosom with sea foam—now no one

could distinguish her little white face within that foam—and waited to see whether anyone would come to aid the poor prince.

She did not wait long: one of the young girls approached the prince and at first grew very frightened, but soon gathered her courage and called for help. Then the mermaid saw that the prince revived and smiled at everyone around him. But he did not smile at her, and did not even know that she had saved his life! The mermaid grew sad, and when the prince was led into the large white building, she sorrowfully dove beneath the water and swam home.

Previously she had been quiet and thoughtful; now she became even quieter, even more thoughtful. Her sisters asked her what she had seen for the first time upon the sea's surface, but she told them nothing.

Often in the evening and morning she swam to the place where she had left the prince, watched how fruits ripened and were gathered in the gardens, how snow melted on the high mountains, yet she saw the prince no more and returned home each time sadder and sadder. Her sole consolation was

For her, sitting in her little garden, wrapping her arms around a beautiful marble statue resembling a prince, she no longer tended the flowers; they grew as they wished, along the paths and walkways, intertwining their stems and leaves with the branches of the trees, until the garden became quite dark.

Finally she could bear it no longer and told everything to one of her sisters; after her, all the other sisters learned about it too, but no one else, except perhaps two or three other mermaids and their closest friends. One of the mermaids also knew the prince, had seen the festival on the ship, and even knew where the prince's kingdom lay.

"Come with us, sister!" the sisters said to the little mermaid, and hand in hand they all rose to the surface of the sea near the place where the prince's palace stood.

The palace was made of light-yellow shining stone, with great marble staircases; one of them descended straight into the sea. Magnificent gilded domes towered above the roof, and in the niches between the columns surrounding the entire building stood marble statues, quite like living beings. Through the tall mirror-like windows luxurious chambers could be seen; everywhere hung costly silk draperies, carpets were spread out, and the walls were adorned with large paintings. A true delight, nothing less! In the middle of the largest hall bubbled a great fountain; jets of water shot high, high up toward the glass dome-shaped ceiling, through which rays of sunlight poured onto the water and onto the wonderful plants growing in the wide basin.

Now the little mermaid knew where the prince lived, and she began swimming to the palace almost every evening or every night. None of her sisters dared to swim so close to land as she did; she even entered the narrow channel that ran directly beneath the magnificent marble balcony, which cast a long shadow upon the water. There she would stop and gaze for a long time at the young prince, while he thought he was walking alone, all alone, in the moonlight.

Many times she saw him sailing with musicians in his beautiful boat, decorated with fluttering flags: the little mermaid peered out from the green reeds, and if people sometimes noticed her long silvery-white veil fluttering in the wind, they thought it was a swan flapping its wing.

Many times also she heard fishermen, who caught fish at night, speaking about the prince; they told many good things about him, and the little mermaid rejoiced that she had saved his life when he, half-dead, drifted upon the waves; she recalled those moments when his head rested upon her breast and when she had so tenderly kissed his white, beautiful forehead. But he knew nothing about her; she did not even appear in his dreams!

More and more the little mermaid began to love humans, more and more she was drawn toward them; their earthly world seemed to her far greater than her underwater one: they could sail across the sea in their ships, climb high mountains right up to the clouds, and the expanses of land under their rule, with forests and fields, stretched far, far away, beyond what the eye could encompass! She so wished to learn more about humans and their lives, but her sisters could not answer all her questions, so she turned to her old grandmother; this woman knew well the "higher society," as she rightly called the land lying above the sea.

"If humans do not drown," asked the little mermaid, "do they then live forever, never dying as we do?"

"Certainly!" answered the old woman. "They too die, and their lifespan is even shorter than ours. We live three hundred years, yet when our end comes, only sea foam remains of us; we do not even have graves dear to us. We are not given an immortal soul, and we shall never rise again to new life; we are like this green reed: once torn up by the roots, it will never grow green again! Humans, on the contrary, possess an immortal soul, which lives forever, even after the body turns to dust; it then flies away into the blue sky, there, to the bright little stars! Just as we can rise from the sea bottom and see the land where humans live, so they can ascend after death to unknown blessed realms, which we shall never see!"

"Why do we not have an immortal soul!" sadly said the little mermaid. "I would give all my hundreds of years for one single day of human life, so that afterward I might share in the heavenly bliss of humans."

"Do not even think about it!" said the old woman. "Life here is far better for us than life on earth for humans!"

"Then I too shall die, become sea foam, hear no more the music of the waves, see no more the wonderful flowers and the red sun! Is there truly no way for me to gain an immortal soul?"

"You can," said the grandmother, "but only if some human loves you so much that you become dearer to him than father and mother, if he gives himself to you with all his heart and all his thoughts, and orders a priest to join your hands as a sign of eternal fidelity to each other; then a portion of his soul will pass to you, and you will share in the eternal bliss of humans. He will give you a soul and keep his own. But this will never happen! For what we consider beautiful here—your fish tail—humans find ugly: they understand little about beauty; in their opinion, to be beautiful one must necessarily have two clumsy supports—legs, as they call them."

The little mermaid sighed deeply and looked sadly at her fish tail.

"Let us live without sorrow!" said the old woman. "Let us enjoy ourselves fully for our three hundred years—that is a considerable span; the rest after death will be all the sweeter! This evening we have a ball at court!"

There was such magnificence as cannot be seen on earth! The walls and ceiling of the dancing hall were made of thick yet transparent glass; along the walls, in rows, lay hundreds of enormous purple and grass-green shells with blue lights in their centers: these lights brightly illuminated the entire hall, and through the glass walls—the sea itself; one could see how schools of large and small fish, gleaming with purple-golden and silvery scales, swam up to the walls.

In the middle of the hall flowed a wide stream, and upon it danced water spirits and mermaids to their own wondrous singing. Humans do not possess such wonderful voices. The little mermaid sang better than all, and everyone clapped their hands for her. For a moment she felt joyful at the thought that nowhere, neither in the sea nor on earth, did anyone have such a wonderful voice as hers; but then she began thinking again about the world above the water, about the beautiful prince, and sorrowed because she had no immortal soul. She slipped unnoticed out of the palace and, while others sang and rejoiced there, sat sadly in her little garden; through the water came to her the sounds of French horns, and she thought: "There he is again, sailing in his boat! How I love him! More than

father and mother! I belong to him with all my heart, with all my thoughts; to him I would gladly entrust the happiness of my entire life! For his sake and for an immortal soul, I would go to any length! While my sisters dance in father's palace, I will swim to the sea witch; I have always feared her, but perhaps she can advise me or help me somehow!"

And the little mermaid swam from her little garden toward the turbulent whirlpools, behind which the witch lived. She had never before traveled this path; here grew neither flowers nor even grass—only bare gray sand; the water in the whirlpools churned and roared as under mill wheels, dragging down into the depths everything it encountered along the way. The little mermaid had to swim precisely between such churning whirlpools; then, on the path to the witch's dwelling, lay a vast expanse covered with hot, bubbling mud; this spot the witch called her peat bog. Beyond it appeared the witch's very dwelling, surrounded by some strange forest: the trees and bushes were polyps, half-animal, half-plant creatures, resembling hundred-headed snakes growing straight out of the sand; their branches were long, slimy arms with fingers writhing like worms; the polyps never ceased moving all their joints, from root to very top, seizing with their flexible fingers whatever came their way, and never releasing it again. The little mermaid stopped in fright, her heart pounding with fear; she was ready to turn back, but remembering the prince and the immortal soul, she gathered her courage: she tightly bound her long hair around her head so the polyps could not seize it, crossed her arms over her chest, and, like a fish, swam between the hideous polyps stretching their

writhing arms. She saw how firmly, as if with iron pincers, they held with their fingers everything they managed to seize: the white skeletons of drowned people, ship rudders, chests, animal skeletons, even one little mermaid. The polyps had caught and strangled her. That was the most terrible of all!

But then she found herself on a slippery forest clearing where large, fat water snakes tumbled about, showing their ugly pale-yellow bellies. In the middle of the clearing stood a house built of white human bones; there sat the sea witch herself, feeding a toad from her mouth just as people feed sugar to small canaries. She called the ugly fat snakes her little chicks and allowed them to roll about on her great spongy, nostril-like breast.

"I know, I know why you have come!" said the sea witch to the little mermaid. "You are undertaking foolishness, yet I shall help you anyway, to your own misfortune, my beauty! You wish to receive instead of your fish tail two props so that you may walk like humans; you wish the young prince to fall in love with you, and you to gain an immortal soul!"

And the witch laughed so loudly and so uglily that both the toad and the snakes fell off her and stretched out upon the ground.

"Well then, you have come at the right time!" continued the witch. "Had you come tomorrow morning, it would have been too late, and I could not have helped you before next year. I shall prepare a potion for you; you will take it, swim with it to shore before sunrise, sit there and drink it down to the last drop; then your tail will split and turn into a pair of wonderful legs, as humans call them. But it will hurt you as though you were pierced through by a sharp sword. Yet everyone who sees you will say they have never beheld such a lovely maiden! You will keep your airy gliding gait—no dancer can compare with you; but remember, you will step as though upon sharp knives, so that your feet will be cut until they bleed. Do you agree? Do you want my help?"

"Yes!" said the little mermaid in a trembling voice, thinking of the prince and of the immortal soul.

"Remember," said the witch, "that once you take human form, you can never again become a mermaid! You will never again see the sea floor, nor your father's house, nor your sisters. And if the prince does not love you so much that he forgets for your sake both father and mother, gives himself to you with all his heart, and orders the priest to join your hands so that you become husband and wife, you will not receive an immortal soul. At the first dawn after his marriage to another, your heart will burst apart, and you will become sea foam!"

"So be it!" said the little mermaid, turning pale as death.

"You must also pay me for my help!" said the witch. "And I do not charge cheaply! You have a wonderful voice, and with it you hope to enchant the prince, but you must give your voice to me. For my precious potion I will take the best thing you possess: for I must mix my own blood into the drink, so that it becomes as sharp as a sword's blade!"

"If you take my voice, what will remain to me?" asked the little mermaid.

"Your lovely face, your gliding gait, and your speaking eyes—enough to conquer a human heart! Come now, do not be afraid; stick out your tongue, and I will cut it off as payment for the magic potion!"

"Very well!" said the little mermaid, and the witch set a cauldron upon the fire to brew the potion.

"Cleanliness is the best beauty!" she said, wiped the cauldron with a bundle of live snakes, then scratched her own breast; black blood dripped into the cauldron, from

which soon rose clouds of steam taking such bizarre shapes that merely looking at them inspired terror. The witch continually added new and new ingredients to the cauldron, and when the potion began to boil, there arose a sound like the weeping of a crocodile. Finally the drink was ready and looked clearer than the purest spring water!

"Here it is for you!" said the witch, handing the potion to the little mermaid; then she cut out her tongue, and the little mermaid became mute, able neither to sing nor to speak!

"If the polyps try to seize you when you swim back," said the witch, "splash a drop of this potion upon them, and their arms and fingers will fly apart into thousands of pieces!"

But the little mermaid did not need to do this: the polyps turned away in horror at the mere sight of the potion, which sparkled in her hands like a bright star. Swiftly she swam through the forest, past the swamp and the churning whirlpools.

There stood her father's palace; the lights in the ballroom were extinguished, everyone slept; she dared no longer enter—it because she was mute and intended to leave her father's house forever. Her heart was ready to burst from longing and sorrow. She slipped into the garden, took one flower from each sister's bed, sent thousands of kisses to her kin with her hand, and rose to the dark-blue surface of the sea.

The sun had not yet risen when she saw before her the prince's palace and sat down upon the magnificent marble staircase. The moon illuminated her with its wonderful blue radiance. The little mermaid drank the sparkling, sharp potion, and it seemed to her as though she were pierced through by a double-edged sword; she lost consciousness and fell as if dead.

When she regained her senses, the sun already shone above the sea; she felt burning pain throughout her whole body, yet before her stood the handsome prince, gazing at her with eyes black as night; she lowered her gaze and saw that instead of a fish tail she had two most wonderful little white feet, like those of a child. But she was completely naked, and so she wrapped herself in her long thick hair. The prince asked who she was and how she had come there, but she only looked at him gently and sadly with her dark-blue eyes: for she could not speak. Then he took her by the hand and led her into the palace. The witch had spoken truth: with every step the little mermaid felt as though she were stepping upon sharp knives and needles, yet she bore the pain patiently and walked hand in hand with the prince, light and airy as a water bubble; the prince and all around marvelled only at her wonderful gliding gait.

The little mermaid was dressed in silk and muslin, and she became the foremost beauty at court, yet she remained mute as before—able neither to sing nor to speak. Beautiful slave girls, all clad in silk and gold, appeared before the prince and his royal parents and began to sing. One of them sang especially well, and the prince clapped his hands and smiled at her; the little mermaid grew very sorrowful: once she too could sing, and incomparably better! "Ah, if only he knew that I have forever parted with my voice merely to be near him!"

Then the slave girls began to dance to the sounds of most wonderful music; hereupon the little mermaid raised her white pretty hands, stood on tiptoe, and swept away in a light airy dance—such as no one had ever danced before! Every movement only increased her beauty; her eyes alone spoke to the heart more than the singing of all the slave girls.

Everyone was delighted, especially the prince, who called the little mermaid his little foundling, and the little mermaid danced and danced, although each time her feet touched the ground it hurt her as though she were stepping upon sharp knives. The prince said that she must always remain near him, and she was permitted to sleep on a velvet cushion before the door of his room.

He ordered a man's costume sewn for her so that she might accompany him on horseback rides. They rode through fragrant forests where birds sang among the fresh leaves and green branches struck against her shoulders; they climbed high mountains, and although blood oozed from her feet so that everyone saw it, she laughed and continued to follow the prince to the very summits; there they admired the clouds floating beneath their feet like flocks of birds flying away to foreign lands.

When they remained at home, the little mermaid went at night to the seashore, descended the marble staircase, placed her feet, burning as if in fire, into the cold water, and thought of her native home and of the sea floor.

One night her sisters rose from the water hand in hand and sang a sorrowful song; she nodded to them, they recognized her and told her how much she had grieved them all. From then on they visited her every night, and once she saw even her old grandmother in the distance, who for many, many years had not risen from the water, and the Sea King himself with crown upon his head; they stretched their hands toward her but dared not swim so close to land as her sisters.

Day by day the prince grew more and more attached to the little mermaid, yet he loved her only as a dear,

Good child, yet it never entered his head to make her his wife and queen; meanwhile, she had to become his wife, otherwise she could not gain an immortal soul and would, should he marry another, turn into sea foam.

"Do you love me more than anyone in the world?"—so the little mermaid's eyes seemed to ask while the prince embraced her and kissed her forehead.

"Yes, I love you!" said the prince. "You have a kind heart, you are devoted to me more than anyone, and you resemble the young maiden whom I once saw and whom, surely, I shall never see again! I was sailing on a ship; the ship was wrecked; the waves cast me ashore near a wondrous temple where young maidens serve God; the youngest of them found me on the shore and saved my life; I saw her only twice, yet she alone in the whole world could I love! But you resemble her and have almost driven her image from my heart. She belongs to the holy temple, and thus my lucky star has sent you to me; never shall I part from you!"

"Alas, he does not know that it was I who saved his life!" thought the little mermaid. "I carried him out of the sea waves onto the shore and laid him in the grove where the temple stood, while I myself hid in the sea foam and watched to see whether anyone would come to his aid. I saw that beautiful maiden whom he loves more than me!"—and the little mermaid sighed deeply, deeply; she could not weep. "But that maiden belongs to the temple; she will never appear in the world, and they will never meet! As for me, I am beside him, I see him every day, I can care for him, love him, give my life for him!"

But now people began to say that the prince would marry the lovely daughter of a neighboring king, and therefore he was fitting out his magnificent ship for a voyage. The prince would sail to the neighboring king, ostensibly to acquaint himself with his country, but in truth to see the princess; a large retinue accompanied him. At all this talk the little mermaid only shook her head and smiled: for she knew the prince's thoughts better than anyone.

"I must go!" he told her. "I must see the beautiful princess: my parents demand it, but they will not force me to marry her, and I shall never love her! She does not resemble that beauty whom you resemble. And if, at last, I must choose a bride, then I shall choose, most likely, you, my mute foundling with speaking eyes!"

And he kissed her rosy lips, played with her long hair, and laid his head upon her breast, where beat a heart longing for human happiness and an immortal human soul.

"You are not afraid of the sea, my mute little one?" he asked when they already stood aboard the magnificent ship that was to carry them to the land of the neighboring king.

And the prince told her of storms and of calms, of the various fishes that live in the depths of the sea, and of the wonders divers had seen there; she only smiled as she listened to his tales, for she knew better than anyone what lay upon the sea floor.

On a clear moonlit night, when all save one helmsman slept, she sat by the very rail and gazed into the transparent waves; and suddenly it seemed to her that she saw her father's palace; her old grandmother stood upon the tower and looked through the surging streams of water at the ship's keel. Then her sisters rose to the surface of the sea; they looked sorrowfully at her and wrung their white hands, while she nodded her head to them, smiled, and wished to tell them how well she fared here; but just then a ship's boy approached her, and the sisters dove into the water; the boy thought that white sea foam had flashed in the waves.

By morning the ship entered the harbor of the magnificent capital of the neighboring kingdom. And now bells rang in the city, horns sounded from the high towers, and regiments of soldiers with gleaming bayonets and fluttering banners gathered in the squares. Festivities began; ball followed ball, but the princess was not yet there: she had been raised far away in a convent, whither she had been sent to learn all royal virtues. At last she arrived.

The little mermaid gazed eagerly upon her and had to confess that she had never seen a face lovelier or more beautiful. The skin of the princess's face was so tender, so translucent, and from beneath long dark lashes smiled a pair of deep-blue, gentle eyes.

"It is you!" said the prince. "You saved my life when I lay half-dead upon the seashore!"

And he pressed his blushing bride tightly to his heart.

"Oh, I am too happy!" he said to the little mermaid. "That which I dared not even dream of has come to pass! You will rejoice in my happiness, for you love me so!"

The little mermaid kissed his hand, and it seemed to her that her heart would burst with pain: his wedding must kill her, turn her into sea foam!

The bells in the churches rang; heralds rode through the streets, proclaiming to the people the betrothal of the princess. Fragrant incense streamed from the priests' censers; the bridegroom and bride gave each other their hands and received the bishop's blessing. The little mermaid, arrayed in silk and gold, held

the bride's train, but her ears heard not the festive music, her eyes saw not the glittering ceremony: she thought of her mortal hour and of all she was losing with life.

That same evening the bridegroom and bride were to sail back to the prince's homeland; cannons fired, flags waved, and upon the ship's deck a luxurious tent of gold and purple had been pitched; within the tent rose a wondrous bridal bed.

The sails swelled with wind; the ship glided lightly over the waves without the slightest tremor and sped forward.

When dusk fell, hundreds of colored lanterns were lit aboard the ship, and the sailors began to dance merrily on deck. The little mermaid remembered the festival she had seen on the ship on the day she first rose to the surface of the sea, and now she flew in a swift, airy dance, like a swallow pursued by a hawk. All were enraptured: never had she danced so wonderfully! Her tender feet were cut as though by knives, yet she felt no such pain—her heart suffered still more keenly. Only one evening remained to her to stay with him for whose sake she had left her kin and her father's house, surrendered her wonderful voice, and daily endured endless torments, while he did not even notice them. Only one night more remained to her to breathe the same air with him, to behold the blue sea and the starry sky; thereafter would come for her an eternal night, without thoughts, without dreams. For she had not been granted an immortal soul! Long past midnight the dancing and music continued on the ship; the little mermaid laughed and danced with deathly anguish in her heart; the prince kissed his beautiful bride, and she played with his black hair; at last, hand in hand, they withdrew into their magnificent tent.

All grew quiet on the ship; only the steersman remained at the helm. The little mermaid leaned her white hands upon the rail and, turning her face toward the east, awaited the first ray of the sun, which, as she knew, must kill her. And suddenly she saw her sisters in the sea; they were pale as she, but their long, luxuriant hair no longer floated in the wind: it had been cut off.

"We gave our hair to the witch that she might help us save you from death! She gave us this knife; do 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 upon your feet, they will grow together again into a fish's tail, you will become a mermaid once more, descend to us in the sea, and live out your three hundred years before turning into salt sea foam. But hasten! Either he or you—one of you must die before sunrise! Our old grandmother grieves so sorely that she has lost all her gray hairs from sorrow, and we have given ours to the witch! Kill the prince and return

to us! Hurry—do you see, a red streak has appeared in the sky? Soon the sun will rise, and you will die!" With these words they sighed deeply, deeply, and plunged into the sea.

The little mermaid lifted the purple curtain of the tent and saw that the head of the lovely bride rested upon the prince's breast. The little mermaid bent down and kissed his fair forehead, looked at the sky where the dawn was kindling, then looked at the sharp knife, and again fixed her gaze upon the prince, who at that moment uttered in his sleep the name of his bride—she alone occupied his thoughts!—and the knife trembled in the little mermaid's hands. But another moment—and

She threw him into the waves, which turned red, as if stained with blood, at the spot where he fell. Once more she looked at the prince with her half-extinguished gaze, threw herself from the ship into the sea, and felt her body dissolve into foam.

Above the sea the sun rose; its rays lovingly warmed the deathly-cold sea foam, and the little mermaid did not feel death; she saw the clear sun and some transparent, wonderful creatures hovering above her by the hundreds. She could see through them the white sails of the ship and the red clouds in the sky; their voices sounded like music, but so ethereal that no human ear could hear it, just as no human eye could see them themselves. They had no wings, and they floated through the air thanks to their own lightness and airiness. The little mermaid saw that she too had a body like theirs, and that she was separating more and more from the sea foam.

"Whither do I go?" she asked, rising into the air, and her voice sounded with the same wondrous airy music that no earthly sounds could convey.

"To the daughters of the air!" the airy creatures answered her. "A mermaid has no immortal soul, and she cannot acquire one except through a human's love for her. Her eternal existence depends on another's will. The daughters of the air likewise have no immortal soul, but they themselves can acquire one for themselves through good deeds. We fly to hot countries where people perish from the scorching, plague-laden air, and we breathe coolness upon them. We spread the fragrance of flowers through the air and bring healing and comfort to people. After three hundred years, during which we do what good we can, we receive as reward an immortal soul and may partake in mankind's eternal bliss. You, poor little mermaid, have striven with all your heart for the same as we; you have loved and suffered; rise therefore with us into the world above the clouds; now you yourself can acquire an immortal soul!"

And the little mermaid stretched out her transparent hands toward God's sun, and for the first time felt tears upon her eyes.

Meanwhile, everything on the ship had again come to life, and the little mermaid saw how the prince and his bride were searching for her. Sadly they gazed upon the churning sea foam, as if they knew that the little mermaid had thrown herself into the waves. Invisible, the little mermaid kissed the beautiful bride upon the forehead, smiled at the prince, and rose together with the other children of the air toward the rosy clouds floating in the sky.

"In three hundred years we too shall enter God's kingdom! Perhaps even sooner!" whispered one of the daughters of the air. "As invisible beings we fly into the dwellings of people where there are children, and if we find there a good, obedient child who gladdens its parents and is worthy of their love, we smile, and the term of our trial is shortened by a whole year; but if we meet there an evil, disobedient child, we weep bitterly, and each tear adds yet another day to the long term of our trial!"