

Tales of Hans Christian Andersen

THE LITTLE MERMAID

Adapted by Rob John

A long time ago, in a beautiful world under the sea, there lived mer-people. Mer-people were strange magical creatures with bodies like you and me but long fish's tails instead of legs.

Although mer-people were happy in their under-sea kingdom, sometimes, just for fun, they would swim up to the surface and take a look at our world.

Sometimes they would see human beings sail past on their great ships and say, 'What strange lives those humans lead!'

The king of the mer-people had six mermaid daughters. All were very beautiful, but the loveliest was the youngest. Not only was she beautiful, but the Little Mermaid had the best singing voice of all the mer-people. When the Little Mermaid sang, everyone would stop what they were doing and listen. Even the fishes seemed to swim more slowly as if they too were enjoying her singing.

Mermaids were not allowed to go up to the surface to see the world of human beings until they were fifteen years old, and each sister on her fifteenth birthday swam up to see our world for herself. When they came back they told of huge ships plunging through great storms, of children playing happily on sandy beaches, of white creatures that seemed to float gracefully through the air, and of strange sad music that floated from the towers of tall buildings.



Each time one of her sisters went to the surface, the Little Mermaid would plead with her father to be allowed to go with her.

'Be patient, little one,' her father would say. 'Your turn will come.'

At last it was the Little Mermaid's fifteenth birthday and, towards the end of the day, her father looked at her and said, 'The time has come, little one. Come back and tell us what you find.'

The Little Mermaid kissed her father, said goodbye to her five sisters and began the long swim to the surface.

Up and up she swam and it was night time before she came close to the surface. She saw a bright light dancing on the water, then moments later her face burst through the waves into the moonlight.

For the first time the Little Mermaid saw stars shining in the dark night sky and felt the gentle sea winds on her cheeks. She saw a sailing ship lit by hundreds of lanterns and thought that she had never seen anything so beautiful in all her life. She swam closer to the ship...and, upon hearing strange music, she just had to find out what creatures made those wonderful sounds.

Looking through a window in the side of the ship, she saw what seemed to be a birthday party and the special guest was a young prince. He stood in the centre of the room and everybody seemed to be smiling at him.

He was the most handsome thing she had ever seen. When he smiled, his eyes seemed to light up the whole room and, by the time the party had ended and the guests had gone to bed, the Little Mermaid had fallen in love.

'It's getting late,' she sighed. 'I must go back to my father and sisters and tell them what I have seen. But then came a sound which the Little Mermaid had never heard before.'

A storm was coming and before long great dark clouds hid the moon. The air around the Little Mermaid started to move...and the calm sea started to heave and moan like a giant waking from a deep sleep.

The Prince's ship started to lurch and roll in the churning sea...and the Little Mermaid could hear terror in the voices of the sailors as they tried to save their ship from the giant waves.

Then suddenly the ship's mast snapped in two. Its deck was smashed to pieces by a giant wave. Sailors were thrown into the sea and the beautiful ship began to sink. The Little Mermaid was not afraid of the storm. She dived into a huge wave and swam down into the darkness and there among the swirling wreckage she saw her prince... lifeless...

The Little Mermaid knew that humans could not live in water.

'Drowned already?' said the Little Mermaid. 'No. He will not drown. I will not let him drown.'

So she swam to the prince, carried him back up to the surface and held his head up out of the water. He was still too weak to move but at least he was alive.

The Little Mermaid swam through the night. By morning the storm had passed and she saw dry land.

The Little Mermaid saw a white sandy beach and she laid the sleeping prince on the sand in front of a small church. Then she swam to some nearby rocks to see what would happen. The prince opened his eyes and saw a girl coming out of the church.

The girl stared at the prince for a moment then ran back inside to fetch help. People came running. The prince was picked up and gently carried away. The Little Mermaid sighed and swam back to her home under the sea.

When her father and sisters asked her what she had seen, the Little Mermaid said nothing. For days she sat sadly by herself thinking of nothing but the handsome prince. At last she could bear it no longer and told her oldest sister what had happened to her on the night of the storm.

The Little Mermaid looked sadly at her fish's tail. 'If only I was a human,' she said.

'Don't be silly,' said her sister. 'We mermaids are much happier than humans. Humans only have short lives, but we can live for three hundred years.'

'I don't care,' said the Little Mermaid. 'I would happily give up all my hundreds of years to have just one day as a human.'

'You must forget all about this prince,' said the Little Mermaid's oldest sister. 'You must never speak of him again.'

But the Little Mermaid could not forget about the prince and, later that night when her father and sisters weren't looking, the Little Mermaid slipped away and went to find the old Sea Witch.

The Sea Witch lived in the darkest, coldest part of the ocean and her house, which was made from the bones of drowned sailors, was guarded by poisonous water snakes.

'Madam,' said the little Mermaid. 'I have come to...

'I know why you've come child. You want to lose your fish's tail and marry your prince,' said the witch.

'Can you help me?' asked the mermaid

'I can help you,' said the witch, 'but it will hurt'.

The Little Mermaid shuddered, 'Just tell me what I have to do.'

'You must drink this potion,' said the witch, 'and then your tail will turn into human legs, but every step you take on land will be like walking on sharp knives.'

'I'm not afraid,' said the Little Mermaid.

'And once you have human legs you can never be a mermaid again,' said the witch. 'If your prince doesn't want you; if he falls in love with someone else, then the day after he marries, you will turn into nothing. Nothing more than bubbles floating on the sea.'

'Give me the potion,' said the Little Mermaid.

The Sea Witch smiled. 'Wait my child. First you must pay me.'

'But I have nothing,' said the Little Mermaid. 'How can I pay?'

'I'll take your voice,' said the witch. 'Your beautiful singing voice. Yes, that should do nicely.'

The Little Mermaid looked at the witch and said, 'Very well. If that is what I must pay, then take it.'

The witch handed the Little Mermaid the potion in a small bottle and the Little Mermaid spoke no more – the witch had taken her tongue.

The next day the Prince's servants found a beautiful young woman lying on the beach near the palace. They helped her inside, and when the young woman walked, she seemed to be in pain, almost as if she was walking on knives.

The servants dressed her in fine clothes, but when they asked her who she was, she said nothing because this was the Little Mermaid who had given her voice to the Sea Witch and who could never speak or sing again.

Everybody agreed that the Little Mermaid was the most beautiful young woman in the whole palace and, although she never spoke, she quickly became the prince's favourite. He never went anywhere without the Little Mermaid at his side.

One day he told her how much he cared for her and for a moment she was so full of happiness that she thought her heart would burst.

'But,' said the Prince, 'I cannot marry you because I am still searching for my true love.'

He explained that once he had nearly drowned and that he had been washed ashore and found by a beautiful young girl. He had only seen that girl once but had fallen in love with her and decided that, if he ever found her, he would ask her to marry him.

The Little Mermaid was very sad. She could not tell the prince that it was she who had saved him; that she had given up everything, her tail, her beautiful voice, her family, just to be with him.

One day a king from another land visited the prince. The king brought with him his beautiful daughter and, when the prince saw the king's daughter, he knew her straight away. This was the girl who had found him on the beach.

She had grown up into a beautiful woman but there was no mistake. He had dreamed of her for years and, now he had found her, he asked her to marry him.

On the day of the wedding the Little Mermaid thought her heart would break. She had lost her prince and when sun rose the next day she would die. She remembered the witch's words. She would turn to nothing; nothing more than bubbles on the sea water.

That night when everyone was asleep the Little Mermaid sat by the shore waiting for the dawn. She knew that this was her last night alive and that soon the sun would rise. Suddenly, from out of the waves, five silvery figures rose up in the moonlight. It was the Little Mermaid's sisters.

'Quick,' said the oldest sister. 'You can still save yourself. The witch has given us this magic knife. Kill the prince. Plunge the knife into his heart and when his warm blood splashes on your feet they will grow into a tail and you will become a mermaid again. Hurry little sister. The sun is nearly rising.'

The Little Mermaid took the knife and ran to the prince's bedroom. She looked at him as he slept beside his new wife. One blow with the knife, and then she would be free. How she longed to be once more with her father and her sisters under the sea! She looked at the sharp knife. She looked at the prince. She still loved him, so she went to the window...and threw the knife far out into the sea.

In the morning the prince ordered his servants to search high and low but no sign of the Little Mermaid was ever found. The prince was very sad and would often sit on the beach late at night missing his little friend.

And sometimes he would look at the bubbles on the water shining in the moonlight and almost think he saw her face.