



The Little Mermaid

By Hans Christian Andersen (1837)

Part I: Beneath the Sea, Where Dreams Begin

Far out at sea, the water is as blue as the petals of the loveliest cornflower and as clear as the purest glass. But it is very deep—deeper than any anchor-line, deeper than what a stack of church steeples would reach from the seabed up above the waves. It is there that the merfolk dwell.

Don't imagine the bottom is bare white sand—no! The most wondrous sea-plants and trees grow there, their stems and leaves so flexible that even the gentlest current makes them sway as if alive. Fish, big and small, dart through the groves just like birds in the air. In the deepest place lies the Sea King's palace, its walls built of coral, its tall, pointed windows made of the clearest amber, and its roof of seashells that open and close with the tides. It is a sight to behold—for within each shell lies a radiant pearl, and even one pearl would be splendid in a queen's crown.

The Sea King had been a widower for many years, and his elderly mother ran the palace. She was wise, proud of her noble birth, and wore twelve oysters on her tail while the other noblewomen wore only six—yet she was much admired, chiefly because she doted on her granddaughters, the six young mer-princesses. The youngest was considered the most beautiful: her skin was as delicate and clear as a rose petal, her eyes as blue as a deep lake, and, like the rest, she had no feet—just a fish's tail in place of legs.

By day they all played in the great halls of the palace, which seemed alive with flowers growing from the walls. They opened the amber windows, and fish swam in just as swallows enter through windows on earth. The fish would come to the young princesses to eat from their hands and let themselves be stroked.

Outside the palace was a garden of flame-red and deep-blue trees. Its fruits shone like gold, its flowers glowed like living fire, forever waving their stems and leaves. The finest sands on the ground were tinted blue, like a sulphur flame. Over all these depths lay a wondrous blue haze—it felt as though one floated high up in the sky, surrounded by nothing but air above and below. When the sea was still, one could glimpse the sun, resembling a purple blossom shedding all its rays around.

Each little princess had her own spot in that garden where she could dig and plant at will. One made her garden look like a whale, another like a little mermaid. The youngest made hers perfectly round like the sun, planting only red flowers to match it. Reserved and thoughtful, she cared little for the odd shipwrecked treasure her sisters adored. All she wanted besides her rosy flowers was a beautiful marble statue—a boy carved from white stone that she had rescued from a wreck. She planted beside it a flowering purple willow, its silk-like branches reaching down toward the blue sand, their violet shadows dancing like top and root kissing.



Her greatest joy was hearing stories of the human world above. Their grandmother, the old queen, would tell them of ships and towns, people and animals—and the youngest found it particularly wondrous that flowers on land had scent, that forests were green, and that tiny flying creatures, which she called “fish,” could sing such lovely, high songs.

“When you turn fifteen,” the grandmother told them, “you may rise to the surface on moonlit nights, sit on the cliffs, and watch the ships drift past. You shall glimpse forests and towns.” That year, the eldest turned fifteen and was allowed to swim up for the first time. She returned with countless tales, but none meant more to her than leaning on a moonlit sandbank near the coast, watching a great city’s lights blink like stars, hearing music, the roar of carriages and people, counting church towers, and hearing bells toll.

The youngest sister listened keenly—every evening at the open window she gazed upward through the dark blue water, following the dance of fish fins and tails, the pale moon and stars, and imagining ships or whales passing overhead. She dreamed of floating above, longing to be part of that world.

Part II: A Storm, a Prince, and a Longing Heart

Shortly after that, she rose one evening and spied a grand ship with three masts sailing smoothly across the glassy sea. It was the prince’s sixteenth birthday, and the deck shimmered with lights and music. From her place by the cabin window, she watched the handsome prince greet his guests and dance on deck.

Suddenly a great storm rolled in. The waves became violent, the ship bucked like a wild swan between monstrous black walls of water. Eventually a mast broke and the vessel began to break. Beneath the waves, the little mermaid saw the prince thrown into the churning sea. Quietly she rescued him, carrying him through the night until the storm abated at dawn. On a quiet shore she gently laid him on the shore, smoothing back his wet hair and kissing his brow.

As the bells rang in a nearby temple and young ladies came upon the shore, the mermaid withdrew under the rocks, hiding her tears as they revived the prince and carried him away in their arms. Though he smiled at them, wistfulness filled her heart—he didn’t know who saved him.

Part III – Bargain with the Sea Witch

Though shy, she returned many evenings to the same spot, watching him from the water. She saw his land bloom with flowers and mountains with snow, but never saw him again. Her grief deepened until, at last, she confided in her sisters. They, and a few trusted mermaid friends, learned who he was and where his kingdom lay.

One night, seized by longing for both him and a soul, she ventured through fierce whirlpools and muddy mosses to the home of the Sea Witch. There, amid prowling snake-like water-creatures and slimy toads, the witch revealed a potent potion—but at the cost of the mermaid’s beautiful voice. After sinking the mermaid’s tongue in exchange, the potion transformed her tail into two fragile legs. Yet each step would feel as if stepping on sharp knives, and if the prince wed another, she would die and dissolve into sea foam. Only if he loved her above all else and wed her could she remain human and gain an immortal soul.



Part IV – Life with the Prince, Sacrifice, and Her Transcendence

The next morning in the temple gardens, the prince found her. She could not speak, yet he led her to his palace, amazed by her ethereal presence. Though she could no longer sing, her wordless grace moved him deeply.

In time, he grew fond of her, riding and climbing with her. But he never proposed, and his marriage arrangements weighed heavily upon her. On the wedding night, aboard a golden ship, they danced under brightly lit lanterns. She, too, danced—but each step stabbed with pain, not from knives, but from sorrow and loss.

As the sun began to rise, the little mermaid knew it meant her end. Her sisters appeared, holding a knife of silver—they pleaded that she kill the prince before dawn to retain her tail and life. She kissed the sleeping prince instead, flung the knife into the sea, and cast herself into the waves.

But rather than perishing, she rose as shimmering foam—and she heard gentle voices. The ethereal Air Spirits told her that because of her loving sacrifice, she could earn an immortal soul through three hundred years of virtuous service. She ascended on rose tinted clouds toward the sun, weeping for the first time—and hopeful of her spiritual journey.

The End

