

THE CALL OF THE SEA

If you go walking along Bonuit beach when the tide is out, you will see rock pools that hold limpets and sea urchins that the great tides forgot when they retreated.

It was like this the evening Joseph Rolande strolled on the beach after a long day's fishing. The sunset gave the water a rosy tinge and all was tranquil. Suddenly the peace was interrupted by the cry of a young woman: "Please! Help me, help me, brave sailor."

Joseph ran towards the voice and came upon a young woman up to her waist in seawater in a rock pool. She was crying into her long, salt-spangled hair.

"Help me please, I tarried too long and the tide has gone out and left me. Carry me back to the sea or I shall surely die."

As the woman said this, a large fin flipped the water and Joseph could see that the bottom half of this beautiful woman was as of a fish!

"No, oh no, no. You're a mermaid," said Joseph as he staggered back. "I know what mermaids do to men; they lure them down to the sea to drown."

"I will die if I dry, kind man," sobbed the mermaid.

Joseph was a kind man, so he lifted the lovely creature from the pool and carried her to the sea. He gently lowered her into the water. The mermaid swam around in the shallows, nuzzling Joseph's legs in pleasure and gratitude.

"Thank you," she cried. "If you come with me now, my father will reward you. He is King of the sea kingdom and has many treasures from the depths of the ocean."

"No, no, thank you," said Joseph as he stumbled back from the cold water. "Be off with you. I won't be lured to my death, never mind your father's treasures or your beauty."

"Then take this," said the mermaid, pushing an amber comb into Joseph's hand. "If you ever need me, pass it three times through the water and I shall come to you."

And with a thrash of her tail she disappeared under the foaming currents of the sea.

Joseph became obsessed with the wonderful creature. He tried to fight his thoughts, but every time he closed his eyes, all he could see was her face and her gleaming blue eyes. In the evenings, when the tide was out, he would walk along the shore in hope of catching sight of the swish of her golden tail or the shine of her long hair. Sometimes he would wade into the sea, searching the waves for a glimpse of his mermaid.

"So this is the magic you weave is it?" thought Joseph as he lay awake one night. "This is how you intend to lure me to my death. Well you won't win."

The next day, Joseph left his job as a fisherman, moved inland and bought a smallholding where he kept pigs. He had put a mountain between him and the sea. But the rain that spat on Joseph's tin roof was washed in from the coast. It was sea rain that kept him awake at night.