

THE MERMAID

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Brighter than bright noon,
Clear as a summer moon,
Fair as the wheeling Seven
That nightly dance in heaven,
She stretched her arms to him out of the bay—
Smooth was the water in which she lay,
Smoother than beryl; and white was she,
Whiter than frost-white stone can be—
White as the wind-whipped spray of the sea.

Her voice was like the lute
Touched where waves are mute,
Twelve leagues under water,
By the wan Sea-King's daughter:
Amber her hair in its amber comb—
She laughed, she called to him out of the foam,
"Fisher lad, are you toiling yet
At broken oar and torn net?
Look no more for the spiced gale
To fill and lift in your crimson sail—
Put by the years of spent endeavour,
Furl up the wings of your ship forever;
In a dew-sweet dawn step down to me,
Step down, and be lapped eternally,
Lost in the cool embrace of the sea".

He answered never a word,
But he felt his fancy stirred,
Drawn to follow after
The trembling bells of her laughter;
And sweeter she laughed, and merrier cried—
"Cover your ears, O brown-eyed
Brown-locked wind-deaf spray-blind lover
Of all the seas that lure the rover!
Still you shall hear
—Small, clear—

The long slow comber shoreward roll;
And your heart shall quiver
And stir forever
While the ripple of music breaks in your soul.
—Under a sky as pale as pearl,
Up where the webs of cloud are a-curl,
You have built your house on the delicate dim
Edge of the world at the cliff's rim:
You are up where the wild-winged gannets veer—
But the call of the wave is in your ear;
You have roofed your walls on a height apart—
But the cry of the wave is in your heart;
Never so long as the winds blow,
And the creaming surf runs over the low
Line of the reef, will I let you go!"

Silent, he bent his head
Above the marred spread
Of the dripping net on his knee;
But strangely, quickeningly,
Like a bird in its nest,
His heart moved his breast.

She said, "It is noon; now dreamily
The sun draws up the veils of the sea,
Swathings finer than weft of silk,
Softer than fleeces, soother than milk,
Star-woven, moon-wist,
Tinted by times with amethyst
And primrose and roseate and rose-pale mist.
—The twelve chimes strike from the clock of the town;
Shed off the shoes of your feet, come down—
Down, down, and down, where twelve leagues under
The crashing barrier's constant thunder,
Lies a dim rich world of lovely wonder—
A world that is greener and broader far
Than any meadows terrestrial are;
A world that is wider-tapestried all
And loftier-ceiled than a king's hall.
"In a mellow noon step down to me—
Down from your world of herb and tree,
Down to the emerald world of the sea".

Net yet—ah, not yet
 He put aside the net;
 Nor turned he yet his face,
 Nor moved in his place—
 But the fledged bird, his heart,
 Poised to depart.

She said "It is evening; purple and pale,
 Streaked and shadowed, under the sail,
 Without murmur, without motion,
 Lies the pansy-hued and placid ocean.
 The air offshore is sweet, for it goes
 Through budded lily and blossomed rose
 And the petalled, leafy clematis boughs
 You have trained so tall on your cliff-top house.
 —Fair are they, but fairer yet
 Is the garden never a gardener set,
 The living blooms, the striped, the splendid
 Bells and wheels that never were tended—
 Coral and rock-anemone,
 Flower and branch and fruited tree
 Of the charmed orchards of the sea.

'I will gather you garlands such as grow
 Rooted in whiter sand than snow;
 I will pluck you apples such as knew
 Never an earthly sun or dew:
 —Turn from the land, forget the shore,
 Hunger and labour and thirst no more;
 In the tranquil evening step down to me,
 Down to the still delights there be
 In the pulseless bosom of the sea'.

He pushed away the net;
 He turned his face, he set
 His eyes from the town—
 He rose, he stepped down
 Over the glinting glistening sand,
 To the edge of the sea, to the end of the land;
 Oh in a dusk
 That smelt of musk
 And fresh-flowered stalks of lavender,

She called to him
From the curled wave's brim—
Through the curled wave's lip he went to her.

She gave him the kiss of her cool, cool mouth,
Soft as the wind that blows from the South,
Sweet as the wind that blows from the West;
And all unease and all unrest
Fell asleep in his quieted breast.
She took his hand, she drew him under
The groan of the bar and the reef's thunder,
Into a lucent world of wonder—
Wilder, lonelier, lovelier-fair
Than any world of sun and air.

Here they walked in many a meadow
Of dimpling light and dappling shadow,
Crystal-lucid, coloured as
Alexandrite, chrysoprase,
Chrysoberyl, chrysolite:
Here there came the finned flight
Of many an ocean-creature, starred
And argent-spotted and sable-barred.

Hand in hand they walked together
In a limpid dream of still weather,
Through wall-less gardens, secret, dim—
Arbours where she plucked for him
Many a blossomy wheel and whorl—
 Petals, fair
As her loosed hair—
Apples of moonstone and agate and pearl.

And when he was weary at last, she spread
Ribbony sea-moss for his bed,
And into her lap he laid his head.

She sang; no human melody—
 No stir of the breeze
 In myrtle trees—
But the harp-like crooning of the sea:
The song the steady southward gale

Teaches taut mast and swelling sail;
The murmurous two-toned harmony
That the ghost-white rocks have learned of the sea.
There steals no quainter patterning
From dulcimer or viol-string:
A living sound, it twined and crept
And moaned and lilted and laughed and wept,
While half he wakened and half he slept.

And once he said, "The church-bells toll"—
And breathed his prayer for the parted soul;
And once he said: "There comes to me,
Down through the wavering depths of the sea,
The voice of the stoled priest, who prays
—But I cannot hear the words he says—
The vested choir in the chapel-room—
Mass they sing, for I know not whom.
—It is late, it is night, the nets are cast"—
With the words half-uttered, the memory passed.

Never again will he return
To glowing lamp and hearth a-burn;
Never will he behold again
The tawny sun or the slanted rain
Or the bride-white hawthorns down the lane:
These he has given for the clear deep,
And the glimmering fruits of the starred steep,
And the cool enfolding arms of sleep.

He has forgotten human breath;
He has forgotten fear
And faith—
And joy
And sorrow,
And life
And death.