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## THE LITTLE SIREN

LONG AGO THE SEA-GOD PHORCYS, steering his scallop-shell over the blue Tyrrhenian Sea, heard the voice of a mortal woman singing as she gathered driftwood among the rocks, and, forgetting all else, he rushed ashore and took her to wife and begot upon her, with more than godlike rapidity, a score or so of daughters. These girls combined the qualities of both parents, and, when their mother had taken advantage of one of her husband's frequent absences to elope with an inland herdsman who would not be called from home at all hours to stir up waves or to rescue stranded whales, the daughters remained as the delight of their father's heart. Fortunately he had an endless stock of nectar and ambrosia, for they were very idle housekeepers, as their mother had been before them, and preferred to spend their time sunbathing on the rocks and combing their long hair and singing sweetly in harmony, serene in the knowledge—as they assured him—that there were no men in the neighbourhood. However, Phorcys was not so sure of this, since even a god having been once bitten may be twice shy, and one day he packed the whole family into an extra-large scallop-shell and ferried them out to a tactfully chosen promontory where there was a delightful beach cut off from the sea by a line of knife-edged rocks and from the land by impassable cliffs with a few comfortable caves. Here the young sirens were to make their home.

At first the sirens were very much pleased with their new beach. The shore was edged with the most delightful pale green rocks, so they made themselves dresses to match and sat on the green rocks, combing their long fair hair with golden combs and singing as innocently as though there were not a man within hearing. Only gradually it dawned upon them that there was not a man within hearing, and then their music died away for a while and a sound of scolding rose above the hissing of waves sliced by the knife-edged rocks.

However, the sea was by no means empty. Dolphins slipped through the azure waves, and now and again there passed the square sail of a ship, or nearer at hand a galley approached with rhythmically beating oars. Then the sirens gathered on the green rocks and combed their long hair and sang as only those can sing who love music for its own sake. Far away on the galley the lookout man took two blind steps and fell with a splash into the sea. The

oars on the near side of the ship hesitated and stopped, while those on the far side rowed frantically to bring themselves nearer to that music, and in a few moments the galley crashed against the knife-edged rocks and was reduced to floating timbers drifting with the wind. At first this result rather dampened the spirits of the sirens, but the sight of a new ship made them forget their first disappointment and they sang their best. They soon became accustomed to the tiresome crashing of ships against the knife-edged rocks and came to realize that this was merely one of the drawbacks to a siren's life, which nevertheless was ornamental and gay. One statistically minded siren even recorded each crash by scratching a new tally on her favourite green rock.

The island behind the beach was very rocky and was usually uninhabited, but one day a shepherd brought his flock to graze on the island and, hearing their song, he forgot entirely that he had ever owned sheep. He walked blindly towards that unearthly music, stepped over the edge of the cliff and fell. Some of his sheep had done the same before and had broken their necks on the beach, later to become a welcome variant to the eternal sea-food of the sirens' table. But the shepherd was luckier. Some projecting wild olives on the face of the cliff broke his fall, and he arrived at the bottom, breathless and shaken but unhurt, to find himself sprawled face to face with a fair-haired siren. This young creature had found herself in poor voice that day and so, not wishing to lay herself open to disparagement by her musically critical sisters, she had disclaimed all interest in the Phoenician ship approaching and had withdrawn to the back of the beach. However, noticing that the shepherd's reviving eyes strayed towards the shore where her sisters were singing full-voiced to the ship, she, too, began to sing, but softly, and led the shepherd into one of the caves where he could rest more comfortably. Later in the day she helped him up to the clump of wild olives from which he could scramble to the top of the cliff.

After this it happened occasionally that the shepherd strayed in this direction, and the siren, being romantic by nature, sang softly to him, for it was a delight to her to see him, again as the first time, come tumbling through the wild olives to sprawl upon the beach, dazed and tousled. But, although she managed to keep her prize a secret from her sisters, whose minds were turned seaward, she could not escape the keen eyes of Pallas Athene, patron-goddess of old maids, and Pallas looked sourly upon this misuse of her sacred tree. Therefore, to mark her disapproval, Pallas removed the wild olives and left only their appearance on the cliff, so that, the next time that the shepherd tumbled down to the beach, he broke his neck quite conclusively. The siren

wept a little for him and buried him in the sand. However, there were many beautiful ships to distract her, and soon she was again taking her part in the chorus of welcome to mariners.

A few months later she gave birth to a daughter, and, as such a thing had never before happened on the beach, the baby was soon spoiled by a score of adoring aunts. The years passed, and the little siren grew into a lovely small girl who sat among her aunts on the green rocks and combed her fine hair with a golden comb and joined her piping treble to their songs and thrilled with the joy of an artist when she heard the crash of a ship against the knife-edged rocks. The sun was warm above, the cool waves lapped at her pale feet, seagulls cried and larks chanted shrilly overhead. The world was very beautiful, and women were made to be charming, and men were made to strive and die for them, and life was good.

The little siren grew to ripe maidenhood, and life burgeoned in her so that at times she lay for hours weeping happily for the sorrows that she did not know, and again she felt ecstatic with a painful joy that choked the song in her throat. She was more human than godlike, and she lacked something of that childlike insensitivity with which the gods armour themselves against the abrasion of eternity.

It happened one day when the sirens had most successfully drawn a Pelagian pirate ship to ruin upon the knife-edged rocks, that the body of a young sailor, bruised and scarred, was washed by the waves into the shallows near where the little siren sat. She had never seen a man from so near before. She waded out towards him and gazed fascinated upon the brown face framed in a mist of black hair floating in the water, and she longed to cradle that broken body in her arms and to rock it to contented sleep. The human in her welled up and overwhelmed the godlike, and she saw all men as her children to be loved and helped, not to be used and scorned. The drowned man drifted away on the current that swept the shore, and the little siren lay face down upon the sand and wept.

Thereafter, when ships appeared along the coast, the little siren turned away and fled to the farthest confines of the beach; and then, that she might not hear and think, she too sang softly, so that the grey warblers fluttered down from the cliffs to listen and the nightingale throbbed in sympathy among the rockroses. And there, one day, hidden from the promontory by the curving shore, a small boat rowed out to the knife-edged rocks. The song rose unbidden to the little siren's lips and then was bitten off. The boat came nearer, and the little siren saw that it was driven by a fisher lad, broad-shouldered and

brown, who was setting fish traps among the rocks. As he came, he sang to himself, and his voice, hoarse as a crow's, seemed to the little siren the most beautiful sound that she had ever heard, and his strong brown arms seemed the most desirable things on earth. Again the song rose in her, but human pity overwhelmed her, so that she crouched unseen in her green dress upon a green rock and loved and made no sound.

Day by day the little siren haunted that distant angle of beach where the knife-edged rocks crept close to the cliffs, and she watched her fisherman admiringly as he manoeuvred his boat skilfully among the cradling waves. She loved the leisureliness of his movements which made him seem immortal with all time ahead of him, and she knew and loved the songs that he sang in a voice like a saw cutting a knotty pine. She wished that he would look up and see her there, and at times she raised her golden comb and then, shivering, put it away again.

One day she saw him coming, and his manner was changed. Now he was driving his boat along as though he were pressed to be home again, and yet he was setting more fish traps than ever as though hunger followed him. From afar off she heard his voice raised in song, like a flock of terns creaking over a sandy shallow, and she knew that he was happy, happier than he had ever been. He was composing a new song which grew as he raised each fish trap from the heaving waves. And the song told of a girl named Glyke to whom he would be married tomorrow. . . .

The little siren sat stunned upon her rock, knowing that now he would never see her, and the thought that he had turned from her to seek some ugly brown fishwife along the shore was a knife twisted in her heart. She drew out her golden comb and loosened her golden hair and spread her green dress over the rock, and softly she began to sing, her white throat throbbing with the notes of love. The voices of the birds were stilled, and they fluttered down to listen. The fisherman had turned his boat away, and now he looked back, staring with shortsighted eyes that distinguished nothing. The little siren sang, she sang like the wind in the leafing trees, she sang like the nightingale who calls his mate out of the midnight sky. The boat drifted back as the fisherman stared from under his hand. The little siren rose from the green rock and spread her arms and sang, and the wind dropped, and even the cascade tinkling down the cliffs was stilled to listen. With a cry the fisherman plunged over the stern of his boat into the sea, and a great wave lifted him and cast him against the knife-edged rocks, and a second wave stretched his body at the little siren's feet.