

Wells Herbert George

The Sea Lady



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The Sea Lady

CHAPTER THE FIRST. THE COMING OF THE SEA LADY

I

Such previous landings of mermaids as have left a record, have all a flavour of doubt. Even the very circumstantial account of that Bruges Sea Lady, who was so clever at fancy work, gives occasion to the sceptic. I must confess that I was absolutely incredulous of such things until a year ago. But now, face to face with indisputable facts in my own immediate neighbourhood, and with my own second cousin Melville (of Seaton Carew) as the chief witness to the story, I see these old legends in a very different light. Yet so many people concerned themselves with the hushing up of this affair, that, but for my sedulous enquiries, I am certain it would have become as doubtful as those older legends in a couple of score of years. Even now to many minds —

The difficulties in the way of the hushing-up process were no doubt exceptionally great in this case, and that they did contrive to do so much, seems to show just how strong are the motives for secrecy in all such cases. There is certainly no remoteness nor obscurity about the scene of these events. They began upon the beach just east of Sandgate Castle, towards Folkestone, and they ended on the beach near Folkestone pier not two miles away. The beginning was in broad daylight on a bright blue day in August and in full sight of the windows of half a dozen houses. At first sight this alone is sufficient to make the popular want of information almost incredible. But of that you may think differently later.

Mrs. Randolph Bunting's two charming daughters were bathing at the time in company with their guest, Miss Mabel Glendower. It is from the latter lady chiefly, and from Mrs. Bunting, that I have pieced together the precise circumstances of the Sea Lady's arrival. From Miss Glendower, the elder of two Glendower girls, for all that she is a principal in almost all that follows, I have obtained, and have sought to obtain, no information whatever. There is the question of the lady's feelings — and in this case I gather they are of a peculiarly complex sort. Quite naturally they would be. At any rate, the natural ruthlessness of the literary calling has failed me. I have not ventured to touch them...

The villa residences to the east of Sandgate Castle, you must understand, are particularly lucky in having gardens that run right down to the beach. There is no intervening esplanade or road or path such as cuts off ninety-nine out of the hundred of houses that face the sea. As you look down on them from the western end of the Leas, you see them crowding the very margin. And as a great number of high groins stand out from the shore along this piece of coast, the beach is practically cut off and made private except at very low water, when people can get around the ends of the groins. These houses are consequently highly desirable during the bathing season, and it is the custom of many of their occupiers to let them furnished during the summer to persons of fashion and affluence.

The Randolph Buntings were such persons — indisputably. It is true of course that they were not Aristocrats, or indeed what an unpaid herald would freely call "gentle." They had no right to any sort of arms. But then, as Mrs. Bunting would sometimes remark, they made no pretence of that sort; they were quite free (as indeed everybody is nowadays) from snobbery. They were simple

homely Buntings – Randolph Buntings – “good people” as the saying is – of a widely diffused Hampshire stock addicted to brewing, and whether a suitably remunerated herald could or could not have proved them “gentle” there can be no doubt that Mrs. Bunting was quite justified in taking in the *Gentlewoman*, and that Mr. Bunting and Fred were sedulous gentlemen, and that all their ways and thoughts were delicate and nice. And they had staying with them the two Miss Glendowers, to whom Mrs. Bunting had been something of a mother, ever since Mrs. Glendower’s death.

The two Miss Glendowers were half sisters, and gentle beyond dispute, a county family race that had only for a generation stooped to trade, and risen at once Antæus-like, refreshed and enriched. The elder, Adeline, was the rich one – the heiress, with the commercial blood in her veins. She was really very rich, and she had dark hair and grey eyes and serious views, and when her father died, which he did a little before her step-mother, she had only the later portion of her later youth left to her. She was nearly seven-and-twenty. She had sacrificed her earlier youth to her father’s infirmity of temper in a way that had always reminded her of the girlhood of Elizabeth Barrett Browning. But after his departure for a sphere where his temper has no doubt a wider scope – for what is this world for if it is not for the Formation of Character? – she had come out strongly. It became evident she had always had a mind, and a very active and capable one, an accumulated fund of energy and much ambition. She had bloomed into a clear and critical socialism, and she had blossomed at public meetings; and now she was engaged to that really very brilliant and promising but rather extravagant and romantic person, Harry Chatteris, the nephew of an earl and the hero of a scandal, and quite a possible Liberal candidate for the Hythe division of Kent. At least this last matter was under discussion and he was about, and Miss Glendower liked to feel she was supporting him by being about too, and that was chiefly why the Buntings had taken a house in Sandgate for the summer. Sometimes he would come and stay a night or so with them, sometimes he would be off upon affairs, for he was known to be a very versatile, brilliant, first-class political young man – and Hythe very lucky to have a bid for him, all things considered. And Fred Bunting was engaged to Miss Glendower’s less distinguished, much less wealthy, seventeen-year old and possibly altogether more ordinary half-sister, Mabel Glendower, who had discerned long since when they were at school together that it wasn’t any good trying to be clear when Adeline was about.

The Buntings did not bathe “mixed,” a thing indeed that was still only very doubtfully decent in 1898, but Mr. Randolph Bunting and his son Fred came down to the beach with them frankly instead of hiding away or going for a walk according to the older fashion. (This, notwithstanding that Miss Mabel Glendower, Fred’s *fiancée* to boot, was of the bathing party.) They formed a little procession down under the evergreen oaks in the garden and down the ladder and so to the sea’s margin.

Mrs. Bunting went first, looking as it were for Peeping Tom with her glasses, and Miss Glendower, who never bathed because it made her feel undignified, went with her – wearing one of those simple, costly “art” morning costumes Socialists affect. Behind this protecting van came, one by one, the three girls, in their beautiful Parisian bathing dresses and headdresses – though these were of course completely muffled up in huge hooded gowns of towelling – and wearing of course stockings and shoes – they bathed in stockings and shoes. Then came Mrs. Bunting’s maid and the second housemaid and the maid the Glendower girls had brought, carrying towels, and then at a little interval the two men carrying ropes and things. (Mrs. Bunting always put a rope around each of her daughters before ever they put a foot in the water and held it until they were safely out again. But Mabel Glendower would not have a rope.)

Where the garden ends and the beach begins Miss Glendower turned aside and sat down on the green iron seat under the evergreen oak, and having found her place in “Sir George Tressady” – a book of which she was naturally enough at that time inordinately fond – sat watching the others go on down the beach. There they were a very bright and very pleasant group of prosperous animated

people upon the sunlit beach, and beyond them in streaks of grey and purple, and altogether calm save for a pattern of dainty little wavelets, was that ancient mother of surprises, the Sea.

As soon as they reached the high-water mark where it is no longer indecent to be clad merely in a bathing dress, each of the young ladies handed her attendant her wrap, and after a little fun and laughter Mrs. Bunting looked carefully to see if there were any jelly fish, and then they went in. And after a minute or so, it seems Betty, the elder Miss Bunting, stopped splashing and looked, and then they all looked, and there, about thirty yards away was the Sea Lady's head, as if she were swimming back to land.

Naturally they concluded that she must be a neighbour from one of the adjacent houses. They were a little surprised not to have noticed her going down into the water, but beyond that her apparition had no shadow of wonder for them. They made the furtive penetrating observations usual in such cases. They could see that she was swimming very gracefully and that she had a lovely face and very beautiful arms, but they could not see her wonderful golden hair because all that was hidden in a fashionable Phrygian bathing cap, picked up – as she afterwards admitted to my second cousin – some nights before upon a Norman *plage*. Nor could they see her lovely shoulders because of the red costume she wore.

They were just on the point of feeling their inspection had reached the limit of really nice manners and Mabel was pretending to go on splashing again and saying to Betty, "She's wearing a red dress. I wish I could see –" when something very terrible happened.

The swimmer gave a queer sort of flop in the water, threw up her arms and – vanished!

It was the sort of thing that seems for an instant to freeze everybody, just one of those things that everyone has read of and imagined and very few people have seen.

For a space no one did anything. One, two, three seconds passed and then for an instant a bare arm flashed in the air and vanished again.

Mabel tells me she was quite paralysed with horror, she did nothing all the time, but the two Miss Buntings, recovering a little, screamed out, "Oh, she's drowning!" and hastened to get out of the sea at once, a proceeding accelerated by Mrs. Bunting, who with great presence of mind pulled at the ropes with all her weight and turned about and continued to pull long after they were many yards from the water's edge and indeed cowering in a heap at the foot of the sea wall. Miss Glendower became aware of a crisis and descended the steps, "Sir George Tressady" in one hand and the other shading her eyes, crying in her clear resolute voice, "She must be saved!" The maids of course were screaming – as became them – but the two men appear to have acted with the greatest presence of mind. "Fred, Nexdoors ledder!" said Mr. Randolph Bunting – for the next-door neighbour instead of having convenient stone steps had a high wall and a long wooden ladder, and it had often been pointed out by Mr. Bunting if ever an accident should happen to anyone there was *that*! In a moment it seems they had both flung off jacket and vest, collar, tie and shoes, and were running the neighbour's ladder out into the water.

"Where did she go, Ded?" said Fred.

"Right out hea!" said Mr. Bunting, and to confirm his word there flashed again an arm and "something dark" – something which in the light of all that subsequently happened I am inclined to suppose was an unintentional exposure of the Lady's tail.

Neither of the two gentlemen are expert swimmers – indeed so far as I can gather, Mr. Bunting in the excitement of the occasion forgot almost everything he had ever known of swimming – but they waded out valiantly one on each side of the ladder, thrust it out before them and committed themselves to the deep, in a manner casting no discredit upon our nation and race.

Yet on the whole I think it is a matter for general congratulation that they were not engaged in the rescue of a genuinely drowning person. At the time of my enquiries whatever soreness of argument that may once have obtained between them had passed, and it is fairly clear that while Fred Bunting was engaged in swimming hard against the long side of the ladder and so causing it

to rotate slowly on its axis, Mr. Bunting had already swallowed a very considerable amount of sea-water and was kicking Fred in the chest with aimless vigour. This he did, as he explains, “to get my legs down, you know. Something about that ladder, you know, and they *would* go up!”

And then quite unexpectedly the Sea Lady appeared beside them. One lovely arm supported Mr. Bunting about the waist and the other was over the ladder. She did not appear at all pale or frightened or out of breath, Fred told me when I cross-examined him, though at the time he was too violently excited to note a detail of that sort. Indeed she smiled and spoke in an easy pleasant voice.

“Cramp,” she said, “I have cramp.” Both the men were convinced of that.

Mr. Bunting was on the point of telling her to hold tight and she would be quite safe, when a little wave went almost entirely into his mouth and reduced him to wild splutterings.

“*We’ll* get you in,” said Fred, or something of that sort, and so they all hung, bobbing in the water to the tune of Mr. Bunting’s trouble.

They seem to have rocked so for some time. Fred says the Sea Lady looked calm but a little puzzled and that she seemed to measure the distance shoreward. “You *mean* to save me?” she asked him.

He was trying to think what could be done before his father drowned. “We’re saving you now,” he said.

“You’ll take me ashore?”

As she seemed so cool he thought he would explain his plan of operations, “Trying to get – end of ladder – kick with my legs. Only a few yards out of our depth – if we could only – ”

“Minute – get my breath – moufu’ sea-water,” said Mr. Bunting. *Splash!* wuff!..

And then it seemed to Fred that a little miracle happened. There was a swirl of the water like the swirl about a screw propeller, and he gripped the Sea Lady and the ladder just in time, as it seemed to him, to prevent his being washed far out into the Channel. His father vanished from his sight with an expression of astonishment just forming on his face and reappeared beside him, so far as back and legs are concerned, holding on to the ladder with a sort of death grip. And then behold! They had shifted a dozen yards inshore, and they were in less than five feet of water and Fred could feel the ground.

At its touch his amazement and dismay immediately gave way to the purest heroism. He thrust ladder and Sea Lady before him, abandoned the ladder and his now quite disordered parent, caught her tightly in his arms, and bore her up out of the water. The young ladies cried “Saved!” the maids cried “Saved!” Distant voices echoed “Saved, Hooray!” Everybody in fact cried “Saved!” except Mrs. Bunting, who was, she says, under the impression that Mr. Bunting was in a fit, and Mr. Bunting, who seems to have been under an impression that all those laws of nature by which, under Providence, we are permitted to float and swim, were in suspense and that the best thing to do was to kick very hard and fast until the end should come. But in a dozen seconds or so his head was up again and his feet were on the ground and he was making whale and walrus noises, and noises like a horse and like an angry cat and like sawing, and was wiping the water from his eyes; and Mrs. Bunting (except that now and then she really *had* to turn and say “*Randolph!*”) could give her attention to the beautiful burthen that clung about her son.

And it is a curious thing that the Sea Lady was at least a minute out of the water before anyone discovered that she was in any way different from – other ladies. I suppose they were all crowding close to her and looking at her beautiful face, or perhaps they imagined that she was wearing some indiscreet but novel form of dark riding habit or something of that sort. Anyhow not one of them noticed it, although it must have been before their eyes as plain as day. Certainly it must have blended with the costume. And there they stood, imagining that Fred had rescued a lovely lady of indisputable fashion, who had been bathing from some neighbouring house, and wondering why on earth there was nobody on the beach to claim her. And she clung to Fred and, as Miss Mabel Glendower subsequently remarked in the course of conversation with him, Fred clung to her.

"I had cramp," said the Sea Lady, with her lips against Fred's cheek and one eye on Mrs. Bunting. "I am sure it was cramp... I've got it still."

"I don't see anybody – " began Mrs. Bunting.

"Please carry me in," said the Sea Lady, closing her eyes as if she were ill – though her cheek was flushed and warm. "Carry me in."

"Where?" gasped Fred.

"Carry me into the house," she whispered to him.

"Which house?"

Mrs. Bunting came nearer.

"*Your* house," said the Sea Lady, and shut her eyes for good and became oblivious to all further remarks.

"She – But I don't understand – " said Mrs. Bunting, addressing everybody...

And then it was they saw it. Nettie, the younger Miss Bunting, saw it first. She pointed, she says, before she could find words to speak. Then they all saw it! Miss Glendower, I believe, was the person who was last to see it. At any rate it would have been like her if she had been.

"Mother," said Nettie, giving words to the general horror. "*Mother!* She has a *tail!*"

And then the three maids and Mabel Glendower screamed one after the other. "Look!" they cried. "A tail!"

"Of all – " said Mrs. Bunting, and words failed her.

"*Oh!*" said Miss Glendower, and put her hand to her heart.

And then one of the maids gave it a name. "It's a mermaid!" screamed the maid, and then everyone screamed, "It's a mermaid."

Except the mermaid herself; she remained quite passive, pretending to be insensible partly on Fred's shoulder and altogether in his arms.

II

That, you know, is the tableau so far as I have been able to piece it together again. You must imagine this little knot of people upon the beach, and Mr. Bunting, I figure, a little apart, just wading out of the water and very wet and incredulous and half drowned. And the neighbour's ladder was drifting quietly out to sea.

Of course it was one of those positions that have an air of being conspicuous.

Indeed it was conspicuous. It was some way below high water and the group stood out perhaps thirty yards down the beach. Nobody, as Mrs. Bunting told my cousin Melville, knew a bit *what* to do and they all had even an exaggerated share of the national hatred of being seen in a puzzle. The mermaid seemed content to remain a beautiful problem clinging to Fred, and by all accounts she was a reasonable burthen for a man. It seems that the very large family of people who were stopping at the house called Koot Hoomi had appeared in force, and they were all staring and gesticulating. They were just the sort of people the Buntings did not want to know – tradespeople very probably. Presently one of the men – the particularly vulgar man who used to shoot at the gulls – began putting down their ladder as if he intended to offer advice, and Mrs. Bunting also became aware of the black glare of the field glasses of a still more horrid man to the west.

Moreover the popular author who lived next door, an irascible dark square-headed little man in spectacles, suddenly turned up and began bawling from his inaccessible wall top something foolish about his ladder. Nobody thought of his silly ladder or took any trouble about it, naturally. He was quite stupidly excited. To judge by his tone and gestures he was using dreadful language and seemed disposed every moment to jump down to the beach and come to them.

And then to crown the situation, over the westward groin appeared Low Excursionists!

First of all their heads came, and then their remarks. Then they began to clamber the breakwater with joyful shouts.

“Pip, Pip,” said the Low Excursionists as they climbed – it was the year of “pip, pip” – and, “What HO she bumps!” and then less generally, “What’s up ’ere?”

And the voices of other Low Excursionists still invisible answered, “Pip, Pip.”

It was evidently a large party.

“Anything wrong?” shouted one of the Low Excursionists at a venture.

“My *dear!*” said Mrs. Bunting to Mabel, “what *are* we to do?” And in her description of the affair to my cousin Melville she used always to make that the *clou* of the story. “My DEAR! What ARE we to do?”

I believe that in her desperation she even glanced at the water. But of course to have put the mermaid back then would have involved the most terrible explanations...

It was evident there was only one thing to be done. Mrs. Bunting said as much. “The only thing,” said she, “is to carry her indoors.”

And carry her indoors they did!..

One can figure the little procession. In front Fred, wet and astonished but still clinging and clung to, and altogether too out of breath for words. And in his arms the Sea Lady. She had a beautiful figure, I understand, until that horrible tail began (and the fin of it, Mrs. Bunting told my cousin in a whispered confidence, went up and down and with pointed corners for all the world like a mackerel’s). It flopped and dripped along the path – I imagine. She was wearing a very nice and very long-skirted dress of red material trimmed with coarse white lace, and she had, Mabel told me, a *gilet*, though that would scarcely show as they went up the garden. And that Phrygian cap hid all her golden hair and showed the white, low, level forehead over her sea-blue eyes. From all that followed, I imagine her at the moment scanning the veranda and windows of the house with a certain eagerness of scrutiny.

Behind this staggering group of two I believe Mrs. Bunting came. Then Mr. Bunting. Dreadfully wet and broken down Mr. Bunting must have been by then, and from one or two things I have noticed since, I can’t help imagining him as pursuing his wife with, “Of course, my dear, I couldn’t tell, you know!”

And then, in a dismayed yet curious bunch, the girls in their wraps of towelling and the maids carrying the ropes and things and, as if inadvertently, as became them, most of Mr. and Fred Bunting’s clothes.

And then Miss Glendower, for once at least in no sort of pose whatever, clutching “Sir George Tressady” and perplexed and disturbed beyond measure.

And then, as it were pursuing them all, “Pip, pip,” and the hat and raised eyebrows of a Low Excursionist still anxious to know “What’s up?” from the garden end.

So it was, or at least in some such way, and to the accompaniment of the wildest ravings about some ladder or other heard all too distinctly over the garden wall – (“Overdressed Snobbs take my *rare old English adjective* ladder...!”) – that they carried the Sea Lady (who appeared serenely insensible to everything) up through the house and laid her down upon the couch in Mrs. Bunting’s room.

And just as Miss Glendower was suggesting that the very best thing they could do would be to send for a doctor, the Sea Lady with a beautiful naturalness sighed and came to.

CHAPTER THE SECOND SOME FIRST IMPRESSIONS

I

There with as much verisimilitude as I can give it, is how the Folkestone mermaid really came to land. There can be no doubt that the whole affair was a deliberately planned intrusion upon her part. She never had cramp, she couldn't have cramp, and as for drowning, nobody was near drowning for a moment except Mr. Bunting, whose valuable life she very nearly sacrificed at the outset of her adventure. And her next proceeding was to demand an interview with Mrs. Bunting and to presume upon her youthful and glowing appearance to gain the support, sympathy and assistance of that good-hearted lady (who as a matter of fact was a thing of yesterday, a mere chicken in comparison with her own immemorial years) in her extraordinary raid upon Humanity.

Her treatment of Mrs. Bunting would be incredible if we did not know that, in spite of many disadvantages, the Sea Lady was an extremely well read person. She admitted as much in several later conversations with my cousin Melville. For a time there was a friendly intimacy – so Melville always preferred to present it – between these two, and my cousin, who has a fairly considerable amount of curiosity, learnt many very interesting details about the life “out there” or “down there” – for the Sea Lady used either expression. At first the Sea Lady was exceedingly reticent under the gentle insistence of his curiosity, but after a time, I gather, she gave way to bursts of cheerful confidence. “It is clear,” says my cousin, “that the old ideas of the submarine life as a sort of perpetual game of ‘who-hoop’ through groves of coral, diversified by moonlight hair-combings on rocky strands, need very extensive modification.” In this matter of literature, for example, they have practically all that we have, and unlimited leisure to read it in. Melville is very insistent upon and rather envious of that unlimited leisure. A picture of a mermaid swinging in a hammock of woven seaweed, with what bishops call a “latter-day” novel in one hand and a sixteen candle-power phosphorescent fish in the other, may jar upon one's preconceptions, but it is certainly far more in accordance with the picture of the abyss she printed on his mind. Everywhere Change works her will on things. Everywhere, and even among the immortals, Modernity spreads. Even on Olympus I suppose there is a Progressive party and a new Phaeton agitating to supersede the horses of his father by some solar motor of his own. I suggested as much to Melville and he said “Horrible! Horrible!” and stared hard at my study fire. Dear old Melville! She gave him no end of facts about Deep Sea Reading.

Of course they do not print books “out there,” for the printer's ink under water would not so much run as fly – she made that very plain; but in one way or another nearly the whole of terrestrial literature, says Melville, has come to them. “We know,” she said. They form indeed a distinct reading public, and additions to their vast submerged library that circulates forever with the tides, are now pretty systematically sought. The sources are various and in some cases a little odd. Many books have been found in sunken ships. “Indeed!” said Melville. There is always a dropping and blowing overboard of novels and magazines from most passenger-carrying vessels – sometimes, but these are not as a rule valuable additions – a deliberate shying overboard. But sometimes books of an exceptional sort are thrown over when they are quite finished. (Melville is a dainty irritable reader and no doubt he understood that.) From the sea beaches of holiday resorts, moreover, the lighter sorts of literature are occasionally getting blown out to sea. And so soon as the Booms of our great Popular Novelists are over, Melville assured me, the libraries find it

convenient to cast such surplus copies of their current works as the hospitals and prisons cannot take, below high-water mark.

“That’s not generally known,” said I.

“*They* know it,” said Melville.

In other ways the beaches yield. Young couples who “begin to sit heapy,” the Sea Lady told my cousin, as often as not will leave excellent modern fiction behind them, when at last they return to their proper place. There is a particularly fine collection of English work, it seems, in the deep water of the English Channel; practically the whole of the Tauchnitz Library is there, thrown overboard at the last moment by conscientious or timid travellers returning from the continent, and there was for a time a similar source of supply of American reprints in the Mersey, but that has fallen off in recent years. And the Deep Sea Mission for Fishermen has now for some years been raining down tracts and giving a particularly elevated tone of thought to the extensive shallows of the North Sea. The Sea Lady was very precise on these points.

When one considers the conditions of its accumulation, one is not surprised to hear that the element of fiction is as dominant in this Deep Sea Library as it is upon the counters of Messrs. Mudie; but my cousin learnt that the various illustrated magazines, and particularly the fashion papers, are valued even more highly than novels, are looked for far more eagerly and perused with envious emotion. Indeed on that point my cousin got a sudden glimpse of one of the motives that had brought this daring young lady into the air. He made some sort of suggestion. “We should have taken to dressing long ago,” she said, and added, with a vague quality of laughter in her tone, “it isn’t that we’re unfeminine, Mr. Melville. Only – as I was explaining to Mrs. Bunting, one must consider one’s circumstances – how *can* one *hope* to keep anything nice under water? Imagine lace!”

“Soaked!” said my cousin Melville.

“Drenched!” said the Sea Lady.

“Ruined!” said my cousin Melville.

“And then you know,” said the Sea Lady very gravely, “one’s hair!”

“Of course,” said Melville. “Why! – you can never get it *dry*!”

“That’s precisely it,” said she.

My cousin Melville had a new light on an old topic. “And that’s why – in the old time – ?”

“Exactly!” she cried, “exactly! Before there were so many Excursionists and sailors and Low People about, one came out, one sat and brushed it in the sun. And then of course it really *was* possible to do it up. But now – ”

She made a petulant gesture and looked gravely at Melville, biting her lip the while. My cousin made a sympathetic noise. “The horrid modern spirit,” he said – almost automatically...

But though fiction and fashion appear to be so regrettably dominant in the nourishment of the mer-mind, it must not be supposed that the most serious side of our reading never reaches the bottom of the sea. There was, for example, a case quite recently, the Sea Lady said, of the captain of a sailing ship whose mind had become unhinged by the huckstering uproar of the *Times* and *Daily Mail*, and who had not only bought a second-hand copy of the *Times* reprint of the Encyclopædia Britannica, but also that dense collection of literary snacks and samples, that All-Literature Sausage which has been compressed under the weighty editing of Doctor Richard Garnett. It has long been notorious that even the greatest minds of the past were far too copious and confusing in their – as the word goes – lubrications. Doctor Garnett, it is alleged, has seized the gist and presented it so compactly that almost any business man now may take hold of it without hindrance to his more serious occupations. The unfortunate and misguided seaman seems to have carried the entire collection aboard with him, with the pretty evident intention of coming to land in Sydney the wisest man alive – a Hindoo-minded thing to do. The result might have been anticipated. The mass shifted in the night, threw the whole weight of the science of the middle nineteenth century and the

literature of all time, in a virulently concentrated state, on one side of his little vessel and capsized it instantly...

The ship, the Sea Lady said, dropped into the abyss as if it were loaded with lead, and its crew and other movables did not follow it down until much later in the day. The captain was the first to arrive, said the Sea Lady, and it is a curious fact, due probably to some preliminary dippings into his purchase, that he came head first, instead of feet down and limbs expanded in the customary way...

However, such exceptional windfalls avail little against the rain of light literature that is constantly going on. The novel and the newspaper remain the world's reading even at the bottom of the sea. As subsequent events would seem to show, it must have been from the common latter-day novel and the newspaper that the Sea Lady derived her ideas of human life and sentiment and the inspiration of her visit. And if at times she seemed to underestimate the nobler tendencies of the human spirit, if at times she seemed disposed to treat Adeline Glendower and many of the deeper things of life with a certain sceptical levity, if she did at last indisputably subordinate reason and right feeling to passion, it is only just to her, and to those deeper issues, that we should ascribe her aberrations to their proper cause...

II

My cousin Melville, I was saying, did at one time or another get a vague, a very vague conception of what that deep-sea world was like. But whether his conception has any quality of truth in it is more than I dare say. He gives me an impression of a very strange world indeed, a green luminous fluidity in which these beings float, a world lit by great shining monsters that drift athwart it, and by waving forests of nebulous luminosity amidst which the little fishes drift like netted stars. It is a world with neither sitting, nor standing, nor going, nor coming, through which its inhabitants float and drift as one floats and drifts in dreams. And the way they live there! "My dear man!" said Melville, "it must be like a painted ceiling!.."

I do not even feel certain that it is in the sea particularly that this world of the Sea Lady is to be found. But about those saturated books and drowned scraps of paper, you say? Things are not always what they seem, and she told him all of that, we must reflect, one laughing afternoon.

She could appear, at times, he says, as real as you or I, and again came mystery all about her. There were times when it seemed to him you might have hurt her or killed her as you can hurt and kill anyone – with a penknife for example – and there were times when it seemed to him you could have destroyed the whole material universe and left her smiling still. But of this ambiguous element in the lady, more is to be told later. There are wider seas than ever keel sailed upon, and depths that no lead of human casting will ever plumb. When it is all summed up, I have to admit, I do not know, I cannot tell. I fall back upon Melville and my poor array of collected facts. At first there was amazingly little strangeness about her for any who had to deal with her. There she was, palpably solid and material, a lady out of the sea.

This modern world is a world where the wonderful is utterly commonplace. We are bred to show a quiet freedom from amazement, and why should we boggle at material Mermaids, with Dewars solidifying all sorts of impalpable things and Marconi waves spreading everywhere? To the Buntings she was as matter of fact, as much a matter of authentic and reasonable motives and of sound solid sentimentality, as everything else in the Bunting world. So she was for them in the beginning, and so up to this day with them her memory remains.

III

The way in which the Sea Lady talked to Mrs. Bunting on that memorable morning, when she lay all wet and still visibly fishy on the couch in Mrs. Bunting's dressing-room, I am also able

to give with some little fulness, because Mrs. Bunting repeated it all several times, acting the more dramatic speeches in it, to my cousin Melville in several of those good long talks that both of them in those happy days – and particularly Mrs. Bunting – always enjoyed so much. And with her very first speech, it seems, the Sea Lady took her line straight to Mrs. Bunting's generous managing heart. She sat up on the couch, drew the antimacassar modestly over her deformity, and sometimes looking sweetly down and sometimes openly and trustfully into Mrs. Bunting's face, and speaking in a soft clear grammatical manner that stamped her at once as no mere mermaid but a finished fine Sea Lady, she “made a clean breast of it,” as Mrs. Bunting said, and “fully and frankly” placed herself in Mrs. Bunting's hands.

“Mrs. Bunting,” said Mrs. Bunting to my cousin Melville, in a dramatic rendering of the Sea Lady's manner, “do permit me to apologise for this intrusion, for I know it *is* an intrusion. But indeed it has almost been *forced* upon me, and if you will only listen to my story, Mrs. Bunting, I think you will find – well, if not a complete excuse for me – for I can understand how exacting your standards must be – at any rate *some* excuse for what I have done – for what I *must* call, Mrs. Bunting, my deceitful conduct towards you. Deceitful it was, Mrs. Bunting, for I never had cramp – But then, Mrs. Bunting” – and here Mrs. Bunting would insert a long impressive pause – “I never had a mother!”

“And then and there,” said Mrs. Bunting, when she told the story to my cousin Melville, “the poor child burst into tears and confessed she had been born ages and ages ago in some dreadful miraculous way in some terrible place near Cyprus, and had no more right to a surname – Well, *there* – !” said Mrs. Bunting, telling the story to my cousin Melville and making the characteristic gesture with which she always passed over and disowned any indelicacy to which her thoughts might have tended. “And all the while speaking with such a nice accent and moving in such a ladylike way!”

“Of course,” said my cousin Melville, “there are classes of people in whom one excuses – One must weigh – ”

“Precisely,” said Mrs. Bunting. “And you see it seems she deliberately chose *me* as the very sort of person she had always wanted to appeal to. It wasn't as if she came to us haphazard – she picked us out. She had been swimming round the coast watching people day after day, she said, for quite a long time, and she said when she saw my face, watching the girls bathe – you know how funny girls are,” said Mrs. Bunting, with a little deprecatory laugh, and all the while with a moisture of emotion in her kindly eyes. “She took quite a violent fancy to me from the very first.”

“I can *quite* believe *that*, at any rate,” said my cousin Melville with unction. I know he did, although he always leaves it out of the story when he tells it to me. But then he forgets that I have had the occasional privilege of making a third party in these good long talks.

“You know it's most extraordinary and exactly like the German story,” said Mrs. Bunting. “Oom – what is it?”

“Undine?”

“Exactly – yes. And it really seems these poor creatures are Immortal, Mr. Melville – at least within limits – creatures born of the elements and resolved into the elements again – and just as it is in the story – there's always a something – they have no Souls! No Souls at all! Nothing! And the poor child feels it. She feels it dreadfully. But in order to *get* souls, Mr. Melville, you know they have to come into the world of men. At least so they believe down there. And so she has come to Folkestone. To get a soul. Of course that's her great object, Mr. Melville, but she's not at all fanatical or silly about it. Any more than *we* are. Of course *we* – people who feel deeply – ”

“Of course,” said my cousin Melville, with, I know, a momentary expression of profound gravity, drooping eyelids and a hushed voice. For my cousin does a good deal with his soul, one way and another.

“And she feels that if she comes to earth at all,” said Mrs. Bunting, “she *must* come among *nice* people and in a nice way. One can understand her feeling like that. But imagine her difficulties! To be a mere cause of public excitement, and silly paragraphs in the silly season, to be made a sort of show of, in fact – she doesn’t want *any* of it,” added Mrs. Bunting, with the emphasis of both hands.

“What *does* she want?” asked my cousin Melville.

“She wants to be treated exactly like a human being, to *be* a human being, just like you or me. And she asks to stay with us, to be one of our family, and to learn how we live. She has asked me to advise her what books to read that are really nice, and where she can get a dress-maker, and how she can find a clergyman to sit under who would really be likely to understand her case, and everything. She wants me to advise her about it all. She wants to put herself altogether in my hands. And she asked it all so nicely and sweetly. She wants me to advise her about it all.”

“Um,” said my cousin Melville.

“You should have heard her!” cried Mrs. Bunting.

“Practically it’s another daughter,” he reflected.

“Yes,” said Mrs. Bunting, “and even that did not frighten me. She admitted as much.”

“Still – ”

He took a step.

“She has means?” he inquired abruptly.

“Ample. She told me there was a box. She said it was moored at the end of a groin, and accordingly dear Randolph watched all through luncheon, and afterwards, when they could wade out and reach the end of the rope that tied it, he and Fred pulled it in and helped Fitch and the coachman carry it up. It’s a curious little box for a lady to have, well made, of course, but of wood, with a ship painted on the top and the name of ‘Tom’ cut in it roughly with a knife; but, as she says, leather simply will *not* last down there, and one has to put up with what one can get; and the great thing is it’s *full*, perfectly full, of gold coins and things. Yes, gold – and diamonds, Mr. Melville. You know Randolph understands something – Yes, well he says that box – oh! I couldn’t tell you *how* much it isn’t worth! And all the gold things with just a sort of faint reddy touch... But anyhow, she is rich, as well as charming and beautiful. And really you know, Mr. Melville, altogether – Well, I’m going to help her, just as much as ever I can. Practically, she’s to be our paying guest. As you know – it’s no great secret between *us* – Adeline – Yes... She’ll be the same. And I shall bring her out and introduce her to people and so forth. It will be a great help. And for everyone except just a few intimate friends, she is to be just a human being who happens to be an invalid – temporarily an invalid – and we are going to engage a good, trustworthy woman – the sort of woman who isn’t astonished at anything, you know – they’re a little expensive but they’re to be got even nowadays – who will be her maid – and make her dresses, her skirts at any rate – and we shall dress her in long skirts – and throw something over It, you know – ”

“Over – ?”

“The tail, you know.”

My cousin Melville said “Precisely!” with his head and eyebrows. But that was the point that hadn’t been clear to him so far, and it took his breath away. Positively – a tail! All sorts of incorrect theories went by the board. Somehow he felt this was a topic not to be too urgently pursued. But he and Mrs. Bunting were old friends.

“And she really has ... a tail?” he asked.

“Like the tail of a big mackerel,” said Mrs. Bunting, and he asked no more.

“It’s a most extraordinary situation,” he said.

“But what else *could* I do?” asked Mrs. Bunting.

“Of course the thing’s a tremendous experiment,” said my cousin Melville, and repeated quite inadvertently, “*a tail!*”

Clear and vivid before his eyes, obstructing absolutely the advance of his thoughts, were the shiny clear lines, the oily black, the green and purple and silver, and the easy expansiveness of a mackerel's termination.

"But really, you know," said my cousin Melville, protesting in the name of reason and the nineteenth century – "a tail!"

"I patted it," said Mrs. Bunting.

IV

Certain supplementary aspects of the Sea Lady's first conversation with Mrs. Bunting I got from that lady herself afterwards.

The Sea Lady had made one queer mistake. "Your four charming daughters," she said, "and your two sons."

"My dear!" cried Mrs. Bunting – they had got through their preliminaries by then – "I've only two daughters and one son!"

"The young man who carried – who rescued me?"

"Yes. And the other two girls are friends, you know, visitors who are staying with me. On land one has visitors – "

"I know. So I made a mistake?"

"Oh yes."

"And the other young man?"

"You don't mean Mr. Bunting."

"Who is Mr. Bunting?"

"The other gentleman who – "

"No!"

"There was no one – "

"But several mornings ago?"

"Could it have been Mr. Melville?... I know! You mean Mr. Chatteris! I remember, he came down with us one morning. A tall young man with fair – rather curlyish you might say – hair, wasn't it? And a rather thoughtful face. He was dressed all in white linen and he sat on the beach."

"I fancy he did," said the Sea Lady.

"He's not my son. He's – he's a friend. He's engaged to Adeline, to the elder Miss Glendower. He was stopping here for a night or so. I daresay he'll come again on his way back from Paris. Dear me! Fancy *my* having a son like that!"

The Sea Lady was not quite prompt in replying.

"What a stupid mistake for me to make!" she said slowly; and then with more animation, "Of course, now I think, he's much too old to be your son!"

"Well, he's thirty-two!" said Mrs. Bunting with a smile.

"It's preposterous."

"I won't say *that*."

"But I saw him only at a distance, you know," said the Sea Lady; and then, "And so he is engaged to Miss Glendower? And Miss Glendower – ?"

"Is the young lady in the purple robe who – "

"Who carried a book?"

"Yes," said Mrs. Bunting, "that's the one. They've been engaged three months."

"Dear me!" said the Sea Lady. "She seemed – And is he very much in love with her?"

"Of course," said Mrs. Bunting.

"*Very* much?"

"Oh – of *course*. If he wasn't, he wouldn't – "

“Of course,” said the Sea Lady thoughtfully.

“And it’s such an excellent match in every way. Adeline’s just in the very position to help him – ”

And Mrs. Bunting it would seem briefly but clearly supplied an indication of the precise position of Mr. Chatteris, not omitting even that he was the nephew of an earl, as indeed why should she omit it? – and the splendid prospects of his alliance with Miss Glendower’s plebeian but extensive wealth. The Sea Lady listened gravely. “He is young, he is able, he may still be anything – anything. And she is so earnest, so clever herself – always reading. She even reads Blue Books – government Blue Books I mean – dreadful statistical schedulely things. And the condition of the poor and all those things. She knows more about the condition of the poor than any one I’ve ever met; what they earn and what they eat, and how many of them live in a room. So dreadfully crowded, you know – perfectly shocking... She is just the helper he needs. So dignified – so capable of giving political parties and influencing people, so earnest! And you know she can talk to workmen and take an interest in trades unions, and in quite astonishing things. *I* always think she’s just *Marcella* come to life.”

And from that the good lady embarked upon an illustrative but involved anecdote of Miss Glendower’s marvellous blue-bookishness...

“He’ll come here again soon?” the Sea Lady asked quite carelessly in the midst of it.

The query was carried away and lost in the anecdote, so that later the Sea Lady repeated her question even more carelessly.

But Mrs. Bunting did not know whether the Sea Lady sighed at all or not. She thinks not. She was so busy telling her all about everything that I don’t think she troubled very much to see how her information was received.

What mind she had left over from her own discourse was probably centred on the tail.

V

Even to Mrs. Bunting’s senses – she is one of those persons who take everything (except of course impertinence or impropriety) quite calmly – it must, I think, have been a little astonishing to find herself sitting in her boudoir, politely taking tea with a real live legendary creature. They were having tea in the boudoir, because of callers, and quite quietly because, in spite of the Sea Lady’s smiling assurances, Mrs. Bunting would have it she *must* be tired and unequal to the exertions of social intercourse. “After *such* a journey,” said Mrs. Bunting. There were just the three, Adeline Glendower being the third; and Fred and the three other girls, I understand, hung about in a general sort of way up and down the staircase (to the great annoyance of the servants who were thus kept out of it altogether) confirming one another’s views of the tail, arguing on the theory of mermaids, revisiting the garden and beach and trying to invent an excuse for seeing the invalid again. They were forbidden to intrude and pledged to secrecy by Mrs. Bunting, and they must have been as altogether unsettled and miserable as young people can be. For a time they played croquet in a half-hearted way, each no doubt with an eye on the boudoir window.

(And as for Mr. Bunting, he was in bed.)

I gather that the three ladies sat and talked as any three ladies all quite resolved to be pleasant to one another would talk. Mrs. Bunting and Miss Glendower were far too well trained in the observances of good society (which is as every one knows, even the best of it now, extremely mixed) to make too searching enquiries into the Sea Lady’s status and way of life or precisely where she lived when she was at home, or whom she knew or didn’t know. Though in their several ways they wanted to know badly enough. The Sea Lady volunteered no information, contenting herself with an entertaining superficiality of touch and go, in the most ladylike way. She professed

herself greatly delighted with the sensation of being in air and superficially quite dry, and was particularly charmed with tea.

“And don’t you have *tea*?” cried Miss Glendower, startled.

“How can we?”

“But do you really mean – ?”

“I’ve never tasted tea before. How do you think we can boil a kettle?”

“What a strange – what a wonderful world it must be!” cried Adeline. And Mrs. Bunting said: “I can hardly *imagine* it without tea. It’s worse than – I mean it reminds me – of abroad.”

Mrs. Bunting was in the act of refilling the Sea Lady’s cup. “I suppose,” she said suddenly, “as you’re not used to it – It won’t affect your diges – ” She glanced at Adeline and hesitated. “But it’s China tea.”

And she filled the cup.

“It’s an inconceivable world to me,” said Adeline. “Quite.”

Her dark eyes rested thoughtfully on the Sea Lady for a space. “Inconceivable,” she repeated, for, in that unaccountable way in which a whisper will attract attention that a turmoil fails to arouse, the tea had opened her eyes far more than the tail.

The Sea Lady looked at her with sudden frankness. “And think how wonderful all this must seem to *me*!” she remarked.

But Adeline’s imagination was aroused for the moment and she was not to be put aside by the Sea Lady’s terrestrial impressions. She pierced – for a moment or so – the ladylike serenity, the assumption of a terrestrial fashion of mind that was imposing so successfully upon Mrs. Bunting. “It must be,” she said, “the strangest world.” And she stopped invitingly...

She could not go beyond that and the Sea Lady would not help her.

There was a pause, a silent eager search for topics. Apropos of the Niphetos roses on the table they talked of flowers and Miss Glendower ventured: “You have your anemones too! How beautiful they must be amidst the rocks!”

And the Sea Lady said they were very pretty – especially the cultivated sorts...

“And the fishes,” said Mrs. Bunting. “How wonderful it must be to see the fishes!”

“Some of them,” volunteered the Sea Lady, “will come and feed out of one’s hand.”

Mrs. Bunting made a little coo of approval. She was reminded of chrysanthemum shows and the outside of the Royal Academy exhibition and she was one of those people to whom only the familiar is really satisfying. She had a momentary vision of the abyss as a sort of diverticulum of Piccadilly and the Temple, a place unexpectedly rational and comfortable. There was a kink for a time about a little matter of illumination, but it recurred to Mrs. Bunting only long after. The Sea Lady had turned from Miss Glendower’s interrogative gravity of expression to the sunlight.

“The sunlight seems so golden here,” said the Sea Lady. “Is it always golden?”

“You have that beautiful greenery-blue shimmer I suppose,” said Miss Glendower, “that one catches sometimes ever so faintly in aquaria – ”

“One lives deeper than that,” said the Sea Lady. “Everything is phosphorescent, you know, a mile or so down, and it’s like – I hardly know. As towns look at night – only brighter. Like piers and things like that.”

“Really!” said Mrs. Bunting, with the Strand after the theatres in her head. “Quite bright?”

“Oh, quite,” said the Sea Lady.

“But – ” struggled Adeline, “is it never put out?”

“It’s so different,” said the Sea Lady.

“That’s why it is so interesting,” said Adeline.

“There are no nights and days, you know. No time nor anything of that sort.”

“Now that’s very queer,” said Mrs. Bunting with Miss Glendower’s teacup in her hand – they were both drinking quite a lot of tea absent-mindedly, in their interest in the Sea Lady. “But how do you tell when it’s Sunday?”

“We don’t – ” began the Sea Lady. “At least not exactly – ” And then – “Of course one hears the beautiful hymns that are sung on the passenger ships.”

“Of course!” said Mrs. Bunting, having sung so in her youth and quite forgetting something elusive that she had previously seemed to catch.

But afterwards there came a glimpse of some more serious divergence – a glimpse merely. Miss Glendower hazarded a supposition that the sea people also had their Problems, and then it would seem the natural earnestness of her disposition overcame her proper attitude of ladylike superficiality and she began to ask questions. There can be no doubt that the Sea Lady was evasive, and Miss Glendower, perceiving that she had been a trifle urgent, tried to cover her error by expressing a general impression.

“I can’t see it,” she said, with a gesture that asked for sympathy. “One wants to see it, one wants to *be* it. One needs to be born a mer-child.”

“A mer-child?” asked the Sea Lady.

“Yes – Don’t you call your little ones – ?”

“*What* little ones?” asked the Sea Lady.

She regarded them for a moment with a frank wonder, the undying wonder of the Immortals at that perpetual decay and death and replacement which is the gist of human life. Then at the expression of their faces she seemed to recollect. “Of course,” she said, and then with a transition that made pursuit difficult, she agreed with Adeline. “It *is* different,” she said. “It *is* wonderful. One feels so alike, you know, and so different. That’s just where it *is* so wonderful. Do I look – ? And yet you know I have never had my hair up, nor worn a dressing gown before today.”

“What do you wear?” asked Miss Glendower. “Very charming things, I suppose.”

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