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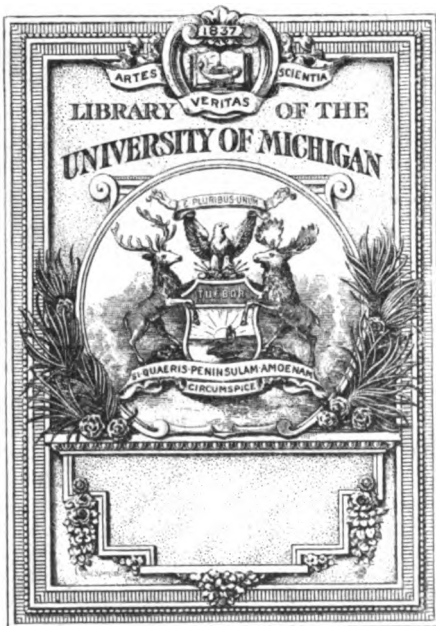
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28

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MERMAID STORIES.

BY GEO. NEWELL LOVEJOY.

IN several of the European countries it is said that seaside folk and sailors, at least those belonging to the simple-minded class, continue, as in former times, to foster the belief in the actual existence of what are known as mermaids. Even to-day, as in former ages, this class of individuals is wont to see more varieties of fish and various forms of amphibia than land people, besides appearing to delight thoroughly in the most marvelous tales concerning such forms of being.

Ancient classical writers describe the sirens as two maidens who passed their time sitting by the sea, and who, through the wondrous witchery of their music, so charmed all wayfarers sailing by, that the latter lingered on the spot where they had been spell-bound until they died. The only persons ever known to have succeeded in passing them were Odysseus and his companions, and they did so only by stopping their ears with wax and binding themselves to the masts of their ship. Homer speaks of only two sirens, but as many as four were recognized in later years, and introduced into various legends, such as that of the Argonauts, or the Sicilian story of the rape of Persephone.

The class of people believing in sirens has never experienced any difficulty whatever in believing in mermaids, and down through the ages, ever since mythology had an existence, there has been no lack of mermaid stories, the credibility of which in each instance has been vouched for with all the seriousness of genuine belief. In the year 1390, according to a narrative recorded by an early English writer, there appeared one summer afternoon, on the northern coast of the Isle of Wight, two mermaids. They were but a short distance from the shore, and were observed by three fishermen, whose account of the affair was one and the same. The fishermen stated that the mermaids arose very suddenly out of the water, a dozen or so boat-lengths in front of them, and immediately turned their gaze upon them. They appeared to be about sixteen years of age, and were handsome in feature, as in form, so far as could be seen. They wore very long hair

of an auburn hue, and had beautiful hands, one of which was held to the forehead as if to shade the eyes from the bright sunlight. For a half-moment the fishermen were held to the spot, as it were, so great was their astonishment. But, at length, recovering themselves, they attempted a nearer approach, when suddenly the mermaids quietly sank beneath the surface, and were seen no more.

In the year 1480, according to an old work, descriptive of Holland, a severe tempest broke through the embankments of the low-lying districts, and flooded much meadow and pasture land with the water. In the town of Edam, in West Friesland, several maidens, going over the water districts in a boat, for the purpose of milking their cows, came upon a mermaid, who was entangled in the mud and shallow water. They took her into the boat with them, and brought her to town, and dressed her in woman's apparel, and sought to teach her how to speak, in which effort, however, they signally failed. But they succeeded in teaching her how to spin, and to make herself useful in certain other ways. She would eat as they did, and though she was given to smiling at times, she was never known to laugh aloud. After a time they took her to Haarlem, where she is said to have lived quite a number of years, though showing all the while a very strong inclination for the water. She was given, as the reader is informed, "some notions of a Deity, and she made her reverences very devoutly whenever she passed by a crucifix."

An almanac for the year 1688 took occasion to inform its readers that, "Near the place where the famous Dee payeth its tribute to the German Ocean, if curious observers of wonderful things in Nature will be pleased to resort thither on the 1st, 13th, and 29th of May, and in divers other times in the ensuing summer, as also in the harvest-time, to the 7th and 14th of October, they will undoubtedly see a pretty company of mermaids, creatures of admirable beauty, and likewise hear their charming, sweet, melodious voices." The very wise prognosticator goes even so far as to tell what song these Scotch

mermaids will sing, and it is nothing more or less than a new version of "God Save the King." Now, whether the song in question was intended for the benefit of William of Orange or James II., the reader is left in no little doubt, since the year 1688 was a decidedly uncertain and even critical one, so far as dynastic matters were concerned. Still, the main thing that was to be kept in mind was the fact that mermaids would show sufficient skill, on the occasion spoken of, to sing so popular an air as the one referred to.

Going back to 1560, we shall not fail to be interested in a discovery made in that year by several fishermen on the west coast of Ceylon. The fishermen brought up at a single draught of the net "seven mermen and maids," an unintentional but magnificent haul certainly. A Jesuit missionary, who saw the creatures, certified that they were real types of humanity, no doubt losing sight, for the time being, of the fact that they were possessed of fish-shaped tails.

The question of tails, however, was satisfactorily settled during that same century by painters and engravers in the following manner: In French and German works on heraldry, mermaids were made with two tails, while a double-tailed mermaid was portrayed in a Swiss edition of Ptolemy's Geography, published in 1540. The Venetian printers also showed a decided fondness for having the same character of symbol appear on the title-pages of their books. In 1650, or a little later, a Spaniard by the name of Merallo made a voyage to Congo. On his return home he published an interesting account of his exploration, and his narrative stated that on his way thither he saw in the sea "some beings like unto men, not only in their figures, but likewise in their actions." He saw them gathering "a great quantity of a certain herb, with which they immediately plunged themselves into the sea." The sailors made every effort to catch them in one of their nets, but in vain, for the mermaids or mermen proved equal to the occasion, "lifting up the net and making good their escape."

No famous personage, in history has ever been made the butt of more and various forms of caricature than Mary Queen of Scots. It is reported that she was greatly disturbed in mind, at times, on account of the ridiculous representations in which she was often made

to appear by those that felt a dislike for her. Certain of these caricatures represented her as a mermaid sitting on a dolphin. One of these pictures, or representations, was found in the English State Paper Office years ago, and it was described as a vulgar, mean affair. Some writer has stated that the immortal William must have had this very caricature in mind when he wrote the "Midsummer Night's Dream." What else could Shakespeare, when addressing *Puck* through *Oberon*," says this same writer, "have referred to when he says:

"Thou rememberest since once I sat upon a promontory,
And heard a mermaid on a dolphin's back,
Uttering such dulcet and harmonious breath
That the rude sea grew civil at her song,
And certain stars shot madly from their spheres
To hear the sea-maid's music."

Sirens and mermaids were really a favorite theme, in one way and another, with Shakespeare. He made many of his characters talk about these beings. "I'll stop mine ear against the mermaid's song." "I'll draw more sailors than the mermaids shall." "At the helm a seeming mermaid steers." These, and other sentiments that might be quoted, are taken from the great poet.

Haydn, the famous composer, also showed a liking for introducing the mermaid into his creations, as in the following example where the siren of the sea says to some enchanted mortal:

"Come with me, and we will go
Where the rocks of coral grow."

In an old work entitled "Brand's Description of the Orkney and Shetland Islands" it is narrated that in 1701 "a boat at the fishing drew her lines, and one of them, as the fishers thought, having some great fish upon it, was, with greater difficulty than the rest, raised from the ground. But when raised, it came more easily to the surface of the water, upon which a creature like a mermaid presented itself at the side of the boat. It had the face, arms, breast, and shoulders of a woman, and long hair hanging down the back; but the nether part was beneath the water, so that they could not understand the shape thereof. The two fishers, who were in the boat, being much surprised at this strange sight, one of them unadvisedly drew a knife and thrust it into her bosom, whereupon she cried, as they judged, 'Alas!' The hook giving way she fell backward, and was seen

no more. The hook, being big, went in at her chin and out at the upper lip."

Of course Brand did not see all this ; he heard the story from a lady, who received the narrative from a lady friend, the latter hearing the story from a gentleman, to whom it was told by the bailie, who got the information from the fishermen who had to do with the mermaid. The account of the affair closes with the statement that the fisherman who was so cruel as to stab the mermaid was greatly troubled in soul after the event. He never prospered in his calling, was tormented by an evil spirit in the person of an old man, who, hour after hour, used to say to him, "Who killed the woman?" and "Why did you do such a thing?" The poor fisherman did not survive the occurrence a great while, and in the end his death was a miserable one.

In the year 1737 the crew of a ship, recently arrived in the Thames from the East Indies, reported that they had partaken of a mermaid on the island of Mauritius. They pronounced the flesh excellent, comparing it to veal, and said the mermaid weighed over three hundred pounds, and was a splendid specimen in every way. The head was very large, as were the features, which were very much like those of a woman. When they, after some little difficulty, succeeded in capturing the creature, "it cried and grieved with great sensibility," they declared.

In the same year a story came from Vigo, in Spain, to the effect that some fishermen on that coast, one morning, had captured a sort of merman, measuring five feet and a half from head to foot. The head was said to be similar to that of a goat, with all the adjuncts in the way of a long beard and mustache. It had a rather hairy and very long neck, short arms, and hands much longer and larger than they should have been in proportion to the arms, and long slim fingers, with nails like claws. Its toes were webbed, and it had a fin at the lower part of its back. Its skin was black and hard. In the year 1782, a Welsh farmer of the name of Reynolds, living at a place called Pen-y-hold, one day saw something that he fancied, or believed, was a mermaid. He reported his discovery to one George Philips, a physician residing near him, who told the story to a young lady, who told it to a Mrs. Moore, who in turn told it to a friend of hers, and

she wrote an account of the discovery for a certain Mrs. Morgan, who included it in a work of hers, entitled "A Tour to Milford Haven." Like the story of the Three Black Crows, or the parlor game of "Russian Scandal," the narrative probably grew in its travels ; but its ultimate form was as follows : "One morning, just outside the cliff at Pen-y-hold, Reynolds saw what seemed to him to be a person bathing in the sea, the upper portion of the body being out of the water. On a nearer view, it looked like the upper part of a person in a tub, a youth, for instance, of sixteen or eighteen years of age, with fair white skin, so far as features were concerned, a sort of brownish body, and what appeared to be a tail under the water. The head and body were, in shape, human ; but the arms and hands were thick in proportion to their length ; while the nose, extending high between the eyes, terminated rather sharply. The mysterious being looked attentively at Reynolds, and at the cliffs, and at the birds flying in the air, but uttered no cry. Reynolds went to bring some one to see the merman, or mermaid, but when he returned it had disappeared."

The real facts in the case afterward came out, and were these : A fisherman, with a goodly amount of common sense in his make-up, happened to be in his boat under the cliffs at the time, and observed the wonderful creature, which was really nothing but a splendid specimen of seal.

Some English magazines, in 1775, mentioned the taking of a mermaid in the Levant by some seamen, who brought it to London. One of the magazines very gravely informed its readers that the mermaid resembled very strongly a European in features and complexion. It was evidently youthful, had light blue eyes, a small nose, and thin lips ; "but the edges of them were round like those of a codfish." Its teeth were very small, white, and regular ; its neck was perfect in form, though the ears were like an eel's ; "but placed like those of the human species, with gills for respiration which resembled curls." Its head was devoid of hair, but covered, so to speak, with "rolls, which might be mistaken for curls at a distance." A fin rose pyramidally from the temples, "forming a fore-top, like that of a lady's head-dress." The bust was said to have been like that of a healthy damsel—a properly or-

thodox mermaiden—but here the lofty description suddenly ends, owing to the fact that all below the waist was precisely *like a fish!* The creature was assisted to swim by three sets of fins below the waist, each above the other. The article closes as follows: “Finally, the mermaid in question has an enchanting voice, which it never exerts except before a storm.”

To sum it all up, the magazine referred to had been doing, perhaps innocently enough, a piece of imaginative description, for it was subsequently proved beyond a doubt that the mermaid was only the angle-shark!

Like those preceding it, our century has had its supply of mermaid stories, some of which have proved their right to be numbered among the most interesting recorded by the historian. With respect to the narrative feature, I propose to close this article by subjoining the following brief account of a mermaid that appeared one day in 1819 off the coast of Martinique. An unsensational work called “Rees’s Cyclopædia” spoke as follows concerning the discovery: “We have a well-attested account of a merman, or mermaid, near the great rock, called Diamond, on the coast of Martinique. The persons that saw it gave a precise description of it before a notary. They affirm that they saw it wipe its hands over its face, and even heard it blow its nose.”

Certain naturalists, from time to time, have pointed out characteristics in marine animals which establish in living creatures

some, at least, of the stories concerning mermaids. For example, Sir J. E. Tennent’s account of what is known among naturalists as the dugong, a herbivorous, cetaceous animal found in the Indian Ocean, bears very strongly on the case. Tennent says: “The rude approach to the human outline observed in the shape of the head of the creature, and the attitude of the mother while suckling her young, holding it to her breast with one flipper while swimming with the other, holding the heads of both above water, and when disturbed, suddenly diving and displaying her fish-like tail,—these, together with her habitual demonstrations of strong maternal affection, probably gave rise to the fable of the mermaid.” Other naturalists refer to this animal in the same way, holding to the theory that the mythical mermaid is really founded on the dugong. But, whether human or mere animal, whether man, woman, or fish, one thing is certain: The mermaid has for ages found an abiding-place in the sentiment of poets, composers, and indeed of all writers who love to indulge in fanciful creations. This fair and seductive being has been portrayed in various ways to the understanding; but probably the real, orthodox mermaid has been oftenest represented in the person of a very beautiful maiden in the act of resting while taking her bath at the seashore, standing waist-deep in the water, one hand occupied in combing her luxuriant hair, and the other holding a bright mirror to her smiling face.

STORM.

BY CLINTON SCOLLARD.

THE sound of thunder rolled down the threatening arch of sky,
 Echoed from hill to hill till the valley rang with the roar,
 And a few great drops of rain on a sudden gust swept by,
 To fall like a bullet spent on the highway’s dusty floor.

Then a mighty wind arose and blew from the sunset land,
 Blew till the tall trees bent like the slender blades of grain;
 Wildly their tangled boughs were tossed by the tempest’s hand
 That smote the cowering fields with the dashing drifts of rain.

But the wrath of the storm-king died, and silence came like a boon;
 The far horizon glowed with gold-edged amethyst bars;
 And up the seas of the night came sailing the mystical moon,
 Her sapphire pathway strewn with the blossoming silvern stars.