

Once upon a time there lived a Little Mermaid. The youngest daughter of the Sea King, she dwelt in a magnificent underwater palace with her five sisters. Their mother having died some years before, the mermaid princesses were cared for by their grandmother, who told them wonderful stories of the world above the waves.

"When you have reached your fifteenth year," said the grandmother, "you will be allowed to swim up to the top of the sea, to see the sights of the great dry world." (For this was the custom of the undersea folk.) "What wonders you will see!"



The Little Mermaid was greatly excited by her grandmother's tales, and could hardly wait until she would be old enough to see the surface world. Her excitement increased year by year, as each of her sisters would reach the magic age, venture forth, and return from the journey with a breathless tale of exotic sights.

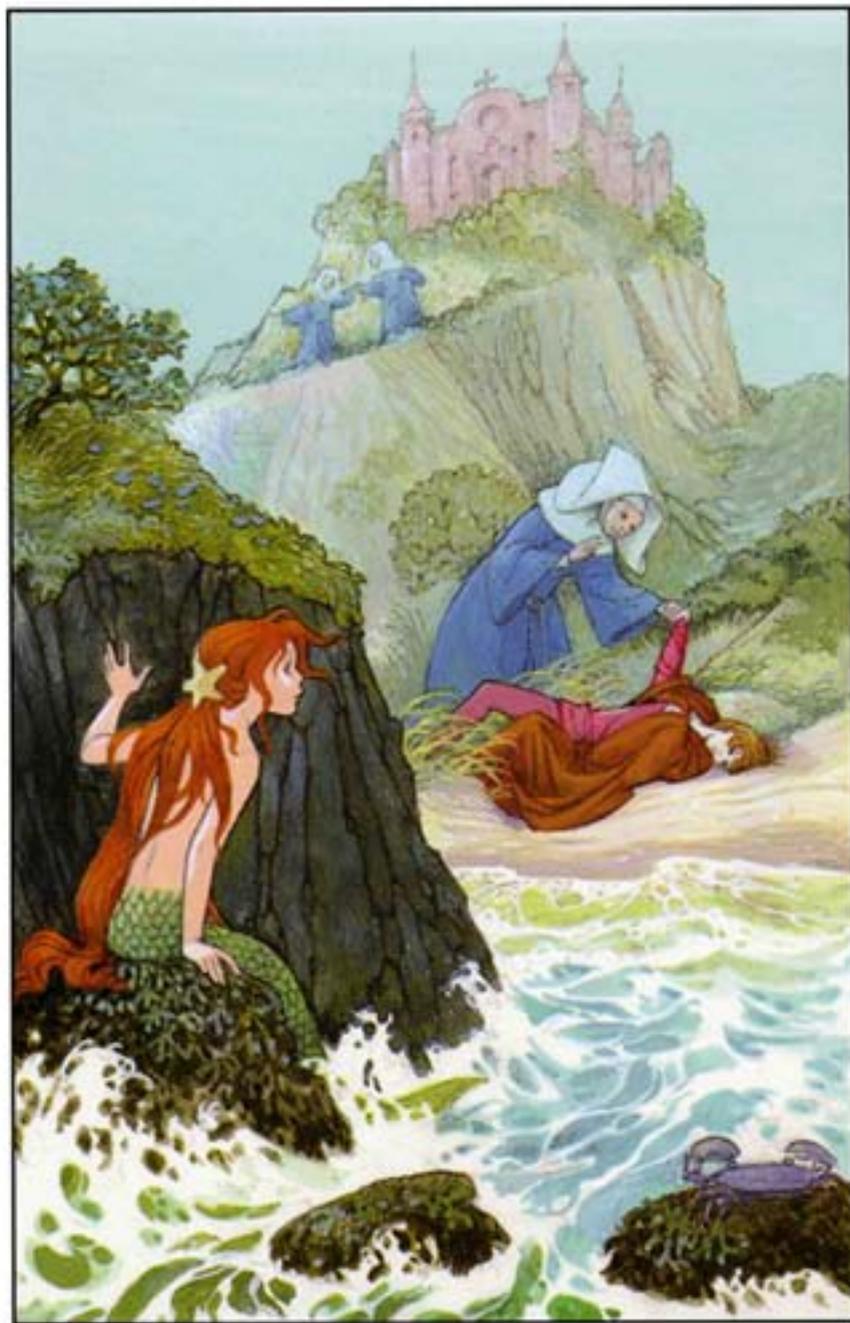
To pass the time the Little Mermaid kept a garden filled with coral and other forms of sea life. In the middle she placed a charming statue of a boy playing a flute, taken from a sunken ship. For hours on end the Little Mermaid would gaze upon the statue and dream of the dry world and its people.



Finally, after the long years of waiting, came the appointed day. The Little Mermaid bid her relatives good-bye and swam off eagerly toward the top of the ocean.

When the Little Mermaid came to the sea's surface, the first thing she noticed was a magnificent ship. A party was being held on board for a handsome Prince, and the vessel was brightly lit. Soon, however, a wild storm came up and knocked the ship about like a toy. The wooden craft could not long stand up to the terrible waves, and the Little Mermaid was horrified to see it begin to sink, and the Prince fall into the water.

Quickly the Little Mermaid swam to the unconscious Prince and, lifting him on her back, carried him to the distant shore. The next morning the Little Mermaid concealed herself and watched as a maiden from a nearby convent discovered the Prince, and had him carried to shelter.



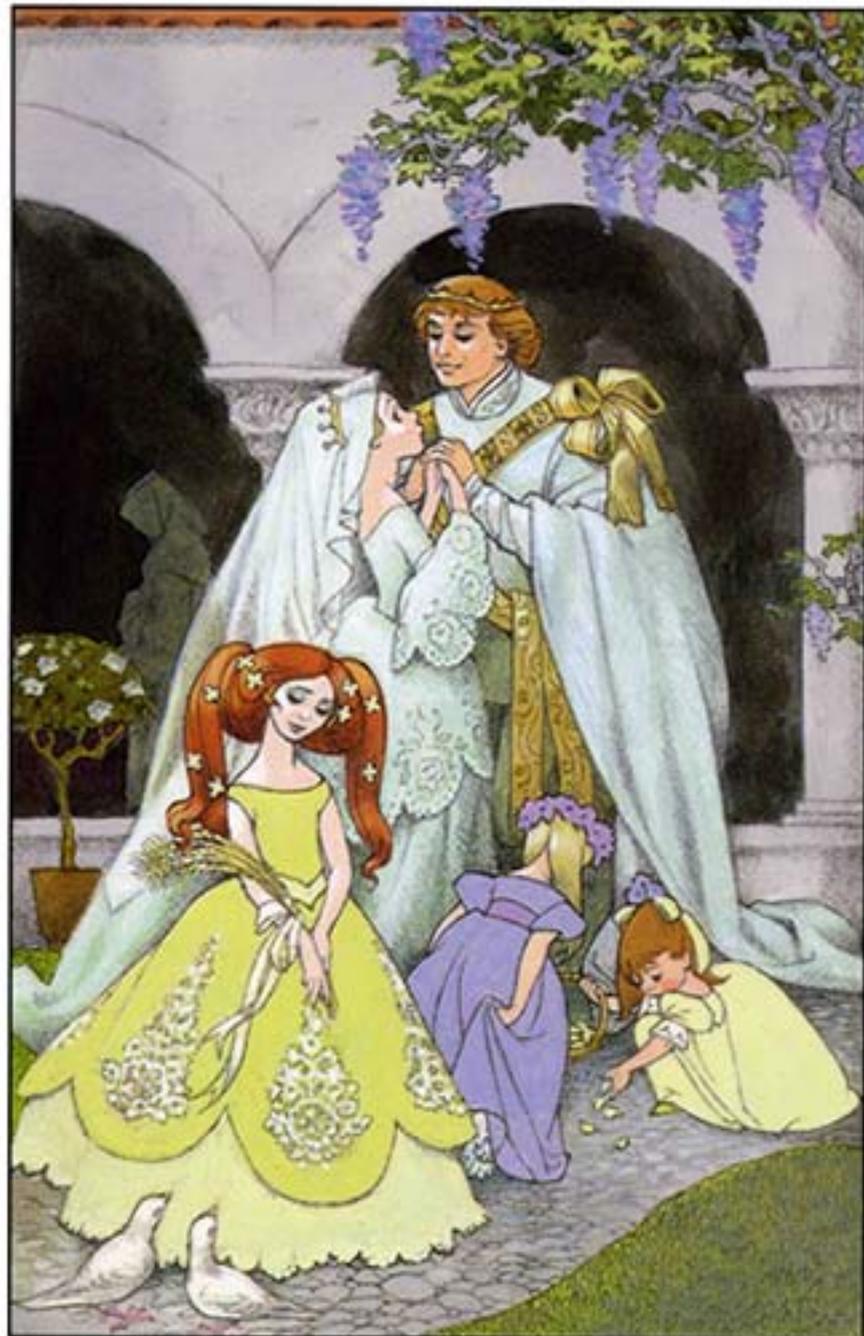
The Little Mermaid returned to the underwater palace with a heavy heart, for she did not want to leave the Prince. As the weeks passed she made many visits to the surface of the waves, where she was able to keep watch on the Prince from a distance, having learned from her sisters where his castle stood. The more the Little Mermaid saw of the Prince, the more she grieved that her half-fish form prevented her from living near him.

At length she sought out a fearsome sea witch, who agreed to transform her mermaid's body into human shape—in exchange for her tongue. The witch warned her that if she failed to win the love of a human—if he wed another—she would be turned to sea foam that very night. In desperation, the Little Mermaid agreed to the frightful bargain.



Bidding a silent farewell to her family, the Little Mermaid swam to the Prince's palace carrying a vial of potion provided by the witch. Drinking the black liquid, she felt a fierce stabbing in her legs and quickly fainted. When she came to, she saw she had a human body—and the Prince was standing over her, looking concerned!

Soon the strange silent maiden was welcomed into the Prince's life as his constant companion. The Little Mermaid's joy at this was short-lived, however, for not long after it was announced that the Prince would wed a human princess, the girl who had found him after his shipwreck. Although she had given nearly everything she had for the Prince, and would vanish the night of his marriage to another, the Little Mermaid could only stand by in helpless silence as he greeted his wife-to-be.



On the night of the Prince's wedding, the Little Mermaid joined him and his bride aboard their wedding ship, fearful of her impending fate. As she leaned over the ship's rail she was surprised to see her mermaid sisters. Secretly they swam to her and gave her a magic knife made by the sea witch, telling her that if she killed the Prince with it she would become a mermaid again and would not die that night.

With trembling hand the Little Mermaid entered the Prince's cabin, where he and his new wife lay sleeping. At the sight of his face her heart was too filled with love to kill him, and she raced forth and threw the dagger into the sea. At that moment her time had come: but instead of changing into sea foam, she found herself being carried aloft. Her deed of love had saved her from her fate, and she was transformed into a daughter of the air, to do good deeds among humans in secret.

