

The Old Fisherman and the Mermaid



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The old fisherman had not been successful that morning.

Anchored beyond the rocky spit, his little boat sat rocking gently in the sun.

In the warmth he had slept peacefully much of the time, and this had not greatly improved his chances of a good catch.

Several pump fish swam in to watch him at work but finding him asleep, didn't feel it worthwhile giving the fishing line a playful tug or two.

They'd been at the game as long as the old man and knew how to do this without risk.

On such occasions, the other fish floated at the surface some way off to watch the fun. This inevitably began with him leaping into the air and frantically reeling in the line.

He would often trip up, and tumble into the bottom of his boat, becoming entangled in ropes, tackle and various bits and pieces.

He was then apt to swear and curse and become very red in the face.

Some of the younger fish looking on would roll about, bubbling with laughter until their sides ached. Had they been humans, they would undoubtedly have toppled over, but fish can't topple, can they?

The old man opened his eyes, stretched, and sighed lazily.

He gazed at the cloudless blue sky, sighed again, and decided to row around and try his luck in the tiny bay beyond the rocky spit.

Hardly anyone went that way nowadays and he hoped that this might have allowed the fish population to recover.

In any case, he was in no hurry to get home.

Under the seat, were a loaf of bread, a big sausage, and a hunk of cheese for his meal. More importantly, a full bottle of good red wine was cooling in a net suspended in the sea beside the boat.

As he guided the little boat around the head of rock, he heard the splash of a big fish jumping.

This was a good sign, but scanning the surface, he could see nothing out of the ordinary.

A few seconds later, he heard an odd gurgling spluttering sound.

Then without warning, a shrill warbling noise split the silence like someone blowing a water-logged whistle.

Following the sound, he spotted a head, bobbing about in the small waves near the dark rocks.

It was a female head. A small head surrounded by a floating mass of dark hair.

The owner was rubbing it vigorously.

'Ho there!' Shouted the old fisherman, 'Are you all right?'

'I banged my head.'

The old man scratched his own, 'what on earth are you doing out here. It's dangerous, you know.'

'Dangerous?'

'Very.'

'Who for?'

'For you, of course.'

'For me?'

'You'll get swept out to sea.'

'Will I?'

'Yes. And get drowned.'

'Me? I don't think that's very probable,' she smiled.

'Famous last words,' sighed the fisherman . 'You wouldn't be the first.'

Then shielding his eyes against the sparkling of the sun on the water he called, 'how on earth did you get down onto the rocks?' He glanced up. 'Surely not from up there on the cliffs?'

The girl turned and followed the fisherman's gaze, and pulled a face, 'It's very rocky and a bit steep.'

'A *bit* steep...! That track is deadly dangerous. You didn't come down that I hope?'

'Oh, no. I swam.'

'Swam?!'

'Yes.'

'All the way?'

'All the way from where?'

'From town.'

'Which town?'

The old man rubbed his chin and frowned. 'You're not kidding me, are you, by any chance?'

'I don't think so.'

'Well. What are you doing here then?'

'Oh. Just swimming around and sitting on the rocks.'

'Sunning yourself?'

'And singing.'

'Was that you, singing just now?'

'Yes. Did You like it?'

'Well, now I understand now why you come all the way out here to do it.'

'It's supposed to be charming,' said he head.

'Is it now?' mused the old man.

During this exchange, the head went bobbing around in front of his little boat, and the young face gazed up at him with interest.

'I can see that you know how to swim well,' said the fisherman, 'I suppose you're a professional?'

'Yes, I suppose I am. I was best in my class, in fact. I'm pleased you spotted that.'

'Still. It's unwise to be overconfident. These waters are sometimes unexpectedly treacherous for the unwary.'

'I'll be wary then,' smiled the head.

The old man shook his head sadly and frowned,

'Do you take singing lessons?'

'Oh yes, that's on the course, naturally.'

'You didn't come top though. In singing, I mean?'

'No. Last but one,' the little face frowned.

'Yes, I can believe that. Not your strong point then?'

'No.'

'But as you were last but one, at least there was one worse than you.'

The face brightened, 'oh yes!' she smiled and laughed, 'She was really, really terrible.'

'Good heaven!'

'Exactly.'

The old man pulled a face then frowned, 'but perhaps you'd like to tell me what you are up to out here. I can't believe you come all the way out here just to sing secretly.'

The head smiled and nodded, well, in fact, I am trying out my luring.'

'Luring?'

'Yes.'

'Is that some sort of swimming stroke?'

The girl broke into a wide grin and laughed. She spluttered, and half-swallowed a mouthful of swirly hair, choking on it. 'Ha, ha,' she gurgled, 'a swimming stroke. Ha, ha, ha. That's very funny.'

She suddenly disappeared under the water, and the old fisherman looked down in concern. Then, just as suddenly, she popped up again on the other side of the boat and pulled herself up on the gunwales gazing at him with frank blue eyes.

'It's not a swimming stroke. It's a singing technique. "Luring", that's what I was doing.'

'Ah! The thing you were last-but-one at?'

'Yes. We are supposed to lure things with it, you see. That's why it's called "Luring".'

'And what, pray, are you supposed to be Luring.'

'Unwary seamen mostly. That's what I'm training for.'

The old man looked down at the masses and masses of dark hair.

'Oh!' His face cleared. 'So, you're a mermaid then?'

She let go of the gunwale, and a broad smile illuminated her face. She clapped her small hands together with pleasure. 'Yes. Yes. Exactly. I'm so pleased you guessed.'

She swam round in a little circle and lifted her shimmering tail out of the sea. 'See?' she called.

'Oh, yes! What a lovely tail!'

'Thank you. I look after it properly, of course.'

'I can see that,' nodded the old man. 'It must take a good deal of time.'

'Well, yes, it does, I suppose. But then, we do have quite a lot of time on our hands, most days.'

'Yes, I can believe that,' he nodded. 'Your hair must take a lot of looking after too, I suppose.'

'Yes. Lots.'

'I thought so, seeing how much there is of it.'

The little Mermaid looked up at him and smiled, 'was it my singing that made you guess I was a mermaid? Was it a tiny bit lovely?' She asked a little timidly.

'Well...'

'Was it my singing that lured you around the rocks, absolutely against your own will?'

'Well...' said the old fisherman again, not wanting to be too cruel. 'Now that I think about it, I hadn't initially intended to come this way.'

'Oh! That's really encouraging.'

'Is that how it's supposed to work?'

'Well, yes. At least I suppose so.' She pulled herself up onto the gunwales again.

'I expect you felt an irresistible pull or something like that.'

'Well, possibly,' frowned the fisherman.

'I don't know what it feels like myself,' she said. We Mermaids can't be lured, you see.'

'Not by other Mermaid singing?'

'Of course not. It only really works on unwary seamen,' she frowned. 'You *are* an unwary seaman, I suppose?'

The old man sat down on the bench, 'Now that's an interesting question. I'm not all that sure.'

'Oh?'

'Well generally speaking, I'm considered to be a wary man.' He paused, 'but then again I have little experience with Mermaids.'

'But surely you felt an unusual and unexplainable desire to come this way as soon as you heard my Luring song.'

'Luring song?' he frowned. 'Was that what it was?'

'Yes. This is my rock, you see. I sit there and Lure.'

'Oh!' he smiled kindly. 'Perhaps it was the singing then. Mind you, my hearing is not as good as it was.'

'Well, I think it must have been. Our singing coach said that you unwary seamen don't even realise that you're being lured.'

'Well, that's very cunning,' he nodded.

The Mermaid nodded back, 'yes, it is, isn't it?'

'Dangerous too.'

'Yes,' she clapped her little hands again. 'You can't imagine how pleased I am that it actually worked.'

'It's certainly a good beginning,' said the old man kindly. 'I'm not saying it's perfect yet, but an encouraging start.'

The little Mermaid smiled happily, 'Oh Good. Not absolutely irresistible yet, though? At least not quite, perhaps?'

'Give yourself time and a bit of practice, and I'm sure it'll be fine.'

'Oh, good. It's so nice to get a bit of reliable feedback.'

The old man looked down at the masses of hair floating around her. 'And is that all there is to the job?'

The Mermaid shook her pretty head and laughed, 'Good heavens! No. That's just the beginning.'

'Dear me!' said the fisherman, 'such a lot to learn.'

'Yes. The course lasts for years and years. We're only allotted a rock in the fourth year.'

'Allotted?'

'Well, yes, and it's not very fair, really.'

'Oh! Why not?'

'Well naturally, the best student gets first pick, and of course, they always choose the best rocks in the nicest places. Places where lots of unwary seamen sail about all the time, just asking to be Lured.'

The man nodded, 'And where the sea is warmest, I bet.'

'Exactly.'

'I see,' said the fisherman. 'And you got last but one choice.'

The Mermaid sighed and nodded, 'Yes. It gets a bit lonely around here. You're the first unwary seaman I've seen since I started my internship.'

'That's bad luck. And some would say that I'm not even a very good catch either.'

'Really! Would they say that?'

'Humans say unkind things sometimes.'

'Mermaids too. But anyway, now you are here we can try out the other bits.'

'The other bits?'

'Yes, of course,' the little Mermaid frowned. 'Well, I admit that I haven't practised much, so you'll have to be a bit patient.'

'Oh, don't worry. I'll be patient. I have a wife and two daughters. I've learnt all about patience.'

'Oh, that's lovely then. We'll first I try a bit more Luring if you don't mind.'

'You mean that singing bit?'

'Yes.'

'Do we have to? I mean, now that you've proved you can do it, it's perhaps not indispensable?'

'Well. I suppose, if you feel lured enough, we could skip it.'

'That would save time. If you don't mind, of course.'

'No. It wasn't all that good, was it?'

'You'll improve with practice,' said the old fisherman.

'Yes, I suppose I will.'

'So, what comes next?'

'Well, if I remember correctly, now I have to charm you. Or, possibly it was, "enchant" you. I can't rightly remember.'

'Both sound equally interesting, but I think I'd prefer to be enchanted.'

'All right. First, I enchant you, then I draw you to your downfall?'

'To my downfall...? Are you sure that's the right wording?'

The little Mermaid frowned, 'I never could remember.'

The fisherman smiled down at the frowning little face. 'I suppose that it means that you draw me down into the depths of the ocean, where I perish.'

The Mermaid clapped her hands happily, 'Yes, that's it exactly. I knew that perishing came into it somewhere.'

'Languishing too perhaps?'

'Yes.' She smiled, 'I do believe that comes into it too.' Suddenly she smote herself on the forehead. 'Silly me. Now I remember. I Lure and Charm you, and you get shipwrecked on the rocks, where you perish. After that that I drag you into the ocean depths, never to be seen again.'

'Yes, that sounds right. But we would need a bit of a storm and some really rough sea for the shipwrecking part, don't you think?'

The Mermaid bit her lip, 'yes, you're probably right. It's not good shipwrecking weather, is it?'

'It rarely is around these parts in mid-summer.'

The Mermaid shook her head and frowned, 'If only there had been a dangerous reef and a deadly current... No doubt that's why I got lumbered with this rock,' she sighed.

'Probably,' said the old man, 'but we can get on with the Charming bit anyway can't we, and see how that goes?'

'Oh, yes,' she then frowned, 'You won't laugh will you, if I get it a bit wrong to start with? I've only done the theoretical part, so far.'

'Don't you get practical instructions?'

'We do normally, yes, but the charming teacher was ill for the last term, so we had to make do with drawings in the sand.'

'Bad organisation that,' said the old man.

'Yes. The coach was absolutely livid.'

'I bet she was. Well, let's try, and we'll see how it goes, shall we.'

'You're very kind for an unwary seaman.'

'Oh, I do my best. As I said, I have two daughters.'

'Do they do any luring?'

'Well, now that you mention it. Yes, I suppose they do quite a bit nowadays.'

'And charming?'

'Quite a bit of that too. But no singing though.'

'Isn't that part of the training?'

'No. Not for seaman's children. Singing is not required.'

'Lucky them!'

'Yes, for me too. However, they often replace the singing with stifled weeping.'

'Really? Does that work?'

'Oh yes. Handled properly it seems to be very effective.' He mused, 'Sobbing seems to work too. It all depends.'

'No wailing though?' asked the Mermaid.

'Oh yes. Sometimes, when things don't go as hoped.'

'Wailing's a bit like singing, I suppose,' mused the little Mermaid.

'Yes, but it tends to go on for longer.'

The Mermaid smiled and nodded. 'Shall we try the charming then?'

'When you're ready.'

'I'll have to get up on the rock though.'

'Go ahead.'

The little Mermaid swept across the strip of water separating the small boat from the rock, and with a flash of silvery tail, slipped up onto a prominent rock.

'Is it alright from down there?' she called.

'Perfect,' replied the fisherman.

'Can you see me clearly? I mean does my silhouette stand out nicely against the skyline. The coach said that that was extremely important.'

'Yes, excellent. Perhaps a little to the left would improve things. Ah yes, that's perfect.'

'Ok. Here goes.'

With this, she shook her little head and swept back her masses of shining wet hair back over her shoulder.

'How's that?' she called over to the old man.

'Lovely,' he replied. 'Charm-on then.'

The Mermaid frowned, 'I *Am* charming. At least that is what I'm supposed to be doing.'

'Ah! Yes, of course. You sit up there and draw the unwary seamen to their peril.'

'That's exactly it,' she gave her hands a little clap. 'I lure them with my melodious singing, then charm them with these things.' She cupped her hands over the small bumps on her chest, 'then they're irresistibly drawn onto the rocks...'

'Where they perish.'

'Exactly.'

'Cunning.' Said the old man.

'Yes. Isn't it?'

'And that's all you have to do?'

'Well, I can comb my hair a bit too.'

'Yes, I heard that they do that sometimes. Clever trick.'

'Well, there might be some more too.' She hesitated. 'But we've still got a few more years to get through. I suppose we'll learn the rest then.'

'Yes. You're probably right. No need to rush things.'

'So,' smiled the little Mermaid with interest. 'Do you feel the irresistible charm tugging at you?'

'Well,' he hesitated, 'I admit that I'm having a little trouble feeling it for the moment.'

'Oh dear!' groaned the little Mermaid. 'If I'm no good at charming either, I'll be in big trouble.'

'Why?'

'Well, just imagine. If I'm next to last at Luring, then no good at charming. Well then, what future is there for me?'

The old man smiled and rowed in a little closer to her rock. 'It's not such a bad rock,' he smiled up encouragingly, 'seen from closer to. Not bad at all, in fact.'

She looked down at him, 'Do you think it's because my charming capacities aren't big enough?'

'Oh, no. They're rather lovely?' he reassured her. 'Some of the best I've seen in recent year, in fact.'

'Oh!' She sighed, blushing slightly. 'That's nice of you. My mother said they'd get bigger when I grow up.'

'Yes, they often do. I noticed that with my daughters. They enlarge quite unexpectedly, in fact.'

'Do they?'

'Apparently.'

'You mean, almost overnight?'

'Well, not quite as fast as that. More gradually, in fact.'

'That's nice. That would improve things, don't you think?'

'Without a doubt,' said the old fisherman.

'Some of the other Mermaids in my year are already quite huge. You don't think that they might have some genetic flaw or something like that, do you?'

The old man smiled, 'It's probably because their mothers were like that.'

'Oh! That's a pity. They get so arrogant and bossy, you see. I'd have liked to think that they were flawed in some way.'

'Well, arrogance is a flaw of sorts.'

'Yes, you're right. So, they are less perfect than they think?'

'Undoubtedly.'

'Good.'

Then she frowned, 'The coach said that, when we charmed an unwary seaman properly, he ought to feel a powerful stirring in his vitals. Then he should be irresistibly drawn to his downfall.'

'In his vitals?' Said the old man. 'Yes, I can imagine that.'

'Do you feel a powerful stirring in your vitals?' she asked.

'Not all that powerful, at least not for the moment,' he admitted.

'Oh, dear!' she gasped. 'I'm a failure. What will my poor mother say?'

'I'm sure she is proud of you.'

'No. She'll be terribly embarrassed every time she's invited out. "How is your little Sireen getting on", they'll ask? and poor mother will have to lie for my sake.'

'Is that your name? Sireen?'

'Yes.'

'That's a lovely name.'

'Thank you. What's your name?'

'Giovi'

'Now look here Sireen,' said the old man kindly. 'The trouble is that your coach has forgotten to tell you something.'

'Oh, no. I don't think so, she's very clever. She's also very lovely. She has loads and loads of hair and much more voluminous charmers than I have. And she sings magnificently too.'

'Good heavens!' cried the old man.

'Exactly. Some say she can even hypnotise sharks with her charming.'

'Well, let me tell you something, Sireen.'

'Yes. I'm all ears.' Here she burst out laughing, 'Well not all ears. A bit of tail too. Ha, ha.'

'Very funny. Well... We seamen tend to change with age.'

'Oh!' exclaimed the little Mermaid, 'do you?'

'Yes,' smiled the fisherman. 'As we get older and more experienced, we get more and more resistant or should I say, less lurable.'

'Less unwary, you mean.'

'That's it.'

The little Mermaid bent forward slightly and leant her chin on her hand, 'Your vitals too. Do they change? Do they swell up like your daughter's charmers?'

'Unfortunately, no. It just gets harder to stir them.'

'Ah! I see. And is that a bad thing?'

'Well, yes and no. My wife seems to think it's a good thing, though.'

'I'm sure she's right?' said the little Mermaid. 'Women often are.'

'I'm sure she would agree with you,' said the fisherman.

The Mermaid smiled, 'Is she nice?'

The fisherman was surprised by this question. 'Yes.' He admitted, 'I believe she is.'

'I'm pleased,' smiled the Mermaid.

The old man had to shake his head to remember what they had been talking about.

'Let's get back to the luring and charming, shall we?'

'Yes, all right. But I'd like to meet your wife. She sounds nice.'

'Hum. But I'm not certain she'd like to meet you if you drew me down to the depths of the ocean and I perished.'

The Mermaid thought about this point. 'Because she wouldn't have you anymore?'

'Exactly.'

'Life's complicated,' she murmured.

'Death too,' said the old man.

'Yes.'

'But,' he continued, 'what your coach failed to mention was that all this Luring and Charming...'

'Or enchanting,' interrupted the Mermaid.

'Exactly,' agreed the old man. 'Well, all that only works perfectly on the younger seamen.'

'Oh!?'

'Yes. And a few of the older ones. Those who have been at sea for many, many months without seeing any women.'

'Ah!' the little Mermaid seemed to have had a revelation. 'You mean that when you age you get to be like old, brittle stalks of seaweed or dried-up coral. The stirring doesn't do the same things to your vitals as when you're like a young sprig of bright green weed?'

He sighed sadly, 'yes I suppose that's close enough to the truth. Anyway, you need a lot of experience and practice, to lure the older ones.'

'Like you?'

'Yes.'

'Because of a sort of rigidness of the vitals.'

'Or lack of it.' smiled the old fisherman.

'I suppose I'll learn about that next term.'

'I expect it's on the course.'

She let her masses of hair fall back, covering her shimmering skin.

'So, in a way, trying to lure and charm old unwary seamen like you, is a waste of energy?'

The old man smiled, 'But it's certainly good practise, and helps to hone the skills to perfection.'

The Mermaid smiled back, nodding, 'hone my skills to perfection...' she squeezed her eyes half closed. 'Yes, I'd like that. It would certainly be beneficial in my case.'

'I think so. And its always best to start at the bottom of the ladder, don't you think?'

The Mermaid smiled and brightened, 'Yes. I do believe you're right.'

'I'm sure your mother will be proud of you soon.'

'Well, I do hope so.'

She then slipped off the rock and came swimming back to the old man's boat.

Pulling herself back up onto the gunwales she looked up into his eyes.

'You are exceedingly kind, for an unwary seaman.'

'Thank you,' he replied. 'I'll tell you what we'll do.'

The Mermaid looked up at him eagerly.

'I'll go back around to the other bay, and you try the luring bit again.'

'Oh, yes!' exclaimed the Mermaid.

'And I'll pretend not to know that you're there.'

'So that I can practice the Enchanting bit too.'

'Exactly.'

Sireen, slipped into the water. 'I'll pull you around to save you rowing against the tide.'

With this, she grabbed the little boat and swam off at an astonishing pace.

'You're certainly a very powerful swimmer,' said the old fisherman with admiration.

'Oh! Thank you.'

'My pleasure.'

The little Mermaid let go of the boat as soon as they had got into the other bay.

'It's a pity we can't try out the bit about enticing you onto the rocks. But if we did, you'd perish, and that would be an end to it.'

The old man smiled, 'One thing at a time. Get the luring and charming right first, before moving on.'

The Mermaid nodded, 'Perhaps we could try the shipwrecking bit another day.'

'There's no hurry.'

'No. You're right.'

'And I only have the one boat.'

'And once it's wrecked, that's it,' she sighed. 'Can't you un-wreck boats.'

'Yes, but it's expensive, especially if the boat is at the bottom of the sea.'

'I could bring it back up.'

'But I'd still have to have it repaired and I haven't the funds for that.'

'I hadn't thought about that.'

'Yes. I guessed that. Anyway, now, you go back and really concentrate on the luring bit first.'

'Perhaps I ought to do some warming up exercises before starting,' said the Mermaid.

The old man started, 'Because you hadn't warmed up earlier?'

'No.'

'Well, there you are then. I thought as much.'

'I don't know what I was thinking about. I forget these things so easily. My coach is always scolding me about it.'

'You could irretrievably damage your voice if you don't warm up properly.'

'I know.'

The old fisherman leant over. 'Now,' he smiled confidentially, 'having often observed my daughters luring, I have noticed that they always start, really very subtly.'

Sireen looked up into his eyes.

'Do they?'

'Yes. Always.'

'Did their coach teach them that?'

'No. I believe it was their mother.'

Sireen nodded and smiled, 'Ah!' she sighed, 'I see. And she must have had a lot of experience of that. When she was young, I mean.'

The old man frowned. This little Mermaid tended to say the most disconcerting things. 'Well. When they start in this subtle way,' he continued, 'men don't even realise that they're being lured at all. Perhaps you should try that.'

The Mermaid frowned, 'You mean sing really softly, to start with.'

'Exactly, and then gradually increase the volume.'

The Mermaid nodded, 'Yes, that'll help warm my voice up too.'

'But, for the moment, try and keep the volume right down low and concentrate on the purity of tone.'

The little Mermaid gazed up at him, nodding with admiration, 'Concentrate on purity.' she sighed, 'Of course, of course...'

'Yes.'

'You mean, it's the purity which stirs the vitals, not the volume?'

'Exactly.'

'Almost like a whisper.'

'Yes, that's it. An irresistible whisper.'

The Mermaid leant her chin on her hands and smiled contentedly, 'You're an excellent teacher. That's the first time I really understood how it works,' she sighed again. 'Just loud enough to be heard and pure and soft and inviting.' She shook her little head. 'Of course, and that's why it's irresistible.'

The old fisherman gazed down at Sireen with affection and smiled, 'You see, we are already making progress.'

'Yes. Aren't we.'

'Off you go then.' He said, 'and in the meantime, I'll pretend to be doing my normal job. I'll eat a bit and have a drink of my nice cold wine.'

'Wine? What's that?'

'I'll explain another day. Off you go now.'

The Mermaid swam off, with a splash of silvery tail and disappeared around the headland.

The old man retrieved his food from under his seat and drew up the wine...

During that quiet afternoon, the two tried out the routine several times. By the time the evening was drawing in, the little Mermaid had made significant progress.

'Can we do some more tomorrow?' asked the Mermaid. 'I'm sure it would do me good.'

The old man hesitated, 'I'd love to, but I'll have to catch some fish, to sell.'

'Oh! Why?'

'Because that's how I make my money. That pays for all the things I have to buy for the family. I'm a fisherman, that's what fishermen do.'

'Oh, yes. Silly me,' Laughed the Mermaid. 'But I'll bring you some fish. Like that, we can help each other.'

'But surely, all the fish are your friends.'

Sireen started, gave him an astonished look and shook her head. 'My friends! I'd like to be able to say that that's true. But not all fish are nice at all.'

'Meaning?'

'Well, there are troublemakers, big heads, brainless idiots, and some seem to have been born simply to spoil life for all the others. Those are certainly not my friends.'

'It's a bit like that for humans too.'

'Really?'

'Yes.'

'Well, in any case, I don't mind bringing you a few of those. That will make things a bit quieter down there too.'

'All right. If you don't mind.'

'Do you need a lot?'

'No just a few.' He showed her the bucket he kept in the bottom of his boat, and she burst into laughter.

'Is that all!? Goodness me! That won't even scratch the surface of the troublemakers, let alone the others.'

'That depends how long we collaborate for.'

'Yes. That's true.'

This being agreed upon, the old fisherman promised to return the following day.

In fact, their little collaboration went on all week during which they spent pleasant days practising and experimenting technique.

That Sunday, they stopped at about mid-day, and the fisherman settled down to his meal, while Sireen sat on a rock nearby in the sun and combed out her masses of thick hair.

'Do you know what I think, Sireen?'

'No.'

'I think you need to practice now on someone more likely to be lured and charmed.'

'A seaman less old and dried-up than you, you mean?' asked the little Mermaid.

'Well, I wouldn't have put it exactly that way, but I suppose that's what it comes down to in the end.'

'Well can't you just catch one for me?' she asked, 'Like I do with troublemaking fish.'

The old man thought about this. 'Catching humans isn't that easy, especially young ones.'

'Because you're too old to run fast enough to catch them?'

The man sighed. This Mermaid unerringly put her finger right on the sore points.

'Well, we would need to lure someone out. And that's not easy.'

An idea had come to the old fisherman.

A few months earlier, a well-known criminal gang leader had exiled his youngest son to the village to keep him out of trouble. The father's intelligence and cunning were absent in the son and replaced by arrogance and conceit. He was idle and a born troublemaker and now seemed to have decided to seduce the fisherman's younger daughter.

He frightened everyone in the surrounding villages more because of his father's reputation than his own physical strength. Furthermore, he preferred the knife to the fist, a thing considered exceedingly bad form, amongst local people.

Removing him from circulation would certainly improve the region's peace and quiet.

'Yes,' murmured the old man, 'I believe I know exactly the right person. But he is unlikely to waste energy in rowing out here though.'

'I could try and sing extra loud.' Suggested Sireen.

'I don't think that's a good idea.'

'You mean, I'm perhaps not ready for that yet.'

'Next term, perhaps.'

'Then how do we get him into Luring range?' she asked.

'If he thought there was treasure out here,' murmured the old man.

'But there is no treasure. I suppose you mean jewels, diamonds and gold and things like that.'

'Yes.'

'Hum. There's none of that, this close in.'

'You mean there's treasure nearby.'

The little Mermaid laughed, 'Of course there is. There's treasure all over the place.'

'Really?'

'Yes, Lots of that gold stuff, but much too deep for you to reach.'

'But not too deep for you?'

The Mermaid shook her head with mock pity, 'Of course not. But we mermaids don't go in much for that gold stuff.'

'Would you bring me some? I like it quite a lot.'

'It's against the rules.'

'What is?'

'Plundering.'

'Plundering?'

'Yes. I'd get put in prison if I were caught plundering.'

'That's a pity.'

'Its the law,' said Sireen.

'I suppose there are jewels too. Emeralds and rubies and diamonds.'

'Oh yes, a few of those too.'

The old man sighed, 'And you can't touch those either?'

'No.'

'And pearls?'

'Pearls?' laughed the Mermaid. 'Pearls aren't jewels.'

'Yes, they are.'

'Oh, no. Jewels are rare things. Pearls aren't rare?'

'Of course, they are. At least for humans'

'That's odd. We mermaids have plenty of pearls. As many as we like, in fact. Would you like to see one?'

At this, she dived off the rock and disappeared. A few moments later, she reappeared beside the boat.

'Here,' she said, holding out her hand. 'look!'

She dropped a big, perfectly round pearl into his hand. 'Nice, isn't it?'

The old man gulped, rolling the beautiful pearl across the palm of his hand with his index finger, 'Is this yours? Where did it come from?'

'Oh no, it's not one of mine. Mine are all at home. I just borrowed this one for you to see.'

The fisherman gulped again, 'borrowed it?'

'Yes, I borrowed it from an oyster, I know. I'll have to take it back though. Once you've looked at it.'

'Borrowed it from an oyster?'

'Well, of course. All oysters from good families have pearls.'

'And there are more down there?'

'More?' she burst into laughter. 'Of course, there are more.'

The old man gulped again and looked at the large pearl.

The Mermaid looked up into the man's eyes and screwed up her eyes, 'Do you think this man would come if he knew that there were pearls?'

The old man nodded with a wry smile, 'I believe it would be very difficult to keep him away.'

'So, if you show him one and say there are more...'

'Now that's exactly what I was thinking.'

'I couldn't leave you this one. It's one of her best. But I'm sure she would lend me one of her second best. A smaller one though.'

And so, the bargain was struck.

The following day, on his way home with his bucket brimming over with flapping fish, the old fisherman stopped to catch his breath just outside the troublemaker's house. The young man was just setting out for the inn.'

The thick-headed youth fell for the trick so readily that the old man found it almost embarrassing.

He furtively showed the pearl and hinted that if the youth helped him bring up the rest, they could split the profit.

'I'm far too old for that sort of thing now, but I'll indicate the spot if you promise to keep it a secret. We don't want half the island onto it.'

The youth took the bait and agreed to row out at daybreak.

He decided that if he found as many pearls as the old idiot fisherman suggested, he would row him out and return alone. Splitting profits was not something he considered to be manly.

Once out of sight, the fisherman chuckled and shook his head with mirth.

The following day, the fisherman took his time over breakfast and set out a little later than usual.

As he came around the small headland, he spotted the Mermaid sitting on her rock combing her hair, with one of his daughter's best combs that he had leant her.

She waved and smiled, then darted into the sea.

She popped out of the water with a wide smile. 'It worked, it worked. It was incredible. She was clearly thrilled. 'I'm so happy. I lured and enchanted and...'

'Goodness me!' cried the old man, looking at her. 'What happened to your eye?'

The little Mermaid had one of the blackest eyes he had ever seen, even in his younger fighting days. 'What happened to your eye?'

'Oh, that! That's nothing.'

'Your eye is all black and blue. What happened?'

'That man hit me.'

'He punched you in the eye?'

'Yes. That wasn't a very nice thing to do was it.'

'No, it wasn't.'

'Well, I saw him coming, so I started to sing really softly.' She smiled. 'And purely.' She nodded knowingly.

'And he hit you?'

'No, silly. I'm coming to that,' she smiled. 'The Luring part worked perfectly, and he rowed toward me with a funny look in his eyes.'

'Did he really?'

'Yes. I think that must have been because of the powerful stirring in his vitals.'

'Yes. That's very possible. It does that sometimes to young ones.'

'I thought so,' she nodded with pleasure. 'Then I did the Enchanting part and shook my hair about a bit.' She smiled at the thought. 'Oh! You should have seen his eyes. They almost popped completely out of his head, like a dorado fish.'

'Well done?'

'Thanks. Well, he rowed right up to the rock and clambered onto it. His eyes were huge and all shiny.'

'And hit you.'

'No.' she cried exasperated, 'Wait.'

'Sorry.'

'Do you know what he did? He tried to touch me here.' She pointed to her chest.'

'Hum!' said the old man, 'I suppose they'll explain that next term.'

'Well, I pushed him away.'

'And he hit you.'

'Yes. He grabbed my arm and punched.'

'I told you he was a troublemaker.'

'I don't know what happened next, but I suddenly got furiously angry and knocked his legs from under him with my tail.'

'Well done.'

'He went down like a log and shouted and cursed and went red in the face.'

'I bet he hadn't expected that.'

'Well then I was so angry I dived in, caught his two legs and dragged him down right to the bottom of the sea.'

'Goodness me. What did he do?'

'Oh, not much. He bubbled quite a bit to start with on the way down. But then I put a big rock on him, and he stopped.'

'Yes. I expect that's normal. Under the circumstances.'

'So,' the little Mermaid clapped her hands. 'I perished him.'

'The old man laughed, 'Oh, yes. That's brilliant. Your very first Perishing. '

'Yes,' laughed the Mermaid, her face lit up with happiness. 'I Lured and Enchanted, almost shipwrecked and Perished him. My first full job.'

The old man sat down. 'I am very, very proud of you, Sireen. Your mother will be extremely proud too. I told you, you would manage, given a bit of practice.'

'Can we do it again? I love practising.'

The old man laughed out loud. 'Ha, ha. Slow down, slow down. Let's get this job finished properly. We don't want his body floating back up again.'

'Oh, it won't come back up,' smiled Sireen. 'As soon as he gets a bit tendered by the water, the crabs will chop him up and eat him.'

The old man screwed up his face, 'yuck.'

'Oh, no. The crabs tell me that human flesh is excellent when it's fresh.'

The old man pulled another face.

'And when they have finished, I'll go and cover the bones with rocks and sand.'

'Good thinking.'

'Oh! My oyster friend said you can keep the pearl for the moment if you promise to return it at the end of the season.'

'Perfect,' said the fisherman.

'I'm so pleased. You can't believe how happy I am,' said Sireen.

'I think I can.'

'When can we do it again?' she cried happily.

The old man nodded. 'Well, we will have to be careful and choose some more targets.'

'Young ones?'

'Of course,' he smiled at the happy Mermaid. 'But we'll have to wait for your eye to get better first.'

'Yes, Enchanting with a black eye, is not so easy.'

'Exactly.'

'I suppose your daughters have had similar problems.'

The old fisherman's eyebrows rose. Sireen was right again, of course.

Over the following few years, the little Mermaid returned to her rock at each school holiday.

As the old man had predicted, her little body developed and soon took on the fuller forms that one usually associates with an adult mermaid.

Her Luring voice improved remarkably as did her enchanting tactics, but she remained as ever, a happy and agreeable companion to the old fisherman.

In the course of their regular practising exercises, the duo gradually rid this part of the island of the less desirable elements.

Thus, Progressively, life along his long stretch of coast returned to pastoral tranquillity, both above and below the surface of the ocean.

Then, early one summer Sireen appeared accompanied by a small and shy mermaid.

'I finished my training,' she beamed. 'I came top of my class.'

'Well done Sireen. I told you, you could do it. I bet your mother is proud.'

'Oh, yes. This is my little sister.'

She pushed the little Mermaid forward. 'She's in the fourth year, like when we met.' She smiled.

'I've been offered a lovely rock off the coast of Greece.'

The old man's face fell, 'Oh! So, you'll be leaving then?'

'Yes. But I'll come back and see you during the holidays. If you'd like it, of course? We get lots of holidays.'

'Of course.' The old man brightened.

Then the Mermaid slipped over and pulled herself up on the gunwales. 'I was just wondering.'

She looked up into the old man's eyes. 'I was wondering if you would be able to look after my little sister.'

The old man glanced at the little frame, bobbing beside Sireen.

'She came third from last in the exams, you see,' added Sireen, raising her eyebrows, 'you understand?'

The old man laughed and nodded, 'Ah! Yes, I see... What do we start with then? Luring?'

Sireen nodded, 'Her name is Pearl.'

'What a lovely name,' smiled the fisherman. 'We'll start tomorrow morning then, shall we?'

The little Mermaid, Pearl, smiled, 'Oh good. Yes, yes. Thank you.'

'The same rock?'

Sireen nodded, 'Yes. The same.'

A wry smile crossed the old fisherman's face, 'Does Pearl sing as well as you did when we first met, Sireen?'

'Almost.'

'Ah! So, we'd best concentrate on purity first then.'

Sireen laughed and smoothed her sister's hair, 'But she has got much nicer hair than I have.'

'Oh well,' smiled the fisherman, 'we'll manage, I'm sure.' Then a grin creased his tanned and wrinkled face and he nodded to himself. 'It's fortunate really.'

'Oh?'

'Yes. Several new troublemakers moved in during the autumn, so we won't be short of supplies.'

'Perfect.' Smiled Sireen.