

The Fisherman and the Mermaid

Stephen William ROWE

The old fisherman had not had much success that day.

He had anchored off a little beach beyond the rocky spit, and the small boat had sat there rocking gently for most of the morning.

Admittedly, the fact that in the quiet warmth he had slept much of the time had not improved his chances of a good catch. But that's life, he reflected.

Several pump fish had come over to observe him at work but finding him asleep, had not felt it worthwhile giving the fishing line a playful tug or two.

They knew perfectly well how to do this without endangering themselves, having been at the game almost as long as the old man himself. First of all, one carefully checked out where the pointed barbs were. Then one followed the shiny line up two or three feet and grabbed it.

On such occasions, the other fish floated at the surface some way off to watch the fun. This always started when the man leapt into the air and frantically reeled in the line.

This particular fisherman usually gave them excellent value for money, because he frequently tripped up, tumbling either into the water or into the bottom of his boat. In the former case, he would get entangled in all sorts of things and would swear and curse and become 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 have toppled over, but fish can't topple, can they?

This morning, the old man opened his eyes, stretched and sighed in a relaxed way.

He gazed up at the blue sky, then after a little thought, decided to sail around the rocky spit and try his luck in the next small bay along the coast.

Hardly anyone went that way nowadays. He reflected that the lack of fishing engendered by this might have allowed the fish population to recover. In any case, he was in no hurry to get home.

In the cool shadow under the seat, he had stored plenty of bread, a big sausage, and a hunk of cheese. More importantly, a nice bottle of red wine was cooling in a net suspended in the sea beside the boat.

As he guided the little sailing boat smoothly around the head of rock, he heard a splash and a sort of gurgling noise.

Looking around, he could see nothing.

A few seconds later, the gurgling spluttering noise came again.

Then suddenly, a sort of shrill whistling noise split the silence.

Following the sound, he suddenly noticed a head bobbing about in the small waves near the rocks.

It was a female head with lots of dark hair floating about.

The owner was rubbing her head vigorously.

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

'Ouch! I banged my head.'

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

'Dangerous? For who?'

'For you, of course. You'll get swept out to sea.'

'Will I?'

'Yes.'

'That's interesting.'

Then straining his eyes against the sparkling of the sun on the water he called, 'how did you get down onto the rocks? Surely not from up there on the cliffs?' He glanced up. 'That track is deadly dangerous. You didn't come down that I hope?'

The Fisherman and the Mermaid

Stephen William ROWE

'Oh, no. I swam.'

'Swam?!'

'Yes.'

'All the way?'

'All the way from where?'

'From town.'

'Which town was that?'

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

'No. I don't think so.'

'Well. What are you doing here then?'

'Oh. Just swimming around, waiting and sitting on the rocks a bit.'

'Oh. Sunning yourself.'

'No. Singing.'

'Was that you, singing just now?'

'Yes. Did You like it?'

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

'It's supposed to be charming.'

'Is it now?' mused the old man.

During this exchange, the head went bobbing around his little boat, and the young face looked up at him with an eager look of interest on it.

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

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

'Did 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 at least there was one worse than you if you were last but one.'

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

The old man nodded, 'but perhaps you would like to tell me what you are up to out here.'

'Well, in fact, I am trying out my luring, really.'

'Luring?'

'Yes.'

'Is that some sort of foreign swimming stroke?'

At this, the girl broke into a wide grin and laughed out loud. She spluttered, and half-swallowed a mouthful of swirly hair and choked 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 and gazed 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.'

The little hands let go of the gunwale, and a broad smile crossed her face. She clapped her small hands together with pleasure. 'Yes. Yes. Exactly. Oh, I'm so happy 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.'

The Fisherman and the Mermaid

Stephen William ROWE

'I'm sure you do,' 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.'

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 to come here, absolutely against your own will?'

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

'Oh! That's lovely.'

'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. 'Because we mermaids can't be lured? You see.'

'Not by your own singing?'

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

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

'But surely you felt an unusual and unexplainable desire to come this way as soon as you heard me singing.'

'Heard you singing?' he frowned. 'Was that you, singing?'

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

'Oh. Maybe it was the singing then,' he smiled kindly. 'But 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. 'Dangerous too.'

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

She then 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 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, 'Oh no, of course not. That's just the beginning.'

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

'Oh yes, the course lasts for years and years. We're only allotted a rock in the fourth year.'

'Allotted?'

'Well, yes, but 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. Where lots of unwary seamen sail about, just asking to be Lured.'

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

'Exactly.'

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

The Fisherman and the Mermaid

Stephen William ROWE

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

'Bad luck.'

'Yes. But at least now you are here we can try out the other stuff.'

'The other stuff?'

'Yes, of course,' the little Mermaid frowned. 'Well I have to 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 is it absolutely necessary, now that you've proved you can do it. I mean?'

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

'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 man.

'Yes, I suppose I will.'

'So, what comes next.'

'Well, if my memory is correct, now I have to charm you. Or, possibly it was, enchant you. I can't remember.'

'Both alternatives 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 charm you, and you get shipwrecked on the rocks, where you perish. After that that I drag you into the ocean depths.'

'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, I think you're probably right. It's not good shipwrecking weather.'

'It rarely is around here in summer.'

The Mermaid shook her head and frowned, 'And no doubt that's why I got lumbered with this rock.'

'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.'

'Oh! don't you get practical instructions then?'

'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.'

The Fisherman and the Mermaid

Stephen William ROWE

'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. They replace the singing with sobbing and crying.'

'Really?'

'Yes. And some wailing as well. It all depends.'

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

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

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

'When you're ready.'

'Oh. I 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 all right 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 very 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. Her breasts appeared small, firm and perfectly formed, shimmering with that unique shimmer that only mermaid breasts have.

'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 her small breasts, 'then they're irresistibly drawn onto the rocks...'

'And they perish.'

'Exactly.'

'Pretty 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 the final two 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 a smile. 'Do you feel the irresistible charm?'

'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.'

The Fisherman and the Mermaid

Stephen William ROWE

My mother said they'd get bigger when I grow up.'

'Yes, they often do. I noticed that with my daughters. They grow quite suddenly, 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?'

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.'

'But you don't feel a powerful stirring in your vitals?' she said.

'Not all that powerful 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?'

'Giovì'

'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 lovely. She has loads and loads of hair and much more voluminous charmers than I have. And she sings well too.'

'Good heavens!' cried the old man.

'Exactly.'

'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.'

The little Mermaid bent forward slightly and leant her chin on her hand, 'Your vitals too. Do they?'

'Yes. It's 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 think she is, really.'

'I'm pleased,' smiled the Mermaid.

The Fisherman and the Mermaid

Stephen William ROWE

The old man had to shake his head a little 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 to the depth of the ocean and I perished.'

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

'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 for 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 get to be like old stalks of seaweed or dried up coral, the stirring doesn't do the same things to your vitals as when you're a young sprig of bright green weed?'

'You've got that exactly right. So, you see, you need a lot of experience and practice, to lure the older ones.'

'Like you?'

'Yes.'

'Because of the 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 cursus.'

She let her masses of hair fall back, covering her breasts.

'So, in a way, trying to lure and charm old seamen 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 and nodded, 'honing to perfection. Yes, I'd like that. It would be beneficial in my case.'

'That may be so. And one must 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.'

'Perhaps I am,' he replied. Then he said, 'I'll tell you what we'll do.'

The Mermaid looked up at him with eager interest.

'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 wind.'

With this, she grabbed the little boat and swam off at a surprising pace.

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

'Oh! Thank you.'

'My pleasure.'

The Fisherman and the Mermaid

Stephen William ROWE

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.'

'Oh. I hadn't thought about that.'

'Yes. I know. 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 man leant over, 'Now,' he smiled, 'having often observed my daughters luring, I have noticed that they always start, really very subtly.'

Sireen looked up into his eyes with undisguised attention.

'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 remarkable things. He then continued. 'Well. In fact, when they start in this subtle way, the 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 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 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, '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?'

The Fisherman and the Mermaid

Stephen William ROWE

'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 took his food out from under his seat and drew up the wine...

During that quiet afternoon, the two tried out the routine several times, and by the time the evening was drawing in the little Mermaid had made some 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, gave him a sorry look and shook her head. 'I'd like to be able to say that that's true. But not all fish are nice.'

'Meaning?'

'There are simply troublemakers, big heads, brainless idiots and others who seem to have been born simply to spoil life for all the others. They are certainly not all 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 laughed.

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

This being agreed, the old fisherman promised to return the following day, during which they spent a pleasant morning practising again.

At about mid-day, they stopped, and the fisherman settled down to his meal, while Sireen sat in 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 on someone more likely to be lured and charmed.'

'A seaman a little 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 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, the youngest son of a well know criminal gang leader had been sent to live in the village by his father. In his case, the father's intelligence and cunning were absent and had been replaced by arrogance and conceit. He was idle and a born troublemaker and had now clearly decided to seduce the old man's younger daughter.

The Fisherman and the Mermaid

Stephen William ROWE

He frightened everyone in the surrounding villages more because of his father's reputation, then by his physical strength. Furthermore, he much preferred the knife to the fist, which was considered bad form amongst countrymen.

Removing him from circulation would be a considerable improvement to the peace and quiet of the entire region.

'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.'

'Exactly.'

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

'If he thought there was a 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. Lots.'

'Really?'

'Yes, Lot and 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 that quite a lot.'

'It's against the rules.'

'What is?'

'Plundering.'

'Plundering?'

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

'That's a pity.'

'It the law,' said Sireen

'I suppose there are emeralds and rubies too.'

'Oh yes, plenty of those too.'

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

'No.'

'And pearls?'

'Pearls?' cried 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, 'Is this yours? Where did it come from?'

'Oh no, it's not one of mine. They're 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 of good family 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 frowned, 'Do you think this man would come if he thought that there were pearls?'

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

The Fisherman and the Mermaid

Stephen William ROWE

'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 small one.'

And so, the bargain was struck.

The following day, on his way home with his bucket full of 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 secretly showed the pearl and let it be understood that if the youth helped him to bring up the rest, he would indicate the location.

'I'm far too old for that sort of thing now, but I'll only tell you if you 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 secretly decided that if he found as many pearls as the old man suggested, he would take the old man out with him and return without.

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 best combs which he had given 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 lovely. 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 came toward me with a funny look in his eyes.'

'Did he?'

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

'Yes. That's very possible. It does that sometimes.'

'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 out, like a dorado fish.'

'Well done?'

'Thanks. Well, he came right up to the rock and climbed onto it.'

'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 little breasts.'

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

'Well, I pushed him away.'

'And he hit you.'

The Fisherman and the Mermaid

Stephen William ROWE

'Yes.'

'I told you he was a troublemaker.'

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

'Well done.'

'And then, without thinking 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. But then I put a big rock on him, and he stopped.'

'Yes. I expect that's normal.'

'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. You mother will be very 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 finished properly. We don't want his body floating back up.

'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 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. But we'll have to wait for your eye to get better first.'

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

'Exactly.'

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 troublemakers. Progressively, thus, the life along his long stretch of coast returned to the calm of former times.

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

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

The Fisherman and the Mermaid

Stephen William ROWE

'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 on holidays. If you'd like that of course?'

'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, 'She came third from last in the exams, you see.'

The old man laughed and nodded, 'What do we start with? Luring?'

Sireen nodded, 'Her name is Pearl.'

'Lovely,' smiled the fisherman, 'We'll start tomorrow morning, shall we?'

The little Mermaid, Pearl, smiled, 'Oh good. That's Lovely.'