

The Siren

By F. Anstey

Long long ago, a siren lived all alone upon a rocky little island far out in the Southern Ocean. She may have been the youngest and most beautiful of the original three sirens, driven by her sisters' jealousy, or her own weariness of their society, to seek this distant home; or she may have lived there in solitude from the beginning.

But she was not unhappy; all she cared about was the admiration and worship of mortal men, and these were hers whenever she wished, for she had only to sing, and her exquisite voice would float away over the waters, until it reached some passing vessel, and then every one that heard was seized instantly with the irresistible longing to hasten to her isle and throw himself adoringly at her feet.

One day as she sat upon a low headland, looking earnestly out over the sparkling blue-green water before her, and hoping to discover the peak of some far-off sail on the hazy sea-line, she was startled by a sound she had never heard before—the grating of a boat's keel on the pebbles in the little creek at her side.

She had been too much absorbed in watching for distant ships to notice that a small bark had been gliding round the other side of her island, but now, as she glanced round, she saw that the stranger who had guided it was already jumping ashore and securing his boat.

Evidently she had not attracted him there, for she had been too indolent to sing of late, and he did not seem even to have seen her, or to have landed from any other motive than curiosity.

He was quite young, gallant-looking and sunburnt, with brown hair curling over his forehead, an open face and honest grey eyes. And as she looked at him, the fancy came to her that she would like to question him and hear his voice; she would find out, if she could, what manner of beings these mortals were over whom she possessed so strange a power.

Never before had such a thought entered her mind, notwithstanding that she had seen many mortals of every age and rank, from captain to the lowest galley slave; but then she had only seen them under the influence of her magical voice, when they were struck dumb and motionless, after which—except as proofs of her power—they did not interest her.

But this stranger was still free—so long as she did not choose to enslave him; and for some reason she did not choose to do so just yet.

As he turned towards her, she beckoned to him imperiously, and he saw the slender graceful figure above for the first time,—the fairest maiden his eyes had ever beheld, with an unearthly beauty in her wonderful dark blue eyes, and hair of the sunniest gold,—he stood gazing at her in motionless uncertainty, for he thought he must be cheated by a vision.

He came nearer, and, obeying a careless motion of her hand, threw himself down on a broad shelf of rock a little below the spot where she was seated; still he did not dare to speak lest the vision should pass away.

She looked at him for some time with an innocent, almost childish, curiosity shining under her long lashes. At last she gave a low little laugh: 'Are you afraid of me?' she asked; 'why don't you speak? but perhaps,' she added to herself, 'mortals cannot speak.'

'I was silent,' he said, 'lest by speaking I should anger you—for surely you must be some goddess or sea-nymph?'

‘Ah, you *can* speak!’ she cried. ‘No, I am no goddess or nymph, and you will not anger me—if only you will tell me many things I want to know!’

And she began to ask him all the questions she could think of: first about the great world in which men lived, and then about himself for she was very curious, in a charmingly wilful and capricious fashion of her own.

He answered frankly and simply, but it seemed as if some influence were upon him which kept him from being dazzled and overcome by her loveliness, for he gave no sign as yet of yielding to the glamour she cast upon all other men, nor did his eyes gleam with the despairing adoration the siren knew so well.

She was quick to perceive this, and it piqued her. She paid less and less attention to the answers he gave her, and ceased at last to question him further.

Presently she said, with a strange smile that showed her cruel little teeth gleaming between her scarlet lips, ‘Why don’t you ask me who I am, and what I am doing here alone? do not you care to know?’

‘If you will deign to tell me,’ he said.

‘Then I will tell you,’ she said; ‘I am a siren— are you not afraid *now*?’

‘Why should I be afraid?’ he asked, for the name had no meaning in his ears.

She was disappointed; it was only her voice—nothing else, then—that deprived men of their senses; perhaps this youth was proof even against that; she longed to try, and yet she hesitated still.

‘Then you have never heard of me,’ she said; ‘you don’t know why I sit and watch for the great gilded ships you mortals build for yourselves?’

‘For your pleasure, I suppose,’ he answered. ‘I have watched them myself many a time; they are grand as they sweep by, with their sharp brazen beaks cleaving the frothing water, and their painted sails curving out firm against the sky. It is good to hear the measured thud of the great oars and the cheerful cries of the sailors as they clamber about the cordage.’

She laughed disdainfully. ‘And you think I care for all that!’ she cried. ‘Where is the pleasure of looking idly on and admiring?—that is for them, not for me. As these galleys of yours pass, I sing—and when the sailors hear, they must come to me. Man after man leaps eagerly into the sea, and makes for the shore—until at last the oars grind and lock together, and the great ship drifts helplessly on, empty and aimless. I like that.’

‘But the men?’ he asked, with an uneasy wonder at her words.

‘Oh, they reach the shore—some of them, and then they lie at my feet, just as you are lying now, and I sing on, and as they listen they lose all power or wish to move, nor have I ever heard them speak as you speak; they only lie there upon the sand or rock, and gaze at me always, and soon their cheeks grow hollow and hollow, and their eyes brighter and brighter—and it is I who make them so!’

‘But I see them not,’ said the youth, divided between hope and fear; ‘the beach is bare; where, then, are all those gone who have lain here?’

‘I cannot say,’ she replied carelessly; ‘they are not here for long; when the sea comes up it carries them away.’

‘And you do not care!’ he cried, struck with horror at the absolute indifference in her face; ‘you do not even try to keep them here?’

‘Why should I care?’ said the siren lightly; ‘I do not want them. More will always come when I wish. And it is so wearisome always to see the same faces, that I am glad when they go.’

'I will not believe it, siren, groaned the young man, turning from her in bitter anguish; 'oh, you cannot be cruel!'

'No, I am not cruel,' she said in surprise. 'And why will you not believe me? It is true!'

'Listen to me,' he said passionately: 'do you know how bitter it is to die,—to leave the sunlight and the warm air, the fair land and the changing sea?'

'How can I know?' said the siren. '*I shall never die—unless—unless something happens which will never be!*'

'You will live on, to bring this bitterness upon others for your sport. We mortals lead but short lives, and life, even spent in sorrow, is sweet to most of us; and our deaths when they come bring mourning to those who cared for us and are left behind. But you lure men to this isle, and look on unmoved as they are borne away!'

'No, you are wrong,' she said; 'I am not cruel, as you think me; when they are no longer pleasant to look at, I leave them. I never see them borne away. I never thought what became of them at last. Where are they now?'

'They are dead, siren,' he said sadly, 'drowned. Life was dear to them; far away there were women and children to whom they had hoped to return, and who have waited and wept for them since. Happy years were before them, and to some at least—but for you—a restful and honoured old age. But you called them, and as they lay here the greedy waves came up, dashed them from these rocks and sucked them, blinded, suffocating, battling painfully for breath and life, down into the dark green depths. And now their bones lie tangled in the sea-weed, but they themselves are wandering, sad, restless shades, in the shadowy world below, where is no sun, no happiness, no hope—but only sighing evermore, and the memory of the past!'

She listened with drooping lids, and her chin resting upon her soft palm; at last she said with a slight quiver in her voice, 'I did not know—I did not mean them to die. And what can I do? I cannot keep back the sea.'

'You can let them sail by unharmed,' he said.

'I cannot!' she cried. 'Of what use is my power to me if I may not exercise it? Why do you tell me of men's sufferings—what are they to me?'

'They give you their lives,' he said; 'you fill them with a hopeless love and they die for it in misery—yet you cannot even pity them!'

'Is it love that brings them here?' she said eagerly. 'What is this that is called love? For I have always known that if I ever love—but then only—I must die, though what love may be I know not. Tell me, so that I may avoid it!'

'You need not fear, siren,' he said, 'for, if death is only to come to you through love, you will never die!'

'Still, I want to know,' she insisted; 'tell me 'If a stranger were to come some day to this isle, and when his eyes meet yours, you feel your indifference leaving you, so that you have no heart to see him lie ignobly at your feet, and cannot leave him to perish miserably in the cold waters; if you desire to keep him by your side—not as your slave and victim, but as your companion, your equal, for evermore—that will be love!'

'If that is love,' she cried joyously, 'I shall indeed never die! But that is not how men love *me?*' she added.

'No,' he said; 'their love for you must be some strange and enslaving passion, since they will submit to death if only they may hear your voice. That is not true love, but a fatal madness.'

'But if mortals feel love for one another,' she asked, 'they must die, must they not?'

‘The love of a man for a maiden who is gentle and good does not kill—even when it is most hopeless,’ he said; ‘and where she feels it in return, it is well for both, for their lives will flow on together in peace and happiness.’

He had spoken softly, with a far away look in his eyes that did not escape the siren.

‘And you love one of your mortal maidens like that?’ she asked. ‘Is she more beautiful than I am?’

‘She is mortal,’ he said, ‘but she is fair and gracious, my maiden; and it is she who has my love, and will have it while I live.’

‘And yet,’ she said, with a mocking smile, ‘I could make you forget her.’

Her childlike waywardness had left her as she spoke the words, and a dangerous fire was shining in her deep eyes.

‘Never!’ he cried; ‘even you cannot make me false to my love! And yet,’ he added quickly, ‘I dare not challenge you, enchantress that you are; what is my will against your power?’

‘You do not love me yet,’ she said; ‘you have called me cruel, and reproached me; you have dared to tell me of a maiden compared with whom I am nothing! You shall be punished. I will have you for my own, like the others!’

‘Siren,’ he pleaded, seizing one of her hands as it lay close to him on the hot grey rock, ‘take my life if you will—but do not drive away the memory of my love; let me die, if I must die, faithful to her; for what am I, or what is my love, to you?’

Nothing,’ she said scornfully, and yet with something of a caress in her tone, ‘yet I want you; you shall lie here, and hold my hand, and look into my eyes, and forget all else but me.’

‘Let me go,’ he cried, rising, and turning back to regain his bark; ‘I choose life while I may!’

She laughed. ‘You have no choice,’ she said; ‘you are mine!’ she seemed to have grown still more radiantly, dazzlingly fair, and presently, as the stranger made his way to the creek where his boat was lying, she broke into the low soft chant whose subtle witchery no mortals had ever resisted as yet.

He started as he heard her, but still he went on over the rocks a little longer, until at last he stopped with a groan, and turned slowly back; his love across the sea was fading fast from his memory; he felt no desire to escape any longer; he was even eager at last to be back on the ledge at her feet and listen to her for ever.

He reached it and sank down with a sigh, and a drowsy delicious languor stole over him, taking away all power to stir or speak.

Her song was triumphant and mocking, and yet strangely tender at times, thrilling him as he heard it, but her eyes only rested now and then, and always indifferently, upon his upturned face.

He wished for nothing better now than to lie there, following the flashing of her supple hands upon the harp-strings and watching every change of her fair face. What though the waves might rise round him and sweep him away out of sight, and drown her voice with the roar and swirl of waters? it would not be just yet.

And the siren sang on; at first with a cruel pride at finding her power supreme, and this youth, for all his fidelity, no wiser than the rest; he would waste there with yearning, hopeless passion, till the sight of him would weary her, and she would leave him to drift away and drown forgotten.

Yet she did not despise him as she had despised all the others; in her fancy his eyes bore a sad reproach, and she could look at him no longer with indifference.

Meanwhile the waves came rolling in fast, till they licked the foot of the rock, and as the foam creamed over the shingle, the siren found herself thinking of the fate which was before him, and, as she thought, her heart was wrung with a new strange pity.

She did not want him to be drowned; she would like him there always at her feet, with that rapt devotion upon his face; she almost longed to hear his voice again—but that could never be!

And the sun went down, and the crimson flush in the sky and on the sea faded out, the sea grew grey and crested with the white billows, which came racing in and broke upon the shore, roaring sullenly and raking back the pebbles with a sharp rattle at each recoil. The siren could sing no longer; her voice died away, and she gazed on the troubled sea with a wistful sadness in her great eyes.

At last a wave larger than the others struck the face of the low cliff with a shock that seemed to leave it trembling, and sent the cold salt spray dashing up into the siren's face.

She sprang forward to the edge and looked over, with a sudden terror lest the ledge below should be bare—but her victim lay there still, bound fast by her spell, and careless of the death that was advancing upon him.

Then she knew for the first time that she could not give him up to the sea, and she leaned down to him and laid one small white hand upon his shoulder. 'The next wave will carry you away,' she cried, trembling; 'there is still time; save yourself, for I cannot let you die!'

But he gave no sign of having heard her, but lay there motionless, and the wind wailed past them and the sea grew wilder and louder.

She remembered now that no efforts of his own could save him—he was doomed, and she was the cause of it, and she hid her face in her slender hands, weeping for the first time in her life.

The words he had spoken in answer to her questions about love came back to her: 'It was true, then,' she said to herself; 'it is love that I feel for him. But I cannot love—I must not love him—for if I do, my power is gone, and I must throw myself into the sea!'

So she hardened her heart once more, and turned away, for she feared to die; but again the ground shook beneath her, and the spray rose high into the air, and then she could bear it no more—whatever it cost her, she must save him—for if he died, what good would her life be to her?

'If one of us must die,' she said, '*I* will be that one. I am cruel and wicked, as *he* told me; I have done harm enough!' and bending down, she wound her arms round his unconscious body and drew him gently up to the level above.

'You are safe now,' she whispered; 'you shall not be drowned—for I love you. Sail back to your maiden on the mainland, and be happy; but do not hate me for the evil I have wrought, for suffering and death have come to me in my turn!'

The lethargy into which he had fallen left him under her clinging embrace, and the sad, tender words fell almost unconsciously upon his dulled ears; he felt the touch of her hair as it brushed his cheek, and his forehead was still warm with the kiss she had pressed there as he opened his eyes—only to find himself alone.

For the fate which the siren had dreaded had come upon her at last; she had loved, and she had paid the penalty for loving, and never more would her wild, sweet voice beguile mortals to their doom.