The Mermaid of Zennor

A Cornish Tale

The village of Zennor lies upon the windward coast of Cornwall. The houses cling to the hillside as if hung there by the wind. Waves still lick the ledges in the coves, and a few fishermen still set out to sea in their boats.

In times past, the sea was both the beginning and the end for the folk of Zennor. It gave them fish for food and fish for sale, and made a wavy road to row from town to town. Hours were reckoned not by clocks but by the ebb and flow of the tide, and months and years ticked off by the herring runs. The sea took from them, too, and often wild, sudden storms would rise. Then fish and fisherman alike would be lost to an angry sea.

At the end of a good day, when the sea was calm and each boat had returned with its share of fish safely stowed in the hold, the people of Zennor would go up the path to the old church and give thanks. They would pray for a fine catch on the morrow, too. The choir would sing, and after the closing hymn the families would go

Now, in the choir that sang at Evensong there was a most handsome lad named Mathew Trewella. Not only was Mathew handsome to the eyes, his singing was sweet to the ears as well. His voice pealed out louder than the church bells, and each note rang clear and true. It was always Mathew who sang the closing hymn.

Early one evening, when all the fishing boats bobbed at anchor, and all the fisher families were in church and all the birds at nest, and even the waves rested themselves and came quietly to shore, something moved softly in the twilight. The waves parted without a sound, and, from deep beneath them, some creature rose and climbed out onto a rock, there in the cove of Zennor. It was both a sea creature and a she-creature. For, though it seemed to be a girl, where the girl's legs should have been was the long and silver-shiny tail of a fish. It was a mermaid, one of the daughters of Llyr, king of the ocean, and her name was Morveren.

Morveren sat upon the rock and looked at herself in the quiet water, and then combed all the little crabs and seashells from her long, long hair. As she combed, she listened to the murmur of the waves and wind. And borne on the wind was Mathew's singing.

"What breeze is there that blows such a song?" wondered Morveren. But then the wind died, and Mathew's song with it. The sun disappeared, and Morveren slipped back beneath the water to her home.

The next evening she came again. But not to the rock. This time she swam closer to shore, the better to hear. And once more Mathew's voice carried out to sea, and Morveren listened.

"What bird sings so sweet?" she asked, and she looked all about. But darkness had come, and her eyes saw only shadows.

The next day Morveren came even earlier, and boldly. She floated right up by the fishermen's boats. And when she heard Mathew's voice, she called, "What reed is there that pipes such music?"

There was no answer save the swishing of the water round the skiffs.

Morveren would and must know more about the singing. So she pulled herself up on the shore itself. From there she could see the church and hear the music pouring from its open doors. Nothing would do then but she must peek in and learn for herself who sang so sweetly.

Still, she did not go at once. For, looking behind her, she saw that the tide had begun to ebb and the water pull back from the shore. And she knew that she must go back, too, or be left stranded on the sand like a fish out of water.

So she dived down beneath the waves, down to the dark sea cave where she lived with her father the king. And there she told Llyr what she had heard.

Llyr was so old he appeared to be carved of driftwood, and his hair floated out tangled and green, like seaweed. At Morveren's words, he shook that massive head from side to side.

"To hear is enough, my child. To see is too much."

"I must go, Father," she pleaded, "for the music is magic."

"Nay," he answered. "The music is man-made, and it comes from a man's mouth. We people of the sea do not walk on the land of men."

A tear, larger than an ocean pearl, fell from Morveren's eye. "Then surely I may die from the wanting down here."

Llyr sighed, and his sigh was like the rumbling of giant waves upon the rocks; for a mermaid to cry was a thing unheard of and it troubled the old sea king greatly.

"Go, then," he said at last, "but go with care. Cover your tail with a dress, such as their women wear. Go quietly, and make sure that none shall see you. And return by high tide, or you may not return at all."

"I shall take care, Father!" cried Morveren, excited. "No one shall snare me like a herring!"

Llyr gave her a beautiful dress crusted with pearls and sea jade and coral and other ocean jewels. It covered her tail, and she covered her shining hair with a net, and so disguised she set out for the church and the land of men.

Slippery scales and fish's tail are not made for walking, and it was difficult for Morveren to get up the path to the church. Nor was she used to the dress of an earth woman dragging behind. But get there she did, pulling herself forward by grasping on the trees, until she was at the very door of the church. She was just in time for the closing hymn. Some folks were looking down at their hymnbooks and some up at the choir, so, since none had eyes in the backs of their heads, they did not see Morveren. But she saw them, and Mathew as well. He was as handsome as an angel, and when he sang it was like a harp from heaven -- although Morveren, of course, being a mermaid, knew nothing of either.

So each night thereafter, Morveren would dress and come up to the church, to look and to listen, staying but a few minutes and always leaving before the last note faded and in time to catch the swell of high tide. And night by night, month by month, Mathew grew taller and his voice grew deeper and stronger (though Morveren neither grew nor changed, for that is the way of mermaids). And so it went for most of a year, until the evening when Morveren lingered longer than usual. She had heard Mathew sing one verse, and then another, and begin a third. Each refrain was lovelier than the one before, and Morveren caught her breath in a sigh.

It was just a little sigh, softer than the whisper of a wave. But it was enough for Mathew to hear, and he looked to the back of the church and saw the mermaid. Morveren's eyes were shining, and the net had slipped from her head and her hair was wet and gleaming, too. Mathew stopped his singing. He was struck silent by the look of her -- and by his love for her. For these things will happen.

Morveren was frightened. Mathew had seen her, and her father had warned that none must look at her. Besides, the church was warm and dry, and merpeople must be cool and wet. Morveren felt herself shriveling, and turned in haste from the door.

"Stop!" cried Mathew boldly. "Wait!" And he ran down the aisle of the church and out the door after her.

Then all the people turned, startled, and their hymn-books fell from their laps.

Morveren tripped, tangled in her dress, and would have fallen had not Mathew reached her side and caught her.

"Stay!" he begged. "Whoever ye be, do not leave!"

Tears, real tears, as salty as the sea itself, rolled down Morveren's cheeks.

"I cannot stay. I am a sea creature, and must go back where I belong."

Mathew stared at her and saw the tip of her fish tail poking out from beneath the dress. But that mattered not at all to him.

"Then I will go with ye. For with ye is where I belong."

He picked Morveren up, and she threw her arms about his neck. He hurried down the path with her, toward the ocean's edge.

And all the people from the church saw this.

"Mathew, stop!" they shouted. "Hold back!"

"No! No, Mathew!" cried that boy's mother.

But Mathew was bewitched with love for the mermaid, and ran the faster with her toward the sea.

Then the fishermen of Zennor gave chase, and all others, too, even Mathew's mother. But Mathew was quick and strong and outdistanced them. And Morveren was quick and clever. She tore the pearls and coral from her dress and flung them on the path. The fishermen were greedy, even as men are now, and stopped in their chase to pick up the gems. Only Mathew's mother still ran after them.

The tide was going out. Great rocks thrust up from the dark water. Already it was too shallow for Morveren to swim. But Mathew plunged ahead into the water, stumbling in to his knees. Quickly his mother caught hold of his fisherman's jersey. Still Mathew pushed on, until the sea rose to his waist, and then his shoulders. Then the waters closed over Morveren and Mathew, and his mother was left with only a bit of yarn in her hand, like a fishing line with nothing on it.

Never again were Mathew and Morveren seen by the people of Zennor. They had gone to live in the land of Llyr, in golden sand castles built far below the waters in a blue-green world.

But the people of Zennor heard Mathew. For he sang to Morveren both day and night, love songs and lullabies. Nor did he sing for her ears only. Mathew learned songs that told of the sea as well. His voice rose up soft and high if the day was to be fair, deep and low if Llyr was going to make the waters boil. From his songs, the fishermen of Zennor knew when it was safe to put to sea, and when it was wise to anchor snug at home.

There are some still who find meanings in the voices of the waves and understand the whispers of the winds. These are the ones who say Mathew sings yet, to them that will listen.