

Peter and the Sea Maiden

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This tale assumes the reader knows Tiptoes as a character. She is a fairy with sky-blue dress and golden wings. She is deeply and sympathetically connected to the soul aspects of nature and the human being, especially childhood. The story begins abruptly because it is a fragment from an unpublished ms.

The lighthouse sat on a rocky island a mile or more from shore, and its light went round and round all day and all night. Tiptoes decided to visit and over the dancing waves she flew, salty spray splashing her face and speckling her dress.

At last she reached the island and circled the lighthouse. The island was not much more than a rock sticking out of the sea. A patch of sea grass sat blowing in the wind, and a small boat landing hid in the lea of the waves that forever washed against the rock. Tiptoes wondered why anyone would want to live in such a place. It must be lonely, with never a soul to visit or pass the time of day.

Tiptoes flew to the lighthouse door and knocked.

"Knock-knock-knock! Knock-knock-knock!"

But nobody answered.

"Knock-knock-knock!" she went again ... and still nobody answered.

She was about to make herself extra small and fly in through the keyhole when the door opened.

"Who's there?" asked the lighthouse keeper, looking around. He couldn't see a soul.

"It's me," said Tiptoes, waving. "I've come to pay a visit."

The keeper looked to see where the voice was coming from, but couldn't find anybody. He scratched his head.

"I could have sworn I heard a voice," he muttered.

"You did!" said Tiptoes, flying right in front of his face. "Here I am!"

The lighthouse keeper's jaw dropped open. "A talking butterfly!" he gasped.

"No, you silly," said Tiptoes. "I'm a fairy! Can't you see?"

"So you are!" exclaimed the lighthouse keeper in astonishment. "I thought you were a butterfly."

"Not me," laughed Tiptoes. "May I come in for a visit?"

"Of course, little fairy," said the keeper. "Please come in. But I don't normally have such tiny visitors. I am not sure I have any teacups small enough for you to drink from."

"That's okay," replied Tiptoes. "I just want to chat," and she flew in the door with a flutter of wings.

The lighthouse was round and had three rooms. On the ground floor was the living room and kitchen; above that was the bedroom, and on the top sat the room with the light that the keeper had to tend at all times. The living room had two small windows looking

towards land. They had to face away from the sea, otherwise when storms sent waves crashing against the lighthouse, the windows would break and the house flooded.

The lighthouse keeper made himself a cup of tea and sat down on the sofa. He stroked his beard and looked carefully at Tiptoes with friendly eyes.

"What's your name, little one?" he asked kindly.

"Tiptoes Lightly," replied Tiptoes.

"And why did you want to visit?" asked the keeper.

"To hear about mermaids," said Tiptoes. "I think you know about them."

"I see," said the keeper, stroking his beard again.

"Yes," said Tiptoes. "I think you know all about them."

The keeper's head bobbed slowly up and down as if he was thinking.

"Yes, I do," he said at last.

"I knew it!" exclaimed Tiptoes, clapping her hands. "Will you tell me about them?"

"There's not much to say really," said the keeper slowly. "They live in the sea and are half human and half fish – or at least that's what the legends say."

"What else?" asked Tiptoes.

"The ladies are called mermaids or sea maidens, and the men are called mermen."

"And who's their king?" asked Tiptoes.

"Neptune," replied the keeper getting up suddenly. "That's all I know. I have to check the light," and he climbed the stairs.

Tiptoes listened to his footsteps going round and round the lighthouse tower until he got to the top. She flew to a windowsill and looked out. She saw the cliffs along the shore redden as the sun began to set. Then fog moved in and everything became misty and dim. The fog was so thick that she could not see the ocean, but the sound of the waves washing against the rocks was as clear as ever.

The lighthouse door opened and a young woman stepped into the living room. She had flowing hair down to her waist, lovely pale white skin, and slim, delicate hands. She was very beautiful.

Tiptoes stayed still and watched. The woman closed the door, sat down on a chair and waited. The room darkened as night settled in. At last Tiptoes heard the keeper's footsteps coming down the stairs. He carried a lantern, and when he entered the whole room lit up. He hung the lamp on a hook and went to the young woman. She smiled and took his hand. Then he turned his head and looked at Tiptoes.

The woman followed his gaze and gave a little gasp. "I didn't know anyone was here!" she said in surprise.

"Yes," said the lighthouse keeper, "we have a little visitor tonight. Her name is Tiptoes Lightly. She's a fairy."

The woman smiled and gave a little bow with her head. The lamplight shone off her hair and Tiptoes saw that it was tinged a soft sea-green – like the color of waves before they crash onto the shore.

The lighthouse keeper lit a fire in the fireplace and soon red and yellow flames were dancing brightly. Tiptoes sat on the edge of a stool and the keeper and the lady sat on the sofa. They seemed happy to be together.

"Please tell me more about mermaids?" Tiptoes begged. "I'm sure you know more than what you told me."

The keeper glanced at the lady. She smiled and gave a little nod.

"Yes," he answered, "perhaps I can. There are many things I could say, but I will tell you a tale, a true tale if you will believe it, of Peter the Sailor and the Sea Maiden."

Tiptoes crossed her legs, arranged her dress over her knees, and put her chin in her hands. She loved to listen to stories.

"There was once a sailor called Peter," began the keeper. "He was young and sailed the seven seas. He sailed from India to Africa, from Mauritius to Maine, and from America to England. He traded in cloths of silk and satin, fine pottery and metalwork, sweet wines and precious spices. Everywhere he sailed he bought and sold until he became rich and owned his own boat and crew.

When he was at sea Peter often stood on deck at the end of the day to plan his voyages and decide what to buy and what to sell. One evening he stood by the railing as usual and gazed out over the sea. The sun was settling into the waves and casting a warm light onto the clouds. It was then, as the boat rocked back and forth on the swell, that Peter saw a woman looking up at him from out of the water. As soon as he noticed her she turned and disappeared out of sight into the deeps.

Peter almost called out. For a moment he thought one of his crew had fallen overboard. Then he realized that this was impossible for his crew was only made up of men. So he kept his peace and told no one of what he had seen.

The next evening as he looked over the ocean he again saw the young maiden rise out of the deep. This time her head rose out of the water and they gazed at each other. She had blue-green eyes and long, sea-green hair floating about her shoulders. Then she turned and vanished under the waves.

And so it was that for seven days the sea maiden appeared when Peter stood at the railing and looked out over the sea. He saw her lovely face and glimmering hair and often looked deeply into her eyes, but never a word did they say to each other. On the eighth evening she did not appear, nor on the ninth, nor ever after that did the sea maiden appear from out of the waves.

Peter's ship reached port. They sold their fine fabrics and costly goods and took sweet wine on board. Then they set sail down the coast. Peter had made much money and now was richer than he had ever been, but he wasn't content. He stood by the railing and looked out over the sea, and for days on end he hardly said anything at all.

One evening he became lightheaded and fey. He climbed to the top of the tallest mast, and shouted:

*"I am richer than the King of the Sea,
yet no maiden for wife has come to me!"*

His crew laughed, thinking he'd been drinking too much of his own cargo.

But they were not the only ones to hear his words. Deep beneath the waves the real King of the Sea heard his boast and roared: "King of the Sea! Who thinks he is King of the Sea? I'll show him who the King of the Sea really is!"

He raised his trident high above his head and shouted: "Waves rise!" and the waves rose and became wild.

"Wind howl!" he cried, and the wind howled and stormed about the ship.

"Rocks doom!" he intoned, lowering his staff and pointing to the rocky shore. Immediately the wind and waves turned and beat the ship towards the shore.

Peter hung on with all his strength. The storm had risen so quickly that he didn't have time to climb down from the mast. Water pounded the deck, wind ripped the sails to shreds and the whole ship groaned. With a thundering crash the boat smashed onto the rocks and broke into a thousand pieces. Peter was flung from the mast far out into the surf. Down, down under the water he went, dragged by the terrible waves until his strength gave out and all became dark.

Peter awoke on the shore. Beside him sat a young woman with long hair down to her waist. On her slim fingers she had two rings, each like the other, showing two fishes intertwined, one made of silver and one of gold. He sat up with a start. He knew it was the sea maiden he had seen in the water.

"Where is my ship?" he asked.

"Gone," she said.

"And my crew?"

"Dead," she replied. "My father was the one who let loose the storm that wrecked your ship."

Peter sat for a while. "Why didn't you come to the boat anymore?" he asked.

"My father would not let me," she replied. "He was jealous and locked me in a cave. When you claimed to be King of the Sea his jealousy turned to anger and rage. But my sisters freed me when he woke the storm."

She took one of the rings from her finger and placed it in his hand. "If you wish to see me again, put this ring on your finger. I will know and come to you."

Then she walked into the ocean and disappeared beneath the waves.

Tiptoes looked at the beautiful young woman sitting next to the lighthouse keeper. She sat still, her greenish hair glistening in the firelight. She reached out and touched the keeper's hand and Tiptoes saw the two finely wrought rings, each of silver and gold.

In the morning Tiptoes woke to the sunlight shining through the windows and brightening the room. The keeper sat at the table.

"Good morning, Tiptoes," he said.

"Good morning," she replied, looking around.

The young woman was not to be seen. Tiptoes flitted to the open window and looked out. The fog had lifted and the sea was calm. It shone like a mirror.

"It's time for me to go," she said.

"Goodbye, Tiptoes," called the keeper with a merry laugh. "Come visit again!"

"I will for sure," Tiptoes replied as she opened her wings. "Goodbye Peter!" she waved, and flew out the window.