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The Merrow

The Merrow

by

Bethany Abrahamson

Once upon a time there was a¹ fisherwoman who lived on a little rocky island, in the midst of a forgotten sea. She did not hunt for fish, but for shells, collecting them to sell on the mainland. Every morning she walked along the garden of a beach, her eyes keenly hunting for anything beautiful that washed up upon her shores---black cowrie, lacy lady's fan scallop, and warm sunny nautilus. Every afternoon she rode the waves on her boat, pulling other shells from the lines she had anchored out at sea. Every evening she curled up by the fire in her home of wood and mud and fashioned the shells into things of beauty for the people of the mainland to enjoy. She loved the island, and in turn the island blessed her with these gifts, the homes of creatures who had outgrown them. The fisherwoman had only the seabirds to keep her company, their mournful crawling along the shoreline the only music she heard. Now and then a ship would pass by her island, and the fisherwoman would fetch her boat, and trade her shells for firewood or crackers or---sometimes---a book of music

from a faraway land. When they sailed away she sat in her boat and watched them, hoping to hear a snatch of a sea shanty. She never boarded the ships, or asked them to sing for her. But despite her shyness she longed to have such music with her always. To comfort herself she retreated to the quiet of her empty shack to read her books of music, for she could not play or sing even a little. One day, she thought, she would find music that played for her alone—but then the joy of creating beautiful things overtook her, and her days and nights passed in industry and silence.

On a bright, misty morning, when the fisherwoman she collected the shells on the beach, she heard music. It was closer than any ship, and seemed to echo against the steely water. She scolded herself for daydreaming, when there were so many shells to collect, and so much work to be done. Yet—the notes rang in her ears in as real a fashion as the cormorants' squawking. Just as suddenly as she had become aware of it, the music stopped, leaving nothing but the sound of her pounding heart in her ears. Perhaps she had imagined it, the fanciful desire for music getting to be too much for her. But a moment later it began again. It floated to her from beyond the shining rocks ahead of her.

The fisherwoman knew her island by heart, and picked a way over the stony shore that would bring her to the top of the rocky outcropping without revealing her to sight

¹ *This story is an adaption from Irish stories of the Merrow such as "The Lady of Gollerus" in Fairy legends and traditions of the South of Ireland, by Thomas Crofton Croker, <https://archive.org/details/fairylegendstrad0Ocrokrich>.*

on the other side. In a moment she crouched behind a large rock, and peeked around it to see a young man sitting on a rock, the tide receding around him into swirls of white sand.

He looked like a desert prince, finely formed and regal though modest in his carriage; naked skin the color of dark clams, and with green urchin hair pushed back and curling up at his neck. Here and there she could see the marks of fairy blood in him—shining scales along the curve of his legs, and from the nape of his neck to the base of his spine there ran a long fin, folded now, but green and shining in the sunlight. He played upon a lyre made from a conch shell, and sang a tune not unlike the shanties that she loved so much. But these were softer, darker, more hollow and unearthly than anything she had ever heard before—the songs of the merfolk that swam below a ship's hull. The notes he sang and played were as beautiful as the foamy sea and the clouds above, but he stopped before the final chord, as if he did not know how to play it, or did not remember.

She knew him to be a Merrow, a fairy of the sea; for when he stretched out his legs on the rock she saw that they were not the legs of a man—long, thin, with long webbed toes. The toes curled around the black rock as he tried to play the song again. She also knew him for a Merrow by the cap that had been laid out to dry on the rock beside him. A Merrow's cap, it was said, kept the water out of the Merrow's pointed ears—perhaps it let them dive to the depths of the ocean. The cap gleamed red against the ocean, the rubies encrusted upon it shimmering in the waning sun, the scarlet feathers fluttering in the breeze.

She saw the cap rustle as the water threatened to drag it out to sea. The Merrow did not notice it, having taken up another song to play. She wondered at it, for she

knew that if a Merrow lost his cap he was but a landbound fish, tied to rocks and air as a goldfish in a bowl, or a marooned sailor with the spirit of the ocean trapped in his bones. How careless—when a stick or a branch would hold the cap very secure. The fisherwoman watched in horror as the cap slid further and further into the surf, and could not help herself—she snatched the cap up just before it sank away.

The cap was indeed a fine thing—full of unearthly splendor. What a thing to leave in the sand! She brushed the sand away and began to return it when the Merrow sang again, and bathing the island in music. The very water danced around his legs at its sweet notes. It was just as she dreamt it would be. To have such music with her, always...the thought made her ache with longing, and the thought of living without such music made her quiver.

But it was, after all, her efforts that rescued the cap from the depths, was it not? The laws of fairies were unknown to her, but—surely her possession of it, her *rescue* of it, entitled her to the Merrow's service? Such creatures were not of her world—a fairy, and everyone knew that fairies were tricky, soulless things. Perhaps it would not mind being kept by her.

The Merrow looked up. Their eyes met for a moment. He had brown eyes, gleaming and smooth like turtleshell beyond a curl of his wild hair. He gazed on her in as much astonishment as she had on him.

The fisherwoman drew a shaky breath. She spoke seldom with anyone, much less fair-folk. "I-I am—"

But the Merrow did not let her finish. The Merrow leapt for the cap, fast as any frog, but she jumped back too quickly, and he landed in the wet sand before her. Though he could leap prodigiously his legs were not used to walking on such uneven ground, and, when he found himself unable

to secure the cap, he changed his mind and leapt into the water, swimming away toward the horizon.

The fisherwoman knew that, without his cap, he could not swim for long out at sea. At once she tucked the little cap into her belt and brought her boat to the spot where the Merrow had disappeared, and cast off to look for him. While she kept watch with her spyglass she floated one of her fishing nets in the wake of her boat. But hour after hour passed, and she saw nothing of the Merrow.

The sun set, and she just was beginning to think that the legend of capturing the Merrow's cap was false, when the bell at the net rang with energy. She looked over the edge to see the Merrow thrashing and choking in the net. She hoisted the net from the water and took her catch quickly back to the island. She pushed away her guilt as quickly as the water that streamed past her boat, and thought only of the music she would hear played. The Merrow only shivered in the net, and offered no resistance as she brought him inside her house. He lay still on the cold hearth, still bundled up in the net, heaving great breaths while his gills flapped at his neck—he had not gotten used to air yet.

It was a good thing that she left him in the net, for once she finished lighting the fire he began to fret in it once more. His legs kicked savagely, only getting himself more tangled up in it.

"Be still!" the fisherwoman urged in panic. What could calm such a foreign creature? She was only a fisher of empty shells, and hated to see him so frightened. She fetched a blanket and put it over him, anxious to calm his shivering at least. "Please, it's alright," she said, drying him off, though there was no way of knowing whether he understood her. Perhaps... She prepared herself, and then sang as best she could to him. Music, it was said, spoke to

all, and though her notes faltered, that seemed to calm him. He looked at her from beyond the netting, an elfish sadness in his eyes.

"Please do not die," she said, almost beginning to tremble with fear for him.

"You shall eat me," he said. His voice was as fair as his features—lilting, ethereal, trembling as much as her own.

The fisherwoman jumped back. "Eat you? No, of course not! Why should I save you, only to eat you?"

"But here I lie next to the fire, and humankind is so hungry for the flesh of my people. I will dry out and die, and then you might as well eat me."

"Y-you will not die, dear fish," the fisherwoman said, trying to sound cheerful. "Fire is only to warm you. I would never harm you."

"You have my cap. Give it to me."

"I—I cannot. I have rescued it from the sea, and now you are bound to me. But I will cut you loose, and then you may be free to move in my home—you may call it your home too. Would that please you?"

The Merrow gazed at her, and a tear sprang up in his eye—it nearly broke her heart to see him so full of despair before her. She quickly withdrew to another part of the house, and hid the cap straightaway, so that he might forget about it. When she returned he lay still sniffing, curled and as unhappy as a hermit crab out of its shell. She was so moved that she spent much of the evening cutting him loose from the netting, and came and went from the well three times to bring him water to drink. He drank each bucket she brought him without pause, and looked as if he would drink a great deal more if he could.

At least his spirits improved with the net gone, and he sat looking around the house with interest. "Lady, why have you caught me, if not to eat me?"

“Lady!” What a fine thing to be called. Though her manners were coarse from a life alone she tried to emulate his fine words. “You sang so beautifully on the shore, my fish,” she said. “Will you not sing for me now, and finish the song you began?”

He looked surprised at her request, and touched his lips with his webbed fingers. “I cannot sing,” he said.

“Perhaps you cannot sing without your lyre,” she said. “I will fetch it for you.” Indeed she found herself eager to do for her fish anything he asked—except that one thing she could not do.

The Merrow’s cheeks glowed sienna, a fairy’s blush. “I have not yet learned the secrets of instrument making—that lyre I tried to craft from seaweed and shell. But if you heard me sing today, you know that the music has gone from that instrument. I must find a new shell before I may sing again.”

“Then, sweet Merrow, it is prodigious lucky that I found you!” the fisherwoman exclaimed, “For I have a boat, and line, and every means of finding any shell in the sea. I shall find you a shell from which only the sweetest notes will play, and then you may sing for me.” And, feeling kinder than she ought to be to a fey, she added, “I shall make you a promise, my fish—that when you sing for me, I shall give you your magic cap, and you may return to the sea.”

At such a prospect the Merrow became even more cheerful, and even smiled at her, a beautiful parting of his lips that made his eyes twinkle. But there was tiredness in his eyes, and he pushed his hair back sleepily. Sailors said the powers of the ocean fairies ebbed and flowed with the sun, and that if he had his cap he would be slumbering among the sponges. She would not have it said that she did not care for her catch: she let him sleep, sandy as he was, in her own bed, while she lay down by the fire.

The next morning the fisherwoman arose

early to find the sea huddled low on the beach, and she searched the sands with every art of her trade, combed away with net and rake to see if she could find a shell worth presenting to the Merrow as a gift. As soon as she found a worthy shell she would run home and let him make it into whatever instrument he wished so that she could hear him sing. But as the sun began to rise on the beach glittering with worthy shells, she remembered her promise. As soon as she heard him sing she would have to give him his cap, never to see him again. Her steps slowed, and the silence of the island fell away around her, leaving her empty.

Well, she reasoned, if she was never to see him again after he sang for her, she would have to find the perfect shell. If she did not find the shell, then—well, it stood to reason she could not let him go. She closed her eyes from the shimmering bounty of the sea and ran back to her home. Another day, she would find the shell and make him an instrument to play, to form such a beautiful memory that she might never want for beautiful music again. But not today. When she returned she had convinced herself that she had no interest in the sea or its treasures.

“Shall we find the shell today?” the Merrow asked.

“Not yet—you cannot sing without any clothes,” she said. “I will sail to the mainland and bring you back something to wear—then you can sing for me and return to the sea.”

She let him follow her to the boat, going slow enough to allow his unsteady land legs to keep up. As she cast off he sat watching on the beach, his dark figure standing out against the sand until the waves hid him from view. With few shells to trade she had precious little money, but she spent it all on gifts for her fish: the most handsome and sturdy clothes of the softest blue and green wool, tall, fur-lined boots to keep his feet

dry, scarves to put about his neck, watches and folding knives to keep in his pockets; and lastly a beautiful comb made from a venus shell, sturdy enough to brush even his barnacle-encrusted hair. Such a fine comb had the power to render any tangled mane tame.

When she had purchased this and more for him, she sailed back to her island, half worried she would find him gone, that it was all a dream. But as she rounded the coast she spotted his dark shape sliding into the sea, and in a moment he surfaced beside her boat, his hands gripping the rail as he looked in on what she brought him. He seemed very impressed, and expressed his thanks at her attention with such fullness as she had only seen glimpses of in humanity, though being of fairy blood he did not know what any of it was for. The buttons confused him until she sewed little cockles in their place, and then they came very naturally to him. As she helped him dress she discovered with some embarrassment that his fishy feet did not fill the boots as a man's foot might. She started to take them away, but he held them close and would not let her. She placed the watch in his pocket and showed him the knives, which he marveled at, happy to have a tool to cut seaweed with. She brought him such seaweed to eat for his dinner, and when he had eaten, she revealed the beautiful comb. He shied from her as she went to brush his hair, however

“It will do you no harm,” she said, and started to brush out one of the shining-black locks. He resented her for it, and no wonder, for it was terribly tangled and matted, but once the barnacles were combed out and he saw how lovely his hair could be with such a tool, he thanked her again. No longer fearing to lie down beside the fire, he went to sleep there at the hearth.

The next day he rose as early as she, and dressed in all quickly except for the boots.

“Perhaps today we might find the shell and I can sing for you,” he said.

The fisherwoman gasped, fear gripping her. “Oh no—how could I let you sing for me, when the crashing waves and cormorants drown out every sound! We must build a proper place for you to sing.”

So the fisherwoman went again to her boat, and again the Merrow accompanied her, though she did not have to go so slowly for him as before: he was used to the land now, and could manage the sand and rocks easily. He watched her go from the rock, and on the mainland she gathered every amenity for the building of a finer cottage: rose oak, smooth plaster, rugs and curtains from lands far away. She had no shells to offer, so she offered her precious collection of sheet music instead. As she sailed back she worried that her fish had found his cap and fled her little island, for he did not greet her at the side of her boat. But as she approached the rocks she saw a figure against the gray rocks and sighed to see that it was the Merrow waiting for her in the surf. She stopped him from looking too closely at the things she brought with her, and straightaway took the Merrow to find a place for him while she worked. The sea lay even lower on the beach now, leaving behind murky tidepools filled with black weeds. She brought him to the biggest one. “I apologize for these poor accommodations,” she said, wringing her hands, “But will you wait here for me, fish? When I return for you, I promise you will have a house of beauty to live in.”

She worried greatly that this little pool would be too small for him, but he gave that fish's smile of his and set about arranging the tidepool how he liked it, making the seaweed to look more presentable and putting the starfish in order. She left him to his strange work, and began her own work.

It took her determination no time at all to

transform the lonely, draughty shack into a cottage worthy of her wonderful fish. The Merrow in her absence completely transformed the tidepools all around, brightening their tired corners and reminding them of the magic they could pour into the world. It was an incredible transformation, even if playing in the water invited new barnacles into his hair. She feared he would never want to leave such glittering gems, but at first sight of the house he stared in wonder and joy.

“It is magic!” he told her, looking around at the beamed ceiling after her fortnight’s toil came to an end.

“Magic?” she laughed. “No, not magic at all. I just built a better house for you.”

The Merrow shook his head. “Dance with me, lady,” he requested, “For I have never danced in a magical land-house, nor with a land-fish.”

This estimation of her and her craft so delighted her than she could not refuse, and though there was no music they danced before the fire, making shadows into splashing waves and firelight into the play of light on the water. And as their dancing fell to laughter she realized that the Merrow possessed more beauty than that of music, that fairies were not as soulless as she thought. That she could not keep this magical, wonderful fish with her forever.

The next morning, while the Merrow slept, the fisherwoman stole down to the water’s edge with the magical cap in her hands. It fit loosely over her hair, which was fine and dry and not encrusted with barnacles, but she rinsed the cap with seawater and it shrank to fit tightly over her ears. She dove into the depths of the sea, the Merrow’s cap letting her dive faster and further than she had ever done before. She passed all manner of ocean creatures, drifting suspended around her like characters in a great mobile, and the bright

morning sun grew darker and darker. The depths called to her, begging her to come to them, and she felt them swell beneath her, offering to envelop her in its magic and never let her go.

And there, she saw it: floating in the water, a beautiful empty shell of gold and coral and pale umber, perfect for making into a lyre. She snatched it from the water and held it to her ear to test how it might sound—and laughed at herself when she remembered the Merrow’s cap would not let her hear anything. She kicked her way to the surface to hear better.

But she heard no music. Just a small voice that whispered, “A net put upon a fish ensnares the fisher. Freedom is found in a fairy freed.”

The fisherwoman dropped the shell with a squeak. It slid away into the darkness, and she barely managed to catch it just as a little silvery fish darted from its coils and was away in a flash of its scales. Perhaps it was the wise fish of the sea, to deliver such an omen. Or perhaps it was just a mean little minnow meant to frighten her. She waited, water undulating around her, before she dared resurface and hold the shell to her ear again. But now she only heard the hollow tones of a shell perfect for lyre-making.

“Lady!”

The fisherwoman turned in the water to see her dear Merrow swimming toward her—though without his cap he was clumsy and slow. He called out to her again. Water sprayed, and then he slipped under the surface.

Gone.

The fisherwoman dashed through the water. Her fish, her music-bringer—oh, she had been foolish to keep his music, his cap from him for so long. The sea had every right to claim him from her—but not like this. Her fish brought beauty wherever he went, and she could not let him go. She shot

forward and caught the Merrow up before he could slip away into the current, and with her arms made strong by fishing she bore him back to the shore. He coughed wetly into the sand. There was so much sand on her island now, the shore pulling back even farther. The fisherwoman felt stretched, exposed, exhausted. She hid the cap as the Merrow rolled over.

“I heard you cry out,” the Merrow said softly. “I was worried.”

“Oh, my dear,” she said, feeling dreadful, “Do not worry—I am well and-- look! I brought you your shell, to make into an instrument for you!”

She held out the shell as if an offering to him, and watched him take it with shaking fingers. The webbing had disappeared from between them—no wonder he had such trouble swimming. He smiled at the shell, but when he held it up to his ear, his face turned sad.

“What’s wrong, dearest fish?” she said, fearing the silver fish had come back to whisper horrid things to her own fish, “Is it not pleasing?”

“It is very pleasing, lady. I am well. Only... the sound of the sea is so beautiful.” He sighed, ear pressed to the shell. It pained her to see the Merrow so saddened, and so she took the shell away, promising that soon, soon she would teach the Merrow how to make it into a lyre. That only made her feel worse, feel the ocean slipping away from her toward the horizon leaving her beached and helpless. But she sustained herself with the promise of creating a perfect instrument for him. If she could only have him a little longer....

Winter came. The tide continued to recede, turning the fisherwoman’s island into a hill, then a great mountain. Neither she nor the Merrow minded, and while the Merrow explored the island and brought beauty to the tidepools, the fisherwoman

forged the instrument in secret, carving and polishing and working each piece with the Merrow’s smile in her mind. She shunned the mainland--every tool she needed she found with the aid of the Merrow’s cap, which let her dive so deep into such a beautiful weighty world though she still kept the cap well-hidden in the house from him. It seemed that creating the instrument came easily to her, and she wondered if she might be able to create the most beautiful lyre the world had ever known, just for her Merrow to play. As the days passed the Merrow’s hair untangled, his skin grew warmer. His fishy legs began to look more gentlemanly, and he soon wore boots and socks wherever he went. She so grew used to the Merrow’s company and the magic he brought to every moment of her routine life that she could not bear to think of the day with the instrument would be completed and she would have to say goodbye to him. But she found herself compelled to return to the instrument by an old magic that ran deeper than the sea’s call, and in secret moments she continued to work upon the piece until one day it was all complete. Handcarved tuning pegs, shining golden lacquer, pale strings that almost sang even without being played. She was almost compelled to play it herself—but it would sound very ill in her hands.

Still she held it back, unable to face how lonely her little island would become without him. They ate dinner, walked along the cliffs, watched the sunset. The fisherwoman never found much magic in a sunset, but with the Merrow everything seemed magical.

“I should very much like to sing for you,” he said as the sky turned emerald, azure, indigo. “Will you show me how to make the shell play music?”

She stopped, thinking of the instrument wrapped in a box, knowing that only the Merrow would do it justice. She hung her

head and nodded. "Yes, dear Merrow. Tomorrow I shall show you."

She cried bitterly that night, knowing what beauty and sadness would befall her lonely little life tomorrow, when she would have no one to talk to but the birds and the sea and the echoes in the shells, and no one to create for but herself.

She arose early and started the long walk to the water's edge, and sailed in silence with the instrument in the boat next to her, savoring this last day before she heard her music. In the bright sun she was able to put away her sadness and only look forward to it—perhaps the cap gave her this power of the fairies, too. But she only felt the sun's encouragement as long as it hung in the sky—at the end of the day she sailed back home to surprise the Merrow with the instrument already made. She held it in her hand now, waiting to see him burst out of the water at the side of the boat and rest his chin on the railing—or wave at her from the shore.

He did not appear.

She drew up to the island and went to the cottage. It was dark and empty in the waning daylight. The house looked as if it had been freshly cleaned, everything swept and laundered. She dashed into her bedroom, and all became clear to her: Her sweet Merrow, showing her a kindness, had cleaned the house as he had all the island's tidepools, bringing light and magic to every nook. And in doing so he had found the magical cap. She could not blame him. She knew how great the pull of the sea might be, and he no doubt was happy to return to his first home.

"It is well," she thought. Salt came to her eyes—the sea, calling her. She let the tears come. "I will bring him his lyre. I may never hear it, but it is the least recompense I can make for the joy he has brought me."

She went out to her boat and cast off—away from the mainland, away from the

ships, heading for open, empty sea, heart breaking. No shells or sheet music to trade. Just the instrument to give. Little did she know that the Merrow felt his heart break too, drawn to the sea and drawn to his land-fish on the rocks. This rending shook the sea to its own heart. It trembled and quaked, and the tides rushed back in to the island in great waves along with the fisherwoman's tears, clouds gathered and wrung themselves into rain overhead. The fisherwoman's little boat found itself no match for the tempest. But it was too late for her to turn back—nothing would make her turn back now. She pressed on into the heart of the storm, imagining that perhaps the Merrow's rage had so upset the waters. The sea would easily ensnare her **h**as she had her Merrow. Perhaps that was for the best. Repay the debt, and the sea would no longer hide from her shores or blast her island with waves. It would lie still along her shore, balance restored.

"Forgive me," she told the sea, for she knew she did not deserve to see her fish again. That the music would never be heard. She cast the dear instrument into the care of the depths with a prayer that it find the Merrow. Then the storm crashed in with its loud cacophony, and came over her boat.

The fisherwoman woke with a start—a bubble jumping from her mouth and floating away. She found herself in a shallow pool in an anemone bed. Their petal-like tentacles brushed against her, soft with no sting. Someone watched her from beyond the water's surface, their image distorted. She sat up and broke through the surface to see her beloved Merrow sitting at the edge of the pool—he held the lyre she made in his hands. He smiled at her.

"Are you well, lady?"

"Yes, I—" she realized she was sitting in one of the Merrow's tidepools on her island's shore, and she stared in amazement. Every anemone was in bloom, every blade

of seagrass shining in the morning sun. It was only then that she realized how strange it was to wake up in a tidepool, to breathe underwater when she was asleep...she felt her head, and gasped as she pulled it off—the red cap of the Merrow's!

The Merrow didn't try to snatch it, and just watched her. "When I found the cap, I felt so dry and hot, and heard the sea calling to me," the Merrow said, "But so did the promise you made to me. Of the lyre? Somehow—I could hear it calling to me through the waves." He blushed, and there was pink in his cheeks as well as blue. "Such a thing has never happened before. The sea grew angry in my turmoil, and brewed such a dreadful storm, I feared you were lost, but you had so much of the sea in you, the cap revived you. For this I am—I am so glad."

"Oh, fish," the fisherwoman sighed. "You should not have saved me, for I am wretched. I stole you from your home—you had every right to flee from me."

The Merrow cocked his head. "But your world is so beautiful, Lady! Full of—sun and foot prints and collecting. I never thought to collect anything before. And the things you have built with your hands are so beautiful--" He crept to the edge of her pool. "Lady— Could I can make a bargain with you, as you made with me? I would be happy to share my cap with you, if you would make such beautiful things for all my

people?"

The girl blushed. "Oh, fish—sweet, loved Merrow—" She used his true name for the first time, and kissed him. She tasted the ocean and something warm and sun-baked on his skin. "I could not do such a thing. How could I? The cap may let me dive for shells, but it leaves you upon the land! And when you are gone with it...I will drown looking for you."

The Merrow gave his big fish smile. "Oh my land-fish—" he stopped, and started again, "—Fisherwoman. What say you— may we inhabit the land and the sea, drying out and drowning, together?"

He kissed her, and played her a song for her alone. When faced with such kindness the fisherwoman found herself utterly ensnared. She now saw that, like the hermit crab, she had outgrown her still, silent island home. His gift of the cap to her granted her entrance to the sea fairie's land, and her gift of the music let him come into her realm--so the fisherwoman and fish reached a new balance. Between them they cared for the magical cap in turns with the changing of the tide—the Merrow's presence made known by the beautiful gardens he left in the tidepools, the fisherwoman's by the crashing waves and gathering shells. The music they built for the sea fairies may not be heard over the crawling of cormorants or the crashing of the sea, but it may still be heard in the shells they leave behind