

SEA LOVERS

On moonless nights the sea is black. Ships sail upon it and shine their lights through the double blackness of water and air. The darkness swallows up light like a great yawning snake. On the beach people walk, looking out to sea, but there is no sign of the ships, no sign of the drowning sailors, no sign of anything living or dead, only the continual rushing and ebbing of water sucking and sucking at the shoreline, drawing the innocent, foolish lovers out a little farther. They are unafraid, showing each other their courage. They laugh, pointing to the water. No one can see them. They slip off their clothes and wade in. The waves draw them out, tease them, lick upward slowly about her pale thighs, slap him playfully, dashing a little salt spray into his eyes. He turns to her, she to him; they can scarcely see each other, but they are strong swimmers and they link hands as they go out a little farther, a little deeper. Now the waves swell about them and they embrace. She is losing her footing, so she leans against him, allows the rising water to lift her right off

her feet as she is pressed against him. He pulls her in tightly, laughing into her mouth as he kisses her.

They can't be seen; they can't be heard. The people on the shore will find their clothes, but they will never find the lovers. A solitary mermaid passing nearby hears their laughter and pauses. She watches them, but even her strange fish-pale eyes can barely see them; the night is so black, so moonless. She could sing to them, as she has sung to other drowning mortals, but she is weary tonight and her heart is heavy from too much solitude. She has not seen another of her kind for many months. She was nearly killed a few days ago, swimming near a steamship. Her head is full of the giant engine blades, of that moment when she looked up and saw that she was a hair's-breadth from death. That was when she turned toward shore. She is swimming in with the tide, even as the lovers are sucked out and down. When she drops beneath the surface of the water, the mermaid can just see the woman's long hair billowing out around her face. Her mouth is open wide in a silent scream. Oh yes, the mermaid thinks, if she could be heard it would be quite a racket. People would come running for miles. But the sea filled her mouth before the sound could get out and no one will ever hear her now. She clings to the man, and he, in his panic, pushes her away. This started out as such a lark. It was a calm, hot, black night and the white sands of the beach made all the light there was. They had wandered along, stopping to kiss and tease, laughing, so happy, so safe, and now this: She was drowning and he could not save her. Worse, worse, she would pull him under.

The mermaid rises above the crest of a wave and looks back at them. She sees only one pale hand reaching up, the fingers

splayed and tense, as if reaching for something to hold; then the water closes over that too.

The sea is full of death, now more than ever. Twice in her short life the mermaid has found herself swimming in a sea red with blood: once from a whale struck by a steamship, once from men drowning during a war. Their ship had been torpedoed and most of them were bleeding when they hit the water. The sharks had done the rest. That time she had dived beneath the battle, for the noise was deafening and the light from the explosions dazzled her so that she could scarcely see. One of the drowning men clutched at her as she swam away, but she shook him off. She disliked being seen by men, even when they were about to die. She could amuse herself singing to them when they couldn't see her; when they were wild-eyed and desperate, clinging to a broken spar from a boat shattered by a storm, or treading water in that ridiculous way they had, with those pathetic, useless legs; then she would hide among the waves and sing to them. Sometimes it made them more frantic, but a few times she had seen a strange calm overtake a drowning man, so that his struggles became more mechanical, less frantic, and he simply stayed afloat as long as he could and went under at last quietly, without that panicked gagging and struggling that was so disgusting to see. Once a man had died like that very near her, and she had felt so curious about him that she drifted too close to him, and in the last moment of his life he saw her. His eyes were wide open and startled already from his long, bitter struggle with death; he knew he was beaten yet could not give up. He saw her and he reached out to her, his mouth opened as if he would speak, but it was blood and not words that poured over his lips and she knew even as he did that he was gone. She

had, by her nature, no sympathy for men, but this one interested her.

The man was so far from land that it would be days before his body was tossed up, bloated, unrecognizable, on some shore. He had been sailing alone in a small boat, far out to sea; she had, in fact, been watching his progress for days. The storm that had wrecked his little craft was intense but quickly over, and he had survived it somehow, holding on to pieces of the wreckage. Then it was a few days of hopeless drifting for him. She watched from a distance, listened to him when he began to babble to himself. Near the end he stunned her by bursting into song, singing as loud as he could, though he had little strength left, a lively song that she couldn't understand. When he was dead she did something she had never done: She touched him. He was already stiffening, and his skin was strange; she was fascinated by the smooth, dense feel of it. She held him by his shoulders and brought him down with her, down where the water was still and clear, and there she looked at him carefully. His eyes fascinated her, so different from her own. She discovered the hard nails on his fingers and toes. She examined his mouth, which she thought incredibly ugly, and his genitals, which confused her. Gradually a feeling of revulsion overtook her and she swam away from him abruptly, leaving him wedged in a bed of coral and kelp, food for the bigger fish that might pass his way.

Now she remembers him as she swims toward shore, and her thin upper lip curls back at the thought of him. She is being driven toward land by a force stronger than her own will, and she hates that force even as she gives in to it, just as she hated the dead man.

It is dark and the air is still. Though the sea is never still, she has the illusion of calm. She swims effortlessly just beneath the surface of the waves. She is getting close to shore, dangerously close, but she neither slows nor alters her course.

She is acquainted with many stories that tell of the perils of the land, stories similar to the ones men tell about the sea, full of terror, wonder, magic, and romance. The moral of these tales (that she can no more live on land than men can live in the sea) has not escaped her. She has seen the land; she knows about its edges and she has seen mountains rising above the surface of the water. Sometimes there are people on these mountains, walking about or driving in their cars. This coast, which she must have chosen, is flat and long. There is white sand along it for miles and behind the sand a line of green, though in the darkness its vivid colors are only black before white before gray. The mermaid can scarcely look at it. She is caught up in the surf that moves relentlessly toward land. For a while she can drop beneath the waves, but soon the water is too shallow, and when her tail and side scrape against the hard sand at the bottom, she shudders as if death had reached up suddenly and touched her. The waves smash her down and roll her over. Her tail wedges into the sand and sends a cloud over her; she feels the grit working in under her scales. She raises her webbed hands to wipe it away. It is different from the sand in the deep water; it feels sharp, irritating, and it smells of land.

It's useless to fight the waves. She lets her body rise and fall with them, rolling in with the surf as heavy and unresisting as a broken ship or a dead man. Soon there is nothing but sand beneath her, and the water ebbs away, leaving her helpless, exposed to the warm and alien air. The pounding she has

taken has left her barely conscious. She lies on her belly in the sand, her arms stretched out over her head, her face turned to one side so that what little water there is can flow over it. Her long silvery body writhes in the shallows and she is aghast with pain. From the waist down she is numb, and she lifts her head as best she can to look back at herself. She can hardly feel her tail, rising and falling in the sand, working her in deeper and deeper, against her will. It is horrible, and she is so helpless that she falls back down with a groan. Something is seeping out of her, spilling out into the sand. It is slippery and viscous; at first she thinks she is bleeding, then she imagines it is her life. She moans again and struggles to lift herself, pushing her hands against the sand. She opens and closes her mouth, gasping for water. Her skin is drying out; it burns along her back, her shoulders, her neck. She presses her face down as a little trickle of water rushes up near her, but it is not enough and she manages only to get more damp sand in her mouth. She lifts her head and shoulders once more against the unexpected weight of the air, and as she does, she sees the man.

He is running toward her. He has left his fishing gear to the whims of the sea and he is running toward her as fast as he can. Her heart sinks. He is in his element and she is at his mercy. But in the next heartbeat she is struck with cunning and a certainty that flashes up in her consciousness with the force of memory. In the same moment she knows that her lower body is now her own, and strength surges through her like an electric current. He must not see her face; she knows this. She spreads her hair out over her shoulders and hides her face in the sand. Her body is still; her strong tail lies flat in the shallows, as shiny and inert as a sheet of steel.

She listens to the slap of his bare feet against the hard wet sand as he comes closer. Soon she can hear his labored breathing and his mumbled exclamations, though his words are meaningless to her. This is a big catch, but it will be a while before he understands what he has caught. In the darkness he takes her for a woman, and it is not until he is bending over her that he sees the peculiar unwomanly shape of her lower body. For a moment he thinks she is a woman who has been half devoured by an enormous fish. He looks back at the shore, as if help might come from it, but there is no help for him now. His hands move over her shoulders. He is determined to pull her out of the water, not for any reason but that she has washed up on the shore and that is what men do with creatures that wash up on the shore. "My God," he says, and the pitch of his voice makes the mermaid clench her jaw, "are you still alive?"

She doesn't move. His hands are communicating all sorts of useless information to him: This creature is very like a woman, and though her smooth skin is extraordinarily cold, it is soft, supple, alive. His fingers dig in under her arms and lift her a little. She is careful to keep her face down, hidden in the stream of her long hair. This hair, he can see even in the darkness, is white, thick, unnaturally long; it falls voluptuously over her shoulders. He is losing his grip; she is heavier than he imagined, and he releases her for a moment while he changes his position. He straddles her back. She hears the squish of his feet as he steps over her head and positions himself behind her. As he does he takes a closer look at her long back and sees the line where the pale skin turns to silver. "What are you?" he says, but he doesn't pause to find out. His hands are under her arms again; one of them strays lightly over her breasts as he lifts her.

Her heart is beating so furiously now she can hear nothing else. For one moment she hangs limp in his arms and in the next she comes alive.

She brings her arms quickly under her and pushes up so suddenly and with such force that the man loses his balance and collapses over her. She is, thanks to the sea, several times as strong as he is, and she has no difficulty now in turning over beneath him. He struggles, astounded at the sudden powerful fury of the creature he had intended to save, but he struggles in vain. They are entwined together in the sand, rising and falling like lovers, but the man, at least, is aware that this is not love. Her strong arms close around him and he can feel her cold, clawed hands in his hair. His face is wedged against her shoulder, and as he breathes in the peculiar odor of her skin, he is filled with terror. She takes a handful of his hair and pulls his head up so that she can look at him and he at her. What he sees paralyzes him, as surely as if he had looked at Medusa, though it is so dark he can make out only the glitter of her cold, flat, lidless eyes, the thin hard line of her mouth, which opens and closes beneath his own. He can hear the desperate sucking sound fish make when they are pulled from the sea. She rolls him under her as easily as if he were a woman and she a man. With one hand she holds his throat while with the other she tears away the flimsy swimming trunks, all the protection he had against her. Her big tail is moving rapidly now, pushing her body up over his. Her hand loosens at his throat and he gasps for air, groaning, pushing against her with all his strength, trying to push her away. She raises herself on her arms, looking down at him curiously, and he sees the sharp fish teeth, the dry black tongue. Her tail is powerful and sinu-

ous; it has curled up between his legs like an eel and now the sharp edge of it grazes the inside of his thighs. It cuts him; he can feel the blood gathering at the cuts, again and again, each time a little closer to the groin. He cries out, but no one hears him. The mermaid doesn't even bother to look at him as her tail comes up hard against his testicles and slices through the unresisting flesh. His fingers have torn the skin on her back and he has bitten into her breast so that she is bleeding, but she can't feel anything as pain now. She drops back over him and clasps his throat between her hands, pressing hard and for a long time, until he ceases to struggle.

Then she is quiet but not still. Carefully she takes up the bleeding pocket of flesh from between his legs; carefully cradling it in her hands, she transfers it into the impression she left in the sand before this struggle began. The sea will wash it all away in a minute or two, for the tide is coming in, but that's all the time she needs. She pushes the sand up around this bloody treasure; then, exhausted and strangely peaceful, she rolls away into the shallows. The cool water revives her and she summons her strength to swim out past the breakers. Now she can feel the pain in her back and her breast, but she can't stop to attend to it. As soon as the water is deep enough she dives beneath the waves, and as she does her tail flashes silver in the dark night air; like great metal wings, the caudal fin slices first the air, then the water.

On the shore everything is still. The waves are creeping up around the man, prying him loose from the sand. Little water fingers rush in around his legs, his arms, his face. Already the water has washed his blood away. Farther down the beach his fishing gear floats in the rising water. His tackle box has spilled

its insides; all his lures and hooks, all the wiles he used to harvest the sea, bob gaily on the waves.

Farther still I am walking on the shore with my lover. We have been dancing at a party. The beach house is behind us, throwing its white light and music out into the night air as if it could fill the void. Inside, it was hot, bright; we couldn't hear the waves or smell the salt air, and so we are feeling lightheaded and pleased with ourselves for having had the good sense to take a walk. We are walking away from the house and away from the dead man, but not away from the sea. I've taken my shoes off so that I can let the water cool my tired feet. My lover follows my example; he sheds his shoes and stops to roll up his pants legs. As I stand looking out into the black water and the blacker sky, it seems to me that I can see tiny lights, like stars, flashing in the waves. When he joins me I ask him, "What are those lights?" and he looks but says he doesn't see any lights.

"Mermaids," I say. I could almost believe it. I raise my hand and wave at them. "Be careful," I say. "Stay away from the shore." My lover is very close to me. His arms encircle me; he draws me close to him. The steady pounding of the waves and the blackness of the night excite us. We would like to make love in the sand at the water's edge.

THE INCIDENT AT VILLEDEAU

"I am a man upon the land."

CHILD BALLAD NO. 113

Before Felix Kelly's death, my uncle Leonce informed me, there hadn't been a murder in Villedeau in fifteen years. At first the homicide appeared to be little more than a hunting accident; in truth, the grand jury wasn't convinced the affair need go to trial at all. Because the accused, Octave Favrot, was a gentleman of both reputation and wealth, and the victim, Felix Kelly, was an outsider, many of us believed that even if there were a trial, Octave would be speedily acquitted.

At that time I was a student of the law, and the prospect of a trial, and a murder trial at that, going forward in our obscure corner of the great world was a circumstance I considered propitious, though of course for the poor victims—there were two, a grown man and his infant son—it could be understood only as a tragedy.