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The
MERMAID
by
George Allan England



'Hurry! Hurry! *Hurry!* She's here! Here! Have you seen her, ladies? Gentleman? Th' mer-maid. Only a nickel—half a dime. An' captured alive in th' China Sea by Colonel Webb. That's right, Jack, give her plenty o' fresh, pure water. Th' mer-maid! Th' *mer*-maid! Five cents admits to everything. *Ker-ak-ak-ak-k-k-k-k-k-kak!*'

That's how it sounds to me—a gyser of eloquence topped off with an oblongato on a big police-rattle. It puts all the other noise-works on the Pike 'way back in the low, far-downer class, so I kind of drifts that way. Takes a good, voluminous wad of racket to draw the blood of int'rest when you're out of a job, the ponies breakin' bad, winter campin' on your trail, and you generally all to th' blinks. But this here mermaid tout is sure a top-liner with the din, so as per above, I drifts.

"All th' papers talkin' about her! *Everybody* sees her! And only half a dime to all! Just a leetle more water, Jack, fer th' China Sea gasteropodinous phernomena!"

Off to one side, on a kind of a scaffold, stands Jack. He's red-wattled and will kick the beam at two hundred and fifty; and he's pumpin' water in a trough. It sloshes down through a hole in th' painted tent.

"Gee!" says I.

Then I does a wriggle through the bunch of open-faced jaspers.

"Me for her!" says I, plunkin' down. Few nickels I had, at that; but I couldn't miss a Chineer mermaid, nixy! "Me for th' mermaid!"

"Pass right on the in-side," barks the proprietor, harvestin' my coin. "On the in-side, the in-side! She's

here, here, here!" I passes on the inside. It's hotter than the Hinges, in there under canvas. Two or three rubber-plants is blossomin' over a red cloth screen, observin' a Fake—an' the big F goes, too! Five foot long she is, that mermaid, reposin' on a pedestal; she has squiz- zled lamps, fish-teeth glued in, coconut- fiber hair, an' a brown hide cracked in places so the hay shows. I shoots one look into her, an' does a quick reverse.

"Say!" I registers a kick with his tout- ship, "I wants that nickel back, an' wants it sudden, see?"

He never even flashes his incandescents on me, but hangs to that wicked spiel of his—"She's here, here, here!"

"She *ain't!*" I protests, raring on my hind legs. "No, nor never was! Your mermaid ain't at home anywheres outside a hayloft. And what's more, she wouldn't last two minutes if a trotter got at her with the ivories! Disgorge, or I holler!"

"On your way!" he growls at me. "Th' conifers for you!" About that time, Jack has quit his fresh- pure-water stunt and is closing in on me. There's a mix, and Jack an' me finds ourselves tangled on the ground.

I breaks away, sits up an' looks at him. He ditto at me. Th' big, round mob ditto at both of us. Then, suddenly, I falls to who he reely is.

"Why, Beef Westerhood!" says I, rubbin' my shoulder where the ground flopped up an' pasted it. "Why—Beef! That you? Where's th' whiskers you used to float? An' why this unfamiliar corporosity? *Is it you, or who is it?*"

He scans me faithful a minute, herdin' together his memories; then his face folds into a grin, and out comes th' joyous palm at me.

"Sim!"

"Beef!"

Twelve years that we ain't so much as batted an eye on each other is bridged in a wink, while th' crowd stretches red, cordy necks.

"I'm sure astounded," I murmurs to him, dustin' off my raiments, "to find you engaged in a flaked-breakfast-food brace game. You, you of all honest fakers, perpetratin' a mermaid!"

"Fergit it!" he whispers, withdrawin' me inside the tent, away from that over-inquisitive bunch of horny-handers. "Fergit it! Times has underwent painful changes since you an' me paraded up Popularity Avnoo to the rattle of a pill in a walnut-shell. It's a case with me of gaff what's offered, now, an' no comers barred. But," he adds wistful, "can you improve this here lay? You always *was* snappy with th' thinks. Can you dope ginger into our modest attempt to put th' jacks under this here rural currency?"

"*Can I? Well, some!*"

"Fine an' dandy! Percolate round tonight after th' Pike closes. I'll knock you down to th' boss, an' we'll rag-chew. Just now, it's Beefy to th' pump. But to-night you'll fall round?"

"I guess yes."

Then we clinches fins again, an' separates.

That's how I gets the job, see? —the job as mermaid.

It was simply a scream; twenty-five per, an' no toil to dally with—nothin' to do but float or paddle or snooze in a tin tank of water, now bonny-fiddy supplied by Beef an' his pump. Get wet? Wet nothin'! I had a padded rubber suit, green, with bunches of sea-weed all over it. By keepin' my

back to the come-ons, an' loafin' round mostly under water, all but my head, th' game we played sent all the rest o' the Pikers skurryin' for the high wood. Crowds? Never *did* pipe such crowds. Looked like th' boss would make a million. He doubled Beefs pay, th' second week, and come up to thirty-five on mine.

"Here," says I to myself, in my tank, "here's where I break far, far ahead of the game. A mermaid's life," says I, "is the life for me! I's to the aquatics, every time!"

Of course there's drawbacks. Ever see an honest biz that didn't have 'em? It *was* kind of bindin' on the legs, bein' wrapped in that there tail-arrangement, and th' seaweed more or less dragged over my frontispiece; but what I reely minded more than all was not bein' able to smoke. I hung out a long time on that proposition, but the boss barred cigaroots absolutum—wouldn't listen to 'em a minute—said no decent, self-respectin' mermaid used 'em, and he wasn't goin' to begin lettin' down the moral bars. So I had to compromise on chawin'—which give the boss an openin' to describe how mermaids was semi-bovine critters, requirin' a cud of eel-grass to keep 'em happy an' in good form. But I wasn't allowed to spit, which I considered then, an' does now. a hardship, and will leave same to anybody what's tried it.

It's a good job, though, in spite of everythin', even includin' old ladies with sharp umbrellas, an' kids with peanuts what I have to snap at. A good job, an' good business. A mob, most all the time—so much of a mob that th' prof, hires another outside man an' tends exclusively to his new lecture on deep-sea marvels. It's two hours on, an' half an hour's rest, thirty-five per, an' all expenses.

"If it lasts," thinks I, "it's me to the banker class in the directory, that's sure. I'll get th' coupon-cutting habit," says I. "if nothin' sands my bearings! Oh, joy!"

Then I flips my tail, turns my quid, and nuzzles against th' professor's long pointer.

"Kindly, affectionate critters they be, these here marine mermaid marvels of th' China Sea, known to science as the *Subaquaticus Humaniformus*," says he, reachin' over and strokin' my snout. "Highly intelligent, too. Go fetch, Lucy!" An' he heaves a piece o' wood for me to retrieve. "Most unfortunate, they require a dim light, like in th' caves an' fastnesses of their native abodes among th' coral-reefs," says he. "or you could mark an' behold the iridescant colors an' beautiful contours of this extrordinary large specimen, captured alive after a desprit struggle by Colonel Lysander Webb, K. C. B., on the 27th of last March off th' coast of Van Diemen's Land, in th' China Sea—and now exhibited at tremenjous expense—only one ever in captivity! They don't survive long in *fresh* water," says he, pointin' at the spout where Beef Westerhood is puttin' in his best licks, "and direct daylight is fatal to 'em immejit. We will now pass out, ladies an' gents, to permit another audience in to witness this, the greatest marvel of all the ages. Kindly pass on the outside, ladies! Gentleman! On the out-side! The out-side!"

It used to be, "Pass on the in-side!" but now it's tough work to keep th' mob shiftin' at all. Fact is, we're the broad-gage dream- pill pushers of the Pike inside of a week, the only original charter-members of the Get There

Club. All the others has to take our dust: Shamdown the Chain-breaker, Mme. Claire the Medium, Moscow the Snake King, an' all—'specially Moscow. I used to know Moscow, y'understand, when his name was MacShane, an' you could put all the love lost between us in your eye without seein' none the worse; so it didn't worry me much about *his* business goin' to the blinks. Oh, I tell you, the mermaid bunch was just swamped in a tidal-wave of rejoicin'. We sure was goin' some! But it's just this very pace of ours that cut the final crimp in our gears—as you'll see all in its good an' proper time. Don't rush the hearse. For, one day along the beginnin' of our third week since the boss grew a spike-tailcoat an' the title of professor, I notices this same Moscow MacShane in among the bunch of E. Z. Marx. There's a difference between them an' him, though, and it don't look extra salubrious, neither. *They're* all standin' with open traps, gorgin' the prof. 's science, while *he's* lurkin' by the far end of the tank, deaf to the spiel, but all there with the optics. And as he pipes me he smiles contented, in a way that gives me a sudden attack of blighted prospecks. That smile makes me feel like bein' dropped from the top story in one o' them sudden elevators; I grows that dopey the prof, has to jab me with his pointer to make me paddle an' retrieve. And all th' time I'm performin', Moscow is givin' me sensations like when you sprinkle sugar on oysters. My blood's runnin' cold enough to freeze th' tank.

Well, we does our little bit, th' prof, and me, and then it comes time t' clear the tent.

"On the out-side! The out-side! —" orates the prof, herdin' out the cattle. They all jostles out—all but Moscow. *He* crouches down around the far corner of the tank, an' stays.

When the tent is full of emptiness, up he bobs; leans over the edge of th' tank, and, "Sim," says he, "Sim, it's a real huge IT, this mimical con of yours, marked up as the greatest ever, and calculated to pull down more coin than anybody can have an' be decent. But!" (he waggles his head at me) "*But*, now let me tell you honest, it ain't *quite* artistic enough, an' that's the livin'. For example—"

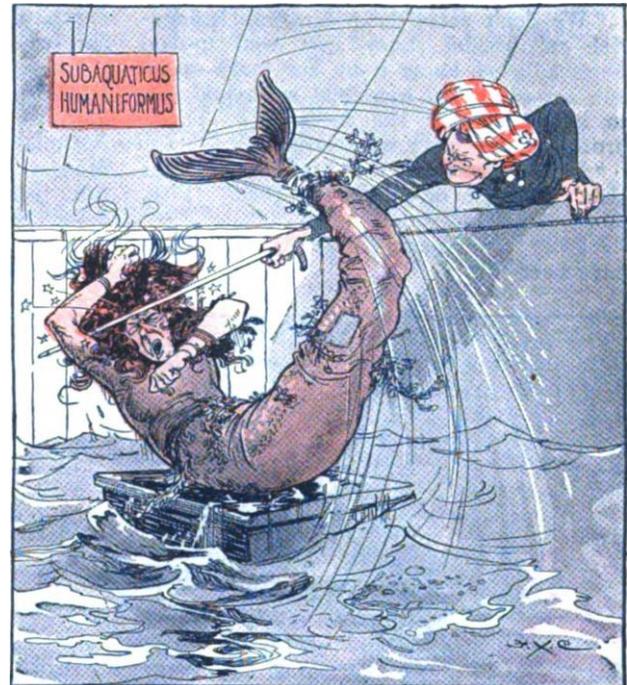
"Gwan!" I growls at him. "Clear out! No man what handles fangless reptyles has any call—"

"Excuse *me!*" he interrupts, "them's all past an' gone, them fangless ones. I handles only th' real venom, these days, havin' been made immune; but that," says he, "ain't th' point. Th' point is that you'd ought a hide that there crooked middle finger of yours better than what you do—an' then again, too, that retreatin' chin ain't fair to th' good name o' mermaids, as per book. However, I'm excruciated to meet you once more, Sim, and here's my promise well meet again, plenty an' often, see?"

"Stow it, an' git! Or I'll claw your face plumb off," says I, sort of rarin' up in the water. "Git, or I call th' prof."

"Dear me, such langwidge!" he protests, mild as rabbit's-milk. "I'm discombobulated, honest I am, to hear such from a lady mermaid! An', moreover, just think how imprudent it would be of you to holler —now wouldn't. it? Sort of shake public confidence, an' all that, eh? Down, Lucy, down, there's a good nice lady mermaid!"

He reaches out an' hits me a crack over the sea-weed on my brow with his long cane.



"DOWN, LUCY, DOWN!" HE SAYS, AND REACHES OVER AND HITS ME A CRACK WITH HIS LONG CANE.

"Down, Lucy, *down!*" he repeats; and his tone for pure A-One insultingness was th' top-notch of all time. "I ain't through with you yet," says he, resum'in' his mild manners. "Compose yourself; there's another bunch of E. Z. 's due in three minutes. See you to-morrow," says he, "and we will resume the sport. Mermaid - hunting—nothin' like it; greatest ever!"

He makes as though to clear.

"Hey, wait a minute!" says I. "What you goin' to do? If it's a divvy you're after, why—"

"Divvy nothin'!" he spurns me. "I'm a member of the Anti-Nature-Faker's Mutual Protective Association," says he, "and above bribery. And as for what I'm goin' to do—ah! Now *there's* a proposition worth ponderin'."

Then he pops me on th' nose with a peanut, and walks away, still smilin' that ice-water smile of his. He leaves my blood no longer cold, but b'ilin' now fit to evaporate th' whole show.

"You *dare* to butt in here again." I sputters after him, through my sea-weed, "and I'll—I'll—"

But he don't stop to listen; just disappears out o' the tent, hummin' a lively little tune.

Must ha' changed his mind about waitin' till to-morrow—maybe thought I'd put th' prof, wise, an' have him excluded, which I sure *would* have done—for, anyhow, back

he comes inside of an hour, an' with him a couple of huskies with such low brows that their hair tangles their eyelashes.

The three of 'em fronts up to our tank, along of a big an' spellbound crowd; an' none o' the audience seems more plumb int'rested than them three.

Moscow's sleeve looks bulgy.

The prof., he seems uneasy and on his guard. I notices the

stream of water ain't comin' in, and judges Beef is bein' held as a reserve for immejit action in case o' need. My nerves is all to the dippy, so I can't hardly do my stunts at all, and the prof, has to more than prod. Every time I flips or dives, "Gee!" thinks I, "this here is just prolongin' the agony. I'm sure workin' a shell-game on myself," thinks I, an' the sweat begins to ooze.

An' every time I comes up, there still stands Moscow MacShane and his L. B. 's, just smilin' — smilin'. That bulgy sleeve feezes *me*.

"Make her dive again, professor!" speaks up one of the L. B. 's, innocent-like, tossin' a penny in. "See if she can find it on th' bottom. She *can* see best in a dim light, can't she?"

"—Iridescent colors an' beautiful con- toors of this extrordinary large specimen," hastens the prof., tryin' to bring his lecture to a speedy finish. "An' captured alive after a desprit struggle by Colonel Lysander Webb, K. C. B., on the 27th of last—"

"Say, prof.," butts in the other L. B., "bow long can she stay down?"

"She requires a dim light, like all the specie," forges the prof., neck an' neck with that ominous curiosity of th' Moscow gang. "Lives in dark ocean caves an' fastnesses, which is their native abode among th' coral reefs! And now we will pass—"

"Under water they live?" inquires the first L. B. again. "In caves, you say? Far down among them beautiful coral reefs?"

"Why—er—yes!" answers th' prof., his voice almost breakin' with suppressed torture. Th' crowd begins to shove an' whisper. "But you—you understand, it's *salt* water—of course it is, out there on th' coasts of Van Diemen's Land in th' China Sea. *Everybody* knows that. Salt water— an' that makes a difference—"

"No such thing!" retorts the L. B., pullin' out a book from his pocket. "I got a volyume here, wrote by Colonel Webb himself, where he says—lemme find th' place, page 156— he says—"

"Never you mind what Colonel Webb says!" flares out the prof. "Ain't I been handlin' mermaids daily an' hourly fer the past eleven years? Don't I know their habits? We will now pass on the out-side. The out-side—"

"Hold on! *Hold on!*" says the L. B., polite an' easy. Not a soul starts for the outside. Contrarywise, they crowds up closer than ever, till it's a regulation sardine-pack. Some laughs, an' I hears confused scraps of talk. "If this here Mermaid Lucy's caught alive after a desprit struggle, last 27th o' March, first an' only one in captivity, how comes it that—?"

"Don't pester him!" speaks up Moscow, soothin'-like. "That's a matter of mere detail. What interests this here intelligent audience now is just this—*how* long can a genooine mermaid stay under water? Now prof., it's up to you!"

"That's right—right!" I hears th' crowd repeat. "How long? Make her try it. Money's worth! Hold 'er under—"

Say, am I sweatin' blood, or ain't I? *You* guess!

"We will now pass—" begins the prof, again, all of a tremble an' rubbin' his chin with a shaky hand; but Moscow interrupts once more:

"We don't press the point. It's immaterial—an' besides,

Lucy ain't well to-day. She's ailin'— I know it by her looks—ailin' and nervous. But somethin' we *would* like to know is what she feeds on? There, professor, her diet; what is it?"

"Diet?" answers the prof., his spirits risin' like an oil-gusher. "Diet? Fish, mostly—fish and—and—"

"Eels?" volunteers Moscow. "If so, I have here—"

"Eels, yes. Eels and—and such. Anythin' marine, you understand. Certainly. Marine food, that's it, such as grows natural on them there coasts of Van—"

"Hang th' diet!" speaks up L. B. Number 1. "I wants to see her stay under water!" "Same here! — An' here! —" persists the crowd, which now is gettin' unruly an' hilarious. All this time, y'understand, I'm in a despair so black it makes soot snow- white by comparison. "Make 'er stay down! *Down!*" shouts some in that jostlin', pushin' mob. "*Feed 'er!*" vociferates others.

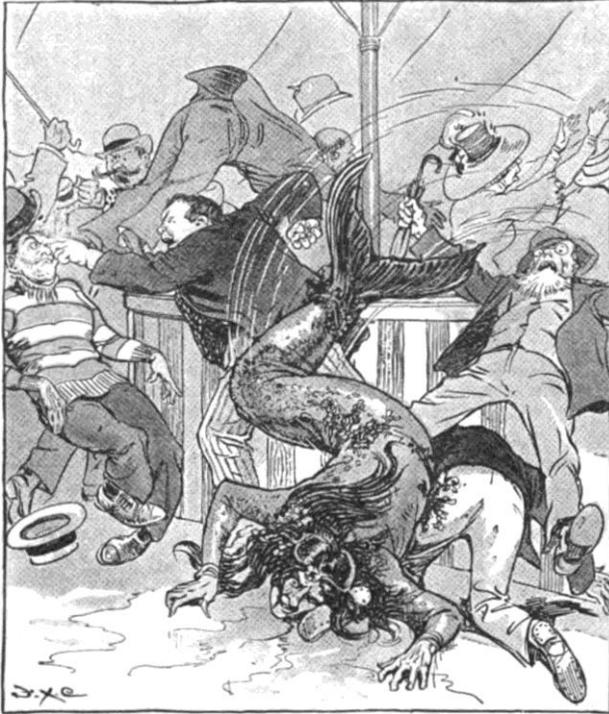
The poor old prof. —say! I has to pity him, spite o' my own bloody sweat. He grips his resolution, leans over an' pats me lovin' on the nozzle.

"Dive, Lucy!" he commands in a tremblin' voice. "Dive, an' stay down—a spell." "Here's *my* speedy end," thinks I, "but I'll croak game. An' Lord help th' fish they flings to *me!*" I gnashes my teeth preparatory to doin' murder vicariously on Moscow MacShane in the person of said fish. It's all dark an' slippery down there on th' bottom; can't more than see a glimmer. From above I hear a rumble o' voices. Then all of a sudden I sees somethin' swimmin' round—kind of a fish-thing, big an' brown. My lungs feel like they was just plumb goin' to bust every second, but I makes a grab at the fish-thing, misses, makes another, lands on it with my left, grapples with my right, closes in and grips till my knuckles crack. I feels the fish-critter give; there's a sudden lash an' tangle—the water boils.

And then—then— Gee Whil- likens! Ow! Oo! Ooooooo! — Somethin' explodes. Somethin' hits me. What *is* it? Where *am* I? Sparks an' fire envelope me! Can't let go—an' I'm all tied up in bow-knots, myself. Jumpin' jewsharps! 'Bout a million volts of red-hot current racks my frame. *Whoof!* —

Up I surges, blind, deaf, chokin'.

Plumb in the eye MacShane lands me one. Down I goes backward—*splash!* — head over tail, down I souses under water again, gulps a gallon an' comes up just explodin' with a *whoof! whoof!* that blows th' drink clean over that hilarious mob of cutthroats. But this time the prof, has unlimbered. Beef comes a shovin' and the outside- man, too—there's reinforcements. I makes my get-out o' the diabolish tank that time— falls on my map, outside, and lays spranglin', all tied up in my tail 'mongst the feet of that stampedin', fightin', roarin' multitude.



I FALLS ON MY MAT, OUTSIDE, AND LAYS ALL TIED UP IN MY TAIL
'MONGST THE FEET OF THAT STAMPEDIN', FIGHTIN', ROARIN'
MULTITUDE.

Mac, he drives a kick at me just as Beef hands him a right-hook on the ear. He drops. I'm top of him in a wink, and the L. B. 's, the prof., the outside-man an' Beef is top of us both. An' after that it's just pure cannibalism, with th' mob weepin' itself sick fer joy, an' screechin' " Perlice! " Perlice? Sure they come—after a while. But there's no tent left, nothin' but ribbons.

Fact is, all th' good them perlice done was shoot that there mermaid-food o' mine— that eel—that there million-volt electric eel. Say, you tumble?