

MARY BELLE AND THE MERMAID



MARY BELLE was the only daughter. Her mother and father treated her well. Yes, and they all lived on life's pleasant shore. But what happened? The mother got ill, and she died. And it was not long before the father married again. The woman he married had two daughters, name of Bethla and Sadie.

The girls treated Mary Belle, oh, like she didn't belong to anybody. Yes, and they treated her like she wasn't even a speck of dirt. Mary Belle felt so bad all the time, she'd run off to the river. She would just stand on the bank and cry.

One day, there came this thing out of the water. It rose up way high on what looked like its tail.

"What in the world are you?" asked Mary Belle.

"I'm the mermaid what lives in this water," came the answer. "Don't you see my tail?"

"I see you got no legs, and that tail," Mary Belle told her.

“But why do you cry, Mary Belle?” asked the mermaid.

“Well, my good mother died,” said Mary Belle. “Then, my own father married a woman who has two daughters, Bethla and Sadie. They keep the meat back from me, they feed me nothing, and they treat me like a stepchild.”

“I don’t like the sound of that. Come with me,” said the mermaid.

Mary Belle went with her. Down and way down, deep in the water. It was real pretty down there, full of fishes and caves and wavery light. The mermaid gave Mary Belle something cool to drink, and lots of food to eat.

Afterward, Mary Belle went on back home. All of them, her father, his wife, and her daughters, were having their supper. They wouldn’t give Mary Belle some, either. So mean.

The next day, she went down to the river. Didn’t know what came over her, but she had to sing. This is what she sang:

*“Down, down, to the deep and shady,
Pretty mer-maidy, take me down!”*

All got still. Then there was a darkening in the river. Next thing, there came the mermaid. She splashed up on her tail, all shimmery silver-blue and gold. She slid on her belly in the waves and lifted her tail over her head like a fan. She came on over, took Mary Belle down. She gave Mary Belle lots of goodies to eat and some sugar, and cream to drink. After a while, she brought Mary Belle up again.

Mary Belle went on home. She just couldn’t keep still about it this time. So she told her father and her stepmother.

“I went with a mermaid way in the river. I wouldn’t lie to you,” Mary Belle told them.



The next day when the sun was going up the sky, all of them went down to the river. So this time, her father sang:

"Mary Belle's been down.

Pretty mer-maidy, take me dow-ow-n."

"That's not the way to do it," says Bethla. "Here, let me sing."

She sang:

"Mary Belle's been, Daddy wants to go.

Pretty mer-maidy, take me dow-ow-n."

They waited a minute. Nothing darkened in the river. Nothing rose up. The youngest, Sadie, said, "Let me do it, let me sing." Sang:

"Mary Belle's been, Daddy can't, Bethla wants to go.

Down, down, to the deep and shady.

Pretty mer-maidy, take me dow-ow-n."

Suddenly, there was a way darkening in the middle of the river. The mermaid came up. It was something about the youngest's voice. Mermaid slid on her belly and came to them on a wave. Her tail was up over her head. It was all sparkly wet and golden. She wiggled it and beckoned them to come to her.

The father, he had a gun. He took it out and shot the poor mermaid through her tail. She shrieked. He shot her again. Now there was bright green foam all around her. She sank way down under and was gone, gone.

Mary Belle never dreamed her father would do what he did. She went away, weeping. Came back the next day. Sang for the mermaid, sang:

"Pretty mer-maidy, it's me, Mary Belle.

Take me down and dow-ow-n."

But the pretty mermaid never came, never rose up. Told you she was gone, gone. Mary Belle didn't know it for certain. And when she did know at last, she walked out into the river. Waded out in the water until it most covered her. And Mary Belle disappeared under the rippling waves.

Gone was she, like the mermaid and like her mother. Gone, gone. All, way gone. True.

Step on a tin, the tin bends. This is how my story ends.



COMMENT: In earlier times, it was reported that African American tales about mermaids were rare. Yet contemporary collectors have uncovered a number of such stories. This one, with its song and sad ending, is a *chante-fable* (cante fable) from South Carolina, dating back to the early 1900s. It was published in 1923 by the American Folk-Lore Society. The storyteller was Ada Bryan, who wrote it down for the folk collector.

There are several mermaid tales that originated in the black and mixed-race communities of the Cape Verde Islands off the African coast. Black Portuguese immigrants brought them to North America and eventually translated them into their new language, English. The Portuguese seafaring families traveled the east coast of the United States. "Mary Belle and the Mermaid" may well have a Portuguese connection.