

THE MER-WOMAN OUT OF THE SEA



OUR COUNTRYSIDE stretches along the ocean. Our city is full of life. We have the best of field crops and of food from the sea. Our younguns can read and write, laugh and sing. We have the best of good, and even better. We sleep deep and long in the nighttimes, as calm as babies.

But one day, something let loose at us out of the blue. A black cloud the size of a man's hat started way up high. We all saw it swell until it filled up the whole sky. Then, it came swirling straight down on our shoulders like some giant, scaresome boil, ready to burst.

Rain upon rain fell from the rolling black cloud. Its darkness bullied down our streets. Lightning streaked past our windows; thunder cracked. We cringed, covered our heads for dear life. It rained rivers over our roofs and down our chimneys.

All at once, the wind of it died down. The lightning of it emptied out of the air. No thunder sounded. Rain fell as steady as every day and every night. We felt the rain would never stop.

Days passed, and the whole of our city became a flood, far and wide.

Every road was a marshland. Every reach of land was a lakeland. In the woods, the trees gave off an odor of rot. All kinds of garbage and muck floated in the streets, clear to our knees. Cockroaches emptied out of our kitchen walls by the thousands — into the flood, and up our backs! What had been hard ground under us became soft and squishy, like flesh wet and fallen off the bone. Some of us folks went crazy.

Rain came down for four, five weeks. All of us became jittery with nerves. We felt there was something new and never seen among us. We'd all heard this tale, that something drenched and cold had crawled out of the sea. It made its way overland, through the rot and stench of wet.

The dark rumor spread among our houses. A woman screamed it, clawing at the lampposts: "There's a mer-woman among us! Yes, *A mermaid!* Our city is drowned. The water will claim us all unless *She* is put back to sea."

That was the story we all believed. We were hysterical. Damp all the time, the sky ghostly dark every day, we'd believe anything. It was the mermaid that caused our misfortune.

We all knew who had captured the mermaid. It was the doctor, with his roots and potions. He was our druggist, our apothecary, as he was known in past times. We all knew him, but we stayed away from him. Because he was the doctor to the dead things; for years, that was the whispered report. He had a hidden room of otherworldly creatures, so the story went. Terrible, half-alive things that ought not to have seen the light of day, ever, some said.

This doctor of darkness had a helper — Asa was his name. He told us, whispering, "He keeps *Her* with his ungodly things. On the topmost shelf, there is a bell jar. And in the bell jar is a mer-woman being. The mermaid."

"No!" we said, but we believed. "Say it isn't true!"

“Oh, yes,” Asa told. “She’s a beauty. But she’s shrunken down, and she’s been out of her ocean too long. She’s awful tiny in the tall bell jar, but she’s just so lovely to see!”

“How does she seem?” we asked. “Is she all right?” We did not want her to suffer and die.

“She’s covered in green water,” Asa told. “She has long hair that floats and waves around her. Hair looks just like stringy vines in a breeze. Her mouth is open. Fists, banging on the bell-jar sides. She wants out!”

“No! Oh, no!” we said.

“And there are goldfish swimming in there, round and round her, too,” Asa told.

Oh, we believed, all right. That this doctor to deadly things of life held a mermaid captive in a tall bell jar.

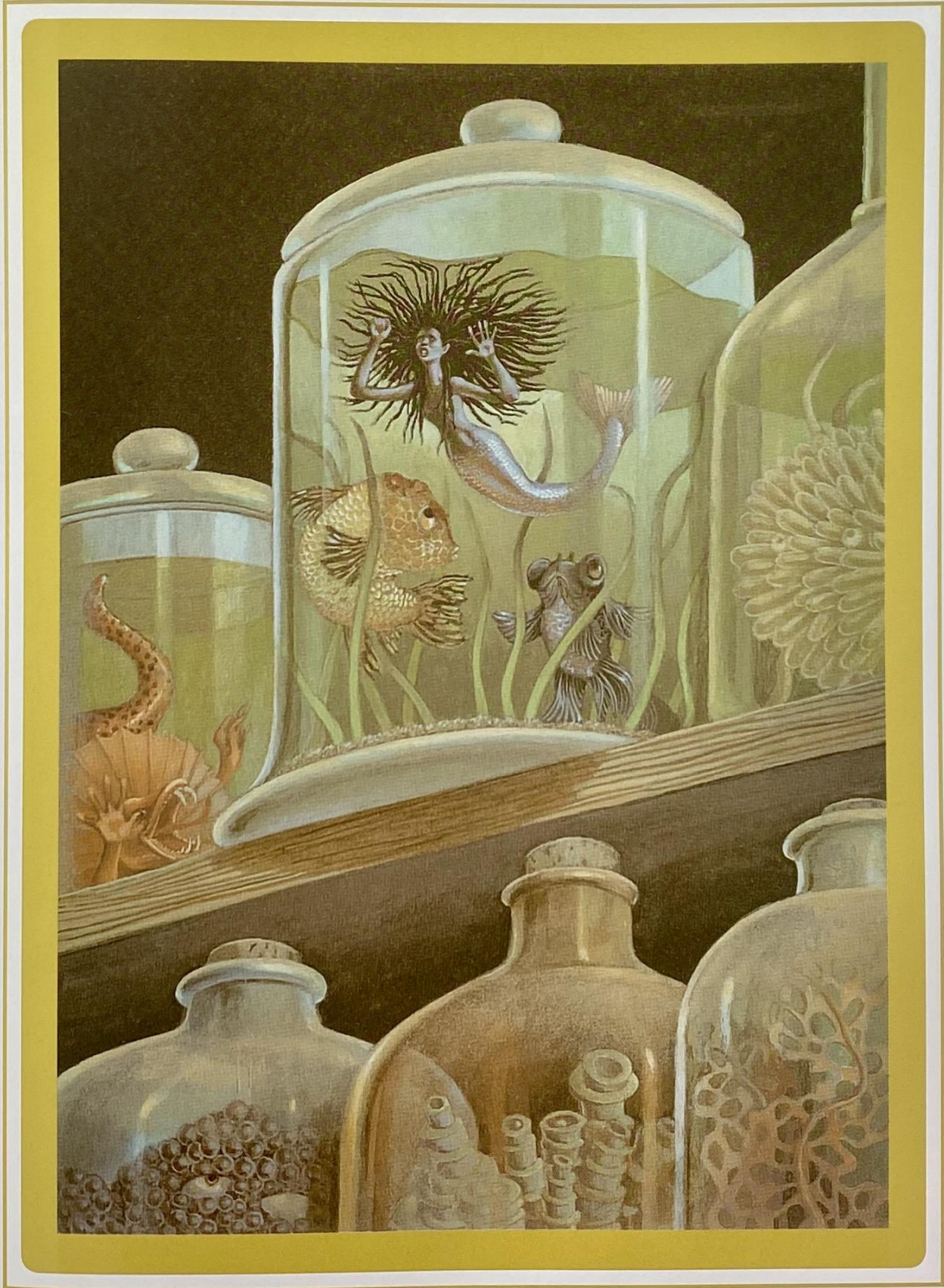
The rain kept on. It beat down on our porches and into our windows. It emptied into our rooms and fireplaces. It seemed that all at once we got angry. We were tired of it all! Of sitting in our chairs, with water up to our knees. We stormed; we raged. And finally, we gathered and became a great mob, wading out toward our doctor’s shop. We were sodden and wild with fear.

We picked up the muck in our hands, throwing it at our doctor’s window.

“Bring us the mermaid!” we shouted. Yes! The thought of her there made us sad enough to cry. “We say let her out, let her go back to where she belongs!”

“But there’s no such thing!” called the doctor. “There is no mermaid here or anywhere.”

“You lie!” one tall black man shouted.



A very small man bravely swam down to a basement window. He was gone a long time. Then, we heard things breaking. Next came putrid, slithering, crawling things out of the house. Their slime coated the waters where we stood cringing.

The small dark man floated up, breathless. "I've seen her!" he gasped. "She's got her little hands on the rim of her jar. She's crying. I tell you, she is beyond beautiful, the tiny, pitiful thing."

Some men of our town got together. They broke down the door and searched the shop — upstairs, downstairs, and in secret places. The rest of the horrible, half-living things must have hidden in deep, dank corners. For our men found nothing unusual. No mermaid at all.

"We give you our word. There is no such thing here," they told us. "Go on home."

A tall white man said to us, "If you don't leave at once, we'll call out the army to make you leave." Speaking that way to us, who've lived in this city all our lives!

The mer-woman was never found. Some of us had hoped to hold her on our palms and talk to her, too. Maybe if those men had just reached up to the top shelf over there, or in the shadows behind things in the doctor's back room, they'd've seen the mermaid swimming, swimming in her jar. Likely she'd shrunk to the size of a baby frog, and a hungry one, too. She'd been there all along, but so shriveled they couldn't recognize her.

The rains did stop, perhaps because the bell jar was now big enough to suit the mermaid. Or else the doctor to the dead things was so frightened by what he'd done, he'd sent her out the back way. Down the flooded streets and woods and on to her home at the bottom of the ocean. We knew she'd caused the rains; we didn't blame her. We blamed the doctor!

Well, what had been was gone, once the rain ended. All that was left when the waters went away to where they belonged was a stinking, rotten fish smell. And lots of muck for us in the city to clean up. Our streets smelled as if tons of fish had been cleaned on our stoops and in our houses.

For weeks, we washed down our walls, and scrubbed and swept our streets. We tried hard to rid ourselves of souring fish odors. On hot days, you can still smell them.

Our doctor soon closed his shop and moved away, some say to the north. We've not heard from him. Maybe he is dead, but no one here can say. Still, we all know that men live, and then they die. All the time. And maybe mer-women, mermaids, do as well.



COMMENT: This is a tale of such amazing detail that it takes on legendary proportions. The original story gives the exact date of the event: July 3, 1867. The description is vivid enough for the storm to have happened.

Indeed, John Bennett, who collected this tale around the turn of the century, had details of the story corroborated by a local black woman. Her name was Araminta Tucker, who told him, "It rained for thirty days, then the town rose. Oh, my God, how it rained!"

Black seagoing families lived along the South Carolina coastal area around Charleston where the tale takes place. There, the weather often was wild and frightening. After a storm, all manner of debris washed up onshore. This type of story about mermaids, while rare, comes from sea experience and the free imaginations of African American tellers.

Martha Bennett Stiles, the granddaughter of Mr. Bennett, has written to say that this retelling of her grandfather's tale, and others from his collection, "would have been of great satisfaction to him, as it was just what he collected the stories for."