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ELIJAH'S MERMAID

Essie Fox



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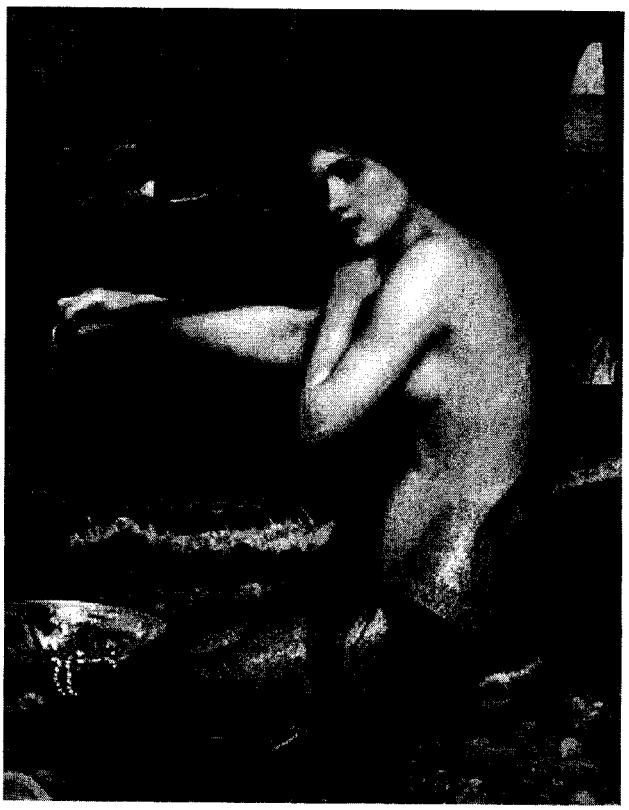
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A Mermaid
by
John William Waterhouse

To

William Henry Bengry

The kindest heart I was blessed to know

and

Hazel and Bossy Davies

Who made me smile and told me tales while we walked around many a field and stream in the village of Kingsland, in Herefordshire

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PART ONE

Sand turns traitor, and betrays the footstep that has passed over it; water gives back to the tell-tale surface the body that has drowned...

From *No Name* by Wilkie Collins

IN WHICH WE ARE INTRODUCED TO PEARL AND LEARN OF THOSE MOMENTOUS EVENTS THAT OCCURRED AT THE TIME OF HER 'FINDING'

Article taken from *The Times* newspaper: May 1850

MYSTERIOUS DEATH. – Late on Thursday evening, Mr. Davies, deputy coroner, held a lengthened enquiry at The Eight Bells public-house in Chelsea, touching the circumstances attending the death of an apparently respectable woman, name unknown, whose body was found floating in the River Thames off Millbank on the morning of Monday last. It appeared from the evidence of the witnesses examined, that about midnight on Sunday the police patrol saw a woman whose dress exactly corresponded with that worn by the deceased, who appeared to be carrying a bundle of cloth while walking along Cheyne Walk in the direction of Battersea Bridge. William Taylor, also of the Thames Police, stated that he had found the deceased at around 6 o'clock on Monday morning. The woman appeared to be about twenty years of age, five foot six or seven inches high, very thin with fine features and abundant fair hair. Advertisements, with a description of the body and the articles found upon it, had been inserted in several of the papers, but as yet no relatives or friends have come forward for identification. On the body were found expensive articles of dress. There was no hat or bonnet. A black velvet cloak was trimmed with black ostrich feathers. A cream silk dress had beneath two petticoats trimmed with lace, both white. Stays were fastened in front by steel clasps below which were a white muslin chemise and white silk stockings. There was no money found on the person. All pockets had been filled with coals and bits of wood apparently collected at the water's edge, leading to the belief that the deceased had committed suicide. Mr. Baker and Mr. Hodgeson, two surgeons of Chelsea Royal hospital, by direction of the deputy coroner, made *post mortem* examination of the corpse upon which no injuries were found. The whole of the organs were found quite healthy though the condition of the womb indicated a recent childbirth. The lungs indicated death by suffocation. The jury, in the absence of any clearer evidence, returned a verdict of 'Found drowned'.

PEARL

Deep with the first dead...secret in the unmourning water of the riding Thames

Dylan Thomas

That May night of my 'birth', of my finding, many marvels and wonders were seen, and every one of them noted down in Mrs Hibbert's Book of Events. Thus –

There was a cabman who worked Cremorne Gardens who, come to the end of his shift for the night, was about to head home across Battersea Bridge when he saw an angel flying by. In the moonlight her ebony wings glistened silver, snapping and billowing out through the air, and two black feathers floated down to brush, like a kiss, against his cheek.

A warehouse nightwatchman at St Katharine Docks swore blind to have heard a mermaid's song, and such a sweet melody it was, ringing clear as a bell through the dense fogged air. A waterman down Wandsworth way claimed to have seen a nymph that dawn. He told how her hair shimmered over black waters, a rippling fan of gold.

And then, there was the comet, described by so many that night; its tail a streaking fire of light as it followed the sinuous bend of the Thames, until its arcing trajectory plunged far out in the sea beyond Margate, at which point there was nothing left to see but a rising plume of fizzing steam.

I doubt that any such tales were true; more likely to have been conjured up by Mrs Hibbert's warped genius – Mrs Hibbert, pronounced Mrs 'eebair', who held court in the House of the Mermaids, a most prestigious Chelsea abode which overlooked the River Thames, from where she concocted fantastical bait with which to lure the clientele through the doors of her *maison de tolerance*. And with every one of them being toffs – aristocrats, barristers, men of the cloth – to retain their investment in her house she indulged those gentlemen's every whim. She offered a glittering palace of dreams where they could dab the finest whores

who played the part of dutiful wives, but without any matrimonial bonds.

Privately, she called them dupes. *The things they will believe, ma chère!* But then she was very persuasive and I was never more beguiled than when hearing my very own story told, with Mrs Hibbert's dulcet tones as soothing as any lullaby – *You were sent to us from the mermaids.*

I used to squeeze my eyes tight shut to try and imagine the scene that night, as glassy as a daguerreotype, a picture exposed in the melting dawn when the street lamps flickered like smouldering ash, when the river was blurred with silver mists.

And now, almost twenty years later, I have made my return to Cheyne Walk, where the winter air is a cold damp gauze, so thick that when I lift a hand it could belong to anyone, I could be standing anywhere, and nothing else alive to hear but the muted snorts and clanging stamps of the horses hitched to a waiting cab. And through their jingling harness song comes Mrs Hibbert's whispering, the hiss of a memory long since passed that still has the power to pierce my heart, which is suddenly beating so very much faster, and I find myself dizzy, having to lean forward, hands clutching the splintering jetty rail, ears filled with the slip-slopping song of the Thames – as if Time itself is ebbing there.

Those swirling small eddies around wooden piers create a dreamy hypnotic state and gradually my heart is lulled, and gradually it starts to slow, a solace not unfamiliar to me though more usually found in a sticky brown syrup rather than the mud and the filth of the river. But I must try not to think of that; the tincture's slow burn in the back of my throat, the tingling fire as it sings in my veins, and how it may still be weaving its dreams, because when I lift my eyes once more the sky has grown dark with a million stars and the milky light of a low full moon is gleaming down on Battersea Bridge; the looming carcass of mouldering wood which creaks and groans as if alive, and through that almost animal sound I hear it so clearly – the fluttering snap of some feathered wings, the sudden hollow splashing thud, the wailing horn of a distant tug as mournful as any funeral bell.

Why does that blast make me shiver? Does it tell of another bride for the Thames, another poor wretch who has been sucked down into his cruel embracing arms until there is nothing left to see but a bubbling phosphorescence of death – as thick and grey as Satan's seed? Has such an event been spied by the mudlarks, those foragers heading towards me now? They look like some ghostly

Greek chorus wreathed in rags of drifting fog, crooked backs hunched beneath their bulging sacks as, oblivious to the noxious stench of oily floating turds around, long hooks prod and scrape through the oozing ditch to glean lumps of sea coal and iron and wood; the pitiful harvest on which they live. Do they see what looks like a diamond of light, the spectral orb of a lantern affixed to the bobbing prow of a scull now emerging from under the bridge's gloom? As it draws nearer I find myself thinking – how strange, how incongruous it is that the man who toils at those clumsy oars should be wearing what looks like a fur-collared coat, and perched on his head is a tall silk hat which, despite the brim falling forward, concealing the upper part of his face, cannot disguise his identity.

I would know this gentleman anywhere. Tip Thomas – Mrs Hibbert's 'fancy man', her procurer, her pimp, her scavenger – who now, with his paddles being set down, pushes back the brim of his tifter (that sly little 'tip' for which he is named) while fixing me with the scheming leer that betrays the mask he prefers to show; the clear blue gaze of the pretty boy who could charm all the birds right down from the trees, who barters with punters and tickles the whores – who might now be charming the fish from the sea. Or has he been looking for mermaids again? Or has he been dredging up the drowned?

Tip once told me such business is lucrative, with rewards coming from the authorities, better still from the medical men who are always in need of another corpse, another fresh body to pin on their tables, to rip and dissect then stitch back up; no more use, no more soul than a sewer rat.

Tip is as cunning and quick as a rat. One lurching dip and his craft is moored, and he stands in the shallows at its side where the sluggish tide is rising round. He pulls a small silver flask from his pocket, deftly unscrewing its lid, knocking back a long slug then exhaling a sigh as the bottle is stoppered and stashed again. '*It helps keep up the spirits, dear.*' And now, with his courage quite restored – slowly, almost tenderly – Tip Thomas stoops forward and lifts his catch, embracing what might be a bundle of rags, and while wading towards me, towards the shore, his pace is very leisurely – though what cause has he to hurry now, having found the thing he was searching for, able to savour each squelching step as his boots trudge their progress through gravelled sludge?

There is a moment I fear him lost, dissolved in the shadows beneath the pier's boards until ... Can you hear it, that *shlump,*

shlump, shlump? That is the sound of Tip Thomas's feet, a steady ascension up wooden steps. And look! He is here! He is right by my side, and the street lamp's glimmer is lighting him up like a bauble on a Christmas tree. But what *is* this gift, this queer fish that he holds? Something soft and pale fleshed is nestling there, lodged between sacking and minky fur collar. And yet, there is no fishy odour. No metallic, glistening lustre of scales, nor the usual bloated decay of the drowned who stare through blind and jellied eyes. When Tip draws back his coat's lapel to reveal his living treasure's face I see it has eyes, green and glistening, and a tiny pink mouth like a shell that opens and whimpers and dribbles with slime before letting out a plaintive whine. And when that creature kicks and squirms the foot of an infant child is revealed – though you might almost think it a little frog, the flesh between toes so wrinkled and webbed.

Tip Thomas is not the least bit repulsed by such an odd deformity. He makes a low sort of shushing sound, and I try not to flinch when that rancid and gin-fumy breath of his prickles like ice against my cheek – when common sense tells me that it should be warm – when the blood very almost stagnates in my veins to hear his crowing mantra, '*God bless your sweet little orphaned soul. Did she think I was going to let you go? A gift from Heaven you are to me. A pearl dropped into me waiting hands.*'

His hands? I wonder, what about mine? What will he do if I hold them out? Will he give her to me? Will he let me save this undrowned child from what is to be her destiny? But I must be taking leave of my senses even to contemplate such a thing, for this is Tip Thomas and he has no conscience, no bleeding heart for compassion to prick. Tip Thomas has only ever cared for what is waiting across the street, where behind iron gates and high brick walls that are topped with shards of broken glass an undraped window glows with light, and there, in its centre, as if on a stage, I see a woman's silhouette – and the silhouette is lifting one arm, as if she is waving – or beckoning.

I know that is Mrs Hibbert. I know that she beckons to Tip, not me, because I am the ghost neither one of them sees. I stand in their future looking back to witness the time of my genesis. And that was a time passing strange, don't you think, as strange as any myth they wove, when they called me the Wondrous Water Child, the Living Jewel from the Oyster Beds, Spawned from the Loins of Old Father Thames and the Fishy Womb of his Mermaid Bride?

But the truth always was more prosaic than that. The truth is

that I was the bastard child saved from the river by Tip that night when my mother drowned herself for shame. And the only name I have ever known is the one Mrs Hibbert chose to bestow. And the very first memory I have is the sound of her lulling, lilting voice as she called for me to enter a room with lovely pictures all over the walls, walls painted with silvers, blues and greens, with fishes, and mermaids with golden hair – hair wreathed with ribbons, with stars, with pearls.

My hair was once yellow and curling. I wore a crown of shells. Beneath lace skirts my legs were bare, no stockings or shoes to hide my feet, the stubby wedges where toes should be, tingling and cold on the marble tiles. I wanted to run back upstairs to my room but I knew Tip Thomas was standing close, his lips twisted into a snide grimace between whiskers as pale as walrus tusks, and the daggers of his fingernails digging down through the flesh of my shoulders, and me more frightened of riling him than whatever was waiting in that room, from where Mrs Hibbert coaxed again – '*Come,* ma chère … ma petite nymphe.'

Mrs Hibbert held out her black-gloved hands and crooned through the mesh of her thick black veils, '*Come play with my friends, my pretty Pearl.*'



THOSE HISTORICAL DOCUMENTS PERTAINING TO THE BIRTHS OF LILY AND ELIJAH LAMB: THE TWINS WHO WHEN BABES WERE DEPOSITED AT THE DOORS OF THE FOUNDLING HOSPITAL

FREDERICK HALL, PUBLISHER
41 Burlington Row
London

May 7th 1855

AUGUSTUS, DEAR FRIEND,
I hardly know how to commence this post which is proving to be the most onerous task, and far be it from my intention to wish to cause you more distress than that you have already suffered during these past five years. It still fills my heart with grief and guilt to think I encouraged your dear boy to London to work with me in the publishing business. They say that fifty thousand souls were lost in that outbreak of cholera, and still no explanation known, whether the miasma of the air or the corruption of water supplies. Alas, I have grown too jaded to care what those quibbling scientists next debate. If only I could go back in time and offer myself to the pestilence, to give my life instead of his.

I pray now that God will steady my hand as I come to relate some further news that has bearing upon your son's personal affairs, and by that a direct connection with you. Believe me, Augustus, for too many nights I have struggled with my conscience, debating whether it is right to burden you with such intelligence. And yet, I do feel that it is my bound duty to relate what has recently come to light – that during the year he spent in my house, Gabriel succumbed to the lure of romance. His actions were not without consequence.

The young woman in question went by the name of Isabella di Marco and, as you may surmise, was descended from Italian stock. I know of some details regarding her background, and for reasons that will soon enough be apparent, such as that in 1848 she left her homeland and set

sail for England along with her father, himself an artist who had hoped for some prospect of work here in London. But he suffered a fatal seizure while their ship was still at sea. Isabella arrived here entirely alone, and being less than twenty years and of a most pleasing appearance then, was at no small peril of being abused by reprobates who seek to inveigle those innocents whose very trust and naivety mark them out as the prey for debauchery. Even so, the girl's future was duly safeguarded when she happened to meet with a friend of mine – a virtuous man who had volunteered to work with the Dockside Nightbird Mission, a charitable Christian enterprise which strives to find occupation for all repentant homeless souls. I have two girls in the kitchens here, as amenable and diligent as those sent from exclusive agencies. But Isabella was a cut above, being refined and well educated, fluent in English and French as well as her native Italian tongue. When my acquaintance first brought her here he suggested she might be employed 'upstairs', helping to translate those foreign works that we often buy in from overseas – mainly short stories and travelogues to feature in the magazines which prove to be more and more popular, really the most lucrative business.

But I digress from the point in hand.

As I am sure you have now deduced it was through their mutual employment in the offices of Hall & Co. that an intimacy came to develop between the two young people. With both of them lodging in my apartments I should have been more vigilant to the signs of a growing affection. But the passions of youth flow very strong, and at times they can be devious, and though I believe they may have wed, events conspired to dash such hopes.

With the tragedy of Gabriel's death, and that coming so close on the loss of her father, Isabella could not, would not, be consoled. Within a month she departed my house without so much as a parting word. And now, there is the further distress of having discovered the reason why – the shame which befell that poor sweet wretch.

You may ask how I happen to come by such news when over five years have since elapsed. My dear friend, I confess it is the result of the strangest of coincidences, which only makes me more convinced that Sacred Providence is at work.

Of all those charities I support the very dearest to my heart is Coram's Foundling Hospital, to which orphanage I make an annual donation along with a great many books – many of your own among them. Only last week, when visiting, I was invited to stay on a while to observe the boys and their marching band, and afterwards the refectory where they partake of their midday meal – though I hardly consider such a show to be classed as 'entertainment'. If I wished to see keepers throw buns to bears I would visit the zoological gardens. I do not find it dignified, no matter what Lady This or Lord That happen to be in attendance. As such I made my excuses to leave, though barely gone past the clerk's office door when faced with two bawling infants and the nurses who struggled to hold them, who, when questioned, gave me the reply that only that morning, the siblings – twins, a boy and a girl – had been returned from their foster home.

The smallest of the children here are farmed out until the age of five by which time they are deemed suitably mature to join the institution's life. However, when in the Foundling the sexes must be separate. Boys in the west wing, girls in the east, and the chapel to separate between. And that was the knotty problem here, for the little girl screamed merry hell, refusing to let her brother go, clinging on to his arm like a limpet.

Of course, I went to offer assistance, only to find myself struck dumb when viewing those siblings' features. So familiar were they – so sure was my mind that I made some immediate enquiries, though how tiresome and protracted they were, my patience and nerves stretched to breaking point while waiting in that office, and whatever discoveries then ensued not without a little bribery. But that is by the by. Corruption is blessed when the outcome is moral. The point is that armed with a good enough guess at the probable date of admission and the fact that twins must be somewhat rare, I found myself viewing the relevant file and in that the petitioning document where I read with the very heaviest heart the name of Isabella di Marco, and alongside that of Gabriel Lamb, he divulged as the children's father, and the place in which he and Isabella had first come to be acquainted was listed as being Burlington Row, at the offices of Hall and Co. Finally there was the fact that

Gabriel Lamb was now deceased, leaving the mother in no fit state to support dependent infants.

And that, my dearest friend, is why I am now obliged to pass on such momentous news, though should you wish to ignore it, fearing the consequential slur on your own good reputation, then you may safely be assured that your grandchildren are in excellent hands and that both will be schooled for respectable trades with which to support their future lives – the boy trained for agricultural work, the military, or the navy – the girl for domestic service.

I only urge you to swiftly decide on whichever course you think best to take.

I am, as ever, Your own True Friend,
FREDERICK

May 20th 1855. Adopted and removed from the Foundling Hospital, one male and one female infant, sibling twins, known as Elijah and Lily.

Name and Condition of the person adopting the children – Mr Augustus Lamb, widower. Occupation, author. Residence, Kingsland House, Kingsland, Herefordshire.

References:- the Reverend John Preece, Bloomsbury, and Mr Frederick Hall, Book and Magazine Publisher, Burlington Row, London.