EDITH NESBIT

WET MAGIC

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Содержание

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CHAPTER ONE
Sabrina Fair

THAT going to the seaside was the very beginning of everything – only it seemed as though it were going to be a beginning without an end, like the roads on the Sussex downs which look like roads and then look like paths, and then turn into sheep tracks, and then are just grass and furze bushes and tottergrass and harebells and rabbits and chalk.

The children had been counting the days to The Day. Bernard indeed had made a calendar on a piece of cardboard that had once been the bottom of the box in which his new white sandshoes came home. He marked the divisions of the weeks quite neatly in red ink, and the days were numbered in blue ink, and every day he crossed off one of those numbers with a piece of green chalk he happened to have left out of a penny box. Mavis had washed and ironed all the dolls' clothes at least a fortnight before The Day. This was thoughtful and farsighted of her, of course, but it was a little trying to Kathleen, who was much younger and who would have preferred to go on playing with her dolls in their dirtier and more familiar state.

"Well, if you do," said Mavis, a little hot and cross from the ironing board, "I'll never wash anything for you again, not even your face."

Kathleen somehow felt as if she could bear that.

"But mayn't I have just one of the dolls" was, however, all she said, "just the teeniest, weeniest one? Let me have Lord Edward. His head's half gone as it is, and I could dress him in a clean hanky and pretend it was kilts."

Mavis could not object to this, because, of course, whatever else she washed she didn't wash hankies. So Lord Edward had his pale kilts, and the other dolls were put away in a row in Mavis's corner drawer. It was after that that Mavis and Francis had long secret consultations – and when the younger ones asked questions they were told, "It's secrets. You'll know in good time." This, of course, excited everyone very much indeed – and it was rather a comedown when the good time came, and the secret proved to be nothing more interesting than a large empty aquarium which the two elders had clubbed their money together to buy, for eight-and ninepence in the Old Kent Road. They staggered up the front garden path with it, very hot and tired.

"But what are you going to do with it?" Kathleen asked, as they all stood around the nursery table looking at it.

"Fill it with seawater," Francis explained, "to put sea anemones in."

"Oh yes," said Kathleen with enthusiasm, "and the crabs and starfish and prawns and the yellow periwinkles – and all the common objects of the seashore."

"We'll stand it in the window," Mavis added: "it'll make the lodgings look so distinguished."

"And then perhaps some great scientific gentleman, like Darwin or Faraday, will see it as he goes by, and it will be such a joyous surprise to him to come face-to-face with our jellyfish; he'll offer to teach Francis all about science for nothing – I see," said Kathleen hopefully.

"But how will you get it to the seaside?" Bernard asked, leaning his hands on the schoolroom table and breathing heavily into the aquarium, so that its shining sides became dim and misty. "It's much too big to go in the boxes, you know."

"Then I'll carry it," said Francis, "it won't be in the way at all – I carried it home today."

"We had to take the bus, you know," said truthful Mavis, "and then I had to help you."

"I don't believe they'll let you take it at all," said Bernard – if you know anything of grown-ups you will know that Bernard proved to be quite right.

"Take an aquarium to the seaside – nonsense!" they said. And "What for?" not waiting for the answer. "They," just at present, was Aunt Enid.

Francis had always been passionately fond of water. Even when he was a baby he always stopped crying the moment they put him in the bath. And he was the little boy who, at the age of four, was lost for three hours and then brought home by the police who had found him sitting in a horse trough in front of the Willing Mind, wet to the topmost hair of his head, and quite happy, entertaining a circle of carters with pots of beer in their hands. There was very little water in the horse trough and the most talkative of the carters explained that, the kid being that wet at the first start off, him and his mates thought he was as safe in the trough as anywhere – the weather being what it was and all them nasty motors and trams about.

To Francis, passionately attracted as he was by water in all forms, from the simple mud puddle to the complicated machinery by which your bath supply is enabled to get out of order, it was a real tragedy that he had never seen the sea. Something had always happened to prevent it. Holidays had been spent in green countries where there were rivers and wells and ponds, and waters deep and wide – but the water had been fresh water, and the green grass had been on each side of it. One great charm of the sea, as he had heard of it, was that it had nothing on the other side "so far as eye could see." There was a lot about the sea in poetry, and Francis, curiously enough, liked poetry.

The buying of the aquarium had been an attempt to make sure that, having found the sea, he should not lose it again. He imagined the aquarium fitted with a real rock in the middle, to which radiant sea anemones clung and limpets stuck. There were to be yellow periwinkles too, and seaweeds, and gold and silver fish (which don't live in the sea by the way, only Francis didn't know this), flitting about in radiant scaly splendor, among the shadows of the growing water plants. He had thought it all out – how a cover might be made, very light, with rubber in between, like a screw-top bottle, to keep the water in while it traveled home in the guard's van to the admiration of passengers and porters at both stations. And now – he was not to be allowed to take it.

He told Mavis, and she agreed with him that it was a shame.

"But I'll tell you what," she said, for she was not one of those comforters who just say, "I'm sorry," and don't try to help. She generally thought of something that would make things at any rate just a little better. "Let's fill it with fresh water, and get some goldfish and sand and weeds; and I'll make Eliza promise to put ants' eggs in – that's what they eat – and it'll be something to break the dreadful shock when we have to leave the sea and come home again."

Francis admitted that there was something in this and consented to fill the aquarium with water from the bath. When this was done the aquarium was so heavy that the combined efforts of all four children could not begin to move it.

"Never mind," said Mavis, the consoler; "let's empty it out again and take it back to the common room, and then fill it by secret jugfuls, carried separately, you know."

This might have been successful, but Aunt Enid met the first secret jugful – and forbade the second.

"Messing about," she called it. "No, of course I shan't allow you to waste your money on fish." And Mother was already at the seaside getting the lodgings ready for them. Her last words had been —

"Be sure you do exactly what Aunt Enid says." So, of course, they had to. Also Mother had said, "Don't argue," so they had not even the melancholy satisfaction of telling Aunt Enid that she was quite wrong, and that they were not messing about at all.

Aunt Enid was not a real aunt, but just an old friend of Grandmamma's, with an aunt's name and privileges and rather more than an aunt's authority. She was much older than a real aunt and not half so nice. She was what is called "firm" with children, and no one ever called her auntie. Just Aunt Enid. That will tell you in a moment.

So there the aquarium was, dishearteningly dry – for even the few drops left in it from its first filling dried up almost at once.

Even in its unwatery state, however, the aquarium was beautiful. It had not any of that ugly ironwork with red lead showing between the iron and the glass which you may sometimes have noticed in the aquariums of your friends. No, it was one solid thick piece of clear glass, faintly green, and when you stooped down and looked through you could almost fancy that there really was water in it.

"Let's put flowers in it," Kathleen suggested, "and pretend they're anemones. Do let's, Francis."

"I don't care what you do," said Francis. "I'm going to read *The Water Babies*."

"Then we'll do it, and make it a lovely surprise for you," said Kathleen cheerily.

Francis sat down squarely with *The Water Babies* flat before him on the table, where also his elbows were, and the others, respecting his sorrow, stole quietly away. Mavis just stepped back to say, "I say, France, you don't mind their putting flowers? It's to please you, you know."

"I tell you I don't mind *anything*," said Francis savagely.

When the three had finished with it, the aquarium really looked rather nice, and, if you stooped down and looked sideways through the glass, like a real aquarium.

Kathleen took some clinkers from the back of the rockery – "where they won't show," she said – and Mavis induced these to stand up like an arch in the middle of the glassy square. Tufts of long grass, rather sparingly arranged, looked not unlike waterweed. Bernard begged from the cook some of the fine silver sand which she uses to scrub the kitchen tables and dressers with, and Mavis cut the thread of the Australian shell necklace that Uncle Robert sent her last Christmas, so that there should be real, shimmery, silvery shells on the sand. (This was rather self-sacrificing of her, because she knew she would have to put them all back again on their string, and you know what a bother shells are to thread.) They shone delightfully through the glass. But the great triumph was the sea anemones – pink and red and yellow – clinging to the rocky arch just as though they were growing there.

"Oh, lovely, lovely," Kathleen cried, as Mavis fixed the last delicate flesh-tinted crown. "Come and look, France."

"Not yet," said Mavis, in a great hurry, and she tied the thread of the necklace round a tin goldfish (out of the box with the duck and the boat and the mackerel and the lobster and the magnet that makes them all move about – you know) and hung it from the middle of the arch. It looked just as though it were swimming – you hardly noticed the thread at all.

"*Now*, France," she called. And Francis came slowly with his thumb in *The Water Babies*. It was nearly dark by now, but Mavis had lighted the four dollhouse candles in the gilt candlesticks and set them on the table around the aquarium.

"Look through the side," she said; "isn't it ripping?"

"Why," said Francis slowly, "you've got water in it – and real anemones! Where on earth…?"

"Not real," said Mavis. "I wish they were; they're only dahlias. But it does look pretty, doesn't it?"

"It's like Fairyland," said Kathleen, and Bernard added, "I *am* glad you bought it."

"It just shows what it will be like when we *do* get the sea creatures," said Mavis. "Oh, Francis, you do like it, don't you?"

"Oh, I like it all right," he answered, pressing his nose against the thick glass, "but I wanted it to be waving weeds and mysterious wetness like the Sabrina picture."

The other three glanced at the picture which hung over the mantelpiece – Sabrina and the water nymphs, drifting along among the waterweeds and water lilies. There were words under the picture, and Francis dreamily began to say them:

> "'Sabrina fair,
> Listen where thou art sitting,
> Under the glassie, cool, translucent wave

In twisted braids of Lillies knitting
The loose train of thy amber-dropping hair…'"

"Hullo – what was that?" he said in quite a different voice, and jumped up.

"What was what?" the others naturally asked.

"Did you put something alive in there?" Francis asked.

"Of course not," said Mavis. "Why?"

"Well, I saw something move, that's all."

They all crowded around and peered over the glass walls. Nothing, of course, but the sand and the grass and the shells, the clinkers and the dahlias and the little suspended tin goldfish.

"I expect the goldfish swung a bit," said Bernard. "That's what it must have been."

"It didn't look like that," Francis answered. "It looked more like – "

"Like what?"

"I don't know – get out of the light. Let's have another squint."

He stooped down and looked again through the glass.

"It's not the goldfish," he said. "That's as quiet as a trout asleep. No – I suppose it was a shadow or something."

"You might tell us what it looked like," said Kathleen.

"Was it like a rat?" Bernard asked with interest.

"Not a bit. It was more like – "

"Well, like what?" asked three aggravated voices.

"Like Sabrina – only very, very tiny."

"A sort of doll – Sabrina," said Kathleen, "how awfully jolly!"

"It wasn't at all like a doll, and it wasn't jolly," said Francis shortly – "only I wish it would come again."

It didn't, however.

"I say," said Mavis, struck by a new idea, "perhaps it's a magic aquarium."

"Let's play it is," suggested Kathleen – "let's play it's a magic glass and we can see what we like in it. I see a fairy palace with gleaming spires of crystal and silver."

"I see a football match, and our chaps winning," said Bernard heavily, joining in the new game.

"Shut up," said Francis. "That isn't play. There was something."

"Suppose it is magic," said Mavis again.

"We've played magic so often, and nothing's ever happened – even when we made the fire of sweet-scented woods and eastern gums, and all that," said Bernard; "it's much better to pretend right away. We always have to in the end. Magic just wastes time. There isn't any magic really, is there, Mavis?"

"Shut up, I tell you," was the only answer of Francis, his nose now once more flattened against the smooth green glass.

Here Aunt Enid's voice was heard on the landing outside, saying, "Little ones – bed," in no uncertain tones.

The two grunted as it were in whispers, but there was no appeal against Aunt Enid, and they went, their grunts growing feebler as they crossed the room, and dying away in a despairing silence as they and Aunt Enid met abruptly at the top of the stairs.

"Shut the door," said Francis, in a strained sort of voice. And Mavis obeyed, even though he hadn't said "please." She really was an excellent sister. Francis, in moments of weakness, had gone so far as to admit that she wasn't half bad.

"I say," she said when the click of the latch assured her that they were alone, "how could it be magic? We never said any spell."

"No more we did," said Francis, "unless – And besides, it's all nonsense, of course, about magic. It's just a game we play, isn't it?"

"Yes, of course," Mavis said doubtfully; "but what did you mean by 'unless'?"

"We weren't saying any spells, were we?"

"No, of course we weren't – we weren't saying anything – "

"As it happens *I* was."

"Was what? When?"

"When it happened."

"What happened?"

Will it be believed that Aunt Enid chose this moment for opening the door just wide enough to say, "Mavis – bed." And Mavis had to go. But as she went she said again: "What happened?"

"*It*," said Francis, "whatever it was. I was saying…"

"MAVIS!" called Aunt Enid.

"Yes, Aunt Enid – you were saying *what?*"

"I was saying, '*Sabrina fair*,'" said Francis, "do you think – but, of course, it couldn't have been – and all dry like that, no water or anything."

"Perhaps magic *has* to be dry," said Mavis. "Coming, Aunt Enid! It seems to be mostly burning things, and, of course, that wouldn't do in the water. What *did* you see?"

"It looked like Sabrina," said Francis – "only tiny, tiny. Not doll-small, you know, but live-small, like through the wrong end of a telescope. I do wish you'd seen it."

"Say, 'Sabrina fair' again quick while I look."

> "'Sabrina fair,
> Listen where thou art sitting,
> Under the —'"

"Oh, Mavis, it is – it did. There's something there truly. Look!"

"Where?" said Mavis. "I can't see – oh, let me look."

"MAVIS!" called Aunt Enid very loud indeed; and Mavis tore herself away.

"I must go," she said. "Never mind, we'll look again tomorrow. Oh, France, if it *should* be – magic, I mean – I'll tell you what – "

But she never told him what, for Aunt Enid swept in and swept out, bearing Mavis away, as it were, in a whirlwind of impatient exasperation, and, without seeming to stop to do it, blowing out the four candles as she came and went.

At the door she turned to say, "Good night, Francis. Your bath's turned on ready. Be sure you wash well behind your ears. We shan't have much time in the morning."

"But Mavis always bathes first," said he. "I'm the eldest."

"Don't argue, child, for goodness' sake," said Aunt Enid. "Mavis is having the flat bath in my bedroom to save time. Come – no nonsense," she paused at the door to say. "Let me see you go. Right about face – quick march!"

And he had to.

"If she must pretend to give orders like drill, she might at least learn to say "Bout turn!'" he reflected, struggling with his collar stud in the steaming bathroom. "Never mind. I'll get up early and see if I can't see it again."

And so he did – but early as he was, Aunt Enid and the servants were earlier. The aquarium was empty – clear, clean, shining and quite empty.

Aunt Enid could not understand why Francis ate so little breakfast.

"What has she done with them?" he wondered later.

"*I* know," said Bernard solemnly. "She told Esther to put them on the kitchen fire – I only just saved my fish."

"And what about my shells?" asked Mavis in sudden fear.

"Oh, she took those to take care of. Said you weren't old enough to take care of them yourself."

You will wonder why the children did not ask their Aunt Enid right out what had become of the contents of the aquarium. Well, you don't know their Aunt Enid. And besides, even on that first morning, before anything that really *was* anything could be said to have happened – for, after all, what Francis said he had seen might have been just fancy – there was a sort of misty, curious, trembling feeling at the hearts of Mavis and her brother which made them feel that they did not want to talk about the aquarium and what had been in it to any grown-up – and least of all to their Aunt Enid.

And leaving the aquarium, that was the hardest thing of all. They thought of telegraphing to Mother, to ask whether, after all, they mightn't bring it – but there was first the difficulty of wording a telegram so that their mother would understand and not deem it insanity or a practical joke – secondly, the fact that ten-pence half-penny, which was all they had between them, would not cover the baldest statement of the facts.

MRS DESMOND,
CARE OF MRS PEARCE,
EAST CLIFF VILLA,
LEWIS ROAD,
WEST BEACHFIELD-ON-SEA, SUSSEX

alone would be eightpence – and the simplest appeal, such as "May we bring aquarium please say yes wire reply" brought the whole thing hopelessly beyond their means.

"It's no good," said Francis hopelessly. "And, anyway," said Kathleen, "there wouldn't be time to get an answer before we go."

No one had thought of this. It was a sort of backhanded consolation.

"But think of coming back to it," said Mavis: "it'll be something to live for, when we come back from the sea and everything else is beastly."

And it was.

CHAPTER TWO
The Captive

THE delicate pinkish bloom of newness was on the wooden spades, the slick smoothness of the painted pails showed neither scratch nor dent on their green and scarlet surface – the shrimping nets were full and fluffy as, once they and sand and water had met, they never could be again. The pails and spades and nets formed the topmost layer of a pile of luggage – you know the sort of thing, with the big boxes at the bottom; and the carryall bulging with its wraps and mackers; the old portmanteau that shows its striped lining through the crack and is so useful for putting boots in; and the sponge bag, and all the little things that get left out. You can almost always squeeze a ball or a paint box or a box of chalks or any of those things – which grown-ups say you won't really want till you come back – into that old portmanteau – and then when it's being unpacked at the journey's end the most that can happen will be that someone will say, "I thought I told you not to bring that," and if you don't answer back, that will be all. But most likely in the agitation of unpacking and settling in, your tennis ball, or pencil box, or whatever it is, will pass unnoticed. Of course, you can't shove an aquarium into the old portmanteau – nor a pair of rabbits, nor a hedgehog – but anything in reason you can.

The luggage that goes in the van is not much trouble – of course, it has to be packed and to be strapped, and labeled and looked after at the junction, but apart from that the big luggage behaves itself, keeps itself to itself, and like your elder brothers at college never occasions its friends a moment's anxiety. It is the younger fry of the luggage family, the things you have with you in the carriage that are troublesome – the bundle of umbrellas and walking sticks, the golf clubs, the rugs, the greatcoats, the basket of things to eat, the books you are going to read in the train and as often as not you never look at them, the newspapers that the grown-ups are tired of and yet don't want to throw away, their little bags or dispatch cases and suitcases and card cases, and scarfs and gloves —

The children were traveling under the care of Aunt Enid, who always had far more of these tiresome odds and ends than Mother had – and it was at the last moment, when the cab was almost to be expected to be there, that Aunt Enid rushed out to the corner shop and returned with four new spades, four new pails, and four new shrimping nets, and presented them to the children just in time for them to be added to the heap of odds and ends with which the cab was filled up.

"I hope it's not ungrateful," said Mavis at the station as they stood waiting by the luggage mound while Aunt Enid went to take the tickets – "but why couldn't she have bought them at Beachfield?"

"Makes us look such babies," said Francis, who would not be above using a wooden spade at the proper time and place but did not care to be branded in the face of all Waterloo Junction as one of those kids off to the seaside with little spades and pails.

Kathleen and Bernard were, however, young enough to derive a certain pleasure from stroking the smooth, curved surface of the spades till Aunt Enid came fussing back with the tickets and told them to put their gloves on for goodness' sake and try not to look like street children.

I am sorry that the first thing you should hear about the children should be that they did not care about their Aunt Enid, but this was unfortunately the case. And if you think this was not nice of them I can only remind you that you do not know their Aunt Enid.

There was a short, sharp struggle with the porter, a flustered passage along the platform and the children were safe in the carriage marked "Reserved" – thrown into it, as it were, with all that small fry of luggage which I have just described. Then Aunt Enid fussed off again to exchange a few last home truths with the porter, and the children were left.

"We breathe again," said Mavis.

"Not yet we don't," said Francis, "there'll be some more fuss as soon as she comes back. I'd almost as soon not go to the sea as go with her."

"But you've never seen the sea," Mavis reminded him.

"I know," said Francis, morosely, "but look at all this – " he indicated the tangle of their possessions which littered seats and rack – "I do wish – "

He stopped, for a head appeared in the open doorway – in a round hat very like Aunt Enid's – but it was not Aunt Enid's. The face under the hat was a much younger, kinder one.

"I'm afraid this carriage is reserved," said the voice that belonged to the face.

"Yes," said Kathleen, "but there's lots of room if you like to come too."

"I don't know if the aunt we're with would like it," said the more cautious Mavis. "We should, of course," she added to meet the kind smiling eyes that looked from under the hat that was like Aunt Enid's.

The lady said: "I'm an aunt too – I'm going to meet my nephew at the junction. The train's frightfully crowded… If I were to talk to your aunt … perhaps on the strength of our common aunthood. The train will start in a minute. I haven't any luggage to be a bother – nothing but one paper." – she had indeed a folded newspaper in her hands.

"Oh, do get in," said Kathleen, dancing with anxiety, "I'm sure Aunt Enid won't mind," – Kathleen was always hopeful – "suppose the train were to start or anything!"

"Well, if you think I may," said the lady, and tossed her paper into the corner in a lighthearted way which the children found charming. Her pleasant face was rising in the oblong of the carriage doorway, her foot was on the carriage step, when suddenly she retreated back and down. It was almost as though someone pulled her off the carriage step.

"Excuse me," said a voice, "this carriage is reserved." The pleasant face of the lady disappeared and the – well, the face of Aunt Enid took its place. The lady vanished. Aunt Enid trod on Kathleen's foot, pushed against Bernard's waistcoat, sat down, partly on Mavis and partly on Francis and said – "Of all the impertinence!" Then someone banged the door – the train shivered and trembled and pulled itself together in the way we all know so well – grunted, snorted, screamed, and was off. Aunt Enid stood up arranging things on the rack, so that the children could not even see if the nice lady had found a seat in the train.

"Well – I do think – " Francis could not help saying.

"Oh – do you?" said Aunt Enid, "I should never have thought it of you."

When she had arranged the things in the rack to her satisfaction she pointed out a few little faults that she had noticed in the children and settled down to read a book by Miss Marie Corelli. The children looked miserably at each other. They could not understand why Mother had placed them under the control of this most unpleasant mock aunt.

There was a reason for it, of course. If your parents, who are generally so kind and jolly, suddenly do a thing that you can't understand and can hardly bear, you may be quite sure they have a good reason for it. The reason in this case was that Aunt Enid was the only person who offered to take charge of the children at a time when all the nice people who usually did it were having influenza. Also she was an old friend of Granny's. Granny's taste in friends must have been very odd, Francis decided, or else Aunt Enid must have changed a good deal since she was young. And there she sat reading her dull book. The children also had been provided with books —*Eric, or Little by Little; Elsie, or Like a Little Candle; Brave Bessie* and *Ingenious Isabel* had been dealt out as though they were cards for a game, before leaving home. They had been a great bother to carry, and they were impossible to read. Kathleen and Bernard presently preferred looking out of the windows, and the two elder ones tried to read the paper left by the lady, "looking over."

Now, that is just where it was, and really what all that has been written before is about. If that lady hadn't happened to look in at their door, and if she hadn't happened to leave the paper they would never have seen it, because they weren't the sort of children who read papers except under extreme provocation.

You will not find it easy to believe, and I myself can't see why it should have happened, but the very first word they saw in that newspaper was Beachfield, and the second was On, and the third was Sea, and the fifth was Mermaid. The fourth which came between Sea and Mermaid was Alleged.

"I say," said Mavis, "let's look."

"Don't pull then, you can see all right," said Francis, and this is what they read together:

BEACHFIELD-ON-SEA – ALLEGED MERMAID. AMAZING STORY.

> "'At this season of the year, which has come to be designated the silly season, the public press is deluged with puerile old-world stories of gigantic gooseberries and enormous sea serpents. So that it is quite in keeping with the weird traditions of this time of the year to find a story of some wonder of the deep, arising even at so well-known a watering place as Beachfield. Close to an excellent golf course, and surrounded by various beauty spots, with a thoroughly revised water supply, a newly painted pier and three rival Cinematograph Picture Palaces, Beachfield has long been known as a rising *plage* of exceptional attractions, the quaint charm of its…'"

"Hold on," said Francis, "this isn't about any old Mermaid."

"Oh, that'll be further on," said Mavis. "I expect they have to put all that stuff in to be polite to Beachfield – let's skip – 'agreeable promenade, every modern convenience, while preserving its quaint…' What does quaint mean, and why do they keep on saying it?"

"I don't think it means anything," said Francis, "it's just a word they use, like weird and dainty. You always see it in a newspaper. Ah – got her. Here she is – 'The excitement may be better imagined than described' – no, that's about the Gymkhana – here we are:

> "'Master Wilfred Wilson, the son of a well-known and respected resident, arrived home yesterday evening in tears. Inquiry elicited a statement that he had been paddling in the rock pools, which are to be found in such profusion under the West Cliff, when something gently pinched his foot. He feared that it might be a lobster, having read that these crustaceans sometimes attack the unwary intruder, and he screamed. So far his story, though unusual, contains nothing inherently impossible. But when he went on to state that a noise "like a lady speaking" told him not to cry, and that, on looking down, he perceived that what held him was a hand "coming from one of the rocks under water," his statement was naturally received with some incredulity. It was not until a boating party returning from a pleasure trip westward stated that they had seen a curious sort of white seal with a dark tail darting through the clear water below their boat that Master Wilfred's story obtained any measure of credence.'"

("What's credence?" said Mavis.

"Oh, never mind. It's what you believe with, I think. Go on," said Francis.)

> "' – of credence. Mr. Wilson, who seems to have urged an early retirement to bed as a cure for telling stories and getting his feet wet, allowed his son to rise and conduct him to the scene of adventure. But Mr. Wilson, though he even went to the length of paddling in some of the pools, did not see or feel any hands nor hear any noise, ladylike or otherwise. No doubt the seal theory is the correct one. A white seal would be a valuable acquisition to the town, and would, no doubt, attract visitors. Several boats have gone out, some with nets and some with lines. Mr. Carrerras, a visitor from South America, has gone out with a lariat, which in these latitudes is, of course, quite a novelty.'"

"That's all," whispered Francis, and glanced at Aunt Enid. "I say – she's asleep." He beckoned the others, and they screwed themselves along to that end of the carriage farthest from the slumbering aunt. "Just listen to this," he said. Then in hoarse undertones he read all about the Mermaid.

"I say," said Bernard, "I do hope it's a seal. I've never seen a seal."

"I hope they *do* catch it," said Kathleen. "Fancy seeing a real live Mermaid."

"If it's a real live Mermaid I jolly well hope they don't catch her," said Francis.

"So do I," said Mavis. "I'm certain she would die in captivity."

"But I'll tell you what," said Francis, "we'll go and look for her, first thing tomorrow. I suppose," he added thoughtfully, "Sabrina was a sort of Mermaid."

"She hasn't a tail, you know," Kathleen reminded him.

"It isn't the tail that makes the Mermaid," Francis reminded her. "It's being able to live underwater. If it was the tail, then mackerels would be Mermaids."

"And, of course, they're not. *I* see," said Kathleen.

"I wish," said Bernard, "that she'd given us bows and arrows instead of pails and spades, and then we could have gone seal-shooting – "

"Or Mermaid-shooting," said Kathleen. "Yes, that would have been ripping."

Before Francis and Mavis could say how shocked they were at the idea of shooting Mermaids, Aunt Enid woke up and took the newspaper away from them, because newspapers are not fit reading for children.

She was somehow the kind of person before whom you never talk about anything that you really care for, and it was impossible therefore to pursue either seals or Mermaids. It seemed best to read *Eric* and the rest of the books. It was uphill work.

But the last two remarks of Bernard and Kathleen had sunk into the minds of the two elder children. That was why, when they had reached Beachfield and found Mother and rejoiced over her, and when Aunt Enid had unexpectedly gone on by that same train to stay with her really relations at Bournemouth, they did not say any more to the little ones about Mermaids or seals, but just joined freely in the chorus of pleasure at Aunt Enid's departure.

"I thought she was going to stay with us all the time," said Kathleen. "Oh, Mummy, I am so glad she isn't."

"Why? Don't you like Aunt Enid? Isn't she kind?"

All four thought of the spades and pails and shrimping nets, and of *Eric* and *Elsie* and the other books – and all said:

"Yes."

"Then what was it?" Mother asked. And they could not tell her. It is sometimes awfully difficult to tell things to your mother, however much you love her. The best Francis could do was:

"Well – you see we're not used to her."

And Kathleen said: "I don't think perhaps she's used to being an aunt. But she was kind."

And Mother was wise and didn't ask any more questions. Also she at once abandoned an idea one had had of asking Aunt Enid to come and stay at Beachfield for part of the holidays; and this was just as well, for if Aunt Enid had not passed out of the story exactly when she did, there would not have been any story to pass out of. And as she does now pass out of the story I will say that she thought she was very kind, and that she meant extremely well.

There was a little whispering between Francis and Mavis just after tea, and a little more just before bed, but it was tactfully done and the unwhispered-to younger ones never noticed it.

The lodgings were very nice – a little way out of the town – not a villa at all as everyone had feared. I suppose the landlady thought it grander to call it a villa, but it was really a house that had once been a mill house, and was all made of a soft-colored gray wood with a red-tiled roof, and at the back was the old mill, also gray and beautiful – not used now for what it was built for – but just as a store for fishing nets and wheelbarrows and old rabbit hutches and beehives and harnesses and

odds and ends, and the sack of food for the landlady's chickens. There was a great corn bin there too – that must have been in some big stable – and some broken chairs and an old wooden cradle that hadn't had any babies in it since the landlady's mother was a little girl.

On any ordinary holiday the mill would have had all the charm of a magic palace for the children, with its wonderful collection of pleasant and unusual things to play with, but just now all their thoughts were on Mermaids. And the two elder ones decided that they would go out alone the first thing in the morning and look for the Mermaid.

Mavis woke Francis up very early indeed, and they got up and dressed quite quietly, not washing, I am sorry to say, because water makes such a noise when you pour it out. And I am afraid their hair was not very thoroughly brushed either. There was not a soul stirring in the road as they went out, unless you count the mill cat who had been out all night and was creeping home very tired and dusty looking, and a yellowhammer who sat on a tree a hundred yards down the road and repeated his name over and over again in that conceited way yellowhammers have, until they got close to him; and then he wagged his tail impudently at them and flew on to the next tree where he began to talk about himself as loudly as ever.

This desire to find the Mermaid must have been wonderfully strong in Francis, for it completely swallowed the longing of years – the longing to see the sea. It had been too dark the night before to see anything but the winking faces of the houses as the fly went past them. But now as he and Mavis ran noiselessly down the sandy path in their rubber shoes and turned the corner of the road, he saw a great pale-gray something spread out in front of him, lit with points of red and gold fire where the sun touched it. He stopped.

"Mavis," he said, in quite an odd voice, "that's the sea."

"Yes," she said and stopped too.

"It isn't a bit what I expected," he said, and went on running.

"Don't you like it?" asked Mavis, running after him.

"Oh – like," said Francis, "it isn't the sort of thing you *like*."

When they got down to the shore the sands and the pebbles were all wet because the tide had just gone down, and there were the rocks and the little rock pools, and the limpets, and whelks, and the little yellow periwinkles looking like particularly fine Indian corn all scattered among the red and the brown and the green seaweed.

"Now, this *is* jolly," said Francis. "This is jolly if you like. I almost wish we'd wakened the others. It doesn't seem quite fair."

"Oh, they've seen it before," Mavis said, quite truly, "and I don't think it's any good going by fours to look for Mermaids, do you?"

"Besides," said Francis, saying what had been in their thoughts since yesterday in the train, "Kathleen wanted to shoot Mermaids, and Bernard thought it was seals, anyhow."

They had sat down and were hastily pulling off their shoes and stockings.

"Of course," said he, "we shan't find anything. It isn't likely."

"Well," she said, "for anything we jolly well know, they may have found her already. Take care how you go over these rocks, they're awfully slippy."

"As if I didn't know that," said he, and ran across the narrow strip of sand that divided rocks from shingle and set his foot for the first time in The Sea. It was only a shallow little green and white rock pool, but it was the sea all the same.

"I say, isn't it cold," said Mavis, withdrawing pink and dripping toes; "do mind how you go – "

"As if I – " said Francis, again, and sat down suddenly and splashingly in a large, clear sparkling pool.

"Now, I suppose we've got to go home at once and you change," said Mavis, not without bitterness.

"Nonsense," said Francis, getting up with some difficulty and clinging wetly to Mavis to steady himself. "I'm quite dry, almost."

"You know what colds are like," said Mavis, "and staying indoors all day, or perhaps bed, and mustard plasters and gruel with butter in it. Oh, come along home, we should never have found the Mermaid. It's much too bright and light and everyday-ish for anything like magic to happen. Come on home, do."

"Let's just go out to the end of the rocks," Francis urged, "just to see what it's like where the water gets deep and the seaweed goes swish, swish, all long and lanky and grassy, like in the Sabrina picture."

"Halfway then, not more," said Mavis, firmly, "it's dangerous – deep outside – Mother said so."

And halfway they went, Mavis still cautious, and Francis, after his wetting, almost showing off in his fine carelessness of whether he went in again or not. It was very jolly. You know how soft and squeezy the blobby kind of seaweed is to walk on, and how satin smooth is the ribbon kind; how sharp are limpets, especially when they are covered with barnacles, and how comparatively bearable to the foot are the pale primrose-colored hemispheres of the periwinkle.

"Now," said Mavis, "come on back. We'll run all the way as soon as we get our shoes and stockings on for fear of colds."

"I almost wish we hadn't come," said Francis, turning with a face of gloom.

"You didn't really think we should find a Mermaid, did you?" Mavis asked, and laughed, though she was really annoyed with Francis for getting wet and cutting short this exciting morning game. But she was a good sister.

"It's all been so silly. Flopping into that pool, and talking and rotting, and just walking out and in again. We ought to have come by moonlight, and been very quiet and serious, and said —

> "'Sabrina fair,
> Listen where thou art sitting —'"

"Ow – Hold on a minute. I've caught my foot in something."

Mavis stopped and took hold of her brother's arm to steady him; and as she did so both children plainly heard a voice that was not the voice of either of them. It was the sweetest voice in the world they thought, and it said:

"Save her. We die in captivity."

Francis looked down and had a sort of sudden sight of something white and brown and green that moved and went quickly down under the stone on which Mavis was standing. There was nothing now holding his foot.

"I say," he said, on a deep breath of awe and wonder, "did you hear that?"

"Of course, I heard it."

"We couldn't both have fancied it," he said, "I wish it had told us who to save, and where, and how – "

"Whose do you think that voice was?" Mavis asked softly.

"The Mermaid's," said Francis, "who else's could it have been?"

"Then the magic's really begun – "

"Mermaids aren't magic," he said, "anymore than flying fishes or giraffes are."

"But she came when you said 'Sabrina fair,'" said Mavis.

"Sabrina wasn't a Mermaid," said Francis firmly. "It's no use trying to join things on when they won't. Come on, we may as well be getting home."

"Mightn't she be?" suggested Mavis. "A Mermaid, I mean. Like salmon that live in rivers and go down to the sea."

"I say, I never thought of that. How simply ripping if it turned out to be really Sabrina – wouldn't it be? But which do you suppose could be her – the one who spoke to us or the one she's afraid will die in captivity – the one she wants us to save."

They had reached the shore by now and Mavis looked up from turning her brown stockings right way out to say:

"I suppose we didn't really both fancy it. Could we have? Isn't there some sort of scientific magic that makes people think the same things as each other when it's not true at all, like with Indian mango tricks? Uncle Fred said so, you know, they call it 'Tell-ee-something.'"

"I'll tell *you* something," said Francis, urgent with shoelace, "if we keep on saying things weren't when we know perfectly well they were, we shall soon dish up any sort of chance of magic we may ever have had. When do you find people in books going on like that? They just say 'This is magic!' and behave as if it was. They don't go pretending they're not sure. Why, no magic would stand it."

"Aunt Dorothea once told me that all magic was like Prince Rupert's drop," Mavis owned: "if once you broke it there was nothing left but a little dust."

"That's just what I'm saying, isn't it? We've always felt there was magic right enough, haven't we? Well, now we've come across it, don't let's be silly and pretend. Let's believe in it as hard as ever we can. Mavis – shall we, eh? Believing in things makes them stronger. Aunt Dorothea said that too – you remember."

They stood up in their shoes.

"Shall we tell the others?" Mavis asked.

"We must," said Francis, "it would be so sneakish not to. But they won't believe us. We shall have to be like Cassandra and not mind."

"I only wish I knew who it is we've got to save," said Mavis.

Francis had a very strong and perfect feeling that they would know this all in good time. He could not have explained this, but he felt it. All he said was, "Let's run."

And they ran.

Kathleen and Bernard met them at the gate, dancing with excitement and impatience.

"Where have you been?" they cried and "What on earth?" and "Why, you're all wet, France."

"Down to the sea – shut up, I know I am – " their elder brother came in and passed up the path to the gate.

"You might have called us," said Kathleen in a more-in-sorrow-than-in-anger sort of voice, "but anyhow you've lost something by going out so early without us."

"Lost something. What?"

"Hearing the great news," said Bernard, and he added, "Aha!"

"What news?"

"Wouldn't you like to know?" Bernard was naturally annoyed at having been left out of the first expedition of the holidays. Anyone would have. Even you or I.

"Out with it," said Francis, with a hand on Bernard's ear. There came a yell from Bernard and Mother's voice from the window, saying, "Children, children."

"All right, Mummy. Now, Bear – don't be a young rotter. What's the news?"

"You're hurting my ear," was all Bernard's rejoinder.

"All right," said Francis, "we've got some news too. But we won't tell, will we, Mavis?"

"Oh *don't*," said Kathleen, "don't let's be sneaky, the very first day too. It's only that they've caught the Mermaid, and I'm afraid she'll die in captivity, like you said. What's yours?"

Francis had released Bernard's ear and now he turned to Mavis.

"So that's it," he said slowly – "who's got her?"

"The circus people. What's your news?" asked Kathleen eagerly.

"After brek," said Francis. "Yes, Mother, half a sec! I apologize about the ear, Bernard. We will tell you all. Oh, it's quite different from what you think. We meet and discuss the situation in the mill the minute we're free from brek. Agreed? Right! Yes, Mother, coming!"

"Then there must," Mavis whispered to Francis, "be two Mermaids. They can't both be Sabrina … then which…?"

"We've got to save one of them anyhow," Francis answered with the light of big adventure in his eye, "*they die in captivity*."

CHAPTER THREE
The Rescue

THE great question, of course, was – Would Mother take them to the circus, or would she, if she wouldn't herself take them, let them go alone? She had once, in Buckinghamshire, allowed them to go to a traveling menagerie, after exacting from them a promise that they were not to touch any of the animals, and they had seen reason to regret their promise when the showman offered to let them stroke his tame performing wolf, who was so very like a collie. When they had said, "No, thank you," the showman had said, "Oh, frightened, are you? Run along home to Mammy then!" and the bystanders had laughed in a most insulting way. At a circus, of course, the horses and things aren't near enough for you to stroke them, so this time they might not be asked to promise. If Mother came with them her presence, though agreeable, would certainly add to the difficulties, already quite enough – as even Mavis could not but see – of rescuing the Mermaid. But suppose Mother didn't come with them.

"Suppose we have to promise we won't touch any of the animals?" suggested Cathay. "You can't rescue a person without touching it."

"That's just it," said Mavis, "a Mermaid isn't an animal. She's a person."

"But suppose it isn't that sort of Mermaid," said Bernard. "Suppose it's the sort that other people call seals, like it said in the paper."

"Well, it isn't," said Francis briefly, adding, "so there!"

They were talking in the front garden, leaning over the green gate while Mother upstairs unpacked the luggage that had been the mound with spades on top only yesterday, at Waterloo.

"Mavis!" Mother called through the open window. "I can only find – but you'd better come up."

"I ought to offer to help Mother unpack," said Mavis, and went walking slowly.

She came back after a little while, however, quickly running.

"It's all right," she said. "Mother's going to meet Daddy at the Junction this afternoon and buy us sunbonnets. And we're to take our spades and go down to the sea till dinnertime – it's roast rabbit and apple dumps – I asked Mrs. Pearce – and we can go to the circus by ourselves – and she never said a word about promise not to touch the animals."

So off they went, down the white road where the yellowhammer was talking about himself as usual on the tree just beyond wherever you happened to be walking. And so to the beach.

Now, it is very difficult to care much about a Mermaid you have never seen or heard or touched. On the other hand, when once you have seen one and touched one and heard one speak, you seem to care for very little else. This was why when they got to the shore Kathleen and Bernard began at once to dig the moat of a sandcastle, while the elder ones walked up and down, dragging the new spades after them like some new kind of tail, and talking, talking, talking till Kathleen said they might help dig or the tide would be in before the castle was done.

"You don't know what a lark sandcastles are, France," she added kindly, "because you've never seen the sea before."

So then they all dug and piled and patted and made molds of their pails to stand as towers to the castle and dug out dungeons and tunnels and bridges, only the roof always gave way in the end unless you had beaten the sand very tight beforehand. It was a glorious castle, though not quite finished when the first thin flat wash of the sea reached it. And then everyone worked twice as hard trying to keep the sea out till all was hopeless, and then everyone crowded into the castle and the sea washed it away bit by bit till there was only a shapeless island left, and everyone was wet through and had to change every single thing the minute they got home. You will know by that how much they enjoyed themselves.

After the roast rabbit and the apple dumplings Mother started on the sunbonnet-and-meet-Daddy expedition. Francis went with her to the station and returned a little sad.

"I had to promise not to touch any of the animals," he said. "And perhaps a Mermaid *is* an animal."

"Not if she can speak," said Kathleen. "I say, don't you think we ought to wear our best things – I do. It's more respectable to the wonders of the deep. She'd like us to look beautiful."

"I'm not going to change for anybody," said Bernard firmly.

"All right, Bear," said Mavis. "Only we will. Remember it's magic."

"I say, France," he said, "do you think we *ought* to change?"

"No, I don't," Francis answered. "I don't believe Mermaids care a bit what you've got on. You see, they don't wear anything but tails and hair and looking glasses themselves. If there's any beautifulness to be done they jolly well do it themselves. But I don't say you wouldn't be better for washing your hands again, and you might as well try to get *some* of the sand out of your hair. It looks like the wrong end of a broom as it is."

He himself went so far as to put on the blue necktie that Aunt Amy had given him, and polished his silver watch chain on the inside of his jacket. This helped to pass the time till the girls were ready. At last this happened though they had put on their best things, and they started.

The yellowhammer went on about himself – he was never tired of the subject.

"It's just as if that bird was making fun of us," Bernard said.

"I daresay it is a wild-goose step we're taking," said Kathleen; "but the circus will be jolly, anyhow."

There is a piece of wasteland just beyond Beachfield on the least agreeable side of that village – the side where the flat-faced shops are and the yellow brick houses. At the nice end of Beachfield the shops have little fat bow windows with greenish glass that you can hardly see through. Here also are gaunt hoardings plastered with tattered, ugly-colored posters, asking you in red to wear Ramsden's Really Boots or to Vote for Wilton Ashby in blue. Some of the corners of the posters are always loose and flap dismally in the wind. There is always a good deal of straw and torn paper and dust at this end of the village, and bits of dirty rag, and old boots and tins are found under the hedges where flowers ought to be. Also there are a great many nettles and barbed wires instead of pleasant-colored fences. Don't you sometimes wonder who is to blame for all the uglification of places that might be so pretty, and wish you could have a word with them and ask them not to? Perhaps when these people were little nobody told them how wrong it is to throw orange peel about, and the bits of paper off chocolate, and the paper bag which once concealed your bun. And it is a dreadful fact that the children who throw these things about are little uglifiers, and they grow up to be perfect monsters of uglification, and build hideous yellow brick cottages, and put up hoardings, and sell Ramsden's Really Boots (in red), and vote passionately for Wilton Ashby (in blue), and care nothing for the fields that used to be green and the hedges where once flowers used to grow. Some people like this, and see nothing to hate in such ugly waste places as the one, at the wrong end of the town, where the fair was being held on that never-to-be-forgotten day when Francis, Mavis, Bernard and Kathleen set out in their best clothes to rescue the Mermaid because Mermaids "die in captivity."

The fair had none of those stalls and booths which old-fashioned fairs used to have, where they sold toys, and gilt gingerbread, and carters' whips, and cups and saucers, and mutton pies, and dolls, and china dogs, and shell boxes, and pincushions, and needle cases, and penholders with views of the Isle of Wight and Winchester Cathedral inside that you see so bright and plain when you put your eye close to the little round hole at the top.

The steam roundabouts were there – but hardly a lean back of their spotted horses was covered by a rider. There were swings, but no one happened to be swinging. There were no shows, no menagerie, no boxing booth, no marionettes. No penny gaff with the spangled lady and the fat man who beats the drum. Nor were there any stalls. There were pink-and-white paper whips and bags of

dust-colored minced paper – the English substitute for *confetti*– there were little metal tubes of dirty water to squirt in people's faces, but except for the sale of these crude instruments for making other people uncomfortable there was not a stall in the fair. I give you my word, there was not a single thing that you could buy – no gingerbread, no sweets, no crockery dogs, not even a half-penny orange or a bag of nuts. Nor was there anything to drink – not as much as a lemonade counter or a ginger beer stall. The revelers were no doubt drinking elsewhere. A tomblike silence reigned – a silence which all the steam roundabout's hideous hootings only emphasized.

A very dirty-nosed boy, overhearing a hurried council, volunteered the information that the circus had not yet opened.

"Never mind," they told each other – and turned to the sideshows. These were all of one character – the arrangement by which you throw something or roll something at something else, and if you hit the something you get a prize – the sort of prize that is sold in Houndsditch at ninepence a gross.

Most of these arrangements are so ordered that to get a prize is impossible. For instance, a peculiarly offensive row of masks with open mouths in which pipes are set up. In the golden days of long ago if you hit a pipe it broke – and you got a "prize" worth – I can't do sums – put it briefly at the hundred and forty-fourth part of ninepence. But the children found that when their wooden ball struck the pipe it didn't break. They wondered why! Then, looking more closely, they saw that the pipes were not of clay, but of painted wood. They could never be broken – and the whole thing was a cruel mockery of hope.

The coconut-shy was not what it used to be either. Once one threw sticks, three shies a penny. Now it is a penny a shy, with light wooden balls. You can win a coconut if you happen to hit one that is not glued onto its support. If you really wish to win one of these unkindly fruits it is well to stand and watch a little and not to aim at those coconuts which, when they are hit, fail to fall off the sticks. Are they glued on? One hopes not. But if they are, who can wonder or reprove? It is hard to get a living, anyhow.

There was one thing, though, that roused the children's resentment – chiefly, I think, because its owners were clean and did not look half-starved, so there was no barrier of pity between them and dislike – a sort of round table sloping up to its center. On this small objects were arranged. For a penny you received two hoops. If you could throw a hoop over an object that object was yours. None of the rustic visitors to the fair could, it seemed, or cared to. It did not look difficult, however. Nor was it. At the first shot a tiny candlestick was encircled. Between pride and shame Mavis held out a hand.

"Hard luck," said one of the two young women, too clean to be pitied. "Has to go flat on – see?"

Francis tried again. This time the ring encircled a matchbox, "flat on."

"Hard luck," said the lady again.

"What's the matter now?" the children asked, baffled.

"Hoop has to be red side up," said she. So she scored. Now they went to the other side and had another penn'orth of hoops from the other too clean young woman. And the same thing happened. Only on the second winning she said:

"Hard luck. Hoops have to be blue side up."

It was Bernard's blood that was up. He determined to clear the board.

"Blue side up, is it," he said sternly, and took another penn'orth. This time he brought down a tin pin tray and a little box which, I hope, contained something. The girl hesitated and then handed over the prizes. "Another penn'orth of hoops," said Bernard, warming to the work.

"Hard luck," said she. "We don't give more than two penn'orth to any one party."

The prizes were not the kind of things you care to keep, even as trophies of victory – especially when you have before you the business of rescuing a Mermaid. The children gave their prizes to a small female bystander and went to the shooting gallery. That, at least, could have no nonsense about it. If you aimed at a bottle and hit it it would break. No sordid self-seeking custodian could rob you

of the pleasant tinkling of the broken bottle. And even with a poor weapon it is not impossible to aim at a bottle and hit it. This is true – but at the shooting gallery the trouble was *not* to hit the bottles. There were so many of them and they were so near. The children got thirteen tinkling smashes for their fourteen shots. The bottles were hung fifteen feet away instead of thirty. Why? Space is not valuable at the fair – can it be that the people of Sussex are such poor shots that thirty feet is to them a prohibitive distance?

They did not throw for coconuts, nor did they ride on the little horses or pull themselves to dizzy heights in the swings. There was no heart left in them for such adventures – and besides everyone in the fair, saving themselves and the small female bystander and the hoop girls, was dirtier than you would believe possible. I suppose Beachfield has a water supply. But you would have doubted it if you had been at the fair. They heard no laughter, no gay talk, no hearty give-and-take of holiday jests. A dull heavy silence brooded over the place, and you could hear that silence under the shallow insincere gaiety of the steam roundabout.

Laughter and song, music and good-fellowship, dancing and innocent revelry, there were none of these at Beachfield Fair. For music there was the steam roundabout's echoes of the sordid musical comedy of the year before the year before last – laughter there was not – nor revelry – only the dirty guardians of the machines for getting your pennies stood gloomily huddled, and a few groups of dejected girls and little boys shivered in the cold wind that had come up with the sunset. In that wind, too, danced the dust, the straw, the newspaper and the chocolate wrappers. The only dancing there was. The big tent that held the circus was at the top of the ground, and the people who were busy among the ropes and pegs and between the bright vans resting on their shafts seemed gayer and cleaner than the people who kept the little arrangements for people not to win prizes at. And now the circus at last was opened; the flap of the tent was pinned back, and a gypsy-looking woman, with oily black ringlets and eyes like bright black beads, came out at the side to take the money of those who wished to see the circus. People were now strolling toward it in twos and threes, and of these our four were the very first, and the gypsy woman took four warm sixpences from their four hands.

"Walk in, walk in, my little dears, and see the white elephant," said a stout, black-mustached man in evening dress – greenish it was and shiny about the seams. He flourished a long whip as he spoke, and the children stopped, although they had paid their sixpences, to hear what they were to see when they did walk in. "The white elephant – tail, trunk, and tusks all complete, sixpence only. See the Back Try A or Camels, or Ships of the Arabs – heavy drinker when he gets the chance – total abstainer while crossing the desert. Walk up, walk up. See the Trained Wolves and Wolverines in their great National Dance with the flags of all countries. Walk up, walk up, walk up. See the Educated Seals and the Unique Lotus of the Heast in her famous bare-backed act, riding three horses at once, the wonder and envy of royalty. Walk up and see the very table Mermaid caught on your own coast only yesterday as ever was."

"Thank you," said Francis, "I think we will." And the four went through the opened canvas into the pleasant yellow dusty twilight which was the inside of a squarish sort of tent, with an opening at the end, and through that opening you could see the sawdust-covered ring of the circus and benches all around it, and two men just finishing covering the front benches with red cotton strips.

"Where's the Mermaid?" Mavis asked a little boy in tights and a spangled cap.

"In there," he said, pointing to a little canvas door at the side of the squarish tent. "I don't advise you to touch her, though. Spiteful, she is. Lashes out with her tail – splashed old Mother Lee all over water she did – an' dangerous too: our Bill 'e got 'is bone set out in his wrist a-trying to hold on to her. An' it's thruppence extry to see her close."

There are times, as we all know, when threepence extra is a baffling obstacle – a cruel barrier to desire, but this was not, fortunately, such a moment. The children had plenty of money, because Mother had given them two half-crowns between them to spend as they liked.

"Even then," said Bernard, in allusion to the threepence extra, "we shall have two bob left."

So Mavis, who was treasurer, paid over the extra threepences to a girl with hair as fair and lank as hemp, and a face as brown and round as a tea cake, who sat on a kitchen chair by the Mermaid door. Then one by one they went in through the narrow opening, and at last there they were alone in the little canvas room with a tank in it that held – well, there was a large label, evidently written in a hurry, for the letters were badly made and arranged quite crookedly, and this label declared:

REAL LIVE MERMAID

SAID TO BE FABULUS, BUT NOW TRUE

CAUGHT HERE

PLEASE DO NOT TOUCH

DANGEROUS

The little Spangled Boy had followed them in and pointed to the last word.

"What I tell you?" he asked proudly.

The children looked at each other. Nothing could be done with this witness at hand. At least…

"Perhaps if it's going to be magic," Mavis whispered to Francis, "outsiders wouldn't notice. They don't sometimes – I believe. Suppose you just said a bit of 'Sabrina' to start the magic."

"Wouldn't be safe," Francis returned in the same low tones. "Suppose he *wasn't* an outsider, and *did* notice."

So there they stood helpless. What the label was hung on was a large zinc tank – the kind that they have at the tops of houses for the water supply – you must have seen one yourself often when the pipes burst in frosty weather, and your father goes up into the roof of the house with a candle and pail, and the water drips through the ceilings and the plumber is sent for, and comes when it suits him. The tank was full of water and at the bottom of it could be seen a mass of something dark that looked as if it were partly browny-green fish and partly greeny-brown seaweed.

"Sabrina fair," Francis suddenly whispered, "send him away."

And immediately a voice from outside called "Rube – Reuben – drat the boy, where's he got to?" – and the little spangled intruder had to go.

"There, now," said Mavis, "if *that* isn't magic!" Perhaps it was, but still the dark fish-and-seaweed heap in the tank had not stirred. "Say it all through," said Mavis.

"Yes, do," said Bernard, "then we shall know for certain whether it's a seal or not."

So once again —

> "'Sabrina fair,
> Listen where thou art sitting,
> Under the glassie, cool, translucent wave,'"

He got no further. There was a heaving and stirring of the seaweed and fish tail, something gleamed white, through the brown something white parted the seaweed, two white hands parted it, and a face came to the surface of the rather dirty water and – there was no doubt about it – spoke.

"'Translucent wave,'indeed!" was what the face said. "I wonder you're not ashamed to speak the invocation over a miserable cistern like this. What do you want?"

Brown hair and seaweed still veiled most of the face, but all the children, who, after their first start back had pressed close to the tank again, could see that the face looked exceedingly cross.

"We want," said Francis in a voice that would tremble though he told himself again and again that he was not a baby and wasn't going to behave like one – "we want to help you."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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