

# HIS MERMAID

By HENRY THOLENS

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"By Jove, Jack, you must wait until I get my camera for that afternoon sun over the water. Aren't those clouds magnificent? The rocks on the beach, the woods over yonder, the waves almost too lazy to break as they come rolling up—I can see the picture now, printed deep down on sepia paper, fast to a prize at the amateur exhibition."

Jack laughed good naturedly.

"All right, old man; sail in, but hurry up," he said.

Five minutes later George Carrington had snatched his camera from the broad hallway of the Berkeley Inn, snatched it at the waterscape, and he and Jack Grayson were off on a fishing trip. It was the last day of their vacation, spent wandering down the coast at random, seldom two nights in the same place.

The final day's sport over, Carrington sped back to the city in a train, camera, fishing kit and grip beside him, tanned and tired, but happy. He reached his apartments and thought of the last picture of clouds and rocks and sea. He must develop it forthwith, and he did.

"A vacation of jolly good fun without a romance," he mused. "Nature, sunshine, fresh air, a good chum and good fishing; nothing more to be desired."

The film sunk in the developing fluid, and in a few seconds the outlines of a coast scene appeared. First came the blotches of black, representing the high lights—clouds and the crests of waves. By an alchemy which never ceases to be marvelous all the delicate gradations of light and shade filled in until the perfect picture appeared.

Then occurred something which caused Carrington to gasp in astonishment and almost drop the developing tray, for in the center of the picture, head and shoulders visible above the crest of a breaker, appeared the form of a young woman, like a mermaid arising out of the sea. There was a saucy tilt to the laughing face, and the bare arms were outstretched as a beckoning mermaid's might have been. Carrington knew that no human being had been in that expanse of sea while he was on the beach.

With almost feverish haste he made a print from the film. There was no doubt about it. It was no freak effect.

The girl's face, which he had never seen before, seemed to mock him in mystery. Clad in a dainty bathing

artist's dress, she posed before "there, a dainty bit of indubitably human life that rounded out the scene and perfected it. Fate had tossed a romance into his vacation after all."

He recalled the events of the day. Grayson and he had reached the inn just before noon, tired by a tramp of a half dozen miles from a fishing station farther down the coast. Dinner, then a rest; the snapshot and the final two hours' fishing that closed the fortnight's holiday, leaving the camera in the hotel office beside his grip while he was gone; then supper and the train back to the city. All this was clear enough. But how did the mermaid creep into his camera? Carrington stared at the laughing face in blank perplexity. Only one point was certain. It was the prettiest face he had ever seen in his life.

A paper he had recently read in a scientific journal flashed across his mind. It dealt with the photographic discovery of a new light ray invisible to the eye, but duly recorded on the peculiarly sensitized photographic plate.

"Nonsense!" he promptly said. "That's a flesh and blood girl. She has the face of an angel, but angels don't wear bathing suits with all those frills."

Next day he jumped on a train and was whisked to Berkeley Inn. He sought the manager and showed him the picture.

"You recognize her, of course?" Carrington asked, with a careless air.

"I should say I did," said the manager, with a smile. "That's the handsome one of the Langford girls, who were here a month with their aunt. Went back to town only a couple of days ago. Splendid picture. Taken right here on the beach, too," he added in a quizzical tone. "I didn't know you were acquainted."

Carrington rejected the conversational tender. "Yes; I think it's pretty good," was all he said. But just before train time he sought the porter and casually asked him the destination of the Langford baggage two days before.

"New York, sah," came the ready response. "Thank you, sah."

The journey had not been altogether in vain. And while other passengers on that train chatted gayly together or read their newspapers or watched the panorama of forest and farmland and the twinkling lights of villages there was one young man whose eyes and attention did not wander from a photograph he held before him.

Three months later he was at one of Mrs. Bloomer Billings' receptions. He did not know Mrs. Bloomer Billings, but he had not been idle during the autumn months, and without being a Sherlock Holmes he decided that he must get an invitation, and he did. Mrs. Billings was a literary lady whose assemblages were diverse and often astonishing. Artists and writers attended them, musicians and player folk, with a leavening of accepted "society." They were truly heterogeneous gatherings.

Eagerly Carrington scanned the rooms. A long haired violinist had just finished a Beethoven sonata, and there was much clapping of hands. Carrington was presented to Mrs. Billings, who was surrounded by a bevy of pretty girls. A moment of gallant conversation, and then his face lit up with a sudden joy that caused his hostess to look up in politely suppressed wonder. In that group, now in a setting of pink and white, but with the same laughing face of the glistening beach and wave, stood his lady of the sea.

An hour later they sat together on a window seat listening to a prima donna's song.

"I have a picture I would like you to see, Miss Langford," he said diffidently. He took the photograph from his pocketbook and showed it to her.

She gave a little startled cry, and the unmounted print fell from her hand.

"Why—why, you were at Berkeley Inn!" she exclaimed.

"I took a picture of the beach, but not that one," he said slowly. "And

yet that is the one I found in my camera."

Their eyes met for an instant, and the girl flushed crimson. Silent and bewildered, she studied the photograph. Suddenly she broke into the laugh of the water witch again.

"No less surprising was the picture my sister took of me," she exclaimed excitedly. "The water and rocks were lovely, but I was nowhere to be seen!"

"Now the mystery is no longer mysterious!" laughed Carrington. "It's plain enough. I saw another camera in the hotel office, but never thought until this instant that I might have picked up the wrong one. Your sister took a picture with my camera, and I took one with hers." Suddenly he became silent and after a moment or two stammered, "I—I suppose this is your sister's property, but may I not keep it?"

The girl tossed her head and smiled in mock hesitation. She had been turning the picture around and around in her hand. Then the smile and the warm blood left her face in company, and there was an almost imperceptible tremor of the long dark eyelashes. On the back of the photograph she had read:

"My mermaid."

Again their eyes met, but hers were quickly withdrawn. Her hesitation was real now.

Both were silent another moment. He sat eagerly, expectantly. Her eyes were fixed on the floor, and as she slowly extended her hand and placed the picture in his he felt the warm touch of her finger tips.



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