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IMAGINATION OVER KNOWLEDGE

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Hilda's mermaid

The father of little Hilda was a sailor who went on long voyages. Hilda lived in a cottage by the coast and spun and knitted when her father was away, because her mother had passed away and she had to be the housekeeper. On some days, she went out on her boat to fish, for Hilda loved the water. She was born by the coast and had always lived there. When the water was very calm, Hilda would look into the blue depths and try to see a mermaid. She really wanted to see one, for her father had told her such beautiful stories about them, how they sang and combed their long hair. One evening, when the wind was blowing and the rain was pounding against her window, Hilda heard the ship horn warning the sailors for the rocks. Hilda lit her father's big lantern and ran to the coast and hung it on the mast of a wreck that was there, so the sailors wouldn't crash their ships into it. Little Hilda was not afraid, for she had seen many storms like this before. When she returned to her cottage, she discovered that the door was not locked, but she thought that the wind had blown it open. When she entered, she found a little girl with beautiful hair sitting on the floor. She was a little scared at first, for the girl wore a green dress that was wrapped around her body in a strange way. "I saw your light," said the girl, "and came in. The wind blew me far onto the coast. I shouldn't have come on a

night like this, but a big wave looked so tempting that I thought if I jumped on it, I would take a beautiful ride, but it was closer to the coast than I



thought, and I landed right by your door."

Oh my heavens. Hilda's heart was beating so fast, for she knew that this girl must be a mermaid. Then she saw that the green dress was in reality her body and tail, rolled up on the floor, and it was beautiful as the lamp shone on it and made it glitter.

"Would you like some of my dinner?" asked Hilda, for she wanted to be hospitable, although she had no idea what mermaids ate.

"Thank you," replied the mermaid. "I'm not very hungry, but I would love a seaweed sandwich."

Poor Hilda didn't know what to do, but she went to the cupboard and took out some bread, which she spread with delicious fresh butter, and she filled a glass with milk. She apologized that she didn't have any seaweed sandwiches, but she hoped that the mermaid would like what she had prepared. The little mermaid ate it and Hilda was pleased.

"Do you live here all the time?" she asked Hilda. "I would think you would get very hot and want to be in the water some of the time."

Hilda told her that she couldn't live in the water like she did, because her body wasn't like hers.

"Oh, what a shame," replied the mermaid. "I was hoping you could visit me sometime, we have so much fun under the sea, my sisters and I."

"Tell me about your home," said Hilda.

"Come sit next to me and I will tell you everything," replied the mermaid.

Hilda sat down next to her on the floor. The mermaid felt Hilda's clothes and thought it must be annoying to wear so many clothes.

"How do you swim like that?" she asked.

Hilda told her that she wore a swimsuit, but the mermaid found that very strange.

"I'll tell you about our home first," she began. "Our father, Neptune, lives in a beautiful castle on the bottom of the sea. It's built of pearl. Beautiful green things grow around the castle, and there's fine white sand around it too. All of my sisters live there, and we're always happy to come home after being on top of the ocean, it's so nice and cool in our home. The wind never blows there and the rain doesn't reach us."

"You don't mind getting wet in the rain, do you?" asked Hilda.

"Oh no!" said the



mermaid, "but the rain hurts us. It falls in small sharp points and feels like pebbles."

"How do you know what pebbles feel like?" asked Hilda.

"Oh, sometimes the Nereids bother us; they throw pebbles and stir up the water so we can't see."

"Who are the Nereids?" asked Hilda.

"They are sea nymphs, but we let the dogfish chase them away. They're very jealous of us because we're more beautiful than they are," said the mermaid.

Hilda thought she was rather conceited, but the little mermaid didn't seem to be aware that she had given that impression.

"How do you find your way home after being on top of the ocean?" asked Hilda.

"Oh, Father Neptune counts us, and if someone's missing, he sends a whale to spray. Sometimes he sends more than one, and we know where to dive when we see it."

"What else do you eat besides seaweed sandwiches?" asked Hilda.

"Fish eggs and some fish," answered the mermaid.

"When we have a party, we eat cake."

"Where do you get cake?" asked Hilda, surprised.

"We make it. We grind coral into flour and mix it with fish eggs. Then we put it in a dish and send a mermaid to the top of the ocean and she holds it in the sun until it bakes. We go to the Gulf Stream to pick grapes and we have sea foam and lemonade to drink."

"Lemonade?" said Hilda. "Where do you get your lemons?"

"Well, we have the sea lemon!" answered the mermaid, "it's a small mussel fish the color of a lemon."

"What do you do at your parties since you can't dance?" said Hilda.

"We swim to the music, circle around and dive and slide."

"But the music? Where do you get musicians?" Hilda continued.

"We have enough music," the mermaid replied. "The sea elephant trumpets for us, then there's the sea horse, the swordfish runs his sword over the scales of the sea adder, the sea shells splash in the sea, and all in all, we have beautiful music. But it's late, and we shouldn't talk anymore." So the little mermaid curled up and soon they both slept.

The sun shining through the window woke Hilda the next morning and she looked around. The mermaid was gone, but Hilda was sure it wasn't a dream because she found pieces of seaweed on the floor. Every time she goes out on her boat, she looks for her new friend. And every time she sees the whales spout, she knows they're telling the mermaids it's time to come home.