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The Mermaid of Warsaw And Other Tales From Poland

Written by

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In memory of the Polish President, Lech Kaczynski,
and all who lost their lives in the Smolensk plane crash
on April 10th, 2010

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The Mermaid of Warsaw

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Illustrated by Paul Hess

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CHILDREN'S BOOKS

The Mermaid of Warsaw

The red glow of the hot summer sun had vanished and a full moon hung over the little fishing hamlet. A young fisherman whose name was Stanislaw leaned out of his window watching the yellow stars twinkling in the black sky and listening to the gentle lapping of the River Vistula. A breeze hummed through the darkness.



Suddenly his ear picked up a thin metallic sound, a delicate tinkling like a silver bell singing in the night.

Stanislaw climbed into his little wooden bed. All through the night he tossed and turned, his head full of the faint melody ringing softly on the air. Finally he slept – he had to be up early in the morning to fetch salt from the castle.

"It was a tinny sound. The wind wouldn't make a noise like that," thought Stanislaw, as he packed his crate into the fish cart and set off to meet his friends who were also taking their wares to the Castle of the Mazovian Princes.

Stanislaw and Szymon sat in the cart, while Mateusz rode a brown stallion.

As they travelled north through the dense oak and larch forests, the three fishermen exchanged stories.

"I couldn't sleep a wink, either! It didn't sound like a silver bell to me, though, Stach. It was a haunting melody – a violin crying and laughing through the night," said Szymon, rubbing his bobbly nose.

"More like a lark singing of love under the moon, Szymon. At least, that's what it sounded like to me," added Mateusz, with the freckled face.

They had come to the end of the forest. Ahead of them, perched majestically on a grassy peak, was the stone castle. The three friends drove up to the

iron gates. Three crates of freshly caught fish from the Vistula went into the hands of the gatekeeper, and in return three large cloth bags full of Wieliczka salt were handed over to the fishermen.

"Good health to you, sir. And please, don't forget to pass on our respects and wishes to the wise princes," they called out to him.

They rode back in silence. All three had the same thing on their minds. At last, Szymon spoke.

"We ought to be thankful for this trade with Mazovia."

"Thankful yes – but not complacent," declared Mateusz, turning his head. "Fish is fine, as far as it goes, but there are more desirable things in this world."

"You're right, Mateusz. But it is not for us simple fishermen to pry into mysterious sounds," muttered Stanislaw.

"You worry too much, Stach… but now I think of it, princes love novelty. What would they give us if we could find the source of this ethereal music?" asked Szymon, his eyes glinting as he spoke.

They rode on until the oak trees folded over their heads and blacked out the blue sky. By the time they reached the hamlet, they were hatching a cunning plan. They discussed it as they sat on the green banks

of the river, eating their freshly buttered bread and drinking frothy goat's milk.

"It would be easier to wait for the full moon to come around again," mused Szymon.

"You're right. Under the full moon we'd have plenty of light to see what's going on," observed Mateusz.

Stanislaw chewed on a fresh crust and rolled his eyes. "We can't wait for another full moon. We don't know how long this singing will continue. I say we go this evening. We could finish early and get back in time to hide in the bushes over there before the sun begins to set." He pointed to a cluster of reeds growing by the bank.

Reluctantly the others agreed with Stanislaw's plan. They didn't want to appear frightened in the eyes of their bold young friend.

The yellow bush of reeds which grew on the marshy banks of the Vistula was tall and dense enough to hide the three fishermen as they crouched in the middle. As the orange sun began to redden, Stanislaw crept forward and gently parted the reeds.

"See anything yet, Stach?" hissed Szymon.

"Keep your voice down," said Mateusz.



Stanislaw, who was the smallest of the three, was almost at the edge of the water, when all at once the sun turned into a red ball and once more the air was filled with an enchanting sound. The tinkling silver bell was drawing him towards the water. The other two were following behind, consumed by the angelic sounds of a violin and a lark.

Stanislaw reached the edge of the reeds. And there, beneath the glowing red orb of the sun, was the loveliest creature he had ever seen: a woman with golden hair flowing down her back in a waterfall, with eyes as deep as the blue sea, and a slender curving body covered in turquoise scales like an exotic fish.

Soon they all saw her, and they stood rooted to the ground unable to move while those beautiful sounds of bells, larks and violins filled the night air. And there they stayed, while the blood-red sun slipped over the horizon, excited and a bit scared by their wonderful discovery. At last, when the sky finally darkened, the singing stopped and the mermaid vanished. None of them could remember the exact moment when she slipped below the surface of the water.

For the rest of the evening the three fishermen couldn't think of anything else, and after a sleepless night filled with dreams of the sublime creature they'd seen, they gathered in Stanislaw's kitchen.

"We must find out who she is," cried Szymon.

"If we could only catch her, my friend, imagine what those princes would pay for her!" exclaimed Mateusz.

"Listen, both of you. Before we attempt to capture this creature, we ought to consult Father Barnaba. He will know what to do, mark my words," said Stanislaw.

Wise old Father Barnaba, thin as a bean-pole, with a snow-white beard and a bald head, lived the life of a hermit in a ramshackle hut in the depths of the forest. He was just finishing his prayers when the three fishermen arrived. They caught sight of his brown, shapeless, fraying bag of a habit approaching the narrow window and then his familiar face, wrinkled with wisdom, beamed out and smiled.

"Good afternoon, dear brothers. What brings you so deep into the forest?"

Stanislaw hesitated, while his two friends bit their lips nervously.

"We… we've come to ask for your advice," they blurted out.

Father Barnaba winked, his bushy white eyebrows dancing up and down on his shiny forehead.

"Let me see. Three fishermen in the forest. Three nervous-looking fishermen. This can only mean one thing. Someone's been disturbing the fish!" he observed knowingly.

Szymon's chestnut eyes sparkled.

"Well, in a way you are right, Father. We've seen a heavenly mermaid in the river, and when she sings, none of us can sleep a wink. The music makes our souls leap for joy."

"Well, I've heard some things in my time, but this beats them all!" exclaimed the hermit. "Tell me, when does this usually happen?"

"She sings through the night when there is a full moon. At other times, she starts at sunset and stops when the sun has disappeared beneath the horizon," recalled Mateusz.

"What is this singing like, exactly?" enquired Father Barnaba.

"It's impossible to describe! And the funny thing is, we all hear her music differently. It reminds me of a silver bell. Szymon here speaks of a lark singing, and Mateusz thinks he hears a violin!" exclaimed Stanislaw.

"Well, my good men. What do you want an old

man like me to do about it? It sounds as if you three are having a wonderful time!" said Father Barnaba.

"Oh, no, Father, don't get us wrong. It's remarkable to think there is a real mermaid in our river, but the sound leaves us tossing and turning at night. It's affected our fishing! And all this has made Mateusz's and Szymon's wives extremely cross!" cried Stanislaw.

"Wives! Ah… now I understand everything! Don't think that just because I haven't got one myself, I can't appreciate your problem. If one of your good ladies were to find out that you'd been cavorting with a mermaid, there'd be trouble. There's nothing for it – you'll have to get rid of the creature, quick!"

"How, Father? Please tell us how!" implored Szymon.

"Come inside for a moment," whispered Father Barnaba mysteriously.

They seated themselves on oak-log stools at a round table. The hermit leaned forward, coughed and began.

"Now let's see, what have we got? You say that this mermaid only sings through the night under a full moon."

"Yes, that's right, Father," the three of them chimed back.

"Good. A full moon it has to be, then. You'll need time. And light. Plenty of it. You'll also need a good, sturdy boat and a strong net. Although I doubt whether that'll pose you three a problem!" he said, chuckling to himself.

The three fishermen listened intently.

"Now, let's see. A boat. A net. What else? Ah yes – the branches and leaves of a lime tree. You'll need to disguise yourselves. Go to the mermaid dressed as trees, smelling of lime. You mustn't smell human, or she'll run a mile!"

Szymon clapped his hands.

"Is that it, Father? Splendid! And just think what the Mazovian Princes will pay for a mermaid!"

Father Barnaba winked, and the eager fishermen got up to leave.

"Just one more thing!" the old hermit called out.

The three friends stopped in their tracks.

"Remember to put wax in your ears when you do this. If you hear that weeping and wailing sound when you catch her, it'll be game over. She'll have all three of you hypnotised in no time, and you'll feel so much pity for her, none of you will be able to catch her. Then there'll be no bag of gold waiting for you in Mazovia Castle. And don't think it will be easy. Mermaids are beautiful on the surface, but inside, some

of them can be as cunning and spiteful as witches!" Father Barnaba's words echoed around the room.

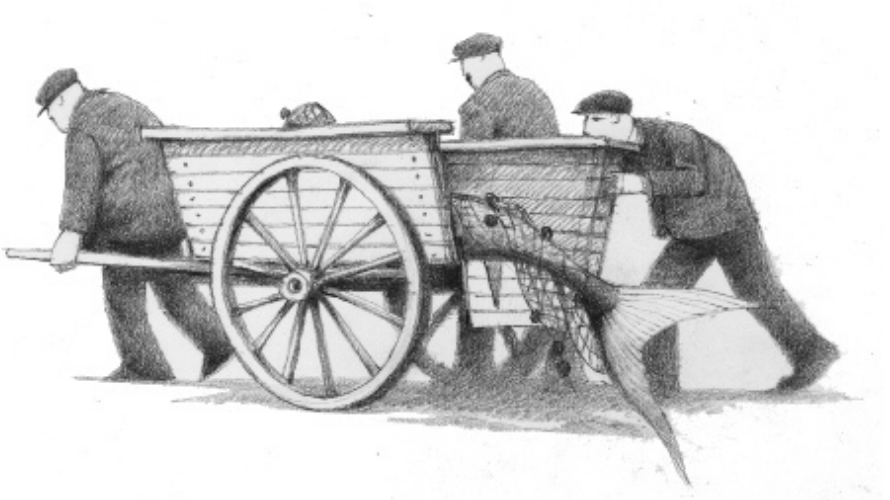
Szymon, Mateusz and Stanislaw waited eagerly for the next full moon, preparing themselves just as the wise hermit had advised. The boat and net were soon ready, and on the appointed night they crept down to the bank, their heads and arms covered in bushy leaves and branches. There was a strong scent of lime in the air as they approached the river. Little clusters of white and red peonies shone under the soft yellow light of the moon.

The three fishermen, their ears plugged with wax, crept towards the bank, took up their positions among the rushes and settled down patiently to wait – looking for all the world like three strange trees growing among the reeds. Szymon kept tugging nervously at his corner of the fishing net, peering out for any sign of the elusive mermaid. Time stood still, and their little boat bobbed about at the water's edge.

Then, just when they had almost lost patience, the ethereal creature appeared. Once again, she was the most beautiful vision they had ever seen upon the Earth! Long, blonde hair decorated with water lilies

curled down her graceful back, and her dark blue eyes were as radiant as a glimmering sea.

Quick as a flash, the three fishermen hurled the net out on to the water and watched it fall down over their prey. The bewildered mermaid struggled to free herself, but the more she turned, the more entangled she became. Jumping out and throwing off their disguises, the three fishermen were soon in the boat and rowing furiously towards the writhing mermaid. It wasn't easy getting her in the vessel. She was crying and wailing all the while, and they thanked Father Barnaba for his gift of wax.



They hoisted her up on a cart and pulled it into the village. Stanislaw held the rickety wooden door of

his old barn open, while the other two dragged their prisoner inside. Then Szymon and Mateusz waved goodbye to their young friend. He was to keep watch while they fetched a more sumptuous carriage to take their catch to the Mazovian Castle at dawn light.

But do you think it is easy being locked up near a creature so exotic, so alluring, so exquisitely beautiful? Poor Stanislaw sat and watched as the mermaid wriggled and writhed, twisting her curvaceous body into knots, tears streaming down her sad face. He watched her lips moving and fell into a trance, wondering what on earth this wonderful creature was saying. Suddenly it was all too much for him. Without even realising what he was doing, he pulled out his ear wax.

Suddenly the room was filled with pitiful cries, and at the sound of that lilting voice, Stanislaw fell into a trance. He would do anything for this sublime creature. Anything!

"Free me from the shackles of this horrible net! Let me go back to the river where I belong! I beg you! Please let me go!" the beautiful voice cried.

Soon the young man was wrestling with the knots which bound the net, cutting at them eagerly with a knife, laughing as the hole grew bigger, until finally the mermaid jumped through and was free.

How quickly she could hop on that tail of hers, out through the barn door and back down to the river, with the little fisherman skipping behind her like a lovesick fool!

When Szymon and Mateusz returned to find the barn door swinging on its rusty hinges, they thought something terrible had happened to their friend. Once inside, they were dismayed to find the torn fishing net lying on the hay bales, but of Stanislaw there was no sign.

"We shouldn't have left him alone," began Szymon – then, realising that his friend couldn't hear him, he pulled out the wax plugs.

"I said, we shouldn't have left him alone with the creature!"

Mateusz looked annoyed.

"There's no need to shout!" he countered, surveying the ground.

"Look, Szymon. Flipper marks. They went this way – back towards the river!"

That was when they heard the mermaid's voice again – and this time she sounded angry. Her spell was broken.

All Szymon and Mateusz could think about now was rescuing their friend.

"Stach! Leave her! Let her go!" they shouted

as they approached the river bank. But Stanislaw couldn't hear them. He was staring into the mermaid's sea-blue eyes.

All at once he hurled himself into the water. There was an almighty splash and he disappeared, resurfacing a moment later at the side of the beautiful creature. Much to his friends' horror, she curled her fins around the young fisherman.

"Give him back!" they shouted.

"Never!" sang the mermaid. "You tried to catch me as if I was a mere fish. You wanted to keep me as your prisoner on the land. You wanted to make me sing. I was here to tell you that your little fishing hamlet will one day grow into a great and prosperous city. But now I am returning to the sea, and I shall take your friend with me."

"You can't do that! You can't take Stach. He's got his whole life ahead of him…"

Their words disappeared into thin air. The mermaid had gone, taking Stanislaw with her.

A great sadness fell upon the two fishermen and as they turned dejectedly towards home, they heard a voice on the wind.

"One day, when this hamlet is a thriving city I will come back and protect its people from danger, for I carry with me a sword and a shield."

Szymon and Mateusz didn't know what to think. But they never forgot what had happened, and told everyone about their meeting with the entrancing creature.

Many years later, the good people of Warsaw built a statue of the mermaid in the centre of their city. You see, if she ever does come back, they want her to feel truly at home!