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A mermaid A mermaid is a mythical creature that is half woman and half fish. The male version is called a merman. Although some mermaids are described as monstrous and ugly, they are more usually very beautiful. Above the waist they appear as a lovely young woman, whilst from the waist down, they are like a fish with fins and a spreading tail. Mermaids like to comb their long hair. In art, they are often shown with a mirror and a comb. Sometimes they sit on a rock and sing, luring sailors to their destruction. This is why they are often confused with sirens who also inhabit the sea. Mermaids lure handsome young men to their homes in the deep seas. Mermen, however, are usually wilder and uglier than mermaids and have little interest in humans. All sea-faring cultures have mermaid tales. The Aegean Sea, it seems, was full of such creatures. In Greek legends there are mermaids that can sink ships and sirens that lure sailors to their doom. In a silvery cave, live the golden haired Nereids or sea nymphs that helped sailors fighting perilous storms. Other sea dwellers from Greek legend include the Oceanids, the daughters of the Titans Oceanus and Tethys. Similar creatures live in lakes and rivers. In Slavic mythology there are the Rusalki, the spirits of young women who have met their fate through drowning. They appear in the form of beautiful fish-women or mermaids. They have lovely hair, fine features but sad fathomless eyes which tell their tragic tale. They entrance young men, taking them to the river floor to live with them. It was always considered most unlucky to do anything unkind to Mermaids. Often in stories, they fail to thrive if brought onto land. The exception to this is the Merrow who sometimes marry humans. Mermaids live for a very long time but, according to some legends, do not have a soul. How did the myths arise? Mer people Legends of half-human, half-fish creatures go back thousands of years. Everyone has seen pictures of mermaids. Sightings were made by the early Arabs and the Greek Pliny in A. Most sightings by sailors were probably normal marine creatures, such as manatees, dugongs, or sea-cows now extinct. These appear to cradle their young much as a human would carry a baby. It is possible that sailors, seeing these unfamiliar beasts, would assume that they had stumbled across some sort of humanoid species. Mermaids described by the famous explorer, Christopher Columbus, were almost certainly manatees. He reported seeing three mermaids in the ocean off Haiti, in January of He said they "came quite high out of the water", but were "not as pretty as they are depicted, for somehow in the face they look like men. The Sirens were sea-nymphs who had the power to charm by their song all who heard them, so that the unhappy mariners were irresistibly impelled to cast themselves into the sea to their destruction. This may have shaped the portrayal of mermaids from medieval times onwards. So, are mermaids good or bad? Rusalki It seems it would depend on which story you read. However, based on the evidence, you would need to be very careful if you ever encountered one. In British folklore they can be bringers of bad fortune, capable of causing storms and killing humans. Some of the bad things that mermaids are accused of include telling sailors their ship is doomed and enchanting sailors and causing shipwrecks. Seeing a mermaid is a sure sign of a violent storm to come. In other stories, they deliberately drag people down in the water and squeeze the life out of drowning men. They also take men down to their underwater kingdoms. However, on occasions, mermaids can also bring good fortune by giving humans cures or granting them wishes. In some tales, they even marry and live with humans. For example, the Merrow of Ireland and Scotland. These mermaids are beautiful, gentle, modest and kind. They wear a red cap and, if this is captured and hidden from them, they will shed their skins and stay on land. However, most times they eventually retrieve the cap and return to the sea. They also lure young men to follow them beneath the waves. Here they live in an enchanted state. Merrow music is often heard coming from beneath the waves. How did this story come about? Old man helping the mermaid The Lizard in Cornwall is a high plateau surrounded by the sea, with numerous hidden little coves and beaches, just the sort of area for mermaid stories. Many Cornish people, particularly sailors, have claimed to have seen or heard a mermaid and belief in them was once widespread. There are many stories of mermaids seen on the rocks and of mermaids sitting weeping and wailing on the shore. The mermaids in Cornish stories possess many of the

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features of mermaids the world over. They are beautiful, often seen combing their golden hair and live for a long time without ageing. Like many British and Irish mermaids, the mermaid in this story has more sympathy, inquisitiveness and interest in humans than other mermaids. It was often thought that people with a knowledge of healing or a knowledge of the future gained these powers by supernatural means, either from the witches, fairies or, in this case, a mermaid. This is not the only tale passed down the generations, of special powers given to an ancestor from a mermaid. Preparing a vessel of water, which would show the face of a thief, as in the story, is a common means of detection that occurs in many myths. Mermaids are one of the most famous mythical creatures, depicted regularly in literature and film.

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