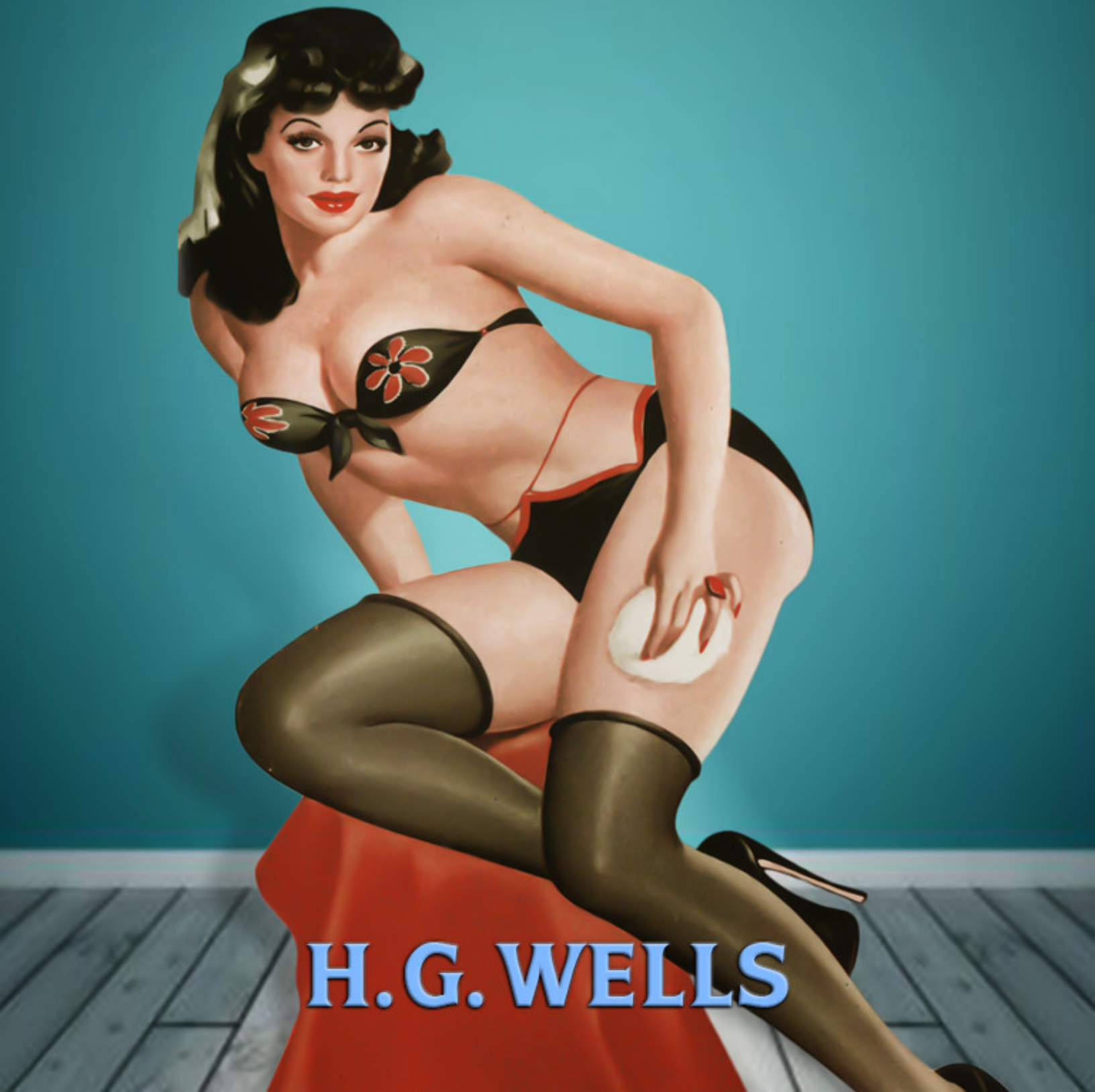
CLASSICS TO GO

THE SEA LADY



H. G. WELLS

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THE COMING OF THE SEA LADY

I

Such previous landings of mermaids as have left a record, have all a flavour of doubt. Even the very circumstantial account of that Bruges Sea Lady, who was so clever at fancy work, gives occasion to the sceptic. I must confess that I was absolutely incredulous of such things until a year ago. But now, face to face with indisputable facts in my own immediate neighbourhood, and with my own second cousin Melville (of Seaton Carew) as the chief witness to the story, I see these old legends in a very different light. Yet so many people concerned themselves with the hushing up of this affair, that, but for my sedulous enquiries, I am certain it would have become as doubtful as those older legends in a couple of score of years. Even now to many minds——

The difficulties in the way of the hushing-up process were no doubt exceptionally great in this case, and that they did contrive to do so much, seems to show just how strong are the motives for secrecy in all such cases. There is certainly no remoteness nor obscurity about the scene of these events. They began upon the beach just east of Sandgate Castle, towards Folkestone, and they ended on the beach near Folkestone pier not two miles away. The beginning was in broad daylight on a bright blue day in August and in full sight of the windows of half a dozen houses. At first sight this alone is sufficient to make the popular want of information almost incredible. But of that you may think differently later.

Mrs. Randolph Bunting’s two charming daughters were bathing at the time in company with their guest, Miss Mabel Glendower. It is from the latter lady chiefly, and from Mrs. Bunting, that I have pieced together the precise circumstances of the Sea Lady’s arrival. From Miss Glendower, the elder of two Glendower girls, for all that she is a principal in almost all that follows, I have obtained, and have sought to obtain, no information whatever. There is the question of the lady’s feelings—and in this case I gather they are of a peculiarly complex sort. Quite naturally they would be. At any rate, the natural ruthlessness of the literary calling has failed me. I have not ventured to touch them….

The villa residences to the east of Sandgate Castle, you must understand, are particularly lucky in having gardens that run right down to the beach. There is no intervening esplanade or road or path such as cuts off ninety-nine out of the hundred of houses that face the sea. As you look down on them from the western end of the Leas, you see them crowding the very margin. And as a great number of high groins stand out from the shore along this piece of coast, the beach is practically cut off and made private except at very low water, when people can get around the ends of the groins. These houses are consequently highly desirable during the bathing season, and it is the custom of many of their occupiers to let them furnished during the summer to persons of fashion and affluence.

The Randolph Buntings were such persons—indisputably. It is true of course that they were not Aristocrats, or indeed what an unpaid herald would freely call “gentle.” They had no right to any sort of arms. But then, as Mrs. Bunting would sometimes remark, they made no pretence of that sort; they were quite free (as indeed everybody is nowadays) from snobbery. They were simple homely Buntings—Randolph

Buntings—“good people” as the saying is—of a widely diffused Hampshire stock addicted to brewing, and whether a suitably remunerated herald could or could not have proved them “gentle” there can be no doubt that Mrs. Bunting was quite justified in taking in the *Gentlewoman*, and that Mr. Bunting and Fred were sedulous gentlemen, and that all their ways and thoughts were delicate and nice. And they had staying with them the two Miss Glendowers, to whom Mrs. Bunting had been something of a mother, ever since Mrs. Glendower’s death.

The two Miss Glendowers were half sisters, and gentle beyond dispute, a county family race that had only for a generation stooped to trade, and risen at once Antæus-like, refreshed and enriched. The elder, Adeline, was the rich one—the heiress, with the commercial blood in her veins. She was really very rich, and she had dark hair and grey eyes and serious views, and when her father died, which he did a little before her step-mother, she had only the later portion of her later youth left to her. She was nearly seven-and-twenty. She had sacrificed her earlier youth to her father’s infirmity of temper in a way that had always reminded her of the girlhood of Elizabeth Barrett Browning. But after his departure for a sphere where his temper has no doubt a wider scope—for what is this world for if it is not for the Formation of Character?—she had come out strongly. It became evident she had always had a mind, and a very active and capable one, an accumulated fund of energy and much ambition. She had bloomed into a clear and critical socialism, and she had blossomed at public meetings; and now she was engaged to that really very brilliant and promising but rather extravagant and romantic person, Harry Chatteris, the nephew of an earl and the hero of a scandal, and quite a possible Liberal candidate for the Hythe division of Kent. At least this last matter was under discussion and he was about, and Miss Glendower liked to

feel she was supporting him by being about too, and that was chiefly why the Buntings had taken a house in Sandgate for the summer. Sometimes he would come and stay a night or so with them, sometimes he would be off upon affairs, for he was known to be a very versatile, brilliant, first-class political young man—and Hythe very lucky to have a bid for him, all things considered. And Fred Bunting was engaged to Miss Glendower's less distinguished, much less wealthy, seventeen-year old and possibly altogether more ordinary half-sister, Mabel Glendower, who had discerned long since when they were at school together that it wasn't any good trying to be clear when Adeline was about.

The Buntings did not bathe "mixed," a thing indeed that was still only very doubtfully decent in 1898, but Mr. Randolph Bunting and his son Fred came down to the beach with them frankly instead of hiding away or going for a walk according to the older fashion. (This, notwithstanding that Miss Mabel Glendower, Fred's *fiancée* to boot, was of the bathing party.) They formed a little procession down under the evergreen oaks in the garden and down the ladder and so to the sea's margin.

Mrs. Bunting went first, looking as it were for Peeping Tom with her glasses, and Miss Glendower, who never bathed because it made her feel undignified, went with her—wearing one of those simple, costly "art" morning costumes Socialists affect. Behind this protecting van came, one by one, the three girls, in their beautiful Parisian bathing dresses and headdresses—though these were of course completely muffled up in huge hooded gowns of towelling—and wearing of course stockings and shoes—they bathed in stockings and shoes. Then came Mrs. Bunting's maid and the second housemaid and the maid the Glendower girls had brought, carrying towels, and then at a little interval the two men carrying ropes and things. (Mrs. Bunting always

put a rope around each of her daughters before ever they put a foot in the water and held it until they were safely out again. But Mabel Glendower would not have a rope.)

Where the garden ends and the beach begins Miss Glendower turned aside and sat down on the green iron seat under the evergreen oak, and having found her place in “Sir George Tressady”—a book of which she was naturally enough at that time inordinately fond—sat watching the others go on down the beach. There they were a very bright and very pleasant group of prosperous animated people upon the sunlit beach, and beyond them in streaks of grey and purple, and altogether calm save for a pattern of dainty little wavelets, was that ancient mother of surprises, the Sea.

As soon as they reached the high-water mark where it is no longer indecent to be clad merely in a bathing dress, each of the young ladies handed her attendant her wrap, and after a little fun and laughter Mrs. Bunting looked carefully to see if there were any jelly fish, and then they went in. And after a minute or so, it seems Betty, the elder Miss Bunting, stopped splashing and looked, and then they all looked, and there, about thirty yards away was the Sea Lady’s head, as if she were swimming back to land.

Naturally they concluded that she must be a neighbour from one of the adjacent houses. They were a little surprised not to have noticed her going down into the water, but beyond that her apparition had no shadow of wonder for them. They made the furtive penetrating observations usual in such cases. They could see that she was swimming very gracefully and that she had a lovely face and very beautiful arms, but they could not see her wonderful golden hair because all that was hidden in a fashionable Phrygian bathing cap, picked up—as she afterwards admitted to my second cousin—some nights before upon a Norman *plage*.

Nor could they see her lovely shoulders because of the red costume she wore.

They were just on the point of feeling their inspection had reached the limit of really nice manners and Mabel was pretending to go on splashing again and saying to Betty, “She’s wearing a red dress. I wish I could see—” when something very terrible happened.

The swimmer gave a queer sort of flop in the water, threw up her arms and—vanished!

It was the sort of thing that seems for an instant to freeze everybody, just one of those things that everyone has read of and imagined and very few people have seen.

For a space no one did anything. One, two, three seconds passed and then for an instant a bare arm flashed in the air and vanished again.

Mabel tells me she was quite paralysed with horror, she did nothing all the time, but the two Miss Buntings, recovering a little, screamed out, “Oh, she’s drowning!” and hastened to get out of the sea at once, a proceeding accelerated by Mrs. Bunting, who with great presence of mind pulled at the ropes with all her weight and turned about and continued to pull long after they were many yards from the water’s edge and indeed cowering in a heap at the foot of the sea wall. Miss Glendower became aware of a crisis and descended the steps, “Sir George Tressady” in one hand and the other shading her eyes, crying in her clear resolute voice, “She must be saved!” The maids of course were screaming—as became them—but the two men appear to have acted with the greatest presence of mind. “Fred, Nexdoors ledder!” said Mr. Randolph Bunting—for the next-door neighbour instead of having convenient stone steps had a high wall and a long wooden ladder, and it had often been pointed out

by Mr. Bunting if ever an accident should happen to anyone there was *that!* In a moment it seems they had both flung off jacket and vest, collar, tie and shoes, and were running the neighbour's ladder out into the water.

"Where did she go, Ded?" said Fred.

"Right out hea!" said Mr. Bunting, and to confirm his word there flashed again an arm and "something dark"—something which in the light of all that subsequently happened I am inclined to suppose was an unintentional exposure of the Lady's tail.

Neither of the two gentlemen are expert swimmers—indeed so far as I can gather, Mr. Bunting in the excitement of the occasion forgot almost everything he had ever known of swimming—but they waded out valiantly one on each side of the ladder, thrust it out before them and committed themselves to the deep, in a manner casting no discredit upon our nation and race.

Yet on the whole I think it is a matter for general congratulation that they were not engaged in the rescue of a genuinely drowning person. At the time of my enquiries whatever soreness of argument that may once have obtained between them had passed, and it is fairly clear that while Fred Bunting was engaged in swimming hard against the long side of the ladder and so causing it to rotate slowly on its axis, Mr. Bunting had already swallowed a very considerable amount of sea-water and was kicking Fred in the chest with aimless vigour. This he did, as he explains, "to get my legs down, you know. Something about that ladder, you know, and they *would* go up!"

And then quite unexpectedly the Sea Lady appeared beside them. One lovely arm supported Mr. Bunting about the waist and the other was over the ladder. She did not appear at all

pale or frightened or out of breath, Fred told me when I cross-examined him, though at the time he was too violently excited to note a detail of that sort. Indeed she smiled and spoke in an easy pleasant voice.

“Cramp,” she said, “I have cramp.” Both the men were convinced of that.

Mr. Bunting was on the point of telling her to hold tight and she would be quite safe, when a little wave went almost entirely into his mouth and reduced him to wild splutterings.

“*We’ll* get you in,” said Fred, or something of that sort, and so they all hung, bobbing in the water to the tune of Mr. Bunting’s trouble.

They seem to have rocked so for some time. Fred says the Sea Lady looked calm but a little puzzled and that she seemed to measure the distance shoreward. “You *mean* to save me?” she asked him.

He was trying to think what could be done before his father drowned. “We’re saving you now,” he said.

“You’ll take me ashore?”

As she seemed so cool he thought he would explain his plan of operations, “Trying to get—end of ladder—kick with my legs. Only a few yards out of our depth—if we could only ——”

“Minute—get my breath—moufu’ sea-water,” said Mr. Bunting. *Splash!* wuff!…

And then it seemed to Fred that a little miracle happened. There was a swirl of the water like the swirl about a screw propeller, and he gripped the Sea Lady and the ladder just in time, as it seemed to him, to prevent his being washed far out into the Channel. His father vanished from his sight

with an expression of astonishment just forming on his face and reappeared beside him, so far as back and legs are concerned, holding on to the ladder with a sort of death grip. And then behold! They had shifted a dozen yards inshore, and they were in less than five feet of water and Fred could feel the ground.

At its touch his amazement and dismay immediately gave way to the purest heroism. He thrust ladder and Sea Lady before him, abandoned the ladder and his now quite disordered parent, caught her tightly in his arms, and bore her up out of the water. The young ladies cried “Saved!” the maids cried “Saved!” Distant voices echoed “Saved, Hooray!” Everybody in fact cried “Saved!” except Mrs. Bunting, who was, she says, under the impression that Mr. Bunting was in a fit, and Mr. Bunting, who seems to have been under an impression that all those laws of nature by which, under Providence, we are permitted to float and swim, were in suspense and that the best thing to do was to kick very hard and fast until the end should come. But in a dozen seconds or so his head was up again and his feet were on the ground and he was making whale and walrus noises, and noises like a horse and like an angry cat and like sawing, and was wiping the water from his eyes; and Mrs. Bunting (except that now and then she really *had* to turn and say “*Ran*dolph!”) could give her attention to the beautiful burthen that clung about her son.

And it is a curious thing that the Sea Lady was at least a minute out of the water before anyone discovered that she was in any way different from—other ladies. I suppose they were all crowding close to her and looking at her beautiful face, or perhaps they imagined that she was wearing some indiscreet but novel form of dark riding habit or something of that sort. Anyhow not one of them noticed it, although it must have been before their eyes as plain as day. Certainly

it must have blended with the costume. And there they stood, imagining that Fred had rescued a lovely lady of indisputable fashion, who had been bathing from some neighbouring house, and wondering why on earth there was nobody on the beach to claim her. And she clung to Fred and, as Miss Mabel Glendower subsequently remarked in the course of conversation with him, Fred clung to her.

“I had cramp,” said the Sea Lady, with her lips against Fred’s cheek and one eye on Mrs. Bunting. “I am sure it was cramp…. I’ve got it still.”

“I don’t see anybody—” began Mrs. Bunting.

“Please carry me in,” said the Sea Lady, closing her eyes as if she were ill—though her cheek was flushed and warm. “Carry me in.”

“Where?” gasped Fred.

“Carry me into the house,” she whispered to him.

“Which house?”

Mrs. Bunting came nearer.

“*Your* house,” said the Sea Lady, and shut her eyes for good and became oblivious to all further remarks.

“She— But I don’t understand—” said Mrs. Bunting, addressing everybody….

And then it was they saw it. Nettie, the younger Miss Bunting, saw it first. She pointed, she says, before she could find words to speak. Then they all saw it! Miss Glendower, I believe, was the person who was last to see it. At any rate it would have been like her if she had been.

“Mother,” said Nettie, giving words to the general horror. “*Mother!* She has a *tail!*”

And then the three maids and Mabel Glendower screamed one after the other. “Look!” they cried. “A tail!”

“Of all—” said Mrs. Bunting, and words failed her.

“*Oh!*” said Miss Glendower, and put her hand to her heart.

And then one of the maids gave it a name. “It’s a mermaid!” screamed the maid, and then everyone screamed, “It’s a mermaid.”

Except the mermaid herself; she remained quite passive, pretending to be insensible partly on Fred’s shoulder and altogether in his arms.

II

That, you know, is the tableau so far as I have been able to piece it together again. You must imagine this little knot of people upon the beach, and Mr. Bunting, I figure, a little apart, just wading out of the water and very wet and incredulous and half drowned. And the neighbour’s ladder was drifting quietly out to sea.

Of course it was one of those positions that have an air of being conspicuous.

Indeed it was conspicuous. It was some way below high water and the group stood out perhaps thirty yards down the beach. Nobody, as Mrs. Bunting told my cousin Melville, knew a bit *what* to do and they all had even an exaggerated share of the national hatred of being seen in a puzzle. The mermaid seemed content to remain a beautiful problem clinging to Fred, and by all accounts she was a reasonable burthen for a man. It seems that the very large family of people who were stopping at the house called Koot Hoomi had appeared in force, and they were all staring and

gesticulating. They were just the sort of people the Buntings did not want to know—tradespeople very probably. Presently one of the men—the particularly vulgar man who used to shoot at the gulls—began putting down their ladder as if he intended to offer advice, and Mrs. Bunting also became aware of the black glare of the field glasses of a still more horrid man to the west.

Moreover the popular author who lived next door, an irascible dark square-headed little man in spectacles, suddenly turned up and began bawling from his inaccessible wall top something foolish about his ladder. Nobody thought of his silly ladder or took any trouble about it, naturally. He was quite stupidly excited. To judge by his tone and gestures he was using dreadful language and seemed disposed every moment to jump down to the beach and come to them.

And then to crown the situation, over the westward groin appeared Low Excursionists!

First of all their heads came, and then their remarks. Then they began to clamber the breakwater with joyful shouts.

“Pip, Pip,” said the Low Excursionists as they climbed—it was the year of “pip, pip”—and, “What HO she bumps!” and then less generally, “What’s up *’ere?”*

And the voices of other Low Excursionists still invisible answered, “Pip, Pip.”

It was evidently a large party.

“Anything wrong?” shouted one of the Low Excursionists at a venture.

“My *dear!”* said Mrs. Bunting to Mabel, “what *are* we to do?” And in her description of the affair to my cousin Melville she

used always to make that the *clou* of the story. “My DEAR! What ARE we to do?”

I believe that in her desperation she even glanced at the water. But of course to have put the mermaid back then would have involved the most terrible explanations….

It was evident there was only one thing to be done. Mrs. Bunting said as much. “The only thing,” said she, “is to carry her indoors.”

And carry her indoors they did!…

One can figure the little procession. In front Fred, wet and astonished but still clinging and clung to, and altogether too out of breath for words. And in his arms the Sea Lady. She had a beautiful figure, I understand, until that horrible tail began (and the fin of it, Mrs. Bunting told my cousin in a whispered confidence, went up and down and with pointed corners for all the world like a mackerel’s). It flopped and dripped along the path—I imagine. She was wearing a very nice and very long-skirted dress of red material trimmed with coarse white lace, and she had, Mabel told me, a *gilet*, though that would scarcely show as they went up the garden. And that Phrygian cap hid all her golden hair and showed the white, low, level forehead over her sea-blue eyes. From all that followed, I imagine her at the moment scanning the veranda and windows of the house with a certain eagerness of scrutiny.

Behind this staggering group of two I believe Mrs. Bunting came. Then Mr. Bunting. Dreadfully wet and broken down Mr. Bunting must have been by then, and from one or two things I have noticed since, I can’t help imagining him as pursuing his wife with, “Of course, my dear, *I* couldn’t tell, you know!”