

Matthew Arnold (1822-88)

1 *The Forsaken Merman*

Come, dear children, let us away;  
Down and away below.  
Now my brothers call from the bay;  
Now the great winds shorewards blow;  
Now the salt tides seawards flow; 5  
Now the wild white horses play,  
Champ and chafe and toss in the spray.  
Children dear, let us away.  
This way, this way.

Call her once before you go. 10  
Call once yet.  
In a voice that she will know:  
'Margaret! Margaret!'  
Children's voices should be dear  
(Call once more) to a mother's ear: 15  
Children's voices, wild with pain.  
Surely she will come again.  
Call her once and come away.  
This way, this way.  
'Mother dear, we cannot stay.' 20  
The wild white horses foam and fret.  
Margaret! Margaret!

Come, dear children, come away down.  
Call no more. 25  
One last look at the white-wall'd town,  
And the little grey church on the windy shore.  
Then come down.  
She will not come though you call all day.  
Come away, come away.  
Children dear, was it yesterday 30  
We heard the sweet bells over the bay?  
In the caverns where we lay,  
Through the surf and through the swell,

The far-off sound of a silver bell?  
Sand-strewn caverns, cool and deep, 35  
Where the winds are all asleep;  
Where the spent lights quiver and gleam;  
Where the salt weed sways in the stream;  
Where the sea-beasts rang'd all round  
Feed in the ooze of their pasture-ground; 40  
Where the sea-snakes coil and twine,  
Dry their mail and bask in the brine;  
Where great whales come sailing by,  
Sail and sail, with unshut eye,  
Round the world for ever and ay? 45  
When did music come this way?  
Children dear, was it yesterday?

Children dear, was it yesterday  
(Call yet once) that she went away?  
Once she sate with you and me, 50  
On a red gold throne in the heart of the sea,  
And the youngest sate on her knee.  
She comb'd its bright hair, and she tended it well,  
When down swung the sound of the far-off bell.  
She sigh'd, she look'd up through the clear green sea. 55  
She said; 'I must go, for my kinsfolk pray  
In the little grey church on the shore to-day.  
'Twill be Easter-time in the world — ah me!  
And I lose my poor soul, Merman, here with thee.'  
I said; 'Go up, dear heart, through the waves. 60  
Say thy prayer, and come back to the kind sea-caves.'  
She smil'd, she went up through the surf in the bay.  
Children dear, was it yesterday?

Children dear, were we long alone?  
'The sea grows stormy, the little ones moan. 65  
Long prayers,' I said, 'in the world they say.  
Come,' I said, and we rose through the surf in the bay.  
We went up the beach, by the sandy down  
Where the sea-stocks bloom, to the white-wall'd town.  
Through the narrow pav'd streets, where all was still, 70  
To the little grey church on the windy hill.  
From the church came a murmur of folk at their prayers,

But we stood without in the cold blowing airs.  
We climb'd on the graves, on the stones, worn with rains,  
And we gaz'd up the aisle through the small leaded panes. 75  
She sate by the pillar; we saw her clear:  
'Margaret, hist! come quick, we are here.  
Dear heart,' I said, 'we are long alone.  
The sea grows stormy, the little ones moan.'  
But, ah, she gave me never a look, 80  
For her eyes were seal'd to the holy book.  
'Loud prays the priest; shut stands the door.'  
Come away, children, call no more.  
Come away, come down, call no more.

Down, down, down. 85  
Down to the depths of the sea.  
She sits at her wheel in the humming town,  
Singing most joyfully.  
Hark, what she sings; 'O joy, O joy,  
For the humming street, and the child with its toy. 90  
For the priest, and the bell, and the holy well.  
For the wheel where I spun,  
And the blessed light of the sun.'  
And so she sings her fill,  
Singing most joyfully, 95  
Till the shuttle falls from her hand,  
And the whizzing wheel stands still.  
She steals to the window, and looks at the sand;  
And over the sand at the sea;  
And her eyes are set in a stare; 100  
And anon there breaks a sigh,  
And anon there drops a tear,  
From a sorrow-clouded eye,  
And a heart sorrow-laden,  
A long, long sigh, 105  
For the cold strange eyes of a little Mermaid,  
And the gleam of her golden hair.

Come away, away children.  
Come children, come down.  
The hoarse wind blows colder; 110  
Lights shine in the town.

She will start from her slumber  
When gusts shake the door;  
She will hear the winds howling,  
Will hear the waves roar. 115

We shall see, while above us  
The waves roar and whirl,  
A ceiling of amber,  
A pavement of pearl.  
Singing, 'Here came a mortal, 120  
But faithless was she.  
And alone dwell for ever  
The kings of the sea.'

But, children, at midnight,  
When soft the winds blow; 125  
When clear falls the moonlight;  
When spring-tides are low:

When sweet airs come seaward  
From heaths starr'd with broom;  
And high rocks throw mildly 130  
On the blanch'd sands a gloom:  
Up the still, glistening beaches,  
Up the creeks we will hie;  
Over banks of bright seaweed  
The ebb-tide leaves dry. 135

We will gaze, from the sand-hills,  
At the white, sleeping town;  
At the church on the hill-side —  
And then come back down.  
Singing, 'There dwells a lov'd one, 140  
But cruel is she.  
She left lonely for ever  
The kings of the sea.'

1849

(From *The Poems of Matthew Arnold 1849-1867*. Ed. with an Introduction by A. T. Quiller-Couch and Notes by G. St. Quintin. Oxford UP, 1926)