

The Mermaid and the Gar

One day, a man went to fish with a pole on a rock and saw a lady fall into the sea, writhe, and tear at her hair; a diamond that she had on her finger fell into the water between two rocks, and that man, having removed his most heavy articles of clothing, rushed to aid the lady.

A boat arrived, mounted by the fishermen who were using a seine, and caught them. They asked the lady where she wanted to be sailed, and she replied:

“On the rock; there no water ever comes. You have saved me and I must repay you. I have a diamond that I have lost in the water; I am very upset because of that, and whoever retrieves it will not have wasted their efforts.”

One of the sailors said:

“I’m a good diver. Maybe I can retrieve it!”

And a turtledove that was on the rock said:

“A man cannot bring the diamond back. A fish can, but the King of the Fish needs to come, there will be seven little red fish and, between the seven, all sorts of them will come.”

First, an old female fish¹ tried, but her lips were too thick and she could not seize the diamond. The king whistled and a gar succeeded. The turtledove brought the diamond to the lady on the rock and she said:

“My brave men, you can use your seine tonight, but there will be terrible weather. Don’t let me leave this rock before you have captured the King of the Fish. None of you will need to go in the water, and you will stay at your houses with your wives and your children.”

They threw their net, the seven little red fish all went inside and the fishermen could not hold onto them, for the holes were too wide.

The third night, they took in the King of the Fish. He had a crown on his head, and no one had ever seen a similar fish. When they took the seine to the coast and onto the large beach, he was crying. All of the fish in the sea came to the edge of the water and said:

“Now we have no king; who will lead us?”

The turtledove went up to them and said:

“The fish who brought the diamond back will replace the King.”

They were not far from Normandy. The lady went with the fisherman to a marketplace in Normandy to sell the fish, but the King was in a basket. All of the gentlemen arrived and the fishermen cried out:

“We have the King of the Fish in the basket, but you must pay to see him.”

¹ Groah.

The fishermen amassed a great deal of money and a rich gentleman who did not know the “number of his fortune” arrived and said:

“How much, fishermen, do you want to sell the King of the Fish for? I will give you sixty thousand *francs*.”

A lady came to propose eighty thousand *francs*, then a peasant with a blue jacket and a *tok-plad*² on his head said:

“He won’t go with the gentleman, nor with the lady, but with the peasant for a hundred thousand *francs*.”

The fishermen said to themselves:

“We now have enough to live off; there are only four of us in the carriage. A hundred thousand *francs* for the King of the Fish and forty thousand for having shown him, that makes a hundred and forty thousand *francs*.”

The lady said to the man who had saved her:

“Poor man, you are not going to fish on the rock anymore. I will repay you.”

The turtledove was near her head as well and said to him:

“Remain there always. We will build you a house and it won’t leave the spot.”

“But,” replied the lady, “you will predict everything, you will know everything that has happened and that will happen. Where, turtledove, do you want me to find the masons to build a house?”

“Not far from here, *madame*, and, in forty-eight hours, your *château* will have risen. There will be a pond outside of it into which only the water of the sea will come, and the seven little red fish will find a cave, go inside of it, and not budge.”

The turtledove said to the lady one day:

“Come down now and see the pond with the seven little red fish. They’re so happy and joyous!”

When they arrived at the pond, the turtledove said:

“The fish that retrieved your diamond will come here.”

It was the gar. When the little red fish saw the gar, the turtledove said to them:

“Are you happy with your queen?”

“We are happy.”

“I want,” said the gar, “to remain with you, but there are still seven little green fish whom I like very much. I shall search for them to bring them before your eyes. I will sometimes spend three or four months with you and sometimes a year far away, for I cannot remain in the same place and I must travel the sea because I am Queen.”

² Presumably a type of hat. The Breton term sounds like the French phrase *toque plate*, or flat cap. – Trans.

The turtledove said to her:

“The fourteen fish are now in the pond; you can go take your tour of the sea.”

The gar left and was absent for a year and two days. The fourteen fish were sighing and saying:

“We have lost our Queen; she won’t return to see us.”

The turtledove was bathing in their pond and said to them:

“Calm down. A year and two days after her departure, she will return.”

The lady never left the side of the pond. One day, the gar arrived, the turtledove had gone two miles to meet up with her, and the gar, upon arriving, passed through the grotto to enter the pond and said:

“I have narrowly escaped losing my life four times since the day of my departure, because I am not very large, I am long and thin, and a shark, a porpoise, a whale, all of the large fish can swallow me by breathing. The only fish I cannot rule over is one half woman and half fish, because I do not have the right. Four days ago, I saw her place her two hands on a boat, capsize it, and make the crew perish; I shall tell you what it is.”

The turtledove replied:

“It’s the mermaid. She is evil and makes everyone whom she pursues with her malice die.”

“It is time for me to leave,” said the gar, “because, if she had caught me with her hands, she would have crushed me. For having told her that she had no reason to kill those people, she replied, ‘Don’t stay here any longer, or the same thing will happen to you.’”

The turtledove said to the gar:

“You can remain for two years with us in the pond, because the mermaid is always angry. I will fly fifty miles over the sea and find a rock to rest on, but my voyage will last three months and I will bring you news on the sea, if I do not lose my life.”

The turtledove left, and, three months later, she returned. Having rested for several minutes, she went to the lady’s bosom and said to her:

“*Madame*, detach the paper that I brought you and read what is written on it.”

The lady began to read and said to the turtledove:

“Who attached this paper to you?”

“A mermaid, but not the one who capsized the boat. The one who attached the paper was another mermaid.”

On the paper were the words:

“The gar can travel, because she is the Queen of the Fish of the Sea, she does not have to be afraid, and the mermaid who frightened her is very sick on her

bed – a man cut off one of her wrists and she does not have a chance, because she is cruel; the lady is a good woman who will live a long time, but the gar can come take a tour, because I want to speak to her.”

Eight days later, the turtledove said to the gar:

“Tomorrow, you will go on the road and travel a bit, but don’t stay away as long as the last time, and bring the little red fish and the little green fish, so that they can entertain you a bit.”

The lady said to the turtledove:

“Come onto my bosom. It seems to me that your feathers are wet and you’re cold.”

She began to pet her and, under her left wing, she found a private message that she began to read, but the gar and the fourteen fish had already left, and the lady cried.

“If I had only found the message under your wing before they departed.”

“What is written on it?”

“They will only remain away for a month, but misery will come to them, because the mermaid who was sick and is now alive and well has only one hand, but, if she catches them, she will crush them in her hand.”

One night, there was dreadful weather, and the fisherman said to the lady:

“I don’t know, but it seems that something bad will happen to us.”

The turtledove said:

“I’m going away from the *château* for a bit.”

She saw the gar coming, followed by the fourteen little fish, who were very tired. They were going to rest and, the next morning, when they were a little less exhausted, the gar said:

“Whichever fish wants to will become the Queen or King, because I cannot leave here anymore. My red and green fish will remain here as well, for we have experienced misery during the month that we were on the road. There is a place for the mermaid who put the secret message under the wing of the turtledove, but she says that we must lift three stones of the masonry when the sea is low, because she cannot come here through where we passed, and, when the water begins to rise, she will approach little by little.”

The turtledove said:

“The mermaid is nearby, sitting on a small rock. When the rock is covered, she can enter.”

The mermaid entered the pond and the turtledove said to the fisherman:

“Tonight at eleven, the sea will be low and there will be a beautiful moon. You will put the three stones back in place.”

One night, the lady slept next to the pond and the fisherman slept above it. They heard three knocks at the door and asked:

“Who is it?”

No one replied. He got up, opened it, and saw a man, but he could not see a face.

“What do you want, my brave man?” said the fisherman.

“I’m looking for a mermaid and I hear that she is hidden somewhere here.”

“I don’t know of any mermaid,” replied the fisherman.

“My hour of death has not yet arrived. If you tell me where she is, I will be happy to see her, and, if she isn’t the mermaid I’m looking for, I will go away.”

“The mermaid who made you lose your lives only needs a hand, because a man on the crew, with a small axe, cut off her wrist aboard the boat.”

The turtledove arrived and said:

“Follow me and see if you recognize her.”

Next to the pond, he saw the mermaid, and the mermaid, upon seeing him, put her face in her hands and cried.

He said to the turtledove:

“No, turtledove, that is not the mermaid I’m looking for. I’m going.”

The mermaid said to the turtledove:

“Follow that man. Go to the mermaid who is sick and who has only one hand. Maybe she is dead now, as she has neither a chance nor good fortune. Since I have known her, she has capsized thirty boats and no one could save themselves.”

“I,” said the gar, “will always be queen of my fourteen fish, because the sea will not torment me anymore. When I die, my fourteen fish will die, the turtledove will live as long as we have, but you, mermaid, I do not know how long you will live.”

The turtledove said:

“When the mermaid dies, the lady, the fisherman, and I shall die as well.”

Joseph Frison. “La sirène et l’aiguillette.” *Revue des traditions populaires* 29:4

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Translated by Michelle Collins.