

Alexander the Great And His Sister the Mermaid

The historic figure of Alexander the Great, who spread the Greek civilization as far as the depths of Asia, is prevalent in a multitude of legends, both Greek and non-Greek. Among them there is a well-known fable which involves Alexander's half sister, the Mermaid.

After Alexander had created one of the greatest empires in the ancient world, he summoned his wise men and asked them in what way he could gain immortality and eternal youth. They replied to him that only if he drank the Immortal Water, he could become immortal. That would be a very difficult accomplishment, though, because he had to reach the End of the World, pass through two mountains, which constantly separated and united again, and defeat the guard of the Water, the Great Dragon with the one-hundred sleepless eyes. The wise men added that never had anyone achieved that and those who ever tried lost their lives.

Alexander did not hesitate at all and saddled his horse Bucephalus, took his huge sword and set off to the End of the World. Bucephalus ran faster than lightning and they managed to pass through the two mountains, where only three hairs of his horse's tail were cut off, and eventually killed the guarding dragon. He filled his gold flask, gave water to his horse and started his journey back. On his way back, the two mountains had remained separate and never moved again.

On his arrival at the palace, Alexander forgot to tell his sister about the contents of the flask. One day, after she had cleaned and polished the flask, she poured the water onto some plants. When she was told by her brother what the water was for, grief-stricken and desperate, she turned into a creature with the upper body of a woman and the tail of a fish and she has been living in the sea ever since. She is called the Mermaid. When the moon is full, she can be seen and

heard by sailors and fishermen. She wanders over the seas and when she encounters a ship, she comes close and asks with her sweet singing voice:



-You, seafarer on the white-sailed ship, please tell me: Is my brother
alive,
is King Alexander alive?

Alas, if the captain and the sailors answer that King Alexander died, the sublimely beautiful maiden turns suddenly into a disgusting creature. A Cyclop emerges from the waves and shows that half of her body is covered with scales. Her silk hair turns into snakes with tongues and poisonous stings that hiss. The Mermaid, sorrowful and furious, stirs violently the sea waters, blows with rage, rips the sails off and breaks the oars. She mercilessly drags the ship with his crew to the bottom of the sea.

The correct answer to the Mermaid's question is:

"He lives and reigns and conquers the world!"

Then she is pleased, she lets her hair loose, puts her arms around the ship, as an embrace, to protect it. She calms the waters and wishes the ship farewell. The captain and his men hear her singing:

"King Alexander lives, my brother lives, he lives and reigns and
conquers the world!"

Arion and the Dolphin

The following is a story about *Arion's* life, a lyric poet from *Lesvos*, the first to compose a "dithyramb" as far as we know. This story, narrated by *Herodotus* in his "*Histories*", seems more like a fairytale.



Once upon a time a poet from *Lesvos* named *Arion* heard that in *Sicily* there was going to be a great music contest. So, he immediately left for the island where all the well-known poets and musicians had gathered from every part of Greece.

But *Arion* beat them all. Everybody was enchanted by his songs, even his opponents. He sang about spring and love, heroism and enthusiasm and made them feel for a moment all the dreams and nostalgia of his heart. His song earned him the gold wreath of victory. When he decided to leave, they provided him with a ship of his own and wished him, with eyes full of tears, joy and happiness. *Arion*, touched by their gesture, stood at the stern of the ship watching the golden land fading in the horizon.

Suddenly he realized that the sailors were staring at him with eyes full of hatred.

— What do you want? he asked.

— We want a lot of things! And first of all to throw you into the sea. One of them yelled.

— Why? What have I done to you? He asked. If money is what you need I have plenty of gold and jewellery. It's yours. It's of no worth to me. But if I lose my life, what will you gain from it?

— If we spare your life you will give us away at the first port we will arrive at and send us all to our death, one of them said fiercely.
— That's true, everyone screamed. Jump by your own will, singer, or we will throw you in the water with our own hands.

Arion, revolted by their envy, gazed at the calm endless sea. He knew deep in his heart that he was going to die and that it would be the last time he would ever see nature again. Then, he begged them to do him one last favour, to let him sing before dying. He took his harp and stood at the prow of the ship and sang a hymn to *god Apollo*. His song was the best song he had ever sung. He sang about his desires, his joy and pain of never seeing the sea again. The air filled with his sweet melody and every part of the ship started shaking by his song. Then *Arion* threw himself into the sea to meet his fate.

His song still echoed in the air as if thousand of voices were mourning for his loss. The sailors were so frightened that they left the haunted place in a hurry.

Arion for a moment saw the deep endless blue of the sea surrounding him and a thought crossed his mind: If only he saw the sun and sea for one more time...

While he was struggling to swim, he felt something pushing him onto the surface. Feeling dizzy, he looked around and saw the sea full of dolphins. He realized that he was sitting upon the black smooth back of a huge dolphin, *Apollo's* sacred animal.

After a while, the dolphin brought him ashore at *Cape Taenarum*. Finally the poet arrived in *Corinth*, his homeland. There he narrated everything to *King Periandros* but unfortunately he did not believe him and doubted his story.

When the sailors arrived in *Corinth*, the King called them and inquired if they had any news from *Arion*. When they replied that he was safe in *Sicily*, *Arion* appeared before them. They were struck with amazement and were no longer able to deny what they had done. Thus, *King Periandros* saw that *Arion* was telling the truth and immediately ordered the sailors' execution.

