

'NOTHIN' LEFT TO LOSE

by TERESA SARICK

It was hot and sunny on the beach at Gulls-Way. Which was as it should be, being Southern California and all. The few dark clouds peeking over the horizon didn't looke very threatening in the midst of all this sunshine and probably wouldn't produce any rain until much later in the night or tomorrow, if at all. Most likely the clouds would just take their raindrops and blow out to sea as was often the case during the summer.

Relaxing on the deck chair that he'd dragged down to the beach, Mark McCormick felt himself drifting into a light sleep. The ex-con and one-time race driver known as 'Skid' was milking his head injury from the leperchaun incident for all its worth. He'd use any excuse to get out of those scuzzy maintenance jobs and yardwork that Hardcastle was forever loading on him.

Milton C. Hardcastle, the retired judge who owned Gulls-Way, had picked Mark to be the last in a long line of parolees under his guidance. Together they would play their own version of the Lone Ranger and Tonto, delving into the judge's old cases and making sure that justice was finally served. Only it hadn't worked out quite that way and most of the 'cases' they got involved with were personal...or accidental. Like the leprechauns Mark had spotted one night last week when they chose the estate grounds on which to bury their gold. Of course 'Hardcase' never believed that the little guys were elves or fairies or whatever; the old geezer had no poetry in his soul. And it had all led to a very weird adventure, not the least amazing of which was Mark's car, the Coyote, blown up in earlier case, being magically reconstructed and delivered at the end of a rainbow.

Mark yawned and let his sore head tilt back, his eyes half-closed against the sun's glare. "Anyway I need my rest. I'm still not fully recovered," he mumbled sleepily.

Mark had intended to finish reading the fascinating old book on Gaelic legends but Hardcase had gone and hit it on him. Mark smiled confidently. It was only a matter of time until he sniffed out the Judge's newest hiding place for stuff he didn't want McCormick to find. He always did. Meantime Mark was making do with a large radio-cassette player for entertainment. Right now it was turned low, playing a quiet song.

A mosquito buzzed his ear and Mark roused enough to wave it away. Some rest he was getting out here, he should have stayed in bed. He yawned again, feeling the oppressive heat in the still air. He forced his eyes open and winced at the soft music, 'Melt with You' by Modern English. Very quiet, very pretty, very dull. You couldn't trust those newmusic college stations, he thought. Rolling over to reach the radio. Mark flipped the FM selector off and snapped in a music tape. Immediately a rocking version of an old standard started up.

"Old man rhythm is in my shoes. It's no use a sitting
And a-singing the blues. So be my guest, you got nuthin'
to lose. Won't you lemme take you on a sea cruise."

Robert Gordon wailed the 'ooo-ees' expertly in the remake. Mark grinned at the hard driving beat as it penetrated his lethargy. "Feel like jumpin', baby, won't you join me please," Mark sang the words enthusiastically. "I don't like beggin' but now I'm on bended knee." He was snapping his fingers now, rocking back and forth in his lounge chair. Mark was doing a little air guitar, Fifties style, when the high-pitched squeals of a dolphin caught his attention. He'd rarely seen the friendly creatures and he stood up, eyes eagerly searching the waves. There was no sign of dolphin and Mark resumed his seat, disappointed. The music tape rolled on.

"I got to get movin' baby, I ain't lyin'
My heart is beatin' rhythm and it's right on time."

Just then Mark saw her. She had long dark hair and was splashing in the waves about twenty feet out from shore.

"Now where did she come from?" he wondered. "She wasn't there a minute ago." He scratched his head in puzzlement.

"Hey, you!" Mark called, and getting off his good intentions, trotted down to the surf. "Are you lost, lady? This is a private beach." Not that I mind the company, he thought, but Hardcase is peculiar about these minor details.

She looked up then, smiling widely. "Hello, there!" she cried, waving merrily.

"Hello, yourself." The girl was now some fifteen feet away in the water and Mark could see she was beautiful. Her dark hair gleamed in the sunlight and fell in long curly masses down her bare back and over her shoulders. She appeared to be wearing a one-piece green swimsuit with hints of silver in it. The suit material was fascinating in itself, it looked like rainbow fish scales where the water touched it.

"Come on in!" she called with a smile, and swam a few strokes before turning and floating on her back. The water looked cool and inviting.

Mark was ready to wade out to her before he remembered that this woman was a

stranger.

"Hold on a minute," Mark told her. "I don't even know you. And how did you get here?"

"My brother brought me," she said simply and frowned slightly. "Don't you like me? I heard your music and saw you on the beach. I thought we could be friends," she said ingenuously.

Mark's forehead furrowed. "Your brother came with you? Where is he now? I don't see anyone else around here except me and you."

"You ask too many questions," she sighed. "Why not just accept the moment and have a swim with me. You look hot and it's so cool in the water."

Mark hesitated. I am blistering in the sun and a swim would be nice about now. Besides, I'm a big boy, I can take care of myself. What the hell, he thought and pulled off his shirt.

They swam together, never touching but pacing each other, a few feet of water always separating them like an invisible barrier. Mark's shorts served as swimming trunks and he thought his new friend was wearing more than a swimsuit. He couldn't quite make it out through the water but she seemed to have something over her legs as well. The water made her skin look blue and shimmery.

"Is that some sort of wetsuit you've got on?" he asked her as they backstroked in unison.

She giggled. "Something like that. I think it's about time for introductions."

"Mark McCormick."

"Hello, Mark. I'm Deidre."

He tried out the sound. "Deidre---that's a pretty name."

"Thanks. Neptune gave it to me."

Mark smirked. "Oh, yeah? That's neat. It's quite an honor to be tagged by the old man."

"Do you know the King of the Seas?" she asked in surprise.

Mark played along with the gag. "The guy with the crown and spear, right? Sure, me and the old boy are pretty tight."

"You're friends? Great. I'll be sure to tell him I saw you." Deidre seemed half-serious.

"Yeah, you tell him his old landlubber pal Mark is doin' okay. Adapting to this air-breathing gizmo just fine."

"Sure, I'll pass it on to him," Deidre said straight faced.

"You do that, Dee," he grinned at her.

Try as he might, Mark could not coax Deidre out of the water. She came quite near the shore but remained playfully out of his reach. Standing in the shallows, he watched as she half-sat, half-floated in the waves, kicking so energetically that he could not make out her legs below the water. When he asked why she kicked so much Deidre answered: "To keep my balance," which made very little sense to him.

He was still trying to encourage her to leave the water but Deidre only smiled and shook her head. Somewhere out beyond the breakers a dolphin trilled his song.

"There they are again," Mark said. "I heard one earlier today. They almost never come around here, and now there's two in one day."

"Shush!" said Deidre sharply and tilted her head as though listening to a far off sound. The dolphin's squeals rose in pitch and a look of sadness came over Deidre's face. "I have to go now, Mark," she said resignedly. "But I'll see you again."

"Hey,---wait," he stammered, startled at her sudden decision.

"My brother's calling. G'bye, Mark," she said and with a wave of her hand was gone.

"I thought maybe we could go out for---aw, heck," he muttered. Her abrupt departure had caught him by surprise. Deidre was already out of sight and the dolphin had disappeared as well.

"Can that lady swim or what?" He shook his head in amusement and waded back to shore. Reaching the beach he stood stockstill. "'My brother's calling?!'" he yelled suddenly, looking wildly out to sea. "Holy Neptune! She's a mermaid!"

The judge was digging through his case files stored in the basement when Mark came rushing in, upsetting a cardboard carton and sending papers and folders flying everywhere.

"Judge! Judge! You'll never guess what happened!"

The older man fairly growled with irritation. "McCormick! Now look what you've done. Those were my 1969-1972 files, I just got them divided between plea bargaining and trial by jury."

"I'll pick them all up," Mark promised, his eyes bright with excitement. "But listen, I gotta tell you---"

Hardcastle cut him off. "How'm I ever supposed to be able to find anything around here if every time I get things organized, you come blowing in like Cyclone Sammy messing it all up again," he yelled.

"I'll fix it, I'll fix it," Mark said rapidly. "Just please listen to me," he begged.

"Naw, I'll put 'em back myself. You'd just mix up everything anyway." The tone of his voice changed to one of concern. "And you shouldn't be running around so excited after that bop on the noggin you took."

"But, Judge, the most amazing thing just happened!" Mark waved his arms expansively.

Hardcastle squinted at the younger man. "Alright, alright. Calm down. What's the big story?"

"I was down on the beach and I met a mermaid!"

Hardcastle went through a series of facial contortions, then scratched his eyebrow, clasped his hands, and pulled on his baseball cap brim. "A mermaid, huh?"

"Yeah!" Mark nodded eagerly. "I saw---I talked to---I swam with a mermaid."

"Ya did, huh?" The Judge wrinkled his nose. "How long you been sitting out in the sun, kid?"

"Not that long, Judge."

"Course not, you didn't get up till noon!"

"I need my rest," he protested.

"My point exactly. You're sick," he said pointing at Mark.

Mark's mouth opened to defend himself but Milt cut him off with a gesture. "Let me finish here. You're sick and you're recuperating. You shouldn't be out in the water exerting yourself. Maybe that thick skull of yours infected with something in the sea water. There's lots of unexplained, peculiar little cridders in the briny deep."

"Yeah, like mermaids."

"No-no-no! Now stop that. There ain't no sech thing and you know it. First it was leprechauns with their magic gold, now mermaids on the beach. What next? Unicorns in the posies?"

"They were so leprechauns. And they worked their magic."

"Ehhh, what magic?"

"What about the lawn being restored after that small war we had?"

"The rain did that," the Judge said confidently.

"What?!" Mark couldn't believe what he was hearing.

The Judge elaborated: "The rain got the ground soft, wet and muddy. Like your brain, McCormick. And the lawn sorta flattened out when it dried the next morning."

Mark shook his head in disbelief. "Explain the Coyote then. It was completely rebuilt overnight. And you know the last time we saw it it was barely recognizable as a car."

"Hmmp, that was something that you and your mechanic friend cooked up between the two of you."

"Was not!"

"I expect to get a bill on that any day now."

"Well, you won't. It was the leprechauns that did it, with magic."

"Maybe one of the little guys was an auto engineer."

"Oh, right. And how about the Coyote turning up at the end of a rainbow. No one could arrange that," he said smugly.

"Luck."

"Eeeeeee!" Mark grabbed his head in frustration. "Okay, what about the statues and bushes that were replaced on the lawn?"

"Now that can be explained," Hardcastle said and stopped.

"Oh? How?"

"It just can, that's all. Magic is for card tricks and illusions."

"Uh huh, well, I saw Deidre and I know she's real."

"Deidre? Who's that?"

"The mermaid. That's her name."

"Deidre, huh? I thought it'd be something salty like Ishmael or Flipper." Hardcastle chuckled.

"Hey, there was a dolphin," Mark remembered. "He came and whistled for her and she had to leave."

"Her brother calling her home for dinner, no doubt."

"You know, that's what I thought, too."

Hardcastle shook his head. "Kid, it's like I said, you've been spending too much time in the sun. Sit on the terrace for the next few days---under an umbrella."

"I'm going back out there right now and wait for her."

"Like hell you are. You're spending the rest of the day in this house where it's nice and cool and shady if I have to tie you down and lock you in."

"Why? Why should I?" Mark challenged him.

"Because you've got sunstroke, that's why! Now go rest and drink something. And I don't want you swimming anymore until Doc Brown says your head is a-okay. You hear me?"

"But what about Deidre? What if she comes back and I'm not there?"

"Now quit that kind of talk. You're supposed to be taking it easy and generally getting out of working around here."

Mark smiled. The old donkey had his number all right.

"Get out of here," Milt said gruffly.

Mark saluted. "Aye, aye, Captain."

"And if I find you anywhere near the beach today---" But Mark was already gone and the Judge turned to the drift of papers strewn across the floor. He sighed as he picked up the overturned box that the folders had been neatly arranged in. "Thirty years I lived on this beach and I've never seen dolphins come around here. Kid must be hallucinating."

Rather than risk Hardcastle's wrath, Mark spent the remainder of the day indoors, raiding the estate library. By dinnertime he had read everything he could find on marine folklore, which wasn't much. Hardcastle's library tended to lean toward books on law

and the concept of justice.

"Do you know there is not one book on the subject of mermaids in that entire library?" Mark asked at the dinner table.

"No? Why that's awful." Thank the Lord, thought Hardcastle privately, as he passed a dish of food to Mark.

"Nope. No mermaids, sirens, tritons. Not even a nereid."

The Judge looked up from his salad. "What the hell is a nereid?"

Mark ignored the question and produced a leather bound volume. "But I did find this reference in the encyclopedia."

"Oh, no," the Judge covered his face with his hand and momentarily abandoned the casserole.

"Oh, yes, and it's fascinating." Mark paused to take a drink of milk.

Hardcastle tried to look interested as Mark opened his book to the page he'd marked.

"It says here a mermaid is a sea creature with the head and torso of a woman to the waist but ending in the tail of a fish."

"Uh huh." The Judge was leaning on one arm.

"Listen to this. She usually surfaces in the water while combing her long hair and holding a mirror. There is an obvious correlation between the legends of mermaids and those stories pertaining to tritons, nereids, and possibly sirens. The appearance of the mermaid is connected to man's misfortune.

"Man's misfortune---what do you suppose that means?"

"Sounds right up your alley," commented the Judge, reaching for a corn muffin.

"Aw, Judge. The entry's too short. It doesn't say enough. There's no background details. And anyway, Deidre didn't have a comb or a mirror. But wait'll you hear what it's got on tritons."

"Spare me. Eat your dinner."

"What're we having?"

"Tuna casserole."

Mark stared down at his plate. "I hope it's nobody I know."

The judge started choking on his food and Mark had to administer first aid.

"You okay?" he asked Hardcastle. "What happened?"

"You and your mermaids!" shouted the Judge, recovering his voice. "This tuna was packaged in the Phillipines---not Atlantis!"

"Simmer down. I'm eating it, I'm eating it." Mark stuffed a spoonful of noodles and sauce into his mouth.

"You better. It took me four hours to make this thing."

"Four hours? For a casserole?"

"Yeah, well, I couldn't find the can opener," the Judge scowled, angry at his admission.

Mark used his napkin vigorously. "Umph pkfft lttt," he said.

"What was that?"

"I said it's delicious."

Hardcastle smiled sweetly. "Have a second helping. You always do," he added under his breath.

Mark didn't catch the comment and continued buttering his roll thoughtfully. Tomorrow he'd be out there bright and early. And he'd get proof, proof that even Hardcastle couldn't ignore.

The next day the unthinkable happened---it rained in Southern California. The storm system had moved in and it looked like it would be staying for a while. Sheets of water rippled down the driveway, flooding the street and sidewalk. Trees swayed in the wind, their branches lashing about. Rain poured on the roof, and filled the gutters, creating miniature waterfalls. The runoff soaked the lawn which was gathering shallow puddles and swamping the flowerbeds. The sky was dark and gloomy as the sea churned with the force of the pelting rain that seemed intent on overflowing the very ocean.

Mark stared through the window at the downpour. He should be out there. Water streaming down his clothes, hair plastered to his head. She could be waiting, even now. But ol' Hardcase wouldn't let him out of the house. The old donkey had even threatened to call Dr. Ridley, an old friend and shrink who had recently moved out here from Boston, if Mark didn't stay inside.

Mark's nose was pressed to the windowpane as he tried in vain to see beyond the drenching rainfall to the beach. It was useless. A curtain of water obscured his vision and with Hardcastle fussing over him there was no way he could break out of here.

"Lunch, McCormick! Come and get it. Hot soup and baloney sandwiches!"

Mark turned away from the streaming windows. Tomorrow. Definately tomorrow.

The following day brought the sun back again and Mark was once more on the beach despite Hardcastle's friendly concern. "Get your behind back in bed or I'll put it in a sling for you," was the way the Judge had put it.

Mark grinned at the memory. The old goat was really worried about his charge. No matter. Mark had eventually convinced the retired Judge that fresh air and sunshine would help him recuperate faster and Hardcastle had given in. Especially after he had realized it would keep Mark out of his hair while he worked on cross-indexing his 'unsolved' and 'thrown out of court' case files. Hardcastle had learned yesterday that Mark cooped up in the house was no gift. And Mark had given his word on no more swim-

ming until his head injury was completely healed. This seemed to satisfy Hardcastle and with a last warning of "And no more crazy talk about sea nymphs," Mark had made his escape. Lucky thing the Judge hadn't noticed Mark surreptitiously slipping the 35mm camera out of the house when he left. Today he'd have proof positive that Deidre truly existed and hopefully that she was a mermaid as well.

It wasn't long before Mark caught sight of a familiar green and silver flashing form and heard Deidre calling his name. He ran down to the surf, waving to her.

"Hi, Dee. I was hoping you'd come back."

"What happened? You didn't come yesterday," she said from the water where she splashed gracefully.

"Well, it was raining pretty hard and it was cold and wet, and miserable. I wasn't sure if you'd show in that monsoon."

Deidre's laugh tinkled across the water.

"What's so funny?"

"It's always wet and cool in the ocean. I don't mind the rain. But come on, let's go swimming." She beckoned to him.

"I---can't," he hesitated, touching the side of his head.

"What's wrong?"

"It's my head. I hit it the other day and uh---" He hated to lie to her but he had promised the Judge not to go in the water. "The, uh, exercise of swimming was too much for me, I guess. I had a terrific headache all day yesterday." Well, that was partly true, although the name of his headache was Milton C. Hardcastle.

"I'm sorry that you're hurting, Mark. I feel as though I caused your pain."

"Oh no. It was my fault. I don't know my limitations. It's nothing major, I just have to rest for a while." He didn't want her feeling guilty.

"Perhaps I can help. Come on closer."

She glided up to him and slowly drew him into the water.

"Hey, I'm not supposed to---"

"Ssshhh. Relax. Float." They were still in the shallows, Mark floating on his back. Reaching up, she touched his head, the palms of her hands on either side, fingers spread wide. Mark felt a tingling sensation in his skull followed by a feeling of great heat, then nothing.

"You should be okay now," she said withdrawing her hands.

"What'd you do? How'd you do that?" He gingerly felt his head, but there was no soreness. The skin was unbroken and the bruises gone.

"A little something I picked up from the coral trolls. I restored your body to its proper wholeness. It's a natural process, I just speeded it up. We do it all the time at home."

"Not where I come from. But hey, thanks loads. I feel great."

"Now can you swim with me?"

"Nothing could stop me, lady."

She smiled warmly and together they drifted into the waves.

Mark spent most of the day with Deidre in the water. She showed him many wonders of sea life he had never noticed before. Sea plants, tiny animals and large ones, and they dove for shells and rocks. They even had a ride with a pair of dolphins.

As they swam together, very close, she turned to him and shyly kissed him on the cheek. He looked into her blue-green eyes and after a moment returned the kiss full on the lips.

They held each other close in the water and she leaned her head on his chest as he stroked her long hair. She ran her hands down his sides and drew him into her arms. He kissed her face, her neck, her shoulders, and she trembled at his touch.

She spoke in whispers, her mouth at his ear. "I want to take you to my city, Mark. It's so beautiful there and everything is cool and wet. The land is blue and green and full of life. The buildings are made of stone with water vines growing on them. Caverns from the seabed form our homes. We walk on the seabottom and the rays and fishes are our friends. You would love it there. I would love you there." It was a promise.

Mark took her hands and kissed them. "I don't think I can follow you that far, that deep, Deidre. I'm a man, a human. I need air. Not like you."

"But you are like me, almost," she said, searching his face. "Couldn't you change a little, try to---for me?"

Mark was silent. "I care about you, Deidre---a lot. Maybe I could even love you. But this---" He gestured above the water. "Is my world. Your life is the sea. We had some time together but we can't have a life together. Hell, most people wouldn't even believe you exist. One guy already thinks I'm crazy and he's my best friend."

Deidre dipped her head in sad agreement. "It's true then. My sisters told me not to love a human but I wouldn't listen."

"Maybe it's for the best," said Mark, but his heart didn't believe it and his words sounded hollow even to himself. "If I brought you on land, you'd die or be considered a freak. And I couldn't survive three minutes down there without scuba gear and tanks. I'd get the bends if I came up too fast. It just wouldn't work."

They exchanged a few more words and then Deidre kissed him once, passionately.

"I will always love you, Mark McCormick. Goodbye."

He watched her swim out to sea and dive, her tail flashing green and silver in the sunlight.

He was back on shore before he remembered the camera. Damn. He'd forgotten all about it. "Now the Judge will never believe me. I don't have proof of anything."

Mark seemed to hear a voice inside his head. You have all the proof you need,

Mark. In your heart.

She was right. He would make the Judge believe him. All he had to do was try. The two of them had a special relationship and a unique respect for one another.

What was it Deidre had said before she left him?

"Always have dreams, Mark, and follow them. But you can't hold a dream fast or it dies."

Would she ever be back? he wondered. Someday, perhaps. Mark ran a hand through his wet curls, then froze. "I do have proof!" he screamed, startling the seagulls. He raced toward the house yelling, "Hey, Judge! Guess what!"

EPILOGUE

Sitting on the sand Mark idly flipped on the radio he'd brought with him to the seaside. It was a week since he'd said goodbye to Deidre. Every chance he got found him sitting out here, waiting, hoping. The Judge hadn't bought his story of a miraculous cure. Called it a cockamamie line of drivel and as long as his head was healed it was about time Mark painted the garage door.

Mark yawned and stretched. The garage door was done, the flower garden choked with peat moss, hedges trimmed, leaves raked, and gutters sparkling clean. And he was on a much-deserved break.

The radio played softly in the background as Mark looked out to sea. He no longer searched the waves for his lovely friend. He sensed she wouldn't be coming back. But it was pleasant to sit here and it made him feel closer to her somehow. He felt himself relaxing in the warm sun, listening to the surf break a few feet away. As he studied the creamy waves, his eyes were drawn upward by a flash of gold in the sky. He narrowed his eyes, yeah, there it was again. A large dark shape with metallic glints slowly coming closer. And, hey, were those wings he saw???

"...Puff the magic dragon lived the sea

And frolicked in the ocean mist in a land called Hon-a-lee..."

-the end-

BARNEY MILLER TRIVIA QUIZ By Anne Collins Smith

Note: (a) = easy (b) = hard

Questions:

1. a. Name two recurring guests.
b. Name five recurring guests.
2. a. What is the name of Harris' book?
b. What was his original title for it? Answers are on page 125
3. a. Name Barney's wife.
b. Name Barney's children.
4. a. Name Fish's wife.
b. What is Fish's first name?
5. a. What are the first names of Yemana, Harris and Wojo?
b. What are the first names of Luger and Levitt?
6. a. Name the three detectives making up the squad in the last season.
b. Name the three detectives who made up Luger's squad in the 'good old days.'
7. a. Which two squad members were romantically involved?
b. Which two lived together?
8. a. What was Chano's last name?
b. What did Luger call: Harris? Dietrich? Levitt?
9. a. What keepsake was always on Wojo's desk?
b. How do you spell Wojo's last name?
10. a. Who was Luger's long-suffering girlfriend?
b. Whom did he finally marry?
11. a. What languages other than English were spoken by: Chano? Dietrich? Wojo?
b. In what language was Levitt fluent?
12. a. Linda Lavin (Wentworth) later starred in her own show. What was it?
b. James Gregory (Luger) played a villain on Star Trek. Who was he?