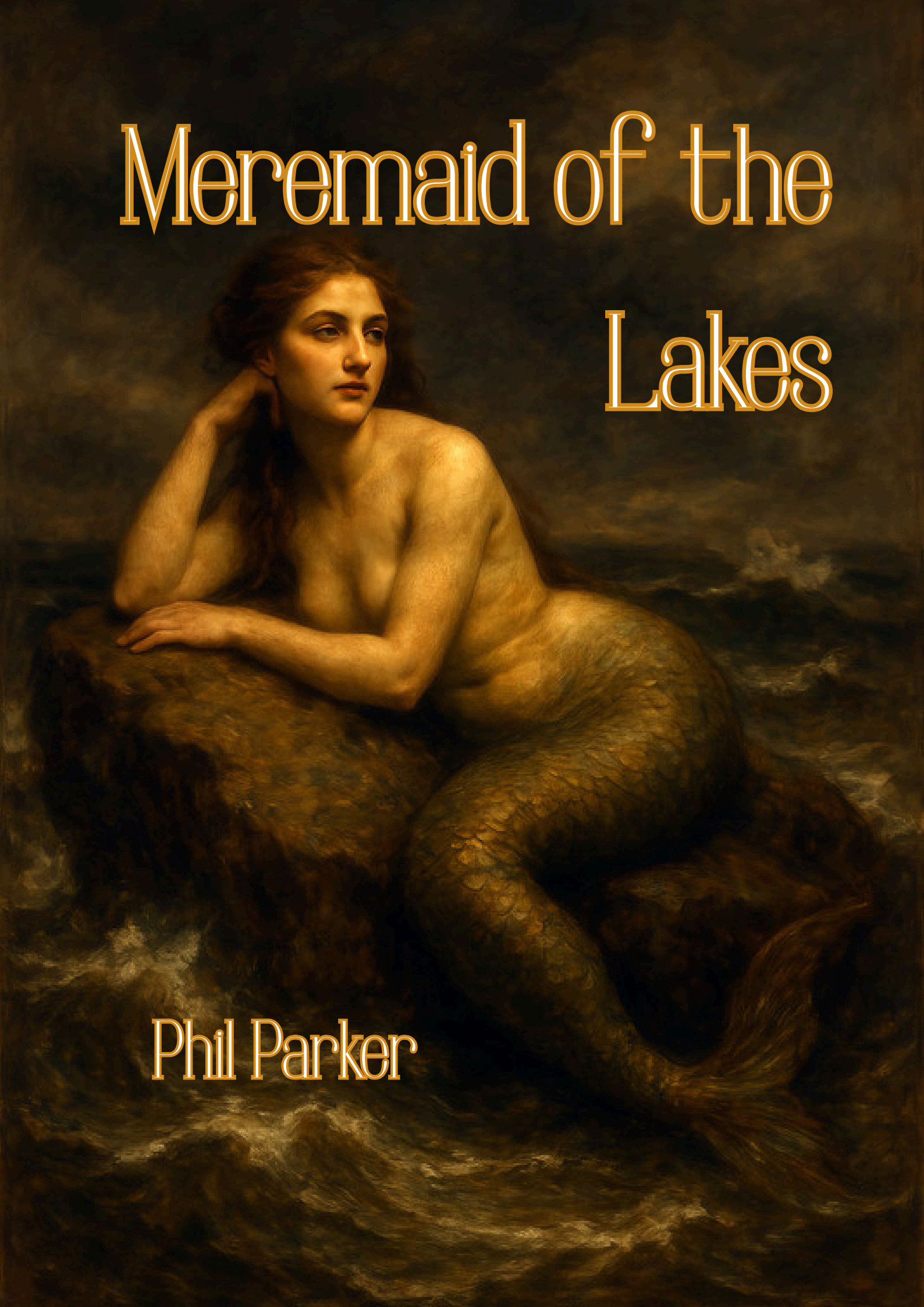


# Meremaid of the Lakes

Phil Parker



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Gerry Robertson stared at the damaged steamship in its dry dock cradle, while behind her, its owner sighed loud enough to display his frustration. Herbert Forbes had to be in his fifties and led a life of indulgence, if his waistline was any indication. His florid complexion and red nose suggested that indulgence included alcohol and likely contributed to his foul mood. He'd already made several observations about the futility of their current endeavours; there was nothing to be gained from having a woman examine his prized asset. There were hooligans on the loose and he was going to hire some serious muscle to put the matter to rights.

'Could the ship have struck a rock beneath the surface of water?' she asked.

Forbes guffawed, louder than was necessary. His son, Erik, placed a restraining hand on the older man's arm as he answered. 'I'm afraid not, miss. Windermere is deep; besides, we know these waters well. We've been navigating them since 1845.'



The statement drew a polite smile from the young woman. 'You're going to employ these thugs around the clock, are you, Mr Forbes? Without knowing how long you'll need that level of security; it's going to cost a pretty penny. You strike me as a man who likes to get value for money.'

The man's rising blood pressure turned his face crimson, as he stifled curses while glowering at his son, busy trying to placate his father. 'What are you suggesting, young woman? I'd love to hear your solution.'

Gerry stood upright, hiding her trembling hands behind her back, and took a deep breath to mask the tremor in her voice. She glanced at Julian Prendergast, the young viscount who'd invited the British Bureau for the Arcane to investigate in the first place. He looked equally as anxious. 'The damage is entirely below the waterline, Mr Forbes. Yet not deep enough to have opened up the hull to sink the vessel. If the damage wasn't caused by grounding the ship, the only other conclusion is the damage was deliberate.'

'That's what I've been saying, young woman. I don't need you to tell me what's obvious to anyone with a grain of common sense.'

Gerry offered another of her disarming smiles. 'Then perhaps you can tell me why your saboteur chose to inflict damage below the waterline, rather than above it. Unless your strong men are going to patrol under the surface of the lake, the same thing could happen again. Perhaps next time with the explicit attempt to sink the vessel.'

Scarlet features gazed at her, and blinked their incomprehension. His son made the most of the opportunity. 'The young lady makes a good point, Dad. How do we stop it from happening again, when we didn't notice it until water started seeping into the hold?'



'That's what I thought. Never mind that people flock in their thousands to sail on the lake, spending good money in the vicinity. Oh no! You're not willing to look after businessmen like me. You fob me off with creatures like that!' He jabbed a plump, sausage-like finger, in the direction of the suited and booted young woman. 'Well, I plan to spend copper on hiring muscle, to protect my assets, and woe betide anyone that tries to damage my ship again.'

He stomped off, his red face a beacon of anger that caused everyone nearby to scuttle out of his way. His son scurried after him, pleading for him to listen to common sense and being reprimanded loudly for his absolute stupidity.



Julian Prendergast shook his head, raised blond eyebrows in recognition of a lost cause. He wore a grey cutaway coat, very much the height of fashion, and evidence of his recent return from Cambridge; he'd made a point of that fact within minutes of their introduction. Despite his vanity, Gerry liked him. His aristocratic status weighed lightly on him, his Cambridge reference had been his way of establishing his credentials, as someone open-minded and less of a country squire. He was handsome too, with good bone structure, no doubt quite the catch, Gerry reasoned.

'I'm sorry you had to experience such rudeness, Miss Robertson.'

She'd already asked him to call her Gerry but such indiscretion appeared to be beyond him. 'Don't worry, Mr Prendergast, I've been called worse.'

The man hesitated, as though uncertain whether to follow up her comment. Decision taken; his face flushed slightly. 'If you don't mind me saying, I'm surprised a member of our Prime Minister's family subjects herself to such behaviour.'

Gerry wanted to roll her eyes in frustration but restrained herself and smiled instead. 'I'm nothing more than Mr Gladstone's great-niece, on my maternal side. I only met the great man once, as a little girl. I don't remember the occasion. Nepotism exists only in the pressure I exerted on my father, when he took charge of the Bureau. I made a lot of fuss about becoming an agent and sustained that pressure until he agreed. The most productive ten months of my life.'

'You pressured him for ten months for this role?' the young man said, voice rising with astonishment.

Gerry shrugged and chuckled. 'Once I set my mind to something, Mr Prendergast, very little defeats me. With that observation in mind, may I ask if you would tell me more about the folklore connected to the lake. You suggested to my father that this act of vandalism isn't the first, and there are stories of creatures in the waters here.'

'That's right, Miss Robertson. But rather than discuss the matter here, may I suggest we retire to a pleasant little tearoom nearby? I'm sure you must be in need of refreshment, after your long journey.'



The tearoom was indeed pleasant, the tea strong and flavoursome, the scones light, the strawberry jam delightful. The stories surrounding Julian Prendergast's suspicions, vague. Even so, he was convinced they contained some truth and had taken matters into his own hands by contacting the Bureau, against his father's wishes. For this reason, he implored her to be discreet in her investigations.

'To clarify then,' Gerry said as she dabbed her linen napkin on lips devoid of lip rouge. 'The local people believe in these mermaids, creatures who inhabit the depths of the lake.' She watched his reaction to assess the extent of his conviction, in what others might condemn as the ridiculous beliefs of the working class. 'I've heard of mermaids that live in the sea, but we are not by the coast.'

The young man smiled at her, he really was quite good looking, apart from that ridiculous moustache. He obviously wasn't engaged, or courting, because a woman would have pointed out the fault. 'I studied history at Cambridge, Miss Robertson. Part of my reading included British folklore, that was how I learned of the Bureau's existence. Mere is an old Norse word for lake, it would have been spoken here at one time, the prefix refers to the existence of its aquatic creatures. Stories abound regarding these creatures, and how they leave their watery home occasionally, often just to comb their hair but sometimes to form relationships, if you know what I mean.' The man blushed.



'I see,' Gerry replied. She told him how she'd uncovered similar stories from Cornwall in her research before leaving the Bureau. 'May I assume these creatures might be somewhat annoyed by the increased activity in their lake, now so many people visit the area?'

The man nodded. 'The railway reached us in 1847, a little over three decades ago. Our population multiplies ten times in the summer. A century ago, there was nothing here, it would have been quiet and undisturbed.'

'Just the way these mermaids would like it to stay,' Gerry added.

On the pavement, outside the teashop, Julian Prendergast hovered nervously. He'd been a pleasant companion so far, but she worried he might be developing ideas about her. She hoped not, men were a complication she didn't need, her career mattered a great deal more than being trapped in a house, with screaming children. As he gathered the courage to say whatever was on his mind, Gerry looked about her. It was market day in Ambleside, streets were full of people with loaded baskets, numerous horse and traps hurried past with bright cheery faces. The sky was grey. According to her host, this was normal in the Lake District; even so, the climate offered warmth and conviviality. She smiled to herself, imagining how her cousin, Cecily, would cope in such cloying heat, under the girdles, petticoats and thick satin of her awful dresses. Trousers, shirts and jackets might make her look masculine but they were practical, men had life so much easier, it was grossly unfair.

'Do you have somewhere to stay, Miss Robertson?'

Gerry steeled herself for what was to come, he was about to offer hospitality and such unchaperoned behaviour would be frowned upon by everyone, including her father.

'My father suggested I stayed at a nearby hotel, Wray Castle, do you know it? I believe it is not too far away. I was going to hire a horse to travel there.'

The young blinked his astonishment. 'A horse? Wouldn't you prefer a carriage?'



'I've been riding for as long as I've been able to walk, Mr Prendergast.' It was conversations like this that reminded her how unconventional she was. Having lived her entire life seeking independence from conformity, it felt perfectly natural. This young man's reactions said otherwise.

'I see.' The tone of his two words suggested he didn't. 'Well, if you will permit me, our family home isn't far away. You can borrow one of our animals. I don't get chance to ride much these days, it will be a pleasure to accompany you.'

He spotted her frown, his nervousness returned instantly.

'If you don't mind me making a suggestion, Miss Robertson? A single woman, booking a room in a hotel, may provoke some disapproval. By accompanying you, I can use my status, to assure the hotel of your reputation. We don't want to attract gossip, eh?'

She couldn't help but sigh. She may be an agent of the British Bureau for the Arcane, but she still needed a man to vouch for her, to act on her behalf. She hated the unfairness of validation only being available from a man, but she had to acknowledge the wisdom of his advice. 'Thank you, Mr Prendergast, I would value your assistance greatly.'

He chatted enthusiastically as they made their way to his home, a grand Tudor manor house set in acres of parkland, with marvellous views of the lake. Her horse, a chestnut mare called Tawny, proved to be a joy to ride. Despite his reservations, Julian was a skilled rider too. With the wind in her face, her hair blowing free, she felt at one with nature, exhilarated, her frustrations forgotten.

Feelings that didn't last long. Her reception at the hotel was frosty, despite the reassurances of the young man at her side. The stuffy, middle-aged man behind the desk, looked down his nose at her, a nose more like a beak that protruded from deep-set piggy eyes. His perceptions of Julian Prendergast's motives were obvious, and they angered Gerry. The man's undisguised disapproval of her jacket and trousers, her windblown hair, made matters worse. As the clerk dithered, in deciding whether the hotel had an available room or not, it led to her adopting a strategy she loathed.

'I'm surprised Father recommended this establishment, Mr Prendergast. Perhaps I should look for a hotel your father, the High Sheriff, would approve.'

Julian nodded with enthusiasm, picking up on the hint. 'And your father, a cousin of our Prime Minister too. I would have thought any hotel would value your patronage.'

Unsurprisingly, a room was hurriedly made available. As she waited for her luggage to arrive from the station, she found herself enjoying Julian Prendergast's company more and more. He chuckled as they sat outside, enjoying the scenery. 'That odious little man soon changed his tune, didn't he?'

Gerry giggled. 'I liked how you worked Mr Gladstone into the conversation.'

'Good teamwork, eh?'

They arranged to meet the following evening for dinner though, this time, Julian insisted on sending a carriage. It wouldn't look good if she arrived for dinner, windblown and smelling of horses. She waved goodbye, as her luggage arrived. She gave the hotel clerk a smug smile, as he rapidly responded to her request for a porter to take her things to her room.

The next morning, after breakfast, Gerry strolled along the lane, to a footpath that led to the shore of the lake. The sky remained grey; rain looked imminent. The water deepened the hues, making the lake appear almost threatening. She strolled along a narrow strip of beach, a mixture of sand and shingle, pleased she'd worn her boots for that reason. After a couple of minutes, she arrived at a tumble of large boulders, where a girl, in her mid-teens, sat on the topmost boulder, hurling stones into the water.



'Hello, I'm Bea. Who are you? Why are you dressed like that?'

There was no edge to the question, nothing meant with any malice, purely an act of honest curiosity. Gerry stood at the foot of the rocks. 'I'm pleased to make your acquaintance, Bea. I'm Gerry and I dress like this because it's practical.'

The girl frowned. 'Why do you need to be practical?'

'Because of the nature of my work.'

'You work?' The girl did nothing to hide her mixture of surprise and admiration. 'What do you do?'

'I work for an organisation which investigates mysterious events. The pleasure steamer which plies these waters was sabotaged. I'm here to find out why.'

'Gosh. That sounds so thrilling. And men allow you to do this, do they?'

'I don't give them much choice.'

The girl jumped down from her lofty position, landing with the grace borne of repetition. 'The locals think it's the mermaids.'

'Do they? What might be their reasoning?'

'The lack of peace and quiet, of course.'

'They believe these creatures exist?'

The girl frowned. 'Of course, they do. I've seen one.'

Gerry's mystified look caused the girl to sigh, suggesting she was used to her honesty being doubted.

'I did! She sat on these very rocks, combing her hair. She was beautiful.'

'Did you speak with her?' Gerry asked, eager to validate the girl's experience.

'Yes, but she just shushed me and said she wanted to be alone. I left, I didn't want to be a nuisance. I come here every day to see if I can see her again. I think I just missed her yesterday because I heard a splash and the rocks were wet.'



The girl's genuine awe came across in her voice and her in joy, there was no fabrication or guile in her behaviour. Gerry's scrutiny caused the girl to frown again.

'I'm not making this up. Papa and Mama think that's what I'm doing, my brother Walter says I have too active an imagination, it's why I like to write stories. But I really did see her.'

'I believe you, Bea. In my line of work, there are lots of creatures we think are made up, but actually exist. They just prefer to stay away from people.'

The girl nodded, reassured by Gerry's comforting words. 'I don't blame them. People can be so stupid.'

'I quite agree,' Gerry said and clambered up onto the rocks to get a sense of why her quarry might prefer the location. It was high enough to provide a good view of the lake, but hidden by the surrounding foliage from the shoreline. It was a place of privacy.

Bea joined her, grinning. 'You're not like any of the women I've met.'

Gerry bowed her head, 'Why, thank you, for your kind words.'

They both giggled.

The girl turned serious. 'I think the merefolk probably hide in the deepest parts of the lake, which are nearby. Papa says this part of the lake is two hundred and nineteen feet deep. Ely Cathedral is two hundred and seventeen feet. Just think, you could hide the Ship of the Fens in this lake. Isn't that amazing?'

The girl was proving helpful and surprisingly well informed.

'Do you live nearby?'

The girl chuckled, as though the idea was preposterous. 'Oh no! We live in London; we're staying at Wray Castle for our holidays. I like it here. I watch the animals go about their business; I like to make up stories about their exploits.'

The noise of splashing caught their attention. Without hesitation, the girl scrambled over the rocks and down the other side with a squeal of delight. Gerry called after her anxiously. Scrabbling awkwardly, careful not to twist an ankle or fall and hurt herself, the patch of sand on the other side of the rocks was empty.

Gerry called the girl, only to be ignored again. Her mistake, she realised now, involved not carrying a weapon. A harmless stroll to the lake, had turned into something potentially dangerous. Her father kept insisting she carried something she could use in her defence; the Bureau was full of such devices, she should have listened to him on this occasion. She called the girl again, louder, her voice rising in desperation. Still no reply.





The stretch of sand ended. The branches of a large willow tree dipped into the water, blocking her progress. Stumbling through green fingers, that clawed and clutched at her hair and clothes, she collided with a wooden structure. An old jetty, green with mildew. Gerry clambered onto it, ignoring how it stained her jacket and trousers. She burst out of the cloying mass of branches onto a scene that robbed her of her breath.

A dozen figures reclined on the wooden platform, in varying positions, men and women, all of them naked. They weren't human, but they didn't fulfil the traditional image of merfolk either. Their skin glistened in the light; scales covered their entire bodies. The only exception were their faces, where the fine surface looked like the silvery skin of a pilchard.



Two things halted Gerry, causing her to cover her mouth, to stifle her shock. Firstly, the girl was held prisoner by one of the females, who had the struggling girl's arms pinned behind her back. The mermaid's defiance told Gerry she was not going to release her prisoner readily.

The second shock was the sight of several naked adult meremen. Their nudity appeared not to concern them, three of them stood up and approached her, their genitals flapping as they walked.

'Stay where you are!' Gerry said as firmly as her beating heart allowed, extending her arm and an upturned palm, in a halting gesture she hoped they would understand. She continued, summoning every ounce of bravado she possessed. 'I don't want to hurt you but I will if you come any closer.' It was pure bluff but, without a weapon, it was all she had. Thankfully, it worked. The men stopped.

'I've tried to tell them I don't mean any harm,' the girl called to Gerry. 'They won't listen to me.'

The woman holding the girl said something to the others, in a language Gerry didn't understand. It was nothing like anything she'd heard before, even though she'd met a man from China. The sounds were utterly alien, swooping and diving noises, sometimes more like a whistle and other times like chirruping sounds. As the woman turned, the reason was evident, she displayed slits in the side of her neck - gills. Yet they were all breathing the air around them. They had to be amphibian.

Training had prepared her for meetings like this. She'd learned how not to rely on words, but to use gestures to convey a message. The way she stood, the expression on her face, her entire demeanour, communicated far more. It appeared to have worked with the men. She took a breath and addressed the woman holding the girl, she appeared to be the leader. She had long black hair, it glistened like coal, no doubt from regular combing.

Gerry attempted a conciliatory smile as she spoke, gesturing with her hands at the same time. 'The girl. Release her. Send her to me.'

The woman glared, larger than normal eyes watched Gerry with undisguised malice. 'Girl, disturb us. We quiet.'

The girl had stopped wriggling, she looked remarkably composed for her age. 'Do you think she's heard people speak our language and copied it?'

'I do,' Gerry said but decided to continue with the methodology she'd learned in her training. The mermaid's limited command of English would not be enough in a hostage negotiation.

Gerry nodded her head in understanding and maintained the smile. 'Sorry. We do not want trouble. The girl is curious.'

Gerry pointed at the girl and pantomimed looking around and being thoughtful. One of the men made a sound that might have been laughter. A couple of the women smiled at his reaction.

'Girl, disturb us. We quiet,' the adult woman repeated, angry now.

'Yes, I'm sorry.' Gerry bowed as a sign of respect. 'Give me the girl. We will leave.' She pointed back the way she'd come.

'No!' the woman growled, a noise deep in the throat that appeared to vibrate across her chest. All the others were on their feet in a second, hostile now. Their proximity, their behaviour, made their hostility more than obvious.

'I'm sorry,' Gerry repeated in the hope she'd been misunderstood.

'Not go. Tell humans. Quiet, gone.'

'Oh.' Gerry blinked in sudden realisation of the danger. They weren't going to release the girl, or her most likely, for fear of them betraying their existence.

The girl caught Gerry's eye and winked. Suddenly she broke down in tears, her shoulders heaved as breath faltered. It shattered the tension. The men and women all turned to look at her, bewildered by her behaviour. The woman holding her, relaxed her grip, uncertain suddenly. She looked at the girl, as though she'd gone insane. It was enough for the girl to wrench herself free, and run to Gerry.

The leader gestured at the men; her message obvious. Exasperated, powerless to stop them, Gerry repeated her earlier gesture but shouted as loudly as she could. 'Stop!' Her voice echoed across the lake; birds squawked as they burst from nearby trees.

The merfolk planted their hands against their heads and grimaced in pain. Reactions that emphasized a detail Gerry had missed, they didn't have ears, only small holes in the side of their heads. Perhaps she did have a weapon after all, her voice.

Her mind raced through her training, to find any knowledge that might prove useful. Her brain locked onto a lecture from her anthropology lecturer, Arthur Bennet. He'd used new research from America, that had examined the way dolphins lived their lives. The creatures communicated with clicks that travelled through the water, to vibrate against the skin. The merefolk had to do the same. Loud noise would be quite hurtful for that reason. How glad she was that she'd paid attention to that lecture.

'I'm sorry,' she said quietly and bowed again. She held her own ears and displayed pain. 'I did not mean to hurt.'

The men and women turned to their leader for translation, though it was obvious they'd guessed from her gestures. Hostility gave way to resentment in the woman but she stayed silent.

Gerry gave the woman another smile. 'Now I understand why you like quiet.' She whispered the last four words and grinned as she did so.

They'd reached an impasse and both women knew it. One of them needed to find a solution to it. The problem was greater than being held captive by these people. She'd hoped to find the merefolk, so she could negotiate with them, to stop their attacks on the pleasure craft. Well, she had them in front of her now. There would never be a better opportunity.

Gerry sat down on the wooden platform and smiled up at the confused faces.

The girl knelt behind her. 'What are you doing?'

'Negotiating a peace treaty.' Gerry splayed her hands as a gesture for the other, to join her.

They turned to the woman for a reaction. They saw confusion and uncertainty. One of the men, the one who'd laughed, took the decision. He sat opposite Gerry, cross-legged, exposing a part of himself she did her best to ignore. The others followed, some more readily than others. Their leader was the last to join them. Gerry pointed at herself and spoke her name, then the girl. She extended a hand, inviting the leader to do the same. The answer came in a swooping whistle. Gerry nodded. 'I'm going to call you Susan.' She pointed at the woman and said the name again. The woman frowned, shook her head. Gerry grinned. 'You. Susan. Me. Gerry. Friend.'

It was slow and laborious work. Messages got lost in translation and needed to be found by pantomime, silly noises and even drawings on the mouldy platform. As the sun sank behind trees, it became obvious time had to play its part. Gerry had explained how the girl's family would come looking for her, if she didn't go home. That would bring many people down to the lake, angry people.

It would lead to trouble, and she wanted to avoid any hostility with humans, she wanted to keep the merfolk secret. When she suggested she came back the next day, that brought real surprise.

It was the man sat opposite her, who interceded. Their leader opposed the idea but the man reached over, put his hand on the woman's shoulder and squeezed. It was a gentle and romantic gesture, as was his smile. The woman glared at him, but he made a noise that sounded like a quieter version of the woman's name. His grin widened. The leader's reaction was bizarrely human, she sighed and slapped his knee. The man made the laughing noise again.

True to her word, Gerry made her way to the mouldering jetty the next morning, where she found Susan and Edward waiting. She'd christened the man Edward because she thought it captured his conciliatory nature. He beamed his smile at her, Susan merely glowered. It took most of the day to reach an understanding. She discovered how the noise of the chugging pleasure steamer reverberated through the water, making the merfolk ill. The solution came down to designating the deeper part of the lake off limits to the vessel. It wouldn't be easy to persuade Herbert Forbes to agree, but Julian Prendergast's father would pile enough pressure on the man to guarantee his cooperation.

Gerry stood up and reached out a hand to the woman, to affirm their new relationship. It drew a blank reaction. The man strolled over to the corner of the platform, to a stone which he picked up and brought back. He handed it to Susan, with an expression that made it obvious what he wanted her to do. Arthur Bennett, Gerry's anthropology lecturer, had talked about how some cultures used objects to represent agreement, like signing a contract. Susan handed over the stone, with a serious and solemn expression, Gerry took it and bowed. It was a beautiful thing, silver-white bands threaded through purple and teal hues, something an artist would have appreciated. Gerry placed it in her jacket pocket with great care. Undaunted, she reached out her hand, took the woman's and shook it, maintaining eye contact the whole time. When she released it, Edward had his hand ready, white teeth gleaming in his ready smile. She shook his hand too.

The pair dived into the water and were gone. Gerry stared at the lake, lost in thought. Her first contact with an arcane race, and she'd enjoyed it. It proved she was meant to do this work; she'd been right to pester her father for the opportunity. Perhaps one day, women would get such opportunities without going to such lengths. She doubted it, but she could hope.

As she walked up the drive, to the Wray Castle hotel, she spotted the teenage girl. Bea's attention focused on a bunch of rabbits, nibbling at a carrot she'd obviously brought for them. Her arrival disturbed the animals, who hopped off into a flowerbed.

'Did you meet with them again? What happened?' Bea called out as she ran toward Gerry.

With explanations complete, the solution outlined, the teenager awarded the woman with a very serious nod of the head. 'For a woman, you did an amazing job you know. I don't think a man would have been so clever. He would have tried to fight them or something equally silly.'

'I think you're right.'

One of the rabbits poked his head out from under a large rose bush, dashed over to the carrot, picked it up in his mouth and ran back again.

'He's very cheeky,' Gerry said.

'He is. I've got an idea for a story about him. I'm going to call him Peter Rabbit.'

'I think that's a jolly good name,' Gerry replied with a grin. 'I realise we haven't been properly introduced; I don't know your full name. Mine is Geraldine Robertson.'

'And mine is Beatrix Potter,' the girl said and reached out a hand.

The two women shook hands and strolled back to the hotel, watched from under the rose bushes by a family of rabbits.



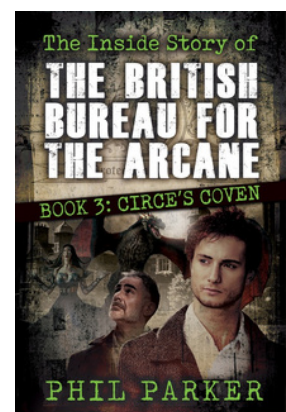
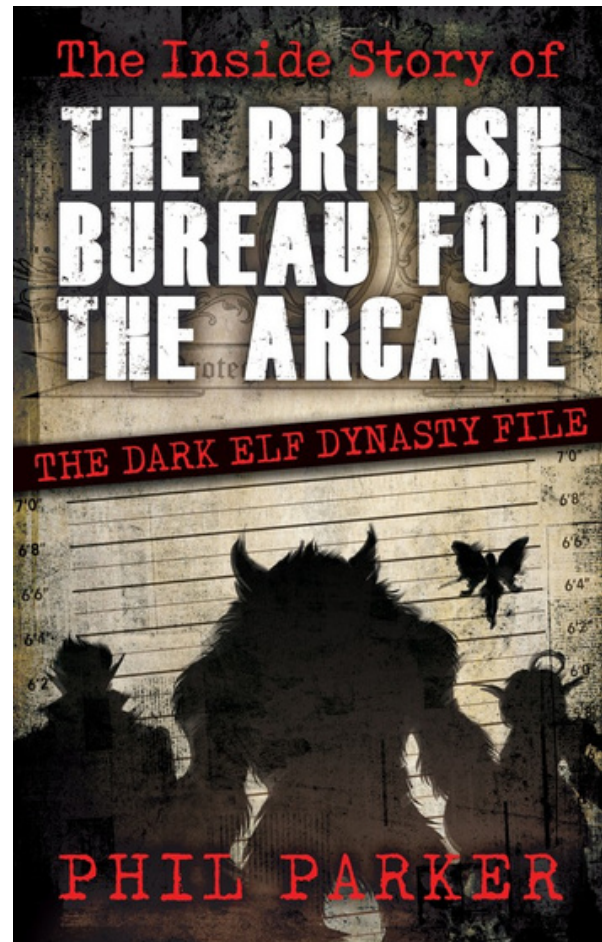


# THE BRITISH BUREAU FOR THE ARCANE SERIES

The British Bureau for the Arcane has kept people safe for centuries from the arcane species that seek to harm human beings. Their range extends to Commonwealth nations that were part of the British Empire. A once-proud part of the British Secret Service, their success in controlling the arcane races has been their downfall.

These beings now live on the edge of survival in remote parts of Britain. Or, at least they did. For Arlo Austin, a loyal but troubled agent for the Bureau, something is wrong. When he's sent to protect the citizens of the Shetland Isles from rampaging Norwegian trolls, it soon becomes apparent it was an attempt on his life. When another agent dies in mysterious circumstances, and Arlo is warned of an impending war with arcane species, his instincts are proved right.

But who is behind this rebellion? Could it be linked to Arlo's own bloodline as a Dark Elf? His traumatic childhood holds secrets, ones that are going to test his loyalty to the Bureau. In their cells another Dark Elf is held prisoner, one who is so despised by its staff, their hatred has extended to Arlo. This species is violent and vengeful, can they recruit one of their own to bring about the destruction of the Bureau? And in so doing, enable the arcane races to wage war against the human race.



Described by one reader as the “fantasy version of Men in Black”.



More details: [https://linktr.ee/phil\\_parker](https://linktr.ee/phil_parker)

