

Weird Tales

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D. McILWRAITH, Editor

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When one wanted something very much, could the
very seas bring it to you?



NEPTHE

BY SUZANNE PICKETT

THE salt spray spewed up from the rocks and the wind whipped his hair about his face as Brent Belgium strode along the rocky shore. Here at last was a sort of peace. Here he had found what he wished.

But even here he remembered Ingrid's face. Why not forget her? There was nothing about either of them to make it possible

to live together. His temperament was as dark and restless as his eyes and hair: and hers as cold, yet as fierce as the icy wind that whipped across her homeland.

Well, they had tried it three years. Three years of happiness, anguish and despair. But finally it ended sordidly; in the divorce courts and blazing across the morning papers.

Heading by W. H. Silvey

Yes, he was to blame. He had taken the girl out on his yacht; but it was in anger against Ingrid. He had meant to come back before midnight; but unfortunately, the drinks were stronger than he had realized. They had both gone to sleep and their sleep and been as innocent as that of brother and sister.

But when he awoke next morning and ordered the boat to shore it hadn't looked that way. Ingrid met them with reporters and cameramen and—

Well, she was in Paris now running around with some Prince. And he lived here in this old house near San Francisco. Of one thing he was sure. He was cured of women. Never again could another stir him, not after he had known Ingrid. He didn't even want to see another woman.

It was just at this moment that he saw *her*, and his heart stopped a minute while fear raced across the rocky shore with him. How had she reached here? Had the tide washed her ashore, and from what place had she come?

She couldn't have been dead long, he thought as he bent over her. Her face was not swollen and distorted. He remembered with a shudder other bodies floating around him; pieces of a ship and himself clinging to a raft.

Well, that was over now, but here was new terror. For one minute he was afraid to touch

her. With his reputation, suppose someone accused him—

He started to go away, but looked at her again, and drew in his breath. Nothing earthly had a right to be so beautiful. Even Ingrid would seem plain beside this girl. She might have been sleeping, and comfortable in her sleep.

Her hair was as silvery as the whitecaps in the moonlight. It even had blue-green shadows in its depths, like waves of white that showed the real color beneath. But her lashes and brows were as dark as seaweed.

Her lips were parted and small teeth that had the exact translucence of pearls showed for a minute. Brent stared at her lips. They were pink, as pink as seashell, and only a little darker than the color in her cheeks. SHE WAS NOT DEAD.

But what was she doing here, half submerged in water? By what miracle had she escaped drowning, and if she had fainted why were her lips and cheeks red?

HE STOOPED to touch her arm. It was cool, but not cold. Just a delicious, tender coolness, round and white beneath his hand.

She opened startled eyes, for a minute, he thought she would leap to her feet and rush into the ocean. And in that same min-

ute, he knew that he would follow her.

Her eyes were smoke gray at first; like the ocean before sunrise. Then they brightened and changed from gray to aqua to green as suddenly as a wave changes. Her tenseness relaxed and she smiled.

"Who are you?" she asked. Her voice was like muted, silver bells he had heard in the south of Spain.

"I am Brent Belgium." He reached to help her to her feet. "Who are you, and what are you doing here?" The wind was cold through his wool jacket and made him shiver.

But she didn't seem to feel the cold. Yet her hair was wet and she was dressed only in a thin garment of pale gray-green silk.

"I am Nephthae," she said and reached for his hand. "I'll go home with you."

It seemed the natural, the only thing for her to say. Brent was sure that he was dreaming now. No earthly creature could be so beautiful, and where had she learned the name Nephthae? This couldn't be real.

The waves grew higher suddenly, lashed furiously after them. But her hand warmed in his, and her laughter was no dream as they walked up the trail to the big, dark house on the hilltop.

At the entrance, she hesitated

a minute, looked across the ocean, smiled at its roaring, then gave a wave. "I love you, you know," she said simply, and walked ahead of him into the house.

THEY were married the next day in what still seemed a dream. He knew only that her name was Nephthae, and that heaven and earth held nothing besides her face, her eyes and her silvery voice. She was lovely in every way. Strange, mysterious, enchanting. Brent didn't ask or care that she never told him anything about herself.

Where, and even if she *had* been born, she never mentioned. Where she came from and who her antecedents. If she had relatives or friends, he didn't know. He only knew that life was more beautiful with her.

The first morning she watched as he ate his egg; tasted her own, smiled and ate a mouthful. He stared at her. One could think that she had never seen bacon and eggs before.

It was the same with everything. Best of all, she loved raw fruits and vegetables. Her eyes were surprised and delighted when she tasted her first orange, pear, apple and grapes; and she couldn't seem to get enough of these.

A few days after they were married, Nancy, the cook, brought in a platter of abalone.

She beamed as she said, "I hope this is right, Mr. Belgium."

With the steaks she served raw spinach salad, broiled tomatoes and small, new potatoes sprinkled with parsley.

Nepthae looked interestedly at the platter before helping herself.

"Um-m-m," Brént sighed. "Abalone. The first of the season, Nepthae, and no one cooks it like Nancy. Beaten just right, neither too much nor too little. You'll love it."

Nepthae stared at him and her face paled. "Abalone!" she said in horror. "But I—couldn't eat abalone, why—" She began to weep and left the table.

Brent, puzzled yet tender, tried to comfort her; and when he saw her horror, refused the steaks himself. And it was the same with all seafood. When he realized how she felt, he instructed Nancy to buy no more.

They must go shopping the day after they were married. Nepthae had only the soft, silky dress she had worn when he found her. She made no explanation as to why she had no other clothes.

But she had unerring taste. Everything she bought was soft blues, aquas and greens, or silvery gray, and some things she found the exact color of the ocean at sunrise.

And she was so lovely. Half the time Brent knew it was true and the other half he was sure

he was dreaming. No one on earth could give such happiness. He would sit for hours just looking at her, or listening to her speak. Her voice rippled like the waters at low tide on a smooth, sandy beach. But sometimes she sang and her voice must have been that of a mermaid. It was like nothing on earth.

THE third morning Brent awoke lazily; smiled and still half asleep reached for Nepthae. She wasn't there! He reached still farther, patted the bed all over, then opened his eyes and sat up. She wasn't even in the room!

"Darling," he called.

There was no answer.

"Nepthae. Sweetheart; where are you?"

Still no answer.

He dressed hurriedly and went through the house looking for her. He met Nancy in the dining-room. "Have you seen Nepthae?" he tried to smile as he asked.

"She said she was going swimming," Nancy returned his smile.

Brent turned and ran from the room. The tide was low at this season, but the undercurrents were always strong along this rugged coast. Nepthae shouldn't have gone out alone. Was she a good swimmer? Did she know the sea well enough to be trusted out alone, and why had she gone so early?

As he walked down to the

shore, Brent remembered something and stopped. She must have gone swimming every morning. When he would awake she lay quietly beside him, but her hair was strangely damp as if—Of course! She had slipped up to swim, and returned before he awoke. No need to be afraid. She was certainly a good swimmer.

But she was nowhere in sight. He walked up and down the shore; avoiding seaweed, jellyfish and the debris that had washed up during the night.

"Nepthae!" he called. "Darling, are you hiding from me?"

The water echoed her name; the surf brought it to shore, but there was no answer. He returned to the house and found his binoculars.

As he came outside, he noticed her footprints leading to the shore and followed them. They trailed across the wet sand to where the waves came in and ended. She had gone into the water, but was somewhere—far out of sight.

Not even when Ingrid divorced him, had Brent felt such grief; such heartache. No one could stay in the ocean this long and not drown or—there were sharks out there!

Hopelessly, he put the glasses to his eyes and carefully scanned the distant waves. It must have been five miles from shore that he saw and recognized that silvery

hair. The glasses brought her close. She dived, stayed under an incredibly long time—or perhaps the waves hid her; then she came up to swim and dive again.

She threw back her head and seemed to be singing—or talking to someone, and her face was young, beautiful, happy. Not once did she look towards the shore.

THERE was a shallow, sandy cove below the house. Brent kept his boats there. He ran down, climbed into a motorboat and started the motor. A wind came from the West and the waves grew higher; roared as they came in. They must have drowned the noise of the boat, for Nepthae didn't turn as he cut the motor and coasted towards her.

Her light, happy voice came to him above the roar of the waves. She WAS talking to someone. But just then she turned, saw him and her face lighted. She swam towards the boat, pulled up and slipped into it to kiss him with wet, salty lips. "Brent," she was distressed. "Darling, I forgot and stayed too long."

"You—you might have been drowned," he choked. "It is too much to swim this far and expect to get home safely. Nepthae, you don't know these waters. They are treacherous—"

She threw back her head and

shouted with laughter, then she sobered and was her gentle self again. "Don't worry darling," she said. "I'll never drown, Brent. Never be afraid that I will drown."

"Some of the best swimmers have thought that." He tried to be stern.

But she only smiled, kissed him and smiled again. He pulled the cord to start the motor. But something was wrong. It was silent. The boat was drifting farther and farther from shore. Something; some malignant monster underwater seemed to have it and to forcibly pull it towards the distant horizon.

Nepthae was still smiling while he, distressed, then afraid as the boat increased its speed, frantically tried again and again to start the motor. At the speed they were going they would soon be adrift far out at sea.

"Darling, can't you understand?" he said at last. "We are being towed out to sea by something. Perhaps a fish has caught his fins in the bottom of the boat; though how, I don't know."

She stopped smiling and put her hand on his. "It's only Sesprae," she said, and gazed at him a minute. "You want to return to shore?" she asked.

"Of course," he said.

She sighed, then began to smile again. "Sesprae," she leaned over the side of the boat, "let us go."

LATER, Brent was sure that he had dreamed this. But the boat stopped its swift flight through the water; the motor started, he turned and sputtered back to shore.

But he knew by now that he hadn't dreamed Nepthae. She grew sweeter, dearer all of the time. She was distressed if he worried over her long swims; so now, if he awoke to find her gone, he waited quietly for her to return.

Once she was gone for two days before she came in smiling, quiet, but happy to be with him. And by now he was afraid to ask questions. There was nothing wrong in what she did, he knew. No one could look into her face, see the adoration for him, and believe that she would be unfaithful.

He learned that her love was not only sweet, but savage. Once, some people came to see them. Lura Daniels and Fern Donaldson, friends of Ingrid and almost as beautiful, were in the crowd. As usual they kissed Brent, laughed, then sobered to talk of Ingrid for a moment.

Nepthae's eyes were pure green. Brent saw the fire smouldering in them. But she smiled quietly, accepted the astounded compliments of the men, and was civil to the girls.

When they were gone, she flew into a rage. She fell on the bed

and wept. Pushed her beautiful hair back from her face and lay on her pillow. "They kissed you," she cried. "They kissed you, and you liked it!"

"But, Nepthae, it didn't mean anything."

"It meant something to me!" passionately.

"But everyone—"

"I'm not like everyone," she wept again. "You don't love me. I can't make you happy. Make you forget—" Then her eyes widened. "Who was Ingrid?" she asked.

He was forced to tell her. She grew quiet, pale, her eyes changed to turgid, molten gray. "You still love her?" she asked evenly.

"You know that I love you." His voice was harsh.

"How," she whispered, "how can I be sure? Prove your love, Brent."

"What can I do?" he asked helplessly. "If you don't believe me, how can I prove it?"

She looked at him a minute, then ran from the room. He saw her swimming out to sea a few minutes later and walked the floor, brooding, worried, fearful.

Two hours later she came back. Sweet, quiet, tender. He was so glad to see her that he forgot her outburst of temper.

The next day his aunt called from Dallas. "Your uncle Roger is dying," she said, her voice low but controlled. "He wants to see

you before he goes, and to meet your wife."

"What is it?" Nepthae stood at his shoulder as he talked. Briefly, he told her.

Nepthae's face paled. She was silent a minute, then her eyes began to shine. "I'll go," she whispered. "I'll go with you."

"If you only knew," she told him when he hung up. "If you knew how I shall suffer, Brent, you'd know how much I love you."

"But they're my people, darling. They will love you. No need to be afraid of them."

"I—wasn't thinking of them," she said.

UNCLE ROGER was weak, but he smiled gallantly. took Nepthae's hand and kissed it. "How do you do it?" he asked Brent. "And where did you find her?"

"I found him," Nepthae smiled.

"Tell us about her, Brent," his aunt asked later, while Nepthae took a bath. "She's the loveliest thing I ever saw, but where *did* you find her?"

"I found her asleep," he said. "On the beach, below my house."

He spread his hands. "I have told you all that I know." But he was still smiling.

Nepthae grew gentler, sweeter, more subdued. It was a week before he noticed that she had paled

and her face was full of suffering. When he asked her what was wrong, she only smiled at him, put her hand over his and whispered, "I love you Brent."

It was then he noticed her hand. It was limp, and beginning to shrivel as a rose petal left in the sun. He stared at her face. It had the same look. "Darling!" he cried. "Tell me. Are you ill?"

She shook her head but her eyes filled with tears.

"What is it?" he urged. "Tell me, Nepthae."

"But your uncle. We can't leave him."

"I can leave anyone for you," fiercely.

"Brent," her little soft, withered hand touched his cheek, rested on his shoulder. "I," her voice was weak, just a whisper, "I must get back to the ocean."

He gave her a long, questioning look, kissed her and went to the telephone. He hoped that his uncle would understand and forgive him.

Shortly, he and Nepthae were on a plane for San Francisco.

She was getting weaker. He looked at her with fear. She was almost limp as he helped her into the taxi he had called. In the hour it took to drive from the airport to his home, she visibly grew weaker.

He handed the driver a handfull of bills, took Nepthae in his arms and ran towards the rocky

beach. Her eyes were closed and he was afraid she had ceased breathing. But a big wave came in, pounded against the rocks and blew spray into their faces.

Nepthae opened her eyes, smiled and reached her hands towards the water.

Gently, he put her in the same place where he had found her. The waves roared louder, lashed angrily about and over her, seemed hesitant to recede and leave her. Foam gathered in her silvery hair and water sucked about her as she lay quietly.

Brent sat on a rock and watched with troubled eyes. A little color came into her cheeks and her eyes lost their dead, sick look. The biggest wave of all roared in, splashed over her, took her up and lifted her into the ocean. She gathered strength, threw back her head and began to swim.

Brent was ready to cast himself after her, let the waves take him also with no effort at swimming. But she looked back at him, smiled joyously and called, "I'll be back, wait for me."

He ate when he knew he must, slept when he was so tired that his body would no longer keep him going, and walked the beach. With Nepthae gone, his life was gone, only blackness was left.

A WEEK later, he arose after a sleepless night and started across the beach for his daily

vigil. The salt spray spewed up from the rocks and the wind whipped his hair about his face. It was just at this moment that he saw her. Perhaps he had gone mad and was imagining things. But he raced across the rocky shore.

She might have been sleeping and comfortable in her sleep. The blue-green shadows were in her silvery hair and her skin was younger and pinker than ever. She opened her eyes and smiled at him, "I'll go home with you, darling," she said.

Life was more wonderful than when he first had her. Days and nights were full of enchantment. Brent didn't ask or care where she had been; who or what she was.

They had never been out on the yacht. Nepthae had seemed only to wish to stay in the big house near the shore. But one day, laughing, she suggested they take a cruise.

Just before he hauled up anchor, Brent thought he saw a woman walking along the shore and there was the sound of voices. But he was busy, and when he looked a few minutes later there was no one there.

The first day and night, Nepthae was wild with excitement. She was in and out of the ocean, leaping from the deck, then climbing back; her hair and eyes bright. "You really love me,

Brent?" she asked more than once. "More than anything on earth?"

"Really," he told her gravely.

"Enough to—" She regarded him just as gravely, but hesitated.

"Enough to go with me for always?"

"Enough to go with you for always," he said.

"Do you regret coming to me?" he asked.

"Of course not, but—"

"Yes?"

"But I am still near—" she paused, leaned her head on his shoulder and was silent.

He didn't ask what she meant.

The moon was bright on the waters. Nepthae had gone to her cabin for a minute. Brent heard her coming softly up behind him. He turned, held out his arms and she ran into them. His lips found hers and he kissed her. An old madness stirred in him for one minute, then he tried to shove her away as he said, "Ingrid! how did you get here?"

He heard a startled gasp, then a sob behind him and turned to see Nepthae, her eyes wide and sick in the moonlight.

"I have been here since you left shore," Ingrid said. "I came because I want you back, Brent. Because I know, and you know that we belong together."

"It is true," Nepthae moaned. "I knew it." She ran towards the rail.

Brent ran faster. He caught her fiercely to him as she started to climb over the rail. "No," he cried. "No, darling, it's you I love, Nepthae!"

"How can I know?" she gasped. "How can I be sure?"

"How can I make you sure?" he pleaded.

"I'll—I'll try you," she whispered, strong and relentless as a wave as she eluded his grasp and plunged into the ocean.

"Nepthae!" he called in despair and started to follow her.

"If you follow now, you'll never find me, Brent," she said. Then she smiled. "But wait for me, darling. I'll be back."

He took the boat back to shore; sent Ingrid finally and firmly away.

Then he waited a week, a month, a year.

Another year and five more went by. He ate and slept. Walked the beach to eat and sleep again. He knew that people were beginning to call him, "The queer man in the big house on the hill," but he didn't care.

Nepthae had said, "I'll come back." And she would surely come back. But he worried a little as he noticed that he was beginning to change. His black hair was getting as white as hers with its silvery depths. What if she did not love him when she came?

TEN years from the day he first saw her, Brent walked along the rocky beach. The salt spray blew against his face and the wind whipped his hair.

She was in exactly the same spot, and she was younger and more beautiful than ever. She smiled as she opened her eyes. "You did wait for me, didn't you?" she said.

He was on his knees beside her, the waves lapping about them both. "I could do nothing else," he told her and he was weeping as he kissed her.

"You will come with me?" she asked.

"I will come with you."

He swam beside her into the ocean. They were far, far out to sea and he was growing stronger. He felt a new, young, fierce happiness as he swam beside her. She laughed at him, and reached to kiss his lips.

The waves grew fiercer. Boiled and billowed around them. But he was beginning to see through the depths. Far away, he saw the white columns and blue spires of a city. The walls shone as if they were made of pearl.

"You will never regret it?" Nepthae asked.

"I have you," was his answer.

She took his hand, pulled him to her and they began to sink, to flow towards the gates of the city.