

# *The Mermaid and the Mariner*

By Jody Studdard

## Chapter 1

Christopher Cooke stood on the deck of the S.S. Minnow, staring out at the endless miles of ocean all around him. He thought about adventure, and excitement, and all the good things mariners fantasize about when they are at sea. Unfortunately, his fantasies were short lived.

“Get back to work, Mr. Cooke,” the ship’s captain called from above. He was a tall, gaunt man with a narrow face and a white beard. His name was Stephen Jensen. Like always, he was in a bad mood.

“Yes, sir,” Chris said, snapping back to attention. He had a mop in one hand and a bucket of soapy water in the other.

If there was one thing Chris hated doing, it was swabbing the deck. He had done it every day for the past month, and the boredom was driving him crazy. The minute Captain Jensen turned away, to attend to other matters, Chris’s mind returned to a dreamy, tropical paradise filled with beautiful women and loads of treasure.

But then something unexpected happened. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw an object floating in the water about a hundred feet from the ship. At first he thought it was nothing more than a large piece of driftwood, or maybe a patch of seaweed or other debris. As the Minnow moved closer, however, he could see it better, and it looked like a person. A young woman, to be more precise. She floated in the water with only her head and shoulders above the surface. Her long, blond hair drifted in the water behind her.

He put his mop down and rubbed his eyes. He couldn't believe what he was seeing. Was he imagining things?

Before he could contemplate the matter any further, and without any warning whatsoever, the young woman turned and dived into the water. Her long, golden tail was the last part of her to disappear beneath the surface.

Chris rubbed his eyes again, with his knuckles, this time much harder than before. Now he knew he was seeing things. A mermaid? It was a hot day. Clearly he had been in the sun too long and his mind was playing tricks on him.

Unfortunately, he didn't get a chance to ponder the matter any further.

"Ship ahoy!" the Minnow's watchman called from the crow's nest high above.

During their voyage from London, the Minnow had encountered a few ships along the way, but it had been rare, so the sight of a ship immediately caught the crew's attention. The approaching ship was a small wooden brigand with the name 'Raider' painted on its bow. An unmistakable black flag with a skull and crossbones flapped amidst its sails.

Chris could hardly believe it. He had spent two years aboard the Minnow but had never seen a pirate ship before.

"Batten down the hatches!" Captain Jensen shouted. "This could get ugly fast."

The Minnow's crew rushed to their battle positions. Unfortunately, there were several minutes of confusion since most of the crew, including the older, more experienced sailors, had never been in a battle before.

In the meantime, the brigand moved closer. On its deck, Chris saw people milling about, making preparations of their own. Unlike the mariners on the Minnow, who wore gray and

white uniforms, the pirates were brightly adorned. Many of them wore scarlet and gold, and some wore shirts with broad stripes.

“Furl up the main sail!” Captain Jensen shouted. “Man the cannons.”

The brigand moved closer.

There was a BOOM as loud as thunder. A cannonball landed in the water a few feet from the Minnow’s side, spraying water onto its deck. Chris ducked behind a bulkhead to keep from being doused by the spray.

“Heigh ho,” a man called from the brigand’s bow. He wore a velvet jacket and had a bushy, gray beard. When the sunlight hit it just right, it had a blue tint to it.

Fear raced across the Minnow’s deck. They had all heard of him. He was William “Bluebeard” Fitzgerald, one of the most nefarious pirates to sail the seven seas. For years he had raided ports along the Spanish main, then had moved to the far east, then to the Caribbean. He was extremely ill-tempered and had once tossed a man overboard for frowning at him.

“Surrender at once,” Bluebeard called, waving a large, menacing cutlass over his head. “If you do, I’ll spare your lives. All I want is your cargo.”

“We have nothing of value,” Captain Jensen responded.

A suspicious, puzzled look crossed Bluebeard’s evil face. “Nothing? I find that hard to believe, Captain. I guess my men will need to come aboard to verify your claim.”

There was a second BOOM, and another cannonball exploded in the water a few feet from the Minnow’s bow.

“Return fire!” Captain Jensen shouted, thrusting his rapier high into the air.

The air between the ships filled with smoke and musket fire. A pirate stood straight up as he was hit, then toppled into the water with a loud splash.

Chris pulled his pistol from his side and fired as quickly as he could. Two more pirates fell into the water below.

In the meantime, a cannonball flew through the air and struck the Minnow's mast, the large pole that held up the ship's main sail, and shattered it into a thousand pieces. Ropes, sails, and chunks of wood and metal crashed to the deck below.

Another volley struck the Minnow's side, shaking it badly. Chris grabbed onto the ship's rail to keep from being thrown overboard. A barrel of kerosene tipped over and caught fire. Flames raced across the deck all around him.

The brigand moved closer. Within seconds, the ships were side by side. The pirates threw ropes with large hooks onto the Minnow, pulled the ships together, and started jumping aboard. One landed right next to Chris. He wore a bright, crimson sash, a striped shirt, and a belt buckle shaped like a skull.

Chris hadn't had a chance to reload his pistol, so he tossed it to the side and drew his sword from his belt. The pirate carried a swashbuckler, a long weapon with a menacing, curved blade. It was much bigger than Chris's sword. The pirate growled fiercely and charged forward. Chris deflected his first blow, and his second, then returned one of his own. Unfortunately, the pirate ducked the blow easily. Chris swung again, this time much lower than before, but the pirate jumped over it. Chris grabbed the pirate by his sash, pulled them together, and kned him in the stomach as hard as he could. The pirate gasped for breath as he tumbled over the edge of the ship and fell into the water below.

A feeling of sheer exhilaration flooded Chris's body. He could hardly believe what he had done. He had fought a pirate and lived to tell about it.

Unfortunately, his victory was short lived. Another pirate came up on him from behind and struck him across the back with a thick, wooden plank. He fell face down onto the deck and his entire world went black.