

PIRATE AHOY!

by Iain Armstrong



Once upon a time there was a pirate who had spent many years looking for a treasure chest that had fallen off the side of a ship in a very big storm and sunk to the bottom of the sea.

One day he was swimming down to the bottom of the sea when he saw something shining on the seabed below him.

Could it be some of the treasure that he was looking for? He knew that the chest would have a lot of silver inside it, and what he could see certainly looked like silver. He was very excited and started to swim faster. At last he reached the seabed. He bent down and picked up the shiny object. It was a cup, a very large one, and it was also silver, and therefore very valuable, like the rest of the treasure.

But treasure chests didn't just have one cup in them, he knew that they had lots of cups in them, both silver and gold, and other treasures like jewels, precious stones, gold and silver coin. He looked around him but couldn't see anything else on the seabed, and he certainly couldn't see any treasure chest.

So the chest, in falling off the side of the ship had not only fallen to the bottom of the sea but being very heavy and full of treasure it must have buried itself beneath the ocean floor. But the single cup worried him. Would the chest still be intact?

He was wondering where to start digging – he had brought a very big spade with him – when a voice said 'What are you looking for?'

'My treasure', said the pirate without turning. Normally, he would turn if he heard a strange voice addressing him, to see who it was.

‘Why would your treasure be on the bottom of the sea? It seems a very strange place to keep one’s treasure.’

‘It fell off a ship in a storm – hereabouts’ said the pirate, pointing towards the surface.

‘Ah,’ said the mermaid. ‘Would you like me to help you look for it? I have a very large fin. I sweep, you dig.’

The pirate turned and saw a mermaid standing before him. He was slightly taken aback. He knew they existed, but he had never seen one before, in all his voyages. And she did have a very large fin!

‘Er, yes, perhaps you could start sweeping, then I’ll start digging. It might be that you find the treasure, and then I wouldn’t have to dig.... er, thank you.’

The mermaid gave him an odd look and started to sweep the seabed with her fin in order to clear the sand and small stones that lay on the seabed, and thus reveal his treasure chest.

A few minutes later there started to appear what looked like ribs of iron sticking up from the ocean floor.

‘You can stop sweeping, I think this is my chest.’ The pirate knelt down and looked closely at the ribs. ‘Yes, it’s mine! Thank you, thank you! Oh, what’s your name?’

‘Amaryllis,’ replied the mermaid, and smiled. ‘How do you know it’s yours?’

‘By what is engraved on the ribs. Come closer and see.’

She glided across.

‘You see the initials written on each rib? G.A. – George Arbuthnott. That’s my name.’

‘So, George, what are you going to do with your treasure chest? Sell the contents?’

‘Er, yes, possibly, but first I must pull the chest up to the surface.’

Amaryllis noticed that the pirate had a coil of rope wrapped round himself. ‘Are you sure that rope will be strong enough?’

George wasn’t too sure. He hadn’t had occasion before now to pull up a chestfull of treasure from the seabed.

‘Well, er, I hope it will be’, and he started to uncoil the rope. ‘Thank you for helping me find my treasure, Amaryllis.’

Again, that odd look from the mermaid.

‘Well, all the best, George,’ and the mermaid glided off into the distance. Well, almost off into the distance. She was curious to see if the rope was strong enough to withstand the weight of the treasure chest. So she turned and settled behind a rock where she watched him as he tied the rope several times around the chest, then swam upwards, pulling it after him. She was also curious to know if the chest actually belonged to this pirate called George.

Her curiosity was at least partly satisfied when there was a resounding crash as the rope broke and the chest fell on to the seabed, splitting open as it did so and scattering its contents everywhere. George soon followed, swimming quickly down. He stood on the sea-floor looking very upset, not knowing what to do next.

‘Hello, again’ said Amaryllis. She barely glanced at him but finned around – yes, mermaids ‘fin’, it’s their word for

swim, or at least it was this mermaid's word for swim – looking at what had been inside the chest. There were lots of gold and silver cups, and other treasures like jewels, precious stones, gold and silver coin, brass plates and a few old maps and charts.

‘So these all belong to you?’ said the mermaid. She picked up a gold cup and noticed that it had an inscription on the base, two initials which read H.P., and not G.A. She picked up another cup, a silver one and noticed that it had the same two initials inscribed on its base. Then another cup, and then another, both with the same two initials.

‘Are you sure these all belong to you?’ she asked the pirate, ‘These four cups here have H.P. on them, and not G.A.’

George said nothing.

Yet another odd look from the mermaid. Some fish swam by, dipped down to look at the treasure, then swam on.

‘And why was your treasure on the ship that was in the storm?’

A shadow passed overhead. They both looked up. It was a dolphin. She could tell it was a dolphin as its rear fin was a bit like hers.

‘Well?’

George didn't know what to say.

Instead he burst into tears.

He couldn't believe it, but this mermaid seemed to have a magical effect on him which made him want to tell the truth. Perhaps it was the effect of all those looks she was giving him. It was also the first time that he had cried

underwater and the salt in his tears and the saltwater together made what he was seeing appear distorted, it was like looking at a lot of rainbows, all jumbled up together.

‘I plundered a ship some years ago now and took what wasn’t mine, then sold the treasure to a merchant who put it on his ship, the same ship that was in the storm. He tried several times to find the treasure but couldn’t.

Another pirate told me roughly where the storm had taken place. It’s taken me all this time to find the treasure and, well, here it is. Oh, the initials H.P. on the cups stand for Henry Petherton, the name of the merchant. The initials on the ribs of the chest are G.A., my initials, George Arbuthnott.’

Amaryllis passed George a handkerchief and told him to wipe his eyes. He did so, and then returned it to the mermaid.

‘Well, I know you’ve told the truth.’

‘But how do you know that?’ broke in the pirate.

‘I just do,’ replied the mermaid. There was a pause.

‘Well, I suppose I had better return to my ship.’

It was then that he noticed the silver cup which was the shiny something he saw on his way down. He picked it up.

‘You can have this. In fact you can have all this treasure. I mean, how would I get it all to the surface, with no chest to carry it in?’ The chest lay on the seabed with the lid and its hinges separated from the chest.

‘Thank you for your kind offer, but all this . . .’ and here Amaryllis gave a huge sweep of her fin, ‘. . . is of no use whatsoever. Please take it all away. Also, more importantly, if you leave your treasure here it would start to break up into

little pieces which we mermaids would breathe in and then we would become very ill. You wouldn't want that, would you?

'Er, no . . . I wouldn't.'

'Oh, and don't forget your coil of rope and spade, you can put them in the chest.'

'But I still can't take it all away because the lid has come away from the chest.'

'Then put the lid back on the chest and fill it up with your treasures. I can assist you, together with some of my friends. Stay there.'

What an odd thing to say thought the pirate. He wasn't going anywhere, except up when, hopefully, his chest would be repaired.

The mermaid returned with some other mermaids and they set to putting the lid back on the chest with nails and driving them home with lumps of rocks from the sea floor. He thought he could have done that, except he didn't have any nails on his person. He wondered where the mermaids had found the nails, probably off an old shipwreck. He also wondered how on earth he and a few mermaids – he counted six in total – were going to lift the treasure up to the surface, after all the rope had broken when he had attempted to pull the chest up to the surface on his own. But now there were six mermaids and a pirate to lift the chest, so it should be possible.

As soon as the chest was filled with all the treasure – here George joined in helping – and the clasps shut Amaryllis and all the mermaids gathered in a circle round the chest.

‘We are going to raise the chest above our heads, and as soon as we do this you, George, will stand directly beneath the chest and place your hands on its underside, ready to push upwards. I will count to three and then we will all swim up towards the surface.’

‘Ready? One, two, three!’

It was a good many fathoms to the surface, and after some minutes he was beginning to feel really tired. His legs were aching and his arms were aching even more, with pushing up the chest and all its treasure, even though he had five mermaids to assist him. He wished he had fins like the mermaids, and he noticed, looking round as much as he could, that their fins were sweeping back and forth in a regular, rhythmic fashion, not slowing down at all. But gradually he noticed that the fins of the two mermaids in front of him were not straight anymore, but sweeping back and forth at an angle away from him. And he could feel the tips of the fins of the two mermaids behind him on his legs. They were still all going up, but also sideways!

George knew what was happening. They were being swept along by a current! It wasn’t a strong current, he could still see the two mermaids in front of him and feel the fins of the two mermaids behind him, and he was still supporting the chest, but the current was getting stronger by the minute. Very soon no-one would be able to support the chest and it

would sink down to the bottom of the sea and he would have to start all over again!

George felt the underside of the chest slipping away from him . . .

Oh no! He was going to have to start all over again . . .

Suddenly they all broke the surface together, to find that the sea was very choppy, and there was a strong wind blowing. But the chest was still being supported by six mermaids and a pirate! What a huge relief, thought George.

‘To those rocks over there!’ shouted Amaryllis. Fortunately the current had taken them all quite close to some rocks where George had tied up his boat, and from where he had swum out before swimming down to the bottom of the sea.

Amaryllis and her mermaids led the way, with George following. The current was still going in the same direction so no one had to swim very hard. Even so, George wished that he were a mermaid, with a large fin to thrust him along! If only he could have changed into a mermaid on his way up from the bottom . . .

When they reached the rocks George was able to clamber up out of the water and he lay on a large slab, panting. He was exhausted. He couldn’t help noticing, however, that neither Amaryllis nor her friends showed any signs of tiredness, let alone exhaustion.

‘Well, George, we’ll be off now.’ Then she added, ‘You will be sure to return all the treasure to its rightful owner?’

‘Yes, I will, Amaryllis, and thank you all’ – here he took in all the mermaids – ‘for your help in bringing up my chest.’

‘Glad to be of assistance,’ said Amaryllis. And her friends smiled and nodded.

‘Oh, another thing –’

But they had all disappeared beneath the waves, leaving just circles of water behind.

George was going to ask the other mermaids what their names were.

But that would have to wait until another time . . .



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