MERMAID

 The ferocious hurricane ambushed the pirate ship Vendetta, first with ominous dark clouds, then with fierce, blinding rain and howling winds. Captain Leegard tried to save his crew and his vessel, but his brave attempt was futile. With shattered masts and ripped canvas and her hold rapidly filling with sea water, the Vendetta crashed into a coral reef in the Bahamas. All were lost as she went down -- save one lucky but determined pirate: thirty-nine year old Nigel Goss, who clung to a floating portion of splintered oak mast.

 The year was 1686. The crew of the HMS Defiant had mutinied off the southern coast of Jamaica. They slit the throat of its cruel Royal Navy captain while he lay in his cabin bunk, and likewise disposed of the remaining officers and militiamen, throwing their bodies overboard to a hungry band of circling grey sharks. The Union Jack was burned, and a new pirate flag was fashioned and hoisted: black, with a white skull and two crossed cutlasses below it. The Defiant was renamed the Vendetta, and Basil Leegard was elected Captain by popular acclaim. The Vendetta then made her way to Port Royal, the infamous 'Sodom of the Caribbean,' where dozens of pirate ships could lay safely at anchor and re-provision, while their crews could enjoy over 600 taverns (1 for every 10 residents) and a bevy of eager prostitutes from various nationalities. Pirate vessels from as far away as Madagascar came here for unabashed marathons of drinking and whoring. Port Royal -- near Kingston Harbor in Jamaica -- was ideally situated to take full advantage of attacking and looting Spanish ships carrying their precious cargoes of gold and silver, from Cartagena and Panama, on their route back to Spain. The Vendetta was on her way to the Bermuda Islands via Charles Town (later renamed Nassau) in the Bahamas, in her quest for rich Spanish treasure, when the fatal hurricane struck.

 Nigel Goss had been at sea since age fifteen. He was born in Land's End -- the farthest point of rocky soil in southwestern England -- to a poor family of seven siblings. As a sailor in the Royal Navy these past twenty-four years, he was disgusted with its iron discipline and the readiness with which the lash was administered to the crew for minor offenses. The captains and officers on the several ships that Nigel had served were generally competent in matters of navigation and naval warfare, but they treated their sailors with contempt and cruelty. The use of press gangs to fill any sparse naval ranks was abhorrent. The food aboard ship was also miserable and barely edible. He had had enough abuse! His back -- like those of most Ordinary British seamen -- was heavily scarred from the lash. Thus, Goss was ready to mutiny, even though it meant a swift trial and then certain hanging if he and his mates were ever captured by a patrolling British man-o-war.

 Nigel's sole thought now was to somehow stay alive. All he had were the soaked clothes on his back, his shoes, and his belt knife. He looked in every direction through pouring rain and wind and saw nothing but churning sea. Up and down, up and down his broken oak mast bobbed. Gradually, however, the hurricane moved away, and the lone surviving pirate fell asleep. By dawn, the devastating storm had gone away to the northwest.

 The clear morning skies soon brought misery in the form of a blistering tropical sun. Nigel's salt-chaffed skin was roasting like pork on a spit, and painful rashes were rapidly erupting across his body. He was plagued with thirst, and his tongue was starting to swell. Goss had no idea where the sea currents were taking him, or for how long he might hope to live. His empty stomach growled with hunger. He remembered to keep his arms and legs out of the water, so as not to be attacked by sharks. Two more long days and nights passed. The mutineer never felt more forlorn.

 Suddenly, he saw her. Was it just his desperate imagination? Were his stinging, blood-shot eyes playing him tricks? Or could he actually be seeing a living mermaid?

 She was graceful and beautiful, with pale, milk-white skin, long greenish hair the color of kelp, green eyes, and a shy but welcoming smile. She kept herself just under the clear water. Nigel could tell she was naked above the waist, her firm breasts displaying pert, light brown nipples. Strangely, as best Goss could tell, the unusual maiden had no navel. Below her waist, however, was the green-scaled body of a substantial fish, with a large, webbed flipper gently moving back and forth to sustain her submerged buoyancy and position. The human part of her anatomy resembled that of a healthy, and very alluring, twenty-five year old woman.

 Nigel soon realized that the mermaid could read his thoughts, and that her questions and answers would likewise appear in his mind -- remarkably, in his own language.

 "You need help," she made it known.

 "Yes. I need fresh water and food. And I must be put on land again soon or I will die," he silently responded.

 "I will push you to an island not far away. Then I will bring you fish and seaweed to eat. You will live and be safe, human man."

 While the mermaid pushed the shipwrecked sailor's floating mast towards one of the hundreds of uncharted Bahamian islands, she asked, "What shall I call you?"

 Weakly, Goss sent his name mentally to his strange sea rescuer: "Nigel."

 "Ni-Gel," she acknowledged.

 "What is your name, then? How shall I call you?"

 "We merfolk have no need of names. We all know each other."

 "Merfolk? So mermaids and mermen both exist?"

 "Yes, and our children as well. Now you must rest your thoughts and your body, Ni-Gel, while I guide us to the island."

 An hour went by while Nigel slept. Upon awakening and looking around, he could see an island in the distance. It appeared about another hour away. Meanwhile, he wanted to know more about these remarkable half-human, half-sea creatures.

 "Our human legends say that mermaids are bad luck, and that seeing one means an upcoming disaster. Other legends say that mermaids tempt sailors to their deaths, and cause ships to get wrecked and sink. Yet you are helping me."

 "Ni-Gel, your legends are wrong. We rescue humans in need. Humans are our friends, like dolphins and whales. They are special creatures to us. We also collect any human items that are lost at sea. We keep them stored in our underwater colonies."

 "What about other legends that say mermaids can grow legs, and come up on land, and walk like female humans -- but only once a month, on the darkest night of the new moon?"

 "That is also not true, Ni-Gel. How could we breath air without lungs? How could we shed our flipper and grow legs and then reverse the change before the first light of dawn? It is not possible."

 The unlikely pair were now approaching the deserted tropical island the mermaid had promised. She halted when the water depth was about eight feet. "I can go no further, Ni-Gel. I must always stay under the sea. The sun above the waves is harmful to my skin. You can go ashore now. I will chase some fish into the shallows where you can catch them and eat them. I will also harvest some seaweed from their undersea beds and bring it near the surface for you."

 "Will I see you again? You have saved my life. I am most grateful." The pirate hoped to find fresh water somewhere on the island, and perhaps some coconut palms or wild bananas. Goss knew, however, that the flesh of raw fish held some fresh water, so he could survive on that. As for wild pigs or edible fowl, whether such available food existed here was unknown at this point.

 "Yes, Ni-Gel. I will return from time to time to help you if I can. But I must return to my merfolk colony now."

 "I understand. I thank you with all my heart. But can you find me a flint stone and bring it back with you? One can be found in the hammer of a pistol or rifle. With that, I can make sparks with my knife blade and build a fire. Then I can cook my food, and keep a signal fire lit day and night, and hopefully be rescued by a passing ship someday."

 "Yes, Ni-Gel, I will look in our collection of human objects for such a stone, and bring it back with me. But you must first eat and then rest now."

 For the next thirty minutes or so, the mermaid chased fish towards the shallow shoreline , where Goss could seize them. At first, his cramped legs and arms were weak and unsteady, but soon he went to work. He threw a dozen bonefish and six snook up on the sandy beach, then waded into the warm, salty water to gather the mass of green seaweed that the mermaid had floated to the surface. Then Nigel saw the flipper of his sea-born savior rise slightly above the surf and then fall from sight, as the mysterious female sea creature swam rapidly away, heading back to her undersea home colony. Starving for sustenance and nearly delirious from thirst, the mutineer expertly gutted a five-pound bonefish with his belt knife and sucked the life-giving liquids in its raw flesh first, then carefully chewed and swallowed the meat. This practice he repeated with some smaller two-pound snooks until he felt revived. Then Nigel went to sleep in the shade of the nearest grove of palm trees away from the shore.

 The ship-wrecked sailor slept peacefully for more than twelve hours, until the following morning. He ate some more raw fish, then looked for any crabs or signs of sea turtles or bird nests for their nourishing eggs. Nothing new was found.

 Next, Nigel visually surveyed the topography of the strange world where he was stranded -- and for who knew how long? The island was silent, save for the tropical breezes rustling the palm fronds. No sounds of birds or monkeys. The island did, however, have a large rocky peak in its center, perhaps two-hundred and fifty feet high. Nigel knew he needed to climb it soon to determine the extent of his kingdom. From its heights, he might also see beyond the flat horizon for any other nearby islands, or even spot a ship if he was lucky. His top priority, however, was to find a good supply of fresh water. For that, Goss figured that rainfall might cascade down the prominent rocky outcrop and possibly collect in pools near its base. So into the jungle interior of the island he went, towards the looming dark peak.

 It took him about an hour and a half of hot, sweaty marching through the shadowy landscape of trees and vines before he reached his destination. Along the way, he took note of various insect species, some harmless but others clearly pests, such as black flies, fire ants, and centipedes. He was heartened, however, when he first noticed several natural caves eroded in the base of the igneous rock of the island's sole peak.

 Entering the largest of the dim caves, Nigel noted with joyous relief several substantial pools of water, which must have percolated through the porous stone from the tropical rains and had collected there. Upon tasting the life-giving water, Goss was relieved to find it clear and untainted with salt. He eagerly drank his fill.

 Now, he needed to fashion some kind of container to fill with water to bring back to the beach. Or should he stay here and make the cave his home? Probably not, for fresh fish and the mermaid could only be found back at the shoreline, the pirate realized. But, while exploring further on the far side of his rocky peak, the fortunate sailor spied a welcomed grove of swaying coconut palms!

 Using his knife, he removed the husks from several fallen coconuts that lay on the ground. Next, using the tip of his blade, he carefully bored into the three coconut 'eyes' of one and drank its delicious, sweet milk. He repeated this process several times, then went back and filled three empty shells with fresh water from the discovered pools. Removing his tattered shirt, he collected seven untapped coconuts in it like a pouch and walked the ninety-minutes back to the beach, being careful not to spill his trio of water-filled shells, which he balanced in his left hand while pressing them against his bare chest.

 Over the coming days, Nigel learned to spear fish with a sharpened stick in the warm shallow waters of his beach front. He also fashioned a kind of head-covering out of a palm frond to protect his crown from the blistering sun. He went back and forth to his rocky peak -- which he dubbed Mt. Goss -- for more coconuts and water as needed. Sometimes, a tropical downpour would occur for an hour or so, and Nigel would remove his ragged clothes and happily rinse his grimy naked body off with cleansing rainwater. He also noted one morning nearby evidence of sea turtles coming ashore at night to lay their eggs in the warm island sands. Such eggs were dug up and greedily consumed raw by the pirate castaway.

 One day, having the strength to climb Mt. Goss and survey his surroundings at last, Nigel carefully negotiated his way up to its 250-foot summit. But what he saw was very discouraging: no other nearby islands, no rescue ships on the horizon, and nothing except endless blue sea in every direction. The mutineer was utterly stranded and completely alone. Will I ever see civilization somewhere again? he wondered. Nigel knew that he could never return to England without facing certain imprisonment and execution. He would have liked to see his parents and siblings again, but that was out of the question.

 Crestfallen, the pirate returned to his usual beach and rested under his familiar grove of shady palm trees. That was when he suddenly noticed that his mermaid -- his 'rescuing angel' and sea-friend -- had returned!

 She was calmly waiting just under the water in the eight-foot shallows, and was holding a rusty and rotting pistol barely above the waves.

 "We could not remove the flint stone from its hammer, so I brought the whole object," the mermaid slowly communicated to Nigel's mind. He joyfully swam out to her and gratefully took it.

 "I can use my knife blade to unscrew the flint," he mentally answered. "I thank your merfolk colony for finding this important object, and I especially thank you for bringing it."

 "Ni-Gel, you are healthy again. I am pleased."

 "I am so happy to see you! I have no one else to communicate with. I have more questions to ask about your life. For example, how can you know my language?"

 "We merfolk do not know, Ni-Gel. It just happens. I have helped sailors lost at sea from many countries, speaking many different thought-languages."

 "You mentioned children once before. How do mermaids reproduce, and how long do you live?"

 "The mermaids lay eggs when they are fertile. The mermen cover the eggs with their milt, like fish. Our children are hatchlings, but we feed them milk from our breasts like other sea mammals until they are old enough to normally consume fish and sea plants. Merfolk can also live up to 150 years, using your measurement of time. Like humans, we slowly grow old, weaken, and die."

 The mermaid stayed for a two-hour visit. She asked about Nigel's family, and what was it like living on land in England? She also asked about the storm that destroyed the Vendetta, and she especially wanted to know why humans fired deadly cannons at each other's ships and tried to kill each other. ("Such a strange human practice is a mystery to us merfolk. It serves no useful purpose.") Then she announced that she had to leave.

 "I can return only one more time, Ni-Gel. My merfolk colony is migrating far away to cooler northern waters for the coming summer. It must be so every year. But I will bring you a parting gift. Look for me on the night of the next full moon. I will be waiting for you here, at this same place. Farewell until then, Ni-Gel, my good human friend." And the beautiful and kindly mermaid swam away.

 The pirate castaway was sad at being left alone again, but he focused on removing with his knife blade the precious flint chip from the rotting and rusting pistol. Soon, the flint was free. Gathering some coconut husk fibers to use as dry tinder, and collecting assorted sticks and fallen tree fragments, Nigel coaxed sparks until he had his first fire started. Now he could finally cook his fish and later light a continuously burning signal fire -- low and smoky during the day, but brightly blazing at night!

 The mutineer kept a keen watch on the phases of the moon when it rose following many purple and pink sunsets -- anxiously awaiting its fullness and the return of his mermaid.

 At last, he saw her arrive and eagerly waded out to her, then swam a short distance to the eight-foot depth where she waited.

 "Ni-Gel, here is the gift I promised you," she made known in his mind. The mermaid carefully handed Goss an unusually heavy, yet standard-sized, decorated porcelain chamber pot with lid. Somewhat puzzled, the pirate removed the lid and looked inside. The interior was packed with hundreds of shiny gold coins -- indeed, it was a small fortune in Spanish pieces-of-eight!

 "We merfolk know that humans like you treasure such odd metal objects, though we cannot understand why. They are not food, nor are they any use to us. We have many, many of these shiny things collected in our underwater colony storehouses. We have found many such things on sunken human ships in seas and oceans everywhere. Perhaps you can find a use for my gift, Ni-Gel, once you are rescued by your own kind?"

 The pirate castaway was overwhelmed with the mermaid's thoughtful generosity. He regularly bobbed up and down in the water to catch breaths on the surface. Then he filled his lungs to their limit and went under the waves so as to be very close to the mermaid. Even in the moonlight filtering two feet down, Nigel could see the stunning mermaid's pure, milky skin, her firm breasts, her stunning green hair and eyes, her shy smile, and her green bottom-half with its fish scales and flipper. He temporarily placed his treasured gift on the sea bed sands a few feet below him.

 "I know I will never see you again, dear mermaid, yet I will never forget you. You saved my life. May I please ask you for one, last favor? I desperately want to kiss you once, by way of saying good-bye. It is a human wish. Will you permit me?"

 Seemingly surprised, the mermaid made no reply, but looked into his eyes. Nigel went up for a needed gulp of air but then immediately went back under the warm, tropical waves.

 "Ni-Gel, we merfolk are warned against ever touching a human. It is not wise. It is part of our tradition from ages past. We can help people in need but we must not get involved further with humans and their land lives. This is how merfolk have survived separately from people for thousands and thousands of your human years."

 "Please," Goss pleaded. "My spirit reaches out to your spirit." He bobbed up for another breath of air and quickly returned to face the hesitant mermaid.

 "But what is this action that you call 'a kiss?' Such a practice is unknown in my world." The mermaid seemed bewildered.

 "It is the brief, affectionate touching of the lips on the mouths with each other, " the sailor patiently explained.

 "I am not sure what will happen, but it seems a simple and hopefully harmless interchange... So you may kiss me once now, Ni-Gel..." The mermaid moved her lips towards the pirate's expectant face, her eyes open in alert observation.

 The three-second contact with the alluring young mermaid's lips was otherworldly. Although he needed another fresh gulp of air, he wanted to stay underwater with this remarkable creature forever. The mutineer's entire being was swept away to a unique place beyond time and space -- deep, primordial, mystical, and lovingly energizing. Utterly unique. Unforgettable...

 Their eyes met for the last time. The mermaid smiled and nodded. Then she turned and swam away. Nigel rushed to the surface and gasped for breath. He went under again to retrieve the chamber pot filled with gold doubloons and carried it back to the beach.

 For the next two months, the castaway thought about his special mermaid every day. His loneliness was agony. Nigel lit his signal fire and constantly kept it going. About once a week, he climbed Mt. Goss to look for any ships on the horizon. Then one day, he spotted one! Because it was still daylight, he went back to the beach and made his signal fire extra smoky. After a few hours, a large ship approached the island and lowered a jolly boat. But the pirate realized with shock that the ship was flying the Union Jack and not a pirate flag. And it was too late to try and hide.

 The ship was HMS Valiant, under the command of Captain Granville Faragher. The rescued mutineer confessed his story to Faragher, and told how the HMS Defiant/Vendetta went down in a raging hurricane with all hands save himself. Still dressed in his original shipwrecked rags and clutching his valuable chamber pot, Nigel went on the describe his unusual encounter with a living mermaid, and how she had saved him, and how she had gifted him with so many gold coins.

 "A very interesting tale, Ordinary Seaman Goss. Quite imaginative." The Captain sniffed, took a pinch of snuff from his desktop snuffbox, and sneezed to the side. He looked bemused for a moment, catching the eye of his First Officer, Tyler Stone, who was present as a witness. Then Granville got serious. "But you are still mutinous pirate scum, Goss, who, as a sailor of the Royal Navy, did indeed help steal one of His Majesty's ships, and participate in the murders of its lawful commander and all of his associates. As such, your gold coins are forfeited to The Crown, and you will put in irons until we return home to England. There, you will be given a fair trial and then placed in Newgate Prison until it is time for you to be hung by the neck until dead...Guards! Take the prisoner below!" Faragher barked, as Nigel was roughly hauled away. "And be thankful you are such a pitiful scarecrow that flogging will be unnecessary. I need you alive for the gallows, Goss, as an example to other fools who would defy the law!"

 Once imprisoned at Newgate months later-- and forbidden to even contact his family at Land's End -- Nigel tried to tell his fellow prisoners and even his sadistic jailers about his mysterious mermaid encounter. But no one believed him...

 No one, that is, except me...your humble chronicler who recorded this tale. My name is Wallace Poole. I happened to be visiting Newgate as a volunteer, reading Bible passages once a week to any interested prisoners, in hopes to save their souls from the fires of Hell before they went to meet their Maker at the end of a rope. Nigel Goss told me everything you have been reading. I even witnessed his awful hanging on a rainy dawn on 19th March 1687, and wrote of his sad demise to his poor surviving relatives.

 As for what he told me being truth or fancy, I must now leave that judgment to you...

 THE END

 by Jack Karolewski

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