

The Merbaby





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THE
MERBABY

PATIENCE BREWSTER
ILLUSTRATIONS

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Summary: When he and his brother, Josh, find a merbaby
caught in their fishing net, Larron, rejecting his brother's plan to sell the baby
and make a profit, discovers that there are greater treasures than gold.
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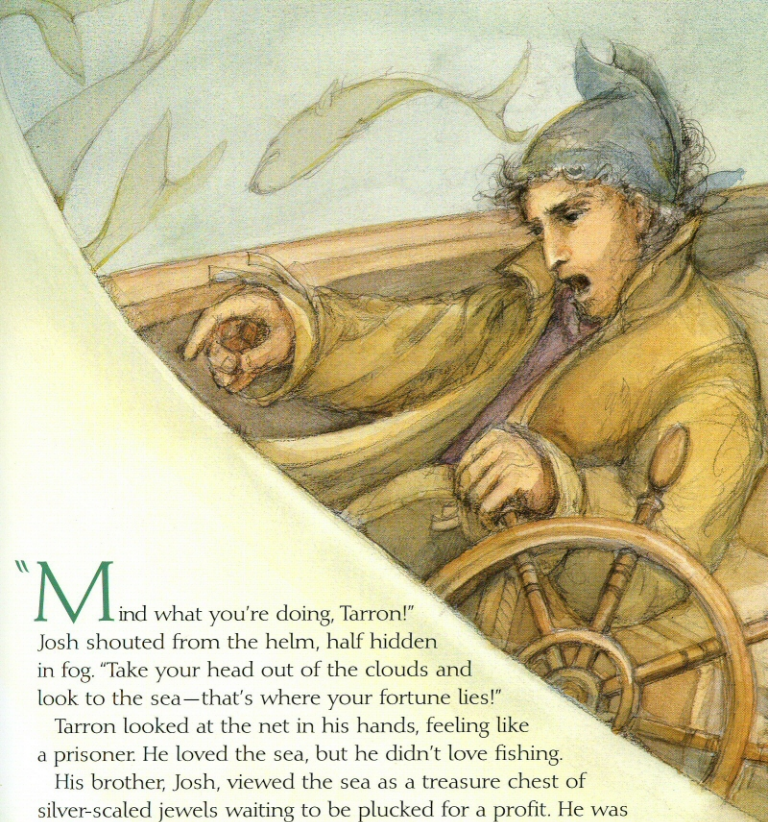
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In loving memory
of my brother, Tony—
the first of us to sail
beyond the horizon
T. B.

To Marietta,
the beautiful merbaby
I got to hold
for a while
P. B.







Mind what you're doing, Tarron!"

Josh shouted from the helm, half hidden in fog. "Take your head out of the clouds and look to the sea—that's where your fortune lies!"

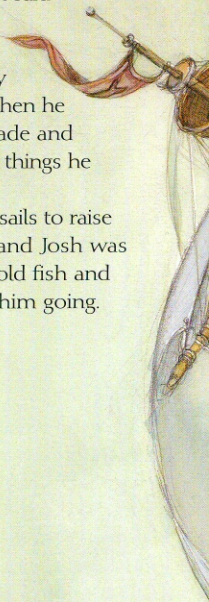
Tarron looked at the net in his hands, feeling like a prisoner. He loved the sea, but he didn't love fishing.

His brother, Josh, viewed the sea as a treasure chest of silver-scaled jewels waiting to be plucked for a profit. He was forever talking of that one great catch that would set them up for life.

It was his brother who had insisted they come here, to dangerous waters shunned by other fishermen. Josh said the fishing was rich enough to be worth the risk.

Tarron sighed. Truth be told, he wanted the money, too, though for a different reason. He hoped one day to buy his own ship and become his own master. Then he could follow the stars as they turned above him. Trade and travel, exploration and excitement—those were the things he longed for.

Now there were fish to be tipped into the hold, sails to raise or lower, and nets to be mended. It was a hard life, and Josh was a hard taskmaster. Tarron saw long years ahead of cold fish and scaly decks. Only the dream of his own ship kept him going.



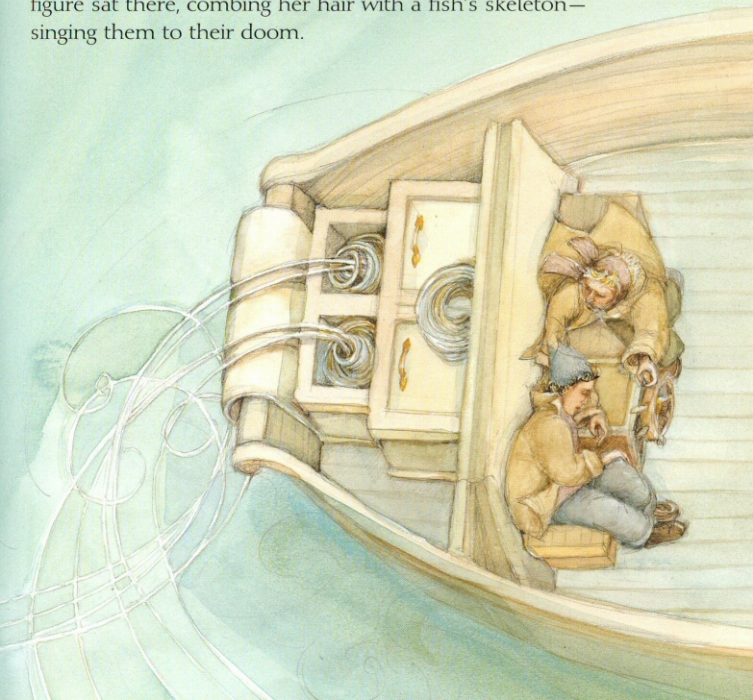




Because the dream filled his thoughts, Tarron did not at first hear the song weaving its way through the wind, but Josh heard it. The ship seemed pulled, and they tacked suddenly starboard.

Tarron glanced up. His brother's eyes were dull and glazed. Then Tarron heard it, too: a melody like a beckoning finger. He was alert enough to wrap his muffler tightly around his ears and leap for the wheel, swinging hard apart.

Ahead, a tiny island of solitary rocks jugged upward. A beautiful figure sat there, combing her hair with a fish's skeleton—singing them to their doom.





The mermaid's song faltered as she saw the ship veer. She raised angry eyes to Tarron's. He could barely tear his own eyes away. Then the sails caught the wind. As they turned, he imagined he could feel rocks scraping barnacles from the hull.

Many long minutes passed before the rock vanished in the fog and Tarron dared uncover his ears. He watched his brother blink and awaken from his daze.

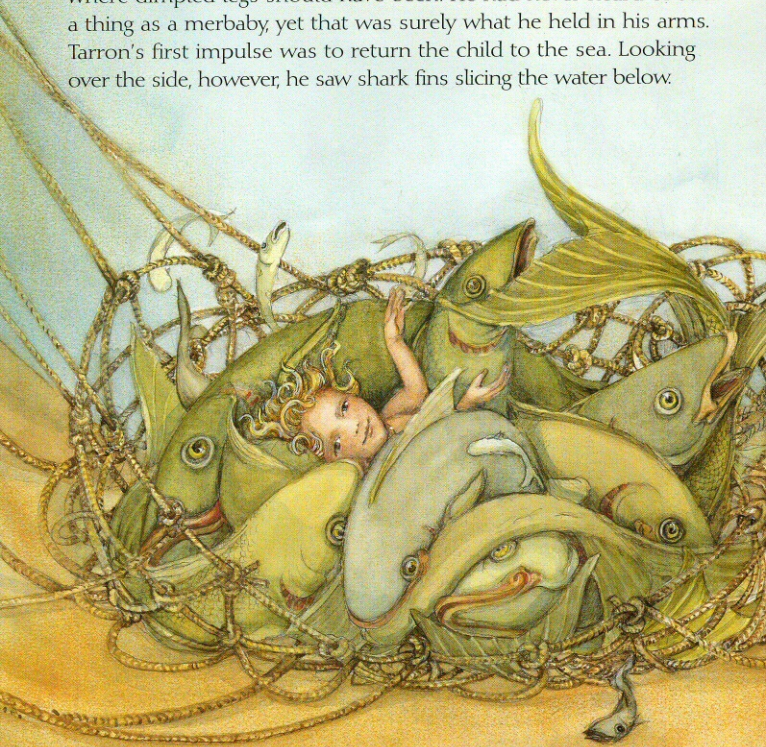
Josh did not at first believe Tarron's tale. When convinced, however, he turned on his brother angrily. "How often have I said that you must take what the sea offers? Why didn't you seize the chance and capture the mermaid? She would have been both our fortune and our fame."


Tarron's shoulders slumped. Surely his brother was wrong. Still, that night in his hammock, he thought of the wealth—and the ship—that might have been his if, indeed, he had captured the mermaid.



It was the next day that the nets hauled in an unexpected treasure. Tarron saw it first, blinked, then looked again. A baby's face peered out from among the fish. Tarron scanned the horizon for ships, but there was none to be seen. Yet, there in the net gurgled a small smiling face topped by golden curls.

Tarron lifted the child into his arms, only then seeing a fish's tail where dimpled legs should have been. He had never heard of such a thing as a merbaby, yet that was surely what he held in his arms. Tarron's first impulse was to return the child to the sea. Looking over the side, however, he saw shark fins slicing the water below.



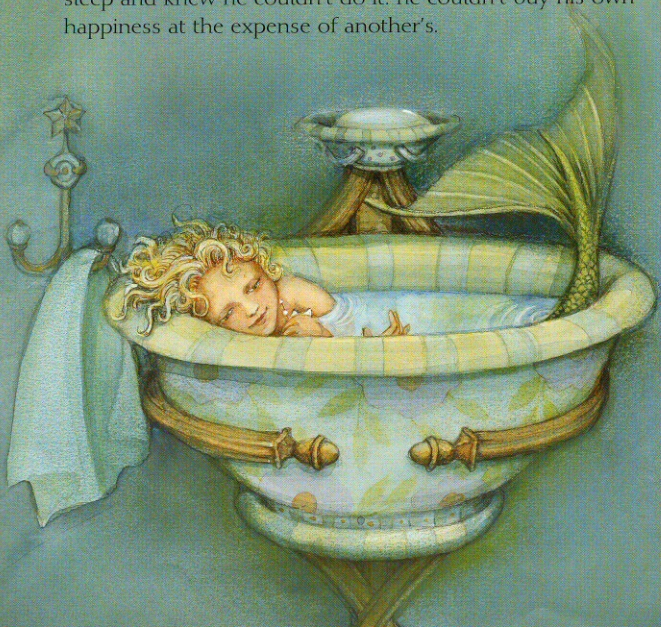
An illustration showing a mermaid with long, flowing blonde hair and a green tail, holding a small child with curly blonde hair. The child is wearing a blue necklace with a seashell pendant. They are positioned near a wooden structure, possibly a boat's railing, with a large white sail or canopy above them. The scene is set against a light blue background.

A small hand patted his cheek, and he looked into sea green eyes as plump arms circled his neck. A seashell necklace with the name *Meri* written in gold pressed against him, identifying the child as a girl. Then Josh caught sight of Tarron's "catch." "Good work!" he exclaimed, clapping Tarron on the back. "We can sell it, or put it in a glass cage and charge admission. Our fortune is made!"

Tarron glowed. For once he was not only accepted but admired. He also knew that the fortune his brother spoke of would mean his own freedom.

It wasn't until that night, as he lay in his hammock and heard the gentle splash of the merbaby in a washtub of seawater nearby, that doubts bubbled up in his mind. He fell asleep at last. In his dreams he saw the merbaby brought into port to be stared at by uncaring gawkers. He heard the clink of the coins he and his brother would earn and, beneath it, the soft sobbing of the merbaby trapped in a glass cage, never to know the sea again.

Tarron awoke in a cold sweat after only an hour of troubled sleep and knew he couldn't do it: he couldn't buy his own happiness at the expense of another's.







It was true that merfolk sought only the death of those born on the land, calling them to their doom with siren songs. Yet, would landfolk act differently if their shores were invaded by strangers taking whatever they wished? The hatred between the two groups was long-standing. Still, Tarron could not forget the feel of Meri's trusting arms curled around his neck.

"I'm a fool," Tarron admitted, but he knew what he had to do. He could no more take this merchild onto land than he could throw a human child into the sea. Nor would he toss Meri overboard, like a too-small fish, into strange waters far from her home. He needed to entrust her to another of her kind, and there was only one whose location was sure in his mind. He tried not to think of the danger.

Tarron smiled into the washtub, then strode on deck. "I can't sleep," he said to Josh. "I thought I'd do the night watch, since I'm awake."

Josh smiled. "All the more time for me to dream of coming riches."





When snores filled the night air, Tarron gently twisted the wheel, returning them eastward. The ship swiftly swallowed the miles before it.

It was nearly dawn when Tarron knew he had to leave the ship behind. It would not be fair to risk his brother's life as well as his own. He tiptoed into the cabin and carefully lifted the washtub with the merbaby. Saltwater soaked his feet as he carried the tub to the ship's dingy. He threw a few supplies into the boat, then lowered it.

Tarron turned the ship west again, lashing the wheel in place. Then he tucked a candle in his pocket and slid down a rope to the dingy below, where Meri greeted him with a smile and a splash.

He rowed east as the ship sailed west. They surged across the waves, stopping only at noon to eat and for Tarron to make a tent of his jacket over the washtub.

The sun was halfway to the horizon when he heard the first wisps of a song settling across the sea like a fishing net. Quickly Tarron dug the warm candle from his pocket, molding the wax off the wick into two plugs that he placed carefully in his ears. Suddenly the world became eerily still. Waves moved soundlessly in a silent sea. Ahead he caught a glimpse of stones. He rowed on, glancing over his shoulder as the jagged rocks grew to fill his horizon.

Then he saw her: the mermaid, her lips moving in song and her eyes dark with mystery. He shipped the oars as the boat neared the rocks, letting it drift in.

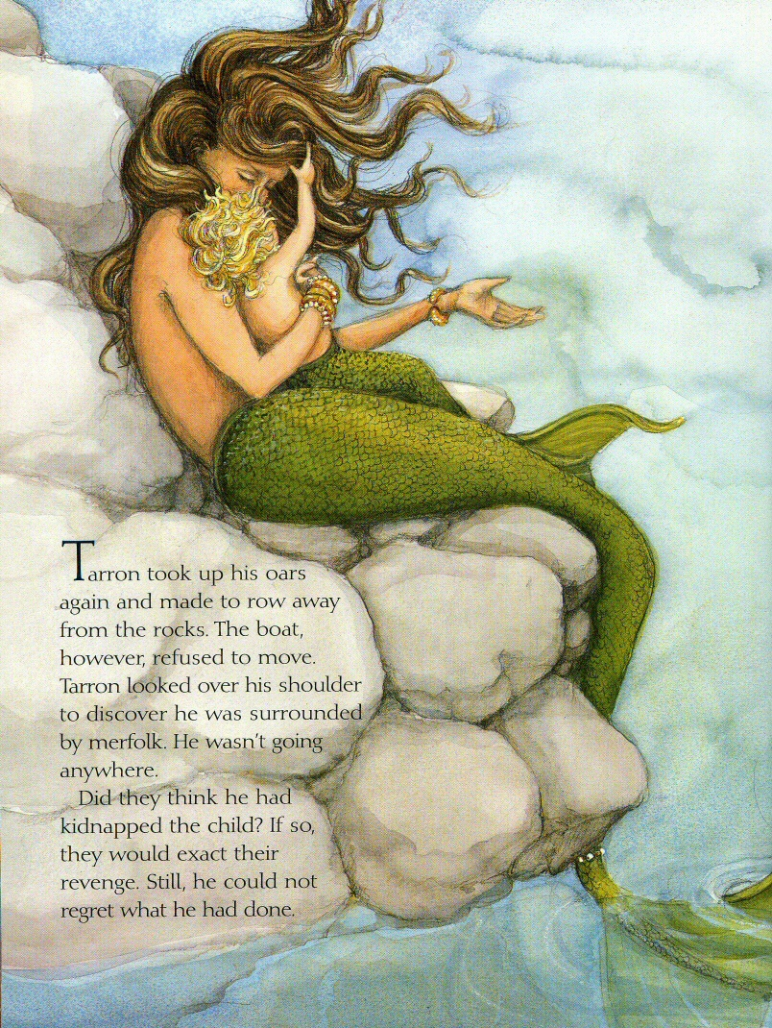




The mermaid's lips stilled, and her eyes were wide in amazement, pinned to the merbaby in the washtub. Tarron scooped Meri out of the water, giving her a gentle kiss before placing her in the mermaid's arms. "Can you find her family?" he asked, the words echoing strangely behind stopped-up ears.

The mermaid nodded silently, solemnly. Then she gave a cry he could not hear.





Tarron took up his oars again and made to row away from the rocks. The boat, however, refused to move. Tarron looked over his shoulder to discover he was surrounded by merfolk. He wasn't going anywhere.

Did they think he had kidnapped the child? If so, they would exact their revenge. Still, he could not regret what he had done.



The mermaid motioned to Tarron's ears. Since he was already their prisoner, he removed the wax. Her voice was musical as she spoke, yet Tarron felt none of the compulsion of her song. "Come."



Tarron scrambled up to the mermaid. He stood beside her and scanned the sea. It was alive with bobbing heads focused on the rocks. Tarron felt like a condemned prisoner facing execution.

The mermaid spoke again, and her voice rang over the waves. "What was lost has been found. What was taken has been returned. Let us do the same."

There was a sheen of silver as a thousand tails flicked the sea.

Soon they were back, carrying treasures from ships that had met their doom in merfolk waters: pearl necklaces, gold coins, jewels of all kinds. These were placed into Tarron's small boat until it nearly sank from the weight.





"I didn't return Meri for a reward," he protested.

"All the more reason you should have one," the mermaid replied. "You risked all to return her. We never thought to see such courage or kindness from a land-man. From this time forth you shall be called mer-friend, and will always find a welcome in our waters."

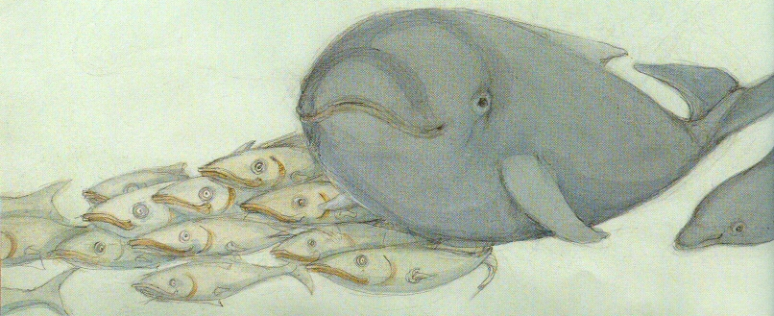
He bowed awkwardly to the mermaid, let Meri grasp his finger one last time, then scrambled down the rocks again.

Cautiously stepping into the well-laden boat, Tarron dug the oars out. He knew he couldn't make it safely to land with so much weight in the boat. He began to edge away gently, thinking he'd lighten his load when out of sight of his new friends.



He had underestimated them, however. As soon as he was away from the rocks, the boat was surrounded by a vast school of fish that caught the wooden vessel up on their myriad backs and carried him swiftly away, leaving only when he was in sight of port.

Tarron shared his fortune with his brother, then purchased a smart ship with crisp white sails. He returned from each voyage with rare treasures and fantastic tales.





Still, through
all the years,
the treasure
he always held
closest to his heart
was the memory
of the merbaby's
smile.

