

15. The Lonesome Duck

Trot and Cap'n Bill stood before the Magic Flower, actually rooted to the spot.

"Aren't you hungry, Cap'n?" asked the little girl, with a long sigh, for she had been standing there for hours and hours.

"Well," replied the sailor-man, "I ain't sayin' as I couldn't EAT, Trot--if a dinner was handy--but I guess old folks don't get as hungry as young folks do."

"I'm not sure 'bout that, Cap'n Bill," she said thoughtfully. "Age MIGHT make a difference, but seems to me SIZE would make a bigger difference. Seeing you're twice as big as me, you ought to be twice as hungry."

"I hope I am," he rejoined, "for I can stand it a while longer. I do hope the Glass Cat will hurry, and I hope the Wizard won't waste time a-comin' to us."

Trot sighed again and watched the wonderful Magic Flower, because there was nothing else to do. Just now a lovely group of pink peonies budded and bloomed, but soon they faded away, and a mass of deep blue lilies took their place. Then some yellow chrysanthemums blossomed on the plant, and when they had opened all their petals and reached perfection, they gave way to a lot of white floral balls spotted with crimson--a flower Trot had never seen before.

"But I get awful tired watchin' flowers an' flowers an' flowers," she said impatiently.

"They're might pretty," observed Cap'n Bill.

"I know; and if a person could come and look at the Magic Flower just when she felt like it, it would be a fine thing, but to HAVE TO stand and watch it, whether you want to or not, isn't so much fun. I wish, Cap'n Bill, the thing would grow fruit for a while instead of flowers."

Scarcely had she spoken when the white balls with crimson spots faded away and a lot of beautiful ripe peaches took their place. With a cry of mingled surprise and delight Trot reached out and plucked a peach from the bush and began to eat it, finding it delicious. Cap'n Bill was somewhat dazed at the girl's wish being granted so quickly, so before he could pick a peach they had faded away and bananas took their place. "Grab one, Cap'n!" exclaimed Trot, and even while eating the peach she seized a banana with her other hand and tore it from the bush.

The old sailor was still bewildered. He put out a hand indeed, but he was too late, for now the bananas disappeared and lemons took their place.

"Pshaw!" cried Trot. "You can't eat those things; but watch out, Cap'n, for something else."

Cocoanuts next appeared, but Cap'n Bill shook his head.

"Ca'n't crack 'em," he remarked, "'cause we haven't anything handy to smash 'em with."

"Well, take one, anyhow," advised Trot; but the cocoanuts were gone now, and a deep, purple, pear-shaped fruit which was unknown to them took their place. Again Cap'n Bill hesitated, and Trot said to him:

"You ought to have captured a peach and a banana, as I did. If you're not careful, Cap'n, you'll miss all your chances. Here, I'll divide my banana with you."

Even as she spoke, the Magic Plant was covered with big red apples, growing on every branch, and Cap'n Bill hesitated no longer. He grabbed with both hands and picked two apples, while Trot had only time to secure one before they were gone.

"It's curious," remarked the sailor, munching his apple, "how these fruits keep good when you've picked 'em, but dis'pear inter thin air if they're left on the bush."

"The whole thing is curious," declared the girl, "and it couldn't exist in any country but this, where magic is so common. Those are limes. Don't pick 'em, for they'd pucker up your mouth and--Ooo! here come plums!" and she tucked her apple in her apron pocket and captured three plums--each one almost as big as an egg--before they disappeared. Cap'n Bill got some too, but both were too hungry to fast any longer, so they began eating their apples and plums and let the magic bush bear all sorts of fruits, one after another. The Cap'n stopped once to pick a fine cantaloupe, which he held under his arm, and Trot, having finished her plums, got a handful of cherries and an orange; but when almost every sort of fruit had appeared on the bush, the crop ceased and only flowers, as before, bloomed upon it.

"I wonder why it changed back," mused Trot, who was not worried because she had enough fruit to satisfy her hunger.

"Well, you only wished it would bear fruit 'for a while,'" said the sailor, "and it did. P'raps if you'd said 'forever,' Trot, it would have always been fruit."

"But why should MY wish be obeyed?" asked the girl. "I'm not a fairy or a wizard or any kind of a magic-maker."

"I guess," replied Cap'n Bill, "that this little island is a magic island, and any folks on it can tell the bush what to produce, an' it'll produce it."

"Do you think I could wish for anything else, Cap'n and get it?" she inquired anxiously.

"What are you thinkin' of, Trot?"

"I'm thinking of wishing that these roots on our feet would disappear, and let us free."

"Try it, Trot."

So she tried it, and the wish had no effect whatever.

"Try it yourself, Cap'n," she suggested.

Then Cap'n Bill made the wish to be free, with no better result.

"No," said he, "it's no use; the wishes only affect the Magic Plant; but I'm glad we can make it bear fruit, 'cause now we know we won't starve before the Wizard gets to us."

"But I'm gett'n' tired standing here so long," complained the girl. "If I could only lift one foot, and rest it, I'd feel better."

"Same with me, Trot. I've noticed that if you've got to do a thing, and can't help yourself, it gets to be a hardship mighty quick."

"Folks that can raise their feet don't appreciate what a blessing it is," said Trot thoughtfully. "I never knew before what fun it is to raise one foot, an' then another, any time you feel like it."

"There's lots o' things folks don't 'preciate," replied the sailor-man. "If somethin' would 'most stop your breath, you'd think breathin' easy was the finest thing in life. When a person's well, he don't realize how jolly it is, but when he gets sick he 'members the time he was well, an' wishes that time would come back. Most folks forget to thank God for givin' 'em two good legs,

till they lose one o' 'em, like I did; and then it's too late, 'cept to praise God for leavin' one."

"Your wooden leg ain't so bad, Cap'n," she remarked, looking at it critically. "Anyhow, it don't take root on a Magic Island, like our meat legs do."

"I ain't complainin'," said Cap'n Bill. "What's that swimmin' towards us, Trot?" he added, looking over the Magic Flower and across the water.

The girl looked, too, and then she replied.

"It's a bird of some sort. It's like a duck, only I never saw a duck have so many colors."

The bird swam swiftly and gracefully toward the Magic Isle, and as it drew nearer its gorgeously colored plumage astonished them. The feathers were of many hues of glistening greens and blues and purples, and it had a yellow head with a red plume, and pink, white and violet in its tail. When it reached the Isle, it came ashore and approached them, waddling slowly and turning its head first to one side and then to the other, so as to see the girl and the sailor better.

"You're strangers," said the bird, coming to a halt near them, "and you've been caught by the Magic Isle and made prisoners."

"Yes," returned Trot, with a sigh; "we're rooted. But I hope we won't grow."

"You'll grow small," said the Bird. "You'll keep growing smaller every day, until bye and bye there'll be nothing left of you. That's the usual way, on this Magic Isle."

"How do you know about it, and who are you, anyhow?" asked Cap'n Bill.

"I'm the Lonesome Duck," replied the bird. "I suppose you've heard of me?"

"No," said Trot, "I can't say I have. What makes you lonesome?"

"Why, I haven't any family or any relations," returned the Duck.

"Haven't you any friends?"

"Not a friend. And I've nothing to do. I've lived a long time, and I've got to live forever, because I belong in the Land of Oz, where no living thing dies. Think of existing year after year, with no friends, no family, and nothing to do! Can you wonder I'm lonesome?"

"Why don't you make a few friends, and find something to do?" inquired Cap'n Bill.

"I can't make friends because everyone I meet--bird, beast, or person--is disagreeable to me. In a few minutes I shall be unable to bear your society longer, and then I'll go away and leave you," said the Lonesome Duck. "And, as for doing anything, there's no use in it. All I meet are doing something, so I have decided it's common and uninteresting and I prefer to remain lonesome."

"Don't you have to hunt for your food?" asked Trot.

"No. In my diamond palace, a little way up the river, food is magically supplied me; but I seldom eat, because it is so common."

"You must be a Magician Duck," remarked Cap'n Bill.

"Why so?"

"Well, ordinary ducks don't have diamond palaces an' magic food, like you do."

"True; and that's another reason why I'm lonesome. You must remember I'm the only Duck in the Land of Oz, and I'm not like any other duck in the outside world."

"Seems to me you LIKE bein' lonesome," observed Cap'n Bill.

"I can't say I like it, exactly," replied the Duck, "but since it seems to be my fate, I'm rather proud of it."

"How do you s'pose a single, solitary Duck happened to be in the Land of Oz?" asked Trot, wonderingly.

"I used to know the reason, many years ago, but I've quite forgotten it," declared the Duck. "The reason for a thing is never so important as the thing itself, so there's no use remembering anything but the fact that I'm lonesome."

"I guess you'd be happier if you tried to do something," asserted Trot. "If you can't do anything for yourself, you can do things for others, and then you'd get lots of friends and stop being lonesome."

"Now you're getting disagreeable," said the Lonesome Duck, "and I shall have to go and leave you."

"Can't you help us any," pleaded the girl. "If there's anything magic about you, you might get us out of this scrape."

"I haven't any magic strong enough to get you off the Magic Isle," replied the Lonesome Duck. "What magic I possess is very simple, but I find it enough for my own needs."

"If we could only sit down a while, we could stand it better," said Trot, "but we have nothing to sit on."

"Then you will have to stand it," said the Lonesome Duck.

"P'raps you've enough magic to give us a couple of stools," suggested Cap'n Bill.

"A duck isn't supposed to know what stools are," was the reply.

"But you're different from all other ducks."

"That is true." The strange creature seemed to reflect for a moment, looking at them sharply from its round black eyes. Then it said: "Sometimes, when the sun is hot, I grow a toadstool to shelter me from its rays. Perhaps you could sit on toadstools."

"Well, if they were strong enough, they'd do," answered Cap'n Bill.

"Then, before I do I'll give you a couple," said the Lonesome Duck, and began waddling about in a small circle. It went around the circle to the right three times, and then it went around to the left three times. Then it hopped backward three times and forward three times.

"What are you doing?" asked Trot.

"Don't interrupt. This is an incantation," replied the Lonesome Duck, but now it began making a succession of soft noises that sounded like quacks and seemed to mean nothing at all. And it kept up these sounds so long that Trot finally exclaimed:

"Can't you hurry up and finish that 'cantation? If it takes all summer to make a couple of toadstools, you're not much of a magician."

"I told you not to interrupt," said the Lonesome Duck, sternly. "If you get TOO disagreeable, you'll drive me away before I finish this incantation."

Trot kept quiet, after the rebuke, and the Duck resumed the quacky muttering. Cap'n Bill chuckled a little to himself and remarked to Trot in a whisper: "For a bird that ain't got anything to do, this Lonesome Duck is

makin' consider'ble fuss. An' I ain't sure, after all, as toadstools would be worth sittin' on."

Even as he spoke, the sailor-man felt something touch him from behind and, turning his head, he found a big toadstool in just the right place and of just the right size to sit upon. There was one behind Trot, too, and with a cry of pleasure the little girl sank back upon it and found it a very comfortable seat--solid, yet almost like a cushion. Even Cap'n Bill's weight did not break his toadstool down, and when both were seated, they found that the Lonesome Duck had waddled away and was now at the water's edge.

"Thank you, ever so much!" cried Trot, and the sailor called out: "Much obliged!"

But the Lonesome Duck paid no attention. Without even looking in their direction again, the gaudy fowl entered the water and swam gracefully away.