

Chapter Two - The Cavern Under the Sea

The circles were so much smaller at the bottom of the basin, and the boat moved so much more swiftly, that Trot was beginning to get dizzy with the motion, when suddenly the boat made a leap and dived headlong into the murky depths of the hole. Whirling like tops, but still clinging together, the sailor and the girl were separated from their boat and plunged down--down--down--into the farthestmost recesses of the great ocean.

At first their fall was swift as an arrow, but presently they seemed to be going more moderately and Trot was almost sure that unseen arms were about her, supporting her and protecting her. She could see nothing, because the water filled her eyes and blurred her vision, but she clung fast to Cap'n Bill's sou'wester, while other arms clung fast to her, and so they gradually sank down and down until a full stop was made, when they began to ascend again.

But it seemed to Trot that they were not rising straight to the surface from where they had come. The water was no longer whirling them and they seemed to be drawn in a slanting direction through still, cool ocean depths. And then--in much quicker time than I have told it--up they popped to the surface and were cast at full length upon a sandy beach, where they lay choking and gasping for breath and wondering what had happened to them.

Trot was the first to recover. Disengaging herself from Cap'n Bill's wet embrace and sitting up, she rubbed the water from her eyes and then looked around her. A soft, bluish-green glow lighted the place, which seemed to be a sort of cavern, for above and on either side of her were rugged rocks. They had been cast upon a beach of clear sand, which slanted upward from the pool of water at their feet--a pool which doubtless led into the big ocean that fed it. Above the reach of the waves of the pool were more rocks, and still more and more, into the dim windings and recesses of which the glowing light from the water did not penetrate.

The place looked grim and lonely, but Trot was thankful that she was still alive and had suffered no severe injury during her trying adventure under water. At her side Cap'n Bill was sputtering and coughing, trying to get rid of the water he had swallowed. Both of them were soaked through, yet the cavern was warm and comfortable and a wetting did not dismay the little girl in the least.

She crawled up the slant of sand and gathered in her hand a bunch of dried seaweed, with which she mopped the face of Cap'n Bill and cleared the water from his eyes and ears. Presently the old man sat up and stared at her intently. Then he nodded his bald head three times and said in a gurgling voice:

"Mighty good, Trot; mighty good! We didn't reach Davy Jones's locker that time, did we? Though why we didn't, an' why we're here, is more'n I kin make out."

"Take it easy, Cap'n," she replied. "We're safe enough, I guess, at least for the time being."

He squeezed the water out of the bottoms of his loose trousers and felt of his wooden leg and arms and head, and finding he had brought all of his person with him he gathered courage to examine closely their surroundings.

"Where d'ye think we are, Trot?" he presently asked.

"Can't say, Cap'n. P'r'aps in one of our caves."

He shook his head. "No," said he, "I don't think that, at all. The distance we came up didn't seem half as far as the distance we went down; an' you'll notice there ain't any outside entrance to this cavern whatever. It's a reg'lar dome over this pool o' water, and unless there's some passage at the back, up yonder, we're fast pris'ners."

Trot looked thoughtfully over her shoulder.

"When we're rested," she said, "we will crawl up there and see if there's a way to get out."

Cap'n Bill reached in the pocket of his oilskin coat and took out his pipe. It was still dry, for he kept it in an oilskin pouch with his tobacco. His matches were in a tight tin box, so in a few moments the old sailor was smoking contentedly. Trot knew it helped him to think when he was in any difficulty. Also, the pipe did much to restore the old sailor's composure, after his long ducking and his terrible fright--a fright that was more on Trot's account than his own.

The sand was dry where they sat, and soaked up the water that dripped from their clothing. When Trot had squeezed the wet out of her hair she began to feel much like her old self again. By and by they got upon their feet and crept

up the incline to the scattered boulders above. Some of these were of huge size, but by passing between some and around others, they were able to reach the extreme rear of the cavern.

"Yes," said Trot, with interest, "here's a round hole."

"And it's black as night inside it," remarked Cap'n Bill.

"Just the same," answered the girl, "we ought to explore it, and see where it goes, 'cause it's the only poss'ble way we can get out of this place."

Cap'n Bill eyed the hole doubtfully

"It may be a way out o' here, Trot," he said, "but it may be a way into a far worse place than this. I'm not sure but our best plan is to stay right here."

Trot wasn't sure, either, when she thought of it in that light. After awhile she made her way back to the sands again, and Cap'n Bill followed her. As they sat down, the child looked thoughtfully at the sailor's bulging pockets.

"How much food have we got, Cap'n?" she asked.

"Half a dozen ship's biscuits an' a hunk o' cheese," he replied. "Want some now, Trot?"

She shook her head, saying:

"That ought to keep us alive 'bout three days if we're careful of it."

"Longer'n that, Trot," said Cap'n Bill, but his voice was a little troubled and unsteady.

"But if we stay here we're bound to starve in time," continued the girl, "while if we go into the dark hole--"

"Some things are more hard to face than starvation," said the sailor-man, gravely. "We don't know what's inside that dark hole: Trot, nor where it might lead us to."

"There's a way to find that out," she persisted.

Instead of replying, Cap'n Bill began searching in his pockets. He soon drew out a little package of fish-hooks and a long line. Trot watched him join them together. Then he crept a little way up the slope and turned over a big rock. Two or three small crabs began scurrying away over the sands and the old

sailor caught them and put one on his hook and the others in his pocket. Coming back to the pool he swung the hook over his shoulder and circled it around his head and cast it nearly into the center of the water, where he allowed it to sink gradually, paying out the line as far as it would go. When the end was reached, he began drawing it in again, until the crab bait was floating on the surface.

Trot watched him cast the line a second time, and a third. She decided that either there were no fishes in the pool or they would not bite the crab bait. But Cap'n Bill was an old fisherman and not easily discouraged. When the crab got away he put another on the hook. When the crabs were all gone he climbed up the rocks and found some more.

Meantime Trot tired of watching him and lay down upon the sands, where she fell fast asleep. During the next two hours her clothing dried completely, as did that of the old sailor. They were both so used to salt water that there was no danger of taking cold.

Finally the little girl was wakened by a splash beside her and a grunt of satisfaction from Cap'n Bill. She opened her eyes to find that the Cap'n had landed a silver-scaled fish weighing about two pounds. This cheered her considerably and she hurried to scrape together a heap of seaweed, while Cap'n Bill cut up the fish with his jackknife and got it ready for cooking.

They had cooked fish with seaweed before. Cap'n Bill wrapped his fish in some of the weed and dipped it in the water to dampen it. Then he lighted a match and set fire to Trot's heap, which speedily burned down to a glowing bed of ashes. Then they laid the wrapped fish on the ashes, covered it with more seaweed, and allowed this to catch fire and burn to embers. After feeding the fire with seaweed for some time, the sailor finally decided that their supper was ready, so he scattered the ashes and drew out the bits of fish, still encased in their smoking wrappings.

When these wrappings were removed, the fish was found thoroughly cooked and both Trot and Cap'n Bill ate of it freely. It had a slight flavor of seaweed and would have been better with a sprinkling of salt.

The soft glow which until now had lighted the cavern, began to grow dim, but there was a great quantity of seaweed in the place, so after they had eaten their fish they kept the fire alive for a time by giving it a handful of fuel now and then.

From an inner pocket the sailor drew a small flask of battered metal and unscrewing the cap handed it to Trot. She took but one swallow of the water although she wanted more, and she noticed that Cap'n Bill merely wet his lips with it.

"S'pose," said she, staring at the glowing seaweed fire and speaking slowly, "that we can catch all the fish we need; how 'bout the drinking-water, Cap'n?"

He moved uneasily but did not reply. Both of them were thinking about the dark hole, but while Trot had little fear of it the old man could not overcome his dislike to enter the place. He knew that Trot was right, though. To remain in the cavern, where they now were, could only result in slow but sure death.

It was nighttime up on the earth's surface, so the little girl became drowsy and soon fell asleep. After a time the old sailor slumbered on the sands beside her. It was very still and nothing disturbed them for hours. When at last they awoke the cavern was light again.

They had divided one of the biscuits and were munching it for breakfast when they were startled by a sudden splash in the pool. Looking toward it they saw emerging from the water the most curious creature either of them had ever beheld. It wasn't a fish, Trot decided, nor was it a beast. It had wings, though, and queer wings they were: shaped like an inverted chopping-bowl and covered with tough skin instead of feathers. It had four legs--much like the legs of a stork, only double the number--and its head was shaped a good deal like that of a poll parrot, with a beak that curved downward in front and upward at the edges, and was half bill and half mouth. But to call it a bird was out of the question, because it had no feathers whatever except a crest of wavy plumes of a scarlet color on the very top of its head. The strange creature must have weighed as much as Cap'n Bill, and as it floundered and struggled to get out of the water to the sandy beach it was so big and unusual that both Trot and her companion stared at it in wonder--in wonder that was not unmixed with fear.