

CHAPTER 2 - THE MERMAIDS

The next morning, as soon as Trot had helped wipe the breakfast dishes and put them away in the cupboard, the little girl and Cap'n Bill started out toward the bluff. The air was soft and warm and the sun turned the edges of the waves into sparkling diamonds. Across the bay the last of the fisherboats was speeding away out to sea, for well the fishermen knew this was an ideal day to catch rockbass, barracuda and yellowtail.

The old man and the young girl stood on the bluff and watched all this with interest. Here was their world. "It isn't a bit rough this morning. Let's have a boat ride, Cap'n Bill," said the child.

"Suits me to a T," declared the sailor. So they found the winding path that led down the face of the cliff to the narrow beach below and cautiously began the descent. Trot never minded the steep path or the loose rocks at all, but Cap'n Bill's wooden leg was not so useful on a downgrade as on a level, and he had to be careful not to slip and take a tumble.

But by and by they reached the sands and walked to a spot just beneath the big acacia tree that grew on the bluff. Halfway to the top of the cliff hung suspended a little shed-like structure that sheltered Trot's rowboat, for it was necessary to pull the boat out of reach of the waves which beat in fury against the rocks at high tide. About as high up as Cap'n Bill could reach was an iron ring securely fastened to the cliff, and to this ring was tied a rope. The old sailor unfastened the knot and began paying out the rope, and the rowboat came out of its shed and glided slowly downward to the beach. It hung on a pair of davits and was lowered just as a boat is lowered from a ship's side. When it reached the sands, the sailor unhooked the ropes and pushed the boat to the water's edge. It was a pretty little craft, light and strong, and Cap'n Bill knew how to sail it or row it, as Trot might desire.

Today they decided to row, so the girl climbed into the bow and her companion stuck his wooden leg into the water's edge "so he wouldn't get his foot wet" and pushed off the little boat as he climbed aboard. Then he seized the oars and began gently paddling.

"Whither away, Commodore Trot?" he asked gaily.

"I don't care, Cap'n. It's just fun enough to be on the water," she answered, trailing one hand overboard. So he rowed around by the North Promontory, where

the great caves were, and much as they were enjoying the ride, they soon began to feel the heat of the sun.

"That's Dead Man's Cave, 'cause a skellington was found there," observed the child as they passed a dark, yawning mouth in the cliff. "And that's Bumble Cave, 'cause the bumblebees make nests in the top of it. And here's Smuggler's Cave, 'cause the smugglers used to hide things in it."

She knew all the caves well, and so did Cap'n Bill. Many of them opened just at the water's edge, and it was possible to row their boat far into their dusky depths.

"And here's Echo Cave," she continued, dreamily, as they slowly moved along the coast, "and Giant's Cave, and--oh, Cap'n Bill! Do you s'pose there were ever any giants in that cave?"

"Pears like there must o' been, Trot, or they wouldn't o' named it that name," he replied, pausing to wipe his bald head with the red handkerchief while the oars dragged in the water.

"We've never been into that cave, Cap'n," she remarked, looking at the small hole in the cliff--an archway through which the water flowed. "Let's go in now."

"What for, Trot?"

"To see if there's a giant there."

"Hm. Aren't you 'fraid?"

"No, are you? I just don't b'lieve it's big enough for a giant to get into."

"Your father was in there once," remarked Cap'n Bill, "an' he says it's the biggest cave on the coast, but low down. It's full o' water, an' the water's deep down to the very bottom o' the ocean; but the rock roof's liable to bump your head at high tide ."

"It's low tide now," returned Trot. "And how could any giant live in there if the roof is so lowdown?"

"Why, he couldn't, mate. I reckon they must have called it Giant's Cave 'cause it's so big, an' not 'cause any giant man lived there."

"Let's go in," said the girl again. "I'd like to 'splore it."

"All right," replied the sailor. "It'll be cooler in there than out here in the sun. We won't go very far, for when the tide turns we mightn't get out again." He picked up the oars and rowed slowly toward the cave. The black archway that marked its

entrance seemed hardly big enough to admit the boat at first, but as they drew nearer, the opening became bigger. The sea was very calm here, for the headland shielded it from the breeze.

"Look out fer your head, Trot!" cautioned Cap'n Bill as the boat glided slowly into the rocky arch. But it was the sailor who had to duck, instead of the little girl. Only for a moment, though. Just beyond the opening the cave was higher, and as the boat floated into the dim interior they found themselves on quite an extensive branch of the sea. For a time neither of them spoke and only the soft lapping of the water against the sides of the boat was heard. A beautiful sight met the eyes of the two adventurers and held them dumb with wonder and delight.

It was not dark in this vast cave, yet the light seemed to come from underneath the water, which all around them glowed with an exquisite sapphire color. Where the little waves crept up the sides of the rocks they shone like brilliant jewels, and every drop of spray seemed a gem fit to deck a queen. Trot leaned her chin on her hands and her elbows on her lap and gazed at this charming sight with real enjoyment. Cap'n Bill drew in the oars and let the boat drift where it would while he also sat silently admiring the scene.

Slowly the little craft crept farther and farther into the dim interior of the vast cavern, while its two passengers feasted their eyes on the beauties constantly revealed. Both the old seaman and the little girl loved the ocean in all its various moods. To them it was a constant companion and a genial comrade. If it stormed and raved, they laughed with glee; if it rolled great breakers against the shore, they clapped their hands joyfully; if it lay slumbering at their feet, they petted and caressed it, but always they loved it.

Here was the ocean yet. It had crept under the dome of overhanging rock to reveal itself crowned with sapphires and dressed in azure gown, revealing in this guise new and unexpected charms. "Good morning, Mayre," said a sweet voice.

Trot gave a start and looked around her in wonder. Just beside her in the water were little eddies--circles within circles--such as are caused when anything sinks below the surface. "Did--did you hear that, Cap'n Bill?" she whispered solemnly.

Cap'n Bill did not answer. He was staring with eyes that fairly bulged out at a place behind Trot's back, and he shook a little, as if trembling from cold. Trot turned half around, and then she stared, too. Rising from the blue water was a fair face around which floated a mass of long, blonde hair. It was a sweet, girlish face with eyes of the same deep blue as the water and red lips whose dainty smile disposed two rows of pearly teeth. The cheeks were plump and rosy, the brows gracefully penciled, while the chin was rounded and had a pretty dimple in it.

"The most beauti-ful-est in all the world," murmured Cap'n Bill in a voice of horror, "an' no one has ever lived to--to tell the tale!"

There was a peal of merry laughter at this, laughter that rippled and echoed throughout the cavern. Just at Trot's side appeared a new face even fairer than the other, with a wealth of brown hair wreathing the lovely features. And the eyes smiled kindly into those of the child. "Are you a--a mermaid?" asked Trot curiously. She was not a bit afraid. They seemed both gentle and friendly.

"Yes, dear," was the soft answer.

"We are all mermaids!" chimed a laughing chorus, and here and there, all about the boat, appeared pretty faces lying just upon the surface of the water.

"Are you part fishes?" asked Trot, greatly pleased by this wonderful sight.

"No, we are all mermaid," replied the one with the brown hair. "The fishes are partly like us, because they live in the sea and must move about. And you are partly like us, Mayre dear, but have awkward stiff legs so you may walk on the land. But the mermaids lived before fishes and before mankind, so both have borrowed something from us."

"Then you must be fairies if you've lived always," remarked Trot, nodding wisely.

"We are, dear. We are the water fairies," answered the one with the blonde hair, coming nearer and rising till her slender white throat showed plainly.

"We--we're goners, Trot!" sighed Cap'n Bill with a white, woebegone face.

"I guess not, Cap'n," she answered calmly. "These pretty mermaids aren't going to hurt us, I'm sure."

"No indeed," said the first one who had spoken. "If we were wicked enough to wish to harm you, our magic could reach you as easily upon the land as in this cave. But we love little girls dearly and wish only to please them and make their lives more happy."

"I believe that!" cried Trot earnestly.

Cap'n Bill groaned.

"Guess why we have appeared to you," said another mermaid, coming to the side of the boat.

"Why?" asked the child.

"We heard you say yesterday you would like to see a mermaid, and so we decided to grant your wish."

"That was real nice of you," said Trot gratefully.

"Also, we heard all the foolish things Cap'n Bill said about us," remarked the brown-haired one smilingly, "and we wanted to prove to him that they were wrong."

"I on'y said what I've heard," protested Cap'n Bill. "Never havin' seen a mermaid afore, I couldn't be ackerate, an' I never expected to see one an' live to tell the tale."

Again the cave rang with merry laughter, and as it died away, Trot said, "May I see your scales, please? And are they green and purple and pink like Cap'n Bill said?" They seemed undecided what to say to this and swam a little way off, where the beautiful heads formed a group that was delightful to see. Perhaps they talked together, for the brown-haired mermaid soon came back to the side of the boat and asked, "Would you like to visit our kingdom and see all the wonders that exist below the sea?"

"I'd like to," replied Trot promptly, "but I couldn't. I'd get drowned."

"That you would, mate!" cried Cap'n Bill.

"Oh no," said the mermaid. "We would make you both like one of ourselves, and then you could live within the water as easily as we do."

"I don't know as I'd like that," said the child, "at least for always."

"You need not stay with us a moment longer than you please," returned the mermaid, smiling as if amused at the remark. "Whenever you are ready to return home, we promise to bring you to this place again and restore to you the same forms you are now wearing."

"Would I have a fish's tail?" asked Trot earnestly.

"You would have a mermaid's tail," was the reply.

"What color would my scales be--pink, or purple?"

"You may choose the color yourself."

"Look ahere, Trot!" said Cap'n Bill in excitement. "You ain't thinkin' o' doin' such a fool thing, are you?"

"Course I am," declared the little girl. "We don't get such inv'tations every day, Cap'n, and if I don't go now I may never find out how the mermaids live."

"I don't care how they live, myself," said Cap'n Bill. "I jes' want 'em to let ME live."

"There's no danger," insisted Trot.

"I do' know 'bout that. That's what all the other folks said when they dove after the mermaids an' got drowned."

"Who?" asked the girl.

"I don't know who, but I've heard tell--"

"You've heard that no one ever saw a mermaid and lived," said Trot.

"To tell the tale," he added, nodding. "An' if we dives down like they says, we won't live ourselves."

All the mermaids laughed at this, and the brown-haired one said, "Well, if you are afraid, don't come. You may row your boat out of this cave and never see us again, if you like. We merely thought it would please little Mayre, and were willing to show her the sights of our beautiful home."

"I'd like to see 'em, all right," said Trot, her eyes glistening with pleasure.

"So would I," admitted Cap'n Bill, "if we would live to tell the tale."

"Don't you believe us?" asked the mermaid, fixing her lovely eyes on those of the old sailor and smiling prettily. "Are you afraid to trust us to bring you safely back?"

"N-n-no," said Cap'n Bill, "'tain't that. I've got to look after Trot."

"Then you'll have to come with me," said Trot decidedly, "for I'm going to 'cept this inv'tation. If you don't care to come, Cap'n Bill, you go home and tell mother I'm visitin' the mermaids."

"She'd scold me inter shivers!" moaned Cap'n Bill with a shudder. "I guess I'd ruther take my chance down below."

"All right, I'm ready, Miss Mermaid," said Trot. "What shall I do? Jump in, clothes and all?"

"Give me your hand, dear," answered the mermaid, lifting a lovely white arm from the water. Trot took the slender hand and found it warm and soft and not a bit "fishy."

"My name is Clia," continued the mermaid, "and I am a princess in our deep-sea kingdom."

Just then Trot gave a flop and flopped right out of the boat into the water. Cap'n Bill caught a gleam of pink scales as his little friend went overboard, and the next moment there was Trot's face in the water among those of the mermaids. She was laughing with glee as she looked up into Cap'n Bill's face and called, "Come on in, Cap'n! It didn't hurt a bit!"