

CHAPTER 3 - THE DEPTHS OF THE DEEP BLUE SEA

Cap'n Bill stood up in the boat as if undecided what to do. Never a sailor man was more bewildered than this old fellow by the strangeness of the adventure he had encountered. At first he could hardly believe it was all true and that he was not dreaming; but there was Trot in the water, laughing with the mermaids and floating comfortably about, and he couldn't leave his dear little companion to make the trip to the depths of the ocean alone.

"Take my hand, please, Cap'n Bill," said Princess Clia, reaching her dainty arm toward him; and suddenly the old man took courage and clasped the soft fingers in his own. He had to lean over the boat to do this, and then there came a queer lightness to his legs and he had a great longing to be in the water. So he gave a flop and flopped in beside Trot, where he found himself comfortable enough, but somewhat frightened.

"Law sakes!" he gasped. "Here's me in the water with my rheumatics! I'll be that stiff termorrer I can't wiggle."

"You're wigglin' all right now," observed Trot. "That's a fine tail you've got, Cap'n, an' its green scales is jus' beautiful."

"Are they green, eh?" he asked, twisting around to try to see them.

"Green as em'ralds, Cap'n. How do they feel?"

"Feel, Trot, feel? Why, this tail beats that ol' wooden leg all holler! I kin do stunts now that I couldn't o' done in a thousand years with ol' peg."

"And don't be afraid of the rheumatism," advised the Princess. "No mermaid ever catches cold or suffers pain in the water."

"Is Cap'n Bill a mermaid now?" asked Trot.

"Why, he's a merMAN, I suppose," laughed the pretty princess. "But when he gets home, he will be just Cap'n Bill again."

"Wooden leg an' all?" inquired the child.

"To be sure, my dear."

The sailor was now trying his newly discovered power of swimming, and became astonished at the feats he could accomplish. He could dart this way and that with wonderful speed, and turn and dive, and caper about in the water far better than he had ever been able to do on land--even before he got the wooden leg. And a

curious thing about this present experience was that the water did not cling to him and wet him as it had always done before. He still wore his flannel shirt and pea jacket and his sailor cap; but although he was in the water and had been underneath the surface, the cloth still seemed dry and warm. As he dived down and came up again, the drops flashed from his head and the fringe of beard, but he never needed to wipe his face or eyes at all.

Trot, too, was having queer experiences and enjoying them. When she ducked under water, she saw plainly everything about her as easily and distinctly as she had ever seen anything above water. And by looking over her shoulder she could watch the motion of her new tail, all covered with pretty iridescent pink scales, which gleamed like jewels. She wore her dress the same as before, and the water failed to affect it in the least.

She now noticed that the mermaids were clothed, too, and their exquisite gowns were the loveliest thing the little girl had ever beheld. They seemed made of a material that was like sheeny silk, cut low in the neck and with wide, flowing sleeves that seldom covered the shapely, white arms of her new friends. The gowns had trains that floated far behind the mermaids as they swam, but were so fleecy and transparent that the sparkle of their scales might be seen reaching back of their waists, where the human form ended and the fish part began. The sea fairies wore strings of splendid pearls twined around their throats, while more pearls were sewn upon their gowns for trimmings. They did not dress their beautiful hair at all, but let it float around them in clouds.

The little girl had scarcely time to observe all this when the princess said, "Now, my dear, if you are ready, we will begin our journey, for it is a long way to our palaces."

"All right," answered Trot, and took the hand extended to her with a trustful smile.

"Will you allow me to guide you, Cap'n Bill?" asked the blonde mermaid, extending her hand to the old sailor.

"Of course, ma'am," he said, taking her fingers rather bashfully.

"My name is Merla," she continued, "and I am cousin to Princess Clia. We must all keep together, you know, and I will hold your hand to prevent your missing the way."

While she spoke they began to descend through the water, and it grew quite dark for a time because the cave shut out the light. But presently Trot, who was eagerly looking around her, began to notice the water lighten and saw they were

coming into brighter parts of the sea. "We have left the cave now," said Clia, "and may swim straight home."

"I s'pose there are no winding roads in the ocean," remarked the child, swimming swiftly beside her new friend.

"Oh yes indeed. At the bottom, the way is far from being straight or level," replied Clia. "But we are in mid-water now, where nothing will hinder our journey, unless--"

She seemed to hesitate, so Trot asked, "Unless what?"

"Unless we meet with disagreeable creatures," said the Princess. "The mid-water is not as safe as the very bottom, and that is the reason we are holding your hands."

"What good would that do?" asked Trot.

"You must remember that we are fairies," said Princess Clia. "For that reason, nothing in the ocean can injure us, but you two are mortals and therefore not entirely safe at all times unless we protect you."

Trot was thoughtful for a few moments and looked around her a little anxiously. Now and then a dark form would shoot across their pathway or pass them at some distance, but none was near enough for the girl to see plainly what it might be. Suddenly they swam right into a big school of fishes, all yellowtails and of very large size. There must have been hundreds of them lying lazily in the water, and when they saw the mermaids they merely wriggled to one side and opened a path for the sea fairies to pass through. "Will they hurt us?" asked Trot.

"No indeed," laughed the Princess. "Fishes are stupid creatures mostly, and this family is quite harmless."

"How about sharks?" asked Cap'n Bill, who was swimming gracefully beside them, his hand clutched in that of pretty Merla.

"Sharks may indeed be dangerous to you," replied Clia, "so I advise you to keep them at a safe distance. They never dare attempt to bite a mermaid, and it may be they will think you belong to our band; but it is well to avoid them if possible."

"Don't get careless, Cap'n," added Trot.

"I surely won't, mate," he replied. "You see, I didn't use to be 'fraid o' sharks 'cause if they came near I'd stick my wooden leg at 'em. But now, if they happens to fancy these green scales, it's all up with ol' Bill."

"Never fear," said Merla, "I'll take care of you on our journey, and in our palaces you will find no sharks at all."

"Can't they get in?" he asked anxiously.

"No. The palaces of the mermaids are inhabited only by themselves."

"Is there anything else to be afraid of in the sea?" asked the little girl after they had swum quite a while in silence.

"One or two things, my dear," answered Princess Clia. "Of course, we mermaids have great powers, being fairies; yet among the sea people is one nearly as powerful as we are, and that is the devilfish."

"I know," said Trot. "I've seen 'em."

"You have seen the smaller ones, I suppose, which sometimes rise to the surface or go near the shore, and are often caught by fishermen," said Clia, "but they are only second cousins of the terrible deep-sea devilfish to which I refer."

"Those ones are bad enough, though," declared Cap'n Bill. "If you know any worse ones, I don't want a interduction to 'em."

"The monster devilfish inhabit caves in the rugged, mountainous regions of the ocean," resumed the Princess, "and they are evil spirits who delight in injuring all who meet them. None lives near our palaces, so there is little danger of your meeting any while you are our guests."

"I hope we won't," said Trot.

"None for me," added Cap'n Bill. "Devils of any sort ought to be give a wide berth, an' devilfish is worsen ner sea serpents."

"Oh, do you know the sea serpents?" asked Merla as if surprised.

"Not much I don't," answered the sailor, "but I've heard tell of folks as has seen 'em."

"Did they ever live to tell the tale?" asked Trot.

"Sometimes," he replied. "They're jes' ORful creatures, mate."

"How easy it is to be mistaken," said Princess Clia softly. "We know the sea serpents very well, and we like them."

"You do!" exclaimed Trot.

"Yes, dear. There are only three of them in all the world, and not only are they harmless, but quite bashful and shy. They are kind-hearted, too, and although not beautiful in appearance, they do many kind deeds and are generally beloved."

"Where do they live?" asked the child.

"The oldest one, who is king of this ocean, lives quite near us," said Clia. "His name is Anko."

"How old is he?" inquired Cap'n Bill curiously.

"No one knows. He was here before the ocean came, and he stayed here because he learned to like the water better than the land as a habitation. Perhaps King Anko is ten thousand years old, perhaps twenty thousand. We often lose track of the centuries down here in the sea."

"That's pretty old, isn't it?" said Trot. "Older than Cap'n Bill, I guess."

"Summat," chuckled the sailor man, "summat older, mate, but not much. P'raps the sea serpent ain't got gray whiskers."

"Oh yes he has," responded Merla with a laugh. "And so have his two brothers, Unko and Inko. They each have an ocean of their own, you know; and once every hundred years they come here to visit their brother Anko. So we've seen all three many times."

"Why, how old are mermaids, then?" asked Trot, looking around at the beautiful creatures wonderingly.

"We are like all ladies of uncertain age," rejoined the Princess with a smile. "We don't care to tell."

"Older than Cap'n Bill?"

"Yes, dear," said Clia.

"But we haven't any gray whiskers," added Merla merrily, "and our hearts are ever young."

Trot was thoughtful. It made her feel solemn to be in the company of such old people. The band of mermaids seemed to all appearances young and fresh and not a bit as if they'd been soaked in water for hundreds of years. The girl began to take more notice of the sea maidens following after her. More than a dozen were in the group; all were lovely in appearance and clothed in the same gauzy robes as Merla and the Princess. These attendants did not join in the conversation but darted here and there in sportive play, and often Trot heard the tinkling chorus of

their laughter. Whatever doubts might have arisen in the child's mind through the ignorant tales of her sailor friend, she now found the mermaids to be light-hearted, joyous and gay, and from the first she had not been in the least afraid of her new companions.

"How much farther do we have to go?" asked Cap'n Bill presently.

"Are you getting tired?" Merla inquired.

"No," said he, "but I'm sorter anxious to see what your palaces look like. Inside the water ain't as interestin' as the top of it. It's fine swimmin', I'll agree, an' I like it, but there ain't nuthin' special to see that I can make out."

"That is true, sir," replied the Princess. "We have purposely led you through the mid-water hoping you would see nothing to alarm you until you get more accustomed to our ocean life. Moreover, we are able to travel more swiftly here. How far do you think we have already come, Cap'n?"

"Oh, 'bout two mile," he answered.

"Well, we are now hundreds of miles from the cave where we started," she told him.

"You don't mean it!" he exclaimed in wonder.

"Then there's magic in it," announced Trot soberly.

"True, my dear. To avoid tiring you and to save time, we have used a little of our fairy power," said Clia. "The result is that we are nearing our home. Let us go downward a bit, now, for you must know that the mermaid palaces are at the very bottom of the ocean, and in its deepest part."