

## CHAPTER 4 - THE PALACE OF QUEEN AQUAREINE

Trot was surprised to find it was not at all dark or gloomy as they descended farther into the deep sea. Things were not quite so clear to her eyes as they had been in the bright sunshine above the ocean's surface, but every object was distinct nevertheless, as if she saw through a pane of green-tinted glass. The water was very clear except for this green shading, and the little girl had never before felt so light and buoyant as she did now. It was no effort at all to dart through the water, which seemed to support her on all sides.

"I don't believe I weigh anything at all," she said to Cap'n Bill.

"No more do I, Trot," said he. "But that's nat'ral, seein' as we're under water so far. What bothers me most is how we manage to breathe, havin' no gills like fishes have."

"Are you sure we haven't any gills?" she asked, lifting her free hand to feel her throat.

"Sure. Ner the mermaids haven't any, either," declared Cap'n Bill.

"Then," said Trot, "we're breathing by magic."

The mermaids laughed at this shrewd remark, and the Princess said, "You have guessed correctly, my dear. Go a little slower, now, for the palaces are in sight."

"Where?" asked Trot eagerly.

"Just before you."

"In that grove of trees?" inquired the girl. And really, it seemed to her that they were approaching a beautiful grove. The bottom of the sea was covered with white sand, in which grew many varieties of sea shrubs with branches like those of trees. Not all of them were green, however, for the branches and leaves were of a variety of gorgeous colors. Some were purple, shading down to a light lavender; and there were reds all the way from a delicate rose-pink to vivid shades of scarlet. Orange, yellow and blue shades were there, too, mingling with the sea-greens in a most charming manner. Altogether, Trot found the brilliant coloring somewhat bewildering.

These sea shrubs, which in size were quite as big and tall as the trees on earth, were set so close together that their branches entwined; but there were several avenues leading into the groves, and at the entrance to each avenue the girl noticed several large fishes with long spikes growing upon their noses.

"Those are swordfishes," remarked the Princess as she led the band past one of these avenues.

"Are they dang'rous?" asked Trot.

"Not to us," was the reply. "The swordfishes are among our most valued and faithful servants, guarding the entrances to the gardens which surround our palaces. If any creatures try to enter uninvited, these guards fight them and drive them away. Their swords are sharp and strong, and they are fierce fighters, I assure you."

"I've known 'em to attack ships, an' stick their swords right through the wood," said Cap'n Bill.

"Those belonged to the wandering tribes of swordfishes," explained the Princess. "These, who are our servants, are too sensible and intelligent to attack ships."

The band now headed into a broad passage through the "gardens," as the mermaids called these gorgeous groves, and the great swordfishes guarding the entrance made way for them to pass, afterward resuming their posts with watchful eyes. As they slowly swam along the avenue, Trot noticed that some of the bushes seemed to have fruits growing upon them, but what these fruits might be neither she nor Cap'n Bill could guess.

The way wound here and there for some distance, till finally they came to a more open space all carpeted with sea flowers of exquisite colorings. Although Trot did not know it, these flowers resembled the rare orchids of earth in their fanciful shapes and marvelous hues. The child did not examine them very closely, for across the carpet of flowers loomed the magnificent and extensive palaces of the mermaids.

These palaces were built of coral; white, pink and yellow being used, and the colors arranged in graceful designs. The front of the main palace, which now faced them, had circular ends connecting the straight wall, not unlike the architecture we are all familiar with; yet there seemed to be no windows to the building, although a series of archways served as doors.

Arriving at one of the central archways, the band of sea maidens separated. Princess Clia and Merla leading Trot and Cap'n Bill into the palace, while the other mermaids swam swiftly away to their own quarters.

"Welcome!" said Clia in her sweet voice. "Here you are surrounded only by friends and are in perfect safety. Please accept our hospitality as freely as you desire, for

we consider you honored guests. I hope you will like our home," she added a little shyly.

"We are sure to, dear Princess," Trot hastened to say.

Then Clia escorted them through the archway and into a lofty hall. It was not a mere grotto, but had smoothly built walls of pink coral inlaid with white. Trot at first thought there was no roof, for looking upward she could see the water all above them. But the princess, reading her thought, said with a smile, "Yes, there is a roof, or we would be unable to keep all the sea people out of our palace. But the roof is made of glass to admit the light."

"Glass!" cried the astonished child. "Then it must be an awful big pane of glass."

"It is," agreed Clia. "Our roofs are considered quite wonderful, and we owe them to the fairy powers of our queen. Of course, you understand there is no natural way to make glass under water."

"No indeed," said Cap'n Bill. And then he asked, "Does your queen live here?"

"Yes. She is waiting now, in her throne room, to welcome you. Shall we go in?"

"I'd just as soon," replied Trot rather timidly, but she boldly followed the princess, who glided through another arch into another small room where several mermaids were reclining upon couches of coral. They were beautifully dressed and wore many sparkling jewels.

"Her Majesty is awaiting the strangers, Princess Clia," announced one of these. "You are asked to enter at once."

"Come, then," said Clia, and once more taking Trot's hand, she led the girl through still another arch, while Merla followed just behind them, escorting Cap'n Bill. They now entered an apartment so gorgeous that the child fairly gasped with astonishment. The queen's throne room was indeed the grandest and most beautiful chamber in all the ocean palaces. Its coral walls were thickly inlaid with mother-of-pearl, exquisitely shaded and made into borders and floral decorations. In the corners were cabinets, upon the shelves of which many curious shells were arranged, all beautifully polished. The floor glittered with gems arranged in patterns of flowers, like a brilliant carpet.

Near the center of the room was a raised platform of mother-of-pearl upon which stood a couch thickly studded with diamonds, rubies, emeralds and pearls. Here reclined Queen Aquareine, a being so lovely that Trot gazed upon her spellbound and Cap'n Bill took off his sailor cap and held it in his hands.

All about the room were grouped other mother-of-pearl couches, not raised like that of the queen, and upon each of these reclined a pretty mermaid. They could not sit down as we do, Trot readily understood, because of their tails; but they rested very gracefully upon the couches with their trailing gauzy robes arranged in fleecy folds.

When Clia and Merla escorted the strangers down the length of the great room toward the royal throne, they met with pleasant looks and smiles on every side, for the sea maidens were too polite to indulge in curious stares. They paused just before the throne, and the queen raised her head upon one elbow to observe them. "Welcome, Mayre," she said, "and welcome, Cap'n Bill. I trust you are pleased with your glimpse of the life beneath the surface of our sea."

"I am," answered Trot, looking admiringly at the beautiful face of the queen.

"It's all mighty cur'ous an' strange-like," said the sailor slowly. "I'd no idee you mermaids were like this, at all!"

"Allow me to explain that it was to correct your wrong ideas about us that led me to invite you to visit us," replied the Queen. "We usually pay little heed to the earth people, for we are content in our own dominions; but, of course, we know all that goes on upon your earth. So when Princess Clia chanced to overhear your absurd statements concerning us, we were greatly amused and decided to let you see with your own eyes just what we are like."

"I'm glad you did," answered Cap'n Bill, dropping his eyes in some confusion as he remembered his former description of the mermaids.

"Now that you are here," continued the Queen in a cordial, friendly tone, "you may as well remain with us a few days and see the wonderful sights of our ocean."

"I'm much obliged to you, ma'am," said Trot, "and I'd like to stay ever so much, but mother worries jus' dreadfully if we don't get home in time."

"I'll arrange all that," said Aquareine with a smile.

"How?" asked the girl.

"I will make your mother forget the passage of time so she will not realize how long you are away. Then she cannot worry."

"Can you do that?" inquired Trot.

"Very easily. I will send your mother into a deep sleep that will last until you are ready to return home. Just at present she is seated in her chair by the front

window, engaged in knitting." The queen paused to raise an arm and wave it slowly to and fro. Then she added, "Now your good mother is asleep, little Mayre, and instead of worries I promise her pleasant dreams."

"Won't someone rob the house while she's asleep?" asked the child anxiously.

"No, dear. My charm will protect the house from any intrusion."

"That's fine!" exclaimed Trot in delight.

"It's jes' won-erful!" said Cap'n Bill. "I wish I knew it was so. Trot's mother has a awful sharp tongue when she's worried."

"You may see for yourselves," declared the Queen, and waved her hand again. At once they saw before them the room in the cottage, with Mayre's mother asleep by the window. Her knitting was in her lap, and the cat lay curled up beside her chair. It was all so natural that Trot thought she could hear the clock over the fireplace tick. After a moment the scene faded away, when the queen asked with another smile, "Are you satisfied?"

"Oh yes!" cried Trot. "But how could you do it?"

"It is a form of mirage," was the reply. "We are able to bring any earth scene before us whenever we wish. Sometimes these scenes are reflected above the water so that mortals also observe them."

"I've seen 'em," said Cap'n Bill, nodding. "I've seen mirages, but I never knowed what caused 'em afore now."

"Whenever you see anything you do not understand and wish to ask questions, I will be very glad to answer them," said the Queen.

"One thing that bothers me," said Trot, "is why we don't get wet, being in the ocean with water all around us."

"That is because no water really touches you," explained the Queen. "Your bodies have been made just like those of the mermaids in order that you may fully enjoy your visit to us. One of our peculiar qualities is that water is never permitted to quite touch our bodies, or our gowns. Always there remains a very small space, hardly a hair's breadth, between us and the water, which is the reason we are always warm and dry."

"I see," said Trot. "That's why you don't get soggy or withered."

"Exactly," laughed the Queen, and the other mermaids joined in her merriment.

"I s'pose that's how we can breathe without gills," remarked Cap'n Bill thoughtfully.

"Yes. The air space is constantly replenished from the water, which contains air, and this enables us to breathe as freely as you do upon the earth."

"But we have fins," said Trot, looking at the fin that stood upright on Cap'n Bill's back.

"Yes. They allow us to guide ourselves as we swim, and so are very useful," replied the Queen.

"They make us more finished," said Cap'n Bill with a chuckle. Then, suddenly becoming grave, he added, "How about my rheumatics, ma'am? Ain't I likely to get stiffened up with all this dampness?"

"No indeed," Aquareine answered. "There is no such thing as rheumatism in all our dominions. I promise no evil result shall follow this visit to us, so please be as happy and contented as possible."