

CHAPTER 6 - EXPLORING THE OCEAN

The queen now requested her guests to recline upon couches that they might rest themselves from their long swim and talk more at their ease. So the girl and the sailor allowed themselves to float downward until they rested their bodies on two of the couches nearest the throne, which were willingly vacated for them by the mermaids who occupied them until then.

The visitors soon found themselves answering a great many questions about their life on the earth, for although the queen had said she kept track of what was going on on the land, there were many details of human life in which all the mermaids seemed greatly interested.

During the conversation several sea-maids came swimming into the room bearing trays of sea apples and other fruit, which they first offered to the queen, and then passed the refreshments around to the company assembled. Trot and Cap'n Bill each took some, and the little girl found the fruits delicious to eat, as they had a richer flavor than any that grew upon land. Queen Aquareine was much pleased when the old sailor asked for more, but Merla warned him dinner would soon be served and he must take care not to spoil his appetite for that meal. "Our dinner is at noon, for we have to cook in the middle of the day when the sun is shining," she said.

"Cook!" cried Trot. "Why, you can't build a fire in the water, can you?"

"We have no need of fires," was the reply. "The glass roof of our kitchen is so curved that it concentrates the heat of the sun's rays, which are then hot enough to cook anything we wish."

"But how do you get along if the day is cloudy, and the sun doesn't shine?" inquired the little girl.

"Then we use the hot springs that bubble up in another part of the palace," Merla answered. "But the sun is the best to cook by." So it was no surprise to Trot when, about noon, dinner was announced and all the mermaids, headed by their queen and their guests, swam into another spacious room where a great, long table was laid. The dishes were of polished gold and dainty-cut glass, and the cloth and napkins of fine gossamer. Around the table were ranged rows of couches for the mermaids to recline upon as they ate. Only the nobility and favorites of Queen Aquareine were invited to partake of this repast, for Clia explained that tables were set for the other mermaids in different parts of the numerous palaces.

Trot wondered who would serve the meal, but her curiosity was soon satisfied when several large lobsters came sliding into the room backward, bearing in their claws trays loaded with food. Each of these lobsters had a golden band behind its neck to show it was the slave of the mermaids.

These curious waiters were fussy creatures, and Trot found much amusement in watching their odd motions. They were so spry and excitable that at times they ran against one another and upset the platters of food, after which they began to scold and argue as to whose fault it was, until one of the mermaids quietly rebuked them and asked them to be more quiet and more careful.

The queen's guests had no cause to complain of the dinner provided. First the lobsters served bowls of turtle soup, which proved hot and deliciously flavored. Then came salmon steaks fried in fish oil, with a fungus bread that tasted much like field mushrooms. Oysters, clams, soft-shell crabs and various preparations of seafoods followed. The salad was a delicate leaf from some seaweed that Trot thought was much nicer than lettuce. Several courses were served, and the lobsters changed the plates with each course, chattering and scolding as they worked, and as Trot said, "doing everything backwards" in their nervous, fussy way.

Many of the things offered them to eat were unknown to the visitors, and the child was suspicious of some of them, but Cap'n Bill asked no questions and ate everything offered him, so Trot decided to follow his example. Certain it is they found the meal very satisfying, and evidently there was no danger of their being hungry while they remained the guests of the mermaids. When the fruits came, Trot thought that must be the last course of the big dinner, but following the fruits were ice creams frozen into the shape of flowers.

"How funny," said the child, "to be eating ice cream at the bottom of the sea."

"Why does that surprise you?" inquired the Queen.

"I can't see where you get the ice to freeze it," Trot replied.

"It is brought to us from the icebergs that float in the northern parts of the ocean," explained Merla.

"O' course, Trot. You orter thought o' that. I did," said Cap'n Bill.

The little girl was glad there was no more to eat, for she was ashamed to feel she had eaten every morsel she could. Her only excuse for being so greedy was that "ev'rything tasted just splendid!" as she told the queen.

"And now," said Aquareine, "I will send you out for a swim with Merla, who will show you some of the curious sights of our sea. You need not go far this afternoon, and when you return, we will have another interesting talk together." So the blonde mermaid led Trot and Cap'n Bill outside the palace walls, where they found themselves in the pretty flower gardens.

"I'd feel all right, mate, if I could have a smoke," remarked the old sailor to the child, "but that's a thing as can't be did here in the water."

"Why not?" asked Merla, who overheard him.

"A pipe has to be lighted, an' a match wouldn't burn," he replied.

"Try it," suggested the mermaid. "I do not mind your smoking at all, if it will give you pleasure."

"It's a bad habit I've got, an' I'm too old to break myself of it," said Cap'n Bill. Then he felt in the big pocket of his coat and took out a pipe and a bag of tobacco. After he had carefully filled his pipe, rejoicing in the fact that the tobacco was not at all wet, he took out his matchbox and struck a light. The match burned brightly, and soon the sailor was puffing the smoke from his pipe in great contentment. The smoke ascended through the water in the shape of bubbles, and Trot wondered what anyone who happened to be floating upon the surface of the ocean would think to see smoke coming from the water.

"Well, I find I can smoke, all right," remarked Cap'n Bill, "but it bothers me to understand why."

"It is because of the air space existing between the water and everything you have about you," explained Merla. "But now, if you will come this way, I will take you to visit some of our neighbors." They passed over the carpet of sea flowers, the gorgeous blossoms swaying on their stems as the motion of the people in the water above them disturbed their repose, and presently the three entered the dense shrubbery surrounding the palace. They had not proceeded far when they came to a clearing among the bushes, and here Merla paused.

Trot and Cap'n Bill paused, too, for floating in the clear water was a group of beautiful shapes that the child thought looked like molds of wine jelly. They were round as a dinner plate, soft and transparent, but tinted in such lovely hues that no artist's brush has ever been able to imitate them. Some were deep sapphire blue; others rose pink; still others a delicate topaz color. They seemed to have neither heads, eyes nor ears, yet it was easy to see they were alive and able to float in any direction they wished to go. In shape they resembled inverted

flowerpots, with the upper edges fluted, and from the centers floated what seemed to be bouquets of flowers.

"How pretty!" exclaimed Trot, enraptured by the sight.

"Yes, this is a rare variety of jellyfish," replied Merla. "The creatures are not so delicate as they appear, and live for a long time--unless they get too near the surface and the waves wash them ashore."

After watching the jellyfish a few moments, they followed Merla through the grove, and soon a low chant, like that of an Indian song, fell upon their ears. It was a chorus of many small voices and grew louder as they swam on. Presently a big rock rose suddenly before them from the bottom of the sea, rearing its steep side far up into the water overhead, and this rock was thickly covered with tiny shells that clung fast to its surface. The chorus they heard appeared to come from these shells, and Merla said to her companions, "These are the singing barnacles. They are really very amusing, and if you listen carefully, you can hear what they say."

So Trot and Cap'n Bill listened, and this is what the barnacles sang:

"We went to topsy-turvy land to see a man-o'-war, And we were much attached to it, because we simply were; We found an anchor-ite within the mud upon the lea For the ghost of Jonah's whale he ran away and went to sea. Oh, it was awful! It was unlawful! We rallied round the flag in sev'ral millions; They couldn't shake us; They had to take us; So the halibut and cod they danced cotillions."

"What does it all mean?" asked Trot.

"I suppose they refer to the way barnacles have of clinging to ships," replied Merla, "but usually the songs mean nothing at all. The little barnacles haven't many brains, so we usually find their songs quite stupid."

"Do they write some comic operas?" asked the child.

"I think not," answered the mermaid.

"They seem to like the songs themselves," remarked Cap'n Bill.

"Oh yes, they sing all day long. But it never matters to them whether their songs mean anything or not. Let us go in this direction and visit some other sea people."

So they swam away from the barnacle-covered rock, and Trot heard the last chorus as she slowly followed their conductor. The barnacles were singing:

"Oh, very well, then, I hear the curfew, Please go away and come some other day; Goliath tussels With Samson's muscles, Yet the muscles never fight in Oyster Bay."

"It's jus' nonsense!" said Trot scornfully. "Why don't they sing 'Annie Laurie' or 'Home, Sweet Home' or else keep quiet?"

"Why, if they were quiet," replied Merla, "they wouldn't be singing barnacles."

They now came to one of the avenues which led from the sea garden out into the broad ocean, and here two swordfishes were standing guard. "Is all quiet?" Merla asked them.

"Just as usual, your Highness," replied one of the guards. "Mummercubble was sick this morning and grunted dreadfully, but he's better now and has gone to sleep. King Anko has been stirring around some, but is now taking his after-dinner nap. I think it will be perfectly safe for you to swim out for a while, if you wish."

"Who's Mummercubble?" asked Trot as they passed out into deep water.

"He's the sea pig," replied Merla. "I am glad he's asleep, for now we won't meet him."

"Don't you like him?" inquired Trot.

"Oh, he complains so bitterly of everything that he bores us," Merla answered. "Mummercubble is never contented or happy for a single minute."

"I've seen people like that," said Cap'n Bill with a nod of his head. "An' they has a way of upsettin' the happiest folks they meet."

"Look out!" suddenly cried the mermaid. "Look out for your fingers! Here are the snappingeels."

"Who? Where?" asked Trot anxiously.

And now they were in the midst of a cluster of wriggling, darting eels which sported all around them in the water with marvelous activity. "Yes, look out for your fingers and your noses!" said one of the eels, making a dash for Cap'n Bill. At first the sailor was tempted to put out a hand and push the creature away, but remembering that his fingers would thus be exposed, he remained quiet, and the eel snapped harmlessly just before his face and then darted away.

"Stop it!" said Merla. "Stop it this minute, or I'll report your impudence to Aquareine."

"Oh, who cares?" shouted the Eels. "We're not afraid of the mermaids."

"She'll stiffen you up again, as she did once before," said Merla, "if you try to hurt the earth people."

"Are these earth people?" asked one. And then they all stopped their play and regarded Trot and Cap'n Bill with their little black eyes.

"The old polliwog looks something like King Anko," said one of them.

"I'm not a polliwog!" answered Cap'n Bill angrily. "I'm a respec'ble sailor man, an' I'll have you treat me decent or I'll know why."

"Sailor!" said another. "That means to float on the water--not IN it. What are you doing down here?"

"I'm jes' a-visitin'," answered Cap'n Bill.

"He is the guest of our queen," said Merla, "and so is this little girl. If you do not behave nicely to them, you will surely be sorry."

"Oh, that's all right," replied one of the biggest eels, wriggling around in a circle and then snapping at a companion, which as quickly snapped out of his way. "We know how to be polite to company as well as the mermaids. We won't hurt them."

"Come on, fellows, let's go scare old Mummercubble," cried another; and then in a flash they all darted away and left our friends to themselves. Trot was greatly relieved.

"I don't like eels," she said.

"They are more mischievous than harmful," replied Merla, "but I do not care much for them myself."

"No," added Cap'n Bill, "they ain't respec'ful."