

CHAPTER 7 - THE ARISTOCRATIC CODFISH

The three swam slowly along, quite enjoying the cool depths of the water. Every little while they met with some strange creature--or one that seemed strange to the earth people--for although Trot and Cap'n Bill had seen many kinds of fish, after they had been caught and pulled from the water, that was very different from meeting them in their own element, "face to face," as Trot expressed it. Now that the various fishes were swimming around free and unafraid in their deep-sea home, they were quite different from the gasping, excited creatures struggling at the end of a fishline or flopping from a net.

Before long they came upon a group of large fishes lying lazily near the bottom of the sea. They were a dark color upon their backs and silver underneath, but not especially pretty to look at. The fishes made no effort to get out of Merla's way and remained motionless except for the gentle motion of their fins and gills.

"Here," said the mermaid, pausing, "is the most aristocratic family of fish in all the sea."

"What are they?" asked the girl.

"Codfish," was the reply. "Their only fault is that they are too haughty and foolishly proud of their pedigree."

Overhearing this speech, one codfish said to another in a very dignified tone of voice, "What insolence!"

"Isn't it?" replied the other. "There ought to be a law to prevent these common mermaids from discussing their superiors."

"My sakes!" said Trot, astonished. "How stuck up they are, aren't they?"

For a moment the group of fishes stared at her solemnly. Then one of the remarked in a disdainful manner, "Come, my dear, let us leave these vulgar creatures."

"I'm not as vulgar as you are!" exclaimed Trot, much offended by this speech. "Where I come from, we only eat codfish when there's nothing else in the house to eat."

"How absurd!" observed one of the creatures arrogantly.

"Eat codfish indeed!" said another in a lofty manner.

"Yes, and you're pretty salty, too, I can tell you. At home you're nothing but a pick-up!" said Trot.

"Dear me!" exclaimed the first fish who had spoken. "Must we stand this insulting language--and from a person to whom we have never been introduced?"

"I don't need no interduction," replied the girl. "I've eaten you, and you always make me thirsty."

Merla laughed merrily at this, and the codfish said, with much dignity, "Come, fellow aristocrats, let us go."

"Never mind, we're going ourselves," announced Merla, and followed by her guests the pretty mermaid swam away.

"I've heard tell of codfish aristocracy," said Cap'n Bill, "but I never knowed 'zac'ly what it meant afore."

"They jus' made me mad with all their airs," observed Trot, "so I gave 'em a piece of my mind."

"You surely did, mate," said the sailor, "but I ain't sure they understand what they're like when they're salted an' hung up in the pantry. Folks gener'ly gets stuck-up 'cause they don't know theirselves like other folks knows 'em."

"We are near Crabville now," declared Merla. "Shall we visit the crabs and see what they are doing?"

"Yes, let's," replied Trot. "The crabs are lots of fun. I've often caught them among the rocks on the shore and laughed at the way they act. Wasn't it funny at dinnertime to see the way they slid around with the plates?"

"Those were not crabs, but lobsters and crawfish," remarked the mermaid. "They are very intelligent creatures, and by making them serve us we save ourselves much household work. Of course, they are awkward and provoke us sometimes, but no servants are perfect, it is said, so we get along with ours as well as we can."

"They're all right," protested the child, "even if they did tip things over once in a while. But it is easy to work in a sea palace, I'm sure, because there's no dusting or sweeping to be done."

"Or scrubbin'," added Cap'n Bill.

"The crabs," said Merla, "are second cousins to the lobsters, although much smaller in size. There are many families or varieties of crabs, and so many of

them live in one place near here that we call it Crabville. I think you will enjoy seeing these little creatures in their native haunts."

They now approached a kelp bed, the straight, thin stems of the kelp running far upward to the surface of the water. Here and there upon the stalks were leaves, but Trot thought the growing kelp looked much like sticks of macaroni, except they were a rich red-brown color. It was beyond the kelp--which they had to push aside as they swam through, so thickly did it grow--that they came to a higher level, a sort of plateau on the ocean's bottom. It was covered with scattered rocks of all sizes, which appeared to have broken off from big shelving rocks they observed nearby. The place they entered seemed like one of the rocky canyons you often see upon the earth.

"Here live the fiddler crabs," said Merla, "but we must have taken them by surprise, it is so quiet."

Even as she spoke, there was a stirring and scrambling among the rocks, and soon scores of light-green crabs were gathered before the visitors. The crabs bore fiddles of all sorts and shapes in their claws, and one big fellow carried a leader's baton. The latter crab climbed upon a flat rock and in an excited voice called out, "Ready, now--ready, good fiddlers. We'll play Number 19, Hail to the Mermaids. Ready! Take aim! Fire away!"

At this command every crab began scraping at his fiddle as hard as he could, and the sounds were so shrill and unmusical that Trot wondered when they would begin to play a tune. But they never did; it was one regular mix-up of sounds from beginning to end. When the noise finally stopped, the leader turned to his visitors and, waving his baton toward them, asked, "Well, what did you think of that?"

"Not much," said Trot honestly. "What's it all about?"

"I composed it myself!" said the Fiddler Crab. "But it's highly classical, I admit. All really great music is an acquired taste."

"I don't like it," remarked Cap'n Bill. "It might do all right to stir up a racket New Year's Eve, but to call that screechin' music--"

Just then the crabs started fiddling again, harder than ever, and as it promised to be a long performance, they left the little creatures scraping away at their fiddles as if for dear life and swam along the rocky canyon until, on turning a corner, they came upon a new and different scene.

There were crabs here, too, many of them, and they were performing the queerest antics imaginable. Some were building themselves into a pyramid, each standing on edge, with the biggest and strongest ones at the bottom. When the crabs were five or six rows high, they would all tumble over, still clinging to one another and, having reached the ground, they would separate and commence to build the pyramid over again. Others were chasing one another around in a circle, always moving backward or sidewise, and trying to play "leapfrog" as they went. Still others were swinging on slight branches of seaweed or turning cartwheels or indulging in similar antics.

Merla and the earth people watched the busy little creatures for some time before they were themselves observed, but finally Trot gave a laugh when one crab fell on its back and began frantically waving its legs to get right-side-up again. At the sound of her laughter they all stopped their play and came toward the visitors in a flock, looking up at them with their bright eyes in a most comical way.

"Welcome home!" cried one as he turned a back somersault and knocked another crab over.

"What's the difference between a mermaid and a tadpole?" asked another in a loud voice, and without a pause continued, "Why, one drops its tail and the other holds onto it. Ha, ha! Ho, ho! Hee, hee!"

"These," said Merla, "are the clown crabs. They are very silly things, as you may already have discovered, but for a short time they are rather amusing. One tires of them very soon."

"They're funny," said Trot, laughing again. "It's almost as good as a circus. I don't think they would make me tired, but then I'm not a mermaid."

The clown crabs had now formed a row in front of them. "Mr. Johnsing," asked one, "why is a mermaid like an automobile?"

"I don't know, Tommy Blimken," answered a big crab in the middle of the row.

"WHY do you think a mermaid is like an automobile?"

"Because they both get tired," said Tommy Blimken. Then all the crabs laughed, and Tommy seemed to laugh louder than the rest.

"How do the crabs in the sea know anything 'bout automobiles?" asked Trot.

"Why, Tommy Blimken and Harry Hustle were both captured once by humans and put in an aquarium," answered the mermaid. "But one day they climbed out and escaped, finally making their way back to the sea and home again. So they are quite traveled, you see, and great favorites among the crabs. While they were

on land they saw a great many curious things, and so I suppose they saw automobiles."

"We did, we did!" cried Harry Hustle, an awkward crab with one big claw and one little one. "And we saw earth people with legs, awfully funny they were; and animals called horses, with legs; and other creatures with legs; and the people cover themselves with the queerest things--they even wear feathers and flowers on their heads, and--"

"Oh, we know all about that," said Trot. "We live on the earth ourselves."

"Well, you're lucky to get off from it and into the good water," said the Crab. "I nearly died on the earth; it was so stupid, dry and airy. But the circus was great. They held the performance right in front of the aquarium where we lived, and Tommy and I learned all the tricks of the tumblers. Hi! Come on, fellows, and show the earth people what you can do!"

At this the crabs began performing their antics again, but they did the same things over and over, so Cap'n Bill and Trot soon tired, as Merla said they would, and decided they had seen enough of the crab circus. So they proceeded to swim farther up the rocky canyon, and near its upper end they came to a lot of conch shells lying upon the sandy bottom. A funny-looking crab was sticking his head out from each of these shells.

"These are the hermit crabs," said one of the mermaids. "They steal these shells and live in them so no enemies can attack them."

"Don't they get lonesome?" asked Trot.

"Perhaps so, my dear. But they do not seem to mind being lonesome. They are great cowards, and think if they can but protect their lives there is nothing else to care for. Unlike the jolly crabs we have just left, the hermits are cross and unsociable."

"Oh, keep quiet and go away!" said one of the hermit crabs in a grumpy voice. "No one wants mermaids around here." Then every crab withdrew its head into its shell, and our friends saw them no more.

"They're not very polite," observed Trot, following the mermaid as Merla swam upward into the middle water.

"I know now why cross people are called 'crabbed,'" said Cap'n Bill. "They've got dispositions jes' like these 'ere hermit crabs."

Presently they came upon a small flock of mackerel, and noticed that the fishes seemed much excited. When they saw the mermaid, they cried out, "Oh, Merla! What do you think? Our Flippity has just gone to glory!"

"When?" asked the mermaid.

"Just now," one replied. "We were lying in the water, talking quietly together when a spinning, shining thing came along and our dear Flippity ate it. Then he went shooting up to the top of the water and gave a flop and--went to glory! Isn't it splendid, Merla?"

"Poor Flippity!" sighed the mermaid. "I'm sorry, for he was the prettiest and nicest mackerel in your whole flock."

"What does it mean?" asked Trot. "How did Flippity go to glory?"

"Why, he was caught by a hook and pulled out of the water into some boat," Merla explained. "But these poor stupid creatures do not understand that, and when one of them is jerked out of the water and disappears, they have the idea he has gone to glory, which means to them some unknown but beautiful sea."

"I've often wondered," said Trot, "why fishes are foolish enough to bite on hooks."

"They must know enough to know they're hooks," added Cap'n Bill musingly.

"Oh, they do," replied Merla. "I've seen fishes gather around a hook and look at it carefully for a long time. They all know it is a hook and that if they bite the bait upon it they will be pulled out of the water. But they are curious to know what will happen to them afterward, and think it means happiness instead of death. So finally one takes the hook and disappears, and the others never know what becomes of him."

"Why don't you tell 'em the truth?" asked Trot.

"Oh, we do. The mermaids have warned them many times, but it does no good at all. The fish are stupid creatures."

"But I wish I was Flippity," said one of the mackerel, staring at Trot with his big, round eyes. "He went to glory before I could eat the hook myself."

"You're lucky," answered the child. "Flippity will be fried in a pan for someone's dinner. You wouldn't like that, would you?"

"Flippity has gone to glory!" said another, and then they swam away in haste to tell the news to all they met.

"I never heard of anything so foolish," remarked Trot as she swam slowly on through the clear, blue water.

"Yes, it is very foolish and very sad," answered Merla. "But if the fish were wise, men could not catch them for food, and many poor people on your earth make their living by fishing."

"It seems wicked to catch such pretty things," said the child.

"I do not think so," Merla replied laughingly, "for they were born to become food for someone, and men are not the only ones that eat fishes. Many creatures of the sea feed upon them. They even eat one another at times. And if none was ever destroyed, they would soon become so numerous that they would clog the waters of the ocean and leave no room for the rest of us. So after all, perhaps it is just as well they are thoughtless and foolish."

Presently they came to some round balls that looked much like balloons in shape and were gaily colored. They floated quietly in the water, and Trot inquired what they were.

"Balloonfish," answered Merla. "They are helpless creatures, but have little spikes all over them so their enemies dare not bite them for fear of getting pricked."

Trot found the balloonfish quite interesting. They had little dots of eyes and dots for mouths, but she could see no noses, and their fins and tails were very small.

"They catch these fish in the South Sea Islands and make lanterns of 'em," said Cap'n Bill. "They first skin 'em and sew the skin up again to let it dry, and then they put candles inside, and the light shines through the dried skin."

Many other curious sights they saw in the ocean that afternoon, and both Cap'n Bill and Trot thoroughly enjoyed their glimpse of sea life. At last Merla said it was time to return to the palace, from which she claimed they had not at any time been very far distant. "We must prepare for dinner, as it will soon begin to grow dark in the water," continued their conductor. So they swam leisurely back to the groves that surrounded the palaces, and as they entered the gardens the sun sank, and deep shadows began to form in the ocean depths.