

## CHAPTER 8 - A BANQUET UNDER WATER

The palaces of the mermaids were all aglow with lights as they approached them, and Trot was amazed at the sight.

"Where do the lamps come from?" she asked their guide wonderingly.

"They are not lamps, my dear," replied Merla, much amused at this suggestion. "We use electric lights in our palaces and have done so for thousands of years--long before the earth people knew of electric lights."

"But where do you get 'em?" inquired Cap'n Bill, who was as much astonished as the girl.

"From a transparent jellyfish which naturally emits a strong and beautiful electric light," was the answer. "We have many hundreds of them in our palaces, as you will presently see."

Their way was now lighted by small, phosphorescent creatures scattered about the sea gardens and which Merla informed them were hyalaea, or sea glowworms. But their light was dim when compared to that of the electric jellyfish, which they found placed in clusters upon the ceilings of all the rooms of the palaces, rendering them light as day. Trot watched these curious creatures with delight, for delicately colored lights ran around their bodies in every direction in a continuous stream, shedding splendid rays throughout the vast halls.

A group of mermaids met the visitors in the hall of the main palace and told Merla the queen had instructed them to show the guests to their rooms as soon as they arrived. So Trot followed two of them through several passages, after which they swam upward and entered a circular opening. There were no stairs here, because there was no need of them, and the little girl soon found herself in an upper room that was very beautiful indeed.

All the walls were covered with iridescent shells, polished till they resembled mother-of-pearl, and upon the glass ceiling were clusters of the brilliant electric jellyfish, rendering the room bright and cheerful with their radiance. In one corner stood a couch of white coral, with gossamer draperies hanging around it from the four high posts. Upon examining it, the child found the couch was covered with soft, amber sponges, which rendered it very comfortable to lie upon. In a wardrobe she found several beautiful gossamer gowns richly embroidered in colored seaweeds, and these Mayre was told she might wear while she remained the guest of the mermaids. She also found a toilet table with brushes, combs and other conveniences, all of which were made of polished tortoise-shell.

Really, the room was more dainty and comfortable than one might suppose possible in a palace far beneath the surface of the sea, and Trot was greatly delighted with her new quarters. The mermaid attendants assisted the child to dress herself in one of the prettiest robes, which she found to be quite dry and fitted her comfortably. Then the sea-maids brushed and dressed her hair, and tied it with ribbons of cherry-red seaweed. Finally they placed around her neck a string of pearls that would have been priceless upon the earth, and now the little girl announced she was ready for supper and had a good appetite.

Cap'n Bill had been given a similar room near Trot, but the old sailor refused to change his clothes for any others offered him, for which reason he was ready for supper long before his comrade. "What bothers me, mate," he said to the little girl as she swam toward the great banquet hall where Queen Aquareine awaited them, "is why ain't we crushed by the pressin' of the water agin us, bein' as we're down here in the deep sea."

"How's that, Cap'n? Why should we be crushed?" she asked.

"Why, ev'r'body knows that the deeper you go in the sea, the more the water presses agin you," he explained. "Even the divers in their steel jackets can't stand it very deep down. An' here we be, miles from the top o' the water, I s'pect, an' we don't feel crowded a bit."

"I know why," answered the child wisely. "The water don't touch us, you see. If it did, it might crush us, but it don't. It's always held a little way off from our bodies by the magic of the fairy mermaids."

"True enough, Trot," declared the sailor man. "What an idjut I was not to think o' that myself!"

In the royal banquet hall were assembled many of the mermaids, headed by the lovely queen, and as soon as their earth guests arrived, Aquareine ordered the meal to be served. The lobsters again waited upon the table, wearing little white caps and aprons which made them look very funny; but Trot was so hungry after her afternoon's excursion that she did not pay as much attention to the lobsters as she did to her supper, which was very delicious and consisted of many courses. A lobster spilled some soup on Cap'n Bill's bald head and made him yell for a minute, because it was hot and he had not expected it, but the queen apologized very sweetly for the awkwardness of her servants, and the sailor soon forgot all about the incident in his enjoyment of the meal.

After the feast ended, they all went to the big reception room, where some of the mermaids played upon harps while others sang pretty songs. They danced together, too--a graceful, swimming dance, so queer to the little girl that it

interested and amused her greatly. Cap'n Bill seemed a bit bashful among so many beautiful mermaids, yet he was pleased when the queen offered him a place beside her throne, where he could see and hear all the delightful entertainment provided for the royal guests. He did not talk much, being a man of few words except when alone with Trot, but his light-blue eyes were big and round with wonder at the sights he saw.

Trot and the sailor man went to bed early and slept soundly upon their sponge-covered couches. The little girl never wakened until long after the sun was shining down through the glass roof of her room, and when she opened her eyes she was startled to find a number of big, small and middle-sized fishes staring at her through the glass. "That's one bad thing 'bout this mermaid palace," she said to herself. "It's too public. Ever'thing in the sea can look at you through the glass as much as it likes. I wouldn't mind fishes looking at me if they hadn't such big eyes, an'--goodness me! There's a monster that's all head! And there goes a fish with a sail on its back, an' here's old Mummercubble, I'm sure, for he's got a head just like a pig."

She might have watched the fishes on the roof for hours, had she not remembered it was late and breakfast must be ready. So she dressed and made her toilet, and swam down into the palace to find Cap'n Bill and the mermaids politely waiting for her to join them. The sea maidens were as fresh and lovely as ever, while each and all proved sweet tempered and merry, even at the breakfast table--and that is where people are cross, if they ever are. During the meal the queen said, "I shall take you this morning to the most interesting part of the ocean, where the largest and most remarkable sea creatures live. And we must visit King Anko, too, for the sea serpent would feel hurt and slighted if I did not bring my guests to call upon him."

"That will be nice," said Trot eagerly.

But Cap'n Bill asked, "Is there any danger, ma'am?"

"I think not," replied Queen Aquareine. "I cannot say that you will be exposed to any danger at all, so long as I'm with you. But we are going into the neighborhood of such fierce and even terrible beings which would attack you at once did they suspect you to be earth people. So in order to guard your safety, I intend to draw the Magic Circle around both of you before we start."

"What is the Magic Circle?" asked Trot.

"A fairy charm that prevents any enemy from touching you. No monster of the sea, however powerful, will be able to reach your body while you are protected by the Magic Circle," declared the Queen.

"Oh, then I'll not be a bit afraid," returned the child with perfect confidence.

"Am I to have the Magic Circle drawn around me, too?" asked Cap'n Bill.

"Of course," answered Aquareine. "You will need no other protection than that, yet both Princess Clia and I will both be with you. For today I shall leave Merla to rule our palaces in my place until we return."

No sooner was breakfast finished than Trot was anxious to start. The girl was also curious to discover what the powerful Magic Circle might prove to be, but she was a little disappointed in the ceremony. The queen merely grasped her fairy wand in her right hand and swam around the child in a circle, from left to right. Then she took her wand in her left hand and swam around Trot in another circle, from right to left. "Now, my dear," said she, "you are safe from any creature we are liable to meet."

She performed the same ceremony for Cap'n Bill, who was doubtful about the Magic Circle because he felt the same after it as he had before. But he said nothing of his unbelief, and soon they left the palace and started upon their journey.