

CHAPTER 9 - THE BASHFUL OCTOPUS

It was a lovely day, and the sea was like azure under the rays of the sun.

Over the flower beds and through the gardens they swam, emerging into the open sea in a direction opposite that taken by the visitors the day before. The party consisted of but four: Queen Aquareine, Princess Clia, Trot and Cap'n Bill.

"People who live upon the land know only those sea creatures which they are able to catch in nets or upon hooks or those which become disabled and are washed ashore," remarked the Queen as they swam swiftly through the clear water. "And those who sail in ships see only the creatures who chance to come to the surface. But in the deep ocean caverns are queer beings that no mortal has ever heard of or beheld, and some of these we are to visit. We shall also see some sea shrubs and flowering weeds which are sure to delight you with their beauty."

The sights really began before they had gone very far from the palace, and a school of butterfly fish, having gorgeous colors spattered over their broad wings, was first to delight the strangers. They swam just as butterflies fly, with a darting, jerky motion, and called a merry "Good morning!" to the mermaids as they passed.

"These butterfly fish are remarkably active," said the Princess, "and their quick motions protect them from their enemies. We like to meet them; they are always so gay and good-natured."

"Why, so am I!" cried a sharp voice just beside them, and they all paused to discover what creature had spoken to them.

"Take care," said Clia in a low voice. "It's an octopus."

Trot looked eagerly around. A long, brown arm stretched across their way in front and another just behind them, but that did not worry her. The octopus himself came slowly sliding up to them and proved to be well worth looking at. He wore a red coat with brass buttons, and a silk hat was tipped over one ear. His eyes were somewhat dull and watery, and he had a moustache of long, hair-like "feelers" that curled stiffly at the ends. When he tried to smile at them, he showed two rows of sharp, white teeth. In spite of his red coat and yellow-embroidered vest, his standing collar and carefully tied cravat, the legs of the octopus were bare, and Trot noticed he used some of his legs for arms, as in one of them was held a slender cane and in another a handkerchief.

"Well, well!" said the Octopus. "Are you all dumb? Or don't you know enough to be civil when you meet a neighbor?"

"We know how to be civil to our friends," replied Trot, who did not like the way he spoke.

"Well, are we not friends, then?" asked the Octopus in an airy tone of voice.

"I think not," said the little girl. "Octopuses are horrid creatures."

"OctoPI, if you please; octoPI," said the monster with a laugh.

"I don't see any pie that pleases me," replied Trot, beginning to get angry.

"OctoPUS means one of us; two or more are called octoPI," remarked the creature, as if correcting her speech.

"I suppose a lot of you would be a whole bakery!" she said scornfully.

"Our name is Latin. It was given to us by learned scientists years ago," said the Octopus.

"That's true enough," agreed Cap'n Bill. "The learned scientists named ev'ry blamed thing they come across, an' gener'ly they picked out names as nobody could understand or pernounce."

"That isn't our fault, sir," said the Octopus. "Indeed, it's pretty hard for us to go through life with such terrible names. Think of the poor little seahorse. He used to be a merry and cheerful fellow, but since they named him 'hippocampus' he hasn't smiled once."

"Let's go," said Trot. "I don't like to 'sociate with octopuses."

"OctoPI," said the creature, again correcting her.

"You're jus' as horrid whether you're puses or pies," she declared.

"Horrid!" cried the monster in a shocked tone of voice.

"Not only horrid, but horrible!" persisted the girl.

"May I ask in what way?" he inquired, and it was easy to see he was offended.

"Why, ev'rybody knows that octopuses are jus' wicked an' deceitful," she said. "Up on the earth, where I live, we call the Stannerd Oil Company an octopus, an' the Coal Trust an octopus, an'--"

"Stop, stop!" cried the monster in a pleading voice. "Do you mean to tell me that the earth people whom I have always respected compare me to the Stannerd Oil Company?"

"Yes," said Trot positively.

"Oh, what a disgrace! What a cruel, direful, dreadful disgrace!" moaned the Octopus, drooping his head in shame, and Trot could see great tears falling down his cheeks.

"This comes of having a bad name," said the Queen gently, for she was moved by the monster's grief.

"It is unjust! It is cruel and unjust!" sobbed the creature mournfully. "Just because we have several long arms and take whatever we can reach, they accuse us of being like--like--oh, I cannot say it! It is too shameful, too humiliating."

"Come, let's go," said Trot again. So they left the poor octopus weeping and wiping his watery eyes with his handkerchief and swam on their way. "I'm not a bit sorry for him," remarked the child, "for his legs remind me of serpents."

"So they do me," agreed Cap'n Bill.

"But the octopi are not very bad," said the Princess, "and we get along with them much better than we do with their cousins, the sea devils."

"Oh. Are the sea devils their cousins?" asked Trot.

"Yes, and they are the only creatures of the ocean which we greatly fear," replied Aquareine. "I hope we shall meet none today, for we are going near to the dismal caverns where they live."

"What are the sea devils like, ma'am?" inquired Cap'n Bill a little uneasily.

"Something like the octopus you just saw, only much larger and of a bright scarlet color, striped with black," answered the Queen. "They are very fierce and terrible creatures and nearly as much dreaded by the inhabitants of the ocean as is Zog, and nearly as powerful as King Anko himself."

"Zog! Who is Zog?" questioned the girl. "I haven't heard of him before now."

"We do not like to mention Zog's name," responded the Queen in a low voice. "He is the wicked genius of the sea, and a magician of great power."

"What's he like?" asked Cap'n Bill.

"He is a dreadful creature, part fish, part man, part beast and part serpent. Centuries ago they cast him off the earth into the sea, where he has caused much trouble. Once he waged a terrible war against King Anko, but the sea serpent finally conquered Zog and drove the magician into his castle, where he now stays shut up. For if ever Anko catches the monster outside of his enchanted castle, he will kill him, and Zog knows that very well."

"Seems like you have your troubles down here just as we do on top the ground," remarked Cap'n Bill.

"But I'm glad old Zog is shut up in his castle," added Trot. "Is it a sea castle like your own palace?"

"I cannot say, my dear, for the enchantment makes it invisible to all eyes but those of its inhabitants," replied Aquareine. "No one sees Zog now, and we scarcely ever hear of him, but all the sea people know he is here someplace and fear his power. Even in the old days, before Anko conquered him, Zog was the enemy of the mermaids, as he was of all the good and respectable seafolk. But do not worry about the magician, I beg of you, for he has not dared to do an evil deed in many, many years."

"Oh, I'm not afraid," asserted Trot.

"I'm glad of that," said the Queen. "Keep together, friends, and be careful not to separate, for here comes an army of sawfishes."

Even as Aquareine spoke, they saw a swirl and commotion in the water ahead of them, while a sound like a muffled roar fell upon their ears. Then swiftly there dashed upon them a group of great fishes with long saws sticking out in front of their noses, armed with sharp, hooked teeth, all set in a row. They were larger than the swordfishes and seemed more fierce and bold. But the mermaids and Trot and Cap'n Bill quietly awaited their attack, and instead of tearing them with their saws as they expected to do, the fishes were unable to touch them at all. They tried every possible way to get at their proposed victims, but the Magic Circle was all powerful and turned aside the ugly saws; so our friends were not disturbed at all. Seeing this, the sawfishes soon abandoned the attempt and with growls and roars of disappointment swam away and were quickly out of sight.

Trot had been a wee bit frightened during the attack, but now she laughed gleefully and told the queen that it seemed very nice to be protected by fairy powers. The water grew a darker blue as they descended into its depths, farther and farther away from the rays of the sun. Trot was surprised to find she could see so plainly through the high wall of water above her, but the sun was able to

shoot its beams straight down through the transparent sea, and they seemed to penetrate to every nook and crevice of the rocky bottom.

In this deeper part of the ocean some of the fishes had a phosphorescent light of their own, and these could be seen far ahead as if they were lanterns. The explorers met a school of argonauts going up to the surface for a sail, and the child watched these strange creatures with much curiosity. The argonauts live in shells in which they are able to hide in case of danger from prowling wolf fishes, but otherwise they crawl out and carry their shells like humps upon their backs. Then they spread their skinny sails above them and sail away under water till they come to the surface, where they float and let the currents of air carry them along the same as the currents of water had done before. Trot thought the argonauts comical little creatures, with their big eyes and sharp noses, and to her they looked like a fleet of tiny ships.

It is said that men got their first idea of boats and of how to sail them from watching these little argonauts.