

CHAPTER 10 - THE UNDISCOVERED ISLAND

In following the fleet of argonauts, the four explorers had risen higher in the water and soon found they had wandered to an open space that seemed to Trot like the flat top of a high hill. The sands were covered with a growth of weeds so gorgeously colored that one who had never peered beneath the surface of the sea would scarcely believe they were not the product of a dye shop. Every known hue seemed represented in the delicate, fern-like leaves that swayed softly to and fro as the current moved them. They were not set close together, these branches of magnificent hues, but were scattered sparsely over the sandy bottom of the sea so that while from a distance they seemed thick, a nearer view found them spread out with ample spaces of sand between them.

In these sandy spaces lay the real attractiveness of the place, for here were many of those wonders of the deep that have surprised and interested people in all ages.

First were the starfishes--hundreds of them, it seemed--lying sleepily on the bottom, with their five or six points extended outward. They were of various colors, some rich and brilliant, others of dark brown hues. A few had wound their arms around the weeds or were creeping slowly from one place to another, in the latter case turning their points downward and using them as legs. But most of them were lying motionless, and as Trot looked down upon them she thought they resembled stars in the sky on a bright night, except that the blue of the heavens was here replaced by the white sand, and the twinkling diamond stars by the colored starfish.

"We are near an island," said the Queen, "and that is why so many starfishes are here, as they love to keep close to shore. Also the little seahorses love these weeds, and to me they are more interesting than the starfish."

Trot now noticed the seahorses for the first time. They were quite small--merely two or three inches high--but had funny little heads that were shaped much like the head of a horse, and bright, intelligent eyes. They had no legs, though, for their bodies ended in tails which they twined around the stems of seaweeds to support themselves and keep the currents from carrying them away.

Trot bent down close to examine one of the queer little creatures and exclaimed, "Why, the seahorses haven't any fins or anything to swim with."

"Oh yes we have," replied the Sea Horse in a tiny but distinct voice. "These things on the side of my head are fins."

"I thought they were ears," said the girl.

"So they are. Fins and ears at the same time," answered the little sea animal. "Also, there are small fins on our backs. Of course, we can't swim as the mermaids do, or even as swiftly as fishes; but we manage to get around, thank you."

"Don't the fishes catch and eat you?" inquired Trot curiously.

"Sometimes," admitted the Sea Horse, "and there are many other living things that have a way of destroying us. But here I am, as you see, over six weeks old, and during that time I have escaped every danger. That isn't so bad, is it?"

"Phoo!" said a Starfish lying near. "I'm over three months old. You're a mere baby, Sea Horse."

"I'm not!" cried the Sea Horse excitedly. "I'm full-grown and may live to be as old as you are!"

"Not if I keep on living," said the Starfish calmly, and Trot knew he was correct in his statement.

The little girl now noticed several sea spiders creeping around and drew back because she did not think them very pretty. They were shaped not unlike the starfishes, but had slender legs and big heads with wicked-looking eyes sticking out of them.

"Oh, I don't like those things!" said Trot, coming closer to her companions.

"You don't, eh?" said a big Sea Spider in a cross voice. "Why do you come around here, then, scaring away my dinner when you're not wanted?"

"It isn't YOUR ocean," replied Trot.

"No, and it isn't yours," snapped the Spider. "But as it's big enough for us both, I'd like you to go away."

"So we will," said Aquareine gently, and at once she moved toward the surface of the water. Trot and Cap'n Bill followed, with Clia, and the child asked, "What island are we near?"

"It has no name," answered the Queen, "for it is not inhabited by man, nor has it ever yet been discovered by them. Perhaps you will be the first humans to see this island. But it is a barren, rocky place, and only fit for seals and turtles."

"Are any of them there now?" Cap'n Bill inquired.

"I think so. We will see."

Trot was astonished to find how near they were to the "top" of the ocean, for they had not ascended through the water very long when suddenly her head popped into the air, and she gave a gasp of surprise to find herself looking at the clear sky for the first time since she had started upon this adventure by rowing into Giant's Cave.

She floated comfortably in the water, with her head and face just out of it, and began to look around her. Cap'n Bill was at her side, and so were the two mermaids. The day was fair, and the surface of the sea, which stretched far away as the eye could reach, rippled under a gentle breeze. They had risen almost at the edge of a small, rocky islet, high in the middle, but gradually slanting down to the water. No trees or bushes or grass grew anywhere about; only rocks, gray and bleak, were to be seen.

Trot scarcely noticed this at first, however, for the island seemed covered with groups of forms, some still and some moving, which the old sailor promptly recognized as seals. Many were lying asleep or sunning themselves; others crept awkwardly around, using their strong fins as legs or "paddles" and caring little if they disturbed the slumbers of the others. Once in a while one of those crowded out of place would give a loud and angry bark, which awakened others and set them to barking likewise.

Baby seals were there in great numbers, and were more active and playful than their elders. It was really wonderful how they could scramble around on the land, and Trot laughed more than once at their antics.

At the edge of the water lay many huge turtles, some as big around as a wagon wheel and others much smaller in size.

"The big ones are very old," said the Queen, seeing Trot's eyes fixed on the turtles.

"How old?" asked the child.

"Hundreds of years, I think. They live to a great age, for nothing can harm them when they withdraw their legs and heads into their thick shells. We use some of the turtles for food, but prefer the younger ones. Men also fish for turtles and eat them, but of course no men ever come to this out-of-the-way place in the ocean, so the inhabitants of this little island know they are perfectly safe."

In the center of the island rose high cliffs on top of which were to be seen great flocks of seagulls, some whirling in the air, while others were perched upon the points of rock.

"What do the birds find to eat?" asked Cap'n Bill.

"They often feed upon seals which die of accident or old age, and they are expert fishermen," explained Queen Aquareine. "Curiously enough, the seals also feed upon these birds, which they are often able to catch in their strong jaws when the gulls venture too near. And then, the seals frequently rob the nests of eggs, of which they are very fond."

"I'd like a few gulls' eggs now," remarked a big seal that lay near them upon the shore. Trot had thought him sound asleep, but now he opened his eyes to blink lazily at the group in the water.

"Good morning," said the Queen. "Aren't you Chief Muffruff?"

"I am," answered the old seal. "And you are Aquareine, the mermaid queen. You see, I remember you, although you haven't been here for years. And isn't that Princess Clia? To be sure! But the other mermaids are strangers to me, especially the bald-headed one."

"I'm not a mermaid," asserted Cap'n Bill. "I'm a sailor jes' a-visitin' the mermaids."

"Our friends are earth dwellers," explained the Queen.

"That's odd," said Muffruff. "I can't remember that any earth dwellers ever came this way before. I never travel far, you see, for I'm chief of this disorderly family of seals that live on this island--on it and off it, that is."

"You're a poor chief," said a big turtle lying beside the seal. "If your people are disorderly, it is your own fault."

Muffruff gave a chuckling laugh. Then, with a movement quick as lightning, he pushed his head under the shell of the turtle and gave it a sudden jerk. The huge turtle was tossed up on edge and then turned flat upon its back, where its short legs struggled vainly to right its overturned body.

"There!" snorted the Seal contemptuously. "Perhaps you'll dare insult me again in the presence of visitors, you old mud-wallower!"

Seeing the plight of the turtle, several young seals came laughingly wabbling to the spot, and as they approached the helpless creature drew in his legs and head and closed his two shells tightly together. The seals bumped against the turtle and gave it a push that sent it sliding down the beach like a toboggan, and a minute later it splashed into the water and sank out of sight. But that was just what the creature wanted. On shore the upset turtle was quite helpless; but the mischievous seals saved him. For as soon as he touched the water, he was able to

turn and right himself, which he promptly did. Then he raised his head above the water and asked:

"Is it peace or war, Muffruff?"

"Whichever you like," answered the Seal indifferently.

Perhaps the turtle was angry, for it ran on shore with remarkable swiftness, uttering a shrill cry as it advanced. At once all the other turtles awoke to life and with upraised heads joined their comrade in the rush for the seals. Most of Chief Muffruff's band scrambled hastily down the rocks and plunged into the water of the sea without waiting for the turtles to reach them; but the chief himself was slow in escaping. It may be that he was ashamed to run while the mermaids were watching, but if this was so he made a great mistake. The turtles snapped at his fins and tail and began biting round chunks out of them so that Chief Muffruff screamed with pain and anger and floundered into the water as fast as he could go. The vengeful turtles were certainly the victors, and now held undisputed possession of the island.

Trot laughed joyously at the incident, not feeling a bit sorry for the old seal who had foolishly begun the battle. Even the gentle queen smiled as she said:

"These quarrels between the turtles and the seals are very frequent, but they are soon ended. An hour from now they will all be lying asleep together just as we found them; but we will not wait for that. Let us go."

She sank slowly beneath the water again, and the others followed after her.