

CHAPTER 11 - ZOG THE TERRIBLE AND HIS SEA DEVILS

"The sun must be going under a cloud," said Trot, looking ahead.

They had descended far into the ocean depths again--further, the girl thought, than they had ever been before.

"No," the Queen answered after a glance ahead of them, "that is a cuttlefish, and he is dyeing the sea around him with ink so that he can hide from us. Let us turn a little to the left, for we could see nothing at all in that inky water."

Following her advice, they made a broad curve to the left, and at once the water began to darken in that direction.

"Why, there's another of 'em," said Cap'n Bill as the little party came to a sudden halt.

"So there is," returned the Queen, and Trot thought there was a little quiver of anxiety in her voice. "We must go far to the right to escape the ink."

So they again started, this time almost at a right angle to their former course, the little girl inquired:

"How can the cuttlefish color the water so very black?"

"They carry big sacks in front of them where they conceal the ink," Princess Clia answered. "Whenever they choose, the cuttlefish are able to press out this ink, and it colors the water for a great space around them."

The direction in which they were now swimming was taking them far out of their way. Aquareine did not wish to travel very far to the right, so when she thought they had gone far enough to escape the inky water, she turned to lead her party toward the left--the direction in which she DID wish to go. At once another cloud of ink stained the water and drove them to the right again.

"Is anything wrong, ma'am?" asked Cap'n Bill, seeing a frown gather upon the queen's lovely face.

"I hope not," she said. "But I must warn you that these cuttlefish are the servants of the terrible sea devils, and from the way they are acting they seem determined to drive us toward the Devil Caves, which I wished to avoid."

This admission on the part of their powerful protector, the fairy mermaid, sent a chill to the hearts of the earth people. Neither spoke for a time, but finally Cap'n Bill asked in a timid voice:

"Hadn't we better go back, ma'am?"

"Yes," decided Aquareine after a moment's thought. "I think it will be wise to retreat. The sea devils are evidently aware of our movements and wish to annoy us. For my part, I have no fear of them, but I do not care to have you meet such creatures."

But when they turned around to abandon their journey, another inky cloud was to be seen behind them. They really had no choice but to swim in the only streak of clear water they could find, and the mermaids well knew this would lead them nearer and nearer to the caves of their enemies.

But Aquareine led the way, moving very slowly, and the others followed her. In every other direction they were hemmed in by the black waters, and they did not dare to halt, because the inky fluid crept swiftly up behind them and drove them on.

The queen and the princess had now become silent and grave. They swam on either side of their guests as if to better protect them.

"Don't look up," whispered Clia, pressing close to the little girl's side.

"Why not?" asked Trot, and then she did exactly what she had been told not to do. She lifted her head and saw stretched over them a network of scrawny, crimson arms interlaced like the branches of trees in winter when the leaves have fallen and left them bare.

Cap'n Bill gave a start and muttered "Land sakes!" for he, too, had gazed upward and seen the crimson network of limbs.

"Are these the sea devils?" asked the child, more curious than frightened.

"Yes, dear," replied the Queen. "But I advise you to pay no attention to them. Remember, they cannot touch us."

In order to avoid the threatening arms overhead, which followed them as they swam, our friends kept near to the bottom of the sea, which was here thickly covered with rough and jagged rocks. The inky water had now been left far behind, but when Trot looked over her shoulder, she shuddered to find a great crimson monster following closely after them, with a dozen long, snaky feelers stretched out as if to grab anyone that lagged behind. And there, at the side of Princess Clia, was another devil, leering silently with his cruel, bulging eyes at the pretty mermaid. Beside the queen swam still another of their enemies. Indeed, the sea devils had crept upon them and surrounded them everywhere except at the front, and Trot began to feel nervous and worried for the first time.

Cap'n Bill kept mumbling queer words under his breath, for he had a way of talking to himself when anything "upset him," as he would quaintly remark. Trot always knew he was disturbed or in trouble when he began to "growl."

The only way now open was straight ahead. They swam slowly, yet fast enough to keep a safe distance from the dreadful creature behind them.

"I'm afraid they are driving us into a trap," whispered the Queen softly. "But whatever happens, do not lose courage, earth friends. Clia and I are here to protect you, and our fairy powers are sufficient to keep you from all harm."

"Oh, I don't mind so very much," declared Trot calmly. "It's like the fairy adventures in storybooks, and I've often thought I'd like that kind of adventures, 'cause the story always turns out the right way."

Cap'n Bill growled something just then, but the only words Trot could make out were, "never lived to tell the tale."

"Oh, pshaw, Cap'n," she said. "We may be in danger, right enough, an' to be honest, I don't like the looks of these sea devils at all. But I'm sure it's no KILLING matter, for we've got the fairy circles all around us."

"Ha ha!" laughed the monster beside her. "WE know all about the fairy circles, don't we, Migg?"

"Ho ho!" laughed the monster on the other side. "We do, Slibb, my boy, and we don't think much of fairy circles, either!"

"They have foiled our enemies many a time," declared the Princess with much dignity.

"Ha ha!" laughed one. "That's why we're here now."

"Ho ho!" laughed the other. "We've learned a trick or two, and we've got you fast this time."

Then all the sea devils--those above and the one behind, and the two on the sides--laughed all together, and their laughter was so horrible that it made even Trot shudder.

But now the queen stopped short, and the others stopped with her.

"I will go no farther," she said firmly, not caring if the monsters overheard her. "It is evident that these monsters are trying to drive us into some secret place, and it is well known that they are in league with Zog the Terrible, whom they serve because they are as wicked as he is. We must be somewhere near the hidden

castle of Zog, so I prefer to stay here rather than be driven into some place far more dangerous. As for the sea devils, they are powerless to injure us in any way. Not one of those thousand arms about us can possibly touch our bodies."

The only reply to this defiant speech was another burst of horrible laughter; and now there suddenly appeared before them still another of the monsters, which thus completely hemmed them in. Then the creatures began interlacing their long arms--or "feelers"--until they formed a perfect cage around the prisoners, not an opening being left that was large enough for one of them to escape through.

The mermaids and the girl and sailor man kept huddled close together, for although they might be walled in by the sea devils, their captors could not touch them because of the protecting magic circles.

All at once Trot exclaimed, "Why, we must be moving!"

This was startling news, but by watching the flow of water past them they saw that the little girl was right. The sea devils were swimming, all together, and as the cage they were in moved forward, our friends were carried with it.

Queen Aquareine had a stern look upon her beautiful face. Cap'n Bill guessed from this look that the mermaid was angry, for it seemed much like the look Trot's mother wore when they came home late to dinner. But however angry the queen might be, she was unable to help herself or her guests just now or to escape from the guidance of the dreaded sea devils. The rest of the party had become sober and thoughtful, and in dignified silence they awaited the outcome of this strange adventure.