

CHAPTER 13 - PRISONERS OF THE SEA MONSTER

The room in the enchanted castle which Zog called the "den" and in which the wicked sea monster passed most of his time was a perfectly shaped dome of solid gold. The upper part of this dome was thickly set with precious jewels--diamonds, rubies, sapphires and emeralds, which sparkled beautifully through the crystal water. The lower walls were as thickly studded with pearls, all being of perfect shape and color. Many of the pearls were larger than any which may be found upon earth, for the sea people knew where to find the very best and hide them away where men cannot discover them.

The golden floor was engraved with designs of rare beauty, depicting not only sea life, but many adventures upon land. In the room were several large, golden cabinets, the doors of which were closed and locked, and in addition to the cabinets there were tables, chairs and sofas, the latter upholstered with softest sealskins. Handsome rugs of exquisitely woven seaweeds were scattered about, the colors of which were artistically blended together. In one corner a fountain of air bubbled up through the water. The entire room was lighted as brilliantly as if exposed to the direct rays of the sun, yet where this light came from our friends could not imagine. No lamp or other similar device was visible anywhere.

The strangers at first scarcely glanced at all these beautiful things, for in an easy chair sat Zog himself, more wonderful than any other living creature, and as they gazed upon him, their eyes seemed fascinated as if held by a spell. Zog's face was the face of a man, except that the tops of his ears were pointed like horns and he had small horns instead of eyebrows and a horn on the end of his chin. In spite of these deformities, the expression of the face was not unpleasant or repulsive. His hair was carefully parted and brushed, and his mouth and nose were not only perfect in shape but quite handsome.

Only the eyes betrayed Zog and made him terrible to all beholders. They seemed like coals of glowing fire and sparkled so fiercely that no one ever cared to meet their gaze for more than an instant. Perhaps the monster realized this, for he usually drooped his long lashes over his fiery eyes to shut out their glare. Zog had two well-shaped legs which ended in the hoofs of beasts instead of feet, and these hoofs were shod with gold. His body was a shapeless mass covered with richly embroidered raiment, over which a great robe of cloth of gold fell in many folds. This robe was intended to hide the magician's body from view, but Trot noticed that the cloth moved constantly in little ripples, as if what lay underneath would not keep still.

The best features of which Zog could boast were his arms and hands, the latter being as well formed, as delicate and white as those of a well-bred woman. When he spoke, his voice sounded sweet and clear, and its tones were very gentle. He had given them a few moments to stare at him, for he was examining them in turn with considerable curiosity. "Well," said he, "do you not find me the most hateful creature you have ever beheld?"

The queen refrained from answering, but Trot said promptly, "We do. Nothing could be more horrid or more disgustin' than you are, it seems to me."

"Very good, very good indeed," declared the monster, lifting his lashes to flash his glowing eyes upon them. Then he turned toward Cap'n Bill. "Man-fish," he continued, "what do YOU think of me?"

"Mighty little," the sailor replied. "You orter be 'shamed to ask sech a question, knowin' you look worse ner the devil himself."

"Very true," answered Zog, frowning. He felt that he had received a high compliment, and the frown showed he was pleased with Cap'n Bill.

But now Queen Aquareine advanced to a position in front of their captor and said, "Tell me, Zog, why have you trapped us and brought us here?"

"To destroy you," was the quick answer, and the magician turned for an instant to flash his eyes upon the beautiful mermaid. "For two hundred years I have been awaiting a chance to get within my power some friend of Anko the Sea Serpent--of Anko, whom I hate!" he added, smiling sweetly. "When you left your palace today, my swift spies warned me, and so I sent the sea devils to capture you. Often have they tried to do this before, but always failed. Today, acting by my command, they tricked you, and by surrounding you forced you to the entrance of my enchanted castle. The result is a fine capture of important personages. I have now in my power the queen and princess of the fairy mermaids, as well as two wandering earth people, and I assure you I shall take great pleasure in destroying you utterly."

"You are a coward," declared the Queen proudly. "You dared not meet us in the open sea."

"No, I dare not leave this castle," Zog admitted, still smiling. "But here in my own domain my power is supreme. Nothing can interfere with my vengeance."

"That remains to be seen," said Aquareine, firmly meeting the gaze of the terrible eyes.

"Of course," he answered, nodding his head with a graceful movement. "You will try to thwart me and escape. You will pit your fairy power against my powers of magic. That will give me great pleasure, for the more you struggle, the greater will be my revenge."

"But why should you seek revenge upon us?" asked Clia. "We have never harmed you."

"That is true," replied Zog. "I bear you no personal ill will. But you are friends of my great enemy, King Anko, and it will annoy him very much when he finds that you have been destroyed by me. I cannot hurt the rascally old sea serpent himself, but through you I can make him feel my vengeance."

"The mermaids have existed thousands of years," said the Queen in a tone of pride. "Do you imagine the despised and conquered Zog has power to destroy them?"

"I do not know," was the quiet answer. "It will be interesting to discover which is the more powerful."

"I challenge you to begin the test at once, vile magician!" exclaimed Aquareine.

"There is no hurry, fair Queen," answered Zog in his softest tones. "I have been so many years in accomplishing your capture that it is foolish to act hastily now. Besides, I am lonely. Here in my forced retirement I see only those uninteresting earth mortals whom I have made my slaves, for all sea dwellers are forbidden to serve me save the sea devils, and they dare not enter my castle. I have saved many mortals from drowning and brought them here to people my castle, but I do not love mortals. Two lovely mermaids are much more interesting, and before I allow you to perish, I shall have much amusement in witnessing your despair and your struggles to escape. You are now my prisoners. By slow degrees I shall wear out your fairy powers and break your hearts, as well as the hearts of these earth dwellers who have no magic powers, and I think it will be a long time before I finally permit you to die."

"That's all right," said Trot cheerfully. "The longer you take, the better I'll be satisfied."

"That's how I feel about it," added Cap'n Bill. "Don't get in a hurry to kill us Zog. It'll be such a wear an' tear on your nerves. Jes' take it easy an' let us live as long as we can."

"Don't you care to die?" asked the magician.

"It's a thing I never longed for," the sailor replied. "You see, we had no business to go on a trip with the mermaids to begin with. I've allus heard tell that mermaids is dangerous, an' no one as met 'em ever lived to tell the tale. Eh, Trot?"

"That's what you said, Cap'n Bill."

"So I guess we're done for, one way 'r 'nother, an' it don't matter much which. But Trot's a good child, an' mighty young an' tender. It don't seem like her time has come to die. I'd like to have her sent safe home to her mother. So I've got this 'ere proposition to make, Zog. If your magic could make ME die twice, or even THREE times fer good measure, why you go ahead an' do it an' I won't complain. All I ask is fer you to send this little girl safe back to dry land again."

"Don't you do it, Zog!" cried Trot indignantly, and turning to Cap'n Bill, she added, "I'm not goin' to leave you down here in all this mess, Cap'n, and don't you think it. If one of us gets out of the muddle we're in, we'll both get out, so don't you make any bargains with Zog to die twice."

Zog listened to this conversation very carefully. "The dying does not amount to much," he said. "It is the thinking about it that hurts you mortals most. I've watched many a shipwreck at sea, and the people would howl and scream for hours before the ship broke up. Their terror was very enjoyable. But when the end came, they all drowned as peacefully as if they were going to sleep, so it didn't amuse me at all."

"I'm not worrying," said Trot.

"Ner me," said Cap'n Bill. "You'll find we can take what comes jes' as easy as anybody."

"I do not expect to get much from you poor mortals," said Zog carelessly. "You are merely a side show to my circus, a sort of dessert to my feast of vengeance. When the time comes, I can find a hundred ways to kill you. My most interesting prisoners are these pretty mermaids, who claim that none of their race has ever yet died or been destroyed. The first mermaid ever created is living yet, and I am told she is none other than Queen Aquareine. So I have a pretty problem before me to invent some way to destroy the mermaids or put them out of existence. And it will require some thought."

"Also, it will require some power you do not possess," suggested the Queen.

"That may be," replied Zog softly. "But I am going to experiment, and I believe I shall be able to cause you a lot of pain and sorrow before I finally make an end of

you. I have not lived twenty-seven thousand years, Aquareine, without getting a certain amount of wisdom, and I am more powerful than you suspect."

"You are a monster and a wicked magician," said the Mermaid Queen.

"I am," agreed Zog, "but I cannot help it. I was created part man, part bird, part fish, part beast and part reptile, and such a monstrosity could not be otherwise than wicked. Everybody hates me, and I hate everybody."

"Why don't you kill yourself?" asked Trot.

"I've tried that and failed," he answered. "Only one being in the world has power to destroy me, and that is King Anko, the sea serpent."

"Then you'd better let him do it," advised the little girl.

"No. Much as I long to die, I cannot allow King Anko the pleasure of killing me. He has always been my worst enemy, and it would be such a joy to him to kill me that I really cannot allow him. Indeed, I have always hoped to kill Anko. I have now been three thousand six hundred and forty-two years, eleven months and nine days figuring out a plan to destroy old Anko, and as yet I have not discovered away."

"I'd give it up, if I were you," advised Trot. "Don't you think you could get some fun out of trying to be good?"

"No!" cried Zog, and his voice was not so soft as before. "Listen, Aquareine, you and your attendants shall be prisoners in this castle until I can manage to stop you from living. Rooms will be placed at your disposal, and I wish you to go to them at once, as I am tired of looking at you."

"You're no more tired than we are," remarked Trot. "It's lucky you can't see yourself, Zog."

He turned his glowing eyes full upon her. "The worst of my queer body I keep concealed," he said. "If ever you see it, you will scream with terror." He touched a bell beside him, and the girl was surprised to find how clearly its tones rang out through the water. In an instant the boy Sacho appeared and bowed low before his dreadful master. "Take the mermaids and the child to the Rose Chamber," commanded Zog, "and take the old man-fish to the Peony Room."

Sacho turned to obey. "Are the outer passages well guarded?" asked the monster.

"Yes, as you have commanded," said the boy.

"Then you may allow the prisoners to roam at will throughout the castle. Now, go!"

The prisoners followed Sacho from the room, glad to get away. The presence of this evil being had grown oppressive to them, and Zog had himself seemed ill at ease during the last few minutes. The robe so closely wound around his body moved jerkily, as if something beneath disturbed it, and at such times Zog shifted nervously in his seat.

Sacho's thin little legs trotted through the water and led the way into a different passage from the one by which they had entered. They swam slowly after him and breathed easier when they had left the golden domed chamber where their wicked enemy sat enthroned. "Well, how do you like him?" asked Sacho with a laugh.

"We hate him!" declared Trot emphatically.

"Of course you do," replied Sacho. "But you're wasting time hating anything. It doesn't do you any good, or him any harm. Can you sing?"

"A little," said Trot, "but I don't feel like singing now."

"You're wrong about that," the boy asserted. "Anything that keeps you from singing is foolishness, unless it's laughter. Laughter, joy and song are the only good things in the world."

Trot did not answer this queer speech, for just then they came to a flight of stairs, and Sacho climbed up them while the others swam. And now they were in a lofty, broad corridor having many doors hung with seaweed draperies. At one of these doorways Sacho stopped and said, "Here is the Rose Chamber where the master commands you to live until you die. You may wander anywhere in the castle as you please; to leave it is impossible. Whenever you return to the Rose Chamber, you will know it by this design of roses sewn in pearls upon the hangings. The Peony Room where the man-fish is to live is the next one farther on."

"Thank you," replied Queen Aquareine. "Are we to be fed?"

"Meals will be served in your rooms. If you desire anything, ring the bell and some of the slaves will be sure to answer it. I am mostly in attendance upon my master, but whenever I am at liberty I will look after your comfort myself."

Again they thanked the strange boy, and he turned and left them. They could hear him whistle and sing as he returned along the passage. Then Princess Clia parted the curtains that her queen and companions might enter the Rose Chamber.