

CHAPTER 14 - CAP'N JOE AND CAP'N BILL

The rooms Zog had given his prisoners were as handsome as all other parts of this strange enchanted castle. Gold was used plentifully in the decorations, and in the Rose Chamber occupied by the mermaids and Trot golden roses formed a border around the entire room. The sea maidens had evidently been expected, for the magician had provided couches for them to recline upon similar to the ones used in the mermaid palaces. The frames were of mother of pearl and the cushions of soft, white sponges. In the room were toilet tables, mirrors, ornaments and many articles used by earth people, which they afterward learned had been plundered by Zog from sunken ships and brought to his castle by his allies, the seadevils.

While the mermaids were examining and admiring their room, Cap'n Bill went to the Peony Room to see what it was like and found his quarters were very cozy and interesting. There were pictures on the wall, portraits of grave-looking porpoises, bashful seals, and smug and smiling walruses. Some of the wall panels were formed of mirrors and reflected clearly the interior of the room. Around the ceiling was a frieze of imitation peonies in silver, and the furniture was peony-shaped, the broad leaves being bent to form seats and couches. Beside a pretty dressing table hung a bell cord with a tassel at the end. Cap'n Bill did not know it was a bell cord, so he pulled it to see what would happen and was puzzled to find that nothing seemed to happen at all, the bell being too far away for him to hear it. Then he began looking at the treasures contained in this royal apartment, and was much pleased with a golden statue of a mermaid that resembled Princess Clia in feature. A silver flower vase upon a stand contained a bouquet of gorgeous peonies, "as nat'ral as life," said Cap'n Bill, although he saw plainly that they must be made of metal.

Trot came in just then to see how her dear friend was located. She entered from the doorway that connected the two rooms and said, "Isn't it pretty, Cap'n? And who'd ever think that awful creature Zog owned such a splendid castle and kept his prisoners in such lovely rooms?"

"I once heard tell," said the sailor, "of a foreign people that sacrificed humans to please their pagan gods, an' before they killed 'em outright they stuffed the victims full of good things to eat an' dressed 'em in pretty clothes an' treated 'em like princes. That's why I don't take much comfort in our fine surroundin's, Trot. This Zog is a pagan, if ever there was one, an' he don't mean us any good, you may depend on't."

"No," replied Trot soberly, "I'm sure he does not expect us to be happy here. But I'm going to fool him and have just as good a time as I can." As she spoke they both turned around--an easy thing to do with a single flop of their flexible tails--and Cap'n Bill uttered a cry of surprise. Just across the room stood a perfect duplicate of himself. The round head, with its bald top and scraggly whiskers, the sailor cap and shirt, the wide pantaloons, even the wooden leg, each and every one were exact copies of those owned by Cap'n Bill. Even the expression in the light-blue eyes was the same, and it is no wonder the old sailor stared at his "double" in amazement. But the next minute he laughed and said, "Why, Trot, it's ME reflected in a mirror. But at first I thought it was someone else."

Trot was staring, too. "Look, Cap'n!" she whispered. "Look at the wooden leg."

"Well, it's MY wooden leg, ain't it?" he inquired.

"If it is, it can't be a reflection in a mirror," she argued, "for YOU haven't got a wooden leg. You've got a fish's tail."

The old sailor was so startled by this truth that he gave a great flop with his tail that upset his balance and made him keel a somersault in the water before he got right side up again. Then he found the other sailor man laughing at him and was horrified to find the "reflection" advancing toward them by stumping along on its wooden leg. "Keep away! Get out, there!" yelled Cap'n Bill. "You're a ghost, the ghost o' me that once was, an' I can't bear the sight o' you. Git out!"

"Did you ring jes' to tell me to git out?" asked the other in a mild voice.

"I--I didn't ring," declared Cap'n Bill.

"You did. You pulled that bell cord," said the one-legged (one or more lines missing here in this edition)

"Oh, did pullin' that thing ring a bell?" inquired the Cap'n, a little ashamed of his ignorance and reassured by hearing the "ghost" talk.

"It surely did," was the reply, "and Sacho told me to answer your bell and look after you. So I'm a-lookin' after you."

"I wish you wouldn't," protested Cap'n Bill. "I've no use fer--fer ghostses, anyhow."

The strange sailor began to chuckle at hearing this, and his chuckle was just like Cap'n Bill's chuckle, so full of merry humor that it usually made everyone laugh with him.

"Who are you?" asked Trot, who was very curious and much surprised.

"I'm Cap'n Joe," was the reply. "Cap'n Joe Weedles, formerly o' the brig 'Gladsome' an' now a slave o' Zog at the bottom o' the sea."

"J--J--Joe Wee-Weedles!" gasped Cap'n Bill, amazed. "Joe Weedles o' the 'Gladsome'! Why, dash my eyes, mate, you must be my brother!"

"Are YOU Bill Weedles?" asked the other. And then he added, "But no, you can't be. Bill wasn't no mermaid. He were a human critter like myself."

"That's what I am," said Cap'n Bill hastily. "I'm a human critter, too. I've jes' borrered this fish tail to swim with while I'm visitin' the mermaids."

"Well, well," said Cap'n Joe in astonishment. "Who'd o' thought it! An' who'd ever o' thought as I'd find my long-lost brother in Zog's enchanted castle full fifty fathoms deep down in the wet, wet water!"

"Why, as fer that," replied Cap'n Bill, "it's YOU as is the long-lost brother, not me. You an' your ship disappeared many a year ago, an' ain't never been heard of since, while, as you see, I'm livin' on earth yet."

"You don't look it to all appearances," remarked Cap'n Joe in a reflective tone of voice. "But I'll agree it's many a year since I saw the top o' the water, an' I'm not expectin' to ever tramp on dry land again."

"Are you dead, or drowned, or what?" asked Cap'n Bill.

"Neither one nor t'other," was the answer. "But Zog gave me gills so's I could live in the water like fishes do, an' if I got on land I couldn't breathe air any more'n a fish out o' water can. So I guess as long as I live, I'll hev to stay down here."

"Do you like it?" asked Trot.

"Oh, I don't objec' much," said Cap'n Joe. "There ain't much excitement here, fer we don't catch a flock o' mermaids ev'ry day, but the work is easy an' the rations fair. I might o' been worse off, you know, for when my brig was wrecked, I'd 'a' gone to Davy Jones's Locker if Zog hadn't happened to find me an' made me a fish."

"You don't look as much like a fish as Cap'n Bill does," observed Trot.

"P'raps not," said Cap'n Joe, "but I notice Bill ain't got any gills an' breathes like you an' the mermaids does. When he gets back to land, he'll have his two legs again an' live in comfort breathin' air."

"I won't have two legs," asserted Cap'n Bill, "for when I'm on earth I'm fitted with one wooden leg, jes' the same as you are, Joe."

"Oh, I hadn't heard o' that, Bill, but I'm not surprised," replied Brother Joe. "Many a sailor gets to wear a wooden leg in time. Mine's hick'ry."

"So's mine," said Cap'n Bill with a air of pride. "I'm glad I've run across you, Joe, for I often wondered what had become of you. Seems too bad, though, to have to spend all your life under water."

"What's the odds?" asked Cap'n Joe. "I never could keep away from the water since I was a boy, an' there's more dangers to be met floatin' on it than there is soakin' in it. An' one other thing pleases me when I think on it: I'm parted from my wife, a mighty good woman with a tongue like a two-edge sword, an' my pore widder'll get the insurance money an' live happy. As fer me, Bill, I'm a good deal happier than I was when she kep' scoldin' me from mornin' to night every minute I was home."

"Is Zog a kind master?" asked Trot.

"I can't say he's kind," replied Cap'n Joe, "for he's as near a devil as any livin' critter CAN be. He grumbles an' growls in his soft voice all day, an' hates himself an' everybody else. But I don't see much of him. There's so many of us slaves here that Zog don't pay much attention to us, an' we have a pretty good time when the ol' magician is shut up in his den, as he mostly is."

"Could you help us to escape?" asked the child.

"Why, I don't know how," admitted Cap'n Joe. "There's magic all around us, and we slaves are never allowed to leave this great cave. I'll do what I can, o' course, but Sacho is the boy to help you if anyone can. That little chap knows a heap, I can tell you. So now, if nothin' more's wanted, I must get back to work."

"What work do you do?" Cap'n Bill asked.

"I sew buttons on Zog's clothes. Every time he gets mad, he busts his buttons off, an' I have to sew 'em on again. As he's mad most o' the time, it keeps me busy."

"I'll see you again, won't I, Joe?" said Cap'n Bill.

"No reason why you shouldn't, if you manage to keep alive," said Cap'n Joe. "But you mustn't forget, Bill, this Zog has his grip on you, an' I've never known anything to escape him yet."

Saying this, the old sailor began to stump toward the door, but tripped his foot against his wooden leg and gave a swift dive forward. He would have fallen flat had he not grabbed the drapery at the doorway and saved himself by holding fast to it with both hands. Even then he rolled and twisted so awkwardly before he

could get upon his legs that Trot had to laugh outright at his antics. "This hick'ry leg," said Cap'n Joe, "is so blamed light that it always wants to float. Agga-Groo, the goldworker, has promised me a gold leg that will stay down, but he never has time to make it. You're mighty lucky, Bill, to have a merman's tail instead o' legs."

"I guess I am, Joe," replied Cap'n Bill, "for in such a wet country the fishes have the best of it. But I ain't sure I'd like this sort o' thing always."

"Think o' the money you'd make in a side show," said Cap'n Joe with his funny chuckling laugh. Then he pounded his wooden leg against the hard floor and managed to hobble from the room without more accidents.

When he had gone, Trot said, "Aren't you glad to find your brother again, Cap'n Bill?"

"Why, so-so," replied the sailor. "I don't know much about Joe, seein' as we haven't met before for many a long year, an' all I remember about our boyhood days is that we fit an' pulled hair most o' the time. But what worries me most is Joe's lookin' so much like me myself, wooden leg an' all. Don't you think it's rather cheeky an' unbrotherly, Trot?"

"Perhaps he can't help it," suggested the child. "And anyhow, he'll never be able to live on land again."

"No," said Cap'n Bill with a sigh. "Joe's a fish, now, an' so he ain't likely to be took for me by one of our friends on the earth."