

CHAPTER 15 - THE MAGIC OF THE MERMAIDS

When Trot and Cap'n Bill entered the Rose Chamber they found the two mermaids reclining before an air fountain that was sending thousands of tiny bubbles up through the water.

"These fountains of air are excellent things," remarked Queen Aquareine, "for they keep the water fresh and sweet, and that is the more necessary when it is confined by walls, as it is in this castle. But now, let us counsel together and decide what to do in the emergency that confronts us."

"How can we tell what to do without knowing what's going to happen?" asked Trot.

"Somethin's sure to happen," said Cap'n Bill.

As if to prove his words, a gong suddenly sounded at their door and in walked a fat little man clothed all in white, including a white apron and white cap. His face was round and jolly, and he had a big mustache that curled up at the ends.

"Well, well!" said the little man, spreading out his legs and putting his hands on his hips as he stood looking at them. "Of all the queer things in the sea, you're the queerest! Mermaids, eh?"

"Don't bunch us that way!" protested Cap'n Bill.

"You are quite wrong," said Trot. "I'm a--a girl."

"With a fish's tail?" he asked, laughing at her.

"That's only just for a while," she said, "while I'm in the water, you know. When I'm at home on the land I walk just as you do, an' so does Cap'n Bill."

"But we haven't any gills," remarked the Cap'n, looking closely at the little man's throat, "so I take it we're not as fishy as some others."

"If you mean me, I must admit you are right," said the little man, twisting his mustache. "I'm as near a fish as a man can be. But you see, Cap'n, without the gills that make me a fish, I could not live under water."

"When it comes to that, you've no business to live under water," asserted the sailor. "But I s'pose you're a slave and can't help it."

"I'm chief cook for that old horror Zog. And that reminds me, good mermaids, or good people, or good girls and sailors, or whatever you are, that I'm sent here to ask what you'd like to eat."

"Good to see you, sir," said Cap'n Bill. "I'm nearly starved, myself."

"I had it in mind," said the little man, "to prepare a regular mermaid dinner, but since you're not mermaids--"

"Oh, two of us are," said the Queen, smiling. "I, my good cook, am Aquareine, the ruler of the mermaids, and this is the Princess Clia."

"I've often heard of you, your Majesty," returned the chief cook, bowing respectfully, "and I must say I've heard only good of you. Now that you have unfortunately become my master's prisoners, it will give me pleasure to serve you as well as I am able."

"We thank you, good sir," said Aquareine.

"What have you got to eat?" inquired Trot. "Seems to me I'm hollow way down to my toes--my tail, I mean--and it'll take a lot to fill me up. We haven't eaten a morsel since breakfast, you know."

"I think I shall be able to give you almost anything you would like," said the cook. "Zog is a wonderful magician and can procure anything that exists with no more effort than a wiggle of his thumb. But some eatables, you know, are hard to serve under water, because they get so damp that they are soon ruined."

"Ah, it is different with the mermaids," said Princess Clia.

"Yes, all your things are kept dry because they are surrounded by air. I've heard how the mermaids live. But here it is different."

"Take this ring," said the Queen, handing the chief cook a circlet which she drew from her finger. "While it is in your possession, the food you prepare will not get wet, or even moist."

"I thank your Majesty," returned the cook, taking the ring. "My name is Tom Atto, and I'll do my best to please you. How would you like for luncheon some oysters on the half-shell, clam broth, shrimp salad, broiled turtle steak and watermelon?"

"That will do very nicely," answered the Queen.

"Do watermelons grow in the sea?" asked Trot.

"Of course, that is why they are called watermelons," replied Tom Atto. "I think I shall serve you a water ice, in addition to the rest. Water ice is an appropriate sea food."

"Have some watercress with the salad," said Cap'n Bill.

"I'd thought of that," declared the cook. "Doesn't my bill of fare make your mouths water?"

"Hurry up and get it ready," suggested Trot.

Tom Atto at once bowed and retired, and when they were done, Cap'n Bill said to the queen, "Do you think, ma'am, we can manage to escape from Zog and his castle?"

"I hope we shall find a way," replied Aquareine. "The evil powers of magic which Zog controls may not prove to be as strong as the fairy powers I possess, but of course I cannot be positive until I discover what this wicked magician is able to do."

Princess Clia was looking out of one of the windows. "I think I can see an opening far up in the top of the dome," she said. They all hastened to the windows to look, and although Trot and Cap'n Bill could see nothing but a solid dome above the castle--perhaps because it was so far away from them--the sharp eyes of Aquareine were not to be deceived.

"Yes," she announced, "there is surely an opening in the center of the great dome. A little thought must convince us that such an opening is bound to exist, for otherwise the water confined within the dome would not be fresh or clear."

"Then if we could escape from this castle, we could swim up to the hole in the dome and get free!" exclaimed Trot.

"Why, Zog has probably ordered the opening well guarded, as he has all the other outlets," responded the Queen. "Yet it may be worth while for us to make the attempt to get back into the broad ocean this way. The night would be the best time, when all are asleep, and surely it will be quicker to reach the ocean through this hole in the roof than by means of the long, winding passages by which we entered."

"But we will have to break out of the castle in some way," observed Cap'n Bill.

"That will not be difficult," answered Aquareine. "It will be no trouble for me to shatter one of these panes of glass, allowing us to pass out and swim straight up to the top of the dome."

"Let's do it now!" said Trot eagerly.

"No, my dear, we must wait for a good opportunity when we are not watched closely. We do not wish the terrible Zog to thwart our plan," answered the Queen gently.

Presently two sailor boys entered bearing trays of food, which they placed upon a large table. They were cheery-faced young fellows with gills at their throats, but had laughing eyes, and Trot was astonished not to find any of the slaves of Zog weeping or miserable. Instead, they were as jolly and good-natured as could be and seemed to like their life under the water. Cap'n Bill asked one of the boys how many slaves were in the castle, and the youth replied that he would try to count them and let him know.

Tom Atto had, they found, prepared for them an excellent meal, and they ate heartily because they were really hungry. After luncheon Cap'n Bill smoked his pipe contentedly, and they renewed their conversation, planning various ways to outwit Zog and make their escape. While thus engaged, the gong at the door sounded and Sacho entered.

"My diabolical master commands you to attend him," said the boy.

"When?" asked Aquareine.

"At once, your Majesty."

"Very well, we will follow you," she said. So they swam down the corridors following Sacho until they again reached the golden-domed room they had formerly visited. Here sat Zog just as they had left him, seemingly, but when his prisoners entered, the magician arose and stood upon his cloven feet and then silently walked to a curtained archway.

Sacho commanded the prisoners to follow, and beyond the archway they found a vast chamber that occupied the center of the castle and was as big as a ballroom. Zog, who seemed to walk with much difficulty because his ungainly body swayed back and forth, did not go far beyond the arched entrance. A golden throne was set nearby, and in this the monster seated himself. At one side of the throne stood a group of slaves. They were men, women and children. All had broad gold bands clasped around their ankles as a badge of servitude, and at each throat were the fish's gills that enabled them to breathe and live under water. Yet every face was smiling and serene, even in the presence of their dread master. In parts of the big hall were groups of other slaves.

Sacho ranged the prisoners in a circle before Zog's throne, and slowly the magician turned his eyes, glowing like live coals, upon the four. "Captives," said he, speaking in his clear, sweet voice, "in our first interview you defied me, and both the mermaid queen and the princess declared they could not die. But if that is a true statement, as I have yet to discover, there are various ways to make you miserable and unhappy, and this I propose to do in order to amuse myself at your expense. You have been brought here to undergo the first trial of strength between us." None of the prisoners replied to this speech, so Zog turned to one of his slaves and said, "Rivivi, bring in the Yell-Maker."

Rivivi was a big fellow, brown of skin and with flashing, black eyes. He bowed to his master and left the room by an archway covered with heavy draperies. The next moment these curtains were violently pushed aside, and a dreadful sea creature swam into the hall. It had a body much like that of a crab, only more round and of a jet-black color. Its eyes were bright yellow balls set on the ends of two horns that stuck out of its head. They were cruel-looking eyes, too, and seemed able to see every person in the room at the same time. The legs of the Yell-Maker, however, were the most curious part of the creature. There were six of them, slender and black as coal, and each extended twelve to fifteen feet from its body when stretched out in a straight line. They were hinged in several places so they could be folded up or extended at will. At the ends of these thin legs were immense claws shaped like those of a lobster, and they were real "nippers" of a most dangerous sort.

The prisoners knew, as soon as they saw the awful claws, why the thing was called the "Yell-Maker," and Trot gave a little shiver and crept closer to Cap'n Bill. Zog looked with approval upon the creature he had summoned and said to it, "I give you four victims, the four people with fish's tails. Let me hear how loud they can yell."

The Yell-Maker uttered a grunt of pleasure and in a flash stretched out one of its long legs toward the queen's nose, where its powerful claws came together with a loud noise. Aquareine did not stir; she only smiled. Both Zog and the creature that had attacked her seemed much surprised to find she was unhurt. "Again!" cried Zog, and again the Yell-Maker's claw shot out and tried to pinch the queen's pretty ear. But the magic of the fairy mermaid was proof against this sea-rascal's strength and swiftness, nor could he touch any part of Aquareine, although he tried again and again, roaring with anger like a mad bull.

Trot began to enjoy this performance, and as her merry, childish laughter rang out, the Yell-Maker turned furiously upon the little girl, two of the dreadful claws trying to nip her at the same time. She had no chance to cry out or jump backward, yet she remained unharmed. For the Fairy Circle of Queen Aquareine

kept her safe. Now Cap'n Bill was attacked, and Princess Clia as well. The half-dozen slender legs darted in every direction like sword thrusts to reach their victims, and the cruel claws snapped so rapidly that the sound was like the rattling of castanets. But the four prisoners regarded their enemy with smiling composure, and no yell greeted the Yell-Maker's efforts.

"Enough!" said Zog, softly and sweetly. "You may retire, my poor Yell-Maker, for with these people you are powerless."

The creature paused and rolled its yellow eyes. "May I nip just one of the slaves, oh Zog?" it asked pleadingly. "I hate to leave without pleasing your ears with a single yell."

"Let my slaves alone," was Zog's answer. "They are here to serve me and must not be injured. Go, feeble one."

"Not so!" cried the Queen. "It is a shame, Zog, that such an evil thing should exist in our fair sea." With this, she drew her fairy wand from a fold of her gown and waved it toward the creature. At once the Yell-Maker sank down unconscious upon the floor; its legs fell apart in many pieces, the claws tumbling in a heap beside the body. Then all grew withered and lost shape, becoming a pulpy mass, like gelatin. A few moments later the creature had melted away to nothing at all, forever disappearing from the ocean where it had caused so much horror and pain.

Zog watched this destruction with surprising patience. When it was all over, he nodded his head and smiled, and Trot noticed that whenever Zog smiled, his slaves lost their jolly looks and began to tremble. "That is very pretty magic, Aquareine," said the monster. "I myself learned the trick several thousand years ago, so it does not astonish me. Have you fairies nothing that is new to show me?"

"We desire only to protect ourselves," replied the Queen with dignity.

"Then I will give you a chance to do so," said Zog. As he spoke, the great marble blocks in the ceiling of the room directly over the heads of the captives gave way and came crashing down upon them. Many tons of weight were in these marble blocks, and the magician had planned to crush his victims where they stood. But the four were still unharmed. The marble, being unable to touch them, was diverted from its course, and when the roar of the great crash had died away, Zog saw his intended victims standing quietly in their places and smiling scornfully at his weak attempts to destroy them.