

CHAPTER 18 - A DASH FOR LIBERTY

Trot dreamed that she was at home in her own bed, but the night seemed chilly and she wanted to draw the coverlet up to her chin. She was not wide awake, but realized that she was cold and unable to move her arms to cover herself up. She tried, but could not stir. Then she roused herself a little more and tried again. Yes, it was cold, very cold! Really, she MUST do something to get warm, she thought. She opened her eyes and stared at a great wall of ice in front of her.

She was awake now, and frightened, too. But she could not move because the ice was all around her. She was frozen inside of it, and the air space around her was not big enough to allow her to turn over.

At once the little girl realized what had happened. Their wicked enemy Zog had by his magic art frozen all the water in their room while they slept, and now they were all imprisoned and helpless. Trot and Cap'n Bill were sure to freeze to death in a short time, for only a tiny air space remained between their bodies and the ice, and this air was like that of a winter day when the thermometer is below zero.

Across the room Trot could see the mermaid queen lying on her couch, for the solid ice was clear as crystal. Aquareine was imprisoned just as Trot was, and although she held her fairy wand in one hand and the golden sword in the other, she seemed unable to move either of them, and the girl remembered that the queen always waved her magic wand to accomplish anything. Princess Clia's couch was behind that of Trot, so the child could not see her, and Cap'n Bill was in his own room, probably frozen fast in the ice as the others were.

The terrible Zog has surely been very clever in this last attempt to destroy them. Trot thought it all over, and she decided that inasmuch as the queen was unable to wave her fairy wand, she could do nothing to release herself or her friends.

But in this the girl was mistaken. The fairy mermaid was even now at work trying to save them, and in a few minutes Trot was astonished and delighted to see the queen rise from her couch. She could not go far from it at first, but the ice was melting rapidly all around her so that gradually Aquareine approached the place where the child lay. Trot could hear the mermaid's voice sounding through the ice as if from afar off, but it grew more distinct until she could make out that the queen was saying, "Courage, friends! Do not despair, for soon you will be free."

Before very long the ice between Trot and the queen had melted away entirely, and with a cry of joy the little girl flopped her pink tail and swam to the side of her deliverer.

"Are you very cold?" asked Aquareine.

"N-not v-v-very!" replied Trot, but her teeth chattered and she was still shivering.

"The water will be warm in a few minutes," said the Queen. "But now I must melt the rest of the ice and liberate Clia."

This she did in an astonishingly brief time, and the pretty princess, being herself a fairy, had not been at all affected by the cold surrounding her.

They now swam to the door of Cap'n Bill's room and found the Peony Chamber a solid block of ice. The queen worked her magic power as hard as she could, and the ice flowed and melted quickly before her fairy wand. Yet when they reached the old sailor, he was almost frozen stiff, and Trot and Clia had to rub his hands and nose and ears very briskly to warm him up and bring him back to life.

Cap'n Bill was pretty tough, and he came around, in time, and opened his eyes and sneezed and asked if the blizzard was over. So the queen waved her wand over his head a few times to restore him to his natural condition of warmth, and soon the old sailor became quite comfortable and was able to understand all about the strange adventure from which he had so marvelously escaped.

"I've made up my mind to one thing, Trot," he said confidentially. "If ever I get out o' this mess I'm in, I won't be an Arctic explorer, whatever else happens. Shivers an' shakes ain't to my likin', an' this ice business ain't what it's sometimes cracked up to be. To be friz once is enough fer anybody, an' if I was a gal like you, I wouldn't even wear frizzes on my hair."

"You haven't any hair, Cap'n Bill," answered Trot, "so you needn't worry."

The queen and Clia had been talking together very earnestly. They now approached their earth friends, and Aquareine said:

"We have decided not to remain in this castle any longer. Zog's cruel designs upon our lives and happiness are becoming too dangerous for us to endure. The golden sword now bears a fairy charm, and by its aid I will cut a way through our enemies. Are you ready and willing to follow me?"

"Of course we are!" cried Trot.

"It don't seem 'zactly right to ask a lady to do the fightin'," remarked Cap'n Bill, "but magic ain't my strong p'int, and it seems to be yours, ma'am. So swim ahead, and we'll wiggle the same way you do, an' try to wiggle out of our troubles."

"If I chance to fail," said the Queen, "try not to blame me. I will do all in my power to provide for our escape, and I am willing to risk everything, because I well know that to remain here will mean to perish in the end."

"That's all right," said Trot with fine courage. "Let's have it over with."

"Then we will leave here at once," said Aquareine.

She approached the window of the room and with one blow of her golden sword shattered the thick pane of glass. The opening thus made was large enough for them to swim through if they were careful not to scrape against the broken points of glass. The queen went first, followed by Trot and Cap'n Bill, with Clia last of all.

And now they were in the vast dome in which the castle and gardens of Zog had been built. Around them was a clear stretch of water, and far above--full half a mile distant--was the opening in the roof guarded by the prince of the sea devils. The mermaid queen had determined to attack this monster. If she succeeded in destroying it with her golden sword, the little band of fugitives might then swim through the opening into the clear waters of the ocean. Although this prince of the sea devils was said to be big and wise and mighty, there was but one of him to fight; whereas, if they attempted to escape through any of the passages, they must encounter scores of such enemies.

"Swim straight for the opening in the dome!" cried Aquareine, and in answer to the command, the four whisked their glittering tails, waved their fins, and shot away through the water at full speed, their course slanting upward toward the top of the dome.