

CHAPTER 20 - THE HOME OF THE OCEAN MONARCH

Trot sobbed quietly with her head on Cap'n Bill's shoulder. She had been a brave little girl during the trying times they had experienced and never once had she given way to tears, however desperate their fate had seemed to be. But now that the one enemy in all the sea to be dreaded was utterly destroyed and all dangers were past, the reaction was so great that she could not help having "just one good cry," as she naively expressed it.

Cap'n Bill was a big sailor man hardened by age and many adventures, but even he felt a "Lump in his throat" that he could not swallow, try as hard as he might. Cap'n Bill was glad. He was mostly glad on Trot's account, for he loved his sweet, childish companion very dearly, and did not want any harm to befall her.

They were now in the wide, open sea, with liberty to go wherever they wished, and if Cap'n Bill could have "had his way," he would have gone straight home and carried Trot to her mother. But the mermaids must be considered. Aquareine and Clia had been true and faithful friends to their earth guests while dangers were threatening, and it would not be very gracious to leave them at once. Moreover, King Anko was now with them, his big head keeping pace with the mermaids as they swam, and this mighty preserver had a distinct claim upon Trot and Cap'n Bill. The sailor felt that it would not be polite to ask to go home so soon.

"If you people had come to visit me as I invited you to do," said the Sea Serpent, "all this bother and trouble would have been saved. I had my palace put in order to receive the earth dwellers and sat in my den waiting patiently to receive you. Yet you never came at all."

"That reminds me," said Trot, drying her eyes, "you never told us about that third pain you once had."

"Finally," continued Anko, "I sent to inquire as to what had become of you, and Merla said you had been gone from the palace a long time and she was getting anxious about you. Then I made inquiries. Everyone in the sea loves to serve me--except those sea devils and their cousins, the octopi--and it wasn't long before I heard you had been captured by Zog."

"Was the third pain as bad as the other two?" asked Trot.

"Naturally this news disturbed me and made me unhappy," said Anko, "for I well knew, my Aquareine, that the magician's evil powers were greater than your own fairy accomplishments. But I had never been able to find Zog's enchanted castle, and so I was at a loss to know how to save you from your dreadful fate. After I

had wasted a good deal of time thinking it over, I decided that if the sea devils were slaves of Zog, the prince of the sea devils must know where the enchanted castle was located.

"I knew this prince and where to find him, for he always lay on a hollow rock on the bottom of the sea and never moved from that position. His people brought food to him and took his commands. So I had no trouble in finding this evil prince, and I went to him and asked the way to Zog's castle. Of course, he would not tell me. He was even cross and disrespectful, just as I had expected him to be, so I allowed myself to become angry and killed him, thinking he was much better dead than alive. But after the sea devil was destroyed, what was my surprise to find that all these years he had been lying over a round hole in the rock and covering it with his scarlet body!

"A light shone through this hole, so I thrust my head in and found a great domed cave underneath with a splendid silver castle built at the bottom. You, my friends, were at that moment swimming toward me as fast as you could come, and the monster Zog, my enemy for centuries past, was close behind you. Well, the rest of the story you know. I would be angry with all of you for so carelessly getting captured, had the incident not led to the destruction of the one evil genius in all my ocean. I shall rest easier and be much happier now that Zog is dead. He has defied me for hundreds of years."

"But about that third pain," said Trot. "If you don't tell us now, I'm afraid that I'll forget to ask you."

"If you should happen to forget, just remind me of it," said Anko, "and I'll be sure to tell you."

While Trot was thinking this over, the swimmers drew near to a great, circular palace made all of solid alabaster polished as smooth as ivory. Its roof was a vast dome, for domes seemed to be fashionable in the ocean houses. There were no doors or windows, but instead of these, several round holes appeared in different parts of the dome, some being high up and some low down and some in between. Out of one of these holes, which it just fitted, stretched the long, brown body of the sea serpent. Trot, being astonished at this sight, asked, "Didn't you take all of you when you went to the cavern, Anko?"

"Nearly all, my dear," was the reply, accompanied by a cheerful smile, for Anko was proud of his great length. "But not quite all. Some of me remained, as usual, to keep house while my head was away. But I've been coiling up ever since we started back, and you will soon be able to see every inch of me all together."

Even as he spoke, his head slid into the round hole, and at a signal from Aquareine they all paused outside and waited. Presently there came to them four beautiful winged fishes with faces like doll babies. Their long hair and eyelashes were of a purple color, and their cheeks had rosy spots that looked as if they had been painted upon them. "His Majesty bids you welcome," said one of the doll fishes in a sweet voice. "Be kind enough to enter the royal palace, and our ocean monarch will graciously receive you."

"Seems to me," said Trot to the queen, "these things are putting on airs. Perhaps they don't know we're friends of Anko."

"The king insists on certain formalities when anyone visits him," was Aquareine's reply. "It is right that his dignity should be maintained."

They followed their winged conductors to one of the upper openings, and as they entered it Aquareine said in a clear voice, "May the glory and power of the ocean king continue forever!" Then she touched the palm of her hand to her forehead in token of allegiance, and Clia did the same, so Cap'n Bill and Trot followed suit. The brief ceremony being ended, the child looked curiously around to see what the palace of the mighty Anko was like.

An extensive hall lined with alabaster was before them. In the floor were five of the round holes. Upon the walls were engraved many interesting scenes of ocean life, all chiseled very artistically by the tusks of walruses who, Trot was afterward informed, are greatly skilled in such work. A few handsome rugs of woven sea grasses were spread upon the floor, but otherwise the vast hall was bare of furniture. The doll-faced fishes escorted them to an upper room where a table was set, and here the revelers were invited to refresh themselves. As all four were exceedingly hungry, they welcomed the repast, which was served by an army of lobsters in royal purple aprons and caps.

The meal being finished, they again descended to the hall, which seemed to occupy all the middle of the building. And now their conductors said, "His Majesty is ready to receive you in his den."

They swam downward through one of the round holes in the floor and found themselves in a brilliantly lighted chamber which appeared bigger than all the rest of the palace put together. In the center was the quaint head of King Anko, and around it was spread a great coverlet of purple and gold woven together. This concealed all of his body and stretched from wall to wall of the circular room. "Welcome, friends!" said Anko pleasantly. "How do you like my home?"

"It's very grand," replied Trot.

"Just the place for a sea serpent, seems to me," said Cap'n Bill.

"I'm glad you admire it," said the King. "Perhaps I ought to tell you that from this day you four belong to me."

"How's that?" asked the girl, surprised.

"It is a law of the ocean," declared Anko, "that whoever saves any living creature from violent death owns that creature forever afterward, while life lasts. You will realize how just this law is when you remember that had I not saved you from Zog, you would now be dead. The law was suggested by Captain Kid Glove, when he once visited me."

"Do you mean Captain Kidd?" asked Trot. "Because if you do--"

"Give him his full name," said Anko. "Captain Kid Glove was--"

"There's no glove to it," protested Trot. "I ought to know, 'cause I've read about him."

"Didn't it say anything about a glove?" asked Anko.

"Nothing at all. It jus' called him Cap'n Kidd," replied Trot.

"She's right, ol' man," added Cap'n Bill.

"Books," said the Sea Serpent, "are good enough as far as they go, but it seems to me your earth books don't go far enough. Captain Kid Glove was a gentleman pirate, a kid-glove pirate. To leave off the glove and call him just Kidd is very disrespectful."

"Oh! You told me to remind you of that third pain," said the little girl.

"Which proves my friendship for you," returned the Sea Serpent, blinking his blue eyes thoughtfully. "No one likes to be reminded of a pain, and that third pain was--was--"

"What was it?" asked Trot.

"It was a stomach ache," replied the King with a sigh.

"What made it?" she inquired.

"Just my carelessness," said Anko. "I'd been away to foreign parts, seeing how the earth people were getting along. I found the Germans dancing the german and the Dutch making dutch cheese and the Belgians combing their belgian hares and

the Turks eating turkey and the Sardinians sardonically pickling sardines. Then I called on the Prince of Whales, and--"

"You mean the Prince of Wales," corrected Trot.

"I mean what I say, my dear. I saw the battlefield where the Bull Run but the Americans didn't, and when I got to France I paid a napoleon to see Napoleon with his boney apart. He was--"

"Of course you mean--" Trot was beginning, but the king would not give her a chance to correct him this time.

"He was very hungry for Hungary," he continued, "and was Russian so fast toward the Poles that I thought he'd discover them. So as I was not accorded a royal welcome, I took French leave and came home again."

"But the pain--"

"On the way home," continued Anko calmly, "I was a little absent-minded and ate an anchor. There was a long chain attached to it, and as I continued to swallow the anchor I continued to eat the chain. I never realized what I had done until I found a ship on the other end of the chain. Then I bit it off."

"The ship?" asked Trot.

"No, the chain. I didn't care for the ship, as I saw it contained some skippers. On the way home the chain and anchor began to lie heavily on my stomach. I didn't seem to digest them properly, and by the time I got to my palace, where you will notice there is no throne, I was thrown into throes of severe pain. So I at once sent for Dr. Shark--"

"Are all your doctors sharks?" asked the child.

"Yes, aren't your doctors sharks?" he replied.

"Not all of them," said Trot.

"That is true," remarked Cap'n Bill. "But when you talk of lawyers--"

"I'm not talking of lawyers," said Anko reprovingly. "I'm talking about my pain. I don't imagine anyone could suffer more than I did with that stomach ache."

"Did you suffer long?" inquired Trot.

"Why, about seven thousand four hundred and eighty-two feet and--"

"I mean a long time."

"It seemed like a long time," answered the King. "Dr. Shark said I ought to put a mustard poultice on my stomach, so I uncoiled myself and summoned my servants, and they began putting on the mustard plaster. It had to be bound all around me so it wouldn't slip off, and I began to look like an express package. In about four weeks fully one-half of the pain had been covered by the mustard poultice, which got so hot that it hurt me worse than the stomach ache did."

"I know," said Trot. "I had one, once."

"One what?" asked Anko.

"A mustard plaster. They smart pretty bad, but I guess they're a good thing."

"I got myself unwrapped as soon as I could," continued the King, "and then I hunted for the doctor, who hid himself until my anger had subsided. He has never sent in a bill, so I think he must be terribly ashamed of himself."

"You're lucky, sir, to have escaped so easy," said Cap'n Bill. "But you seem pretty well now."

"Yes, I'm more careful of what I eat," replied the Sea Serpent. "But I was saying when Trot interrupted me, that you all belong to me, because I have saved your lives. By the law of the ocean, you must obey me in everything."

The sailor scowled a little at hearing this, but Trot laughed and said, "The law of the ocean isn't OUR law, 'cause we live on land."

"Just now you are living in the ocean," declared Anko, "and as long as you live here, you must obey my commands."

"What are your commands?" inquired the child.

"Ah, that's the point I was coming to," returned the King with his comical smile. "The ocean is a beautiful place, and we who belong here love it dearly. In many ways it's a nicer place for a home than the earth, for we have no sunstroke, mosquitoes, earthquakes or candy ships to bother us. But I am convinced that the ocean is no proper dwelling place for earth people, and I believe the mermaids did an unwise thing when they invited you to visit them."

"I don't," protested the girl. "We've had a fine time, haven't we, Cap'n Bill?"

"Well, it's been different from what I expected," admitted the sailor.

"Our only thought was to give the earth people pleasure, your Majesty," pleaded Aquareine.

"I know, I know, my dear Queen, and it was very good of you," replied Anko. "But still it was an unwise act, for earth people are as constantly in danger under water as we would be upon the land. So having won the right to command you all, I order you to take little Mayre and Cap'n Bill straight home, and there restore them to their natural forms. It's a dreadful condition, I know, and they must each have two stumbling legs instead of a strong, beautiful fish tail, but it is the fate of earth dwellers, and they cannot escape it."

"In my case, your Majesty, make it ONE leg," suggested Cap'n Bill.

"Ah yes, I remember. One leg and a wooden stick to keep it company. I issue this order, dear friends, not because I am not fond of your society, but to keep you from getting into more trouble in a country where all is strange and unnatural to you. Am I right, or do you think I am wrong?"

"You're quite correct, sir," said Cap'n Bill, nodding his head in approval.

"Well, I'm ready to go home," said Trot. "But in spite of Zog, I've enjoyed my visit, and I shall always love the mermaids for being so good to me." That speech pleased Aquareine and Clia, who smiled upon the child and kissed her affectionately.

"We shall escort you home at once," announced the Queen.

"But before you go," said King Anko, "I will give you a rare treat. It is one you will remember as long as you live. You shall see every inch of the mightiest sea serpent in the world, all at one time!"

As he spoke, the purple and gold cloth was lifted by unseen hands and disappeared from view. And now Cap'n Bill and Trot looked down upon thousands and thousands of coils of the sea serpent's body, which filled all of the space at the bottom of the immense circular room. It reminded them of a great coil of garden hose, only it was so much bigger around and very much longer.

Except for the astonishing size of the Ocean King, the sight was not an especially interesting one, but they told old Anko that they were pleased to see him, because it was evident he was very fond of his figure. Then the cloth descended again and covered all but the head, after which they bade the king goodbye and thanked him for all his kindness to them.

"I used to think sea serpents were horrid creatures," said Trot, "but now I know they are good and--and--and--"

"And big," added Cap'n Bill, realizing his little friend could not find another word that was complimentary.