

CHAPTER 21 - KING JOE

As they swam out of Anko's palace and the doll-faced fishes left them, Aquareine asked:

"Would you rather go back to our mermaid home for a time and rest yourselves or would you prefer to start for Giant's Cave at once?"

"I guess we'd better go back home," decided Trot. "To our own home, I mean. We've been away quite a while, and King Anko seemed to think it was best."

"Very well," replied the Queen. "Let us turn in this direction, then."

"You can say goodbye to Merla for us," continued Trot. "She was very nice to us, an' 'specially to Cap'n Bill."

"So she was, mate," agreed the sailor, "an' a prettier lady I never knew, even if she is a mermaid, beggin' your pardon, ma'am."

"Are we going anywhere near Zog's castle?" asked the girl.

"Our way leads directly past the opening in the dome," said Aquareine.

"Then let's stop and see what Sacho and the others are doing," suggested Trot. "They can't be slaves any longer, you know, 'cause they haven't any master. I wonder if they're any happier than they were before?"

"They seemed to be pretty happy as it was," remarked Cap'n Bill.

"It will do no harm to pay them a brief visit," said Princess Clia. "All danger disappeared from the cavern with the destruction of Zog."

"I really ought to say goodbye to Brother Joe," observed the sailor man. "I won't see him again, you know, and I don't want to seem unbrotherly."

"Very well," said the Queen, "we will reenter the cavern, for I, too, am anxious to know what will be the fate of the poor slaves of the magician."

When they came to the hole in the top of the dome, they dropped through it and swam leisurely down toward the castle. The water was clear and undisturbed and the silver castle looked very quiet and peaceful under the radiant light that still filled the cavern. They met no one at all, and passing around to the front of the building, they reached the broad entrance and passed into the golden hall.

Here a strange scene met their eyes. All the slaves of Zog, hundreds in number, were assembled in the room, while standing before the throne formerly occupied by the wicked magician was the boy Sacho, who was just beginning to make a speech to his fellow slaves. "At one time or another," he said, "all of us were born upon the earth and lived in the thin air, but now we are all living as the fishes live, and our home is in the water of the ocean. One by one we have come to this place, having been saved from drowning by Zog, the Magician, and by him given power to exist in comfort under water. The powerful master who made us his slaves has now passed away forever, but we continue to live, and are unable to return to our native land, where we would quickly perish. There is no one but us to inherit Zog's possessions, and so it will be best for us to remain in this fine castle and occupy ourselves as we have done before, in providing for the comforts of the community. Only in labor is happiness to be found, and we may as well labor for ourselves as for others.

"But we must have a king. Not an evil, cruel master like Zog, but one who will maintain order and issue laws for the benefit of all. We will govern ourselves most happily by having a ruler, or head, selected from among ourselves by popular vote. Therefore I ask you to decide who shall be our king, for only one who is accepted by all can sit in Zog's throne."

The slaves applauded this speech, but they seemed puzzled to make the choice of a ruler. Finally the chief cook came forward and said, "We all have our duties to perform and so cannot spend the time to be king. But you, Sacho, who were Zog's own attendant, have now no duties at all. So it will be best for you to rule us. What say you, comrades? Shall we make Sacho king?"

"Yes, yes!" they all cried.

"But I do not wish to be king," replied Sacho. "A king is a useless sort of person who merely issues orders for others to carry out. I want to be busy and useful. Whoever is king will need a good attendant as well as an officer who will see that his commands are obeyed. I am used to such duties, having served Zog in this same way."

"Who, then, has the time to rule over us?" asked Agga-Groo, the goldsmith.

"It seems to me that Cap'n Joe is the proper person for king," replied Sacho. "His former duty was to sew buttons on Zog's garments, so now he is out of a job and has plenty of time to be king, for he can sew on his own buttons. What do you say, Cap'n Joe?"

"Oh, I don't mind," agreed Cap'n Joe. "That is, if you all want me to rule you."

"We do!" shouted the slaves, glad to find someone willing to take the job.

"But I'll want a few pointers," continued Cap'n Bill's brother. "I ain't used to this sort o' work, you know, an' if I ain't properly posted I'm liable to make mistakes."

"Sacho will tell you," said Tom Atto encouragingly. "And now I must go back to the kitchen and look after my dumplings, or you people won't have any dinner today."

"Very well," announced Sacho. "I hereby proclaim Cap'n Joe elected King of the Castle, which is the Enchanted Castle no longer. You may all return to your work."

The slaves went away well contented, and the boy and Cap'n Joe now came forward to greet their visitors. "We're on our way home," explained Cap'n Bill, "an' we don't expect to travel this way again. But it pleases me to know, Joe, that you're the king o' such a fine castle, an' I'll rest easier now that you're well pervided for."

"Oh, I'm all right, Bill," returned Cap'n Joe. "It's an easy life here, an' a peaceful one. I wish you were as well fixed."

"If ever you need friends, Sacho, or any assistance or counsel, come to me," said the Mermaid Queen to the boy.

"Thank you, madam," he replied. "Now that Zog has gone, I am sure we shall be very safe and contented. But I shall not forget to come to you if we need you. We are not going to waste any time in anger or revenge or evil deeds, so I believe we shall prosper from now on."

"I'm sure you will," declared Trot.

They now decided that they must continue their journey, and as neither Sacho nor King Joe could ascend to the top of the dome without swimming in the human way, which was slow and tedious work for them, the goodbyes were said at the castle entrance, and the four visitors started on their return. Trot took one last view of the beautiful silver castle from the hole high up in the dome, which was now open and unguarded, and the next moment she was in the broad ocean again, swimming toward home beside her mermaid friends.

CHAPTER 22

TROT LIVES TO TELL THE TALE

Aquareine was thoughtful for a time. Then she drew from her finger a ring, a plain gold band set with a pearl of great value, and gave it to the little girl.

"If at any period of your life the mermaids can be of service to you, my dear," she said, "you have but to come to the edge of the ocean and call 'Aquareine.' If you are wearing the ring at the time, I shall instantly hear you and come to your assistance."

"Thank you!" cried the child, slipping the ring over her own chubby finger, which it fitted perfectly. "I shall never forget that I have good and loyal friends in the ocean, you may be sure."

Away and away they swam, swiftly and in a straight line, keeping in the middle water where they were not liable to meet many sea people. They passed a few schools of fishes, where the teachers were explaining to the young ones how to swim properly, and to conduct themselves in a dignified manner, but Trot did not care to stop and watch the exercises.

Although the queen had lost her fairy wand in Zog's domed chamber, she had still enough magic power to carry them all across the ocean in wonderfully quick time, and before Trot and Cap'n Bill were aware of the distance they had come, the mermaids paused while Princess Clia said:

"Now we must go a little deeper, for here is the Giant's Cave and the entrance to it is near the bottom of the sea."

"What, already?" cried the girl joyfully, and then through the dark water they swam, passing through the rocky entrance, and began to ascend slowly into the azure-blue water of the cave.

"You've been awfully good to us, and I don't know jus' how to thank you," said Trot earnestly.

"We have enjoyed your visit to us," said beautiful Queen Aquareine, smiling upon her little friend, "and you may easily repay any pleasure we have given you by speaking well of the mermaids when you hear ignorant earth people condemning us."

"I'll do that, of course," exclaimed the child.

"How about changin' us back to our reg'lar shapes?" inquired Cap'n Bill anxiously.

"That will be very easy," replied Princess Clia with her merry laugh. "See! Here we are at the surface of the water."

They pushed their heads above the blue water and looked around the cave. It was silent and deserted. Floating gently near the spot where they had left it was their own little boat. Cap'n Bill swam to it, took hold of the side, and then turned an inquiring face toward the mermaids. "Climb in," said the Queen. So he pulled himself up and awkwardly tumbled forward into the boat. As he did so, he heard his wooden leg clatter against the seat, and turned around to look at it wonderingly.

"It's me, all right!" he muttered. "One meat one, an' one hick'ry one. That's the same as belongs to me!"

"Will you lift Mayre aboard?" asked Princess Clia.

The old sailor aroused himself, and as Trot lifted up her arms, he seized them and drew her safely into the boat. She was dressed just as usual, and her chubby legs wore shoes and stockings. Strangely enough, neither of them were at all wet or even damp in any part of their clothing.

"I wonder where our legs have been while we've been gone?" mused Cap'n Bill, gazing at his little friend in great delight.

"And I wonder what's become of our pretty pink and green scaled tails!" returned the girl, laughing with glee, for it seemed good to be herself again.

Queen Aquareine and Princess Clia were a little way off, lying with their pretty faces just out of the water while their hair floated in soft clouds around them.

"Goodbye, friends!" they called.

"Goodbye!" shouted both Trot and Cap'n Bill, and the little girl blew two kisses from her fingers toward the mermaids.

Then the faces disappeared, leaving little ripples on the surface of the water.

Cap'n Bill picked up the oars and slowly headed the boat toward the mouth of the cave.

"I wonder, Trot, if your ma has missed us," he remarked uneasily.

"Of course not," replied the girl. "She's been sound asleep, you know."

As the boat crept out into the bright sunlight, they were both silent, but each sighed with pleasure at beholding their own everyday world again.

Finally Trot said softly, "The land's the best, Cap'n."

"It is, mate, for livin' on," he answered.

"But I'm glad to have seen the mermaids," she added..

"Well, so'm I, Trot," he agreed. "But I wouldn't 'a' believed any mortal could ever 'a' seen 'em an'--an'--"

Trot laughed merrily.

"An' lived to tell the tale!" she cried, her eyes dancing with mischief. "Oh, Cap'n Bill, how little we mortals know!"

"True enough, mate," he replied, "but we're a-learnin' something ev'ry day."

THE END