

# The Sea Serpent

by L. Frank Baum

Just then Trot happened to look up at the glass roof and saw a startling sight. A big head, with a face surrounded by stubby gray whiskers, was poised just over them, and the head was connected with a long, curved body that looked much like a sewer pipe.

"Oh, there is King Anko," said the Queen, following the child's gaze. "Open a door and let him in, Clia, for I suppose our old friend is anxious to see the earth people."

"Won't he hurt us?" asked the little girl, with a shiver of fear.

"Who, Anko? Oh, no, my dear! We are very fond of the sea serpent, who is king of this ocean, although he does not rule the mermaids. Old Anko is a very agreeable fellow, as you will soon discover."

"Can he talk?" asked Trot.

"Yes, indeed."

"And can we understand what he says?"

"Perfectly," replied the Queen. "I have given you power, while you remain here, to understand the language of every inhabitant of the sea."

"That's nice," said Trot, gratefully.

The Princess Clia swam slowly to one of the walls of the throne room where, at a wave of her hand, a round hole appeared in the coral. The sea serpent at once observed this opening and the head left the roof of glass only to reappear presently at the round hole. Through this he slowly crawled, until his head was just beneath the throne of Queen Aquareine, who said to him:

"Good morning, your Majesty. I hope you are quite well?"

"Quite well, thank your Majesty," answered Anko; and then he turned to the strangers. "I suppose these are the earth folks you were expecting?"

"Yes," returned the Queen; "the girl is named Mayre, and the man Cap'n Bill."

While the sea serpent looked at the visitors they ventured to look at him. He certainly was a queer creature, yet Trot decided he was not at all frightful. His head was round as a ball, but his ears were sharp pointed and had tassels at the ends of them. His nose was flat and his mouth very wide indeed, but his eyes were blue and gentle in expression. The white, stubby hairs that surrounded his face were not thick, like a beard, but scattered and scraggly. From the head, the long brown body of the sea serpent extended to the hole in the coral wall, which was just big enough to admit it, and how much more of the body remained outside the child could not tell. On the back of the body were several fins, which made the creature look more like an eel than a serpent.

"The girl is young and the man is old," said King Anko, in a soft voice. "But I'm quite sure Cap'n Bill isn't as old as I am."

"How old are you?" asked the sailor.

"I can't say, exactly. I can remember several thousands of years back, but beyond that my memory fails me. How's your memory, Cap'n Bill?"

"You've got me beat," was the reply. "I'll give in that you're older than I am."

This seemed to please the sea serpent.

"Are you well?" he asked.

"Pretty fair," said Cap'n Bill. "How's yourself?"

"Oh, I'm very well, thank you," answered Anko. "I never remember to have had a pain but three times in my life. The last time was when Julius Sneezer was on earth."

"You mean Julius Cæsar," said Trot, correcting him.

"No; I mean Julius Sneezer," insisted the Sea Serpent. "That was his real name—Sneezer. They called him Cæsar sometimes, just because he took everything he could lay hands on. I ought to know, because I saw him when he was alive. Did you see him when he was alive, Cap'n Bill?"

"I reckon not," admitted the sailor.

"That time I had a toothache," continued Anko; "but I got a lobster to pull the tooth with his claw, so the pain was soon over."

"Did it hurt to pull it?" asked Trot.

"Hurt!" exclaimed the Sea Serpent, groaning at the recollection. "My dear, those creatures have been called lobsters ever since! The second pain I had way back in the time of Nevercouldnever."

"Oh, I s'pose you mean Nebuchadnezzar," said Trot.

"Do you call him that, now?" asked the Sea Serpent, as if surprised. "He used to be called Nevercouldnever when he was alive, but this new way of spelling seems to get everything mixed up. Nebuchadnezzar doesn't mean anything at all, it seems to me."

"It means he ate grass," said the child.

"Oh, no; he didn't," declared the Sea Serpent. "He was the first to discover that lettuce was good to eat, and he became very fond of it. The people may have called it grass, but they were wrong. I ought to know, because I was alive when Nevercouldnever lived. Were you alive, then?"

"No," said Trot.

"The pain I had then," remarked Anko, "was caused by a kink in my tail, about three hundred feet from the end. There was an old octopus who did not like me, and so he tied a knot in my tail when I wasn't looking."

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

"Well, first I transformed the octopus into a jelly fish, and then I waited for the tide to turn. When my tail was untied the pain stopped."

"I—I don't understand that," said Trot, somewhat bewildered.

"Thank you, my dear," replied the Sea Serpent, in a grateful voice. "People who are always understood are very common. You are sure to respect those you can't understand, for you feel that perhaps they know more than you do."

"About how long do you happen to be?" inquired Cap'n Bill.

"When last measured, I was seven thousand four hundred and eighty-two feet, five inches and a quarter. I'm not sure about the quarter, but the rest is probably correct. Adam measured me when Cain was a baby."

"Where's the rest of you, then?" asked Trot.

"Safe at home, I hope, and coiled up in my parlor," answered the Sea Serpent. "When I go out I usually take along only what is needed. It saves a lot of bother and I can always find my way back in the darkest night, by just coiling up the part that has been away."

"Do you like to be a sea serpent?" inquired the child.

"Yes, for I'm King of my Ocean, and there is no other sea serpent to imagine he is just as good as I am. I have two brothers who live in other oceans, but one is seven inches shorter than I am, and the other several feet shorter. It's curious to talk about feet when we haven't any feet, isn't it?"

"Seems so," acknowledged Trot.

"I feel I have much to be proud of," continued Anko, in a dreamy tone; "my great age, my undisputed sway, and my exceptional length."

"I don't b'lieve I'd care to live so long," remarked Cap'n Bill, thoughtfully.

"So long as seven thousand four hundred and eighty-two feet, five inches and a quarter?" asked the Sea Serpent.

"No; I mean so many years," replied the sailor.

"But what can one do, if one happens to be a sea serpent?" Anko inquired. "There is nothing in the sea that can hurt me, and I cannot commit suicide because we have no carbolic acid, or firearms, or gas to turn on. So it isn't a matter of choice, and I'd about as soon be alive as dead. It does not seem

quite so monotonous, you know. But I guess I've stayed about long enough; so I'll go home to dinner. Come and see me, when you have time."

"Thank you," said Trot; and Merla added:

"I'll take you over to his majesty's palace when we go out, and let you see how he lives."

"Yes, do," said Anko; and then he slowly slid out of the hole, which immediately closed behind him, leaving the coral wall as solid as before.

"Oh!" exclaimed Trot; "King Anko forgot to tell us what the third pain was about."

"So he did," said Cap'n Bill. "We must ask him about that, when we see him. But I guess the ol' boy's mem'ry is failin', an' he can't be depended on for pertic'lars."

Source:

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