

CHAPTER VIII - Mrs. Hootaway

As the child-larks sat side by side upon their limb, with the soft gray nest near at hand, the twilight fell and a shadow began to grow and deepen throughout the forest.

"Twink," said Chubbins, gravely, "how do you like it?"

"Well," replied the girl, "it isn't so bad in the daytime, but it's worse at night. That bunch of grass mixed up with the stems of leaves, that they call a nest, isn't much like my pretty white bed at home, Chubbins."

"Nor mine," he agreed. "And, Twink, how ever can we say our prayers when we haven't any hands to hold up together?"

"Prayers, Chub," said the girl, "are more in our hearts than in our hands. It isn't what we do that counts; it's what we feel. But the most that bothers me is what the folks at home will think, when we don't come back."

"They'll hunt for us," Chubbins suggested; "and they may come under this tree, and call to us."

"If they do," said Twinkle, "we'll fly right down to them."

"I advise you not to fly much, in the night," said a cheery voice beside them, and Wisk the squirrel stuck his head out of the hollow where he lived. "You've had quite a party here today," he continued, "and they behaved pretty well while the policeman was around. But some of them might not be so friendly if you met them alone."

"Would any bird hurt us?" asked the girl, in surprise.

"Why, I've seen a magpie meet a thrush, and fly away alone," replied Wisk. "And the wrens and chickadees avoid the cuckoo as much as possible, because they are fond of being alive. But the policeman keeps the big birds all in order when he is around, and he makes them all afraid to disobey the laws. He's a wonderful fellow, that Policeman Bluejay, and even we squirrels are glad he is in the forest."

"Why?" asked Chubbins.

"Well, we also fear some of the birds," answered Wisk. "The lady in the third flat, for instance, Mrs. Hootaway, is said to like a squirrel for a midnight meal

now and then, when mice and beetles are scarce. It is almost her hour for wakening, so I must be careful to keep near home."

"Tut--tut--tut!" cried a harsh voice from above. "What scandal is this you are talking, Mr. Wisk?"

The squirrel was gone in a flash; but a moment later he put out his head again and turned one bright eye toward the upper part of the tree. There, on a perch outside her hollow, sat the gray owl, pruning her feathers. It was nearly dark by this time, and through the dusk Mrs. Hootaway's yellow eyes could be seen gleaming bright and wide open.

"What nonsense are you putting into the heads of these little innocents?" continued the owl, in a scolding tone.

"No nonsense at all," said Wisk, in reply. "The child-larks are safe enough from you, because they are under the protection of Policeman Bluejay, and he would have a fine revenge if you dared to hurt them. But my case is different. The laws of the birds do not protect squirrels, and when you're abroad, my dear Mrs. Hootaway, I prefer to remain snugly at home."

"To be sure," remarked the owl, with a laugh. "You are timid and suspicious by nature, my dear Wisk, and you forget that although I have known you for a long time I have never yet eaten you."

"That is my fault, and not yours," retorted the squirrel.

"Well, I'm not after you tonight, neighbor, nor after birds, either. I know where there are seven fat mice to be had, and until they are all gone you may cease to worry."

"I'm glad to hear that," replied Wisk. "I wish there were seven hundred mice to feed your appetite. But I'm not going to run into danger recklessly, nevertheless, and it is my bed-time. So good night, Mrs. Hootaway; and good night, little child-larks." The owl did not reply, but Twinkle and Chubbins called good night to the friendly squirrel, and then they hopped into their nest and cuddled down close together.

The moon was now rising over the trees and flooding the gloom of the forest with its subdued silver radiance. The children were not sleepy; their new life was too strange and wonderful for them to be able to close their eyes at once. So they were rather pleased when the gray owl settled on the branch beside their nest and began to talk to them.

"I'm used to slanders, my dears," she said, in a pleasanter tone than she had used before, "so I don't mind much what neighbor Wisk says to me. But I do not wish you to think ill of the owl family, and so I must assure you that we are as gentle and kindly as any feathered creatures in the forest--not excepting the Birds of Paradise."

"I am sure of that," replied Twinkle, earnestly. "You are too soft and fluffy and pretty to be bad."

"It isn't the prettiness," said the gray owl, evidently pleased by the compliment. "It is the nature of owls to be kind and sympathetic. Those who do not know us very well say harsh things about us, because we fly in the night, when most other birds are asleep, and sleep in the daytime when most other birds are awake."

"Why do you do that?" asked Chubbins.

"Because the strong light hurts our eyes. But, although we are abroad in the night, we seek only our natural prey, and obey the Great Law of the forest more than some others do."

"What is the Great Law?" enquired Twinkle, curiously.

"Love. It is the moral law that is above all laws made by living creatures. The whole forest is ruled by love more than it is by fear. You may think this is strange when you remember that some animals eat birds, and some birds eat animals, and the dreadful creeping things eat us both; but nevertheless we are so close to Nature here that love and tenderness for our kind influences us even more than it does mankind-- the careless and unthinking race from which you came. The residents of the forest are good parents, helpful neighbors, and faithful friends. What better than this could be said of us?"

"Nothing, I'm sure, if it is true," replied the girl.

"Over in the Land of Paradise," continued the owl, thoughtfully, "the birds are not obliged to take life in order to live themselves; so they call us savage and fierce. But I believe our natures are as kindly as those of the Birds of Paradise."

"Where is this Land of Paradise you speak of?" asked Twinkle.

"Directly in the center of our forest. It is a magical spot, protected from intrusion not by any wall or barred gates, but by a strong wind that blows all

birds away from that magnificent country except the Birds of Paradise themselves. There is a legend that man once lived there, but for some unknown crime was driven away. But the birds have always been allowed to inhabit the place because they did no harm."

"I'd like to see it," said Chubbins.

"So would I," confessed the gray owl, with a sigh; "but there is no use of my attempting to get into the Paradise of Birds, because the wind would blow me back. But now it is getting quite dark, and I must be off to seek my food. Mrs. 'Possum and I have agreed to hunt together, tonight."

"Who is Mrs. 'Possum?" the girl asked.

"An animal living in the lowest hollow of this tree," answered the owl. "She is a good-natured creature, and hunts by night, as I do. She is slow, but, being near the ground, she can spy a mouse much quicker than I can, and then she calls to me to catch it. So between us we get plenty of game and are helpful to each other. The only drawback is that Mrs. 'Possum has four children, which she carries in her pouch wherever she goes, and they have to be fed as well as their mother. So the 'possums have five mouths to my one, and it keeps us busy to supply them all."

"It's very kind of you to help her," remarked Twinkle.

"Oh, she helps me, too," returned the owl, cheerfully. "But now good night, my dears. You will probably be sound asleep when I get home again."

Off flew Mrs. Hootaway with these words, and her wings moved so noiselessly that she seemed to fade away into the darkness like a ghost.

The child-larks sat looking at the silver moon for a time; but presently Twinkle's eyelids drooped and she fell fast asleep, and Chubbins was not long in following her example.