

CHAPTER IX - The Destroyers

A loud shouting and a bang that echoed like a clap of thunder through the forest awoke the bird-children from their dreams.

Opening their eyes with a start they saw that the gray dawn was breaking and a sort of morning twilight made all objects in the forest distinct, yet not so brilliant as the approaching daylight would. Shadows still lay among the bushes and the thickest branches; but between the trees the spaces were clearly visible.

The children, rudely awakened by the riot of noise in their ears, could distinguish the barking of dogs, the shouts of men calling to the brutes, and the scream of an animal in deep distress. Immediately after, there was a whirl overhead and the gray owl settled on the limb beside their nest.

"They've got her!" she exclaimed, in a trembling, terrified voice. "The men have shot Mrs. 'Possum dead, and the dogs are now tearing her four babies limb from limb!"

"Where are they?" whispered Twinkle, her little heart beating as violently as if the dread destroyers had always been her mortal enemies.

"Just below us. Isn't it dreadful? We had such a nice night together, and Mrs. 'Possum was so sweet and loving in caring for her little ones and feeding them! And, just as we were nearly home again, the dogs sprang upon my friend and the men shot her dead. We had not even suspected, until then, that our foes were in the forest."

Twinkle and Chubbins craned their necks over the edge of the nest and looked down. On the ground stood a man and a boy, and two great dogs were growling fiercely and tearing some bloody, revolting object with their cruel jaws.

"Look out!" cried the voice of Wisk, the squirrel. "He's aiming at you--look out!"

They ducked their heads again, just as the gun roared and flamed fire beneath them.

"Oh-h-h!" wailed Mrs. Hootaway, fluttering violently beside them. "They struck me that time--the bullet is in my heart. Good-bye, my dears. Remember that--all--is love; all is--love!"

Her voice died away to a whisper, and she toppled from the limb. Twinkle and Chubbins tried to save their dying friend from falling, but the gray owl was so much bigger than they that they could not support the weight of her body. Slowly she sank to the ground and fell upon the earth with a dull sound that was dreadful to hear.

Instantly Twinkle darted from the nest and swooped downward, alighting on the ground beside the owl's quivering body. A big dog came bounding toward her. The man was reloading his gun, a few paces away.

"Call off your dog!" shouted Twinkle, wildly excited. "How dare you shoot the poor, harmless birds? Call off your dog, I say!"

But, even as she spoke, the words sounded in her own ears strange and unnatural, and more like the chirping of a bird than the language of men. The hunter either did not hear her or he did not understand her, and the dog snarled and bared its wicked teeth as it sprang greedily upon the child-lark.

Twinkle was too terrified to move. She glared upon the approaching monster helplessly, and it had almost reached her when a black object fell from the skies with the swiftness of a lightning streak and struck the dog's back, tearing the flesh with its powerful talons and driving a stout, merciless beak straight through the skull of the savage brute.

The dog, already dead, straightened out and twitched convulsively. The man shouted angrily and sprang upon the huge bird that had slain his pet, at the same time swinging his gun like a club.

"Quick!" said the eagle to Twinkle, "mount with me as swiftly as you can."

With the words he rose into the air and Twinkle darted after him, while Chubbins, seeing their flight from his nest, joined them just in time to escape a shot from the boy's deadly gun.

The inquisitive squirrel, however, had stuck his head out to see what was happening, and one of the leaden bullets buried itself in his breast. Chubbins saw him fall back into his hollow and heard his agonized scream; but he could not stay to help his poor friend. An instant later he had joined the eagle and Twinkle, and was flying as hard and swift as his wonderful lark wings could carry him up, up into the blue sky.

The sunshine touched them now, while below the tragic forest still lay buried in gloom.

"We are quite safe here, for I am sure no shot from a gun could reach us," said the eagle. "So let us rest upon our wings for a while. How lucky it was that I happened to be around in time to rescue you, my little friends."

"I am very grateful, indeed," answered Twinkle, holding her wings outstretched so that she floated lightly in the air beside her rescuer. "If you had been an instant later, the dog would have killed me."

"Very true," returned the eagle. "I saw your danger while I was in the air, and determined to act quickly, although I might myself have been shot by the man had his gun been loaded. But I have noticed that a bold action is often successful because it causes surprise, and the foe does not know what to do."

"I'm 'shamed of those people," said Chubbins, indignantly. "What right had they to come to the forest and kill the pretty owl, and the dear little squirrel, and the poor mama 'possum and her babies?"

"They had the right of power," said the eagle, calmly. "It would be a beautiful world were there no destroyers of life in it; but the earth and air and water would then soon become so crowded that there would not be room for them all to exist. Don't blame the men."

"But they are cruel," said Twinkle, "and kill innocent, harmless birds and animals, instead of the wicked ones that could be better spared."

"Cruelty is man's nature," answered the eagle. "Of all created things, men, tigers and snakes are known to be the most cruel. From them we expect no mercy. But now, what shall be our next movement? I suppose it will be best for you to keep away from the forest until the men are gone. Would you like to visit my home, and meet my wife and children?"

"Yes, indeed!" cried Twinkle; "if you will be kind enough to let us."

"It will be a great pleasure to me," said the eagle. "Follow me closely, please."

He began flying again, and they kept at his side. By and by they noticed a bright, rosy glow coming from a portion of the forest beneath them.

"What is that?" asked Chubbins.

"It is the place called the Paradise of Birds," answered their conductor. "It is said to be the most beautiful place in all the world, but no one except the Birds of Paradise are allowed to live there. Those favored birds sometimes enter our part of the forest, but we are never allowed to enter theirs."

"I'd like to see that place," said Twinkle.

"Well, you two child-larks are different from all other birds," remarked the eagle, "and for that reason perhaps you would be allowed to visit the paradise that is forbidden the rest of us. If ever I meet one of the beautiful birds that live there, I will ask it to grant you the privilege."

"Do!" said Twinkle and Chubbins, in one eager breath. They flew for a long time, high in the air, but neither of the bird-children seemed to tire in the least. They could not go quite as fast as the eagle, however, who moderated his speed so that they could keep up with him.