

## **CHAPTER XII - The Guardian**

The next morning ushered in a glorious day, sunny and bright. The sky was a clear blue, and only a slight breeze ruffled the leaves of the trees. Even before Twinkle and Chubbins were awake the birds were calling merrily to one another throughout the forest, and the chipmonks chirped in their own brisk, businesslike way as they scuttled from tree to tree.

While the child-larks were finishing their breakfast Policeman Bluejay came to them, his feathers looking fresh and glossy and all his gorgeous colorings appearing especially beautiful in the sunshine.

"Today will be a rare day to visit the Paradise," he said; "so I have come to escort you to the Guardian of the Entrance, who I am sure will arrange for you to enter that wonderful country."

"It is very kind of you to remember our wish," said Twinkle. "We are all ready."

So they flew above the tree-tops and began their journey toward the center of the forest.

"Where's your policeman's hat and club?" Chubbins asked the bluejay.

"Why, I left them at home," was the reply. "I'm not on official duty today, you know, and the Guardian does not like to see anything that looks like a weapon. In his country there are no such things as quarrels or fighting, or naughtiness of any sort; for as they have everything they want there is nothing to quarrel over or fight for. The Birds of Paradise have laws, I understand; but they obey them because they are told to, and not because they are forced to. It would be a bad country for a policeman to live in."

"But a good place for everyone else," said Twinkle.

"Perhaps so," agreed the policeman, reluctantly. "But I sometimes think the goody-goody places would get awful tiresome to live in, after a time. Here in our part of the forest there is a little excitement, for the biggest birds only obey our laws through fear of punishment, and I understand it is just the same in the world of men. But in the Birds' Paradise there lives but one race, every member of which is quite particular not to annoy any of his fellows in any way. That is why they will admit no disturbing element into their country. If you are admitted, my dears, you must be very careful not to offend any one that you meet."

"We'll try to be good," promised Chubbins.

"I would not dare to take any of my own people there," continued the bluejay, flying swiftly along as they talked together; "but you two are different, and more like the fairy Birds of Paradise themselves than like our forest birds. That is the reason I feel sure the Guardian will admit you."

"I'm naughty sometimes, and so is Chubbins," said Twinkle, honestly. "But we try not to be any naughtier than we can help."

"I am sure you will behave very nicely," replied the bluejay.

After a time the rosy glow appeared reflected in the blue sky, and as they flew toward it the soft and delightful radiance seemed to grow and deepen in intensity. It did not dazzle their eyes in the least, but as the light penetrated the forest and its furthest rays fell upon the group, they experienced a queer sense of elation and light-hearted joy.

But now the breeze freshened and grew more strong, pressing against their feathered breasts so gently yet powerfully that they soon discovered they were not advancing at all, but simply fluttering in the air.

"Drop down to the ground," whispered the bluejay; and they obeyed his injunction and found that close to the earth the wind was not so strong.

"That is a secret I learned some time ago," said their friend. "Most birds who seek to enter the Paradise try to beat against the wind, and are therefore always driven back; but there is just one way to approach the Guardian near enough to converse with him. After that it depends entirely upon his good-will whether you get any farther."

The wind still blew so strongly that it nearly took their breath away, but by creeping steadily over the ground they were able to proceed slowly, and after a time the pressure of the wind grew less and less, until it suddenly ceased altogether.

Then they stopped to rest and to catch their breaths, but before this happened Twinkle and Chubbins both uttered exclamations of amazement at the sight that met their eyes.

Before them was a grove composed of stately trees not made of wood, but having trunks of polished gold and silver and leaves of exquisite metallic colorings. Beneath the trees was a mass of brilliant flowers, exceedingly rare

and curious in form, and as our little friends looked upon them these flowers suddenly began a chant of greeting and then sang a song so sweet and musical that the lark-children were entranced and listened in rapt delight.

When the song ended the flowers all nodded their heads in a pretty way, and Twinkle drew a long breath and murmured:

"Isn't it odd to hear flowers sing? I'm sure the birds themselves cannot beat that music."

"They won't try," replied the policeman, "for Birds of Paradise do not sing."

"How strange!" exclaimed the girl.

"The land they live in is so full of music that they do not need to," continued the bluejay. "But before us is the entrance, leading through the limbs of that great golden tree you see at the left. Fly swiftly with me, and perch upon the middle branch."

With these words he darted toward the tree, and Twinkle and Chubbins followed. In a few seconds they alighted upon the branch and found themselves face to face with the first Bird of Paradise they had yet seen.

He possessed a graceful carriage and a most attractive form, being in size about as large as a common pigeon. His eyes were shrewd but gentle in expression and his pose as he stood regarding the newcomers was dignified and impressive. But the children had little time to note these things because their wondering eyes were riveted upon the bird's magnificent plumage. The feathers lay so smoothly against his body that they seemed to present a solid surface, and in color they were a glistening emerald green upon the neck and wings, shading down on the breast to a softer green and then to a pure white. The main wing-feathers were white, tipped with vivid scarlet, and the white feathers of his crest were also tipped with specks of flame. But his tail feathers were the most beautiful of all his gay uniform. They spread out in the shape of a fan, and every other feather was brilliant green and its alternate feather snow white.

"How lovely!" cried Twinkle, and the bird bowed its head and with a merry glance from its eyes responded:

"Your admiration highly honors me, little stranger."

"This," said Policeman Bluejay, "is the important official called the Guardian of the Entrance of Paradise. Sir Guardian, permit me to introduce to you two children of men who have been magically transformed into skylarks against their will. They are not quite birds, because their heads retain the human shape; but whatever form they may bear, their natures are sweet and innocent and I deem them worthy to associate for a brief time with your splendid and regal race. Therefore I have brought them here to commend them to your hospitality and good-will, and I hope you will receive them as your guests."

"What are your names, little strangers?" asked the Guardian.

"Mama calls me Twinkle," said the girl.

"I'm Chubbins," said the boy.

The Guardian looked attentively at the bluejay.

"You know our regulations," said he; "no birds of the forest are admitted to our Paradise."

"I know," replied the policeman. "I will await my little friends here. It is pleasure enough for me to have just this glimpse of your beautiful fairyland."

The Guardian nodded his approval of this speech.

"Very well," he answered, "you shall remain and visit with me. If all forest birds were like you, my friend, there would be little danger in admitting them into our society. But they are not, and the laws must be regarded. As for the child-larks, I will send them first to the King, in charge of the Royal Messenger, whom I will now summon."

He tossed his head upward with an abrupt motion, and in the tree-top a chime of golden bells rang musically in the air. The flowers beneath them caught up the refrain, and sang it softly until another bird came darting through the air and alighted on the golden limb beside the Guardian.

The newcomer was differently garbed from the other. His plumage was orange and white, the crest and wing-feathers being tipped with bright blue. Nor was he so large as the Guardian, nor so dignified in demeanor. Indeed, his expression was rather merry and roguish, and as he saw the strangers he gave a short, sharp whistle of surprise.

"My dear Ephel," said the Guardian, "oblige me by escorting these child-larks to the presence of his Majesty the King."

"I am delighted to obey your request," answered Ephel the Messenger, brightly. Then, turning to Twinkle and Chubbins, he added: "I trust you will find my society agreeable during our flight to the royal monarch of Paradise."

Twinkle was too much embarrassed by this politeness to answer at once, but Chubbins said "Sure thing!" in a matter-of-fact voice, and the Messenger nodded gaily and continued:

"Then we will go, if it pleases you."

He spread his wings in a flash of color and sped away into the Paradise, and the children eagerly followed him.