

CHAPTER XIII - The King Bird

More and more magnificence was unfolded as they advanced into this veritable fairyland of the birds. Vines of silver climbed up the golden trunks of trees and mingled their twining threads with the brilliant leaves. And now upon the trees appeared jewelled blossoms that sparkled most exquisitely in the rosy-hued radiance that, in this favored spot, had taken the place of sunshine. There were beds of plants with wide-spreading leaves that changed color constantly, one hue slowly melting into another and no two leaves on the same plant having the same color at the same time. Yet in spite of the vivid coloring that prevailed everywhere, each combination seemed in perfect harmony and served to delight the senses.

Bushes that emitted a grateful fragrance bore upon slender branches little bells that at times tinkled in the perfumed breeze and played sweet melodies, while here and there were clusters of fountain-lilies that shot sprays of crystal water high into the air. When the water fell back again and the drops struck against the broad leaves of the plants, they produced a melodious sound that was so delightful that Twinkle thought she could listen to it for hours.

Their guide flew silently on, and the two children were so much amazed by their surroundings that they had no words for questions or even remarks.

The scene was ever shifting and becoming more and more lovely and fascinating, and the paradise was more extensive than they had thought it.

By and bye Ephel the Messenger approached the central part, where was a great arbor thickly covered with masses of pure white flowers. Some of these were large, like chrysanthemums and mammoth white double roses, while among them were twined smaller and more delicate blossoms, like the bells of lilies-of-the-valley.

Ephel entered the arch of the arbor and flew on, for it was of great extent and continually enlarged from the point of entrance, so that at last the child-larks found themselves in a lofty circular chamber banked on sides and roof with solid masses of the snow-white flowers, which filled the air with a sweet and agreeable perfume. The floor was also a mass of white blossoms, so that the place resembled the inside of a huge cornucopia.

But the eyes of the little strangers were not directed so much to the arbor itself as to the group of splendid birds that occupied the flower-chamber and

perched upon a wide-spreading bush of filigree gold that rose from the middle of the floor and spread its dainty branches in every direction.

On the lower branches sat many birds of marvellous colorings, some having blue the predominant tint in their feathers, and others green, or scarlet, or brilliant yellows. In strong contrast with these were a few modest-looking birds with soft brown feathers covering their graceful forms, that sat silently upon the lowest and most retired branch of the golden bush; but still greater was the contrast of all present with the magnificence of the one occupying the topmost branch.

This gorgeous creature, whose splendor dominated the white bower, at once won the children's attention, and they had no doubt they were gazing upon the King Bird of Paradise.

The feathers of his head and neck were so fine that they looked like a covering of velvet. These seemed to be, at first, of a delicate lavender color, but the children observed that they shone with a different tint at every movement the King made. The body feathers, also as glossy as velvet, were of a rich royal purple, shading to lavender and then to white upon his breast. His wing plumes were white, tipped with specks of lustrous gold.

But by far the most astonishing part of the King's plumage was that which consisted of the dainty, fern-like plumes that rose from his body and tail and spread in graceful and bewildering curves both right and left, until his form seemed to be standing in a feathery bower of resplendent beauty. All the colors of the rainbow were seen in these delicate feathers, and against the white background of the arch this monarch of the feathered world appeared more royally magnificent than any words can describe.

Both Twinkle and Chubbins gasped with amazement and delight as, at the command of Ephel, they alighted upon a lowly branch of the golden bush and bowed their heads before the ruler of the birds' fairyland.

"Ah, whom have we here?" asked the King, in a soft voice, as he strutted and proudly turned himself upon his perch.

"Strangers, your Majesty," answered the Messenger. "They are sent to you by the Guardian of the Entrance because they are gentle and innocent, and are neither birds nor mortals, but a part of both."

"They are certainly very curious," remarked the King, staring at the human heads upon the lark bodies. "May I ask you, little strangers, how you happen to exist in your present form?"

Twinkle, tossing her head to throw back a straggling lock of hair that had fallen across her eyes, began in her sweet voice to tell the story of their enchantment, and not only the King but all the Birds of Paradise present listened intently to her words.

When she had finished the King exclaimed:

"Indeed, my dear child-larks, you are worthy to be our guests in fairyland. So it will please me if you will be as happy and comfortable as possible, and enjoy your stay with us as much as you can. My people will delight to honor and amuse you, and Ephel shall continue to guide you wherever you go."

"Thank you," returned Twinkle, earnestly; and Chubbins added, in his blunt way: "Much obliged."

"But, before you go," continued his Majesty, "tell me what you think of my royal person. Am I not beautiful?"

"You are, indeed," replied Twinkle; "only--"

"Only what?" asked the King, as she hesitated.

"Only I'm sorry you are so vain, and strut around so, and want everyone to see how beautiful you are."

"Why should I not? Is not vanity one of the great virtues?" asked the King, in a surprised voice.

"My mama says people ought not to think themselves nice, or pretty," said the child. "With us, to be vain is a fault, and we are taught to be modest and unassuming."

"How remarkable!" exclaimed the King. "And how very thoughtless your mother must be. Here we think that if God creates us beautiful it is a sin not to glory in His work, and make everyone acknowledge the kindly skill of the Supreme Maker's hand. Should I try to make others think, or should I myself think, that I am not most gracefully formed and most gorgeously clothed, I would be guilty of the sin of not appreciating the favor of God, and deserve to be punished."

Twinkle was amazed, but could find no words to contradict this astonishing idea.

"I had not thought of it in that way," she answered. "Perhaps I am wrong, your Majesty; and certainly you are very beautiful."

"Think it over," said the King, graciously. "Learn to be grateful for every good thing that is yours, and proud that you have been selected by Nature for adornment. Only in this way may such rare favors be deserved. And now the royal Messenger will show you the sights of our Paradise, and try to entertain you pleasantly while you are our guests."

He turned aside, with these words, and fluttered his waving feathers so that their changing tints might dazzle the eyes of all observers. But immediately afterward he paused and cried out:

"Dear me! One of my wing plumes is disarranged. Help me, you ladies!"

At once the small brown birds on the lower branches, who had been modestly quiet because they had no gay plumage, flew up to the King and with their bills skillfully dressed his feathers, putting the wing plume into its place again and arranging it properly, while the other birds looked on with evident interest.

As the lark-children turned away to follow the Messenger Chubbins remarked:

"I'm glad I haven't got all those giddy feathers."

"Why?" asked Twinkle, who had been rather awed by the King's splendor.

"Because it would take all my time to keep 'em smooth," answered the boy.

"The poor King can't do much more than admire himself, so he don't get time to have fun."