

CHAPTER XVI - The Beauty Dance

Before long they came to another and larger sheet of water, and this Twinkle decided was the most beautiful lake she had ever seen. Its waters were mostly deep blue in color, although they had a changeable effect and constantly shifted from one hue to another. Little waves rippled all over its surface, and the edges of the waves were glistening jewels which, as they scattered in spray and fell into the bosom of the lake, glinted and sparkled with a thousand flashing lights. Here were no rushes upon the shore, but instead of them banks of gorgeous flowers grew far down to the water's edge, so that the last ones dipped their petals into the lake itself.

Nestling upon this bank of flowers the Royal Messenger turned to his companions and said:

"Here let us rest for a time, while I call the friendly fishes to entertain you."

He ended his speech with a peculiar warble, and at its sound a score of fishes thrust their heads above the surface of the water. Some of them were gold-fish and some silver-fish, but others had opal tints that were very pretty. Their faces were jolly in expression and their eyes, Chubbins thought, must be diamonds, because they sparkled so brightly.

Swimming softly here and there in the lovely waters of the Lustrous Lake, the fishes sang this song:

"We are the fishes of the lake; Our lives are very deep; We're always active when awake And quiet when asleep.

"We get our fins from Finland, From books we get out tales; Our eyes they come from Eyerland And weighty are our scales.

"We love to flop and twist and turn Whenever 'tis our whim. Yet social etiquette we learn Because we're in the swim.

"Our beds, though damp, are always made; We need no fires to warm us; When we swim out we're not afraid, For autos cannot harm us.

"We're independent little fish And never use umbrellas. We do exactly as we wish And live like jolly fellows."

As the fishes concluded their song they leaped high into the air and then plunged under the water and disappeared, and it was hard to tell which

sparkled most brilliantly, their gold and silver bodies or the spray of jewels they scattered about them as they leaped.

"If you should dive into this lake," said Ephel the Messenger, "your feathers would be dripping wet when you came out again. It is here we Birds of Paradise bathe each morning, after which we visit the Gleaming Glade to perform our Beauty Dance."

"I should like to see that glade," said Twinkle, who was determined to let nothing escape her that she could possibly see.

"You shall," answered Ephel, promptly. "We will fly there at once."

So he led the way and presently they entered a thicker grove of trees than any they had before noticed. The trunks were so close together that the birds could only pass between them in single file, but as they proceeded in this fashion it was not long before they came to a circular space which the child-lark knew at once must be the Gleaming Glade.

The floor was of polished gold, and so bright that as they stood upon it they saw their forms reflected as in a mirror. The trees surrounding them were also of gold, being beautifully engraved with many attractive designs and set with rows of brilliant diamonds. The leaves of the trees, however, were of burnished silver, and bore so high a gloss that each one served as a looking-glass, reproducing the images of those standing in the glade thousands of times, whichever way they chanced to turn.

The gleam of these mirror-like leaves was exceedingly brilliant, but Ephel said this radiance was much stronger in the morning, when the rosy glow of the atmosphere was not so powerful.

"Then," said he, "the King Bird and all the Nobility of Paradise, who rejoice in the most brilliant plumage, come here from their bath and dance upon the golden floor the Beauty Dance, which keeps their blood warm until the feathers have all dried. While they dance they can admire their reflections in the mirrors, which adds greatly to their pleasure."

"Don't they have music to dance by?" asked Chubbins.

"Of course," the Messenger replied. "There is a regular orchestra that plays exquisite music for the dance; but the musicians are the female Birds of Paradise, who, because their plumage is a modest brown, are not allowed to take part in the Beauty Dance."

"I think the brown birds with the soft gray breasts are just as pretty as the gaily clothed ones," said Twinkle. "The male birds are too bright, and tire my eyes."

Ephel did not like this speech, for he was very proud of his own gorgeous coloring; but he was too polite to argue with his guest, so he let the remark pass.

"You have now witnessed the most attractive scenes in our favored land," he said; "but there are some curious sights in the suburbs that might serve to interest you."

"Oh! have you suburbs, too?" she asked.

"Yes, indeed. We do not like to come into too close contact with the coarse, outer world, so we have placed the flying things that are not birds midway between our Paradise and the great forest. They serve us when we need them, and are under our laws and regulations; but they are so highly favored by being permitted to occupy the outer edge of our glorious Paradise that they willingly obey their masters. After all, they live happy lives, and their habits, as I have said, may amuse you.

"Who are they?" enquired Chubbins.

"Come with me, and you shall see for yourselves."

They flew away from the grove of the Gleaming Glade and Ephel led them by pleasant routes into a large garden with many pretty flowers in it. Mostly it was filled with hollyhocks--yellow, white, scarlet and purple.