

CHAPTER XVII - The Queen Bee

As they approached they heard a low, humming sound, which grew louder as they advanced and aroused their curiosity.

"What is it?" asked Twinkle, at last.

Ephel answered: "It is the suburb devoted to the bees."

"But bees are not birds!" exclaimed Twinkle.

"No; as I have told you, the suburbs contain flying things that cannot be called birds, and so are unable to live in our part of the Paradise. But because they have wings, and love all the flowers and fruits as we do ourselves, we have taken them under our protection."

Ephel perched upon a low bush, and when the child-larks had settled beside him he uttered a peculiar, shrill whistle. The humming sound grew louder, then, and presently hundreds of great bees rose above the flower tops and hovered in the air. But none of them approached the bush except one monstrous bumble-bee that had a body striped with black and gold, and this one sailed slowly toward the visitors and alighted gracefully upon a branch in front of them.

The bee was all bristling with fine hairs and was nearly half as big as Twinkle herself; so the girl shrank back in alarm, and cried:

"Oh-h-h! I'm afraid it will sting me!"

"How ridiculous!" answered the bee, laughing in a small but merry voice. "Our stings are only for our enemies, and we have no enemies in this Paradise; so we do not use our stingers at all. In fact, I'd almost forgotten I had one, until you spoke."

The words were a little mumbled, as if the insect had something in its mouth, but otherwise they were quite easy to understand.

"Permit me to introduce her Majesty the Queen Bee," said their guide. "These, your highness, are some little child-larks who are guests of our King. I have brought them to visit you."

"They are very welcome," returned the Queen Bee. "Are you fond of honey?" she asked, turning to the children.

"Sometimes," replied Chubbins; "but we've just eaten, and we're chock full now."

"You see," the Queen remarked, "my people are all as busy as bees gathering the honey from every flower."

"What do you do with it?" asked Twinkle.

"Oh, we eat part of it, and store up the rest for a rainy day."

"Does it ever rain here?" enquired Chubbins.

"Sometimes, at night, when we are all asleep, so as to refresh and moisten the flowers, and help them to grow."

"But if it rains at night, there can't be any rainy days," remarked Twinkle; "so I can't see the use of saving your honey."

"Nor can I," responded the Queen, laughing again in her pleasant way. "Out in the world people usually rob us of our stores, and so keep us busy getting more. But here there are not even robbers, so that the honey has been accumulating until we hardly know what to do with it. We have built a village of honeycombs, and I have just had my people make me a splendid palace of honey. But it is our way to gather the sweet stuff, whether we need it or not, so we have to act according to our natures. I think of building a mountain of honey next."

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

"Then come with me," answered the Queen Bee, "for it will give me pleasure to show it to you."

"Shall we go?" asked the girl-lark, turning to Ephel.

"Of course," he returned. "It is quite a wonderful sight, and may interest you."

So they all flew away, the Queen Bee taking the lead, and passed directly over the bed of flowers with its swarm of buzzing, busy bees.

"They remind me of a verse from 'Father Goose,'" said Twinkle, looking curiously but half fearfully at the hundreds of big insects.

"What is the verse?" asked the Queen.

"Why, it goes this way," answered the girl:

"A bumble-bee was buzzing on a yellow hollyhock. When came along a turtle, who at the bee did mock, Saying "Prithee, Mr. Bumble, why make that horrid noise? It's really distracting, and every one annoys."

"I'm sorry," said, quite humble, the busy droning bee, "The noise is just my bumble, and natural, you see. And if I didn't buzz so I'm sure that you'll agree I'd only be a big fly, and not a bumble-bee."

"That is quite true," said the bee, "and describes our case exactly. But you should know that we are not named 'bumblebees' by rights, but 'Humble Bees.' The latter is our proper name."

"But why 'humble?'" asked Twinkle.

"Because we are common, work-a-day people, I suppose, and not very aristocratic," was the reply. "I've never heard why they changed our name to 'bumble,' but since you recited that verse I imagine it is on account of the noise our wings make."

They had now passed over the flower beds and approached a remarkable village, where the houses were all formed of golden-yellow honey-combs. There were many pretty shapes among these houses, and some were large and many stories in height while others were small and had but one story. Some had spires and minarets reaching up into the air, and all were laid out into streets just like a real village.

But in the center stood a great honey-comb building with so many gables and roofs and peaks and towers that it was easy to guess it was the Queen Bee's palace, of which she had spoken.

They flew in at a second-story window and found themselves in a big room with a floor as smooth as glass. Yet it was composed of many six-sided cells filled with honey, which could be seen through the transparent covering. The walls and roof were of the same material, and at the end of the room was a throne shaped likewise of the honey cells, like everything else. On a bench along the wall sat several fat and sleepy-looking bumble-bees, who scarcely woke up when their queen entered.

"Those are the drones," she said to her visitors. "It is useless to chide them for their laziness, because they are too stupid to pay attention to even a good scolding. Don't mind them in any way."

After examining the beautiful throne-room, they visited the sleeping chambers, of which there were many, and afterward the parlors and dining-room and the work-rooms.

In these last were many bees building the six-sided pockets or cells for storing the honey in, or piling them up in readiness for the return of those who were gathering honey from the flowers.

"We are not really honey-bees," remarked the Queen; "but gathering honey is our chief business, after all, and we manage to find a lot of it."

"Won't your houses melt when it rains?" asked Twinkle.

"No, for the comb of the honey is pure wax," the Queen Bee replied. "Water does not melt it at all."

"Where do you get all the wax?" Chubbins enquired.

"From the flowers, of course. It grows on the stamens, and is a fine dust called pollen, until we manufacture it into wax. Each of my bees carries two sacks, one in front of him, to put the honey in, and one behind to put the wax in."

"That's funny," said the boy-lark.

"I suppose it may be, to you," answered the Queen, "but to us it is a very natural thing."