

Chapter 13

The secret of the island

In readiness for meeting the king of the bishbirds, Grizzly wore full Highland dress and carried his bagpipes. Mungo wore his best fisherman's jersey (blue with a herring-bone pattern) and carried the recipe book.

They stepped out of the boat and the fog into a cave where the three bishbirds were waiting for them.

First bishbird: "Come with us, imbecile bears!"

Second bishbird: "We have a little surprise for you!"

Third bishbird: "What a bish of a bear!"

They led the two bears up a flight of stairs in a dark tunnel. Remembering the picture of the island, Grizzly guessed that they were ascending, behind the high dark cliffs, to the plateau above. The stairs seemed to go on for ever and the bears were often out of breath and had to pause. This evidently irritated their guides, whom they could hear muttering "Bish!" under their breath.

At last they emerged from the darkness into multi-coloured light. It was like nothing they had ever seen. They could see nothing but the light that swirled around them, radiating the same bright colours as the bishbirds' feathers: emerald and azure and magnolia and crimson and avocado and lilac and ginger and chocolate and aquamarine and apricot and maroon and mustard and cherry and chestnut and lemon and lavender and indigo and burgundy and ... There was no end of colours.

"Wow! Shoot the bonxies!" said Mungo. "This is something else!"

As their eyes got used to the light they began to see through it, and a very strange sight came into view. From as far as they could see to as far as they could see there was a line of dancing bishbirds. Hundreds of them. Sticking out their big feet sideways, they were even more comical than the children of Bearloch were when they pretended to be bishbirds. Each bishbird rested a wing on the shoulder of the bird in front.

And they were singing. The song seemed to swirl around the bears just like the light. They felt surrounded by it, wrapped in it, entranced by it. It went something like this:

Here we go round the bishberry bish

the mulberry mush

the sloeberry stash

Here we go round the tayberry trash

the strawberry slush

the cloudberry cloche

Here we go round the mayberry mash

the silvery slosh

the cranberry crush

Here we go round the gooseberry gush

the raspberry rash

the bumblebee bush

and so on and so on and so on...

The song had a strange effect on the bears. It seemed to get inside them. It made them feel it could go on for ever and take them with it. But they were not sure they wanted to go with it.

Their guides let them experience this for a while but then spoke, in a more solemn tone than they had been using up till then:

First bishbird: "This is the secret of the Island of the Bishbirds."

Second bishbird: "The dance encircles the whole island."

Third bishbird: "Here the sun never rises or sets but turns around and around
in the sky."

First bishbird: "Within the circle time itself goes in a circle."

Second bishbird: "Here time is not an arrow but a boomerang."

Third bishbird: "Those who live here are as young as when they came."

First bishbird: "This is Everland."

Second bishbird: "The dance and the song keep it so."

Third bishbird: "The dance must never be broken or the spell will be too."

Mungo ventured a question: "So do the dancing bishbirds never stop?"

First bishbird: "We take turns."

Second bishbird: "All bishbirds take turns to dance the circle."

Third bishbird: “But the circle is never broken.”

First bishbird: “The song never stops.”

Second bishbird: “You feel the enchantment, foolish bears, do you not?”

Third bishbird: “*This* is what the bishbirds have done!”

While the bishbirds were speaking to them, close up, the two bears noticed something else about bishbirds. They are beautiful but they have stinkingly bad breath.