

The Pageant of Fireflies

For some time Mother had greatly envied us our swimming, both in the daytime and at night, but as she pointed out when we suggested she join us, she was far too old for that sort of thing. Eventually, however, Mother paid a visit into town and returned to the villa coyly bearing a mysterious parcel. Opening this she astonished us all by holding up an extraordinary shapeless garment of black cloth, covered from top to bottom with hundreds of frills and pleats and tucks.

“Well, what do you think of it?” Mother asked.

“What is it?” asked Larry at length.

“It’s a bathing costume of course,” said Mother. “What on earth did you think it was?”

“It looks to me like a badly-skinned whale,” said Larry, peering at it closely.

“You can’t possibly wear that, Mother,” said Margo, horrified, “why, it looks as though it was made in 1920.”

“What are all those frills and things for?” asked Larry with interest.

“Decoration, of course,” said Mother indignantly.

“What a jolly idea! Don’t forget to shake the fish out of them when you come out of the water.”

“Well, I like it, anyway,” Mother said firmly, wrapping the monstrosity up again, “and I’m going to wear it.”

“That’s right, you do what you want to do,” agreed Larry; “It’ll probably suit you very well if you can grow another three or four legs to go with it.”

Mother snorted indignantly and swept upstairs to try on her costume.

Presently she called to us to come and see the effect, and we all trooped up to the bedroom. My dog Roger, was the first to enter and, on being greeted by this strange apparition clad in its voluminous black costume rippling with frills, he retreated hurriedly through the door backwards, barking ferociously. It was some time before we could persuade him that it really was Mother, and even then he kept giving her vaguely uncertain looks from the corner of his eye. However, in spite of all opposition, Mother stuck to her tent-like bathing-suit, and in the end we gave up.

In order to celebrate her first entry into the sea we decided to have a

moonlight picnic down at the bay.

We reached the bay, spread out the rugs on the sand, arranged the food, placed the battalion of wine-bottles in a row in the shallows to keep cool, and the great moment had arrived.

Amid much cheering Mother removed her housecoat and stood revealed in all her glory, clad in the bathing-costume which made her look, as Larry pointed out, like a sort of marine Albert Memorial.

Roger behaved very well until he saw Mother wade into the shallow water in a slow and dignified manner. He then got terribly excited. He seemed to be under the impression that the bathing-costume was some sort of sea monster that had enveloped Mother and was now about to carry her out to sea. Barking wildly, he flung himself to the rescue, grabbed one of the frills dangling so plentifully round the edge of the costume, and tugged with all his strength in order to pull Mother back to safety.

Mother, who had just remarked that she thought the water a little cold, suddenly found herself being pulled backwards. With a squeak of dismay she lost her footing and sat down heavily in two feet of water, while Roger tugged so hard that a large section of the frill gave way. Elated by the fact that the enemy appeared to be disintegrating, Roger, growling encouragement to Mother, set to work to remove the rest of the offending monster from her person.

We writhed on the sand helpless with laughter, while Mother sat gasping in the shallows, making desperate attempts to regain her feet, beat Roger off, and retain at least a portion of her costume.

Unfortunately, owing to the extreme thickness of the material from which the costume was constructed, the air was trapped inside; the effect of the water made it inflate like a balloon, and trying to keep this airship of frills and tucks under control added to Mother's difficulties. In the end we shooed Roger away and helped Mother to her feet.

Eventually, after we had partaken of a glass of wine to celebrate and recover from what Larry referred to as Perseus's rescue of Andromeda, we went into swim, and Mother sat discreetly in the shallows, while Roger crouched nearby, growling ominously at the costume as it bulged and fluttered round Mother's waist.

The phosphorescence was particularly good that night.

By plunging your hand into the water and dragging it along you could draw a wide golden-green ribbon of cold fire across the sea, and when you dived as you hit the surface it seemed as though you had plunged into a frosty furnace of glinting light. When we were tired we waded out of the sea, the water running off our bodies so that we seemed to be on fire, and lay on the sand to eat. Then, at the end of the meal as if by arrangement, a few fireflies appeared in the olives behind us – a sort of overture to the show. First of all there were just two or three green specks, sliding smoothly through the trees, winking regularly. But gradually more and more appeared, until parts of the olive-grove were lit with a weird green glow. Never had we seen so many fireflies congregated in one spot; they flicked through the trees in swarms, they crawled on the grass, the bushes and the olive-trunks, they drifted in swarms over our heads and landed on the rugs, like green embers.

Glittering streams of them flew out over the bay, swirling over the water, and then, right on cue, the porpoises appeared, swimming in line into the bay, rocking rhythmically through the water, their backs as if painted with phosphorous. In the center of the bay they swam round, diving and rolling, occasionally leaping high in the air and falling back into a conflagration of light. With the fireflies above and the illuminated porpoises below it was a fantastic sight. We could even see the luminous trails beneath the surface where the porpoises swam in fiery patterns across the sandy bottom, and when they leapt high in the air the drops of emerald glowing water flicked from them, and you could not tell if it was phosphorescence or fireflies you were looking at. For an hour or so we watched this pageant, and then slowly the fireflies drifted back inland and farther down the coast. Then the porpoises lined up and sped out to sea, leaving a flaming path behind them that flickered and glowed, and then died slowly, like a glowing branch laid across the bay.