

THE SECRET

Frederick sits in a rowing boat trying to fight against the heavy waves of the sea. His small arms move in the wind like swords. He stares at the crests of foam while his parents sit on the beach. They look constantly at the boat which dances on the waves. After a little while they read calmly in the newspaper, because the wind is drifting Frederick towards the beach. There are many children playing with their boats and their surf-boards.

Suddenly some sand falls on Daddy's paper. "Stop it, Frederick," he says angrily, putting his paper on the sand.

"I have a secret, Daddy!" Frederick looks very happy.

"And will you tell me about it?" Daddy asks curiously. "Have you lost your oar, or is one of them broken? There's a heavy wind, you know!"

"Nothing like that."

"Then, there's a hole in your boat?"

"Not that I know of."

"Please don't make it so exciting, Freddy," Mum interrupts.

"Why?" says Frederick's sister Sanna. "You can't tell everybody secrets--then they all know!"

"I don't tell everybody," Frederick says. "I only tell you because you are my family."

"Then tell us!" Sanna is getting more and more curious and impatient. She looks sideways at her brother who has hidden his hands behind his back. "What do you have there? A mussel or a jellyfish? Get away with that stuff."

"I have a bottle message!" Frederick shows them a bottle which is filled with sand and seaweed. His hands are trembling with excitement.

"Sure, it is a bottle message!" Sanna jumps up, taking the bottle from her brother.

"Slow down," Daddy says. He thinks that another quarrel is about to occur.

"Let me open the bottle. There's a piece of paper in it."

"Certainly," the children shout with joy while looking at the treasure.

Daddy takes off the cork and pulls out the small paper with his little finger. Frederick and Sanna look hopefully at him.

"What is it, Daddy, read it!" Frederick shouts, biting his lips in excitement.

"Well, we have another secret."

"What is secret, Daddy?" Sanna asks. She looks at her father in surprise and suspicion.

"Everything," Daddy answers with a smile.

"How come?" the two children shout as if at a word of command.

"I cannot read any of the words on this paper!"

"Just because you can't read something, it doesn't mean that it is a secret," Frederick says. "A secret is something you don't tell anybody, but a bottle message is something you send off."

"To tell others something!" his sister continues. "It might be an ancient message, if Daddy could read it! A message from the past, maybe from sea-robbers or kings."

Daddy smiled roughly, taking the paper in the wind. "From Marco Polo maybe. I can't interpret the message, because it's written in Arabic. That's what I suppose, but of course I don't know for sure."

"So it is from kings or from sultans or whatever you call them--." Frederick looks curiously at the dirty bottle, as if he is trying to find out, whether it is ancient or not.

"Maybe it comes from a sultan," Mum says. "Did they have bottles at that time?" she asks her son.

"Well then--our secret is not a secret, but a riddle that we must solve." Sanna says resolutely, looking out over the sea. The wind has dropped and dark clouds arise in the horizon. Over there--somewhere very far away--is the Arabic beach from where the bottle message was sent to the French beach, Sanna thinks, while the first drops of rain fall on her nose.

Some days later the children have found the solution of the riddle. A man at the hotel interpreted the script: the bottle came from Tunisia. The boy Farid sends regards to the person who finds the bottle. He hopes that it will be a child. Farid wants to get regards from a new bottle message. In the lowest corner of the paper he has drawn a sun, which Daddy had taken for a scripture. Why did Farid draw a sun?

"Let's get started," Sanna shouts enterprisingly. "Let us make a message and put it in a bottle! We have to greet Farid, or don't you want to?"

"Sure I will, but in another way!" Frederick answers. He looks over the sea, perhaps as far as Tunisia.

"I don't understand," Sanna says. Her voice is suddenly very severe.

"I'll make something new. It's boring to make the same thing. I have a great idea. When we get home I'll write some words on my kite and send it into the air. To Tunisia or India or something! I wonder who is going to find it. I hope that he will. . ."

Barbara Bruning