

Chapter Ten - The Cunning of Queen Cor

You may be sure the Queen of Coregos was not well pleased to have King Gos and all his warriors living in her city after they had fled from their own. They were savage natured and quarrelsome men at all times, and their tempers had not improved since their conquest by the Prince of Pingaree. Moreover, they were eating up Queen Cor's provisions and crowding the houses of her own people, who grumbled and complained until their Queen was heartily tired.

"Shame on you!" she said to her husband, King Gos, "to be driven out of your city by a boy, a roly-poly King and a billy goat! Why do you not go back and fight them?"

"No human can fight against the powers of magic," returned the King in a surly voice. "That boy is either a fairy or under the protection of fairies. We escaped with our lives only because we were quick to run away; but, should we return to Regos, the same terrible power that burst open the city gates would crush us all to atoms."

"Bah! you are a coward," cried the Queen, tauntingly.

"I am not a coward," said the big King. "I have killed in battle scores of my enemies; by the might of my sword and my good right arm I have conquered many nations; all my life people have feared me. But no one would dare face the tremendous power of the Prince of Pingaree, boy though he is. It would not be courage, it would be folly, to attempt it."

"Then meet his power with cunning," suggested the Queen. "Take my advice, and steal over to Regos at night, when it is dark, and capture or destroy the boy while he sleeps."

"No weapon can touch his body," was the answer. "He bears a charmed life and cannot be injured."

"Does the fat King possess magic powers, or the goat?" inquired Cor.

"I think not," said Gos. "We could not injure them, indeed, any more than we could the boy, but they did not seem to have any unusual strength, although the goat's head is harder than a battering-ram."

"Well," mused the Queen, "there is surely some way to conquer that slight boy. If you are afraid to undertake the job, I shall go myself. By some stratagem I

shall manage to make him my prisoner. He will not dare to defy a Queen, and no magic can stand against a woman's cunning."

"Go ahead, if you like," replied the King, with an evil grin, "and if you are hung up by the thumbs or cast into a dungeon, it will serve you right for thinking you can succeed where a skilled warrior dares not make the attempt."

"I'm not afraid," answered the Queen. "It is only soldiers and bullies who are cowards."

In spite of this assertion, Queen Cor was not so brave as she was cunning. For several days she thought over this plan and that, and tried to decide which was most likely to succeed. She had never seen the boy Prince but had heard so many tales of him from the defeated warriors, and especially from Captain Buzzub, that she had learned to respect his power.

Spurred on by the knowledge that she would never get rid of her unwelcome guests until Prince Inga was overcome and Regos regained for King Gos, the Queen of Coregos finally decided to trust to luck and her native wit to defeat a simple-minded boy, however powerful he might be. Inga could not suspect what she was going to do, because she did not know herself. She intended to act boldly and trust to chance to win.

It is evident that had the cunning Queen known that Inga had lost all his magic, she would not have devoted so much time to the simple matter of capturing him, but like all others she was impressed by the marvelous exhibition of power he had shown in capturing Regos, and had no reason to believe the boy was less powerful now.

One morning Queen Cor boldly entered a boat, and, taking four men with her as an escort and bodyguard, was rowed across the narrow channel to Regos. Prince Inga was sitting in the palace playing checkers with King Rinkitink when a servant came to him, saying that Queen Cor had arrived and desired an audience with him.

With many misgivings lest the wicked Queen discover that he had now lost his magic powers, the boy ordered her to be admitted, and she soon entered the room and bowed low before him, in mock respect.

Cor was a big woman, almost as tall as King Gos. She had flashing black eyes and the dark complexion you see on gypsies. Her temper, when irritated, was something dreadful, and her face wore an evil expression which she tried to cover by smiling sweetly--often when she meant the most mischief.

"I have come," said she in a low voice, "to render homage to the noble Prince of Pingaree. I am told that Your Highness is the strongest person in the world, and invincible in battle, and therefore I wish you to become my friend, rather than my enemy."

Now Inga did not know how to reply to this speech. He disliked the appearance of the woman and was afraid of her and he was unused to deception and did not know how to mask his real feelings. So he took time to think over his answer, which he finally made in these words:

"I have no quarrel with Your Majesty, and my only reason for coming here is to liberate my father and mother, and my people, whom you and your husband have made your slaves, and to recover the goods King Gos has plundered from the Island of Pingaree. This I hope soon to accomplish, and if you really wish to be my friend, you can assist me greatly."

While he was speaking Queen Cor had been studying the boy's face stealthily, from the corners of her eyes, and she said to herself: "He is so small and innocent that I believe I can capture him alone, and with ease. He does not seem very terrible and I suspect that King Gos and his warriors were frightened at nothing."

Then, aloud, she said to Inga:

"I wish to invite you, mighty Prince, and your friend, the great King of Gilgad, to visit my poor palace at Coregos, where all my people shall do you honor. Will you come?"

"At present," replied Inga, uneasily, "I must refuse your kind invitation."

"There will be feasting, and dancing girls, and games and fireworks," said the Queen, speaking as if eager to entice him and at each word coming a step nearer to where he stood.

"I could not enjoy them while my poor parents are slaves," said the boy, sadly.

"Are you sure of that?" asked Queen Cor, and by that time she was close beside Inga. Suddenly she leaned forward and threw both of her long arms around Inga's body, holding him in a grasp that was like a vise.

Now Rinkitink sprang forward to rescue his friend, but Cor kicked out viciously with her foot and struck the King squarely on his stomach--a very

tender place to be kicked, especially if one is fat. Then, still hugging Inga tightly, the Queen called aloud:

"I've got him! Bring in the ropes."

Instantly the four men she had brought with her sprang into the room and bound the boy hand and foot. Next they seized Rinkitink, who was still rubbing his stomach, and bound him likewise.

With a laugh of wicked triumph, Queen Cor now led her captives down to the boat and returned with them to Coregos.

Great was the astonishment of King Gos and his warriors when they saw that the mighty Prince of Pingaree, who had put them all to flight, had been captured by a woman. Cowards as they were, they now crowded around the boy and jeered at him, and some of them would have struck him had not the Queen cried out:

"Hands off! He is my prisoner, remember not yours."

"Well, Cor, what are you going to do with him?" inquired King Gos.

"I shall make him my slave, that he may amuse my idle hours. For he is a pretty boy, and gentle, although he did frighten all of you big warriors so terribly."

The King scowled at this speech, not liking to be ridiculed, but he said nothing more. He and his men returned that same day to Regos, after restoring the bridge of boats. And they held a wild carnival of rejoicing, both in the King's palace and in the city, although the poor people of Regos who were not warriors were all sorry that the kind young Prince had been captured by his enemies and could rule them no longer.

When her unwelcome guests had all gone back to Regos and the Queen was alone in her palace, she ordered Inga and Rinkitink brought before her and their bonds removed. They came sadly enough, knowing they were in serious straits and at the mercy of a cruel mistress. Inga had taken counsel of the White Pearl, which had advised him to bear up bravely under his misfortune, promising a change for the better very soon. With this promise to comfort him, Inga faced the Queen with a dignified bearing that indicated both pride and courage.

"Well, youngster," said she, in a cheerful tone because she was pleased with her success, "you played a clever trick on my poor husband and frightened him badly, but for that prank I am inclined to forgive you. Hereafter I intend you to be my page, which means that you must fetch and carry for me at my will. And let me advise you to obey my every whim without question or delay, for when I am angry I become ugly, and when I am ugly someone is sure to feel the lash. Do you understand me?"

Inga bowed, but made no answer. Then she turned to Rinkitink and said:

"As for you, I cannot decide how to make you useful to me, as you are altogether too fat and awkward to work in the fields. It may be, however, that I can use you as a pincushion.

"What!" cried Rinkitink in horror, "would you stick pins into the King of Gilgad?"

"Why not?" returned Queen Cor. "You are as fat as a pincushion, as you must yourself admit, and whenever I needed a pin I could call you to me." Then she laughed at his frightened look and asked: "By the way, are you ticklish?"

This was the question Rinkitink had been dreading. He gave a moan of despair and shook his head.

"I should love to tickle the bottom of your feet with a feather," continued the cruel woman. "Please take off your shoes."

"Oh, your Majesty!" pleaded poor Rinkitink, "I beg you to allow me to amuse you in some other way. I can dance, or I can sing you a song."

"Well," she answered, shaking with laughter, "you may sing a song--if it be a merry one. But you do not seem in a merry mood."

"I feel merry--indeed, Your Majesty, I do!" protested Rinkitink, anxious to escape the tickling. But even as he professed to "feel merry" his round, red face wore an expression of horror and anxiety that was really comical.

"Sing, then!" commanded Queen Cor, who was greatly amused.

Rinkitink gave a sigh of relief and after clearing his throat and trying to repress his sobs he began to sing this song-gently, at first, but finally roaring it out at the top of his voice:

"Oh! There was a Baby Tiger lived in a men-ag-er-ie-- Fizzy-fezzy-fuzzy-- they wouldn't set him free; And ev'rybody thought that he was gentle as could be-- Fizzy-fezzy-fuzzy--Ba-by Ti-ger!

"Oh! They patted him upon his head and shook him by the paw-- Fizzy-fezzy-fuzzy--he had a bone to gnaw; But soon he grew the biggest Tiger that you ever saw-- Fizzy-fezzy-fuzzy--what a Ti-ger!

"Oh! One day they came to pet the brute and he began to fight-- Fizzy-fezzy-fuzzy-how he did scratch and bite! He broke the cage and in a rage he darted out of sight-- Fizzy-fezzy-fuzzy was a Ti-ger!"

"And is there a moral to the song?" asked Queen Cor, when King Rinkitink had finished his song with great spirit.

"If there is," replied Rinkitink, "it is a warning not to fool with tigers."

The little Prince could not help smiling at this shrewd answer, but Queen Cor frowned and gave the King a sharp look.

"Oh," said she; "I think I know the difference between a tiger and a lapdog. But I'll bear the warning in mind, just the same."

For, after all her success in capturing them, she was a little afraid of these people who had once displayed such extraordinary powers.