

## 6. The Troubles of Nerle

That night Prince Marvel slept within the cave, surrounded by the fifty-nine reformed thieves, and suffered no harm at their hands. In the morning, accompanied by his esquire, Nerle, who was mounted upon a spirited horse brought him by Wul-Takim, he charged the honest men to remember their promises, bade them good by, and set out in search of further adventure.

As they left the clearing by the narrow passage that led between the overhanging rocks, the prince looked back and saw that the sign above the gate of the cave, which had told of the thieves' treasure house, had been changed. It now read as follows:

WUL-TAKIM	KING OF HONEST MEN	-----	HIS
PLEASURE HOUSE	WALK IN		

"That is much better," laughed the prince. "I accomplished some good by my adventure, anyway!"

Nerle did not reply. He seemed especially quiet and thoughtful as he rode by his master's side, and after they had traveled some distance in silence Prince Marvel said:

"Tell me how you came to be in the cave of thieves, and perched upon the casks where I found you."

"It is a sad story," returned Nerle, with a sigh; "but since you request me to tell it, the tale may serve to relieve the tedium of your journey.

"My father is a mighty baron, very wealthy and with a heart so kind that he has ever taken pleasure in thrusting on me whatever gift he could think of. I had not a single desire unsatisfied, for before I could wish for anything it was given me.

"My mother was much like my father. She and her women were always making jams, jellies, candies, cakes and the like for me to eat; so I never knew the pleasure of hunger. My clothes were the gayest satins and velvets, richly made and sewn with gold and silver braid; so it was impossible to wish for more in the way of apparel. They let me study my lessons whenever I felt like it and go fishing or hunting as I pleased; so I could not complain that I was unable to do just as I wanted to. All the servants obeyed my slightest wish: if I

wanted to sit up late at night no one objected; if I wished to lie in bed till noon they kept the house quiet so as not to disturb me.

"This condition of affairs, as you may imagine, grew more and more tedious and exasperating the older I became. Try as I might, I could find nothing to complain of. I once saw the son of one of our servants receive a flogging; and my heart grew light. I immediately begged my father to flog me, by way of variety; and he, who could refuse me nothing, at once consented. For this reason there was less satisfaction in the operation than I had expected, although for the time being it was a distinct novelty.

"Now, no one could expect a high-spirited boy to put up with such a life as mine. With nothing to desire and no chance of doing anything that would annoy my parents, my days were dreary indeed."

He paused to wipe the tears from his eyes, and the prince murmured, sympathetically: "Poor boy! Poor boy!"

"Ah, you may well say that!" continued Nerle. "But one day a stranger came to my father's castle with tales of many troubles he had met with. He had been lost in a forest and nearly starved to death. He had been robbed and beaten and left wounded and sore by the wayside. He had begged from door to door and been refused food or assistance. In short, his story was so delightful that it made me envy him, and I yearned to suffer as he had done. When I could speak with him alone I said: 'Pray tell me how I can manage to acquire the misfortunes you have undergone. Here I have everything that I desire, and it makes me very unhappy.'

"The stranger laughed at me, at first; and I found some pleasure in the humiliation I then felt. But it did not last long, for presently he grew sober and advised me to run away from home and seek adventure.

"'Once away from your father's castle,' said he, 'troubles will fall upon you thick enough to satisfy even your longings.'

"'That is what I am afraid of!' I answered. 'I don't want to be satisfied, even with troubles. What I seek is unsatisfied longings.'

"'Nevertheless,' said he, 'I advise you to travel. Everything will probably go wrong with you, and then you will be happy.'

"I acted upon the stranger's advice and ran away from home the next day. After journeying a long time I commenced to feel the pangs of hunger, and was

just beginning to enjoy myself when a knight rode by and gave me a supply of food. At this rebuff I could not restrain my tears, but while I wept my horse stumbled and threw me over his head. I hoped at first I had broken my neck, and was just congratulating myself upon the misfortune, when a witch-woman came along and rubbed some ointment upon my bruises, in spite of my protests. To my great grief the pain left me, and I was soon well again. But, as a slight compensation for my disappointment, my horse had run away; so I began my journey anew and on foot.

"That afternoon I stepped into a nest of wasps, but the thoughtless creatures flew away without stinging me. Then I met a fierce tiger, and my heart grew light and gay. 'Surely this will cause me suffering!' I cried, and advanced swiftly upon the brute. But the cowardly tiger turned tail and ran to hide in the bushes, leaving me unharmed!

"Of course, my many disappointments were some consolation; but not much. That night I slept on the bare ground, and hoped I should catch a severe cold; but no such joy was to be mine.

"Yet the next afternoon I experienced my first pleasure. The thieves caught me, stripped off all my fine clothes and jewels and beat me well. Then they carried me to their cave, dressed me in rags, and perched me on the top of the casks, where the slightest movement on my part would send me tumbling among the sword points. This was really delightful, and I was quite happy until you came and released me.

"I thought then that I might gain some pleasure by provoking you to anger; and our fight was the result. That blow on the ear was exquisite, and by forcing me to become your servant you have made me, for the first time in my life, almost contented. For I hope in your company to experience a great many griefs and disappointments."

As Nerle concluded his story Prince Marvel turned to him and grasped his hand.

"Accept my sympathy!" said he. "I know exactly how you feel, for my own life during the past few centuries has not been much different."

"The past few centuries!" gasped Nerle. "What do you mean?"

At this the prince blushed, seeing he had nearly disclosed his secret. But he said, quickly:

"Does it not seem centuries when one is unhappy?"

"It does, indeed!" responded Nerle, earnestly. "But please tell me your story."

"Not now," said Prince Marvel, with a smile. "It will please you to desire in vain to hear a tale I will not tell. Yet I promise that on the day we part company I shall inform you who I am."