

## 9. The Royal Dragon of Spor

"Now," said Terribus, regarding the prince gloomily, "I must dispose of you in another way."

For a moment he dropped his scarlet head in thought. Then he turned fiercely upon his attendants.

"Let the Wrestler come forward!" he shouted, as loudly as his mild voice would carry.

Instantly a tall blackamoor advanced from the throng and cast off his flowing robe, showing a strong figure clad only in a silver loincloth.

"Crack me this fellow's bones!" commanded Terribus.

"I beg your Majesty will not compel me to touch him," said Prince Marvel, with a slight shudder; "for his skin is greasy, and will soil my hands. Here, Nerle!" he continued, turning to his esquire, "dispose of this black man, and save me the trouble."

Nerle laughed pleasantly. The black was a powerfully built man, and compared with Nerle and the prince, who had but the stature of boys, he towered like a very giant in size. Nevertheless, Nerle did not hesitate to spring upon the Wrestler, who with a quick movement sent the boy crashing against the stone pavement.

Nerle was much bruised by the fall, and as he painfully raised himself to his feet a great lump was swelling behind his left ear, where his head had struck the floor, and he was so dizzy that the room seemed swimming around him in a circle. But he gave a happy little laugh, and said to the prince, gratefully:

"Thank you very much, my master! The fall is hurting me delightfully. I almost feel as if I could cry, and that would be joy indeed!"

"Well," answered the prince, with a sigh, "I see I must get my hands greased after all"--for the black's body had really been greased to enable him to elude the grasp of his opponents.

But Marvel made a quick leap and seized the Wrestler firmly around the waist. The next moment, to the astonishment of all, the black man flew swiftly into the air, plunged through one of the open windows high up in the wall, and disappeared from view. When the king and his people again turned their

wondering eyes upon the prince he was wiping his hands carefully upon a silk handkerchief.

At this sight a pretty young girl, who stood near the throne, laughed aloud, and the sound of her laughter made King Terribus very angry.

"Come here!" he commanded, sternly. The girl stepped forward, her face now pale and frightened, while tear-drops trembled upon the lashes that fringed her downcast eyes. "You have dared to laugh at the humiliation of your king," said Terribus, his horrid face more crimson than ever, "and as atonement I command that you drink of the poisoned cup."

Instantly a dwarf came near, bearing a beautiful golden goblet in his crooked hands.

"Drink!" he said, an evil leer upon his face.

The girl well knew this goblet contained a vile poison, one drop of which on her tongue would cause death; so she hesitated, trembling and shrinking from the ordeal.

Prince Marvel looked into her sweet face with pitying eyes, and stepping quickly to her side, took her hand in his.

"Now drink!" he said, smiling upon her; "the poison will not hurt you."

She drank obediently, while the dwarf chuckled with awful glee and the king looked on eagerly, expecting her to fall dead at his feet. But instead the girl stood upright and pressed Marvel's hand, looking gratefully into his face.

"You are a fairy!" she whispered, so low that no one else heard her voice. "I knew that you would save me."

"Keep my secret," whispered the prince in return, and still holding her hand he led her back to her former place.

King Terribus was almost wild with rage and disappointment, and his elephant nose twisted and squirmed horribly.

"So you dare to thwart my commands, do you!" he cried, excitedly. "Well, we shall soon see which of us is the more powerful. I have decreed your death--and die you shall!"

For a moment his eye roved around the chamber uncertainly. Then he shouted, suddenly:

"Ho, there! Keepers of the royal menagerie--appear!"

Three men entered the room and bowed before the king. They were of the Gray Men of the mountains, who had followed Prince Marvel and Nerle through the rocky passes.

"Bring hither the Royal Dragon," cried the king, "and let him consume these strangers before my very eyes!"

The men withdrew, and presently was heard a distant shouting, followed by a low rumbling sound, with groans, snorts, roars and a hissing like steam from the spout of a teakettle.

The noise and shouting drew nearer, while the people huddled together like frightened sheep; and then suddenly the doors flew open and the Royal Dragon advanced to the center of the room.

This creature was at once the pride and terror of the Kingdom of Spor. It was more than thirty feet in length and covered everywhere with large green scales set with diamonds, making the dragon, when it moved, a very glittering spectacle. Its eyes were as big as pie-plates, and its mouth--when wide opened--fully as large as a bath-tub. Its tail was very long and ended in a golden ball, such as you see on the top of flagstaffs. Its legs, which were as thick as those of an elephant, had scales which were set with rubies and emeralds. It had two monstrous, big ears and two horns of carved ivory, and its teeth were also carved into various fantastic shapes--such as castles, horses' heads, chinamen and griffins--so that if any of them broke it would make an excellent umbrella handle.

The Royal Dragon of Spor came crawling into the throne-room rather clumsily, groaning and moaning with every step and waving its ears like two blankets flying from a clothesline.

The king looked on it and frowned.

"Why are you not breathing fire and brimstone?" he demanded, angrily.

"Why, I was caught out in a gale the other night," returned the Dragon, rubbing the back of its ear with its left front paw, as it paused and looked at the king, "and the wind put out my fire."

"Then why didn't you light it again?" asked Terribus, turning on the keepers.

"We--we were out of matches, your Majesty!" stammered the trembling Gray Men.

"So--ho!" yelled the king, and was about to order the keepers beheaded; but just then Nerle pulled out his match-box, lit one of the matches, and held it in front of the Dragon's mouth. Instantly the creature's breath caught fire; and it began to breathe flames a yard in length.

"That's better," sighed the Dragon, contentedly. "I hope your Majesty is now satisfied."

"No,--I am not satisfied!" declared King Terribus. "Why do you not lash your tail?"

"Ah, I can't do that!" replied the Dragon. "It's all stiffened up with rheumatism from the dampness of my cave. It hurts too much to lash it."

"Well, then, gnash your teeth!" commanded the king.

"Tut--tut!" answered the Dragon, mildly; "I can't do that, either; for since you had them so beautifully carved it makes my teeth ache to gnash them."

"Well, then, what are you good for?" cried the king, in a fury.

"Don't I look awful? Am I not terrible to gaze on?" inquired the Dragon, proudly, as it breathed out red and yellow flames and made them curl in circles around its horns. "I guess there's no need for me to suggest terror to any one that happens to see me," it added, winking one of the pie-plate eyes at King Terribus.

The king looked at the monster critically, and it really seemed to him that it was a frightful thing to behold. So he curbed his anger and said, in his ordinary sweet voice:

"I have called you here to destroy these two strangers."

"How?" asked the Dragon, looking upon Prince Marvel and Nerle with interest.

"I am not particular," answered the king. "You may consume them with your fiery breath, or smash them with your tail, or grind them to atoms between your teeth, or tear them to pieces with your claws. Only, do hurry up and get it over with!"

"Hm-m-m!" said the Dragon, thoughtfully, as if it didn't relish the job; "this one isn't Saint George, is it?"

"No, no!" exclaimed the king, irritably; "it's Prince Marvel. Do get to work as soon as possible."

"Prince Marvel--Prince Marvel," repeated the Dragon. "Why, there isn't a prince in the whole world named Marvel! I'm pretty well posted on the history of royal families, you know. I'm afraid he's Saint George in disguise."

"Isn't your name Prince Marvel?" inquired the king, turning to the boyish-looking stranger.

"It is," answered Marvel.

"Well, it's mighty strange I've never heard of you," persisted the Dragon. "But tell me, please, how would you prefer to be killed?"

"Oh, I'm not going to be killed at all," replied the prince, laughing.

"Do you hear that, Terribus?" asked the Dragon, turning to the king; "he says he isn't going to be killed."

"But I say he is!" cried Terribus. "I have decreed his death."

"But do you suppose I'm going to kill a man against his will?" inquired the Dragon, in a reproachful voice; "and such a small man, too! Do you take me for a common assassin--or a murderer?"

"Do you intend to obey my orders?" roared the king.

"No, I don't; and that's flat!" returned the Dragon, sharply. "It's time for me to take my cough medicine; so if you've nothing more to say I'll go back to my cave."

"Go, go, go!" shrieked the king, stamping his foot in passion. "You've outlived your usefulness! You're a coward! You're a traitor! You're a--a--a--"

"I'm a dragon and a gentleman!" answered the monster, proudly, as the king paused for lack of a word; "and I believe I know what's proper for dragons to do and what isn't. I've learned wisdom from my father, who got into trouble with Saint George, and if I fought with this person who calls himself Prince Marvel, I'd deserve to be a victim of your Fool-Killer. Oh, I know my business, King Terribus; and if you knew yours, you'd get rid of this pretended prince as soon as possible!"

With this speech he winked at Prince Marvel, turned soberly around and crawled from the room. One of the keepers got too near and the Dragon's

breath set fire to his robe, the flames being with difficulty extinguished; and the gold ball on the end of the Dragon's tail struck a giant upon his shins and made him dance and howl in pain.

But, aside from these slight accidents, the monster managed to leave the throne-room without undue confusion, and every one, including the king, seemed glad to be rid of him.