

## **11. The Cunning of King Terribus**

The days that followed were pleasant ones for Prince Marvel and Nerle, who were treated as honored guests by both the king and his courtiers. But the prince seemed to be the favorite, for at all games of skill and trials at arms he was invariably the victor, while in the evenings, when the grand ball-room was lighted up and the musicians played sweet music, none was so graceful in the dance as the fairy prince.

Nerle soon tired of the games and dancing, for he had been accustomed to them at his father's castle; and moreover he was shy in the society of ladies; so before many weeks had passed he began to mope and show a discontented face.

One day the prince noticed his esquire's dismal expression of countenance, and asked the cause of it.

"Why," said Nerle, "here I have left my home to seek worries and troubles, and have found but the same humdrum life that existed at my father's castle. Here our days are made smooth and pleasant, and there is no excitement or grief, whatever. You have become a carpet-knight, Prince Marvel, and think more of bright eyes than of daring deeds. So, if you will release me from your service I will seek further adventures."

"Nay," returned the prince, "we will go together; for I, too, am tired of this life of pleasure."

So next morning Marvel sought the presence of King Terribus and said:

"I have come to bid your Majesty adieu, for my esquire and I are about to leave your dominions."

At first the king laughed, and his long nose began to sway from side to side. Then, seeing the prince was in earnest, his Majesty frowned and grew disturbed. Finally he said:

"I must implore you to remain my guests a short time longer. No one has ever before visited me in my mountain home, and I do not wish to lose the pleasure of your society so soon."

"Nevertheless, we must go," answered the prince, briefly.

"Are you not contented?" asked Terribus. "Ask whatever you may desire, and it shall be granted you."

"We desire adventures amid new scenes," said Marvel, "and these you can not give us except by permission to depart."

Seeing his guest was obstinate the king ceased further argument and said:

"Very well; go if you wish. But I shall hope to see you return to us this evening."

The prince paid no heed to this peculiar speech, but left the hall and hurried to the courtyard of the castle, where Nerle was holding the horses in readiness for their journey.

Standing around were many rows and files of the Gray Men, and when they reached the marble roadway they found it lined with motionless forms of the huge giants. But no one interfered with them in any way, although both Prince Marvel and Nerle knew that every eye followed them as they rode forward.

Curiously enough, they had both forgotten from what direction they had approached the castle; for, whereas they had at that time noticed but one marble roadway leading to the entrance, they now saw that there were several of these, each one connecting with a path through the mountains.

"It really doesn't matter which way we go, so long as we get away from the Kingdom of Spor," said Prince Marvel; so he selected a path by chance, and soon they were riding through a mountain pass.

The pleased, expectant look on Nerle's face had gradually turned to one of gloom.

"I hoped we should have a fight to get away," he said, sadly; "and in that case I might have suffered considerable injury and pain. But no one has injured us in any way, and perhaps King Terribus is really glad to be rid of us."

"With good reason, too, if such is the case," laughed Marvel; "for, mark you, Nerle, the king has discovered we are more powerful than he is, and had he continued to oppose us, we might have destroyed his entire army."

On they rode through the rough hill paths, winding this way and that, until they lost all sense of the direction in which they were going.

"Never mind," said the prince; "so long as we get farther and farther away from the ugly Terribus I shall be satisfied."

"Perhaps we are getting into more serious danger than ever," answered Nerle, brightening; "one of the giants told me the other day that near the foot of these mountains is the Kingdom of the High Ki of Twi."

"Who is the High Ki of Twi?" asked Prince Marvel.

"No one knows," answered Nerle.

"And what is the Kingdom of Twi like?"

"No one knows that," answered Nerle.

"Then," returned the prince, with a smile, "if by chance we visit the place we shall know more than any one else."

At noon they ate luncheon by the wayside, Nerle having filled his pouch by stealth at the breakfast table. There were great fragments of rock lying all about them, and the sun beat down so fiercely that the heat reflected from the rocks was hard to bear. So the travelers did not linger over their meal, but remounted and rode away as soon as possible. When the sun began to get lower in the sky the rocks beside the path threw the riders into shadow, so that their journey became more pleasant. They rode along, paying little attention to the way, but talking and laughing merrily together, until it began to grow dark.

"Does this path never end?" asked Prince Marvel, suddenly. "We ought to reach some place where men dwell before long, else we shall be obliged to spend the night among these rocks."

"And then perhaps the wolves will attack us," said Nerle, cheerfully, "and tear us into pieces with their sharp teeth and claws."

But even as he spoke they rode around a turn in the path and saw a sight that made them pause in astonishment. For just before them rose the castle of King Terribus, and along both sides of the marble walk leading up to it were ranged the lines of giants, exactly as they had stood in the morning.

Nerle turned around in his saddle. Sure enough, there were the Gray Men in the rear--stepping from behind every boulder and completely filling the rocky pathway.

"Well, what shall we do?" asked the esquire; "fight?"

"No, indeed!" returned Prince Marvel, laughing at his friend's eager face. "It appears the path we chose winds around in a circle, and so has brought us back to our starting-point. So we must make the best of a bad blunder and spend another night with our ugly friend King Terribus."

They rode forward through the rows of giants to the castle, where the ever-courteous servants took their horses and escorted them to their former handsome apartments with every mark of respect.

No one seemed in the least surprised at their speedy return, and this fact at first puzzled Nerle, and then made him suspicious.

After bathing and dusting their clothing they descended to the banquet hall, where King Terribus sat upon his gray stone throne and welcomed them with quiet courtesy.

The sight of the king's crimson skin and deformed face sent a thrill of repugnance through Prince Marvel, and under the impulse of a sudden thought he extended his hand toward Terribus and whispered a magic word which was unheard by any around him.

Nerle did not notice the prince's swift gesture nor the whispered word; but he was staring straight at Terribus at the time, and he saw with surprise the eye on the top of the king's head move down toward his forehead, and the eye in the center of his forehead slide slightly toward the left, and the elephant-like nose shrink and shorten at the same time. Also it seemed to him that the king's skin was not so crimson in color as before, and that a thin growth of hair had covered his head.

However, no one else appeared to notice any change--least of all Terribus--so Nerle seated himself at the table and began to eat.

"It was very kind of you to return so soon to my poor castle," said the king to Prince Marvel, in his sweet voice.

"We could not help it," laughed the prince, in reply; "for the road wound right and left until we knew not which way we traveled; and then it finally circled around again to your castle. But to-morrow we shall seek a new path and bid you farewell forever."

"Still," remarked the king, gravely, "should you again miss your way, I shall be glad to welcome your return."

The prince bowed politely by way of reply, and turned to address the little maiden he had once saved from death by poison. And so in feasting, dancing and laughter the evening passed pleasantly enough to the prince, and it was late when he called Nerle to attend him to their apartment.