

## 12. The Gift of Beauty

The following morning Marvel and Nerle once more set out to leave the Kingdom of Spor and its ugly king. They selected another pathway leading from the castle and traveled all day, coming at nightfall into view of the place whence they had started, with its solemn rows of giants and Gray Men standing ready to receive them.

This repetition of their former experience somewhat annoyed the prince, while Nerle's usually despondent face wore a smile.

"I see trouble ahead," murmured the esquire, almost cheerfully. "Since the king can not conquer us by force he intends to do it by sorcery."

Marvel did not reply, but greeted the king quietly, while Terribus welcomed their return as calmly as if he well knew they could not escape him.

That evening the prince made another pass toward the king with his hand and muttered again the magic word. Nerle was watching, and saw the upper eye of Terribus glide still farther down his forehead and the other eye move again toward the left. The swaying nose shrank to a few inches in length, and the skin that had once been so brilliantly crimson turned to a dull red color. This time the courtiers and ladies in waiting also noticed the change in the king's features, but were afraid to speak of it, as any reference to their monarch's personal appearance was by law punishable by death. Terribus saw the startled looks directed upon him, and raised his hand to feel of his nose and eyes; but thinking that if any change in his appearance had taken place, he must be uglier than before, he only frowned and turned away his head.

The next day the king's guests made a third attempt to leave his dominions, but met with no better success than before, for a long and tedious ride only brought them back to their starting-place in the evening.

This time Prince Marvel was really angry, and striding into the king's presence he reproached him bitterly, saying:

"Why do you prevent us from leaving your kingdom? We have not injured you in any way."

"You have seen ME," returned Terribus, calmly, "and I do not intend you shall go back to the world and tell people how ugly I am."

The prince looked at him, and could not repress a smile. The two eyes of the king, having been twice removed from their first position, were now both in his forehead, instead of below it, and one was much higher than the other. And the nose, although small when compared to what it had been, still resembled an elephant's trunk. Other changes had been made for the better, but Terribus was still exceedingly repulsive to look upon.

Seeing the prince look at him and smile, the king flew into a fury of anger and declared that the strangers should never, while they lived, be permitted to leave his castle again. Prince Marvel became thoughtful at this, reflecting that the king's enmity all arose from his sensitiveness about his ugly appearance, and this filled the youthful knight with pity rather than resentment.

When they had all assembled at the evening banquet the prince, for a third time, made a mystic pass at the king and whispered a magic word. And behold! this time the charm was complete. For the two front eyes of Terribus fell into their proper places, his nose became straight and well formed, and his skin took on a natural, healthy color. Moreover, he now had a fine head of soft brown hair, with eyebrows and eyelashes to match, and his head was shapely and in proportion to his body. As for the eye that had formerly been in the back of his head, it had disappeared completely.

So amazed were the subjects of the transformed king--who was now quite handsome to look upon--that they began to murmur together excitedly, and something in the new sensations he experienced gave to the king's face likewise an expression of surprise. Knowing from their pleased looks that he must have improved in appearance, he found courage to raise his hand to his nose, and found it well formed. Then he touched his eyes, and realized they were looking straight out from his face, like those of other people.

For some moments after making these discoveries the king remained motionless, a smile of joy gradually spreading over his features. Then he said, aloud:

"What has happened? Why do you all look so startled?"

"Your Majesty is no longer ugly," replied Marvel, laughingly; "so that when Nerle and I leave your kingdom we can proclaim nothing less than praise of your dignified and handsome appearance."

"Is my face indeed pleasing?" demanded the king, eagerly.

"It is!" cried the assembled courtiers and ladies, as with one voice.

"Bring me a mirror!" said the king. "I shall look at my reflection for the first time in many years."

The mirror being brought King Terribus regarded himself for a long time with pleased astonishment; and then, his sensitive nature being overcome by the shock of his good fortune, he burst into a flood of tears and rushed from the room.

The courtiers and ladies now bestowed many grateful thanks upon Prince Marvel for his kind deed; for they realized that thereafter their lives would be safer from the king's anger and much pleasanter in every way.

"Terribus is not bad by nature," said one; "but he brooded upon his ugliness so much that the least thing served to throw him into a violent passion, and our lives were never safe from one day to another."

By and by two giants entered the hall and carried away the throne of gray stone where Terribus had been accustomed to sit; and other slaves brought a gorgeous throne of gold, studded with precious jewels, which they put in its place. And after a time the king himself returned to the room, his simple gray gown replaced by flowing robes of purple, with rich embroideries, such as he had not worn for many years.

"My people," said he, addressing those present with kindness and dignity, "it seems to me fitting that a handsome king should be handsomely attired, and an ugly one clothed simply. For years I have been so terrible in feature that I dared not even look at my own image in a mirror. But now, thanks to the gracious magic of my guest, I have become like other men, and hereafter you will find my rule as kind as it was formerly cruel. To-night, in honor of this joyous occasion, we shall feast and make merry, and it is my royal command that you all do honor and reverence to the illustrious Prince Marvel!"

A loud shout of approval greeted this speech, and the evening was merry indeed. Terribus joined freely in the revelry, laughing as gaily as the lightest-hearted damsel present.

It was nearly morning before they all retired, and as they sought their beds Nerle asked the prince in a voice that sounded like an ill-natured growl:

"Why did you give the king beauty, after his treatment of us?"

Marvel looked at the reproachful face of his esquire and smiled. "When you are older," said he, "you will find that often there are many ways to accomplish

a single purpose. The king's ugliness was the bar to our leaving his country, for he feared our gossip. So the easiest way for us to compass our escape was to take away his reason for detaining us. Thus I conquered the king in my own way, and at the same time gained his gratitude and friendship."

"Will he allow us to depart in the morning?" inquired Nerle.

"I think so," said Marvel.

It was late when they rose from their slumbers; but, having breakfasted, the prince's first act was to seek the king.

"We wish to leave your kingdom," said he. "Will you let us go?"

Terribus grasped the hand of his guest and pressed it with fervor, while tears of gratitude stood in his eyes.

"I should prefer that you remain with me always, and be my friend," he answered. "But if you choose to leave me I shall not interfere in any way with your wishes."

Prince Marvel looked at him thoughtfully, and then said: "My time on this island is short. In a few months Prince Marvel will have passed out of the knowledge of men, and his name will be forgotten. Before then I hope to visit the Kingdoms of Dawna and Auriel and Plenta; so I must not delay, but beg you will permit me to depart at once."

"Very well," answered Terribus. "Come with me, and I shall show you the way."

He led the prince and Nerle to a high wall of rock, and placing his hand upon its rough surface, touched a hidden spring. Instantly an immense block of stone began to swing backward, disclosing a passage large enough for a man on horseback to ride through.

"This is the one road that leads out of my kingdom," said Terribus. "The others all begin and end at the castle. So that unless you know the secret of this passage you could never escape from Spor."

"But where does this road lead?" asked Marvel.

"To the Kingdom of Auriel, which you desire to visit. It is not a straight road, for it winds around the Land of Twi, so it will carry you a little out of your way."

"What is the Land of Twi?" inquired the prince.

"A small country hidden from the view of all travelers," said Terribus. "No one has ever yet found a way to enter the land of Twi; yet there is a rumor that it is ruled by a mighty personage called the High Ki."

"And does the rumor state what the High Ki of Twi is like?"

"No, indeed," returned the king, smiling, "so it will do you no good to be curious. And now farewell, and may good luck attend you. Yet bear in mind the fact that King Terribus of Spor owes you a mighty debt of gratitude; and if you ever need my services, you have but to call on me, and I shall gladly come to your assistance."

"I thank you," said Marvel, "but there is small chance of my needing help. Farewell, and may your future life be pleasant and happy!"

With this he sprang to the saddle of his prancing charger and, followed by Nerle, rode slowly through the stone arch. The courtiers and ladies had flocked from the palace to witness their departure, and the giants and dwarfs and Gray Men were drawn up in long lines to speed the king's guests. So it was a brilliant sight that Marvel and Nerle looked back on; but once they were clear of the arch, the great stone rolled back into its place, shutting them out completely from the Kingdom of Spor, with its turreted castle and transformed king.