

14. The Ki and the Ki-Ki

From the tops of the hills the travelers caught their first glimpse of the wonderful cities of Twi. Two walls surrounded the cities, and in the walls were two gates just alike. Within the inclosures stood many houses, but all were built in pairs, from the poorest huts to the most splendid palaces. Every street was double, the pavements running side by side. There were two lamp-posts on every corner, and in the dim twilight that existed these lamp-posts were quite necessary. If there were trees or bushes anywhere, they invariably grew in pairs, and if a branch was broken on one it was sure to be broken on the other, and dead leaves fell from both trees at identically the same moment.

Much of this Marvel and Nerle learned after they had entered the cities, but the view from the hills showed plainly enough that the "double" plan existed everywhere and in every way in this strange land.

They followed the paths down to the gates of the walls, where two pairs of soldiers rushed out and seized their horses by the bridles. These soldiers all seemed to be twins, or at least mates, and each one of each pair was as like the other as are two peas growing in the same pod. If one had a red nose the other's was red in the same degree, and the soldiers that held the bridles of Nerle's horse both had their left eyes bruised and blackened, as from a blow of the same force.

These soldiers, as they looked upon Nerle and the prince, seemed fully as much astonished and certainly more frightened than their prisoners. They were dressed in bright yellow uniforms with green buttons, and the soldiers who had arrested the prince had both torn their left coat-sleeves and had patches of the same shape upon the seats of their trousers.

"How dare you stop us, fellows?" asked the prince, sternly.

The soldiers holding his horse both turned and looked inquiringly at the soldiers holding Nerle's horse; and these turned to look at a double captain who came out of two doors in the wall and walked up to them.

"Such things were never before heard of!" said the two captains, their startled eyes fixed upon the prisoners. "We must take them to the Ki and the Ki-Ki."

"Why so?" asked Prince Marvel.

"Because," replied the officers, "they are our rulers, under grace of the High Ki, and all unusual happenings must be brought to their notice. It is our law, you know--the law of the Kingdom of Twi."

"Very well," said Marvel, quietly; "take us where you will; but if any harm is intended us you will be made to regret it."

"The Ki and the Ki-Ki will decide," returned the captains gravely, their words sounding at the same instant.

And then the two pairs of soldiers led the horses through the double streets, the captains marching ahead with drawn swords, and crowds of twin men and twin women coming from the double doors of the double houses to gaze upon the strange sight of men and horses who were not double.

Presently they came upon a twin palace with twin turrets rising high into the air; and before the twin doors the prisoners dismounted. Marvel was escorted through one door and Nerle through another, and then they saw each other going down a double hallway to a room with a double entrance.

Passing through this they found themselves in a large hall with two domes set side by side in the roof. The domes were formed of stained glass, and the walls of the hall were ornamented by pictures in pairs, each pair showing identically the same scenes. This, was, of course, reasonable enough in such a land, where two people would always look at two pictures at the same time and admire them in the same way with the same thoughts.

Beneath one of the domes stood a double throne, on which sat the Ki of Twi--a pair of gray-bearded and bald-headed men who were lean and lank and stoop-shouldered. They had small eyes, black and flashing, long hooked noses, great pointed ears, and they were smoking two pipes from which the smoke curled in exactly the same circles and clouds.

Beneath the other dome sat the Ki-Ki of Twi, also on double thrones, similar to those of the Ki. The Ki-Ki were two young men, and had golden hair combed over their brows and "banged" straight across; and their eyes were blue and mild in expression, and their cheeks pink and soft. The Ki-Ki were playing softly upon a pair of musical instruments that resembled mandolins, and they were evidently trying to learn a new piece of music, for when one Ki-Ki struck a false note the other Ki-Ki struck the same false note at the same time, and the same expression of annoyance came over the two faces at the same moment.

When the prisoners entered, the pairs of captains and soldiers bowed low to the two pairs of rulers, and the Ki exclaimed--both in the same voice of surprise:

"Great Kika-koo! what have we here?"

"Most wonderful prisoners, your Highnesses," answered the captains. "We found them at your cities' gates and brought them to you at once. They are, as your Highnesses will see, each singular, and but half of what he should be."

"'Tis so!" cried the double Ki, in loud voices, and slapping their right thighs with their right palms at the same time. "Most remarkable! Most remarkable!"

"I don't see anything remarkable about it," returned Prince Marvel, calmly. "It is you, who are not singular, but double, that seem strange and outlandish."

"Perhaps--perhaps!" said the two old men, thoughtfully. "It is what we are not accustomed to that seems to us remarkable. Eh, Ki-Ki?" they added, turning to the other rulers.

The Ki-Ki, who had not spoken a word but continued to play softly, simply nodded their blond heads carelessly; so the Ki looked again at the prisoners and asked:

"How did you get here?"

"We cut a hole through the prickly hedge," replied Prince Marvel.

"A hole through the hedge! Great Kika-koo!" cried the gray-bearded Ki; "is there, then, anything or any place on the other side of the hedge?"

"Why, of course! The world is there," returned the prince, laughing.

The old men looked puzzled, and glanced sharply from their little black eyes at their prisoners.

"We thought nothing existed outside the hedge of Twi," they answered, simply. "But your presence here proves we were wrong. Eh! Ki-Ki?"

This last was again directed toward the pair of musicians, who continued to play and only nodded quietly, as before.

"Now that you are here," said the twin Ki, stroking their two gray beards with their two left hands in a nervous way, "it must be evident to you that you do

not belong here. Therefore you must go back through the hedge again and stay on the other side. Eh, Ki-Ki?"

The Ki-Ki still continued playing, but now spoke the first words the prisoners had heard from them.

"They must die," said the Ki-Ki, in soft and agreeable voices.

"Die!" echoed the twin Ki, "die? Great Kika-koo! And why so?"

"Because, if there is a world on the other side of the hedge, they would tell on their return all about the Land of Twi, and others of their kind would come through the hedge from curiosity and annoy us. We can not be annoyed. We are busy."

Having delivered this speech both the Ki-Ki went on playing the new tune, as if the matter was settled.

"Nonsense!" retorted the old Ki, angrily. "You are getting more and more bloodthirsty every day, our sweet and gentle Ki-Ki! But we are the Ki--and we say the prisoners shall not die!"

"We say they shall!" answered the youthful Ki-Ki, nodding their two heads at the same time, with a positive motion. "You may be the Ki, but we are the Ki-Ki, and your superior."

"Not in this case," declared the old men. "Where life and death are concerned we have equal powers with you."

"And if we disagree?" asked the players, gently.

"Great Kika-koo! If we disagree the High Ki must judge between us!" roared the twin Ki, excitedly.

"Quite so," answered the Ki-Ki. "The strangers shall die."

"They shall not die!" stormed the old men, with fierce gestures toward the others, while both pairs of black eyes flashed angrily.

"Then we disagree, and they must be taken to the High Ki," returned the blond musicians, beginning to play another tune.

The two Ki rose from their thrones, paced two steps to the right and three steps to the left, and then sat down again.

"Very well!" they said to the captains, who had listened unmoved to the quarrel of the rulers; "keep these half-men safe prisoners until to-morrow morning, and then the Ki-Ki and we ourselves will conduct them to the mighty High Ki."

At this command the twin captains bowed again to both pairs of rulers and led Prince Marvel and Nerle from the room. Then they were escorted along the streets to the twin houses of the captains, and here the officers paused and scratched their left ears with uncertain gestures.

"There being only half of each of you," they said, "we do not know how to lock each of you in double rooms."

"Oh, let us both occupy the same room," said Prince Marvel. "We prefer it."

"Very well," answered the captains; "we must transgress our usual customs in any event, so you may as well be lodged as you wish."

So Nerle and the prince were thrust into a large and pleasant room of one of the twin houses, the double doors were locked upon them by twin soldiers, and they were left to their own thoughts.