

16. The Rebellion of the High Ki

The bold speech of Nerle's made the two damsels laugh at the same time, and their sweet laughter sounded like rippling strains of harmonious music. But the two Ki-Ki frowned angrily, and the two Ki looked at the boy in surprise, as if wondering at his temerity.

"Who are these strangers?" asked the pretty High Ki, speaking together as all the twins of Twi did; "and why are they not mates, but only half of each other?"

"These questions, your Supreme Highnesses," said the blond-haired pair of Ki-Ki, "we are unable to answer."

"Perhaps, then, the strangers can answer themselves," said the little maids, smiling first upon the Ki-Ki and then upon the prisoners.

Prince Marvel bowed.

"I am from the great outside world," said he, "and my name is Prince Marvel. Until now I have never seen people that live in pairs, and speak in unison, and act in the same way and think the same thoughts. My world is much bigger than your world, and in it every person is proud to think and act for himself. You say I am only a 'half,' but that is not so. I am perfect, without a counterpart; my friend Nerle is perfect without a counterpart, and it is yourselves who are halved. For in the Land of Twi no person is complete or perfect without its other half, and it seems to take two of you to make one man--or one maid."

The sweet faces of the twin High Ki grew thoughtful at this speech, and they said:

"Indeed, it may be you are right. But it is our custom in Twi to do everything double and to live double." Then, turning to the Ki, they asked: "Why have you brought these strangers here?"

"To ask your Supreme Highnesses to permit them to return again to the world from whence they came," answered the Ki, both of them regarding their supreme rulers earnestly.

But here the Ki-Ki spoke up quickly in their mild voices, saying:

"That is not our idea, your Highnesses. We, the Ki-Ki of Twi, think it best the strangers should be put to death. And we pray your Supreme Highnesses to favor our wish."

The two little maids looked from the Ki to the Ki-Ki, and frowned and pouted their rosy lips in evident perplexity.

But Nerle whispered to Prince Marvel:

"It's all up with us! I know very well why her royal doublets always favors the Ki-Ki. It's because they are young and handsome, while the Ki are old and ugly. Both of her will condemn us to death--you see if she don't!"

This seemed somewhat mixed, but Nerle was in earnest, and Prince Marvel, who had not forgotten his fairy lore, began to weave a silent spell over the head of the nearest twin High Ki. But just as it was completed, and before he had time to work the spell on the other twin, the Ki-Ki grew impatient, and exclaimed:

"We beg your Highnesses not to keep us waiting. Let us have your decision at once!"

And the twin maidens raised their fair heads and replied. But the reply was of such a nature that both the old Ki and both the young Ki-Ki staggered backward in amazement. For one of the twin High Ki said:

"They shall die!"

And the other twin High Ki said at the same instant:

"They shall NOT die!"

Had twin thunderbolts fallen through the twin roofs of the twin palaces and struck the twin Ki and the twin Ki-Ki upon their twin heads it would have created no more stupendous a sensation than did this remark. Never before had any two halves of a twin of the Land of Twi thought differently or spoken differently. Indeed, it startled the two maidens themselves as much as it did their hearers, for each one turned her head toward the other and, for the first time in her life, looked into the other's face!

This act was fully as strange as their speech, and a sudden horrible thought came into the startled heads of the twin Ki and the twin Ki-Ki: THE HIGH KI OF TWI WAS NO LONGER ONE, BUT TWO. AND THESE TWO WERE THINKING AND ACTING EACH INDEPENDENT OF THE OTHER!

It is no wonder the shock rendered them speechless for a time, and they stood swaying their four bodies, with their eight eyes bulging out like those of fishes and their four mouths wide open, as if the two pairs had become one quartet.

The faces of the two maids flushed as they gazed upon each other.

"How DARE you contradict me?" asked one.

"How dare you contradict ME?" demanded the other, and not only were these questions asked separately, but the accent on the words was different. And their twin minds seemed to get farther apart every moment.

"I'm the High Ki of Twi!" said one.

"You're not! I'M the High Ki!" retorted the other.

"The strangers shall die!" snapped one.

"They shall live!" cried the other. "My will is supreme."

"It's not! MY will is supreme," returned the other twin.

The bald heads of the ancient Ki were bobbing in amazement, first to one maid and then toward the other. The blond hairs of the two Ki-Ki were standing almost on end, and their eyes stared straight before them as if stupefied with astonishment. Nerle was bellowing with rude laughter and holding his sides to keep from getting a stitch in them, while Prince Marvel stood quietly attentive and smiling with genuine amusement. For he alone understood what had happened to separate the twin High Ki.

The girls did not seem to know how to act under their altered conditions. After a time one of them said:

"We will leave our dispute to be settled by the Ki and the Ki-Ki."

"Very well," agreed the other.

"Then I say your half is right," declared the Ki-Ki, both their right forefingers pointing to the maiden who had condemned the strangers to death.

"And I decide that your half is right," exclaimed the Ki, both their trembling forefingers pointing to the maiden who had said the strangers should live.

"Well?" said one girl.

"Well?" said the other.

"The powers of the Ki and the Ki-Ki are equal," said the first. "We are no nearer a settlement of our dispute than we were before."

"My dear young ladies," said Prince Marvel, politely, "I beg you will take time to think the matter over, and see if you can not come to an agreement. We are in no hurry."

"Very well," decided the twins, speaking both together this time. "We command you all to remain in the palace until we have settled our own strange dispute. The servants will care for you, and when we are ready to announce our decision we shall again send for you."

Every one bowed at this command and retired from the room; but Nerle looked over his shoulder as he went through the doorway, and saw that the two High Ki had turned in their seats and were facing each other, and that both their faces wore angry and determined expressions.