

## **17. The Separation of the High Ki**

For nearly a week Prince Marvel and Nerle remained confined to the palace and gardens of the High Ki. Together with the twin Ki, who seemed to be friendly to them, they occupied one of the twin palaces, while the Ki-Ki secluded themselves in the other.

The pretty High Ki maidens they did not see at all, nor did they know what part of the palaces they occupied, not being permitted to wander away from the rooms allotted to them, except to walk in the garden. There was no way for them to escape, had they felt inclined to, for the silver steps had disappeared.

From the garden walks they sometimes caught sight of the solemn heads of the handsome Ki-Ki looking at them through the twin windows of the other palace, and although the expression of their faces was always mild and gentle, Nerle and Marvel well knew the Ki-Ki were only waiting in the hope of having them killed.

"Are you nervous about the decision of the pretty High Ki?" asked Nerle one day.

"No, indeed," said the prince, laughing; "for I do not expect them to kill me, in any event."

"If I felt as sure of my safety," returned the boy, "it would destroy all my pleasure. These are really happy days for me. Every moment I expect to see the executioner arrive with his ax."

"The executioner is double," said the two old Ki, breaking into the conversation. "You should say you expect to see the executioners arrive with their axes."

"Then how will they cut off my head with two axes? For I suppose they will both chop at the same time, and I have but one neck."

"Wait and see," answered the two Ki, sighing deeply and rubbing their red noses thoughtfully.

"Oh, I'll wait," answered the boy; "but as for seeing them cut off my head, I refuse; for I intend to shut my eyes."

So they sat in their rooms or walked in the gardens, yawning and waiting, until one day, just as the two clocks on the wall were striking twenty-four

o'clock, the door opened and to their surprise one of the High Ki twins walked in upon them.

She was as sweet and fair to look upon as when she occupied one of the beautiful thrones, but at first no one could tell which of the High Ki she was--their friend or their enemy. Even the Ki were puzzled and anxious, until the girl said:

"My other half and I have completely separated, for we have agreed to disagree for all time. And she has gone to ask the Ki-Ki to assist her, for war is declared between us. And hereafter her color is to be the green and mine the yellow, and we intend to fight until one of us conquers and overthrows the other."

This announcement was interesting to Marvel and Nerle, but greatly shocked the aged Ki, who asked:

"What is to become of our kingdom? Half of a High Ki can not rule it. It is against the law."

"I will make my own laws when I have won the fight," returned the girl, with a lovely smile; "so do not let that bother you. And now tell me, will you help me to fight my battles?"

"Willingly!" exclaimed Nerle and Prince Marvel, almost as if they had been twins of Twi. And the Ki rubbed their bald heads a moment, and then sneezed together and wiped their eyes on faded yellow handkerchiefs, and finally declared they would "stick to her Supreme Highness through thick and thin!"

"Then go over the wall to the cities, at once, and get together all the soldiers to fight for me and my cause," commanded the girl.

The twin Ki at once left the room, and the High Ki sat down and began to ask questions of Prince Marvel and Nerle about the big outside world from whence they came. Nerle was rather shy and bashful before the dainty little maiden, whose yellow robe contrasted delightfully with her pink cheeks and blue eyes and brown flowing locks; but Prince Marvel did not mind girls at all, so he talked with her freely, and she in return allowed him to examine the pretty gold crown she wore upon her brow.

By and by the Ki came back with both faces sad and gloomy.

"Your Highness," they announced, "we have bad news for you. The other High Ki, who is wearing a green gown, has been more prompt in action than yourself. She and the Ki-Ki have secured the silver steps and will allow no others to use them; and already they have sent for the soldiers of the royal armies to come and aid them. So we are unable to leave the garden, and presently the army will be here to destroy us."

Then the girl showed her good courage; for she laughed and said:

"Then we must remain here and fight to the last; and if I am unable to save you, who are my friends, it will be because I can not save myself."

This speech pleased Prince Marvel greatly. He kissed the little maid's hand respectfully and said:

"Fear nothing, your Highness. My friend and I are not so helpless as you think. We consider it our privilege to protect and save you, instead of your saving us; and we are really able to do this in spite of the other High Ki and her entire army."

So they remained quietly in the palace the rest of that day, and no one molested them in the least. In the evening the girl played and sang for them, and the ancient pair of Ki danced a double-shuffle for their amusement that nearly convulsed them with laughter. For one danced exactly like the other, and the old men's legs were still very nimble, although their wrinkled faces remained anxiously grave throughout their antics. Nerle also sang a song about the King of Thieves whom Prince Marvel had conquered, and another about the Red Rogue of Dawna, so that altogether the evening passed pleasantly enough, and they managed to forget all their uneasy doubts of the morrow.

When at last they separated for the night, Prince Marvel alone did not seek his bed; there was still some business he wished to transact. So he shut himself up in his room and summoned before him, by means of his fairy knowledge, the Prince of the Knooks, the King of the Ryls and the Governor of the Goblins. These were all three his especial friends, and he soon told them the story of the quarrel and separation of the twin High Ki, and claimed their assistance. Then he told them how they might aid him, and afterward dismissed them. Having thus accomplished his task, the fairy prince went to bed and slept peacefully the remainder of the night.

The next morning the blond Ki-Ki and all the army of Twi, which had been won to their cause, came climbing up the silver steps and over the wall to the palace of the green High Ki; but what was their amazement to find the twin palaces separated by a wall so high that no ladders nor steps they possessed could reach to the top! It had been built in a single night, and only Prince Marvel and his fairy friends knew how the work had been done so quickly.

The yellow High Ki, coming downstairs to breakfast with her friends, found herself securely shut in from her enemies, and the bald-headed old Ki were so pleased to escape that they danced another jig from pure joy.

Over the wall could be heard the shouts and threats of the army of Twi, who were seeking a way to get at the fugitives; but for the present our friends knew themselves to be perfectly safe, and they could afford to laugh at the fury of the entire population of Twi.