

18. The Rescue of the High Ki

After several days of siege Prince Marvel began to feel less confident of the safety of his little party. The frantic Ki-Ki had built double battering-rams and were trying to batter down the high wall; and they had built several pairs of long ladders with which to climb over the wall; and their soldiers were digging two tunnels in the ground in order to crawl under the wall.

Not at once could they succeed, for the wall was strong and it would take long to batter it down; and Nerle stood on top of the wall and kicked over the ladders as fast as the soldiers of Twi set them up; and the gray-bearded Ki stood in the garden holding two big flat boards with which to whack the heads of any who might come through the tunnels.

But Prince Marvel realized that the perseverance of his foes might win in the end, unless he took measures to defeat them effectually. So he summoned swift messengers from among the Sound Elves, who are accustomed to travel quickly, and they carried messages from him to Wul-Takim, the King of the Reformed Thieves, and to King Terribus of Spor, who had both promised him their assistance in case he needed it. The prince did not tell his friends of this action, but after the messengers had been dispatched he felt easier in his mind.

The little High Ki remained as sweet and brave and lovable as ever, striving constantly to cheer and encourage her little band of defenders. But none of them was very much worried, and Nerle confided to the maiden in yellow the fact that he expected to suffer quite agreeably when the Ki-Ki at last got him in their clutches.

Finally a day came when two big holes were battered through the wall, and then the twin soldiers of Twi poured through the holes and began to pound on the doors of the palace itself, in which Prince Marvel and Nerle, the Ki and the yellow High Ki had locked themselves as securely as possible.

The prince now decided it was high time for his friends to come to their rescue; but they did not appear, and before long the doors of the palace gave way and the soldiers rushed upon them in a vast throng.

Nerle wanted to fight, and to slay as many of the Twi people as possible; but the prince would not let him.

"These poor soldiers are but doing what they consider their duty," he said, "and it would be cruel to cut them down with our swords. Have patience, I pray you. Our triumph will come in good time."

The Ki-Ki, who came into the palace accompanied by the green High Ki, ordered the twin soldiers to bind all the prisoners with cords. So one pair of soldiers bound the Ki and another pair Nerle and the prince, using exactly the same motions in the operation. But when it came to binding the yellow High Ki the scene was very funny. For twin soldiers tried to do the binding, and there was only one to bind; so that one soldier went through the same motions as his twin on empty air, and when his other half had firmly bound the girl, his own rope fell harmless to the ground. But it seemed impossible for one of the twins to do anything different from the other, so that was the only way the act could be accomplished.

Then the green-robed High Ki walked up to the one in yellow and laughed in her face, saying:

"You now see which of us is the most powerful, and therefore the most worthy to rule. Had you remained faithful to our handsome Ki-Ki, as I did, you would not now be defeated and disgraced."

"There is no disgrace in losing one battle," returned the other girl, proudly. "You are mistaken if you think you have conquered me, and you are wrong to insult one who is, for the time being, your captive."

The maiden in green looked for an instant confused and ashamed; then she tossed her pretty head and walked away.

They led all the prisoners out into the garden and then through the broken wall, and up and down the silver steps, into the great square of the cities of Twi. And here all the population crowded around them, for this was the first time any of them had seen their High Ki, or even known that they were girls; and the news of their quarrel and separation had aroused a great deal of excitement.

"Let the executioners come forward!" cried the Ki-Ki, gleefully, and in answer to the command the twin executioners stepped up to the prisoners.

They were big men, these executioners, each having a squint in one eye and a scar on the left cheek. They polished their axes a moment on their coat-sleeves, and then said to Prince Marvel and Nerle, who were to be the first victims:

"Don't dodge, please, or our axes may not strike the right place. And do not be afraid, for the blows will only hurt you an instant. In the Land of Twi it is usually considered a pleasure to be executed by us, we are so exceedingly skillful."

"I can well believe that," replied Nerle, although his teeth were chattering.

But at this instant a loud shout was heard, and the twin people of Twi all turned their heads to find themselves surrounded by throngs of fierce enemies.

Prince Marvel smiled, for he saw among the new-comers the giants and dwarfs and the stern Gray Men of King Terribus, with their monarch calmly directing their movements; and on the other side of the circle were the jolly faces and bushy whiskers of the fifty-nine reformed thieves, with burly Wul-Takim at their head.