

20. Kwytoffle, the Tyrant

Having restored the High Ki to their former condition, to the great joy of the ancient Ki, Prince Marvel led his friends back to the palaces where his men were waiting.

They were just in time to prevent serious trouble, for the fifty-eight reformed thieves had been boasting of their prowess to the huge giants and tiny dwarfs of King Terribus, and this had resulted in a quarrel as to which were the best fighters. Had not their masters arrived at the right moment there would certainly have been a fierce battle and much bloodshed,--and all over something of no importance.

Terribus and Wul-Takim soon restored order, and then they accompanied the Ki and the Ki-Ki to the public square, where the people were informed that their Supreme Highnesses, the High Ki, had been reunited and would thereafter rule them with twin minds as well as twin bodies. There was great rejoicing at this news, for every twin in Twi was glad to have his troubles ended so easily and satisfactorily.

That night the ryls and knooks and other invisible friends of Prince Marvel came and removed the dividing wall between the twin palaces of the High Ki, repairing speedily all the damage that had been done. And when our friends called upon the High Ki the next morning they found the two maids again dressed exactly alike in yellow robes, with strings of sparkling emeralds for ornament. And not even Prince Marvel could now tell one of the High Ki from the other.

As for the maids themselves, it seemed difficult to imagine they had ever existed apart for a single moment.

They were very pleasant and agreeable to their new friends, and when they heard that Prince Marvel was about to leave them to seek new adventures they said:

"Please take us with you! It seems to us that we ought to know something of the big outside world from whence you came. If we see other kingdoms and people we shall be better able to rule our own wisely."

"That seems reasonable," answered Marvel, "and I shall be very glad to have you accompany me. But who will rule the Land of Twi in your absence?"

"The Ki-Ki shall be the rulers," answered the High Ki, "and we will take the Ki with us."

"Then I will delay my departure until to-morrow morning," said the prince, "in order that your Highnesses may have time to prepare for the journey."

And then he went back to the palaces of the other rulers, where the Ki expressed themselves greatly pleased at the idea of traveling, and the new Ki-Ki were proud to learn they should rule for some time the Land of Twi.

Wul-Takim also begged to join the party, and so also did King Terribus, who had never before been outside of his own Kingdom of Spor; so Prince Marvel willingly consented.

The fifty-eight reformed thieves, led by Gunder, returned to their cave, where they were living comfortably on the treasure Prince Marvel had given them; and the Gray Men and giants and dwarfs of Spor departed for their own country.

In the morning Prince Marvel led his own gay cavalcade through the hole in the hedge, and they rode merrily away in search of adventure.

By his side were the High Ki, mounted upon twin chestnut ponies that had remarkably slender limbs and graceful, arched necks. The ponies moved with exactly the same steps, and shook their manes and swished their tails at exactly the same time. Behind the prince and the High Ki were King Terribus, riding his great white charger, and Wul-Takim on a stout horse of jet-black color. The two ancient Ki and Nerle, being of lesser rank than the others, brought up the rear.

"When we return to our Land of Twi," said the High Ki, "we shall close up for all time the hole you made in the hedge; for, if we are different from the rest of the world, it is better that we remain in seclusion."

"I think it is right you should do that," replied Prince Marvel. "Yet I do not regret that I cut a hole in your hedge."

"It was the hedge that delayed us in coming more promptly to your assistance," said Terribus; "for we had hard work to find the hole you had made, and so lost much valuable time."

"All is well that ends well!" laughed the prince. "You certainly came in good time to rescue us from our difficulties."

They turned into a path that led to Auriel, which Nerle had heard spoken of as "the Kingdom of the Setting Sun."

Soon the landscape grew very pleasant to look upon, the meadows being broad and green, with groups of handsome trees standing about. The twilight of the Land of Twi was now replaced by bright sunshine, and in the air was the freshness of the near-by sea.

At evening they came to a large farmhouse, where the owner welcomed them hospitably and gave them the best his house afforded.

In answer to their questions about the Kingdom of Auriel, he shook his head sadly and replied:

"It is a rich and beautiful country, but has fallen under great misfortunes. For when the good king died, about two years ago, the kingdom was seized by a fierce and cruel sorcerer, named Kwytoffle, who rules the people with great severity, and makes them bring him all their money and valuable possessions. So every one is now very poor and unhappy, and that is a great pity in a country so fair and fertile."

"But why do not the people rebel?" asked Nerle.

"They dare not rebel," answered the farmer, "because they fear the sorcery of Kwytoffle. If they do not obey him he threatens to change them into grasshoppers and June-bugs."

"Has he ever changed any one into a grasshopper or a June-bug?" asked Prince Marvel.

"No; but the people are too frightened to oppose him, and so he does not get the opportunity. And he has an army of fierce soldiers, who are accustomed to beat the people terribly if they do not carry every bit of their wealth to the sorcerer. So there is no choice but to obey him."

"We certainly ought to hang this wicked creature!" exclaimed Wul-Takim.

"I wish I had brought my Fool-Killer with me," sighed King Terribus; "for I could have kept him quite busy in this kingdom."

"Can not something be done to rescue these poor people from their sad fate?" asked the lovely High Ki, anxiously.

"We will make a call upon this Kwytoffle to-morrow," answered Prince Marvel, "and see what the fellow is like."

"Alas! Alas!" wailed the good farmer, "you will all become grasshoppers and June-bugs--every one of you!"

But none of the party seemed to fear that, and having passed the night comfortably with the farmer they left his house and journeyed on into the Kingdom of Auriel.

Before noon they came upon the edge of a forest, where a poor man was chopping logs into firewood. Seeing Prince Marvel's party approach, this man ran toward them waving his hands and shouting excitedly:

"Take the other path! Take the other path!"

"And why should we take the other path?" inquired the prince, reining in his steed.

"Because this one leads to the castle of the great sorcerer, Kwytoffle," answered the man.

"But there is where we wish to go," said Marvel.

"What! You wish to go there?" cried the man. "Then you will be robbed and enslaved!"

"Not as long as we are able to fight," laughed the big Wul-Takim.

"If you resist the sorcerer, you will be turned into grasshoppers and June-bugs," declared the man, staring at them in wonder.

"How do you know that?" asked Marvel.

"Kwytoffle says so. He promises to enchant every one who dares defy his power."

"Has any one ever yet dared defy him?" asked Nerle.

"Certainly not!" said the man. "No one wishes to become a June-bug or a grasshopper. No one dares defy him."

"I am anxious to see this sorcerer," exclaimed King Terribus. "He ought to prove an interesting person, for he is able to accomplish his purposes by threats alone."

"Then let us ride on," said Marvel.

"Dear us! Dear us!" remonstrated the bald-headed Ki; "are we to become grasshoppers, then?"

"We shall see," returned the prince, briefly.

"With your long legs," added the pretty pair of High Ki, laughingly, "you ought to be able to jump farther than any other grasshopper in the kingdom."

"Great Kika-koo!" cried the Ki, nervously, "what a fate! what a terrible fate! And your Highnesses, I suppose, will become June-bugs, and flutter your wings with noises like buzz-saws!"