

24. The Enchanted Mirrors

Presently Prince Marvel and his party arrived and paused before the doors of the castle, where the Red Rogue stood bowing to them with mock politeness and with an evil grin showing on his red face.

"I come to demand the release of the Lady Seseley and her companions!" Prince Marvel announced, in a bold voice. "And I also intend to call you to account for the murder of Baron Merd."

"You must be at the wrong castle," answered the Red One, "for I have murdered no baron, nor have I any Lady Seseley as prisoner."

"Are you not the Red Rogue of Dawna?" demanded the prince.

"Men call me by that name," acknowledged the other.

"Then you are deceiving me," said the prince.

"No, indeed!" answered the Red Rogue, mockingly. "I wouldn't deceive any one for the world. But, if you don't believe me, you are welcome to search my castle."

"That I shall do," returned the prince, sternly, "whether I have your permission or not," and he began to dismount. But Nerle restrained him, saying:

"Master, I beg you will allow me to search the castle. For this Red Rogue is playing some trick upon us, I am sure, and if anything happened to you there would be no one to protect the little High Ki and our other friends."

"But suppose something should happen to you?" inquired the prince, anxiously.

"In that case," said Nerle, "you can avenge me."

The advice was so reasonable, under the circumstances, that the prince decided to act upon it.

"Very well," said he, "go and search the castle, and I will remain with our friends. But if anything happens to you, I shall call the Red Rogue to account."

So Nerle entered the castle, passing by the huge form of its owner, who only nodded to the boy and grinned with delight.

The esquire found himself in the great hall and began to look around him, but without seeing any one. Then he advanced a few steps and, to his surprise, discovered a large mirror, in which were reflected the faces and forms of three girls, as well as his own.

"Why, here they are!" he attempted to say; but he could not hear his own voice. He glanced down at himself but could see nothing at all--for his body had become invisible. His reflection was still in the glass, and he knew that his body existed the same as before; but although he yet saw plainly the hall and all that it contained, he could see neither himself nor any other person of flesh.

After waiting a considerable time for his esquire to reappear Prince Marvel became impatient.

"What have you done with Nerle?" he asked of the Red Rogue.

"Nothing," was the reply. "I have been here, plainly within your sight, every moment."

"Let me go and find him!" exclaimed King Terribus, and rushed into the castle before the prince could reply. But Terribus also encountered the enchanted mirror, and the prince waited in vain for his return.

Then Wul-Takim volunteered to go in search of the others, and drew his big, sharp sword before entering the hall. But an hour passed by and he did not return.

The Red Rogue was overjoyed at the success of his stratagem, and could scarce refrain from laughing outright at the prince's anxiety.

Marvel was really perplexed. He knew some treachery was afoot, but could not imagine what it was. And when the pretty High Ki declared their intention of entering the castle, he used every endeavor to dissuade them. But the twin girls would not be denied, so great was their curiosity. So the prince said:

"Well, we will all go together, so that the Ki and I may be able to protect you."

The Red Rogue gladly granted them admittance, and they passed him and entered the great hall.

The place appeared to them to be completely empty, so they walked along and came opposite the mirror. Here all stopped at once, and the twin High Ki uttered exclamations of surprise, and the twin Ki shouted, "Great Kika-koo!"

For there in the glass were the reflections of the three girls and Nerle and King Terribus and Wul-Takim. And there were also the reflections of the twin High Ki and the twin Ki. Only Prince Marvel's reflection was missing, and this was because of his fairy origin. For the glass could reflect and hold only the forms of mortals.

But the prince saw the reflections of all the others, and then made the discovery that the forms of the Ki and the High Ki had become invisible. No one except himself appeared to be standing in the great hall of the Red Rogue's castle! Yet grouped within the glass were the likenesses of all his friends, as well as those of Lady Seseley and her companions; and all were staring back at him earnestly, as if imploring him to save them.

The mystery was now explained, and Prince Marvel rushed from the hall to find the treacherous Red Rogue. But that clever trickster had hidden himself in an upper room, and for the present was safely concealed.

For a time Prince Marvel could not think what to do. Such magic was all unknown to him, and how to free the imprisoned forms of his friends was a real problem. He walked around the castle, but no one was in sight, the Rogue having given orders to all his people to keep away. Only the tethered horses did he see, and these raised their heads and whinnied as if in sympathy with his perplexity.

Then he went back into the hall and searched all the rooms of the castle without finding a single person. On his return he stopped in front of the mirror and sorrowfully regarded the faces of his friends, who again seemed to plead for relief.

And while he looked a sudden fit of anger came over him at being outwitted by this Red Rogue of Dawna. Scarcely knowing what he did, he seized his sword by the blade and struck the mirror a powerful blow with the heavy hilt. It shattered into a thousand fragments, which fell clattering upon the stone floor in every direction. And at once the charm was broken; each of his friends now became visible. They appeared running toward him from all parts of the castle, where they had been wandering in their invisible forms.

They called out joyful greetings to one another, and then all of them surrounded the prince and thanked him earnestly for releasing them.

The little Lady Seseley and her friends, Berna and Helda, were a bit shy in the presence of so many strangers; but they alone knew the prince's secret, and

that he was a fairy transformed for a year; so they regarded him as an old and intimate acquaintance, and after being introduced by him to the others of his party they became more at ease.

The sweet little High Ki maids at once attracted Seseley, and she loved them almost at first sight. But it was Nerle who became the little lady's staunchest friend; for there was something rather mystical and unnatural to him about the High Ki, who seemed almost like fairies, while in Seseley he recognized a hearty, substantial girl of his own rank in life.

While they stood talking and congratulating one another outside of the castle, the Red Rogue of Dawna appeared among them. He had heard the noise of the smashing of his great mirror, and had come running downstairs from his hiding-place to find his cunning had all been for naught and his captives were free.

A furious anger then took possession of the Rogue, and forgetting his personal weakness he caught up a huge battle-ax and rushed out to hurl himself upon Prince Marvel, intending to do him serious injury.

But the prince was not taken unawares. He saw the Red Rogue coming and met him with drawn sword, striking quickly at the arm that wielded the big ax. The stroke was as sure as it was quick, and piercing the arm of the giant caused him to drop the ax with a howl of pain.

Then Prince Marvel seized the Red Rogue by the ear--which he was just tall enough to reach--and dragged him up the steps and into the castle, the big fellow crying for mercy at every step and trembling like a leaf through cowardice.

But down the hall Marvel marched him, seeking some room where the Rogue might be safely locked in. The great curtain that covered the second enchanted mirror now caught Prince Marvel's eye, and, still holding his prisoner by the ear, he reached out his left hand and pulled aside the drapery.

The Red Rogue looked to see what his captor was doing, and beheld his own reflection in the magic mirror. Instantly he gave a wild cry and disappeared, his body becoming absolutely invisible, while his coarse red countenance stared back from the mirror.

And then Prince Marvel gave a sigh of relief and dropped the curtain over the surface of the mirror. For he realized that the Red Rogue of Dawna had at last met with just punishment and was safely imprisoned for all time.