

25. The Adventurers Separate

When Prince Marvel and his friends had ridden away from the castle the savage followers of the Red One came creeping up to listen for their master's voice. But silence reigned in every part of the castle, and after stealing fearfully through the rooms without seeing any one the fellows became filled with terror and fled from the place, never to return.

And afterward the neighbors whispered that the castle was haunted by the spirit of the terrible Red Rogue, and travelers dared not stop in the neighborhood, but passed by quickly and with averted faces.

The prince and his party rode gaily along toward the Kingdom of Heg, for Nerle had invited them all to visit his father's castle. They were very happy over their escape, and only the little Lady Seseley became sad at times, when she thought of her father's sad fate.

The Baron Neggar, who was Nerle's father, was not only a wealthy nobleman, but exceedingly kind and courteous; so that every member of Prince Marvel's party was welcomed to the big castle in a very hospitable manner.

Nerle was eagerly embraced by both his father and mother, who were overjoyed to see him return safe and sound after his wanderings and adventures.

"And have you been cured of your longing for something that you can not have?" asked the baron, anxiously.

"Not quite," said Nerle, laughing; "but I am more reconciled to my lot. For I find wherever I go people are longing for just the things they can not get, and probably would not want if they had them. So, as it seems to be the fate of most mortals to live unsatisfied, I shall try hereafter to be more contented."

These words delighted the good baron, and he gave a rich and magnificent feast in honor of his son's return.

The High Ki of Twi, after passing several pleasant days at Nerle's home, now decided that they had seen enough of the world and would be glad to return to their own kingdom, where all was peaceful and uneventful, and rule it to the end of their days. So the baron furnished them an escort of twenty men-at-

arms, and these conducted the High Ki and the aged Ki safely back to the hole in the hedge.

And after they had entered the Land of Twi, the first act of the High Ki was to order the hedge repaired and the hole blocked up; and I have never heard that any one, from that time forth, ever succeeded in gaining admittance to the hidden kingdom. So its subsequent history is unknown.

King Terribus also bade the prince an affectionate farewell and rode back to his own kingdom; and burly Wul-Takim accompanied him as far as the cave, where the fifty-eight reformed thieves awaited him.

Nerle's mother gladly adopted the Lady Seseley and her two companions, and thereafter they made their home at the baron's castle. And years afterward, when they had grown to be women, Seseley was married to Nerle and became the lady of the castle herself.

Prince Marvel enjoyed the feasting and dancing at the castle very much, but after the party began to break up, and the High Ki and the Ki had left him, as well as King Terribus and honest Wul-Takim, the young knight grew thoughtful and sometimes uneasy, and his happy laugh was less frequently heard. Nerle often regarded his young master with a feeling of awe, for there occasionally came a look into Marvel's eyes that reminded him more of the immortals than of any human being. But the prince treated him with rare kindness and always pressed Nerle's hand affectionately when he bade him good night, for he had grown fond of his esquire. Also they had long conversations together, during which Nerle gleaned a great deal of knowledge and received some advice that was of much use to him in his later life.

One day Prince Marvel sought out Lady Seseley and said:

"Will you ride with me to the Forest of Lurla?"

"Willingly," she answered; and calling Berna and Helda to attend them, they mounted their horses and rode swiftly away, for it was a long distance to Lurla.

By noon the party entered the forest, and although the path they traversed was unknown to the girls, who had usually entered the forest from its other side, near to where the Baron Merd's castle had stood, the prince seemed to have no difficulty in finding his way.

He guided them carefully along the paths, his handsome war-charger stepping with much grace and dignity, until at length they came to a clearing.

Here the prince paused abruptly, and Seseley looked around her and at once recognized the place.

"Why," she exclaimed, in surprise, "it is the Fairy Bower!"

And then she turned to Prince Marvel and asked in a soft voice:

"Is the year ended, Prince?"

His smile was a bit sad as he answered, slowly:

"The year will be ended in five minutes!"