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THE LEGEND OF THE LOST PRINCE

As he walked through the streets, he was thinking of one of these stories. It was one he had heard first when he was very young, and it had so seized upon his imagination that he had asked often for it. It was, indeed, a part of the long-past history of Samavia, and he had loved it for that reason. Lazarus had often told it to him, sometimes adding much detail, but he had always liked best his father's version, which seemed a thrilling and living thing. On their journey from Russia, during an hour when they had been forced to wait in a cold wayside station and had found the time long, Loristan had discussed it with him. He always found some such way of making hard and comfortless hours easier to live through.

"Fine, big lad--for a foreigner," Marco heard a man say to his companion as he passed them this morning. "Looks like a Pole or a Russian."

It was this which had led his thoughts back to the story of the Lost Prince. He knew that most of the people who looked at him and called him a "foreigner" had not even heard of Samavia. Those who chanced to recall its existence knew of it only as a small fierce country, so placed upon the map that the larger countries which were its neighbors felt they must control and keep it in order, and therefore made incursions into

it, and fought its people and each other for possession. But it had not been always so. It was an old, old country, and hundreds of years ago it had been as celebrated for its peaceful happiness and wealth as for its beauty. It was often said that it was one of the most beautiful places in the world. A favorite Samavian legend was that it had been the site of the Garden of Eden. In those past centuries, its people had been of such great stature, physical beauty, and strength, that they had been like a race of noble giants. They were in those days a pastoral people, whose rich crops and splendid flocks and herds were the envy of less fertile countries. Among the shepherds and herdsmen there were poets who sang their own songs when they piped among their sheep upon the mountain

sides and in the flower-thick valleys. Their songs had been about patriotism and bravery, and faithfulness to their chieftains and their country. The simple courtesy of the poorest peasant was as stately as the manner of a noble. But that, as Loristan had said with a tired smile, had been before they had had time to outlive and forget the Garden of Eden. Five hundred years ago, there had succeeded to the throne a king who was bad and weak. His father had lived to be ninety years old, and his son had grown tired of waiting in Samavia for his crown. He had gone out into the world, and visited other countries and their courts. When he returned and became king, he lived as no Samavian king had lived before. He was an extravagant, vicious man of furious temper and bitter jealousies. He was jealous of the larger courts and countries he had seen, and tried to introduce their customs and their ambitions. He ended by introducing their worst faults and vices. There

arose political quarrels and savage new factions. Money was squandered until poverty began for the first time to stare the country in the face. The big Samavians, after their first stupefaction, broke forth into furious rage. There were mobs and riots, then bloody battles. Since it was the king who had worked this wrong, they would have none of him. They would depose him and make his son king in his place. It was at this part of the story that Marco was always most deeply interested. The young prince was totally unlike his father. He was a true royal Samavian. He was bigger and stronger for his age than any man in the country, and he was as handsome as a young Viking god. More than this, he had a lion's heart, and before he was sixteen, the shepherds and herdsmen had already begun to make songs about his young valor, and his kingly courtesy, and generous kindness. Not only the shepherds and herdsmen sang them, but the people in the streets. The king, his father, had always been jealous of him, even when he was only a beautiful, stately child whom the people roared with joy to see as he rode through the streets. When he returned from his journeyings and found him a splendid youth, he detested him. When the people began to clamor and demand that he himself should abdicate, he became insane with rage, and committed such cruelties that the people ran mad themselves. One day they stormed the palace, killed and overpowered the guards, and, rushing into the royal apartments, burst in upon the king as he shuddered green with terror and fury in his private room. He was king no more, and must leave the country, they vowed, as they closed round him with bared weapons and shook them in his face. Where was the prince? They must see him and tell him their ultimatum. It was he whom they wanted for a king.

They trusted him and would obey him. They began to shout aloud his name, calling him in a sort of chant in unison, "Prince Ivor--Prince Ivor--Prince Ivor!" But no answer came. The people of the palace had hidden themselves, and the place was utterly silent.

The king, despite his terror, could not help but sneer.

"Call him again," he said. "He is afraid to come out of his hole!"

A savage fellow from the mountain fastnesses struck him on the mouth.

"He afraid!" he shouted. "If he does not come, it is because thou hast killed him--and thou art a dead man!"

This set them aflame with hotter burning. They broke away, leaving three on guard, and ran about the empty palace rooms shouting the prince's name. But there was no answer. They sought him in a frenzy, bursting open doors and flinging down every obstacle in their way. A page, found hidden in a closet, owned that he had seen His Royal Highness pass through a corridor early in the morning. He had been softly singing to himself one of the shepherd's songs.

And in this strange way out of the history of Samavia, five hundred years before Marco's day, the young prince had walked--singing softly to himself the old song of Samavia's beauty and happiness. For he was never seen again.

In every nook and cranny, high and low, they sought for him, believing that the king himself had made him prisoner in some secret place, or had privately had him killed. The fury of the people grew to frenzy. There were new risings, and every few days the palace was attacked and searched again. But no trace of the prince was found. He had vanished as a star vanishes when it drops from its place in the sky. During a riot in the palace, when a last fruitless search was made, the king himself was killed. A powerful noble who headed one of the uprisings made himself king in his place. From that time, the once splendid little kingdom was like a bone fought for by dogs. Its pastoral peace was forgotten. It was torn and worried and shaken by stronger countries. It tore and worried itself with internal fights. It assassinated kings and created new ones. No man was sure in his youth what ruler his maturity would live under, or whether his children would die in useless fights, or through stress of poverty and cruel, useless laws. There were no more shepherds and herdsmen who were poets, but on the mountain sides and in the valleys sometimes some of the old songs were sung. Those most beloved were songs about a Lost Prince whose name had been Ivor. If he had been king, he would have saved Samavia, the verses said, and all brave hearts believed that he would still return. In the modern cities, one of the jocular cynical sayings was, "Yes, that will happen when Prince Ivor comes again."

In his more childish days, Marco had been bitterly troubled by the

unsolved mystery. Where had he gone--the Lost Prince? Had he been killed, or had he been hidden away in a dungeon? But he was so big and brave, he would have broken out of any dungeon. The boy had invented for himself a dozen endings to the story.

"Did no one ever find his sword or his cap--or hear anything or guess anything about him ever--ever--ever?" he would say restlessly again and again.

One winter's night, as they sat together before a small fire in a cold room in a cold city in Austria, he had been so eager and asked so many searching questions, that his father gave him an answer he had never given him before, and which was a sort of ending to the story, though not a satisfying one:

"Everybody guessed as you are guessing. A few very old shepherds in the mountains who like to believe ancient histories relate a story which most people consider a kind of legend. It is that almost a hundred years after the prince was lost, an old shepherd told a story his long-dead father had confided to him in secret just before he died. The father had said that, going out in the early morning on the mountain side, he had found in the forest what he at first thought to be the dead body of a beautiful, boyish, young huntsman. Some enemy had plainly attacked him from behind and believed he had killed him. He was, however, not quite dead, and the shepherd dragged him into a cave where he himself often took refuge from storms with his flocks. Since there was such riot and

disorder in the city, he was afraid to speak of what he had found; and, by the time he discovered that he was harboring the prince, the king had already been killed, and an even worse man had taken possession of his throne, and ruled Samavia with a blood-stained, iron hand. To the terrified and simple peasant the safest thing seemed to get the wounded youth out of the country before there was any chance of his being discovered and murdered outright, as he would surely be. The cave in which he was hidden was not far from the frontier, and while he was still so weak that he was hardly conscious of what befell him, he was smuggled across it in a cart loaded with sheepskins, and left with some kind monks who did not know his rank or name. The shepherd went back to his flocks and his mountains, and lived and died among them, always in terror of the changing rulers and their savage battles with each other. The mountaineers said among themselves, as the generations succeeded each other, that the Lost Prince must have died young, because otherwise he would have come back to his country and tried to restore its good, bygone days."

"Yes, he would have come," Marco said.

"He would have come if he had seen that he could help his people," Loristan answered, as if he were not reflecting on a story which was probably only a kind of legend. "But he was very young, and Samavia was in the hands of the new dynasty, and filled with his enemies. He could not have crossed the frontier without an army. Still, I think he died young."

It was of this story that Marco was thinking as he walked, and perhaps the thoughts that filled his mind expressed themselves in his face in some way which attracted attention. As he was nearing Buckingham Palace, a distinguished-looking well-dressed man with clever eyes caught sight of him, and, after looking at him keenly, slackened his pace as he approached him from the opposite direction. An observer might have thought he saw something which puzzled and surprised him. Marco didn't see him at all, and still moved forward, thinking of the shepherds and the prince. The well-dressed man began to walk still more slowly. When he was quite close to Marco, he stopped and spoke to him--in the Samavian language.

"What is your name?" he asked.

Marco's training from his earliest childhood had been an extraordinary thing. His love for his father had made it simple and natural to him, and he had never questioned the reason for it. As he had been taught to keep silence, he had been taught to control the expression of his face and the sound of his voice, and, above all, never to allow himself to look startled. But for this he might have started at the extraordinary sound of the Samavian words suddenly uttered in a London street by an English gentleman. He might even have answered the question in Samavian himself. But he did not. He courteously lifted his cap and replied in English:

"Excuse me?"

The gentleman's clever eyes scrutinized him keenly. Then he also spoke in English.

"Perhaps you do not understand? I asked your name because you are very like a Samavian I know," he said.

"I am Marco Loristan," the boy answered him.

The man looked straight into his eyes and smiled.

"That is not the name," he said. "I beg your pardon, my boy."

He was about to go on, and had indeed taken a couple of steps away, when he paused and turned to him again.

"You may tell your father that you are a very well-trained lad. I wanted to find out for myself." And he went on.

Marco felt that his heart beat a little quickly. This was one of several incidents which had happened during the last three years, and made him feel that he was living among things so mysterious that their very mystery hinted at danger. But he himself had never before seemed involved in them. Why should it matter that he was well-behaved? Then he remembered something. The man had not said "well-behaved," he had said

"well-trained." Well-trained in what way? He felt his forehead prickle slightly as he thought of the smiling, keen look which set itself so straight upon him. Had he spoken to him in Samavian for an experiment, to see if he would be startled into forgetting that he had been trained to seem to know only the language of the country he was temporarily living in? But he had not forgotten. He had remembered well, and was thankful that he had betrayed nothing. "Even exiles may be Samavian soldiers. I am one. You must be one," his father had said on that day long ago when he had made him take his oath. Perhaps remembering his training was being a soldier. Never had Samavia needed help as she needed it to-day. Two years before, a rival claimant to the throne had assassinated the then reigning king and his sons, and since then, bloody war and tumult had raged. The new king was a powerful man, and had a great following of the worst and most self-seeking of the people. Neighboring countries had interfered for their own welfare's sake, and the newspapers had been full of stories of savage fighting and atrocities, and of starving peasants.

Marco had late one evening entered their lodgings to find Loristan walking to and fro like a lion in a cage, a paper crushed and torn in his hands, and his eyes blazing. He had been reading of cruelties wrought upon innocent peasants and women and children. Lazarus was standing staring at him with huge tears running down his cheeks. When Marco opened the door, the old soldier strode over to him, turned him about, and led him out of the room.

"Pardon, sir, pardon!" he sobbed. "No one must see him, not even you. He suffers so horribly."

He stood by a chair in Marco's own small bedroom, where he half pushed, half led him. He bent his grizzled head, and wept like a beaten child.

"Dear God of those who are in pain, assuredly it is now the time to give back to us our Lost Prince!" he said, and Marco knew the words were a prayer, and wondered at the frenzied intensity of it, because it seemed so wild a thing to pray for the return of a youth who had died five hundred years before.

When he reached the palace, he was still thinking of the man who had spoken to him. He was thinking of him even as he looked at the majestic gray stone building and counted the number of its stories and windows. He walked round it that he might make a note in his memory of its size and form and its entrances, and guess at the size of its gardens. This he did because it was part of his game, and part of his strange training.

When he came back to the front, he saw that in the great entrance court within the high iron railings an elegant but quiet-looking closed carriage was drawing up before the doorway. Marco stood and watched with interest to see who would come out and enter it. He knew that kings and emperors who were not on parade looked merely like well-dressed private gentlemen, and often chose to go out as simply and quietly as other men.

So he thought that, perhaps, if he waited, he might see one of those well-known faces which represent the highest rank and power in a monarchical country, and which in times gone by had also represented the power over human life and death and liberty.

"I should like to be able to tell my father that I have seen the King and know his face, as I know the faces of the czar and the two emperors."

There was a little movement among the tall men-servants in the royal scarlet liveries, and an elderly man descended the steps attended by another who walked behind him. He entered the carriage, the other man followed him, the door was closed, and the carriage drove through the entrance gates, where the sentries saluted.

Marco was near enough to see distinctly. The two men were talking as if interested. The face of the one farthest from him was the face he had often seen in shop-windows and newspapers. The boy made his quick, formal salute. It was the King; and, as he smiled and acknowledged his greeting, he spoke to his companion.

"That fine lad salutes as if he belonged to the army," was what he said, though Marco could not hear him.

His companion leaned forward to look through the window. When he caught sight of Marco, a singular expression crossed his face.

"He does belong to an army, sir," he answered, "though he does not know it. His name is Marco Loristan."

Then Marco saw him plainly for the first time. He was the man with the keen eyes who had spoken to him in Samavian.