

IV

THE RAT

Marco would have wondered very much if he had heard the words, but, as he did not hear them, he turned toward home wondering at something else. A man who was in intimate attendance on a king must be a person of importance. He no doubt knew many things not only of his own ruler's country, but of the countries of other kings. But so few had really known anything of poor little Samavia until the newspapers had begun to tell them of the horrors of its war--and who but a Samavian could speak its language? It would be an interesting thing to tell his father--that a man who knew the King had spoken to him in Samavian, and had sent that curious message.

Later he found himself passing a side street and looked up it. It was so narrow, and on either side of it were such old, tall, and sloping-walled houses that it attracted his attention. It looked as if a bit of old London had been left to stand while newer places grew up and hid it from view. This was the kind of street he liked to pass through for curiosity's sake. He knew many of them in the old quarters of many cities. He had lived in some of them. He could find his way home from the other end of it. Another thing than its queerness attracted him. He heard a clamor of boys' voices, and he wanted to see what they were

doing. Sometimes, when he had reached a new place and had had that lonely feeling, he had followed some boyish clamor of play or wrangling, and had found a temporary friend or so.

Half-way to the street's end there was an arched brick passage. The sound of the voices came from there--one of them high, and thinner and shriller than the rest. Marco tramped up to the arch and looked down through the passage. It opened on to a gray flagged space, shut in by the railings of a black, deserted, and ancient graveyard behind a venerable church which turned its face toward some other street. The boys were not playing, but listening to one of their number who was reading to them from a newspaper.

Marco walked down the passage and listened also, standing in the dark arched outlet at its end and watching the boy who read. He was a strange little creature with a big forehead, and deep eyes which were curiously sharp. But this was not all. He had a hunch back, his legs seemed small and crooked. He sat with them crossed before him on a rough wooden platform set on low wheels, on which he evidently pushed himself about. Near him were a number of sticks stacked together as if they were rifles. One of the first things that Marco noticed was that he had a savage little face marked with lines as if he had been angry all his life.

"Hold your tongues, you fools!" he shrilled out to some boys who interrupted him. "Don't you want to know anything, you ignorant swine?"

He was as ill-dressed as the rest of them, but he did not speak in the Cockney dialect. If he was of the riffraff of the streets, as his companions were, he was somehow different.

Then he, by chance, saw Marco, who was standing in the arched end of the passage.

"What are you doing there listening?" he shouted, and at once stooped to pick up a stone and threw it at him. The stone hit Marco's shoulder, but it did not hurt him much. What he did not like was that another lad should want to throw something at him before they had even exchanged boy-signs. He also did not like the fact that two other boys promptly took the matter up by bending down to pick up stones also.

He walked forward straight into the group and stopped close to the hunchback.

"What did you do that for?" he asked, in his rather deep young voice.

He was big and strong-looking enough to suggest that he was not a boy it would be easy to dispose of, but it was not that which made the group stand still a moment to stare at him. It was something in himself--half of it a kind of impartial lack of anything like irritation at the stone-throwing. It was as if it had not mattered to him in the least. It had not made him feel angry or insulted. He was only rather curious

about it. Because he was clean, and his hair and his shabby clothes were brushed, the first impression given by his appearance as he stood in the archway was that he was a young "toff" poking his nose where it was not wanted; but, as he drew near, they saw that the well-brushed clothes were worn, and there were patches on his shoes.

"What did you do that for?" he asked, and he asked it merely as if he wanted to find out the reason.

"I'm not going to have you swells dropping in to my club as if it was your own," said the hunchback.

"I'm not a swell, and I didn't know it was a club," Marco answered. "I heard boys, and I thought I'd come and look. When I heard you reading about Samavia, I wanted to hear."

He looked at the reader with his silent-expressed eyes.

"You needn't have thrown a stone," he added. "They don't do it at men's clubs. I'll go away."

He turned about as if he were going, but, before he had taken three steps, the hunchback hailed him unceremoniously.

"Hi!" he called out. "Hi, you!"

"What do you want?" said Marco.

"I bet you don't know where Samavia is, or what they're fighting about."

The hunchback threw the words at him.

"Yes, I do. It's north of Beltrazo and east of Jiardasia, and they are fighting because one party has assassinated King Maran, and the other will not let them crown Nicola Iarovitch. And why should they? He's a brigand, and hasn't a drop of royal blood in him."

"Oh!" reluctantly admitted the hunchback. "You do know that much, do you? Come back here."

Marco turned back, while the boys still stared. It was as if two leaders or generals were meeting for the first time, and the rabble, looking on, wondered what would come of their encounter.

"The Samavians of the Iarovitch party are a bad lot and want only bad things," said Marco, speaking first. "They care nothing for Samavia. They only care for money and the power to make laws which will serve them and crush everybody else. They know Nicola is a weak man, and that, if they can crown him king, they can make him do what they like."

The fact that he spoke first, and that, though he spoke in a steady boyish voice without swagger, he somehow seemed to take it for granted that they would listen, made his place for him at once. Boys are

impressionable creatures, and they know a leader when they see him. The hunchback fixed glittering eyes on him. The rabble began to murmur.

"Rat! Rat!" several voices cried at once in good strong Cockney. "Arst 'im some more, Rat!"

"Is that what they call you?" Marco asked the hunchback.

"It's what I called myself," he answered resentfully. "'The Rat.' Look at me! Crawling round on the ground like this! Look at me!"

He made a gesture ordering his followers to move aside, and began to push himself rapidly, with queer darts this side and that round the inclosure. He bent his head and body, and twisted his face, and made strange animal-like movements. He even uttered sharp squeaks as he rushed here and there--as a rat might have done when it was being hunted. He did it as if he were displaying an accomplishment, and his followers' laughter was applause.

"Wasn't I like a rat?" he demanded, when he suddenly stopped.

"You made yourself like one on purpose," Marco answered. "You do it for fun."

"Not so much fun," said The Rat. "I feel like one. Every one's my enemy. I'm vermin. I can't fight or defend myself unless I bite. I can bite,

though." And he showed two rows of fierce, strong, white teeth, sharper at the points than human teeth usually are. "I bite my father when he gets drunk and beats me. I've bitten him till he's learned to remember." He laughed a shrill, squeaking laugh. "He hasn't tried it for three months--even when he was drunk--and he's always drunk." Then he laughed again still more shrilly. "He's a gentleman," he said. "I'm a gentleman's son. He was a Master at a big school until he was kicked out--that was when I was four and my mother died. I'm thirteen now. How old are you?"

"I'm twelve," answered Marco.

The Rat twisted his face enviously.

"I wish I was your size! Are you a gentleman's son? You look as if you were."

"I'm a very poor man's son," was Marco's answer. "My father is a writer."

"Then, ten to one, he's a sort of gentleman," said The Rat. Then quite suddenly he threw another question at him. "What's the name of the other Samavian party?"

"The Maranovitch. The Maranovitch and the Iarovitch have been fighting

with each other for five hundred years. First one dynasty rules, and then the other gets in when it has killed somebody as it killed King Maran," Marco answered without hesitation.

"What was the name of the dynasty that ruled before they began fighting? The first Maranovitch assassinated the last of them," The Rat asked him.

"The Fedorovitch," said Marco. "The last one was a bad king."

"His son was the one they never found again," said The Rat. "The one they call the Lost Prince."

Marco would have started but for his long training in exterior self-control. It was so strange to hear his dream-hero spoken of in this back alley in a slum, and just after he had been thinking of him.

"What do you know about him?" he asked, and, as he did so, he saw the group of vagabond lads draw nearer.

"Not much. I only read something about him in a torn magazine I found in the street," The Rat answered. "The man that wrote about him said he was only part of a legend, and he laughed at people for believing in him. He said it was about time that he should turn up again if he intended to. I've invented things about him because these chaps like to hear me tell them. They're only stories."

"We likes 'im," a voice called out, "becos 'e wos the right sort; 'e'd fight, 'e would, if 'e was in Samavia now."

Marco rapidly asked himself how much he might say. He decided and spoke to them all.

"He is not part of a legend. He's part of Samavian history," he said.

"I know something about him too."

"How did you find it out?" asked The Rat.

"Because my father's a writer, he's obliged to have books and papers, and he knows things. I like to read, and I go into the free libraries. You can always get books and papers there. Then I ask my father questions. All the newspapers are full of things about Samavia just now." Marco felt that this was an explanation which betrayed nothing. It was true that no one could open a newspaper at this period without seeing news and stories of Samavia.

The Rat saw possible vistas of information opening up before him.

"Sit down here," he said, "and tell us what you know about him. Sit down, you fellows."

There was nothing to sit on but the broken flagged pavement, but that was a small matter. Marco himself had sat on flags or bare ground often

enough before, and so had the rest of the lads. He took his place near The Rat, and the others made a semicircle in front of them. The two leaders had joined forces, so to speak, and the followers fell into line at "attention."

Then the new-comer began to talk. It was a good story, that of the Lost Prince, and Marco told it in a way which gave it reality. How could he help it? He knew, as they could not, that it was real. He who had pored over maps of little Samavia since his seventh year, who had studied them with his father, knew it as a country he could have found his way to any part of if he had been dropped in any forest or any mountain of it. He knew every highway and byway, and in the capital city of Melzarr could almost have made his way blindfolded. He knew the palaces and the forts, the churches, the poor streets and the rich ones. His father had once shown him a plan of the royal palace which they had studied together until the boy knew each apartment and corridor in it by heart. But this he did not speak of. He knew it was one of the things to be silent about. But of the mountains and the emerald velvet meadows climbing their sides and only ending where huge bare crags and peaks began, he could speak. He could make pictures of the wide fertile plains where herds of wild horses fed, or raced and sniffed the air; he could describe the fertile valleys where clear rivers ran and flocks of sheep pastured on deep sweet grass. He could speak of them because he could offer a good enough reason for his knowledge of them. It was not the only reason he had for his knowledge, but it was one which would serve well enough.

"That torn magazine you found had more than one article about Samavia in it," he said to The Rat. "The same man wrote four. I read them all in a free library. He had been to Samavia, and knew a great deal about it. He said it was one of the most beautiful countries he had ever traveled in--and the most fertile. That's what they all say of it."

The group before him knew nothing of fertility or open country. They only knew London back streets and courts. Most of them had never traveled as far as the public parks, and in fact scarcely believed in their existence. They were a rough lot, and as they had stared at Marco at first sight of him, so they continued to stare at him as he talked. When he told of the tall Samavians who had been like giants centuries ago, and who had hunted the wild horses and captured and trained them to obedience by a sort of strong and gentle magic, their mouths fell open. This was the sort of thing to allure any boy's imagination.

"Blimme, if I wouldn't 'ave liked ketchin' one o' them 'orses," broke in one of the audience, and his exclamation was followed by a dozen of like nature from the others. Who wouldn't have liked "ketchin' one"?

When he told of the deep endless-seeming forests, and of the herdsmen and shepherds who played on their pipes and made songs about high deeds and bravery, they grinned with pleasure without knowing they were grinning. They did not really know that in this neglected, broken-flagged inclosure, shut in on one side by smoke-blackened,

poverty-stricken houses, and on the other by a deserted and forgotten sunken graveyard, they heard the rustle of green forest boughs where birds nested close, the swish of the summer wind in the river reeds, and the tinkle and laughter and rush of brooks running.

They heard more or less of it all through the Lost Prince story, because Prince Ivor had loved lowland woods and mountain forests and all out-of-door life. When Marco pictured him tall and strong-limbed and young, winning all the people when he rode smiling among them, the boys grinned again with unconscious pleasure.

"Wisht 'e 'adn't got lost!" some one cried out.

When they heard of the unrest and dissatisfaction of the Samavians, they began to get restless themselves. When Marco reached the part of the story in which the mob rushed into the palace and demanded their prince from the king, they ejaculated scraps of bad language. "The old geezer had got him hidden somewhere in some dungeon, or he'd killed him out an' out--that's what he'd been up to!" they clamored. "Wisht the lot of us had been there then--wisht we 'ad. We'd 'ave give' 'im wot for, anyway!"

"An' 'im walkin' out o' the place so early in the mornin' just singin' like that! 'E 'ad 'im follered an' done for!" they decided with various exclamations of boyish wrath. Somehow, the fact that the handsome royal lad had strolled into the morning sunshine singing made them more savage. Their language was extremely bad at this point.

But if it was bad here, it became worse when the old shepherd found the young huntsman's half-dead body in the forest. He had "bin 'done for' in the back! 'E'd bin give' no charnst. G-r-r-r!" they groaned in chorus. "Wisht" they'd "bin there when 'e'd bin 'it!" They'd "'ave done fur somebody" themselves. It was a story which had a queer effect on them. It made them think they saw things; it fired their blood; it set them wanting to fight for ideals they knew nothing about--adventurous things, for instance, and high and noble young princes who were full of the possibility of great and good deeds. Sitting upon the broken flagstones of the bit of ground behind the deserted graveyard, they were suddenly dragged into the world of romance, and noble young princes and great and good deeds became as real as the sunken gravestones, and far more interesting.

And then the smuggling across the frontier of the unconscious prince in the bullock cart loaded with sheepskins! They held their breaths. Would the old shepherd get him past the line! Marco, who was lost in the recital himself, told it as if he had been present. He felt as if he had, and as this was the first time he had ever told it to thrilled listeners, his imagination got him in its grip, and his heart jumped in his breast as he was sure the old man's must have done when the guard stopped his cart and asked him what he was carrying out of the country. He knew he must have had to call up all his strength to force his voice into steadiness.

And then the good monks! He had to stop to explain what a monk was, and when he described the solitude of the ancient monastery, and its walled gardens full of flowers and old simples to be used for healing, and the wise monks walking in the silence and the sun, the boys stared a little helplessly, but still as if they were vaguely pleased by the picture.

And then there was no more to tell--no more. There it broke off, and something like a low howl of dismay broke from the semicircle.

"Aw!" they protested, "it 'adn't ought to stop there! Ain't there no more? Is that all there is?"

"It's all that was ever known really. And that last part might only be a sort of story made up by somebody. But I believe it myself."

The Rat had listened with burning eyes. He had sat biting his finger-nails, as was a trick of his when he was excited or angry.

"Tell you what!" he exclaimed suddenly. "This was what happened. It was some of the Maranovitch fellows that tried to kill him. They meant to kill his father and make their own man king, and they knew the people wouldn't stand it if young Ivor was alive. They just stabbed him in the back, the fiends! I dare say they heard the old shepherd coming, and left him for dead and ran."

"Right, oh! That was it!" the lads agreed. "Yer right there, Rat!"

"When he got well," The Rat went on feverishly, still biting his nails, "he couldn't go back. He was only a boy. The other fellow had been crowned, and his followers felt strong because they'd just conquered the country. He could have done nothing without an army, and he was too young to raise one. Perhaps he thought he'd wait till he was old enough to know what to do. I dare say he went away and had to work for his living as if he'd never been a prince at all. Then perhaps sometime he married somebody and had a son, and told him as a secret who he was and all about Samavia." The Rat began to look vengeful. "If I'd bin him I'd have told him not to forget what the Maranovitch had done to me. I'd have told him that if I couldn't get back the throne, he must see what he could do when he grew to be a man. And I'd have made him swear, if he got it back, to take it out of them or their children or their children's children in torture and killing. I'd have made him swear not to leave a Maranovitch alive. And I'd have told him that, if he couldn't do it in his life, he must pass the oath on to his son and his son's son, as long as there was a Fedorovitch on earth. Wouldn't you?" he demanded hotly of Marco.

Marco's blood was also hot, but it was a different kind of blood, and he had talked too much to a very sane man.

"No," he said slowly. "What would have been the use? It wouldn't have done Samavia any good, and it wouldn't have done him any good to torture and kill people. Better keep them alive and make them do things for the

country. If you're a patriot, you think of the country." He wanted to add "That's what my father says," but he did not.

"Torture 'em first and then attend to the country," snapped The Rat.

"What would you have told your son if you'd been Ivor?"

"I'd have told him to learn everything about Samavia--and all the things kings have to know--and study things about laws and other countries--and about keeping silent--and about governing himself as if he were a general commanding soldiers in battle--so that he would never do anything he did not mean to do or could be ashamed of doing after it was over. And I'd have asked him to tell his son's sons to tell their sons to learn the same things. So, you see, however long the time was, there would always be a king getting ready for Samavia--when Samavia really wanted him. And he would be a real king."

He stopped himself suddenly and looked at the staring semicircle.

"I didn't make that up myself," he said. "I have heard a man who reads and knows things say it. I believe the Lost Prince would have had the same thoughts. If he had, and told them to his son, there has been a line of kings in training for Samavia for five hundred years, and perhaps one is walking about the streets of Vienna, or Budapest, or Paris, or London now, and he'd be ready if the people found out about him and called him."

"Wisht they would!" some one yelled.

"It would be a queer secret to know all the time when no one else knew it," The Rat communed with himself as it were, "that you were a king and you ought to be on a throne wearing a crown. I wonder if it would make a chap look different?"

He laughed his squeaky laugh, and then turned in his sudden way to Marco:

"But he'd be a fool to give up the vengeance. What is your name?"

"Marco Loristan. What's yours? It isn't The Rat really."

"It's Jem Ratcliffe. That's pretty near. Where do you live?"

"No. 7 Philibert Place."

"This club is a soldiers' club," said The Rat. "It's called the Squad. I'm the captain. Tention, you fellows! Let's show him."

The semicircle sprang to its feet. There were about twelve lads altogether, and, when they stood upright, Marco saw at once that for some reason they were accustomed to obeying the word of command with military precision.

"Form in line!" ordered The Rat.

They did it at once, and held their backs and legs straight and their heads up amazingly well. Each had seized one of the sticks which had been stacked together like guns.

The Rat himself sat up straight on his platform. There was actually something military in the bearing of his lean body. His voice lost its squeak and its sharpness became commanding.

He put the dozen lads through the drill as if he had been a smart young officer. And the drill itself was prompt and smart enough to have done credit to practiced soldiers in barracks. It made Marco involuntarily stand very straight himself, and watch with surprised interest.

"That's good!" he exclaimed when it was at an end. "How did you learn that?"

The Rat made a savage gesture.

"If I'd had legs to stand on, I'd have been a soldier!" he said. "I'd have enlisted in any regiment that would take me. I don't care for anything else."

Suddenly his face changed, and he shouted a command to his followers.

"Turn your backs!" he ordered.

And they did turn their backs and looked through the railings of the old churchyard. Marco saw that they were obeying an order which was not new to them. The Rat had thrown his arm up over his eyes and covered them. He held it there for several moments, as if he did not want to be seen. Marco turned his back as the rest had done. All at once he understood that, though The Rat was not crying, yet he was feeling something which another boy would possibly have broken down under.

"All right!" he shouted presently, and dropped his ragged-sleeved arm and sat up straight again.

"I want to go to war!" he said hoarsely. "I want to fight! I want to lead a lot of men into battle! And I haven't got any legs. Sometimes it takes the pluck out of me."

"You've not grown up yet!" said Marco. "You might get strong."

No one knows what is going to happen. How did you learn to drill the club?"

"I hang about barracks. I watch and listen. I follow soldiers. If I could get books, I'd read about wars. I can't go to libraries as you can. I can do nothing but scuffle about like a rat."

"I can take you to some libraries," said Marco. "There are places where boys can get in. And I can get some papers from my father."

"Can you?" said The Rat. "Do you want to join the club?"

"Yes!" Marco answered. "I'll speak to my father about it."

He said it because the hungry longing for companionship in his own mind had found a sort of response in the queer hungry look in The Rat's eyes. He wanted to see him again. Strange creature as he was, there was attraction in him. Scuffling about on his low wheeled platform, he had drawn this group of rough lads to him and made himself their commander. They obeyed him; they listened to his stories and harangues about war and soldiering; they let him drill them and give them orders. Marco knew that, when he told his father about him, he would be interested. The boy wanted to hear what Loristan would say.

"I'm going home now," he said. "If you're going to be here to-morrow, I will try to come."

"We shall be here," The Rat answered. "It's our barracks."

Marco drew himself up smartly and made his salute as if to a superior officer. Then he wheeled about and marched through the brick archway, and the sound of his boyish tread was as regular and decided as if he had been a man keeping time with his regiment.

"He's been drilled himself," said The Rat. "He knows as much as I do."

And he sat up and stared down the passage with new interest.