

THE DRILL AND THE SECRET PARTY

Loristan did not forbid Marco to pursue his acquaintance with The Rat and his followers.

"You will find out for yourself whether they are friends for you or not," he said. "You will know in a few days, and then you can make your own decision. You have known lads in various countries, and you are a good judge of them, I think. You will soon see whether they are going to be men or mere rabble. The Rat now--how does he strike you?"

And the handsome eyes held their keen look of questioning.

"He'd be a brave soldier if he could stand," said Marco, thinking him over. "But he might be cruel."

"A lad who might make a brave soldier cannot be disdained, but a man who is cruel is a fool. Tell him that from me," Loristan answered. "He wastes force--his own and the force of the one he treats cruelly. Only a fool wastes force."

"May I speak of you sometimes?" asked Marco.

"Yes. You will know how. You will remember the things about which silence is the order."

"I never forget them," said Marco. "I have been trying not to, for such a long time."

"You have succeeded well, Comrade!" returned Loristan, from his writing-table, to which he had gone and where he was turning over papers.

A strong impulse overpowered the boy. He marched over to the table and stood very straight, making his soldierly young salute, his whole body glowing.

"Father!" he said, "you don't know how I love you! I wish you were a general and I might die in battle for you. When I look at you, I long and long to do something for you a boy could not do. I would die of a thousand wounds rather than disobey you--or Samavia!"

He seized Loristan's hand, and knelt on one knee and kissed it. An English or American boy could not have done such a thing from unaffected natural impulse. But he was of warm Southern blood.

"I took my oath of allegiance to you, Father, when I took it to Samavia. It seems as if you were Samavia, too," he said, and kissed his hand again.

Loristan had turned toward him with one of the movements which were full of dignity and grace. Marco, looking up at him, felt that there was always a certain remote stateliness in him which made it seem quite natural that any one should bend the knee and kiss his hand.

A sudden great tenderness glowed in his father's face as he raised the boy and put his hand on his shoulder.

"Comrade," he said, "you don't know how much I love you--and what reason there is that we should love each other! You don't know how I have been watching you, and thanking God each year that here grew a man for Samavia. That I know you are--a man, though you have lived but twelve years. Twelve years may grow a man--or prove that a man will never grow, though a human thing he may remain for ninety years. This year may be full of strange things for both of us. We cannot know what I may have to ask you to do for me--and for Samavia. Perhaps such a thing as no twelve-year-old boy has ever done before."

"Every night and every morning," said Marco, "I shall pray that I may be called to do it, and that I may do it well."

"You will do it well, Comrade, if you are called. That I could make oath," Loristan answered him.

The Squad had collected in the inclosure behind the church when Marco

appeared at the arched end of the passage. The boys were drawn up with their rifles, but they all wore a rather dogged and sullen look. The explanation which darted into Marco's mind was that this was because The Rat was in a bad humor. He sat crouched together on his platform biting his nails fiercely, his elbows on his updrawn knees, his face twisted into a hideous scowl. He did not look around, or even look up from the cracked flagstone of the pavement on which his eyes were fixed.

Marco went forward with military step and stopped opposite to him with prompt salute.

"Sorry to be late, sir," he said, as if he had been a private speaking to his colonel.

"It's 'im, Rat! 'E's come, Rat!" the Squad shouted. "Look at 'im!"

But The Rat would not look, and did not even move.

"What's the matter?" said Marco, with less ceremony than a private would have shown. "There's no use in my coming here if you don't want me."

"'E's got a grouch on 'cos you're late!" called out the head of the line. "No doin' nothin' when 'e's got a grouch on."

"I sha'n't try to do anything," said Marco, his boy-face setting itself into good stubborn lines. "That's not what I came here for. I came to

drill. I've been with my father. He comes first. I can't join the Squad if he doesn't come first. We're not on active service, and we're not in barracks."

Then The Rat moved sharply and turned to look at him.

"I thought you weren't coming at all!" he snapped and growled at once. "My father said you wouldn't. He said you were a young swell for all your patched clothes. He said your father would think he was a swell, even if he was only a penny-a-liner on newspapers, and he wouldn't let you have anything to do with a vagabond and a nuisance. Nobody begged you to join. Your father can go to blazes!"

"Don't you speak in that way about my father," said Marco, quite quietly, "because I can't knock you down."

"I'll get up and let you!" began The Rat, immediately white and raging. "I can stand up with two sticks. I'll get up and let you!"

"No, you won't," said Marco. "If you want to know what my father said, I can tell you. He said I could come as often as I liked--till I found out whether we should be friends or not. He says I shall find that out for myself."

It was a strange thing The Rat did. It must always be remembered of him that his wretched father, who had each year sunk lower and lower in the

under-world, had been a gentleman once, a man who had been familiar with good manners and had been educated in the customs of good breeding. Sometimes when he was drunk, and sometimes when he was partly sober, he talked to The Rat of many things the boy would otherwise never have heard of. That was why the lad was different from the other vagabonds. This, also, was why he suddenly altered the whole situation by doing this strange and unexpected thing. He utterly changed his expression and voice, fixing his sharp eyes shrewdly on Marco's. It was almost as if he were asking him a conundrum. He knew it would have been one to most boys of the class he appeared outwardly to belong to. He would either know the answer or he wouldn't.

"I beg your pardon," The Rat said.

That was the conundrum. It was what a gentleman and an officer would have said, if he felt he had been mistaken or rude. He had heard that from his drunken father.

"I beg yours--for being late," said Marco.

That was the right answer. It was the one another officer and gentleman would have made. It settled the matter at once, and it settled more than was apparent at the moment. It decided that Marco was one of those who knew the things The Rat's father had once known--the things gentlemen do and say and think. Not another word was said. It was all right. Marco

slipped into line with the Squad, and The Rat sat erect with his military bearing and began his drill:

"Squad!

"Attention!

"Number!

"Slope arms!

"Form fours!

"Right!

"Quick march!

"Halt!

"Left turn!

"Order arms!

"Stand at ease!

"Stand easy!"

They did it so well that it was quite wonderful when one considered the limited space at their disposal. They had evidently done it often, and The Rat had been not only a smart, but a severe, officer. This morning they repeated the exercise a number of times, and even varied it with Review Drill, with which they seemed just as familiar.

"Where did you learn it?" The Rat asked, when the arms were stacked again and Marco was sitting by him as he had sat the previous day.

"From an old soldier. And I like to watch it, as you do."

"If you were a young swell in the Guards, you couldn't be smarter at it," The Rat said. "The way you hold yourself! The way you stand! You've got it! Wish I was you! It comes natural to you."

"I've always liked to watch it and try to do it myself. I did when I was a little fellow," answered Marco.

"I've been trying to kick it into these chaps for more than a year," said The Rat. "A nice job I had of it! It nearly made me sick at first."

The semicircle in front of him only giggled or laughed outright. The members of it seemed to take very little offense at his cavalier treatment of them. He had evidently something to give them which was entertaining enough to make up for his tyranny and indifference. He

thrust his hand into one of the pockets of his ragged coat, and drew out a piece of newspaper.

"My father brought home this, wrapped round a loaf of bread," he said.

"See what it says there!"

He handed it to Marco, pointing to some words printed in large letters at the head of a column. Marco looked at it and sat very still.

The words he read were: "The Lost Prince."

"Silence is still the order," was the first thought which flashed through his mind. "Silence is still the order."

"What does it mean?" he said aloud.

"There isn't much of it. I wish there was more," The Rat said fretfully.

"Read and see. Of course they say it mayn't be true--but I believe it is. They say that people think some one knows where he is--at least where one of his descendants is. It'd be the same thing. He'd be the real king. If he'd just show himself, it might stop all the fighting.

Just read."

Marco read, and his skin prickled as the blood went racing through his body. But his face did not change. There was a sketch of the story of the Lost Prince to begin with. It had been regarded by most people,

the article said, as a sort of legend. Now there was a definite rumor that it was not a legend at all, but a part of the long past history of Samavia. It was said that through the centuries there had always been a party secretly loyal to the memory of this worshiped and lost Fedorovitch. It was even said that from father to son, generation after generation after generation, had descended the oath of fealty to him and his descendants. The people had made a god of him, and now, romantic as it seemed, it was beginning to be an open secret that some persons believed that a descendant had been found--a Fedorovitch worthy of his young ancestor--and that a certain Secret Party also held that, if he were called back to the throne of Samavia, the interminable wars and bloodshed would reach an end.

The Rat had begun to bite his nails fast.

"Do you believe he's found?" he asked feverishly. "Don't you? I do!"

"I wonder where he is, if it's true? I wonder! Where?" exclaimed Marco. He could say that, and he might seem as eager as he felt.

The Squad all began to jabber at once. "Yus, where wos'e? There is no knowin'. It'd be likely to be in some o' these furrin places. England'd be too far from Samavia. 'Ow far off wos Samavia? Wos it in Roosha, or where the Frenchies were, or the Germans? But wherever 'e wos, 'e'd be the right sort, an' 'e'd be the sort a chap'd turn and look at in the street."

The Rat continued to bite his nails.

"He might be anywhere," he said, his small fierce face glowing.

"That's what I like to think about. He might be passing in the street outside there; he might be up in one of those houses," jerking his head over his shoulder toward the backs of the inclosing dwellings. "Perhaps he knows he's a king, and perhaps he doesn't. He'd know if what you said yesterday was true--about the king always being made ready for Samavia."

"Yes, he'd know," put in Marco.

"Well, it'd be finer if he did," went on The Rat. "However poor and shabby he was, he'd know the secret all the time. And if people sneered at him, he'd sneer at them and laugh to himself. I dare say he'd walk tremendously straight and hold his head up. If I was him, I'd like to make people suspect a bit that I wasn't like the common lot o' them." He put out his hand and pushed Marco excitedly. "Let's work out plots for him!" he said. "That'd be a splendid game! Let's pretend we're the Secret Party!"

He was tremendously excited. Out of the ragged pocket he fished a piece of chalk. Then he leaned forward and began to draw something quickly on the flagstones closest to his platform. The Squad leaned forward also, quite breathlessly, and Marco leaned forward. The chalk was sketching a

roughly outlined map, and he knew what map it was, before The Rat spoke.

"That's a map of Samavia," he said. "It was in that piece of magazine I told you about--the one where I read about Prince Ivor. I studied it until it fell to pieces. But I could draw it myself by that time, so it didn't matter. I could draw it with my eyes shut. That's the capital city," pointing to a spot. "It's called Melzarr. The palace is there. It's the place where the first of the Maranovitch killed the last of the Fedorovitch--the bad chap that was Ivor's father. It's the palace Ivor wandered out of singing the shepherds' song that early morning. It's where the throne is that his descendant would sit upon to be crowned--that he's going to sit upon. I believe he is! Let's swear he shall!" He flung down his piece of chalk and sat up. "Give me two sticks. Help me to get up."

Two of the Squad sprang to their feet and came to him. Each snatched one of the sticks from the stacked rifles, evidently knowing what he wanted. Marco rose too, and watched with sudden, keen curiosity. He had thought that The Rat could not stand up, but it seemed that he could, in a fashion of his own, and he was going to do it. The boys lifted him by his arms, set him against the stone coping of the iron railings of the churchyard, and put a stick in each of his hands. They stood at his side, but he supported himself.

"E could get about if 'e 'ad the money to buy crutches!" said one whose name was Cad, and he said it quite proudly. The queer thing that

Marco had noticed was that the ragamuffins were proud of The Rat, and regarded him as their lord and master. "--'E could get about an' stand as well as any one," added the other, and he said it in the tone of one who boasts. His name was Ben.

"I'm going to stand now, and so are the rest of you," said The Rat.

"Squad! 'Tention! You at the head of the line," to Marco. They were in line in a moment--straight, shoulders back, chins up. And Marco stood at the head.

"We're going to take an oath," said The Rat. "It's an oath of allegiance. Allegiance means faithfulness to a thing--a king or a country. Ours means allegiance to the King of Samavia. We don't know where he is, but we swear to be faithful to him, to fight for him, to plot for him, to die for him, and to bring him back to his throne!" The way in which he flung up his head when he said the word "die" was very fine indeed. "We are the Secret Party. We will work in the dark and find out things--and run risks--and collect an army no one will know anything about until it is strong enough to suddenly rise at a secret signal, and overwhelm the Maranovitch and Iarovitch, and seize their forts and citadels. No one even knows we are alive. We are a silent, secret thing that never speaks aloud!"

Silent and secret as they were, however, they spoke aloud at this juncture. It was such a grand idea for a game, and so full of possible larks, that the Squad broke into a howl of an exultant cheer.

"Hooray!" they yelled. "Hooray for the oath of 'legiance! 'Ray! 'ray!
'ray!"

"Shut up, you swine!" shouted The Rat. "Is that the way you keep yourself secret? You'll call the police in, you fools! Look at him!" pointing to Marco. "He's got some sense."

Marco, in fact, had not made any sound.

"Come here, you Cad and Ben, and put me back on my wheels," raged the Squad's commander. "I'll not make up the game at all. It's no use with a lot of fat-head, raw recruits like you."

The line broke and surrounded him in a moment, pleading and urging.

"Aw, Rat! We forgot. It's the primest game you've ever thought out! Rat! Rat! Don't get a grouch on! We'll keep still, Rat! Primest lark of all 'll be the sneakin' about an' keepin' quiet. Aw, Rat! Keep it up!"

"Keep it up yourselves!" snarled The Rat.

"Not another cove of us could do it but you! Not one! There's no other cove could think it out. You're the only chap that can think out things. You thought out the Squad! That's why you're captain!"

This was true. He was the one who could invent entertainment for them, these street lads who had nothing. Out of that nothing he could create what excited them, and give them something to fill empty, useless, often cold or wet or foggy, hours. That made him their captain and their pride.

The Rat began to yield, though grudgingly. He pointed again to Marco, who had not moved, but stood still at attention.

"Look at him!" he said. "He knows enough to stand where he's put until he's ordered to break line. He's a soldier, he is--not a raw recruit that don't know the goose-step. He's been in barracks before."

But after this outburst, he deigned to go on.

"Here's the oath," he said. "We swear to stand any torture and submit in silence to any death rather than betray our secret and our king. We will obey in silence and in secret. We will swim through seas of blood and fight our way through lakes of fire, if we are ordered. Nothing shall bar our way. All we do and say and think is for our country and our king. If any of you have anything to say, speak out before you take the oath."

He saw Marco move a little, and he made a sign to him.

"You," he said. "Have you something to say?"

Marco turned to him and saluted.

"Here stand ten men for Samavia. God be thanked!" he said. He dared say that much, and he felt as if his father himself would have told him that they were the right words.

The Rat thought they were. Somehow he felt that they struck home. He reddened with a sudden emotion.

"Squad!" he said. "I'll let you give three cheers on that. It's for the last time. We'll begin to be quiet afterward."

And to the Squad's exultant relief he led the cheer, and they were allowed to make as much uproar as they liked. They liked to make a great deal, and when it was at an end, it had done them good and made them ready for business.

The Rat opened the drama at once. Never surely had there ever before been heard a conspirator's whisper as hollow as his.

"Secret Ones," he said, "it is midnight. We meet in the depths of darkness. We dare not meet by day. When we meet in the daytime, we pretend not to know each other. We are meeting now in a Samavian city where there is a fortress. We shall have to take it when the secret sign is given and we make our rising. We are getting everything ready, so

that, when we find the king, the secret sign can be given."

"What is the name of the city we are in?" whispered Cad.

"It is called Larrina. It is an important seaport. We must take it as soon as we rise. The next time we meet I will bring a dark lantern and draw a map and show it to you."

It would have been a great advantage to the game if Marco could have drawn for them the map he could have made, a map which would have shown every fortress--every stronghold and every weak place. Being a boy, he knew what excitement would have thrilled each breast, how they would lean forward and pile question on question, pointing to this place and to that. He had learned to draw the map before he was ten, and he had drawn it again and again because there had been times when his father had told him that changes had taken place. Oh, yes! he could have drawn a map which would have moved them to a frenzy of joy. But he sat silent and listened, only speaking when he asked a question, as if he knew nothing more about Samavia than The Rat did. What a Secret Party they were! They drew themselves together in the closest of circles; they spoke in unearthly whispers.

"A sentinel ought to be posted at the end of the passage," Marco whispered.

"Ben, take your gun!" commanded The Rat.

Ben rose stealthily, and, shouldering his weapon, crept on tiptoe to the opening. There he stood on guard.

"My father says there's been a Secret Party in Samavia for a hundred years," The Rat whispered.

"Who told him?" asked Marco.

"A man who has been in Samavia," answered The Rat. "He said it was the most wonderful Secret Party in the world, because it has worked and waited so long, and never given up, though it has had no reason for hoping. It began among some shepherds and charcoal-burners who bound themselves by an oath to find the Lost Prince and bring him back to the throne. There were too few of them to do anything against the Maranovitch, and when the first lot found they were growing old, they made their sons take the same oath. It has been passed on from generation to generation, and in each generation the band has grown. No one really knows how large it is now, but they say that there are people in nearly all the countries in Europe who belong to it in dead secret, and are sworn to help it when they are called. They are only waiting. Some are rich people who will give money, and some are poor ones who will slip across the frontier to fight or to help to smuggle in arms. They even say that for all these years there have been arms made in caves in the mountains, and hidden there year after year. There are men

who are called Forgers of the Sword, and they, and their fathers, and grandfathers, and great-grandfathers have always made swords and stored them in caverns no one knows of, hidden caverns underground."

Marco spoke aloud the thought which had come into his mind as he listened, a thought which brought fear to him. "If the people in the streets talk about it, they won't be hidden long."

"It isn't common talk, my father says. Only very few have guessed, and most of them think it is part of the Lost Prince legend," said The Rat.

"The Maranovitch and Iarovitch laugh at it. They have always been great fools. They're too full of their own swagger to think anything can interfere with them."

"Do you talk much to your father?" Marco asked him.

The Rat showed his sharp white teeth in a grin.

"I know what you're thinking of," he said. "You're remembering that I said he was always drunk. So he is, except when he's only half drunk. And when he's half drunk, he's the most splendid talker in London. He remembers everything he has ever learned or read or heard since he was born. I get him going and listen. He wants to talk and I want to hear. I found out almost everything I know in that way. He didn't know he was teaching me, but he was. He goes back into being a gentleman when he's half drunk."

"If--if you care about the Samavians, you'd better ask him not to tell people about the Secret Party and the Forgers of the Sword," suggested Marco.

The Rat started a little.

"That's true!" he said. "You're sharper than I am. It oughtn't to be blabbed about, or the Maranovitch might hear enough to make them stop and listen. I'll get him to promise. There's one queer thing about him," he added very slowly, as if he were thinking it over, "I suppose it's part of the gentleman that's left in him. If he makes a promise, he never breaks it, drunk or sober."

"Ask him to make one," said Marco. The next moment he changed the subject because it seemed the best thing to do. "Go on and tell us what our own Secret Party is to do. We're forgetting," he whispered.

The Rat took up his game with renewed keenness. It was a game which attracted him immensely because it called upon his imagination and held his audience spellbound, besides plunging him into war and strategy.

"We're preparing for the rising," he said. "It must come soon. We've waited so long. The caverns are stacked with arms. The Maranovitch and the Iarovitch are fighting and using all their soldiers, and now is our time." He stopped and thought, his elbows on his knees. He began to bite

his nails again.

"The Secret Signal must be given," he said. Then he stopped again, and the Squad held its breath and pressed nearer with a softly shuffling sound. "Two of the Secret Ones must be chosen by lot and sent forth," he went on; and the Squad almost brought ruin and disgrace upon itself by wanting to cheer again, and only just stopping itself in time. "Must be chosen by lot," The Rat repeated, looking from one face to another.

"Each one will take his life in his hand when he goes forth. He may have to die a thousand deaths, but he must go. He must steal in silence and disguise from one country to another. Wherever there is one of the Secret Party, whether he is in a hovel or on a throne, the messengers must go to him in darkness and stealth and give him the sign. It will mean, 'The hour has come. God save Samavia!'"

"God save Samavia!" whispered the Squad, excitedly. And, because they saw Marco raise his hand to his forehead, every one of them saluted.

They all began to whisper at once.

"Let's draw lots now. Let's draw lots, Rat. Don't let's 'ave no waitin'."

The Rat began to look about him with dread anxiety. He seemed to be examining the sky.

"The darkness is not as thick as it was," he whispered. "Midnight has passed. The dawn of day will be upon us. If any one has a piece of paper or a string, we will draw the lots before we part."

Cad had a piece of string, and Marco had a knife which could be used to cut it into lengths. This The Rat did himself. Then, after shutting his eyes and mixing them, he held them in his hand ready for the drawing.

"The Secret One who draws the longest lot is chosen. The Secret One who draws the shortest is chosen," he said solemnly.

The drawing was as solemn as his tone. Each boy wanted to draw either the shortest lot or the longest one. The heart of each thumped somewhat as he drew his piece of string.

When the drawing was at an end, each showed his lot. The Rat had drawn the shortest piece of string, and Marco had drawn the longest one.

"Comrade!" said The Rat, taking his hand. "We will face death and danger together!"

"God save Samavia!" answered Marco.

And the game was at an end for the day. The primest thing, the Squad said, The Rat had ever made up for them. "E was a wonder, he was!"