

VIII

AN EXCITING GAME

Loristan referred only once during the next day to what had happened.

"You did your errand well. You were not hurried or nervous," he said.

"The Prince was pleased with your calmness."

No more was said. Marco knew that the quiet mention of the stranger's title had been made merely as a designation. If it was necessary to mention him again in the future, he could be referred to as "the Prince." In various Continental countries there were many princes who were not royal or even serene highnesses--who were merely princes as other nobles were dukes or barons. Nothing special was revealed when a man was spoken of as a prince. But though nothing was said on the subject of the incident, it was plain that much work was being done by Loristan and Lazarus. The sitting-room door was locked, and the maps and documents, usually kept in the iron box, were being used.

Marco went to the Tower of London and spent part of the day in living again the stories which, centuries past, had been inclosed within its massive and ancient stone walls. In this way, he had throughout boyhood become intimate with people who to most boys seemed only the unreal creatures who professed to be alive in school-books of history. He had

learned to know them as men and women because he had stood in the palaces they had been born in and had played in as children, had died in at the end. He had seen the dungeons they had been imprisoned in, the blocks on which they had laid their heads, the battlements on which they had fought to defend their fortified towers, the thrones they had sat upon, the crowns they had worn, and the jeweled scepters they had held. He had stood before their portraits and had gazed curiously at their "Robes of Investiture," sewn with tens of thousands of seed-pearls. To look at a man's face and feel his pictured eyes follow you as you move away from him, to see the strangely splendid garments he once warmed with his living flesh, is to realize that history is not a mere lesson in a school-book, but is a relation of the life stories of men and women who saw strange and splendid days, and sometimes suffered strange and terrible things.

There were only a few people who were being led about sight-seeing. The man in the ancient Beef-eaters' costume, who was their guide, was good-natured, and evidently fond of talking. He was a big and stout man, with a large face and a small, merry eye. He was rather like pictures of Henry the Eighth, himself, which Marco remembered having seen. He was specially talkative when he stood by the tablet that marks the spot where stood the block on which Lady Jane Grey had laid her young head. One of the sightseers who knew little of English history had asked some questions about the reasons for her execution.

"If her father-in-law, the Duke of Northumberland, had left that young

couple alone--her and her husband, Lord Guildford Dudley--they'd have kept their heads on. He was bound to make her a queen, and Mary Tudor was bound to be queen herself. The duke wasn't clever enough to manage a conspiracy and work up the people. These Samavians we're reading about in the papers would have done it better. And they're half-savages."

"They had a big battle outside Melzarr yesterday," the sight-seer standing next to Marco said to the young woman who was his companion. "Thousands of 'em killed. I saw it in big letters on the boards as I rode on the top of the bus. They're just slaughtering each other, that's what they're doing."

The talkative Beef-eater heard him.

"They can't even bury their dead fast enough," he said. "There'll be some sort of plague breaking out and sweeping into the countries nearest them. It'll end by spreading all over Europe as it did in the Middle Ages. What the civilized countries have got to do is to make them choose a decent king and begin to behave themselves."

"I'll tell my father that too," Marco thought. "It shows that everybody is thinking and talking of Samavia, and that even the common people know it must have a real king. This must be the time!" And what he meant was that this must be the time for which the Secret Party had waited and worked so long--the time for the Rising. But his father was out when he went back to Philibert Place, and Lazarus looked more silent than ever

as he stood behind his chair and waited on him through his insignificant meal. However plain and scant the food they had to eat, it was always served with as much care and ceremony as if it had been a banquet.

"A man can eat dry bread and drink cold water as if he were a gentleman," his father had said long ago. "And it is easy to form careless habits. Even if one is hungry enough to feel ravenous, a man who has been well bred will not allow himself to look so. A dog may, a man may not. Just as a dog may howl when he is angry or in pain and a man may not."

It was only one of the small parts of the training which had quietly made the boy, even as a child, self-controlled and courteous, had taught him ease and grace of boyish carriage, the habit of holding his body well and his head erect, and had given him a certain look of young distinction which, though it assumed nothing, set him apart from boys of carelessly awkward bearing.

"Is there a newspaper here which tells of the battle, Lazarus?" he asked, after he had left the table.

"Yes, sir," was the answer. "Your father said that you might read it. It is a black tale!" he added, as he handed him the paper.

It was a black tale. As he read, Marco felt as if he could scarcely bear it. It was as if Samavia swam in blood, and as if the other countries

must stand aghast before such furious cruelties.

"Lazarus," he said, springing to his feet at last, his eyes burning,
"something must stop it! There must be something strong enough. The time
has come. The time has come." And he walked up and down the room
because
he was too excited to stand still.

How Lazarus watched him! What a strong and glowing feeling there was in
his own restrained face!

"Yes, sir. Surely the time has come," he answered. But that was all he
said, and he turned and went out of the shabby back sitting-room at
once. It was as if he felt it were wiser to go before he lost power over
himself and said more.

Marco made his way to the meeting-place of the Squad, to which The Rat
had in the past given the name of the Barracks. The Rat was sitting
among his followers, and he had been reading the morning paper to them,
the one which contained the account of the battle of Melzarr. The Squad
had become the Secret Party, and each member of it was thrilled with the
spirit of dark plot and adventure. They all whispered when they spoke.

"This is not the Barracks now," The Rat said. "It is a subterranean
cavern. Under the floor of it thousands of swords and guns are buried,
and it is piled to the roof with them. There is only a small place left

for us to sit and plot in. We crawl in through a hole, and the hole is hidden by bushes."

To the rest of the boys this was only an exciting game, but Marco knew that to The Rat it was more. Though The Rat knew none of the things he knew, he saw that the whole story seemed to him a real thing. The struggles of Samavia, as he had heard and read of them in the newspapers, had taken possession of him. His passion for soldiering and warfare and his curiously mature brain had led him into following every detail he could lay hold of. He had listened to all he had heard with remarkable results. He remembered things older people forgot after they had mentioned them. He forgot nothing. He had drawn on the flagstones a map of Samavia which Marco saw was actually correct, and he had made a rough sketch of Melzarr and the battle which had had such disastrous results.

"The Maranovitch had possession of Melzarr," he explained with feverish eagerness. "And the Iarovitch attacked them from here," pointing with his finger. "That was a mistake. I should have attacked them from a place where they would not have been expecting it. They expected attack on their fortifications, and they were ready to defend them. I believe the enemy could have stolen up in the night and rushed in here," pointing again. Marco thought he was right. The Rat had argued it all out, and had studied Melzarr as he might have studied a puzzle or an arithmetical problem. He was very clever, and as sharp as his queer face looked.

"I believe you would make a good general if you were grown up," said Marco. "I'd like to show your maps to my father and ask him if he doesn't think your stratagem would have been a good one."

"Does he know much about Samavia?" asked The Rat.

"He has to read the newspapers because he writes things," Marco answered. "And every one is thinking about the war. No one can help it."

The Rat drew a dingy, folded paper out of his pocket and looked it over with an air of reflection.

"I'll make a clean one," he said. "I'd like a grown-up man to look at it and see if it's all right. My father was more than half-drunk when I was drawing this, so I couldn't ask him questions. He'll kill himself before long. He had a sort of fit last night."

"Tell us, Rat, wot you an' Marco'll 'ave ter do. Let's 'ear wot you've made up," suggested Cad. He drew closer, and so did the rest of the circle, hugging their knees with their arms.

"This is what we shall have to do," began The Rat, in the hollow whisper of a Secret Party. "The hour has come. To all the Secret Ones in Samavia, and to the friends of the Secret Party in every country, the sign must be carried. It must be carried by some one who could not be

suspected. Who would suspect two boys--and one of them a cripple? The best thing of all for us is that I am a cripple. Who would suspect a cripple? When my father is drunk and beats me, he does it because I won't go out and beg in the streets and bring him the money I get. He says that people will nearly always give money to a cripple. I won't be a beggar for him--the swine--but I will be one for Samavia and the Lost Prince. Marco shall pretend to be my brother and take care of me. I say," speaking to Marco with a sudden change of voice, "can you sing anything? It doesn't matter how you do it."

"Yes, I can sing," Marco replied.

"Then Marco will pretend he is singing to make people give him money. I'll get a pair of crutches somewhere, and part of the time I will go on crutches and part of the time on my platform. We'll live like beggars and go wherever we want to. I can whiz past a man and give the sign and no one will know. Some times Marco can give it when people are dropping money into his cap. We can pass from one country to another and rouse everybody who is of the Secret Party. We'll work our way into Samavia, and we'll be only two boys--and one a cripple--and nobody will think we could be doing anything. We'll beg in great cities and on the highroad."

"Where'll you get the money to travel?" said Cad.

"The Secret Party will give it to us, and we sha'n't need much. We could beg enough, for that matter. We'll sleep under the stars, or under

bridges, or archways, or in dark corners of streets. I've done it myself many a time when my father drove me out of doors. If it's cold weather, it's bad enough but if it's fine weather, it's better than sleeping in the kind of place I'm used to. Comrade," to Marco, "are you ready?"

He said "Comrade" as Loristan did, and somehow Marco did not resent it, because he was ready to labor for Samavia. It was only a game, but it made them comrades--and was it really only a game, after all? His excited voice and his strange, lined face made it singularly unlike one.

"Yes, Comrade, I am ready," Marco answered him.

"We shall be in Samavia when the fighting for the Lost Prince begins." The Rat carried on his story with fire. "We may see a battle. We might do something to help. We might carry messages under a rain of bullets--a rain of bullets!" The thought so elated him that he forgot his whisper and his voice rang out fiercely. "Boys have been in battles before. We might find the Lost King--no, the Found King--and ask him to let us be his servants. He could send us where he couldn't send bigger people. I could say to him, 'Your Majesty, I am called "The Rat," because I can creep through holes and into corners and dart about. Order me into any danger and I will obey you. Let me die like a soldier if I can't live like one.'"

Suddenly he threw his ragged coat sleeve up across his eyes. He had wrought himself up tremendously with the picture of the rain of bullets.

And he felt as if he saw the King who had at last been found. The next moment he uncovered his face.

"That's what we've got to do," he said. "Just that, if you want to know. And a lot more. There's no end to it!"

Marco's thoughts were in a whirl. It ought not to be nothing but a game. He grew quite hot all over. If the Secret Party wanted to send messengers no one would think of suspecting, who could be more harmless-looking than two vagabond boys wandering about picking up their living as best they could, not seeming to belong to any one? And one a cripple. It was true--yes, it was true, as The Rat said, that his being a cripple made him look safer than any one else. Marco actually put his forehead in his hands and pressed his temples.

"What's the matter?" exclaimed The Rat. "What are you thinking about?"

"I'm thinking what a general you would make. I'm thinking that it might all be real--every word of it. It mightn't be a game at all," said Marco.

"No, it mightn't," The Rat answered. "If I knew where the Secret Party was, I'd like to go and tell them about it. What's that!" he said, suddenly turning his head toward the street. "What are they calling out?"

Some newsboy with a particularly shrill voice was shouting out something at the topmost of his lungs.

Tense and excited, no member of the circle stirred or spoke for a few seconds. The Rat listened, Marco listened, the whole Squad listened, pricking up their ears.

"Startling news from Samavia," the newsboy was shrilling out. "Amazing story! Descendant of the Lost Prince found! Descendant of the Lost Prince found!"

"Any chap got a penny?" snapped The Rat, beginning to shuffle toward the arched passage.

"I have!" answered Marco, following him.

"Come on!" The Rat yelled. "Let's go and get a paper!" And he whizzed down the passage with his swiftest rat-like dart, while the Squad followed him, shouting and tumbling over each other.

IX

"IT IS NOT A GAME"