

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"

Loristan walked slowly up and down the back sitting-room and listened to Marco, who sat by the small fire and talked.

"Go on," he said, whenever the boy stopped. "I want to hear it all. He's a strange lad, and it's a splendid game."

Marco was telling him the story of his second and third visits to the inclosure behind the deserted church-yard. He had begun at the beginning, and his father had listened with a deep interest.

A year later, Marco recalled this evening as a thrilling memory, and as one which would never pass away from him throughout his life. He would always be able to call it all back. The small and dingy back room, the dimness of the one poor gas-burner, which was all they could afford to light, the iron box pushed into the corner with its maps and plans locked safely in it, the erect bearing and actual beauty of the tall form, which the shabbiness of worn and mended clothes could not hide or dim. Not even rags and tatters could have made Loristan seem insignificant or undistinguished. He was always the same. His eyes seemed darker and more wonderful than ever in their remote thoughtfulness and interest as he spoke.

"Go on," he said. "It is a splendid game. And it is curious. He has thought it out well. The lad is a born soldier."

"It is not a game to him," Marco said. "And it is not a game to me. The Squad is only playing, but with him it's quite different. He knows he'll never really get what he wants, but he feels as if this was something near it. He said I might show you the map he made. Father, look at it."

He gave Loristan the clean copy of The Rat's map of Samavia. The city of Melzarr was marked with certain signs. They were to show at what points The Rat--if he had been a Samavian general--would have attacked the capital. As Marco pointed them out, he explained The Rat's reasons for his planning.

Loristan held the paper for some minutes. He fixed his eyes on it curiously, and his black brows drew themselves together.

"This is very wonderful!" he said at last. "He is quite right. They might have got in there, and for the very reasons he hit on. How did he learn all this?"

"He thinks of nothing else now," answered Marco. "He has always thought of wars and made plans for battles. He's not like the rest of the Squad. His father is nearly always drunk, but he is very well educated, and, when he is only half drunk, he likes to talk. The Rat asks him questions then, and leads him on until he finds out a great deal. Then he begs old newspapers, and he hides himself in corners and listens to what people are saying. He says he lies awake at night thinking it out, and he

thinks about it all the day. That was why he got up the Squad."

Loristan had continued examining the paper.

"Tell him," he said, when he refolded and handed it back, "that I studied his map, and he may be proud of it. You may also tell him--" and he smiled quietly as he spoke--"that in my opinion he is right. The Iarovitch would have held Melzarr to-day if he had led them."

Marco was full of exultation.

"I thought you would say he was right. I felt sure you would. That is what makes me want to tell you the rest," he hurried on.

"If you think he is right about the rest too--" He stopped awkwardly because of a sudden wild thought which rushed upon him. "I don't know what you will think," he stammered. "Perhaps it will seem to you as if the game--as if that part of it could--could only be a game."

He was so fervent in spite of his hesitation that Loristan began to watch him with sympathetic respect, as he always did when the boy was trying to express something he was not sure of. One of the great bonds between them was that Loristan was always interested in his boyish mental processes--in the way in which his thoughts led him to any conclusion.

"Go on," he said again. "I am like The Rat and I am like you. It has not seemed quite like a game to me, so far."

He sat down at the writing-table and Marco, in his eagerness, drew nearer and leaned against it, resting on his arms and lowering his voice, though it was always their habit to speak at such a pitch that no one outside the room they were in could distinguish what they said.

"It is The Rat's plan for giving the signal for a Rising," he said.

Loristan made a slight movement.

"Does he think there will be a Rising?" he asked.

"He says that must be what the Secret Party has been preparing for all these years. And it must come soon. The other nations see that the fighting must be put an end to even if they have to stop it themselves. And if the real King is found--but when The Rat bought the newspaper there was nothing in it about where he was. It was only a sort of rumor. Nobody seemed to know anything." He stopped a few seconds, but he did not utter the words which were in his mind. He did not say: "But you know."

"And The Rat has a plan for giving the signal?" Loristan said.

Marco forgot his first feeling of hesitation. He began to see the plan

again as he had seen it when The Rat talked. He began to speak as The Rat had spoken, forgetting that it was a game. He made even a clearer picture than The Rat had made of the two vagabond boys--one of them a cripple--making their way from one place to another, quite free to carry messages or warnings where they chose, because they were so insignificant and poor-looking that no one could think of them as anything but waifs and strays, belonging to nobody and blown about by the wind of poverty and chance. He felt as if he wanted to convince his father that the plan was a possible one. He did not quite know why he felt so anxious to win his approval of the scheme--as if it were real--as if it could actually be done. But this feeling was what inspired him to enter into new details and suggest possibilities.

"A boy who was a cripple and one who was only a street singer and a sort of beggar could get almost anywhere," he said. "Soldiers would listen to a singer if he sang good songs--and they might not be afraid to talk before him. A strolling singer and a cripple would perhaps hear a great many things it might be useful for the Secret Party to know. They might even hear important things. Don't you think so?"

Before he had gone far with his story, the faraway look had fallen upon Loristan's face--the look Marco had known so well all his life. He sat turned a little sidewise from the boy, his elbow resting on the table and his forehead on his hand. He looked down at the worn carpet at his feet, and so he looked as he listened to the end. It was as if some new thought were slowly growing in his mind as Marco went on talking and

enlarging on The Rat's plan. He did not even look up or change his position as he answered, "Yes. I think so."

But, because of the deep and growing thought in his face, Marco's courage increased. His first fear that this part of the planning might seem so bold and reckless that it would only appear to belong to a boyish game, gradually faded away for some strange reason. His father had said that the first part of The Rat's imaginings had not seemed quite like a game to him, and now--even now--he was not listening as if he were listening to the details of mere exaggerated fancies. It was as if the thing he was hearing was not wildly impossible. Marco's knowledge of Continental countries and of methods of journeying helped him to enter into much detail and give realism to his plans.

"Sometimes we could pretend we knew nothing but English," he said. "Then, though The Rat could not understand, I could. I should always understand in each country. I know the cities and the places we should want to go to. I know how boys like us live, and so we should not do anything which would make the police angry or make people notice us. If any one asked questions, I would let them believe that I had met The Rat by chance, and we had made up our minds to travel together because people gave more money to a boy who sang if he was with a cripple. There was a boy who used to play the guitar in the streets of Rome, and he always had a lame girl with him, and every one knew it was for that reason. When he played, people looked at the girl and were sorry for her and gave her soldi. You remember."

"Yes, I remember. And what you say is true," Loristan answered.

Marco leaned forward across the table so that he came closer to him. The tone in which the words were said made his courage leap like a flame. To be allowed to go on with this boldness was to feel that he was being treated almost as if he were a man. If his father had wished to stop him, he could have done it with one quiet glance, without uttering a word. For some wonderful reason he did not wish him to cease talking. He was willing to hear what he had to say--he was even interested.

"You are growing older," he had said the night he had revealed the marvelous secret. "Silence is still the order, but you are man enough to be told more."

Was he man enough to be thought worthy to help Samavia in any small way--even with boyish fancies which might contain a germ of some thought which older and wiser minds might make useful? Was he being listened to because the plan, made as part of a game, was not an impossible one--if two boys who could be trusted could be found? He caught a deep breath as he went on, drawing still nearer and speaking so low that his tone was almost a whisper.

"If the men of the Secret Party have been working and thinking for so many years--they have prepared everything. They know by this time exactly what must be done by the messengers who are to give the signal.



They can tell them where to go and how to know the secret friends who must be warned. If the orders could be written and given to--to some one who has--who has learned to remember things!" He had begun to breathe so quickly that he stopped for a moment.

Loristan looked up. He looked directly into his eyes.

"Some one who has been trained to remember things?" he said.

"Some one who has been trained," Marco went on, catching his breath again. "Some one who does not forget--who would never forget--never! That one, even if he were only twelve--even if he were only ten--could go and do as he was told." Loristan put his hand on his shoulder.

"Comrade," he said, "you are speaking as if you were ready to go yourself."

Marco's eyes looked bravely straight into his, but he said not one word.

"Do you know what it would mean, Comrade?" his father went on. "You are right. It is not a game. And you are not thinking of it as one. But have you thought how it would be if something betrayed you--and you were set up against a wall to be shot?"

Marco stood up quite straight. He tried to believe he felt the wall against his back.

"If I were shot, I should be shot for Samavia," he said. "And for you, Father."

Even as he was speaking, the front door-bell rang and Lazarus evidently opened it. He spoke to some one, and then they heard his footsteps approaching the back sitting-room.

"Open the door," said Loristan, and Marco opened it.

"There is a boy who is a cripple here, sir," the old soldier said. "He asked to see Master Marco."

"If it is The Rat," said Loristan, "bring him in here. I wish to see him."

Marco went down the passage to the front door. The Rat was there, but he was not upon his platform. He was leaning upon an old pair of crutches, and Marco thought he looked wild and strange. He was white, and somehow the lines of his face seemed twisted in a new way. Marco wondered if something had frightened him, or if he felt ill.

"Rat," he began, "my father--"

"I've come to tell you about my father," The Rat broke in without waiting to hear the rest, and his voice was as strange as his pale face.

"I don't know why I've come, but I--I just wanted to. He's dead!"

"Your father?" Marco stammered. "He's--"

"He's dead," The Rat answered shakily. "I told you he'd kill himself. He had another fit and he died in it. I knew he would, one of these days. I told him so. He knew he would himself. I stayed with him till he was dead--and then I got a bursting headache and I felt sick--and I thought about you."

Marco made a jump at him because he saw he was suddenly shaking as if he

were going to fall. He was just in time, and Lazarus, who had been looking on from the back of the passage, came forward. Together they held him up.

"I'm not going to faint," he said weakly, "but I felt as if I was. It was a bad fit, and I had to try and hold him. I was all by myself. The people in the other attic thought he was only drunk, and they wouldn't come in. He's lying on the floor there, dead."

"Come and see my father," Marco said. "He'll tell us what do do. Lazarus, help him."

"I can get on by myself," said The Rat. "Do you see my crutches? I did something for a pawnbroker last night, and he gave them to me for pay."

But though he tried to speak carelessly, he had plainly been horribly shaken and overwrought. His queer face was yellowish white still, and he was trembling a little.

Marco led the way into the back sitting-room. In the midst of its shabby gloom and under the dim light Loristan was standing in one of his still, attentive attitudes. He was waiting for them.

"Father, this is The Rat," the boy began. The Rat stopped short and rested on his crutches, staring at the tall, reposeful figure with widened eyes.

"Is that your father?" he said to Marco. And then added, with a jerky half-laugh, "He's not much like mine, is he?"

X

THE RAT--AND SAMAVIA

What The Rat thought when Loristan began to speak to him, Marco wondered. Suddenly he stood in an unknown world, and it was Loristan who