

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

made it so because its poverty and shabbiness had no power to touch him. He looked at the boy with calm and clear eyes, he asked him practical questions gently, and it was plain that he understood many things without asking questions at all. Marco thought that perhaps he had, at some time, seen drunken men die, in his life in strange places. He seemed to know the terribleness of the night through which The Rat had passed. He made him sit down, and he ordered Lazarus to bring him some hot coffee and simple food.

"Haven't had a bite since yesterday," The Rat said, still staring at him. "How did you know I hadn't?"

"You have not had time," Loristan answered.

Afterward he made him lie down on the sofa.

"Look at my clothes," said The Rat.

"Lie down and sleep," Loristan replied, putting his hand on his shoulder and gently forcing him toward the sofa. "You will sleep a long time. You must tell me how to find the place where your father died, and I will see that the proper authorities are notified."

"What are you doing it for?" The Rat asked, and then he added, "sir."

"Because I am a man and you are a boy. And this is a terrible thing,"

Loristan answered him.

He went away without saying more, and The Rat lay on the sofa staring at the wall and thinking about it until he fell asleep. But, before this happened, Marco had quietly left him alone. So, as Loristan had told him he would, he slept deeply and long; in fact, he slept through all the night.

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When he awakened it was morning, and Lazarus was standing by the side of the sofa looking down at him.

"You will want to make yourself clean," he said. "It must be done."

"Clean!" said The Rat, with his squeaky laugh. "I couldn't keep clean when I had a room to live in, and now where am I to wash myself?" He sat up and looked about him.

"Give me my crutches," he said. "I've got to go. They've let me sleep here all night. They didn't turn me into the street. I don't know why they didn't. Marco's father--he's the right sort. He looks like a swell."

"The Master," said Lazarus, with a rigid manner, "the Master is a great gentleman. He would turn no tired creature into the street. He and his

son are poor, but they are of those who give. He desires to see and talk to you again. You are to have bread and coffee with him and the young Master. But it is I who tell you that you cannot sit at table with them until you are clean. Come with me," and he handed him his crutches. His manner was authoritative, but it was the manner of a soldier; his somewhat stiff and erect movements were those of a soldier, also, and The Rat liked them because they made him feel as if he were in barracks. He did not know what was going to happen, but he got up and followed him on his crutches.

Lazarus took him to a closet under the stairs where a battered tin bath was already full of hot water, which the old soldier himself had brought in pails. There were soap and coarse, clean towels on a wooden chair, and also there was a much worn but cleanly suit of clothes.

"Put these on when you have bathed," Lazarus ordered, pointing to them. "They belong to the young Master and will be large for you, but they will be better than your own." And then he went out of the closet and shut the door.

It was a new experience for The Rat. So long as he remembered, he had washed his face and hands--when he had washed them at all--at an iron tap set in the wall of a back street or court in some slum. His father and himself had long ago sunk into the world where to wash one's self is not a part of every-day life. They had lived amid dirt and foulness, and when his father had been in a maudlin state, he had sometimes cried and

talked of the long-past days when he had shaved every morning and put on a clean shirt.

To stand even in the most battered of tin baths full of clean hot water and to splash and scrub with a big piece of flannel and plenty of soap was a marvelous thing. The Rat's tired body responded to the novelty with a curious feeling of freshness and comfort.

"I dare say swells do this every day," he muttered. "I'd do it myself if I was a swell. Soldiers have to keep themselves so clean they shine."

When, after making the most of his soap and water, he came out of the closet under the stairs, he was as fresh as Marco himself; and, though his clothes had been built for a more stalwart body, his recognition of their cleanliness filled him with pleasure. He wondered if by any effort he could keep himself clean when he went out into the world again and had to sleep in any hole the police did not order him out of.

He wanted to see Marco again, but he wanted more to see the tall man with the soft dark eyes and that queer look of being a swell in spite of his shabby clothes and the dingy place he lived in. There was something about him which made you keep on looking at him, and wanting to know what he was thinking of, and why you felt as if you'd take orders from him as you'd take orders from your general, if you were a soldier. He looked, somehow, like a soldier, but as if he were something more--as if people had taken orders from him all his life, and always would take

orders from him. And yet he had that quiet voice and those fine, easy movements, and he was not a soldier at all, but only a poor man who wrote things for papers which did not pay him well enough to give him and his son a comfortable living. Through all the time of his seclusion with the battered bath and the soap and water, The Rat thought of him, and longed to have another look at him and hear him speak again. He did not see any reason why he should have let him sleep on his sofa or why he should give him a breakfast before he turned him out to face the world. It was first-rate of him to do it. The Rat felt that when he was turned out, after he had had the coffee, he should want to hang about the neighborhood just on the chance of seeing him pass by sometimes. He did not know what he was going to do. The parish officials would by this time have taken his dead father, and he would not see him again. He did not want to see him again. He had never seemed like a father. They had never cared anything for each other. He had only been a wretched outcast whose best hours had been when he had drunk too much to be violent and brutal. Perhaps, The Rat thought, he would be driven to going about on his platform on the pavements and begging, as his father had tried to force him to do. Could he sell newspapers? What could a crippled lad do unless he begged or sold papers?

Lazarus was waiting for him in the passage. The Rat held back a little.

"Perhaps they'd rather not eat their breakfast with me," he hesitated.

"I'm not--I'm not the kind they are. I could swallow the coffee out here and carry the bread away with me. And you could thank him for me. I'd

want him to know I thanked him."

Lazarus also had a steady eye. The Rat realized that he was looking him over as if he were summing him up.

"You may not be the kind they are, but you may be of a kind the Master sees good in. If he did not see something, he would not ask you to sit at his table. You are to come with me."

The Squad had seen good in The Rat, but no one else had. Policemen had moved him on whenever they set eyes on him, the wretched women of the slums had regarded him as they regarded his darting, thieving namesake; loafing or busy men had seen in him a young nuisance to be kicked or pushed out of the way. The Squad had not called "good" what they saw in him. They would have yelled with laughter if they had heard any one else call it so. "Goodness" was not considered an attraction in their world.

The Rat grinned a little and wondered what was meant, as he followed Lazarus into the back sitting-room.

It was as dingy and gloomy as it had looked the night before, but by the daylight The Rat saw how rigidly neat it was, how well swept and free from any speck of dust, how the poor windows had been cleaned and polished, and how everything was set in order. The coarse linen cloth on the table was fresh and spotless, so was the cheap crockery, the spoons shone with brightness.

Loristan was standing on the hearth and Marco was near him. They were waiting for their vagabond guest as if he had been a gentleman.

The Rat hesitated and shuffled at the door for a moment, and then it suddenly occurred to him to stand as straight as he could and salute. When he found himself in the presence of Loristan, he felt as if he ought to do something, but he did not know what.

Loristan's recognition of his gesture and his expression as he moved forward lifted from The Rat's shoulders a load which he himself had not known lay there. Somehow he felt as if something new had happened to him, as if he were not mere "vermin," after all, as if he need not be on the defensive--even as if he need not feel so much in the dark, and like a thing there was no place in the world for. The mere straight and far-seeing look of this man's eyes seemed to make a place somewhere for what he looked at. And yet what he said was quite simple.

"This is well," he said. "You have rested. We will have some food, and then we will talk together." He made a slight gesture in the direction of the chair at the right hand of his own place.

The Rat hesitated again. What a swell he was! With that wave of the hand he made you feel as if you were a fellow like himself, and he was doing you some honor.

"I'm not--" The Rat broke off and jerked his head toward Marco. "He knows--" he ended, "I've never sat at a table like this before."

"There is not much on it." Loristan made the slight gesture toward the right-hand seat again and smiled. "Let us sit down."

The Rat obeyed him and the meal began. There were only bread and coffee and a little butter before them. But Lazarus presented the cups and plates on a small japanned tray as if it were a golden salver. When he was not serving, he stood upright behind his master's chair, as though he wore royal livery of scarlet and gold. To the boy who had gnawed a bone or munched a crust wheresoever he found them, and with no thought but of the appeasing of his own wolfish hunger, to watch the two with whom he sat eat their simple food was a new thing. He knew nothing of the every-day decencies of civilized people. The Rat liked to look at them, and he found himself trying to hold his cup as Loristan did, and to sit and move as Marco was sitting and moving--taking his bread or butter, when it was held at his side by Lazarus, as if it were a simple thing to be waited upon. Marco had had things handed to him all his life, and it did not make him feel awkward. The Rat knew that his own father had once lived like this. He himself would have been at ease if chance had treated him fairly. It made him scowl to think of it. But in a few minutes Loristan began to talk about the copy of the map of Samavia. Then The Rat forgot everything else and was ill at ease no more. He did not know that Loristan was leading him on to explain his theories about the country and the people and the war. He found himself

telling all that he had read, or overheard, or thought as he lay awake in his garret. He had thought out a great many things in a way not at all like a boy's. His strangely concentrated and over-mature mind had been full of military schemes which Loristan listened to with curiosity and also with amazement. He had become extraordinarily clever in one direction because he had fixed all his mental powers on one thing. It seemed scarcely natural that an untaught vagabond lad should know so much and reason so clearly. It was at least extraordinarily interesting. There had been no skirmish, no attack, no battle which he had not led and fought in his own imagination, and he had made scores of rough queer plans of all that had been or should have been done. Lazarus listened as attentively as his master, and once Marco saw him exchange a startled, rapid glance with Loristan. It was at a moment when The Rat was sketching with his finger on the cloth an attack which ought to have been made but was not. And Marco knew at once that the quickly exchanged look meant "He is right! If it had been done, there would have been victory instead of disaster!"

It was a wonderful meal, though it was only of bread and coffee. The Rat knew he should never be able to forget it.

Afterward, Loristan told him of what he had done the night before. He had seen the parish authorities and all had been done which a city government provides in the case of a pauper's death.

His father would be buried in the usual manner. "We will follow him," Loristan said in the end. "You and I and Marco and Lazarus."

The Rat's mouth fell open.

"You--and Marco--and Lazarus!" he exclaimed, staring. "And me! Why should any of us go? I don't want to. He wouldn't have followed me if I'd been the one."

Loristan remained silent for a few moments.

"When a life has counted for nothing, the end of it is a lonely thing," he said at last. "If it has forgotten all respect for itself, pity is all that one has left to give. One would like to give something to anything so lonely." He said the last brief sentence after a pause.

"Let us go," Marco said suddenly; and he caught The Rat's hand.

The Rat's own movement was sudden. He slipped from his crutches to a chair, and sat and gazed at the worn carpet as if he were not looking at it at all, but at something a long way off. After a while he looked up at Loristan.

"Do you know what I thought of, all at once?" he said in a shaky voice.

"I thought of that 'Lost Prince' one. He only lived once. Perhaps he didn't live a long time. Nobody knows. But it's five hundred years ago,

and, just because he was the kind he was, every one that remembers him thinks of something fine. It's queer, but it does you good just to hear his name. And if he has been training kings for Samavia all these centuries--they may have been poor and nobody may have known about them, but they've been kings. That's what he did--just by being alive a few years. When I think of him and then think of--the other--there's such an awful difference that--yes--I'm sorry. For the first time. I'm his son and I can't care about him; but he's too lonely--I want to go."

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So it was that when the forlorn derelict was carried to the graveyard where nameless burdens on the city were given to the earth, a curious funeral procession followed him. There were two tall and soldierly looking men and two boys, one of whom walked on crutches, and behind them were ten other boys who walked two by two. These ten were a queer, ragged lot; but they had respectfully sober faces, held their heads and their shoulders well, and walked with a remarkably regular marching step.

It was the Squad; but they had left their "rifles" at home.