

XI

"COME WITH ME"

When they came back from the graveyard, The Rat was silent all the way. He was thinking of what had happened and of what lay before him. He was, in fact, thinking chiefly that nothing lay before him--nothing. The certainty of that gave his sharp, lined face new lines and sharpness which made it look pinched and hard.

He had nothing before but a corner in a bare garret in which he could find little more than a leaking roof over his head--when he was not turned out into the street. But, if policemen asked him where he lived, he could say he lived in Bone Court with his father. Now he couldn't say it.

He got along very well on his crutches, but he was rather tired when they reached the turn in the street which led in the direction of his old haunts. At any rate, they were haunts he knew, and he belonged to them more than he belonged elsewhere. The Squad stopped at this particular corner because it led to such homes as they possessed. They stopped in a body and looked at The Rat, and The Rat stopped also. He swung himself to Loristan's side, touching his hand to his forehead.

"Thank you, sir," he said. "Line and salute, you chaps!" And the Squad

stood in line and raised their hands also. "Thank you, sir. Thank you, Marco. Good-by."

"Where are you going?" Loristan asked.

"I don't know yet," The Rat answered, biting his lips.

He and Loristan looked at each other a few moments in silence. Both of them were thinking very hard. In The Rat's eyes there was a kind of desperate adoration. He did not know what he should do when this man turned and walked away from him. It would be as if the sun itself had dropped out of the heavens--and The Rat had not thought of what the sun meant before.

But Loristan did not turn and walk away. He looked deep into the lad's eyes as if he were searching to find some certainty. Then he said in a low voice, "You know how poor I am."

"I--I don't care!" said The Rat. "You--you're like a king to me. I'd stand up and be shot to bits if you told me to do it."

"I am so poor that I am not sure I can give you enough dry bread to eat--always. Marco and Lazarus and I are often hungry. Sometimes you might have nothing to sleep on but the floor. But I can find a place for you if I take you with me," said Loristan. "Do you know what I mean by a place?"

"Yes, I do," answered The Rat. "It's what I've never had before--sir."

What he knew was that it meant some bit of space, out of all the world, where he would have a sort of right to stand, howsoever poor and bare it might be.

"I'm not used to beds or to food enough," he said. But he did not dare to insist too much on that "place." It seemed too great a thing to be true.

Loristan took his arm.

"Come with me," he said. "We won't part. I believe you are to be trusted."

The Rat turned quite white in a sort of anguish of joy. He had never cared for any one in his life. He had been a sort of young Cain, his hand against every man and every man's hand against him. And during the last twelve hours he had plunged into a tumultuous ocean of boyish hero-worship. This man seemed like a sort of god to him. What he had said and done the day before, in what had been really The Rat's hours of extremity, after that appalling night--the way he had looked into his face and understood it all, the talk at the table when he had listened to him seriously, comprehending and actually respecting his plans and rough maps; his silent companionship as they followed the pauper hearse

together--these things were enough to make the lad longingly ready to be any sort of servant or slave to him if he might see and be spoken to by him even once or twice a day.

The Squad wore a look of dismay for a moment, and Loristan saw it.

"I am going to take your captain with me," he said. "But he will come back to Barracks. So will Marco."

"Will yer go on with the game?" asked Cad, as eager spokesman. "We want to go on being the 'Secret Party.'"

"Yes, I'll go on," The Rat answered. "I won't give it up. There's a lot in the papers to-day."

So they were pacified and went on their way, and Loristan and Lazarus and Marco and The Rat went on theirs also.

"Queer thing is," The Rat thought as they walked together, "I'm a bit afraid to speak to him unless he speaks to me first. Never felt that way before with any one."

He had jeered at policemen and had impudently chaffed "swells," but he felt a sort of secret awe of this man, and actually liked the feeling.

"It's as if I was a private and he was commander-in-chief," he thought.

"That's it."

Loristan talked to him as they went. He was simple enough in his statements of the situation. There was an old sofa in Marco's bedroom. It was narrow and hard, as Marco's bed itself was, but The Rat could sleep upon it. They would share what food they had. There were newspapers and magazines to be read. There were papers and pencils to draw new maps and plans of battles. There was even an old map of Samavia of Marco's which the two boys could study together as an aid to their game. The Rat's eyes began to have points of fire in them.

"If I could see the papers every morning, I could fight the battles on paper by night," he said, quite panting at the incredible vision of splendor. Were all the kingdoms of the earth going to be given to him? Was he going to sleep without a drunken father near him?

Was he going to have a chance to wash himself and to sit at a table and hear people say "Thank you," and "I beg pardon," as if they were using the most ordinary fashion of speech? His own father, before he had sunk into the depths, had lived and spoken in this way.

"When I have time, we will see who can draw up the best plans," Loristan said.

"Do you mean that you'll look at mine then--when you have time?" asked The Rat, hesitatingly. "I wasn't expecting that."

"Yes," answered Loristan, "I'll look at them, and we'll talk them over."

As they went on, he told him that he and Marco could do many things together. They could go to museums and galleries, and Marco could show him what he himself was familiar with.

"My father said you wouldn't let him come back to Barracks when you found out about it," The Rat said, hesitating again and growing hot because he remembered so many ugly past days. "But--but I swear I won't do him any harm, sir. I won't!"

"When I said I believed you could be trusted, I meant several things," Loristan answered him. "That was one of them. You're a new recruit. You and Marco are both under a commanding officer." He said the words because he knew they would elate him and stir his blood.

XII

"ONLY TWO BOYS"

The words did elate him, and his blood was stirred by them every time