

XIII

LORISTAN ATTENDS A DRILL OF THE SQUAD, AND MARCO MEETS A SAMAVIAN

The Squad was not forgotten. It found that Loristan himself would have regarded neglect as a breach of military duty.

"You must remember your men," he said, two or three days after The Rat became a member of his household. "You must keep up their drill. Marco tells me it was very smart. Don't let them get slack."

"His men!" The Rat felt what he could not have put into words.

He knew he had worked, and that the Squad had worked, in their hidden holes and corners. Only hidden holes and corners had been possible for them because they had existed in spite of the protest of their world and the vigilance of its policemen. They had tried many refuges before they found the Barracks. No one but resented the existence of a troop of noisy vagabonds. But somehow this man knew that there had evolved from it something more than mere noisy play, that he, The Rat, had meant

order and discipline.

"His men!" It made him feel as if he had had the Victoria Cross fastened on his coat. He had brain enough to see many things, and he knew that it was in this way that Loristan was finding him his "place." He knew how.

When they went to the Barracks, the Squad greeted them with a tumultuous welcome which expressed a great sense of relief. Privately the members had been filled with fears which they had talked over together in deep gloom. Marco's father, they decided, was too big a swell to let the two come back after he had seen the sort the Squad was made up of. He might be poor just now, toffs sometimes lost their money for a bit, but you could see what he was, and fathers like him weren't going to let their sons make friends with "such as us." He'd stop the drill and the "Secret Society" game. That's what he'd do!

But The Rat came swinging in on his secondhand crutches looking as if he had been made a general, and Marco came with him; and the drill the Squad was put through was stricter and finer than any drill they had ever known.

"I wish my father could have seen that," Marco said to The Rat.

The Rat turned red and white and then red again, but he said not a single word. The mere thought was like a flash of fire passing through him. But no fellow could hope for a thing as big as that. The Secret

Party, in its subterranean cavern, surrounded by its piled arms, sat down to read the morning paper.

The war news was bad to read. The Maranovitch held the day for the moment, and while they suffered and wrought cruelties in the capital city, the Iarovitch suffered and wrought cruelties in the country outside. So fierce and dark was the record that Europe stood aghast.

The Rat folded his paper when he had finished, and sat biting his nails. Having done this for a few minutes, he began to speak in his dramatic and hollow Secret Party whisper.

"The hour has come," he said to his followers. "The messengers must go forth. They know nothing of what they go for; they only know that they must obey. If they were caught and tortured, they could betray nothing because they know nothing but that, at certain places, they must utter a certain word. They carry no papers. All commands they must learn by heart. When the sign is given, the Secret Party will know what to do--where to meet and where to attack."

He drew plans of the battle on the flagstones, and he sketched an imaginary route which the two messengers were to follow. But his knowledge of the map of Europe was not worth much, and he turned to Marco.

"You know more about geography than I do. You know more about

everything," he said. "I only know Italy is at the bottom and Russia is at one side and England's at the other. How would the Secret Messengers go to Samavia? Can you draw the countries they'd have to pass through?"

Because any school-boy who knew the map could have done the same thing, Marco drew them. He also knew the stations the Secret Two would arrive at and leave by when they entered a city, the streets they would walk through and the very uniforms they would see; but of these things he said nothing. The reality his knowledge gave to the game was, however, a thrilling thing. He wished he could have been free to explain to The Rat the things he knew. Together they could have worked out so many details of travel and possible adventure that it would have been almost as if they had set out on their journey in fact.

As it was, the mere sketching of the route fired The Rat's imagination. He forged ahead with the story of adventure, and filled it with such mysterious purport and design that the Squad at times gasped for breath. In his glowing version the Secret Two entered cities by midnight and sang and begged at palace gates where kings driving outward paused to listen and were given the Sign.

"Though it would not always be kings," he said. "Sometimes it would be the poorest people. Sometimes they might seem to be beggars like ourselves, when they were only Secret Ones disguised. A great lord might wear poor clothes and pretend to be a workman, and we should only know him by the signs we had learned by heart. When we were sent to Samavia,

we should be obliged to creep in through some back part of the country where no fighting was being done and where no one would attack. Their generals are not clever enough to protect the parts which are joined to friendly countries, and they have not forces enough. Two boys could find a way in if they thought it out."

He became possessed by the idea of thinking it out on the spot. He drew his rough map of Samavia on the flagstones with his chalk.

"Look here," he said to Marco, who, with the elated and thrilled Squad, bent over it in a close circle of heads. "Beltrazo is here and Carnolitz is here--and here is Jiardasia. Beltrazo and Jiardasia are friendly, though they don't take sides. All the fighting is going on in the country about Melzarr. There is no reason why they should prevent single travelers from coming in across the frontiers of friendly neighbors. They're not fighting with the countries outside, they are fighting with themselves." He paused a moment and thought.

"The article in that magazine said something about a huge forest on the eastern frontier. That's here. We could wander into a forest and stay there until we'd planned all we wanted to do. Even the people who had seen us would forget about us. What we have to do is to make people feel as if we were nothing--nothing."

They were in the very midst of it, crowded together, leaning over, stretching necks and breathing quickly with excitement, when Marco

lifted his head. Some mysterious impulse made him do it in spite of himself.

"There's my father!" he said.

The chalk dropped, everything dropped, even Samavia. The Rat was up and on his crutches as if some magic force had swung him there. How he gave the command, or if he gave it at all, not even he himself knew. But the Squad stood at salute.

Loristan was standing at the opening of the archway as Marco had stood that first day. He raised his right hand in return salute and came forward.

"I was passing the end of the street and remembered the Barracks was here," he explained. "I thought I should like to look at your men, Captain."

He smiled, but it was not a smile which made his words really a joke. He looked down at the chalk map drawn on the flagstones.

"You know that map well," he said. "Even I can see that it is Samavia. What is the Secret Party doing?"

"The messengers are trying to find a way in," answered Marco.

"We can get in there," said The Rat, pointing with a crutch. "There's a forest where we could hide and find out things."

"Reconnoiter," said Loristan, looking down. "Yes. Two stray boys could be very safe in a forest. It's a good game."

That he should be there! That he should, in his own wonderful way, have given them such a thing as this. That he should have cared enough even to look up the Barracks, was what The Rat was thinking. A batch of ragamuffins they were and nothing else, and he standing looking at them with his fine smile. There was something about him which made him seem even splendid. The Rat's heart thumped with startled joy.

"Father," said Marco, "will you watch The Rat drill us? I want you to see how well it is done."

"Captain, will you do me that honor?" Loristan said to The Rat, and to even these words he gave the right tone, neither jesting nor too serious. Because it was so right a tone, The Rat's pulses beat only with exultation. This god of his had looked at his maps, he had talked of his plans, he had come to see the soldiers who were his work! The Rat began his drill as if he had been reviewing an army.

What Loristan saw done was wonderful in its mechanical exactness.

The Squad moved like the perfect parts of a perfect machine. That they

could so do it in such space, and that they should have accomplished such precision, was an extraordinary testimonial to the military efficiency and curious qualities of this one hunchbacked, vagabond officer.

"That is magnificent!" the spectator said, when it was over. "It could not be better done. Allow me to congratulate you."

He shook The Rat's hand as if it had been a man's, and, after he had shaken it, he put his own hand lightly on the boy's shoulder and let it rest there as he talked a few minutes to them all.

He kept his talk within the game, and his clear comprehension of it added a flavor which even the dullest member of the Squad was elated by. Sometimes you couldn't understand toffs when they made a shy at being friendly, but you could understand him, and he stirred up your spirits. He didn't make jokes with you, either, as if a chap had to be kept grinning. After the few minutes were over, he went away. Then they sat down again in their circle and talked about him, because they could talk and think about nothing else. They stared at Marco furtively, feeling as if he were a creature of another world because he had lived with this man. They stared at The Rat in a new way also. The wonderful-looking hand had rested on his shoulder, and he had been told that what he had done was magnificent.

"When you said you wished your father could have seen the drill," said

The Rat, "you took my breath away. I'd never have had the cheek to think of it myself--and I'd never have dared to let you ask him, even if you wanted to do it. And he came himself! It struck me dumb."

"If he came," said Marco, "it was because he wanted to see it."

When they had finished talking, it was time for Marco and The Rat to go on their way. Loristan had given The Rat an errand. At a certain hour he was to present himself at a certain shop and receive a package.

"Let him do it alone," Loristan said to Marco. "He will be better pleased. His desire is to feel that he is trusted to do things alone."

So they parted at a street corner, Marco to walk back to No. 7 Philibert Place, The Rat to execute his commission. Marco turned into one of the better streets, through which he often passed on his way home. It was not a fashionable quarter, but it contained some respectable houses in whose windows here and there were to be seen neat cards bearing the word "Apartments," which meant that the owner of the house would let to lodgers his drawing-room or sitting-room suite.

As Marco walked up the street, he saw some one come out of the door of one of the houses and walk quickly and lightly down the pavement. It was a young woman wearing an elegant though quiet dress, and a hat which looked as if it had been bought in Paris or Vienna. She had, in fact, a slightly foreign air, and it was this, indeed, which made Marco look at

her long enough to see that she was also a graceful and lovely person. He wondered what her nationality was. Even at some yards' distance he could see that she had long dark eyes and a curved mouth which seemed to be smiling to itself. He thought she might be Spanish or Italian.

He was trying to decide which of the two countries she belonged to, as she drew near to him, but quite suddenly the curved mouth ceased smiling as her foot seemed to catch in a break in the pavement, and she so lost her balance that she would have fallen if he had not leaped forward and caught her.

She was light and slender, and he was a strong lad and managed to steady her. An expression of sharp momentary anguish crossed her face.

"I hope you are not hurt," Marco said.

She bit her lip and clutched his shoulder very hard with her slim hand.

"I have twisted my ankle," she answered. "I am afraid I have twisted it badly. Thank you for saving me. I should have had a bad fall."

Her long, dark eyes were very sweet and grateful. She tried to smile, but there was such distress under the effort that Marco was afraid she must have hurt herself very much.

"Can you stand on your foot at all?" he asked.

"I can stand a little now," she said, "but I might not be able to stand in a few minutes. I must get back to the house while I can bear to touch the ground with it. I am so sorry. I am afraid I shall have to ask you to go with me. Fortunately it is only a few yards away."

"Yes," Marco answered. "I saw you come out of the house. If you will lean on my shoulder, I can soon help you back. I am glad to do it. Shall we try now?"

She had a gentle and soft manner which would have appealed to any boy. Her voice was musical and her enunciation exquisite.

Whether she was Spanish or Italian, it was easy to imagine her a person who did not always live in London lodgings, even of the better class.

"If you please," she answered him. "It is very kind of you. You are very strong, I see. But I am glad to have only a few steps to go."

She rested on his shoulder as well as on her umbrella, but it was plain that every movement gave her intense pain. She caught her lip with her teeth, and Marco thought she turned white. He could not help liking her. She was so lovely and gracious and brave. He could not bear to see the suffering in her face.

"I am so sorry!" he said, as he helped her, and his boy's voice had

something of the wonderful sympathetic tone of Loristan's. The beautiful lady herself remarked it, and thought how unlike it was to the ordinary boy-voice.

"I have a latch-key," she said, when they stood on the low step.

She found the latch-key in her purse and opened the door. Marco helped her into the entrance-hall. She sat down at once in a chair near the hat-stand. The place was quite plain and old-fashioned inside.

"Shall I ring the front-door bell to call some one?" Marco inquired.

"I am afraid that the servants are out," she answered. "They had a holiday. Will you kindly close the door? I shall be obliged to ask you to help me into the sitting-room at the end of the hall. I shall find all I want there--if you will kindly hand me a few things. Some one may come in presently--perhaps one of the other lodgers--and, even if I am alone for an hour or so, it will not really matter."

"Perhaps I can find the landlady," Marco suggested. The beautiful person smiled.

"She has gone to her sister's wedding. That is why I was going out to spend the day myself. I arranged the plan to accommodate her. How good you are! I shall be quite comfortable directly, really. I can get to my easy-chair in the sitting-room now I have rested a little."

Marco helped her to her feet, and her sharp, involuntary exclamation of pain made him wince internally. Perhaps it was a worse sprain than she knew.

The house was of the early-Victorian London order. A "front lobby" with a dining-room on the right hand, and a "back lobby," after the foot of the stairs was passed, out of which opened the basement kitchen staircase and a sitting-room looking out on a gloomy flagged back yard inclosed by high walls. The sitting-room was rather gloomy itself, but there were a few luxurious things among the ordinary furnishings. There was an easy-chair with a small table near it, and on the table were a silver lamp and some rather elegant trifles. Marco helped his charge to the easy-chair and put a cushion from the sofa under her foot. He did it very gently, and, as he rose after doing it, he saw that the long, soft dark eyes were looking at him in a curious way.

"I must go away now," he said, "but I do not like to leave you. May I go for a doctor?"

"How dear you are!" she exclaimed. "But I do not want one, thank you. I know exactly what to do for a sprained ankle. And perhaps mine is not really a sprain. I am going to take off my shoe and see."

"May I help you?" Marco asked, and he kneeled down again and carefully unfastened her shoe and withdrew it from her foot. It was a slender and

delicate foot in a silk stocking, and she bent and gently touched and rubbed it.

"No," she said, when she raised herself, "I do not think it is a sprain. Now that the shoe is off and the foot rests on the cushion, it is much more comfortable, much more. Thank you, thank you. If you had not been passing I might have had a dangerous fall."

"I am very glad to have been able to help you," Marco answered, with an air of relief. "Now I must go, if you think you will be all right."

"Don't go yet," she said, holding out her hand. "I should like to know you a little better, if I may. I am so grateful. I should like to talk to you. You have such beautiful manners for a boy," she ended, with a pretty, kind laugh, "and I believe I know where you got them from."

"You are very kind to me," Marco answered, wondering if he did not redden a little. "But I must go because my father will--"

"Your father would let you stay and talk to me," she said, with even a prettier kindness than before. "It is from him you have inherited your beautiful manner. He was once a friend of mine. I hope he is my friend still, though perhaps he has forgotten me."

All that Marco had ever learned and all that he had ever trained himself to remember, quickly rushed back upon him now, because he had a clear

and rapidly working brain, and had not lived the ordinary boy's life. Here was a beautiful lady of whom he knew nothing at all but that she had twisted her foot in the street and he had helped her back into her house. If silence was still the order, it was not for him to know things or ask questions or answer them. She might be the loveliest lady in the world and his father her dearest friend, but, even if this were so, he could best serve them both by obeying her friend's commands with all courtesy, and forgetting no instruction he had given.

"I do not think my father ever forgets any one," he answered.

"No, I am sure he does not," she said softly. "Has he been to Samavia during the last three years?"

Marco paused a moment.

"Perhaps I am not the boy you think I am," he said. "My father has never been to Samavia."

"He has not? But--you are Marco Loristan?"

"Yes. That is my name."

Suddenly she leaned forward and her long lovely eyes filled with fire.

"Then you are a Samavian, and you know of the disasters overwhelming us.

You know all the hideousness and barbarity of what is being done. Your father's son must know it all!"

"Every one knows it," said Marco.

"But it is your country--your own! Your blood must burn in your veins!"

Marco stood quite still and looked at her. His eyes told whether his blood burned or not, but he did not speak. His look was answer enough, since he did not wish to say anything.

"What does your father think? I am a Samavian myself, and I think night and day. What does he think of the rumor about the descendant of the Lost Prince? Does he believe it?"

Marco was thinking very rapidly. Her beautiful face was glowing with emotion, her beautiful voice trembled. That she should be a Samavian, and love Samavia, and pour her feeling forth even to a boy, was deeply moving to him. But howsoever one was moved, one must remember that silence was still the order. When one was very young, one must remember orders first of all.

"It might be only a newspaper story," he said. "He says one cannot trust such things. If you know him, you know he is very calm."

"Has he taught you to be calm too?" she said pathetically. "You are only

a boy. Boys are not calm. Neither are women when their hearts are wrung. Oh, my Samavia! Oh, my poor little country! My brave, tortured country!" and with a sudden sob she covered her face with her hands.

A great lump mounted to Marco's throat. Boys could not cry, but he knew what she meant when he said her heart was wrung.

When she lifted her head, the tears in her eyes made them softer than ever.

"If I were a million Samavians instead of one woman, I should know what to do!" she cried. "If your father were a million Samavians, he would know, too. He would find Ivor's descendant, if he is on the earth, and he would end all this horror!"

"Who would not end it if they could?" cried Marco, quite fiercely.

"But men like your father, men who are Samavians, must think night and day about it as I do," she impetuously insisted. "You see, I cannot help pouring my thoughts out even to a boy--because he is a Samavian. Only Samavians care. Samavia seems so little and unimportant to other people. They don't even seem to know that the blood she is pouring forth pours from human veins and beating human hearts. Men like your father must think, and plan, and feel that they must--must find a way. Even a woman feels it. Even a boy must. Stefan Loristan cannot be sitting quietly at home, knowing that Samavian hearts are being shot through and Samavian

blood poured forth. He cannot think and say nothing!"

Marco started in spite of himself. He felt as if his father had been struck in the face. How dare she say such words! Big as he was, suddenly he looked bigger, and the beautiful lady saw that he did.

"He is my father," he said slowly.

She was a clever, beautiful person, and saw that she had made a great mistake.

"You must forgive me," she exclaimed. "I used the wrong words because I was excited. That is the way with women. You must see that I meant that I knew he was giving his heart and strength, his whole being, to Samavia, even though he must stay in London."

She started and turned her head to listen to the sound of some one using the latch-key and opening the front door. The some one came in with the heavy step of a man.

"It is one of the lodgers," she said. "I think it is the one who lives in the third floor sitting-room."

"Then you won't be alone when I go," said Marco. "I am glad some one has come. I will say good-morning. May I tell my father your name?"

"Tell me that you are not angry with me for expressing myself so awkwardly," she said.

"You couldn't have meant it. I know that," Marco answered boyishly. "You couldn't."

"No, I couldn't," she repeated, with the same emphasis on the words.

She took a card from a silver case on the table and gave it to him.

"Your father will remember my name," she said. "I hope he will let me see him and tell him how you took care of me."

She shook his hand warmly and let him go. But just as he reached the door she spoke again.

"Oh, may I ask you to do one thing more before you leave me?" she said suddenly. "I hope you won't mind. Will you run up-stairs into the drawing-room and bring me the purple book from the small table? I shall not mind being alone if I have something to read."

"A purple book? On a small table?" said Marco.

"Between the two long windows," she smiled back at him.

The drawing-room of such houses as these is always to be reached by one

short flight of stairs.

Marco ran up lightly.

XIV

MARCO DOES NOT ANSWER

By the time he turned the corner of the stairs, the beautiful lady had risen from her seat in the back room and walked into the dining-room at the front. A heavily-built, dark-bearded man was standing inside the door as if waiting for her.

"I could do nothing with him," she said at once, in her soft voice, speaking quite prettily and gently, as if what she said was the most natural thing in the world. "I managed the little trick of the sprained foot really well, and got him into the house. He is an amiable boy with perfect manners, and I thought it might be easy to surprise him into saying more than he knew he was saying. You can generally do that with children and young things. But he either knows nothing or has been trained to hold his tongue. He's not stupid, and he's of a high spirit. I made a pathetic little scene about Samavia, because I saw he could be