

Perhaps the stillness, perhaps the darkness, perhaps the purring of the mother cat, probably all three, caused his thoughts to begin to travel through his mind slowly and more slowly. At last they ceased and he fell asleep. The mother cat purred for some time, and then fell asleep herself.

XV

A SOUND IN A DREAM

Marco slept peacefully for several hours. There was nothing to awaken him during that time. But at the end of it, his sleep was penetrated by a definite sound. He had dreamed of hearing a voice at a distance, and, as he tried in his dream to hear what it said, a brief metallic ringing sound awakened him outright. It was over by the time he was fully conscious, and at once he realized that the voice of his dream had been a real one, and was speaking still. It was the Lovely Person's voice, and she was speaking rapidly, as if she were in the greatest haste. She was speaking through the door.

"You will have to search for it," was all he heard. "I have not a

moment!" And, as he listened to her hurriedly departing feet, there came to him with their hastening echoes the words, "You are too good for the cellar. I like you!"

He sprang to the door and tried it, but it was still locked. The feet ran up the cellar steps and through the upper hall, and the front door closed with a bang. The two people had gone away, as they had threatened. The voice had been excited as well as hurried. Something had happened to frighten them, and they had left the house in great haste.

Marco turned and stood with his back against the door. The cat had awakened and she was gazing at him with her green eyes. She began to purr encouragingly. She really helped Marco to think. He was thinking with all his might and trying to remember.

"What did she come for? She came for something," he said to himself. "What did she say? I only heard part of it, because I was asleep. The voice in the dream was part of it. The part I heard was, 'You will have to search for it. I have not a moment.' And as she ran down the passage, she called back, 'You are too good for the cellar. I like you.'" He said the words over and over again and tried to recall exactly how they had sounded, and also to recall the voice which had seemed to be part of a dream but had been a real thing. Then he began to try his favorite experiment. As he often tried the experiment of commanding his mind to go to sleep, so he frequently experimented on commanding it to work for him--to help him to remember, to understand, and to argue about things

clearly.

"Reason this out for me," he said to it now, quite naturally and calmly.

"Show me what it means."

What did she come for? It was certain that she was in too great a hurry to be able, without a reason, to spare the time to come. What was the reason? She had said she liked him. Then she came because she liked him. If she liked him, she came to do something which was not unfriendly. The only good thing she could do for him was something which would help him to get out of the cellar. She had said twice that he was too good for the cellar. If he had been awake, he would have heard all she said and have understood what she wanted him to do or meant to do for him. He must not stop even to think of that. The first words he had heard--what had they been? They had been less clear to him than her last because he had heard them only as he was awakening. But he thought he was sure that they had been, "You will have to search for it." Search for it. For what? He thought and thought. What must he search for?

He sat down on the floor of the cellar and held his head in his hands, pressing his eyes so hard that curious lights floated before them.

"Tell me! Tell me!" he said to that part of his being which the Buddhist anchorite had said held all knowledge and could tell a man everything if he called upon it in the right spirit.

And in a few minutes, he recalled something which seemed so much a part of his sleep that he had not been sure that he had not dreamed it. The ringing sound! He sprang up on his feet with a little gasping shout. The ringing sound! It had been the ring of metal, striking as it fell. Anything made of metal might have sounded like that. She had thrown something made of metal into the cellar. She had thrown it through the slit in the bricks near the door. She liked him, and said he was too good for his prison. She had thrown to him the only thing which could set him free. She had thrown him the key of the cellar!

For a few minutes the feelings which surged through him were so full of strong excitement that they set his brain in a whirl. He knew what his father would say--that would not do. If he was to think, he must hold himself still and not let even joy overcome him. The key was in the black little cellar, and he must find it in the dark. Even the woman who liked him enough to give him a chance of freedom knew that she must not open the door and let him out. There must be a delay. He would have to find the key himself, and it would be sure to take time. The chances were that they would be at a safe enough distance before he could get out.

"I will kneel down and crawl on my hands and knees," he said.

"I will crawl back and forth and go over every inch of the floor with my hands until I find it. If I go over every inch, I shall find it."

So he kneeled down and began to crawl, and the cat watched him and purred.

"We shall get out, Puss-cat," he said to her. "I told you we should."

He crawled from the door to the wall at the side of the shelves, and then he crawled back again. The key might be quite a small one, and it was necessary that he should pass his hands over every inch, as he had said. The difficulty was to be sure, in the darkness, that he did not miss an inch. Sometimes he was not sure enough, and then he went over the ground again. He crawled backward and forward, and he crawled forward and backward. He crawled crosswise and lengthwise, he crawled diagonally, and he crawled round and round. But he did not find the key. If he had had only a little light, but he had none. He was so absorbed in his search that he did not know he had been engaged in it for several hours, and that it was the middle of the night. But at last he realized that he must stop for a rest, because his knees were beginning to feel bruised, and the skin of his hands was sore as a result of the rubbing on the flags. The cat and her kittens had gone to sleep and awakened again two or three times.

"But it is somewhere!" he said obstinately. "It is inside the cellar. I heard something fall which was made of metal. That was the ringing sound which awakened me."

When he stood up, he found his body ached and he was very tired. He

stretched himself and exercised his arms and legs.

"I wonder how long I have been crawling about," he thought. "But the key is in the cellar. It is in the cellar."

He sat down near the cat and her family, and, laying his arm on the shelf above her, rested his head on it. He began to think of another experiment.

"I am so tired, I believe I shall go to sleep again. 'Thought which Knows All' "--he was quoting something the hermit had said to Loristan in their midnight talk--"Thought which Knows All! Show me this little thing. Lead me to it when I awake."

And he did fall asleep, sound and fast.

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He did not know that he slept all the rest of the night. But he did. When he awakened, it was daylight in the streets, and the milk-carts were beginning to jingle about, and the early postmen were knocking big double-knocks at front doors. The cat may have heard the milk-carts, but the actual fact was that she herself was hungry and wanted to go in search of food. Just as Marco lifted his head from his arm and sat up, she jumped down from her shelf and went to the door. She had expected to find it ajar as it had been before. When she found it shut, she

scratched at it and was disturbed to find this of no use. Because she knew Marco was in the cellar, she felt she had a friend who would assist her, and she miaued appealingly.

This reminded Marco of the key.

"I will when I have found it," he said. "It is inside the cellar."

The cat miaued again, this time very anxiously indeed. The kittens heard her and began to squirm and squeak piteously.

"Lead me to this little thing," said Marco, as if speaking to something in the darkness about him, and he got up.

He put his hand out toward the kittens, and it touched something lying not far from them. It must have been lying near his elbow all night while he slept.

It was the key! It had fallen upon the shelf, and not on the floor at all.

Marco picked it up and then stood still a moment. He made the sign of the cross.

Then he found his way to the door and fumbled until he found the keyhole and got the key into it. Then he turned it and pushed the door open--and

the cat ran out into the passage before him.

XVI

THE RAT TO THE RESCUE

Marco walked through the passage and into the kitchen part of the basement. The doors were all locked, and they were solid doors. He ran up the flagged steps and found the door at the top shut and bolted also, and that too was a solid door. His jailers had plainly made sure that it should take time enough for him to make his way into the world, even after he got out of the wine-cellar.

The cat had run away to some part of the place where mice were plentiful. Marco was by this time rather gnawingly hungry himself. If he could get into the kitchen, he might find some fragments of food left in a cupboard; but there was no moving the locked door. He tried the outlet into the area, but that was immovable. Then he saw near it a smaller door. It was evidently the entrance to the coal-cellar under the pavement. This was proved by the fact that trodden coal-dust marked the flagstones, and near it stood a scuttle with coal in it.