

his business to come and get a door open in an empty house where a boy who was a street singer had got locked up in a cellar.

## XVII

"IT IS A VERY BAD SIGN"

The policeman was not so much excited as out of temper. He did not know what Marco knew or what The Rat knew. Some common lad had got himself locked up in a house, and some one would have to go to the landlord and get a key from him. He had no intention of laying himself open to the law by breaking into a private house with his truncheon, as The Rat expected him to do.

"He got himself in through some of his larks, and he'll have to wait till he's got out without smashing locks," he growled, shaking the area door. "How did you get in there?" he shouted.

It was not easy for Marco to explain through a keyhole that he had come in to help a lady who had met with an accident. The policeman thought this mere boy's talk. As to the rest of the story, Marco knew that it could not be related at all without saying things which could not be

explained to any one but his father. He quickly made up his mind that he must let it be believed that he had been locked in by some queer accident. It must be supposed that the people had not remembered, in their haste, that he had not yet left the house.

When the young clerk from the house agency came with the keys, he was much disturbed and bewildered after he got inside.

"They've made a bolt of it," he said. "That happens now and then, but there's something queer about this. What did they lock these doors in the basement for, and the one on the stairs? What did they say to you?" he asked Marco, staring at him suspiciously.

"They said they were obliged to go suddenly," Marco answered.

"What were you doing in the basement?"

"The man took me down."

"And left you there and bolted? He must have been in a hurry."

"The lady said they had not a moment's time."

"Her ankle must have got well in short order," said the young man.

"I knew nothing about them," answered Marco. "I had never seen them

before."

"The police were after them," the young man said. "That's what I should say. They paid three months' rent in advance, and they have only been here two. Some of these foreign spies lurking about London; that's what they were."

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The Rat had not waited until the keys arrived. He had swung himself at his swiftest pace back through the streets to No. 7 Philibert Place. People turned and stared at his wild pale face as he almost shot past them.

He had left himself barely breath enough to speak with when he reached the house and banged on the door with his crutch to save time.

Both Loristan and Lazarus came to answer.

The Rat leaned against the door gasping.

"He's found! He's all right!" he panted. "Some one had locked him in a house and left him. They've sent for the keys. I'm going back. Brandon Terrace, No. 10."

Loristan and Lazarus exchanged glances. Both of them were at the moment

as pale as The Rat.

"Help him into the house," said Loristan to Lazarus. "He must stay here and rest. We will go." The Rat knew it was an order.

He did not like it, but he obeyed.

"This is a bad sign, Master," said Lazarus, as they went out together.

"It is a very bad one," answered Loristan.

"God of the Right, defend us!" Lazarus groaned.

"Amen!" said Loristan. "Amen!"

The group had become a small crowd by the time they reached Brandon Terrace. Marco had not found it easy to leave the place because he was being questioned. Neither the policeman nor the agent's clerk seemed willing to relinquish the idea that he could give them some information about the absconding pair.

The entrance of Loristan produced its usual effect. The agent's clerk lifted his hat, and the policeman stood straight and made salute. Neither of them realized that the tall man's clothes were worn and threadbare. They felt only that a personage was before them, and that it was not possible to question his air of absolute and serene authority.

He laid his hand on Marco's shoulder and held it there as he spoke. When Marco looked up at him and felt the closeness of his touch, it seemed as if it were an embrace--as if he had caught him to his breast.

"My boy knew nothing of these people," he said. "That I can guarantee. He had seen neither of them before. His entering the house was the result of no boyish trick. He has been shut up in this place for nearly twenty-four hours and has had no food. I must take him home. This is my address." He handed the young man a card.

Then they went home together, and all the way to Philibert Place Loristan's firm hand held closely to his boy's shoulder as if he could not endure to let him go. But on the way they said very little.

"Father," Marco said, rather hoarsely, when they first got away from the house in the terrace, "I can't talk well in the street. For one thing, I am so glad to be with you again. It seemed as if--it might turn out badly."

"Beloved one," Loristan said the words in their own Samavian, "until you are fed and at rest, you shall not talk at all."

Afterward, when he was himself again and was allowed to tell his strange story, Marco found that both his father and Lazarus had at once had suspicions when he had not returned. They knew no ordinary event could have kept him. They were sure that he must have been detained against

his will, and they were also sure that, if he had been so detained, it could only have been for reasons they could guess at.

"This was the card that she gave me," Marco said, and he handed it to Loristan. "She said you would remember the name." Loristan looked at the lettering with an ironic half-smile.

"I never heard it before," he replied. "She would not send me a name I knew. Probably I have never seen either of them. But I know the work they do. They are spies of the Maranovitch, and suspect that I know something of the Lost Prince. They believed they could terrify you into saying things which would be a clue. Men and women of their class will use desperate means to gain their end."

"Might they--have left me as they threatened?" Marco asked him.

"They would scarcely have dared, I think. Too great a hue and cry would have been raised by the discovery of such a crime. Too many detectives would have been set at work to track them."

But the look in his father's eyes as he spoke, and the pressure of the hand he stretched out to touch him, made Marco's heart thrill. He had won a new love and trust from his father. When they sat together and talked that night, they were closer to each other's souls than they had ever been before.

They sat in the firelight, Marco upon the worn hearth-rug, and they talked about Samavia--about the war and its heart-rending struggles, and about how they might end.

"Do you think that some time we might be exiles no longer?" the boy said wistfully. "Do you think we might go there together--and see it--you and I, Father?"

There was a silence for a while. Loristan looked into the sinking bed of red coal.

"For years--for years I have made for my soul that image," he said slowly. "When I think of my friend on the side of the Himalayan Mountains, I say, 'The Thought which Thought the World may give us that also!'"