

XIX

"THAT IS ONE!"

A week had not passed before Marco brought to The Rat in their bedroom an envelope containing a number of slips of paper on each of which was written something.

"This is another part of the game," he said gravely. "Let us sit down together by the table and study it."

They sat down and examined what was written on the slips. At the head of each was the name of one of the places with which Marco had connected a face he had sketched. Below were clear and concise directions as to how it was to be reached and the words to be said when each individual was encountered.

"This person is to be found at his stall in the market," was written of the vacant-faced peasant. "You will first attract his attention by asking the price of something. When he is looking at you, touch your left thumb lightly with the forefinger of your right hand. Then utter in a low distinct tone the words 'The Lamp is lighted.' That is all you are to do."

Sometimes the directions were not quite so simple, but they were all

instructions of the same order. The originals of the sketches were to be sought out--always with precaution which should conceal that they were being sought at all, and always in such a manner as would cause an encounter to appear to be mere chance. Then certain words were to be uttered, but always without attracting the attention of any bystander or passer-by.

The boys worked at their task through the entire day. They concentrated all their powers upon it. They wrote and re-wrote--they repeated to each other what they committed to memory as if it were a lesson. Marco worked with the greater ease and more rapidly, because exercise of this order had been his practice and entertainment from his babyhood. The Rat, however, almost kept pace with him, as he had been born with a phenomenal memory and his eagerness and desire were a fury.

But throughout the entire day neither of them once referred to what they were doing as anything but "the game."

At night, it is true, each found himself lying awake and thinking. It was The Rat who broke the silence from his sofa.

"It is what the messengers of the Secret Party would be ordered to do when they were sent out to give the Sign for the Rising," he said.

"I made that up the first day I invented the party, didn't I?"

"Yes," answered Marco.

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After a third day's concentration they knew by heart everything given to them to learn. That night Loristan put them through an examination.

"Can you write these things?" he asked, after each had repeated them and emerged safely from all cross-questioning.

Each boy wrote them correctly from memory.

"Write yours in French--in German--in Russian--in Samavian," Loristan said to Marco.

"All you have told me to do and to learn is part of myself, Father," Marco said in the end. "It is part of me, as if it were my hand or my eyes--or my heart."

"I believe that is true," answered Loristan.

He was pale that night and there was a shadow on his face. His eyes held a great longing as they rested on Marco. It was a yearning which had a sort of dread in it.

Lazarus also did not seem quite himself. He was red instead of pale, and his movements were uncertain and restless. He cleared his throat

nervously at intervals and more than once left his chair as if to look for something.

It was almost midnight when Loristan, standing near Marco, put his arm round his shoulders.

"The Game"--he began, and then was silent a few moments while Marco felt his arm tighten its hold. Both Marco and The Rat felt a hard quick beat in their breasts, and, because of this and because the pause seemed long, Marco spoke.

"The Game--yes, Father?" he said.

"The Game is about to give you work to do--both of you," Loristan answered.

Lazarus cleared his throat and walked to the easel in the corner of the room. But he only changed the position of a piece of drawing-paper on it and then came back.

"In two days you are to go to Paris--as you," to The Rat, "planned in the game."

"As I planned?" The Rat barely breathed the words.

"Yes," answered Loristan. "The instructions you have learned you will

carry out. There is no more to be done than to manage to approach certain persons closely enough to be able to utter certain words to them."

"Only two young strollers whom no man could suspect," put in Lazarus in an astonishingly rough and shaky voice. "They could pass near the Emperor himself without danger. The young Master--" his voice became so hoarse that he was obligated to clear it loudly--"the young Master must carry himself less finely. It would be well to shuffle a little and slouch as if he were of the common people."

"Yes," said The Rat hastily. "He must do that. I can teach him. He holds his head and his shoulders like a gentleman. He must look like a street lad."

"I will look like one," said Marco, with determination.

"I will trust you to remind him," Loristan said to The Rat, and he said it with gravity. "That will be your charge."

As he lay upon his pillow that night, it seemed to Marco as if a load had lifted itself from his heart. It was the load of uncertainty and longing. He had so long borne the pain of feeling that he was too young to be allowed to serve in any way. His dreams had never been wild ones--they had in fact always been boyish and modest, howsoever romantic. But now no dream which could have passed through his brain

would have seemed so wonderful as this--that the hour had come--the hour had come--and that he, Marco, was to be its messenger. He was to do no dramatic deed and be announced by no flourish of heralds. No one would know what he did. What he achieved could only be attained if he remained obscure and unknown and seemed to every one only a common ordinary boy who knew nothing whatever of important things. But his father had given to him a gift so splendid that he trembled with awe and joy as he thought of it. The Game had become real. He and The Rat were to carry with them The Sign, and it would be like carrying a tiny lamp to set aflame lights which would blaze from one mountain-top to another until half the world seemed on fire.

As he had awakened out of his sleep when Lazarus touched him, so he awakened in the middle of the night again. But he was not aroused by a touch. When he opened his eyes he knew it was a look which had penetrated his sleep--a look in the eyes of his father who was standing by his side. In the road outside there was the utter silence he had noticed the night of the Prince's first visit--the only light was that of the lamp in the street, but he could see Loristan's face clearly enough to know that the mere intensity of his gaze had awakened him. The Rat was sleeping profoundly. Loristan spoke in Samavian and under his breath.

"Beloved one," he said. "You are very young. Because I am your father--just at this hour I can feel nothing else. I have trained you for this through all the years of your life. I am proud of your young

maturity and strength but--Beloved--you are a child! Can I do this thing!"

For the moment, his face and his voice were scarcely like his own.

He kneeled by the bedside, and, as he did it, Marco half sitting up caught his hand and held it hard against his breast.

"Father, I know!" he cried under his breath also. "It is true. I am a child but am I not a man also? You yourself said it. I always knew that you were teaching me to be one--for some reason. It was my secret that I knew it. I learned well because I never forgot it. And I learned. Did I not?"

He was so eager that he looked more like a boy than ever. But his young strength and courage were splendid to see. Loristan knew him through and through and read every boyish thought of his.

"Yes," he answered slowly. "You did your part--and now if I--drew back--you would feel that I had failed you--failed you."

"You!" Marco breathed it proudly. "You could not fail even the weakest thing in the world."

There was a moment's silence in which the two pairs of eyes dwelt on each other with the deepest meaning, and then Loristan rose to his feet.

"The end will be all that our hearts most wish," he said. "To-morrow you may begin the new part of 'the Game.' You may go to Paris."

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When the train which was to meet the boat that crossed from Dover to Calais steamed out of the noisy Charing Cross Station, it carried in a third-class carriage two shabby boys. One of them would have been a handsome lad if he had not carried himself slouchingly and walked with a street lad's careless shuffling gait. The other was a cripple who moved slowly, and apparently with difficulty, on crutches. There was nothing remarkable or picturesque enough about them to attract attention. They sat in the corner of the carriage and neither talked much nor seemed to be particularly interested in the journey or each other. When they went on board the steamer, they were soon lost among the commoner passengers and in fact found for themselves a secluded place which was not advantageous enough to be wanted by any one else.

"What can such a poor-looking pair of lads be going to Paris for?" some one asked his companion.

"Not for pleasure, certainly; perhaps to get work," was the casual answer.

In the evening they reached Paris, and Marco led the way to a small café

in a side-street where they got some cheap food. In the same side-street they found a bed they could share for the night in a tiny room over a baker's shop.

The Rat was too much excited to be ready to go to bed early. He begged Marco to guide him about the brilliant streets. They went slowly along the broad Avenue des Champs Elysees under the lights glittering among the horse-chestnut trees. The Rat's sharp eyes took it all in--the light of the cafés among the embowering trees, the many carriages rolling by, the people who loitered and laughed or sat at little tables drinking wine and listening to music, the broad stream of life which flowed on to the Arc de Triomphe and back again.

"It's brighter and clearer than London," he said to Marco. "The people look as if they were having more fun than they do in England."

The Place de la Concorde spreading its stately spaces--a world of illumination, movement, and majestic beauty--held him as though by a fascination. He wanted to stand and stare at it, first from one point of view and then from another. It was bigger and more wonderful than he had been able to picture it when Marco had described it to him and told him of the part it had played in the days of the French Revolution when the guillotine had stood in it and the tumbrils had emptied themselves at the foot of its steps.

He stood near the Obelisk a long time without speaking.

"I can see it all happening," he said at last, and he pulled Marco away.

Before they returned home, they found their way to a large house which stood in a courtyard. In the iron work of the handsome gates which shut it in was wrought a gilded coronet. The gates were closed and the house was not brightly lighted.

They walked past it and round it without speaking, but, when they neared the entrance for the second time, The Rat said in a low tone:

"She is five feet seven, has black hair, a nose with a high bridge, her eyebrows are black and almost meet across it, she has a pale olive skin and holds her head proudly."

"That is the one," Marco answered.

They were a week in Paris and each day passed this big house. There were certain hours when great ladies were more likely to go out and come in than they were at others. Marco knew this, and they managed to be within sight of the house or to pass it at these hours. For two days they saw no sign of the person they wished to see, but one morning the gates were thrown open and they saw flowers and palms being taken in.

"She has been away and is coming back," said Marco. The next day they passed three times--once at the hour when fashionable women drive out to

do their shopping, once at the time when afternoon visiting is most likely to begin, and once when the streets were brilliant with lights and the carriages had begun to roll by to dinner-parties and theaters.

Then, as they stood at a little distance from the iron gates, a carriage drove through them and stopped before the big open door which was thrown open by two tall footmen in splendid livery.

"She is coming out," said The Rat.

They would be able to see her plainly when she came, because the lights over the entrance were so bright.

Marco slipped from under his coat sleeve a carefully made sketch.

He looked at it and The Rat looked at it.

A footman stood erect on each side of the open door. The footman who sat with the coachman had got down and was waiting by the carriage. Marco and The Rat glanced again with furtive haste at the sketch. A handsome woman appeared upon the threshold. She paused and gave some order to the

footman who stood on the right. Then she came out in the full light and got into the carriage which drove out of the courtyard and quite near the place where the two boys waited.

When it was gone, Marco drew a long breath as he tore the sketch into very small pieces indeed. He did not throw them away but put them into his pocket.

The Rat drew a long breath also.

"Yes," he said positively.

"Yes," said Marco.

When they were safely shut up in their room over the baker's shop, they discussed the chances of their being able to pass her in such a way as would seem accidental. Two common boys could not enter the courtyard. There was a back entrance for tradespeople and messengers. When she drove, she would always enter her carriage from the same place. Unless she sometimes walked, they could not approach her. What should be done? The thing was difficult. After they had talked some time, The Rat sat and gnawed his nails.

"To-morrow afternoon," he broke out at last, "we'll watch and see if her carriage drives in for her--then, when she comes to the door, I'll go in and begin to beg. The servant will think I'm a foreigner and don't know what I'm doing. You can come after me to tell me to come away, because you know better than I do that I shall be ordered out. She may be a good-natured woman and listen to us--and you might get near her."

"We might try it," Marco answered. "It might work. We will try it."

The Rat never failed to treat him as his leader. He had begged Loristan to let him come with Marco as his servant, and his servant he had been more than willing to be. When Loristan had said he should be his aide-de-camp, he had felt his trust lifted to a military dignity which uplifted him with it. As his aide-de-camp he must serve him, watch him, obey his lightest wish, make everything easy for him. Sometimes, Marco was troubled by the way in which he insisted on serving him, this queer, once dictatorial and cantankerous lad who had begun by throwing stones at him.

"You must not wait on me," he said to him. "I must wait upon myself."

The Rat rather flushed.

"He told me that he would let me come with you as your aide-de camp," he said. "It--it's part of the game. It makes things easier if we keep up the game."

It would have attracted attention if they had spent too much time in the vicinity of the big house. So it happened that the next afternoon the great lady evidently drove out at an hour when they were not watching for her. They were on their way to try if they could carry out their plan, when, as they walked together along the Rue Royale, The Rat suddenly touched Marco's elbow.

"The carriage stands before the shop with lace in the windows," he whispered hurriedly.

Marco saw and recognized it at once. The owner had evidently gone into the shop to buy something. This was a better chance than they had hoped for, and, when they approached the carriage itself, they saw that there was another point in their favor. Inside were no less than three beautiful little Pekingese spaniels that looked exactly alike. They were all trying to look out of the window and were pushing against each other. They were so perfect and so pretty that few people passed by without looking at them. What better excuse could two boys have for lingering about a place?

They stopped and, standing a little distance away, began to look at and discuss them and laugh at their excited little antics. Through the shop-window Marco caught a glimpse of the great lady.

"She does not look much interested. She won't stay long," he whispered, and added aloud, "that little one is the master. See how he pushes the others aside! He is stronger than the other two, though he is so small."

"He can snap, too," said The Rat.

"She is coming now," warned Marco, and then laughed aloud as if at the Pekingese, which, catching sight of their mistress at the shop-door,

began to leap and yelp for joy.

Their mistress herself smiled, and was smiling as Marco drew near her.

"May we look at them, Madame?" he said in French, and, as she made an amiable gesture of acquiescence and moved toward the carriage with him, he spoke a few words, very low but very distinctly, in Russian.

"The Lamp is lighted," he said.

The Rat was looking at her keenly, but he did not see her face change at all. What he noticed most throughout their journey was that each person to whom they gave the Sign had complete control over his or her countenance, if there were bystanders, and never betrayed by any change of expression that the words meant anything unusual.

The great lady merely went on smiling, and spoke only of the dogs, allowing Marco and himself to look at them through the window of the carriage as the footman opened the door for her to enter.

"They are beautiful little creatures," Marco said, lifting his cap, and, as the footman turned away, he uttered his few Russian words once more and moved off without even glancing at the lady again.

"That is one!" he said to The Rat that night before they went to sleep, and with a match he burned the scraps of the sketch he had torn and put

into his pocket.

XX

MARCO GOES TO THE OPERA

Their next journey was to Munich, but the night before they left Paris an unexpected thing happened.

To reach the narrow staircase which led to their bedroom it was necessary to pass through the baker's shop itself.

The baker's wife was a friendly woman who liked the two boy lodgers who were so quiet and gave no trouble. More than once she had given them a hot roll or so or a freshly baked little tartlet with fruit in the center. When Marco came in this evening, she greeted him with a nod and handed him a small parcel as he passed through.

"This was left for you this afternoon," she said. "I see you are making purchases for your journey. My man and I are very sorry you are going."

"Thank you, Madame. We also are sorry," Marco answered, taking the parcel. "They are not large purchases, you see."