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."

But neither he nor The Rat had bought anything at all, though the ordinary-looking little package was plainly addressed to him and bore the name of one of the big cheap shops. It felt as if it contained something soft.

When he reached their bedroom, The Rat was gazing out of the window watching every living thing which passed in the street below. He who had never seen anything but London was absorbed by the spell of Paris and was learning it by heart.

"Something has been sent to us. Look at this," said Marco.

The Rat was at his side at once. "What is it? Where did it come from?"

They opened the package and at first sight saw only several pairs of quite common woolen socks. As Marco took up the sock in the middle of the parcel, he felt that there was something inside it--something laid flat and carefully. He put his hand in and drew out a number of five-franc notes--not new ones, because new ones would have betrayed themselves by crackling. These were old enough to be soft. But there were enough of them to amount to a substantial sum.

"It is in small notes because poor boys would have only small ones. No one will be surprised when we change these," The Rat said.

Each of them believed the package had been sent by the great lady, but

it had been done so carefully that not the slightest clue was furnished.

To The Rat, part of the deep excitement of "the Game" was the working out of the plans and methods of each person concerned. He could not have slept without working out some scheme which might have been used in this case. It thrilled him to contemplate the difficulties the great lady might have found herself obliged to overcome.

"Perhaps," he said, after thinking it over for some time, "she went to a big common shop dressed as if she were an ordinary woman and bought the socks and pretended she was going to carry them home herself. She would do that so that she could take them into some corner and slip the money in. Then, as she wanted to have them sent from the shop, perhaps she bought some other things and asked the people to deliver the packages to different places. The socks were sent to us and the other things to some one else. She would go to a shop where no one knew her and no one would expect to see her and she would wear clothes which looked neither rich nor too poor."

He created the whole episode with all its details and explained them to Marco. It fascinated him for the entire evening and he felt relieved after it and slept well.

Even before they had left London, certain newspapers had swept out of existence the story of the descendant of the Lost Prince. This had been done by derision and light handling--by treating it as a romantic

legend.

At first, The Rat had resented this bitterly, but one day at a meal, when he had been producing arguments to prove that the story must be a true one, Loristan somehow checked him by his own silence.

"If there is such a man," he said after a pause, "it is well for him that his existence should not be believed in--for some time at least."

The Rat came to a dead stop. He felt hot for a moment and then felt cold. He saw a new idea all at once. He had been making a mistake in tactics.

No more was said but, when they were alone afterwards, he poured himself forth to Marco.

"I was a fool!" he cried out. "Why couldn't I see it for myself! Shall I tell you what I believe has been done? There is some one who has influence in England and who is a friend to Samavia. They've got the newspapers to make fun of the story so that it won't be believed. If it was believed, both the Iarovitch and the Maranovitch would be on the lookout, and the Secret Party would lose their chances. What a fool I was not to think of it! There's some one watching and working here who is a friend to Samavia."

"But there is some one in Samavia who has begun to suspect that it might

be true," Marco answered. "If there were not, I should not have been shut in the cellar. Some one thought my father knew something. The spies had orders to find out what it was."

"Yes. Yes. That's true, too!" The Rat answered anxiously. "We shall have to be very careful."

In the lining of the sleeve of Marco's coat there was a slit into which he could slip any small thing he wished to conceal and also wished to be able to reach without trouble. In this he had carried the sketch of the lady which he had torn up in Paris. When they walked in the streets of Munich, the morning after their arrival, he carried still another sketch. It was the one picturing the genial-looking old aristocrat with the sly smile.

One of the things they had learned about this one was that his chief characteristic was his passion for music. He was a patron of musicians and he spent much time in Munich because he loved its musical atmosphere
and the earnestness of its opera-goers.

"The military band plays in the Feldherrn-halle at midday. When something very good is being played, sometimes people stop their carriages so that they can listen. We will go there," said Marco.

"It's a chance," said The Rat. "We mustn't lose anything like a chance."

The day was brilliant and sunny, the people passing through the streets looked comfortable and homely, the mixture of old streets and modern ones, of ancient corners and shops and houses of the day was picturesque and cheerful. The Rat swinging through the crowd on his crutches was full of interest and exhilaration. He had begun to grow, and the change in his face and expression which had begun in London had become more noticeable. He had been given his "place," and a work to do which entitled him to hold it.

No one could have suspected them of carrying a strange and vital secret with them as they strolled along together. They seemed only two ordinary boys who looked in at shop windows and talked over their contents, and who loitered with upturned faces in the Marien-Platz before the ornate Gothic Rathaus to hear the eleven o'clock chimes play and see the painted figures of the King and Queen watch from their balcony the passing before them of the automatic tournament procession with its trumpeters and tilting knights. When the show was over and the automatic cock broke forth into his lusty farewell crow, they laughed just as any other boys would have laughed. Sometimes it would have been easy for The Rat to forget that there was anything graver in the world than the new places and new wonders he was seeing, as if he were a wandering minstrel in a story.

But in Samavia bloody battles were being fought, and bloody plans were being wrought out, and in anguished anxiety the Secret Party and the

Forgers of the Sword waited breathlessly for the Sign for which they had waited so long. And inside the lining of Marco's coat was hidden the sketched face, as the two unnoticed lads made their way to the Feldherrn-halle to hear the band play and see who might chance to be among the audience.

Because the day was sunny, and also because the band was playing a specially fine programme, the crowd in the square was larger than usual. Several vehicles had stopped, and among them were one or two which were not merely hired cabs but were the carriages of private persons.

One of them had evidently arrived early, as it was drawn up in a good position when the boys reached the corner. It was a big open carriage and a grand one, luxuriously upholstered in green. The footman and coachman wore green and silver liveries and seemed to know that people were looking at them and their master.

He was a stout, genial-looking old aristocrat with a sly smile, though, as he listened to the music, it almost forgot to be sly. In the carriage with him were a young officer and a little boy, and they also listened attentively. Standing near the carriage door were several people who were plainly friends or acquaintances, as they occasionally spoke to him. Marco touched The Rat's coat sleeve as the two boys approached.

"It would not be easy to get near him," he said. "Let us go and stand as close to the carriage as we can get without pushing. Perhaps we may hear

some one say something about where he is going after the music is over."

Yes, there was no mistaking him. He was the right man. Each of them knew by heart the creases on his stout face and the sweep of his gray moustache. But there was nothing noticeable in a boy looking for a moment at a piece of paper, and Marco sauntered a few steps to a bit of space left bare by the crowd and took a last glance at his sketch. His rule was to make sure at the final moment. The music was very good and the group about the carriage was evidently enthusiastic. There was talk and praise and comment, and the old aristocrat nodded his head repeatedly in applause.

"The Chancellor is music mad," a looker-on near the boys said to another. "At the opera every night unless serious affairs keep him away! There you may see him nodding his old head and bursting his gloves with applauding when a good thing is done. He ought to have led an orchestra or played a 'cello. He is too big for first violin."

There was a group about the carriage to the last, when the music came to an end and it drove away. There had been no possible opportunity of passing close to it even had the presence of the young officer and the boy not presented an insurmountable obstacle.

Marco and The Rat went on their way and passed by the Hof-Theater and read the bills. "Tristan and Isolde" was to be presented at night and a great singer would sing Isolde.

"He will go to hear that," both boys said at once. "He will be sure to go."

It was decided between them that Marco should go on his quest alone when night came. One boy who hung around the entrance of the Opera would be observed less than two.

"People notice crutches more than they notice legs," The Rat said. "I'd better keep out of the way unless you need me. My time hasn't come yet. Even if it doesn't come at all I've--I've been on duty. I've gone with you and I've been ready--that's what an aide-de-camp does."

He stayed at home and read such English papers as he could lay hands on and he drew plans and re-fought battles on paper.

Marco went to the opera. Even if he had not known his way to the square near the place where the Hof-Theater stood, he could easily have found it by following the groups of people in the streets who all seemed walking in one direction. There were students in their odd caps walking three or four abreast, there were young couples and older ones, and here and there whole families; there were soldiers of all ages, officers and privates; and, when talk was to be heard in passing, it was always talk about music.

For some time Marco waited in the square and watched the carriages roll

up and pass under the huge pillared portico to deposit their contents at the entrance and at once drive away in orderly sequence. He must make sure that the grand carriage with the green and silver liveries rolled up with the rest. If it came, he would buy a cheap ticket and go inside.

It was rather late when it arrived. People in Munich are not late for the opera if it can be helped, and the coachman drove up hurriedly. The green and silver footman leaped to the ground and opened the carriage door almost before it stopped. The Chancellor got out looking less genial than usual because he was afraid that he might lose some of the overture. A rosy-cheeked girl in a white frock was with him and she was evidently trying to soothe him.

"I do not think we are really late, Father," she said. "Don't feel cross, dear. It will spoil the music for you."

This was not a time in which a man's attention could be attracted quietly. Marco ran to get the ticket which would give him a place among the rows of young soldiers, artists, male and female students, and musicians who were willing to stand four or five deep throughout the performance of even the longest opera. He knew that, unless they were in one of the few boxes which belonged only to the court, the Chancellor and his rosy-cheeked daughter would be in the best seats in the front curve of the balcony which were the most desirable of the house. He soon saw them. They had secured the central places directly below the large royal box where two quiet princesses and their attendants were already

seated.

When he found he was not too late to hear the overture, the Chancellor's face become more genial than ever. He settled himself down to an evening of enjoyment and evidently forgot everything else in the world. Marco did not lose sight of him. When the audience went out between acts to promenade in the corridors, he might go also and there might be a chance to pass near to him in the crowd. He watched him closely. Sometimes his fine old face saddened at the beautiful woe of the music, sometimes it looked enraptured, and it was always evident that every note reached his soul.

The pretty daughter who sat beside him was attentive but not so enthralled. After the first act two glittering young officers appeared and made elegant and low bows, drawing their heels together as they kissed her hand. They looked sorry when they were obliged to return to their seats again.

After the second act the Chancellor sat for a few minutes as if he were in a dream. The people in the seats near him began to rise from their seats and file out into the corridors. The young officers were to be seen rising also. The rosy daughter leaned forward and touched her father's arm gently.

"She wants him to take her out," Marco thought. "He will take her because he is good-natured."

He saw him recall himself from his dream with a smile and then he rose and, after helping to arrange a silvery blue scarf round the girl's shoulders, gave her his arm just as Marco skipped out of his fourth-row standing-place.

It was a rather warm night and the corridors were full. By the time Marco had reached the balcony floor, the pair had issued from the little door and were temporarily lost in the moving numbers.

Marco quietly made his way among the crowd trying to look as if he belonged to somebody. Once or twice his strong body and his dense black eyes and lashes made people glance at him, but he was not the only boy who had been brought to the opera so he felt safe enough to stop at the foot of the stairs and watch those who went up and those who passed by. Such a miscellaneous crowd as it was made up of--good unfashionable music-lovers mixed here and there with grand people of the court and the gay world.

Suddenly he heard a low laugh and a moment later a hand lightly touched him.

"You did get out, then?" a soft voice said.

When he turned he felt his muscles stiffen. He ceased to slouch and did not smile as he looked at the speaker. What he felt was a wave of fierce

and haughty anger. It swept over him before he had time to control it.

A lovely person who seemed swathed in several shades of soft violet drapery was smiling at him with long, lovely eyes.

It was the woman who had trapped him into No. 10 Brandon Terrace.