XXI

"HELP!"

Did it take you so long to find it? asked the Lovely Person with the smile. "Of course I knew you would find it in the end. But we had to give ourselves time. How long did it take?"

Marco removed himself from beneath the touch of her hand. It was quietly done, but there was a disdain in his young face which made her wince though she pretended to shrug her shoulders amusedly.

"You refuse to answer?" she laughed.

"I refuse."

At that very moment he saw at the curve of the corridor the Chancellor and his daughter approaching slowly. The two young officers were talking gaily to the girl. They were on their way back to their box. Was he going to lose them? Was he?

The delicate hand was laid on his shoulder again, but this time he felt that it grasped him firmly.

"Naughty boy!" the soft voice said. "I am going to take you home with

me. If you struggle I shall tell these people that you are my bad boy who is here without permission. What will you answer? My escort is coming down the staircase and will help me. Do you see?" And in fact there appeared in the crowd at the head of the staircase the figure of the man he remembered.

He did see. A dampness broke out on the palms of his hands. If she did this bold thing, what could he say to those she told her lie to? How could he bring proof or explain who he was--and what story dare he tell? His protestations and struggles would merely amuse the lookers-on, who would see in them only the impotent rage of an insubordinate youngster.

There swept over him a wave of remembrance which brought back, as if he were living through it again, the moment when he had stood in the darkness of the wine cellar with his back against the door and heard the man walk away and leave him alone. He felt again as he had done then--but now he was in another land and far away from his father. He could do nothing to help himself unless Something showed him a way.

He made no sound, and the woman who held him saw only a flame leap under
his dense black lashes.

But something within him called out. It was as if he heard it. It was that strong self--the self that was Marco, and it called--it called as if it shouted.

"Help!" it called--to that Unknown Stranger Thing which had made worlds and which he and his father so often talked of and in whose power they so believed. "Help!"

The Chancellor was drawing nearer. Perhaps! Should he--?

"You are too proud to kick and shout," the voice went on. "And people would only laugh. Do you see?"

The stairs were crowded and the man who was at the head of them could only move slowly. But he had seen the boy.

Marco turned so that he could face his captor squarely as if he were going to say something in answer to her. But he was not.

Even as he made the movement of turning, the help he had called for came and he knew what he should do. And he could do two things at once--save himself and give his Sign--because, the Sign once given, the Chancellor would understand.

"He will be here in a moment. He has recognized you," the woman said.

As he glanced up the stairs, the delicate grip of her hand unconsciously slackened.

Marco whirled away from her. The bell rang which was to warn the audience that they must return to their seats and he saw the Chancellor hasten his pace.

A moment later, the old aristocrat found himself amazedly looking down at the pale face of a breathless lad who spoke to him in German and in such a manner that he could not but pause and listen.

"Sir," he was saying, "the woman in violet at the foot of the stairs is a spy. She trapped me once and she threatens to do it again. Sir, may I beg you to protect me?"

He said it low and fast. No one else could hear his words.

"What! What!" the Chancellor exclaimed.

And then, drawing a step nearer and quite as low and rapidly but with perfect distinctness, Marco uttered four words:

"The Lamp is lighted."

The Help cry had been answered instantly. Marco saw it at once in the old man's eyes, notwithstanding that he turned to look at the woman at the foot of the staircase as if she only concerned him.

"What! What!" he said again, and made a movement toward her, pulling his

large moustache with a fierce hand.

Then Marco recognized that a curious thing happened. The Lovely Person saw the movement and the gray moustache, and that instant her smile died away and she turned quite white--so white, that under the brilliant electric light she was almost green and scarcely looked lovely at all. She made a sign to the man on the staircase and slipped through the crowd like an eel. She was a slim flexible creature and never was a disappearance more wonderful in its rapidity. Between stout matrons and their thin or stout escorts and families she made her way and lost herself--but always making toward the exit. In two minutes there was no sight of her violet draperies to be seen. She was gone and so, evidently, was her male companion.

It was plain to Marco that to follow the profession of a spy was not by any means a safe thing. The Chancellor had recognized her--she had recognized the Chancellor who turned looking ferociously angry and spoke to one of the young officers.

"She and the man with her are two of the most dangerous spies in Europe, She is a Rumanian and he is a Russian. What they wanted of this innocent lad I don't pretend to know. What did she threaten?" to Marco.

Marco was feeling rather cold and sick and had lost his healthy color for the moment.

"She said she meant to take me home with her and would pretend I was her son who had come here without permission," he answered. "She believes I know something I do not." He made a hesitating but grateful bow. "The third act, sir--I must not keep you. Thank you! Thank you!"

The Chancellor moved toward the entrance door of the balcony seats, but he did it with his hand on Marco's shoulder.

"See that he gets home safely," he said to the younger of the two officers. "Send a messenger with him. He's young to be attacked by creatures of that kind."

Polite young officers naturally obey the commands of Chancellors and such dignitaries. This one found without trouble a young private who marched with Marco through the deserted streets to his lodgings. He was a stolid young Bavarian peasant and seemed to have no curiosity or even any interest in the reason for the command given him. He was in fact thinking of his sweetheart who lived near Konigsee and who had skated with him on the frozen lake last winter. He scarcely gave a glance to the schoolboy he was to escort, he neither knew nor wondered why.

The Rat had fallen asleep over his papers and lay with his head on his folded arms on the table. But he was awakened by Marco's coming into the room and sat up blinking his eyes in the effort to get them open.

"Did you see him? Did you get near enough?" he drowsed.

"Yes," Marco answered. "I got near enough."

The Rat sat upright suddenly.

"It's not been easy," he exclaimed. "I'm sure something happened--something went wrong."

"Something nearly went wrong--very nearly," answered Marco. But as he spoke he took the sketch of the Chancellor out of the slit in his sleeve and tore it and burned it with a match. "But I did get near enough. And that's two."

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They talked long, before they went to sleep that night. The Rat grew pale as he listened to the story of the woman in violet.

"I ought to have gone with you!" he said. "I see now. An aide-de-camp must always be in attendance. It would have been harder for her to manage two than one. I must always be near to watch, even if I am not close by you. If you had not come back--if you had not come back!" He struck his clenched hands together fiercely. "What should I have done!"

When Marco turned toward him from the table near which he was standing, he looked like his father.

"You would have gone on with the Game just as far as you could," he said. "You could not leave it. You remember the places, and the faces, and the Sign. There is some money; and when it was all gone, you could have begged, as we used to pretend we should. We have not had to do it yet; and it was best to save it for country places and villages. But you could have done it if you were obliged to. The Game would have to go on."

The Rat caught at his thin chest as if he had been struck breathless.

"Without you?" he gasped. "Without you?"

"Yes," said Marco. "And we must think of it, and plan in case anything like that should happen."

He stopped himself quite suddenly, and sat down, looking straight before him, as if at some far away thing he saw.

"Nothing will happen," he said. "Nothing can."

"What are you thinking of?" The Rat gulped, because his breath had not quite come back. "Why will nothing happen?"

"Because--" the boy spoke in an almost matter-of-fact tone--in quite an unexalted tone at all events, "you see I can always make a strong call,

as I did tonight."

"Did you shout?" The Rat asked. "I didn't know you shouted."

"I didn't. I said nothing aloud. But I--the myself that is in me," Marco touched himself on the breast, "called out, 'Help! Help!' with all its strength. And help came."

The Rat regarded him dubiously.

"What did it call to?" he asked.

"To the Power--to the Strength-place--to the Thought that does things. The Buddhist hermit, who told my father about it, called it 'The Thought that thought the World.'"

A reluctant suspicion betrayed itself in The Rat's eyes.

"Do you mean you prayed?" he inquired, with a slight touch of disfavor.

Marco's eyes remained fixed upon him in vague thoughtfulness for a moment or so of pause.

"I don't know," he said at last. "Perhaps it's the same thing--when you need something so much that you cry out loud for it. But it's not words, it's a strong thing without a name. I called like that when I was shut

in the wine-cellar. I remembered some of the things the old Buddhist told my father."

The Rat moved restlessly.

"The help came that time," he admitted. "How did it come to-night?"

"In that thought which flashed into my mind almost the next second. It came like lightning. All at once I knew if I ran to the Chancellor and said the woman was a spy, it would startle him into listening to me; and that then I could give him the Sign; and that when I gave him the Sign, he would know I was speaking the truth and would protect me."

"It was a splendid thought!" The Rat said. "And it was quick. But it was you who thought of it."

"All thinking is part of the Big Thought," said Marco slowly. "It knows--It knows. And the outside part of us somehow broke the chain that linked us to It. And we are always trying to mend the chain, without knowing it. That is what our thinking is--trying to mend the chain. But we shall find out how to do it sometime. The old Buddhist told my father so--just as the sun was rising from behind a high peak of the Himalayas." Then he added hastily, "I am only telling you what my father told me, and he only told me what the old hermit told him."

"Does your father believe what he told him?" The Rat's bewilderment had

become an eager and restless thing.

"Yes, he believes it. He always thought something like it, himself. That is why he is so calm and knows so well how to wait."

"Is that it!" breathed The Rat. "Is that why? Has--has he mended the chain?" And there was awe in his voice, because of this one man to whom he felt any achievement was possible.

"I believe he has," said Marco. "Don't you think so yourself?"

"He has done something," The Rat said.

He seemed to be thinking things over before he spoke again--and then even more slowly than Marco.

"If he could mend the chain," he said almost in a whisper, "he could find out where the descendant of the Lost Prince is. He would know what to do for Samavia!"

He ended the words with a start, and his whole face glowed with a new, amazed light.

"Perhaps he does know!" he cried. "If the help comes like thoughts--as yours did--perhaps his thought of letting us give the Sign was part of it. We--just we two every-day boys--are part of it!"

"The old Buddhist said--" began Marco.

"Look here!" broke in The Rat. "Tell me the whole story. I want to hear it."

It was because Loristan had heard it, and listened and believed, that The Rat had taken fire. His imagination seized upon the idea, as it would have seized on some theory of necromancy proved true and workable.

With his elbows on the table and his hands in his hair, he leaned forward, twisting a lock with restless fingers. His breath quickened.

"Tell it," he said, "I want to hear it all!"

"I shall have to tell it in my own words," Marco said. "And it won't be as wonderful as it was when my father told it to me. This is what I remember:

"My father had gone through much pain and trouble. A great load was upon him, and he had been told he was going to die before his work was done. He had gone to India, because a man he was obliged to speak to had gone there to hunt, and no one knew when he would return. My father followed him for months from one wild place to another, and, when he found him, the man would not hear or believe what he had come so far to say. Then he had jungle-fever and almost died. Once the natives left him for dead

in a bungalow in the forest, and he heard the jackals howling round him all the night. Through all the hours he was only alive enough to be conscious of two things--all the rest of him seemed gone from his body: his thought knew that his work was unfinished--and his body heard the jackals howl!"

"Was the work for Samavia?" The Rat put in quickly. "If he had died that night, the descendant of the Lost Prince never would have been found--never!" The Rat bit his lip so hard that a drop of blood started from it.

"When he was slowly coming alive again, a native, who had gone back and stayed to wait upon him, told him that near the summit of a mountain, about fifty miles away, there was a ledge which jutted out into space and hung over the valley, which was thousands of feet below. On the ledge there was a hut in which there lived an ancient Buddhist, who was a holy man, as they called him, and who had been there during time which had not been measured. They said that their grandparents and great-grandparents had known of him, though very few persons had ever seen him. It was told that the most savage beast was tame before him. They said that a man-eating tiger would stop to salute him, and that a thirsty lioness would bring her whelps to drink at the spring near his hut."

"That was a lie," said The Rat promptly.

Marco neither laughed nor frowned.

"How do we know?" he said. "It was a native's story, and it might be anything. My father neither said it was true nor false. He listened to all that was told him by natives. They said that the holy man was the brother of the stars. He knew all things past and to come, and could heal the sick. But most people, especially those who had sinful thoughts, were afraid to go near him."

"I'd like to have seen--" The Rat pondered aloud, but he did not finish.

"Before my father was well, he had made up his mind to travel to the ledge if he could. He felt as if he must go. He thought that if he were going to die, the hermit might tell him some wise thing to do for Samavia."

"He might have given him a message to leave to the Secret Ones," said The Rat.

"He was so weak when he set out on his journey that he wondered if he would reach the end of it. Part of the way he traveled by bullock cart, and part, he was carried by natives. But at last the bearers came to a place more than halfway up the mountain, and would go no further. Then they went back and left him to climb the rest of the way himself. They had traveled slowly and he had got more strength, but he was weak yet. The forest was more wonderful than anything he had ever seen. There were

tropical trees with foliage like lace, and some with huge leaves, and some of them seemed to reach the sky. Sometimes he could barely see gleams of blue through them. And vines swung down from their high branches, and caught each other, and matted together; and there were hot scents, and strange flowers, and dazzling birds darting about, and thick moss, and little cascades bursting out. The path grew narrower and steeper, and the flower scents and the sultriness made it like walking in a hothouse. He heard rustlings in the undergrowth, which might have been made by any kind of wild animal; once he stepped across a deadly snake without seeing it. But it was asleep and did not hurt him. He knew the natives had been convinced that he would not reach the ledge; but for some strange reason he believed he should. He stopped and rested many times, and he drank some milk he had brought in a canteen. The higher he climbed, the more wonderful everything was, and a strange feeling began to fill him. He said his body stopped being tired and began to feel very light. And his load lifted itself from his heart, as if it were not his load any more but belonged to something stronger. Even Samavia seemed to be safe. As he went higher and higher, and looked down the abyss at the world below, it appeared as if it were not real but only a dream he had wakened from--only a dream."

The Rat moved restlessly.

"Perhaps he was light-headed with the fever," he suggested.

"The fever had left him, and the weakness had left him," Marco answered.

"It seemed as if he had never really been ill at all--as if no one could be ill, because things like that were only dreams, just as the world was."

"I wish I'd been with him! Perhaps I could have thrown these away--down into the abyss!" And The Rat shook his crutches which rested against the table. "I feel as if I was climbing, too. Go on."

Marco had become more absorbed than The Rat. He had lost himself in the memory of the story.

"I felt that I was climbing, when he told me," he said. "I felt as if I were breathing in the hot flower-scents and pushing aside the big leaves and giant ferns. There had been a rain, and they were wet and shining with big drops, like jewels, that showered over him as he thrust his way through and under them. And the stillness and the height--the stillness and the height! I can't make it real to you as he made it to me! I can't! I was there. He took me. And it was so high--and so still--and so beautiful that I could scarcely bear it."

But the truth was, that with some vivid boy-touch he had carried his hearer far. The Rat was deadly quiet. Even his eyes had not moved. He spoke almost as if he were in a sort of trance. "It's real," he said. "I'm there now. As high as you--go on--go on. I want to climb higher."

And Marco, understanding, went on.

"The day was over and the stars were out when he reached the place were the ledge was. He said he thought that during the last part of the climb he never looked on the earth at all. The stars were so immense that he could not look away from them. They seemed to be drawing him up. And all overhead was like violet velvet, and they hung there like great lamps of radiance. Can you see them? You must see them. My father saw them all night long. They were part of the wonder."

"I see them," The Rat answered, still in his trance-like voice and without stirring, and Marco knew he did.

"And there, with the huge stars watching it, was the hut on the ledge. And there was no one there. The door was open. And outside it was a low bench and table of stone. And on the table was a meal of dates and rice, waiting. Not far from the hut was a deep spring, which ran away in a clear brook. My father drank and bathed his face there. Then he went out on the ledge, and sat down and waited, with his face turned up to the stars. He did not lie down, and he thought he saw the stars all the time he waited. He was sure he did not sleep. He did not know how long he sat there alone. But at last he drew his eyes from the stars, as if he had been commanded to do it. And he was not alone any more. A yard or so away from him sat the holy man. He knew it was the hermit because his eyes were different from any human eyes he had ever beheld. They were as still as the night was, and as deep as the shadows covering the world thousands of feet below, and they had a far, far look, and a strange

light was in them."

"What did he say?" asked The Rat hoarsely.

"He only said, 'Rise, my son. I awaited thee. Go and eat the food I prepared for thee, and then we will speak together.' He didn't move or speak again until my father had eaten the meal. He only sat on the moss and let his eyes rest on the shadows over the abyss. When my father went back, he made a gesture which meant that he should sit near him.

"Then he sat still for several minutes, and let his eyes rest on my father, until he felt as if the light in them were set in the midst of his own body and his soul. Then he said, 'I cannot tell thee all thou wouldst know. That I may not do.' He had a wonderful gentle voice, like a deep soft bell. 'But the work will be done. Thy life and thy son's life will set it on its way.'

"They sat through the whole night together. And the stars hung quite near, as if they listened. And there were sounds in the bushes of stealthy, padding feet which wandered about as if the owners of them listened too. And the wonderful, low, peaceful voice of the holy man went on and on, telling of wonders which seemed like miracles but which were to him only the 'working of the Law.'"

"What is the Law?" The Rat broke in.

"There were two my father wrote down, and I learned them. The first was the law of The One. I'll try to say that," and he covered his eyes and waited through a moment of silence.

It seemed to The Rat as if the room held an extraordinary stillness.

"Listen!" came next. "This is it:

"'There are a myriad worlds. There is but One Thought out of which they grew. Its Law is Order which cannot swerve. Its creatures are free to choose. Only they can create Disorder, which in itself is Pain and Woe and Hate and Fear. These they alone can bring forth. The Great One is a Golden Light. It is not remote but near. Hold thyself within its glow and thou wilt behold all things clearly. First, with all thy breathing being, know one thing! That thine own thought--when so thou standest--is one with That which thought the Worlds!'"

"What?" gasped The Rat. "My thought--the things I think!"

"Your thoughts--boys' thoughts--anybody's thoughts."

"You're giving me the jim-jams!"

"He said it," answered Marco. "And it was then he spoke about the broken Link--and about the greatest books in the world--that in all their different ways, they were only saying over and over again one thing

thousands of times. Just this thing--'Hate not, Fear not, Love.' And he said that was Order. And when it was disturbed, suffering came--poverty and misery and catastrophe and wars."

"Wars!" The Rat said sharply. "The World couldn't do without war--and armies and defences! What about Samavia?"

"My father asked him that. And this is what he answered. I learned that too. Let me think again," and he waited as he had waited before. Then he lifted his head. "Listen! This is it:

"'Out of the blackness of Disorder and its outpouring of human misery, there will arise the Order which is Peace. When Man learns that he is one with the Thought which itself creates all beauty, all power, all splendor, and all repose, he will not fear that his brother can rob him of his heart's desire. He will stand in the Light and draw to himself his own.'"

"Draw to himself?" The Rat said. "Draw what he wants? I don't believe it!"

"Nobody does," said Marco. "We don't know. He said we stood in the dark of the night--without stars--and did not know that the broken chain swung just above us."

"I don't believe it!" said The Rat. "It's too big!"

Marco did not say whether he believed it or not. He only went on speaking.

"My father listened until he felt as if he had stopped breathing. Just at the stillest of the stillness the Buddhist stopped speaking. And there was a rustling of the undergrowth a few yards away, as if something big was pushing its way through--and there was the soft pad of feet. The Buddhist turned his head and my father heard him say softly: 'Come forth, Sister.'

"And a huge leopardess with two cubs walked out on to the ledge and came to him and threw herself down with a heavy lunge near his feet."

"Your father saw that!" cried out The Rat. "You mean the old fellow knew something that made wild beasts afraid to touch him or any one near him?"

"Not afraid. They knew he was their brother, and that he was one with the Law. He had lived so long with the Great Thought that all darkness and fear had left him forever. He had mended the Chain."

The Rat had reached deep waters. He leaned forward--his hands burrowing in his hair, his face scowling and twisted, his eyes boring into space. He had climbed to the ledge at the mountain-top; he had seen the luminous immensity of the stars, and he had looked down into the shadows

filling the world thousands of feet below. Was there some remote deep in him from whose darkness a slow light was rising? All that Loristan had said he knew must be true. But the rest of it--?

Marco got up and came over to him. He looked like his father again.

"If the descendant of the Lost Prince is brought back to rule Samavia, he will teach his people the Law of the One. It was for that the holy man taught my father until the dawn came."

"Who will--who will teach the Lost Prince--the new King--when he is found?" The Rat cried. "Who will teach him?"

"The hermit said my father would. He said he would also teach his son--and that son would teach his son--and he would teach his. And through such as they were, the whole world would come to know the Order and the Law."

Never had The Rat looked so strange and fierce a thing. A whole world at peace! No tactics--no battles--no slaughtered heroes--no clash of arms, and fame! It made him feel sick. And yet--something set his chest heaving.

"And your father would teach him that--when he was found! So that he could teach his sons. Your father believes in it?"

"Yes," Marco answered. He said nothing but "Yes." The Rat threw himself forward on the table, face downward.

"Then," he said, "he must make me believe it. He must teach me--if he can."

They heard a clumping step upon the staircase, and, when it reached the landing, it stopped at their door. Then there was a solid knock.

When Marco opened the door, the young soldier who had escorted him from the Hof-Theater was standing outside. He looked as uninterested and stolid as before, as he handed in a small flat package.

"You must have dropped it near your seat at the Opera," he said. "I was to give it into your own hands. It is your purse."

After he had clumped down the staircase again, Marco and The Rat drew a quick breath at one and the same time.

"I had no seat and I had no purse," Marco said. "Let us open it."

There was a flat limp leather note-holder inside. In it was a paper, at the head of which were photographs of the Lovely Person and her companion. Beneath were a few lines which stated that they were the well known spies, Eugenia Karovna and Paul Varel, and that the bearer must be protected against them. It was signed by the Chief of the Police. On a

separate sheet was written the command: "Carry this with you as protection."

"That is help," The Rat said. "It would protect us, even in another country. The Chancellor sent it--but you made the strong call--and it's here!"

There was no street lamp to shine into their windows when they went at last to bed. When the blind was drawn up, they were nearer the sky than they had been in the Marylebone Road. The last thing each of them saw, as he went to sleep, was the stars--and in their dreams, they saw them grow larger and larger, and hang like lamps of radiance against the violet--velvet sky above a ledge of a Himalayan Mountain, where they listened to the sound of a low voice going on and on and on.