XXIII

THE SILVER HORN

During the next week, which they spent in journeying towards Vienna, they gave the Sign to three different persons at places which were on the way. In a village across the frontier in Bavaria they found a giant of an old man sitting on a bench under a tree before his mountain "Gasthaus" or inn; and when the four words were uttered, he stood up and bared his head as the guide had done. When Marco gave the Sign in some quiet place to a man who was alone, he noticed that they all did this and said their "God be thanked" devoutly, as if it were part of some religious ceremony. In a small town a few miles away he had to search some hours before he found a stalwart young shoemaker with bright red hair and a horseshoe-shaped scar on his forehead. He was not in his workshop when the boys first passed it, because, as they found out later, he had been climbing a mountain the day before, and had been detained in the descent because his companion had hurt himself.

When Marco went in and asked him to measure him for a pair of shoes, he was quite friendly and told them all about it.

"There are some good fellows who should not climb," he said. "When they find themselves standing on a bit of rock jutting out over emptiness, their heads begin to whirl round--and then, if they don't turn head over

heels a few thousand feet, it is because some comrade is near enough to drag them back. There can be no ceremony then and they sometimes get hurt--as my friend did yesterday."

"Did you never get hurt yourself?" The Rat asked.

"When I was eight years old I did that," said the young shoemaker, touching the scar on his forehead. "But it was not much. My father was a guide and took me with him. He wanted me to begin early. There is nothing like it--climbing. I shall be at it again. This won't do for me. I tried shoemaking because I was in love with a girl who wanted me to stay at home. She married another man. I am glad of it. Once a guide, always a guide." He knelt down to measure Marco's foot, and Marco bent a little forward.

"The Lamp is lighted," he said.

There was no one in the shop, but the door was open and people were passing in the narrow street; so the shoemaker did not lift his red head. He went on measuring.

"God be thanked!" he said, in a low voice. "Do you want these shoes really, or did you only want me to take your measure?"

"I cannot wait until they are made," Marco answered. "I must go on."

"Yes, you must go on," answered the shoemaker. "But I'll tell you what I'll do--I'll make them and keep them. Some great day might come when I shall show them to people and swagger about them." He glanced round cautiously, and then ended, still bending over his measuring. "They will be called the shoes of the Bearer of the Sign. And I shall say, 'He was only a lad. This was the size of his foot.'" Then he stood up with a great smile.

"There'll be climbing enough to be done now," he said, "and I look to see you again somewhere."

When the boys went away, they talked it over.

"The hair-dresser didn't want to be a hair-dresser, and the shoemaker didn't want to make shoes," said The Rat. "They both wanted to be mountain-climbers. There are mountains in Samavia and mountains on the way to it. You showed them to me on the map.

"Yes; and secret messengers who can climb anywhere, and cross dangerous places, and reconnoiter from points no one else can reach, can find out things and give signals other men cannot," said Marco.

"That's what I thought out," The Rat answered. "That was what he meant when he said, 'There will be climbing enough to be done now.'"

Strange were the places they went to and curiously unlike each other

were the people to whom they carried their message. The most singular of all was an old woman who lived in so remote a place that the road which wound round and round the mountain, wound round it for miles and miles. It was not a bad road and it was an amazing one to travel, dragged in a small cart by a mule, when one could be dragged, and clambering slowly with rests between when one could not: the tree-covered precipices one looked down, the tossing whiteness of waterfalls, or the green foaming of rushing streams, and the immensity of farm- and village-scattered plains spreading themselves to the feet of other mountains shutting them in were breath-taking beauties to look down on, as the road mounted and wound round and round and higher and higher.

"How can any one live higher than this?" said The Rat as they sat on the thick moss by the wayside after the mule and cart had left them. "Look at the bare crags looming up above there. Let us look at her again. Her picture looked as if she were a hundred years old."

Marco took out his hidden sketch. It seemed surely one of the strangest things in the world that a creature as old as this one seemed could reach such a place, or, having reached it, could ever descend to the world again to give aid to any person or thing.

Her old face was crossed and recrossed with a thousand wrinkles. Her profile was splendid yet and she had been a beauty in her day. Her eyes were like an eagle's--and not an old eagle's. And she had a long neck which held her old head high.

"How could she get here?" exclaimed The Rat.

"Those who sent us know, though we don't," said Marco. "Will you sit here and rest while I go on further?"

"No!" The Rat answered stubbornly. "I didn't train myself to stay behind. But we shall come to bare-rock climbing soon and then I shall be obliged to stop," and he said the last bitterly. He knew that, if Marco had come alone, he would have ridden in no cart but would have trudged upward and onward sturdily to the end of his journey.

But they did not reach the crags, as they had thought must be inevitable. Suddenly half-way to the sky, as it seemed, they came to a bend in the road and found themselves mounting into a new green world--an astonishing marvel of a world, with green velvet slopes and soft meadows and thick woodland, and cows feeding in velvet pastures, and--as if it had been snowed down from the huge bare mountain crags which still soared above into heaven--a mysterious, ancient, huddled village which, being thus snowed down, might have caught among the rocks and rested there through all time.

There it stood. There it huddled itself. And the monsters in the blue above it themselves looked down upon it as if it were an incredible thing--this ancient, steep-roofed, hanging-balconied, crumbling cluster of human nests, which seemed a thousand miles from the world. Marco and

The Rat stood and stared at it. Then they sat down and stared at it.

"How did it get here?" The Rat cried.

Marco shook his head. He certainly could see no explanation of its being there. Perhaps some of the oldest villages could tell stories of how its first chalets had gathered themselves together.

An old peasant driving a cow came down a steep path. He looked with a dull curiosity at The Rat and his crutches; but when Marco advanced and spoke to him in German, he did not seem to understand, but shook his head saying something in a sort of dialect Marco did not know.

"If they all speak like that, we shall have to make signs when we want to ask anything," The Rat said. "What will she speak?"

"She will know the German for the Sign or we should not have been sent here," answered Marco. "Come on."

They made their way to the village, which huddled itself together evidently with the object of keeping itself warm when through the winter months the snows strove to bury it and the winds roared down from the huge mountain crags and tried to tear it from among its rocks. The doors and windows were few and small, and glimpses of the inside of the houses showed earthen floors and dark rooms. It was plain that it was counted a more comfortable thing to live without light than to let in the cold.

It was easy enough to reconnoiter. The few people they saw were evidently not surprised that strangers who discovered their unexpected existence should be curious and want to look at them and their houses.

The boys wandered about as if they were casual explorers, who having reached the place by chance were interested in all they saw. They went into the little Gasthaus and got some black bread and sausage and some milk. The mountaineer owner was a brawny fellow who understood some German. He told them that few strangers knew of the village but that bold hunters and climbers came for sport. In the forests on the mountain sides were bears and, in the high places, chamois. Now and again, some great gentlemen came with parties of the daring kind--very great gentlemen indeed, he said, shaking his head with pride. There was one who had castles in other mountains, but he liked best to come here. Marco began to wonder if several strange things might not be true if great gentlemen sometimes climbed to the mysterious place. But he had not been sent to give the Sign to a great gentleman. He had been sent to give it to an old woman with eyes like an eagle which was young.

He had a sketch in his sleeve, with that of her face, of her steep-roofed, black-beamed, balconied house. If they walked about a little, they would be sure to come upon it in this tiny place. Then he could go in and ask her for a drink of water.

They roamed about for an hour after they left the Gasthaus. They went

into the little church and looked at the graveyard and wondered if it was not buried out of all sight in the winter. After they had done this, they sauntered out and walked through the huddled clusters of houses, examining each one as they drew near it and passed.

"I see it!" The Rat exclaimed at last. "It is that very old-looking one standing a little way from the rest. It is not as tumbled down as most of them. And there are some red flowers on the balcony."

"Yes! That's it!" said Marco.

They walked up to the low black door and, as he stopped on the threshold, Marco took off his cap. He did this because, sitting in the doorway on a low wooden chair, the old, old woman with the eagle eyes was sitting knitting.

There was no one else in the room and no one anywhere within sight. When the old, old woman looked up at him with her young eagle's eyes, holding her head high on her long neck, Marco knew he need not ask for water or for anything else.

"The Lamp is lighted," he said, in his low but strong and clear young voice.

She dropped her knitting upon her knees and gazed at him a moment in silence. She knew German it was clear, for it was in German she answered

him.

"God be thanked!" she said. "Come in, young Bearer of the Sign, and bring your friend in with you. I live alone and not a soul is within hearing."

She was a wonderful old woman. Neither Marco nor The Rat would live long enough to forget the hours they spent in her strange dark house. She kept them and made them spend the night with her.

"It is quite safe," she said. "I live alone since my man fell into the crevasse and was killed because his rope broke when he was trying to save his comrade. So I have two rooms to spare and sometimes climbers are glad to sleep in them. Mine is a good warm house and I am well known in the village. You are very young," she added shaking her head. "You are very young. You must have good blood in your veins to be trusted with this."

"I have my father's blood," answered Marco.

"You are like some one I once saw," the old woman said, and her eagle eyes set themselves hard upon him. "Tell me your name."

There was no reason why he should not tell it to her.

"It is Marco Loristan," he said.

"What! It is that!" she cried out, not loud but low.

To Marco's amazement she got up from her chair and stood before him, showing what a tall old woman she really was. There was a startled, even an agitated, look in her face. And suddenly she actually made a sort of curtsey to him--bending her knee as peasants do when they pass a shrine.

"It is that!" she said again. "And yet they dare let you go on a journey like this! That speaks for your courage and for theirs."

But Marco did not know what she meant. Her strange obeisance made him feel awkward. He stood up because his training had told him that when a woman stands a man also rises.

"The name speaks for the courage," he said, "because it is my father's."

She watched him almost anxiously.

"You do not even know!" she breathed--and it was an exclamation and not a question.

"I know what I have been told to do," he answered. "I do not ask anything else."

"Who is that?" she asked, pointing to The Rat.

"He is the friend my father sent with me," said Marco smiling. "He called him my aide-de-camp. It was a sort of joke because we had played soldiers together."

It seemed as if she were obliged to collect her thoughts. She stood with her hand at her mouth, looking down at the earth floor.

"God guard you!" she said at last. "You are very--very young!"

"But all his years," The Rat broke in, "he has been in training for just this thing. He did not know it was training, but it was. A soldier who had been trained for thirteen years would know his work."

He was so eager that he forgot she could not understand English. Marco translated what he said into German and added: "What he says is true."

She nodded her head, still with questioning and anxious eyes.

"Yes. Yes," she muttered. "But you are very young." Then she asked in a hesitating way:

"Will you not sit down until I do?"

"No," answered Marco. "I would not sit while my mother or grandmother stood."

"Then I must sit--and forget," she said.

She passed her hand over her face as though she were sweeping away the sudden puzzled trouble in her expression. Then she sat down, as if she had obliged herself to become again the old peasant she had been when they entered.

"All the way up the mountain you wondered why an old woman should be given the Sign," she said. "You asked each other how she could be of use."

Neither Marco nor The Rat said anything.

"When I was young and fresh," she went on. "I went to a castle over the frontier to be foster-mother to a child who was born a great noble--one who was near the throne. He loved me and I loved him. He was a strong child and he grew up a great hunter and climber. When he was not ten years old, my man taught him to climb. He always loved these mountains better than his own. He comes to see me as if he were only a young mountaineer. He sleeps in the room there," with a gesture over her shoulder into the darkness. "He has great power and, if he chooses to do a thing, he will do it--just as he will attack the biggest bear or climb the most dangerous peak. He is one who can bring things about. It is very safe to talk in this room."

Then all was quite clear. Marco and The Rat understood.

No more was said about the Sign. It had been given and that was enough. The old woman told them that they must sleep in one of her bedrooms. The next morning one of her neighbors was going down to the valley with a cart and he would help them on their way. The Rat knew that she was thinking of his crutches and he became restless.

"Tell her," he said to Marco, "how I have trained myself until I can do what any one else can. And tell her I am growing stronger every day. Tell her I'll show her what I can do. Your father wouldn't have let me come as your aide if I hadn't proved to him that I wasn't a cripple. Tell her. She thinks I'm no use."

Marco explained and the old woman listened attentively. When The Rat got up and swung himself about up and down the steep path near her house she seemed relieved. His extraordinary dexterity and firm swiftness evidently amazed her and gave her a confidence she had not felt at first.

"If he has taught himself to be like that just for love of your father, he will go to the end," she said. "It is more than one could believe, that a pair of crutches could do such things."

The Rat was pacified and could afterwards give himself up to watching

her as closely as he wished to. He was soon "working out" certain things in his mind. What he watched was her way of watching Marco. It was as if she were fascinated and could not keep her eyes from him. She told them stories about the mountains and the strangers who came to climb with guides or to hunt. She told them about the storms, which sometimes seemed about to put an end to the little world among the crags. She described the winter when the snow buried them and the strong ones were forced to dig out the weak and some lived for days under the masses of soft whiteness, glad to keep their cows or goats in their rooms that they might share the warmth of their bodies. The villages were forced to be good neighbors to each other, for the man who was not ready to dig out a hidden chimney or buried door to-day might be left to freeze and starve in his snow tomb next week. Through the worst part of the winter no creature from the world below could make way to them to find out whether they were all dead or alive.

While she talked, she watched Marco as if she were always asking herself some question about him. The Rat was sure that she liked him and greatly admired his strong body and good looks. It was not necessary for him to carry himself slouchingly in her presence and he looked glowing and noble. There was a sort of reverence in her manner when she spoke to him. She reminded him of Lazarus more than once. When she gave them their evening meal, she insisted on waiting on him with a certain respectful ceremony. She would not sit at table with him, and The Rat began to realize that she felt that he himself should be standing to serve him.

"She thinks I ought to stand behind your chair as Lazarus stands behind your father's," he said to Marco. "Perhaps an aide ought to do it. Shall I? I believe it would please her."

"A Bearer of the Sign is not a royal person," answered Marco. "My father would not like it--and I should not. We are only two boys."

It was very wonderful when, after their supper was over, they all three sat together before the fire.

The red glow of the bed of wood-coal and the orange yellow of the flame from the big logs filled the room with warm light, which made a mellow background for the figure of the old woman as she sat in her low chair and told them more and more enthralling stories.

Her eagle eyes glowed and her long neck held her head splendidly high as she described great feats of courage and endurance or almost superhuman daring in aiding those in awesome peril, and, when she glowed most in the telling, they always knew that the hero of the adventure had been her foster-child who was the baby born a great noble and near the throne. To her, he was the most splendid and adorable of human beings. Almost an emperor, but so warm and tender of heart that he never forgot the long-past days when she had held him on her knee and told him tales of chamois- and bear-hunting, and of the mountain-tops in midwinter. He was her sun-god.

"Yes! Yes!" she said. "'Good Mother,' he calls me. And I bake him a cake on the hearth, as I did when he was ten years old and my man was teaching him to climb. And when he chooses that a thing shall be done--done it is! He is a great lord."

The flames had died down and only the big bed of red coal made the room glow, and they were thinking of going to bed when the old woman started very suddenly, turning her head as if to listen.

Marco and The Rat heard nothing, but they saw that she did and they sat so still that each held his breath. So there was utter stillness for a few moments. Utter stillness.

Then they did hear something--a clear silver sound, piercing the pure mountain air.

The old woman sprang upright with the fire of delight in her eyes.

"It is his silver horn!" she cried out striking her hands together. "It is his own call to me when he is coming. He has been hunting somewhere and wants to sleep in his good bed here. Help me to put on more faggots," to The Rat, "so that he will see the flame of them through the open door as he comes."

"Shall we be in the way?" said Marco. "We can go at once."

She was going towards the door to open it and she stopped a moment and turned.

"No, no!" she said. "He must see your face. He will want to see it. I want him to see--how young you are."

She threw the door wide open and they heard the silver horn send out its gay call again. The brushwood and faggots The Rat had thrown on the coals crackled and sparkled and roared into fine flames, which cast their light into the road and threw out in fine relief the old figure which stood on the threshold and looked so tall.

And in but a few minutes her great lord came to her. And in his green hunting-suit with its green hat and eagle's feather he was as splendid as she had said he was. He was big and royal-looking and laughing and he bent and kissed her as if he had been her own son.

"Yes, good Mother," they heard him say. "I want my warm bed and one of your good suppers. I sent the others to the Gasthaus."

He came into the redly glowing room and his head almost touched the blackened rafters. Then he saw the two boys.

"Who are these, good Mother?" he asked.

She lifted his hand and kissed it.

"They are the Bearers of the Sign," she said rather softly. "'The Lamp is lighted.'"

Then his whole look changed. His laughing face became quite grave and for a moment looked even anxious. Marco knew it was because he was startled to find them only boys. He made a step forward to look at them more closely.

"The Lamp is lighted! And you two bear the Sign!" he exclaimed. Marco stood out in the fire glow that he might see him well. He saluted with respect.

"My name is Marco Loristan, Highness," he said. "And my father sent me."

The change which came upon his face then was even greater than at first. For a second, Marco even felt that there was a flash of alarm in it. But almost at once that passed.

"Loristan is a great man and a great patriot," he said. "If he sent you, it is because he knows you are the one safe messenger. He has worked too long for Samavia not to know what he does."

Marco saluted again. He knew what it was right to say next.

"If we have your Highness's permission to retire," he said, "we will leave you and go to bed. We go down the mountain at sunrise."

"Where next?" asked the hunter, looking at him with curious intentness.

"To Vienna, Highness," Marco answered.

His questioner held out his hand, still with the intent interest in his eyes.

"Good night, fine lad," he said. "Samavia has need to vaunt itself on its Sign-bearer. God go with you."

He stood and watched him as he went toward the room in which he and his aide-de-camp were to sleep. The Rat followed him closely. At the little back door the old, old woman stood, having opened it for them. As Marco passed and bade her good night, he saw that she again made the strange obeisance, bending the knee as he went by.