

A VOICE IN THE NIGHT

Late that afternoon there wandered about the gardens two quiet, inconspicuous, rather poorly dressed boys. They looked at the palace, the shrubs, and the flower-beds, as strangers usually did, and they sat on the seats and talked as people were accustomed to seeing boys talk together. It was a sunny day and exceptionally warm, and there were more saunterers and sitters than usual, which was perhaps the reason why the portier at the entrance gates gave such slight notice to the pair that he did not observe that, though two boys came in, only one went out. He did not, in fact, remember, when he saw The Rat swing by on his crutches at closing-time, that he had entered in company with a dark-haired lad who walked without any aid. It happened that, when The Rat passed out, the portier at the entrance was much interested in the aspect of the sky, which was curiously threatening. There had been heavy clouds hanging about all day and now and then blotting out the sunshine entirely, but the sun had refused to retire altogether. Just now, however, the clouds had piled themselves in thunderous, purplish mountains, and the sun had been forced to set behind them.

"It's been a sort of battle since morning," the portier said. "There will be some crashes and cataracts to-night." That was what The Rat had

thought when they had sat in the Fountain Garden on a seat which gave them a good view of the balcony and the big evergreen shrub, which they knew had the hollow in the middle, though its circumference was so imposing. "If there should be a big storm, the evergreen will not save you much, though it may keep off the worst," The Rat said. "I wish there was room for two."

He would have wished there was room for two if he had seen Marco marching to the stake. As the gardens emptied, the boys rose and walked round once more, as if on their way out. By the time they had sauntered toward the big evergreen, nobody was in the Fountain Garden, and the last loiterers were moving toward the arched stone entrance to the streets.

When they drew near one side of the evergreen, the two were together. When The Rat swung out on the other side of it, he was alone! No one noticed that anything had happened; no one looked back. So The Rat swung down the walks and round the flower-beds and passed into the street. And the portier looked at the sky and made his remark about the "crashes" and "cataracts."

As the darkness came on, the hollow in the shrub seemed a very safe place. It was not in the least likely that any one would enter the closed gardens; and if by rare chance some servant passed through, he would not be in search of people who wished to watch all night in the middle of an evergreen instead of going to bed and to sleep. The hollow

was well inclosed with greenery, and there was room to sit down when one was tired of standing.

Marco stood for a long time because, by doing so, he could see plainly the windows opening on the balcony if he gently pushed aside some flexible young boughs. He had managed to discover in his first visit to the gardens that the windows overlooking the Fountain Garden were those which belonged to the Prince's own suite of rooms. Those which opened on to the balcony lighted his favorite apartment, which contained his best-loved books and pictures and in which he spent most of his secluded leisure hours.

Marco watched these windows anxiously. If the Prince had not gone to Budapest,--if he were really only in retreat, and hiding from his gay world among his treasures,--he would be living in his favorite rooms and lights would show themselves. And if there were lights, he might pass before a window because, since he was inclosed in his garden, he need not fear being seen. The twilight deepened into darkness and, because of the heavy clouds, it was very dense. Faint gleams showed themselves in the lower part of the palace, but none was lighted in the windows Marco watched. He waited so long that it became evident that none was to be lighted at all. At last he loosed his hold on the young boughs and, after standing a few moments in thought, sat down upon the earth in the midst of his embowered tent. The Prince was not in his retreat; he was probably not in Vienna, and the rumor of his journey to Budapest had no doubt been true. So much time lost through making a mistake--but it was

best to have made the venture. Not to have made it would have been to lose a chance. The entrance was closed for the night and there was no getting out of the gardens until they were opened for the next day. He must stay in his hiding-place until the time when people began to come and bring their books and knitting and sit on the seats. Then he could stroll out without attracting attention. But he had the night before him to spend as best he could. That would not matter at all. He could tuck his cap under his head and go to sleep on the ground. He could command himself to waken once every half-hour and look for the lights. He would not go to sleep until it was long past midnight--so long past that there would not be one chance in a hundred that anything could happen. But the clouds which made the night so dark were giving forth low rumbling growls. At intervals a threatening gleam of light shot across them and a sudden swish of wind rushed through the trees in the garden. This happened several times, and then Marco began to hear the patter of raindrops. They were heavy and big drops, but few at first, and then there was a new and more powerful rush of wind, a jagged dart of light in the sky, and a tremendous crash. After that the clouds tore themselves open and poured forth their contents in floods. After the protracted struggle of the day it all seemed to happen at once, as if a horde of huge lions had at one moment been let loose: flame after flame of lightning, roar and crash and sharp reports of thunder, shrieks of hurricane wind, torrents of rain, as if some tidal-wave of the skies had gathered and rushed and burst upon the earth. It was such a storm as people remember for a lifetime and which in few lifetimes is seen at all.

Marco stood still in the midst of the rage and flooding, blinding roar of it. After the first few minutes he knew he could do nothing to shield himself. Down the garden paths he heard cataracts rushing. He held his cap pressed against his eyes because he seemed to stand in the midst of darting flames. The crashes, cannon reports and thunderings, and the jagged streams of light came so close to one another that he seemed deafened as well as blinded. He wondered if he should ever be able to hear human voices again when it was over. That he was drenched to the skin and that the water poured from his clothes as if he were himself a cataract was so small a detail that he was scarcely aware of it. He stood still, bracing his body, and waited. If he had been a Samavian soldier in the trenches and such a storm had broken upon him and his comrades, they could only have braced themselves and waited. This was what he found himself thinking when the tumult and downpour were at their worst. There were men who had waited in the midst of a rain of bullets.

It was not long after this thought had come to him that there occurred the first temporary lull in the storm. Its fury perhaps reached its height and broke at that moment. A yellow flame had torn its jagged way across the heavens, and an earth-rending crash had thundered itself into rumblings which actually died away before breaking forth again. Marco took his cap from his eyes and drew a long breath. He drew two long breaths. It was as he began drawing a third and realizing the strange feeling of the almost stillness about him that he heard a new kind of

sound at the side of the garden nearest his hiding-place. It sounded like the creak of a door opening somewhere in the wall behind the laurel hedge. Some one was coming into the garden by a private entrance. He pushed aside the young boughs again and tried to see, but the darkness was too dense. Yet he could hear if the thunder would not break again. There was the sound of feet on the wet gravel, the footsteps of more than one person coming toward where he stood, but not as if afraid of being heard; merely as if they were at liberty to come in by what entrance they chose. Marco remained very still. A sudden hope gave him a shock of joy. If the man with the tired face chose to hide himself from his acquaintances, he might choose to go in and out by a private entrance. The footsteps drew near, crushing the wet gravel, passed by, and seemed to pause somewhere near the balcony; and then flame lit up the sky again and the thunder burst forth once more.

But this was its last great peal. The storm was at an end. Only fainter and fainter rumblings and mutterings and paler and paler darts followed. Even they were soon over, and the cataracts in the paths had rushed themselves silent. But the darkness was still deep.

It was deep to blackness in the hollow of the evergreen. Marco stood in it, streaming with rain, but feeling nothing because he was full of thought. He pushed aside his greenery and kept his eyes on the place in the blackness where the windows must be, though he could not see them. It seemed that he waited a long time, but he knew it only seemed so really. He began to breathe quickly because he was waiting for

something.

Suddenly he saw exactly where the windows were--because they were all lighted!

His feeling of relief was great, but it did not last very long. It was true that something had been gained in the certainty that his man had not left Vienna. But what next? It would not be so easy to follow him if he chose only to go out secretly at night. What next? To spend the rest of the night watching a lighted window was not enough. To-morrow night it might not be lighted. But he kept his gaze fixed upon it. He tried to fix all his will and thought-power on the person inside the room.

Perhaps he could reach him and make him listen, even though he would not know that any one was speaking to him. He knew that thoughts were strong things. If angry thoughts in one man's mind will create anger in the mind of another, why should not sane messages cross the line?

"I must speak to you. I must speak to you!" he found himself saying in a low intense voice. "I am outside here waiting. Listen! I must speak to you!"

He said it many times and kept his eyes fixed upon the window which opened on to the balcony. Once he saw a man's figure cross the room, but he could not be sure who it was. The last distant rumblings of thunder had died away and the clouds were breaking. It was not long before the dark mountainous billows broke apart, and a brilliant full moon showed

herself sailing in the rift, suddenly flooding everything with light. Parts of the garden were silver white, and the tree shadows were like black velvet. A silvery lance pierced even into the hollow of Marco's evergreen and struck across his face.

Perhaps it was this sudden change which attracted the attention of those inside the balconied room. A man's figure appeared at the long windows. Marco saw now that it was the Prince. He opened the windows and stepped out on to the balcony.

"It is all over," he said quietly. And he stood with his face lifted, looking at the great white sailing moon.

He stood very still and seemed for the moment to forget the world and himself. It was a wonderful, triumphant queen of a moon. But something brought him back to earth. A low, but strong and clear, boy-voice came up to him from the garden path below.

"The Lamp is lighted. The Lamp is lighted," it said, and the words sounded almost as if some one were uttering a prayer. They seemed to call to him, to arrest him, to draw him.

He stood still a few seconds in dead silence. Then he bent over the balustrade. The moonlight had not broken the darkness below.

"That is a boy's voice," he said in a low tone, "but I cannot see who is

speaking."

"Yes, it is a boy's voice," it answered, in a way which somehow moved him, because it was so ardent. "It is the son of Stefan Loristan. The Lamp is lighted."

"Wait. I am coming down to you," the Prince said.

In a few minutes Marco heard a door open gently not far from where he stood. Then the man he had been following so many days appeared at his side.

"How long have you been here?" he asked.

"Before the gates closed. I hid myself in the hollow of the big shrub there, Highness," Marco answered.

"Then you were out in the storm?"

"Yes, Highness."

The Prince put his hand on the boy's shoulder. "I cannot see you--but it is best to stand in the shadow. You are drenched to the skin."

"I have been able to give your Highness--the Sign," Marco whispered. "A storm is nothing."

There was a silence. Marco knew that his companion was pausing to turn something over in his mind.

"So-o?" he said slowly, at length. "The Lamp is lighted. And you are sent to bear the Sign." Something in his voice made Marco feel that he was smiling.

"What a race you are! What a race--you Samavian Loristans!"

He paused as if to think the thing over again.

"I want to see your face," he said next. "Here is a tree with a shaft of moonlight striking through the branches. Let us step aside and stand under it."

Marco did as he was told. The shaft of moonlight fell upon his uplifted face and showed its young strength and darkness, quite splendid for the moment in a triumphant glow of joy in obstacles overcome. Raindrops hung on his hair, but he did not look draggled, only very wet and picturesque. He had reached his man. He had given the Sign.

The Prince looked him over with interested curiosity.

"Yes," he said in his cool, rather dragging voice. "You are the son of Stefan Loristan. Also you must be taken care of. You must come with me.

I have trained my household to remain in its own quarters until I require its service. I have attached to my own apartments a good safe little room where I sometimes keep people. You can dry your clothes and sleep there. When the gardens are opened again, the rest will be easy."

But though he stepped out from under the trees and began to move towards the palace in the shadow, Marco noticed that he moved hesitatingly, as if he had not quite decided what he should do. He stopped rather suddenly and turned again to Marco, who was following him.

"There is some one in the room I just now left," he said, "an old man--whom it might interest to see you. It might also be a good thing for him to feel interest in you. I choose that he shall see you--as you are."

"I am at your command, Highness," Marco answered. He knew his companion was smiling again.

"You have been in training for more centuries than you know," he said; "and your father has prepared you to encounter the unexpected without surprise."

They passed under the balcony and paused at a low stone doorway hidden behind shrubs. The door was a beautiful one, Marco saw when it was opened, and the corridor disclosed was beautiful also, though it had an

air of quiet and aloofness which was not so much secret as private. A perfect though narrow staircase mounted from it to the next floor. After ascending it, the Prince led the way through a short corridor and stopped at the door at the end of it. "We are going in here," he said.

It was a wonderful room--the one which opened on to the balcony. Each piece of furniture in it, the hangings, the tapestries, and pictures on the wall were all such as might well have found themselves adorning a museum. Marco remembered the common report of his escort's favorite amusement of collecting wonders and furnishing his house with the things others exhibited only as marvels of art and handicraft. The place was rich and mellow with exquisitely chosen beauties.

In a massive chair upon the hearth sat a figure with bent head. It was a tall old man with white hair and moustache. His elbows rested upon the arm of his chair and he leaned his forehead on his hand as if he were weary.

Marco's companion crossed the room and stood beside him, speaking in a lowered voice. Marco could not at first hear what he said. He himself stood quite still, waiting. The white-haired man lifted his head and listened. It seemed as though almost at once he was singularly interested. The lowered voice was slightly raised at last and Marco heard the last two sentences:

"The only son of Stefan Loristan. Look at him."

The old man in the chair turned slowly and looked, steadily, and with questioning curiosity touched with grave surprise. He had keen and clear blue eyes.

Then Marco, still erect and silent, waited again. The Prince had merely said to him, "an old man whom it might interest to see you." He had plainly intended that, whatsoever happened, he must make no outward sign of seeing more than he had been told he would see--"an old man." It was for him to show no astonishment or recognition. He had been brought here not to see but to be seen. The power of remaining still under scrutiny, which The Rat had often envied him, stood now in good stead because he had seen the white head and tall form not many days before, surmounted by brilliant emerald plumes, hung with jeweled decorations, in the royal carriage, escorted by banners, and helmets, and following troops whose tramping feet kept time to bursts of military music while the populace bared their heads and cheered.

"He is like his father," this personage said to the Prince. "But if any one but Loristan had sent him--His looks please me." Then suddenly to Marco, "You were waiting outside while the storm was going on?"

"Yes, sir," Marco answered.

Then the two exchanged some words still in the lowered voice.

"You read the news as you made your journey?" he was asked. "You know how Samavia stands?"

"She does not stand," said Marco. "The Iarovitch and the Maranovitch have fought as hyenas fight, until each has torn the other into fragments--and neither has blood or strength left."

The two glanced at each other.

"A good simile," said the older person. "You are right. If a strong party rose--and a greater power chose not to interfere--the country might see better days." He looked at him a few moments longer and then waved his hand kindly.

"You are a fine Samavian," he said. "I am glad of that. You may go. Good night."

Marco bowed respectfully and the man with the tired face led him out of the room.

It was just before he left him in the small quiet chamber in which he was to sleep that the Prince gave him a final curious glance. "I remember now," he said. "In the room, when you answered the question about Samavia, I was sure that I had seen you before. It was the day of the celebration. There was a break in the crowd and I saw a boy looking at me. It was you."

"Yes," said Marco, "I have followed you each time you have gone out since then, but I could never get near enough to speak. To-night seemed only one chance in a thousand."

"You are doing your work more like a man than a boy," was the next speech, and it was made reflectively. "No man could have behaved more perfectly than you did just now, when discretion and composure were necessary." Then, after a moment's pause, "He was deeply interested and deeply pleased. Good night."

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When the gardens had been thrown open the next morning and people were passing in and out again, Marco passed out also. He was obliged to tell himself two or three times that he had not wakened from an amazing dream. He quickened his pace after he had crossed the street, because he wanted to get home to the attic and talk to The Rat. There was a narrow side-street it was necessary for him to pass through if he wished to make a short cut. As he turned into it, he saw a curious figure leaning on crutches against a wall. It looked damp and forlorn, and he wondered if it could be a beggar. It was not. It was The Rat, who suddenly saw who was approaching and swung forward. His face was pale and haggard and he looked worn and frightened. He dragged off his cap and spoke in a voice which was hoarse as a crow's.

"God be thanked!" he said. "God be thanked!" as people always said it when they received the Sign, alone. But there was a kind of anguish in his voice as well as relief.

"Aide-de-camp!" Marco cried out--The Rat had begged him to call him so. "What have you been doing? How long have you been here?"

"Ever since I left you last night," said The Rat clutching tremblingly at his arm as if to make sure he was real. "If there was not room for two in the hollow, there was room for one in the street. Was it my place to go off duty and leave you alone--was it?"

"You were out in the storm?"

"Weren't you?" said The Rat fiercely. "I huddled against the wall as well as I could. What did I care? Crutches don't prevent a fellow waiting. I wouldn't have left you if you'd given me orders. And that would have been mutiny. When you did not come out as soon as the gates opened, I felt as if my head got on fire. How could I know what had happened? I've not the nerve and backbone you have. I go half mad." For a second or so Marco did not answer. But when he put his hand on the damp sleeve, The Rat actually started, because it seemed as though he were looking into the eyes of Stefan Loristan.

"You look just like your father!" he exclaimed, in spite of himself.

"How tall you are!"

"When you are near me," Marco said, in Loristan's own voice, "when you are near me, I feel--I feel as if I were a royal prince attended by an army. You are my army." And he pulled off his cap with quick boyishness and added, "God be thanked!"

The sun was warm in the attic window when they reached their lodging, and the two leaned on the rough sill as Marco told his story. It took some time to relate; and when he ended, he took an envelope from his pocket and showed it to The Rat. It contained a flat package of money.

"He gave it to me just before he opened the private door," Marco explained. "And he said to me, 'It will not be long now. After Samavia, go back to London as quickly as you can--as quickly as you can!'"

"I wonder--what he meant?" The Rat said, slowly. A tremendous thought had shot through his mind. But it was not a thought he could speak of to Marco.

"I cannot tell. I thought that it was for some reason he did not expect me to know," Marco said. "We will do as he told us. As quickly as we can." They looked over the newspapers, as they did every day. All that could be gathered from any of them was that the opposing armies of Samavia seemed each to have reached the culmination of disaster and exhaustion. Which party had the power left to take any final step which

could call itself a victory, it was impossible to say. Never had a country been in a more desperate case.

"It is the time!" said The Rat, glowering over his map. "If the Secret Party rises suddenly now, it can take Melzarr almost without a blow. It can sweep through the country and disarm both armies. They're weakened--they're half starved--they're bleeding to death; they want to be disarmed. Only the Iarovitch and the Maranovitch keep on with the struggle because each is fighting for the power to tax the people and make slaves of them. If the Secret Party does not rise, the people will, and they'll rush on the palaces and kill every Maranovitch and Iarovitch they find. And serve them right!"

"Let us spend the rest of the day in studying the road-map again," said Marco. "To-night we must be on the way to Samavia!"