

## ACROSS THE FRONTIER

That one day, a week later, two tired and travel-worn boy-mendicants should drag themselves with slow and weary feet across the frontier line between Jiardasia and Samavia, was not an incident to awaken suspicion or even to attract attention. War and hunger and anguish had left the country stunned and broken. Since the worst had happened, no one was curious as to what would befall them next. If Jiardasia herself had become a foe, instead of a friendly neighbor, and had sent across the border galloping hordes of soldiery, there would only have been more shrieks, and home-burnings, and slaughter which no one dare resist. But, so far, Jiardasia had remained peaceful. The two boys--one of them on crutches--had evidently traveled far on foot. Their poor clothes were dusty and travel-stained, and they stopped and asked for water at the first hut across the line. The one who walked without crutches had some coarse bread in a bag slung over his shoulder, and they sat on the roadside and ate it as if they were hungry. The old grandmother who lived alone in the hut sat and stared at them without any curiosity. She may have vaguely wondered why any one crossed into Samavia in these days. But she did not care to know their reason. Her big son had lived in a village which belonged to the Maranovitch and he had been called out to fight for his lords. He had not wanted to fight and had not known what the quarrel was about, but he was forced to obey. He had kissed his

handsome wife and four sturdy children, blubbing aloud when he left them. His village and his good crops and his house must be left behind. Then the Iarovitch swept through the pretty little cluster of homesteads which belonged to their enemy. They were mad with rage because they had met with great losses in a battle not far away, and, as they swooped through, they burned and killed, and trampled down fields and vineyards. The old woman's son never saw either the burned walls of his house or the bodies of his wife and children, because he had been killed himself in the battle for which the Iarovitch were revenging themselves. Only the old grandmother who lived in the hut near the frontier line and stared vacantly at the passers-by remained alive. She wearily gazed at people and wondered why she did not hear news from her son and her grandchildren. But that was all.

When the boys were over the frontier and well on their way along the roads, it was not difficult to keep out of sight if it seemed necessary. The country was mountainous and there were deep and thick forests by the way--forests so far-reaching and with such thick undergrowth that full-grown men could easily have hidden themselves. It was because of this, perhaps, that this part of the country had seen little fighting. There was too great opportunity for secure ambush for a foe. As the two travelers went on, they heard of burned villages and towns destroyed, but they were towns and villages nearer Melzarr and other fortress-defended cities, or they were in the country surrounding the castles and estates of powerful nobles and leaders. It was true, as Marco had said to the white-haired personage, that the Maranovitch and

Iarovitch had fought with the savageness of hyenas until at last the forces of each side lay torn and bleeding, their strength, their resources, their supplies exhausted.

Each day left them weaker and more desperate. Europe looked on with small interest in either party but with growing desire that the disorder should end and cease to interfere with commerce. All this and much more Marco and The Rat knew, but, as they made their cautious way through byways of the maimed and tortured little country, they learned other things. They learned that the stories of its beauty and fertility were not romances. Its heaven-reaching mountains, its immense plains of rich verdure on which flocks and herds might have fed by thousands, its splendor of deep forest and broad clear rushing rivers had a primeval majesty such as the first human creatures might have found on earth in the days of the Garden of Eden. The two boys traveled through forest and woodland when it was possible to leave the road. It was safe to thread a way among huge trees and tall ferns and young saplings. It was not always easy but it was safe. Sometimes they saw a charcoal-burner's hut or a shelter where a shepherd was hiding with the few sheep left to him. Each man they met wore the same look of stony suffering in his face; but, when the boys begged for bread and water, as was their habit, no one refused to share the little he had. It soon became plain to them that they were thought to be two young fugitives whose homes had probably been destroyed and who were wandering about with no thought but that of finding safety until the worst was over. That one of them

traveled on crutches added to their apparent helplessness, and that he could not speak the language of the country made him more an object of pity. The peasants did not know what language he spoke. Sometimes a foreigner came to find work in this small town or that. The poor lad might have come to the country with his father and mother and then have been caught in the whirlpool of war and tossed out on the world parent-less. But no one asked questions. Even in their desolation they were silent and noble people who were too courteous for curiosity.

"In the old days they were simple and stately and kind. All doors were open to travelers. The master of the poorest hut uttered a blessing and a welcome when a stranger crossed his threshold. It was the custom of the country," Marco said. "I read about it in a book of my father's. About most of the doors the welcome was carved in stone. It was this--"The Blessing of the Son of God, and Rest within these Walls."

"They are big and strong," said The Rat. "And they have good faces. They carry themselves as if they had been drilled--both men and women."

It was not through the blood-drenched part of the unhappy land their way led them, but they saw hunger and dread in the villages they passed. Crops which should have fed the people had been taken from them for the use of the army; flocks and herds had been driven away, and faces were gaunt and gray. Those who had as yet only lost crops and herds knew that homes and lives might be torn from them at any moment. Only old men and women and children were left to wait for any fate which the chances of

war might deal out to them.

When they were given food from some poor store, Marco would offer a little money in return. He dare not excite suspicion by offering much. He was obliged to let it be imagined that in his flight from his ruined home he had been able to snatch at and secrete some poor hoard which might save him from starvation. Often the women would not take what he offered. Their journey was a hard and hungry one. They must make it all on foot and there was little food to be found. But each of them knew how to live on scant fare. They traveled mostly by night and slept among the ferns and undergrowth through the day. They drank from running brooks and bathed in them. Moss and ferns made soft and sweet-smelling beds, and trees roofed them. Sometimes they lay long and talked while they rested. And at length a day came when they knew they were nearing their journey's end.

"It is nearly over now," Marco said, after they had thrown themselves down in the forest in the early hours of one dewy morning. "He said 'After Samavia, go back to London as quickly as you can--as quickly as you can.' He said it twice. As if--something were going to happen."

"Perhaps it will happen more suddenly than we think--the thing he meant," answered The Rat.

Suddenly he sat up on his elbow and leaned towards Marco.

"We are in Samavia!" he said "We two are in Samavia! And we are near the end!"

Marco rose on his elbow also. He was very thin as a result of hard travel and scant feeding. His thinness made his eyes look immense and black as pits. But they burned and were beautiful with their own fire.

"Yes," he said, breathing quickly. "And though we do not know what the end will be, we have obeyed orders. The Prince was next to the last one. There is only one more. The old priest."

"I have wanted to see him more than I have wanted to see any of the others," The Rat said.

"So have I," Marco answered. "His church is built on the side of this mountain. I wonder what he will say to us."

Both had the same reason for wanting to see him. In his youth he had served in the monastery over the frontier--the one which, till it was destroyed in a revolt, had treasured the five-hundred-year-old story of the beautiful royal lad brought to be hidden among the brotherhood by the ancient shepherd. In the monastery the memory of the Lost Prince was as the memory of a saint. It had been told that one of the early brothers, who was a decorator and a painter, had made a picture of him with a faint halo shining about his head. The young acolyte who had served there must have heard wonderful legends. But the monastery had

been burned, and the young acolyte had in later years crossed the frontier and become the priest of a few mountaineers whose little church clung to the mountain side. He had worked hard and faithfully and was worshipped by his people. Only the secret Forgers of the Sword knew that his most ardent worshippers were those with whom he prayed and to whom he gave blessings in dark caverns under the earth, where arms piled themselves and men with dark strong faces sat together in the dim light and laid plans and wrought schemes.

This Marco and The Rat did not know as they talked of their desire to see him.

"He may not choose to tell us anything," said Marco. "When we have given him the Sign, he may turn away and say nothing as some of the others did. He may have nothing to say which we should hear. Silence may be the order for him, too."

It would not be a long or dangerous climb to the little church on the rock. They could sleep or rest all day and begin it at twilight. So after they had talked of the old priest and had eaten their black bread, they settled themselves to sleep under cover of the thick tall ferns.

It was a long and deep sleep which nothing disturbed. So few human beings ever climbed the hill, except by the narrow rough path leading to the church, that the little wild creatures had not learned to be afraid of them. Once, during the afternoon, a hare hopping along under the

ferns to make a visit stopped by Marco's head, and, after looking at him a few seconds with his lustrous eyes, began to nibble the ends of his hair. He only did it from curiosity and because he wondered if it might be a new kind of grass, but he did not like it and stopped nibbling almost at once, after which he looked at it again, moving the soft sensitive end of his nose rapidly for a second or so, and then hopped away to attend to his own affairs. A very large and handsome green stag-beetle crawled from one end of The Rat's crutches to the other, but, having done it, he went away also. Two or three times a bird, searching for his dinner under the ferns, was surprised to find the two sleeping figures, but, as they lay so quietly, there seemed nothing to be frightened about. A beautiful little field mouse running past discovered that there were crumbs lying about and ate all she could find on the moss. After that she crept into Marco's pocket and found some excellent ones and had quite a feast. But she disturbed nobody and the boys slept on.

It was a bird's evening song which awakened them both. The bird alighted on the branch of a tree near them and her trill was rippling clear and sweet. The evening air had freshened and was fragrant with hillside scents. When Marco first rolled over and opened his eyes, he thought the most delicious thing on earth was to waken from sleep on a hillside at evening and hear a bird singing. It seemed to make exquisitely real to him the fact that he was in Samavia--that the Lamp was lighted and his work was nearly done. The Rat awakened when he did, and for a few minutes both lay on their backs without speaking. At last Marco said,



"The stars are coming out. We can begin to climb, Aide-de-camp."

Then they both got up and looked at each other.

"The last one!" The Rat said. "To-morrow we shall be on our way back to London--Number 7 Philibert Place. After all the places we've been to--what will it look like?"

"It will be like wakening out of a dream," said Marco. "It's not beautiful--Philibert Place. But he will be there," And it was as if a light lighted itself in his face and shone through the very darkness of it.

And The Rat's face lighted in almost exactly the same way. And he pulled off his cap and stood bare-headed. "We've obeyed orders," he said.

"We've not forgotten one. No one has noticed us, no one has thought of us. We've blown through the countries as if we had been grains of dust."

Marco's head was bared, too, and his face was still shining. "God be thanked!" he said. "Let us begin to climb."

They pushed their way through the ferns and wandered in and out through trees until they found the little path. The hill was thickly clothed with forest and the little path was sometimes dark and steep; but they knew that, if they followed it, they would at last come out to a place where there were scarcely any trees at all, and on a crag they would

find the tiny church waiting for them. The priest might not be there. They might have to wait for him, but he would be sure to come back for morning Mass and for vespers, wheresoever he wandered between times.

There were many stars in the sky when at last a turn of the path showed them the church above them. It was little and built of rough stone. It looked as if the priest himself and his scattered flock might have broken and carried or rolled bits of the hill to put it together. It had the small, round, mosque-like summit the Turks had brought into Europe in centuries past. It was so tiny that it would hold but a very small congregation--and close to it was a shed-like house, which was of course the priest's.

The two boys stopped on the path to look at it.

"There is a candle burning in one of the little windows," said Marco.

"There is a well near the door--and some one is beginning to draw water," said The Rat, next. "It is too dark to see who it is. Listen!"

They listened and heard the bucket descend on the chains, and splash in the water. Then it was drawn up, and it seemed some one drank long. Then they saw a dim figure move forward and stand still. Then they heard a voice begin to pray aloud, as if the owner, being accustomed to utter solitude, did not think of earthly hearers.

"Come," Marco said. And they went forward.

Because the stars were so many and the air so clear, the priest heard their feet on the path, and saw them almost as soon as he heard them. He ended his prayer and watched them coming. A lad on crutches, who moved as lightly and easily as a bird--and a lad who, even yards away, was noticeable for a bearing of his body which was neither haughty nor proud but set him somehow aloof from every other lad one had ever seen. A magnificent lad--though, as he drew near, the starlight showed his face thin and his eyes hollow as if with fatigue or hunger.

"And who is this one?" the old priest murmured to himself. "Who?"

Marco drew up before him and made a respectful reverence. Then he lifted his black head, squared his shoulders and uttered his message for the last time.

"The Lamp is lighted, Father," he said. "The Lamp is lighted."

The old priest stood quite still and gazed into his face. The next moment he bent his head so that he could look at him closely. It seemed almost as if he were frightened and wanted to make sure of something. At the moment it flashed through The Rat's mind that the old, old woman on the mountain-top had looked frightened in something the same way.

"I am an old man," he said. "My eyes are not good. If I had a

light"--and he glanced towards the house.

It was The Rat who, with one whirl, swung through the door and seized the candle. He guessed what he wanted. He held it himself so that the flare fell on Marco's face.

The old priest drew nearer and nearer. He gasped for breath. "You are the son of Stefan Loristan!" he cried. "It is his son who brings the Sign."

He fell upon his knees and hid his face in his hands. Both the boys heard him sobbing and praying--praying and sobbing at once.

They glanced at each other. The Rat was bursting with excitement, but he felt a little awkward also and wondered what Marco would do. An old fellow on his knees, crying, made a chap feel as if he didn't know what to say. Must you comfort him or must you let him go on?

Marco only stood quite still and looked at him with understanding and gravity.

"Yes, Father," he said. "I am the son of Stefan Loristan, and I have given the Sign to all. You are the last one. The Lamp is lighted. I could weep for gladness, too."

The priest's tears and prayers ended. He rose to his feet--a

rugged-faced old man with long and thick white hair which fell on his shoulders--and smiled at Marco while his eyes were still wet.

"You have passed from one country to another with the message?" he said.

"You were under orders to say those four words?"

"Yes, Father," answered Marco.

"That was all? You were to say no more?"

"I know no more. Silence has been the order since I took my oath of allegiance when I was a child. I was not old enough to fight, or serve, or reason about great things. All I could do was to be silent, and to train myself to remember, and be ready when I was called. When my father saw I was ready, he trusted me to go out and give the Sign. He told me the four words. Nothing else."

The old man watched him with a wondering face.

"If Stefan Loristan does not know best," he said, "who does?"

"He always knows," answered Marco proudly. "Always." He waved his hand like a young king toward The Rat. He wanted each man they met to understand the value of The Rat. "He chose for me this companion," he added. "I have done nothing alone."

"He let me call myself his aide-de-camp!" burst forth The Rat. "I would be cut into inch-long strips for him."

Marco translated.

Then the priest looked at The Rat and slowly nodded his head. "Yes," he said. "He knew best. He always knows best. That I see."

"How did you know I was my father's son?" asked Marco. "You have seen him?"

"No," was the answer; "but I have seen a picture which is said to be his image--and you are the picture's self. It is, indeed, a strange thing that two of God's creatures should be so alike. There is a purpose in it." He led them into his bare small house and made them rest, and drink goat's milk, and eat food. As he moved about the hut-like place, there was a mysterious and exalted look on his face.

"You must be refreshed before we leave here," he said at last. "I am going to take you to a place hidden in the mountains where there are men whose hearts will leap at the sight of you. To see you will give them new power and courage and new resolve. To-night they meet as they or their ancestors have met for centuries, but now they are nearing the end of their waiting. And I shall bring them the son of Stefan Loristan, who is the Bearer of the Sign!"

They ate the bread and cheese and drank the goat's milk he gave them, but Marco explained that they did not need rest as they had slept all day. They were prepared to follow him when he was ready.

The last faint hint of twilight had died into night and the stars were at their thickest when they set out together. The white-haired old man took a thick knotted staff in his hand and led the way. He knew it well, though it was a rugged and steep one with no track to mark it. Sometimes they seemed to be walking around the mountain, sometimes they were climbing, sometimes they dragged themselves over rocks or fallen trees, or struggled through almost impassable thickets; more than once they descended into ravines and, almost at the risk of their lives, clambered and drew themselves with the aid of the undergrowth up the other side. The Rat was called upon to use all his prowess, and sometimes Marco and the priest helped him across obstacles with the aid of his crutch.

"Haven't I shown to-night whether I'm a cripple or not?" he said once to Marco. "You can tell him about this, can't you? And that the crutches helped instead of being in the way?"

They had been out nearly two hours when they came to a place where the undergrowth was thick and a huge tree had fallen crashing down among it in some storm. Not far from the tree was an outcropping rock. Only the top of it was to be seen above the heavy tangle.

They had pushed their way through the jungle of bushes and young

saplings, led by their companion. They did not know where they would be led next and were supposed to push forward further when the priest stopped by the outcropping rock. He stood silent a few minutes--quite motionless--as if he were listening to the forest and the night. But there was utter stillness. There was not even a breeze to stir a leaf, or a half-wakened bird to sleepily chirp.

He struck the rock with his staff--twice, and then twice again.

Marco and The Rat stood with bated breath.

They did not wait long. Presently each of them found himself leaning forward, staring with almost unbelieving eyes, not at the priest or his staff, but at the rock itself!

It was moving! Yes, it moved. The priest stepped aside and it slowly turned, as if worked by a lever. As it turned, it gradually revealed a chasm of darkness dimly lighted, and the priest spoke to Marco. "There are hiding-places like this all through Samavia," he said. "Patience and misery have waited long in them. They are the caverns of the Forgers of the Sword. Come!"