

XXVII

"IT IS THE LOST PRINCE! IT IS IVOR!"

Many times since their journey had begun the boys had found their hearts beating with the thrill and excitement of things. The story of which their lives had been a part was a pulse-quickenning experience. But as they carefully made their way down the steep steps leading seemingly into the bowels of the earth, both Marco and The Rat felt as though the old priest must hear the thudding in their young sides.

"'The Forgers of the Sword.' Remember every word they say," The Rat whispered, "so that you can tell it to me afterwards. Don't forget anything! I wish I knew Samavian."

At the foot of the steps stood the man who was evidently the sentinel who worked the lever that turned the rock. He was a big burly peasant with a good watchful face, and the priest gave him a greeting and a blessing as he took from him the lantern he held out.

They went through a narrow and dark passage, and down some more steps, and turned a corner into another corridor cut out of rock and earth. It was a wider corridor, but still dark, so that Marco and The Rat had walked some yards before their eyes became sufficiently accustomed to the dim light to see that the walls themselves seemed made of arms

stacked closely together.

"The Forgers of the Sword!" The Rat was unconsciously mumbling to himself, "The Forgers of the Sword!"

It must have taken years to cut out the rounding passage they threaded their way through, and longer years to forge the solid, bristling walls. But The Rat remembered the story the stranger had told his drunken father, of the few mountain herdsmen who, in their savage grief and wrath over the loss of their prince, had banded themselves together with a solemn oath which had been handed down from generation to generation. The Samavians were a long-remembered people, and the fact that their passion must be smothered had made it burn all the more fiercely. Five hundred years ago they had first sworn their oath; and kings had come and gone, had died or been murdered, and dynasties had changed, but the Forgers of the Sword had not changed or forgotten their oath or wavered in their belief that some time--some time, even after the long dark years--the soul of their Lost Prince would be among them once more, and that they would kneel at the feet and kiss the hands of him for whose body that soul had been reborn. And for the last hundred years their number and power and their hiding places had so increased that Samavia was at last honeycombed with them. And they only waited, breathless,--for the Lighting of the Lamp.

The old priest knew how breathlessly, and he knew what he was bringing them. Marco and The Rat, in spite of their fond boy-imaginings, were

not quite old enough to know how fierce and full of flaming eagerness the breathless waiting of savage full-grown men could be. But there was a tense-strung thrill in knowing that they who were being led to them were the Bearers of the Sign. The Rat went hot and cold; he gnawed his fingers as he went. He could almost have shrieked aloud, in the intensity of his excitement, when the old priest stopped before a big black door!

Marco made no sound. Excitement or danger always made him look tall and quite pale. He looked both now.

The priest touched the door, and it opened.

They were looking into an immense cavern. Its walls and roof were lined with arms--guns, swords, bayonets, javelins, daggers, pistols, every weapon a desperate man might use. The place was full of men, who turned towards the door when it opened. They all made obeisance to the priest, but Marco realized almost at the same instant that they started on seeing that he was not alone.

They were a strange and picturesque crowd as they stood under their canopy of weapons in the lurid torchlight. Marco saw at once that they were men of all classes, though all were alike roughly dressed. They were huge mountaineers, and plainsmen young and mature in years. Some of the biggest were men with white hair but with bodies of giants, and with

determination in their strong jaws. There were many of these, Marco saw, and in each man's eyes, whether he were young or old, glowed a steady unconquered flame. They had been beaten so often, they had been oppressed and robbed, but in the eyes of each one was this unconquered flame which, throughout all the long tragedy of years had been handed down from father to son. It was this which had gone on through centuries, keeping its oath and forging its swords in the caverns of the earth, and which to-day was--waiting.

The old priest laid his hand on Marco's shoulder, and gently pushed him before him through the crowd which parted to make way for them. He did not stop until the two stood in the very midst of the circle, which fell back gazing wonderingly. Marco looked up at the old man because for several seconds he did not speak. It was plain that he did not speak because he also was excited, and could not. He opened his lips and his voice seemed to fail him. Then he tried again and spoke so that all could hear--even the men at the back of the gazing circle.

"My children," he said, "this is the son of Stefan Loristan, and he comes to bear the Sign. My son," to Marco, "speak!"

Then Marco understood what he wished, and also what he felt. He felt it himself, that magnificent uplifting gladness, as he spoke, holding his black head high and lifting his right hand.

"The Lamp is Lighted, brothers!" he cried. "The Lamp is Lighted!"

Then The Rat, who stood apart, watching, thought that the strange world within the cavern had gone mad! Wild smothered cries broke forth, men caught each other in passionate embrace, they fell upon their knees, they clutched one another sobbing, they wrung each other's hands, they leaped into the air. It was as if they could not bear the joy of hearing that the end of their waiting had come at last. They rushed upon Marco, and fell at his feet. The Rat saw big peasants kissing his shoes, his hands, every scrap of his clothing they could seize. The wild circle swayed and closed upon him until The Rat was afraid. He did not know that, overpowered by this frenzy of emotion, his own excitement was making him shake from head to foot like a leaf, and that tears were streaming down his cheeks. The swaying crowd hid Marco from him, and he began to fight his way towards him because his excitement increased with fear. The ecstasy-frenzied crowd of men seemed for the moment to have almost ceased to be sane. Marco was only a boy. They did not know how fiercely they were pressing upon him and keeping away the very air.

"Don't kill him! Don't kill him!" yelled The Rat, struggling forward.

"Stand back, you fools! I'm his aide-de-camp! Let me pass!"

And though no one understood his English, one or two suddenly remembered

they had seen him enter with the priest and so gave way. But just then the old priest lifted his hand above the crowd, and spoke in a voice of stern command.

"Stand back, my children!" he cried. "Madness is not the homage you must bring to the son of Stefan Loristan. Obey! Obey!" His voice had a power in it that penetrated even the wildest herdsmen. The frenzied mass swayed back and left space about Marco, whose face The Rat could at last see. It was very white with emotion, and in his eyes there was a look which was like awe.

The Rat pushed forward until he stood beside him. He did not know that he almost sobbed as he spoke.

"I'm your aide-de-camp," he said. "I'm going to stand here! Your father sent me! I'm under orders! I thought they'd crush you to death."

He glared at the circle about them as if, instead of worshippers distraught with adoration, they had been enemies. The old priest seeing him, touched Marco's arm.

"Tell him he need not fear," he said. "It was only for the first few moments. The passion of their souls drove them wild. They are your slaves."

"Those at the back might have pushed the front ones on until they trampled you under foot in spite of themselves!" The Rat persisted.

"No," said Marco. "They would have stopped if I had spoken."

"Why didn't you speak then?" snapped The Rat.

"All they felt was for Samavia, and for my father," Marco said, "and for the Sign. I felt as they did."

The Rat was somewhat softened. It was true, after all. How could he have tried to quell the outbursts of their worship of Loristan--of the country he was saving for them--of the Sign which called them to freedom? He could not.

Then followed a strange and picturesque ceremonial. The priest went about among the encircling crowd and spoke to one man after another--sometimes to a group. A larger circle was formed. As the pale old man moved about, The Rat felt as if some religious ceremony were going to be performed. Watching it from first to last, he was thrilled to the core.

At the end of the cavern a block of stone had been cut out to look like an altar. It was covered with white, and against the wall above it hung a large picture veiled by a curtain. From the roof there swung before it an ancient lamp of metal suspended by chains. In front of the altar was a sort of stone dais. There the priest asked Marco to stand, with his aide-de-camp on the lower level in attendance. A knot of the biggest herdsmen went out and returned. Each carried a huge sword which had perhaps been of the earliest made in the dark days gone by. The bearers

formed themselves into a line on either side of Marco. They raised their swords and formed a pointed arch above his head and a passage twelve men long. When the points first clashed together The Rat struck himself hard upon his breast. His exultation was too keen to endure. He gazed at Marco standing still--in that curiously splendid way in which both he and his father could stand still--and wondered how he could do it. He looked as if he were prepared for any strange thing which could happen to him--because he was "under orders." The Rat knew that he was doing whatsoever he did merely for his father's sake. It was as if he felt that he was representing his father, though he was a mere boy; and that because of this, boy as he was, he must bear himself nobly and remain outwardly undisturbed.

At the end of the arch of swords, the old priest stood and gave a sign to one man after another. When the sign was given to a man he walked under the arch to the dais, and there knelt and, lifting Marco's hand to his lips, kissed it with passionate fervor. Then he returned to the place he had left. One after another passed up the aisle of swords, one after another knelt, one after the other kissed the brown young hand, rose and went away. Sometimes The Rat heard a few words which sounded almost like a murmured prayer, sometimes he heard a sob as a shaggy head bent, again and again he saw eyes wet with tears. Once or twice Marco spoke a few Samavian words, and the face of the man spoken to flamed with joy. The Rat had time to see, as Marco had seen, that many of the faces were not those of peasants. Some of them were clear cut and subtle and of the type of scholars or nobles. It took a long time for them all

to kneel and kiss the lad's hand, but no man omitted the ceremony; and when at last it was at an end, a strange silence filled the cavern. They stood and gazed at each other with burning eyes.

The priest moved to Marco's side, and stood near the altar. He leaned forward and took in his hand a cord which hung from the veiled picture--he drew it and the curtain fell apart. There seemed to stand gazing at them from between its folds a tall kingly youth with deep eyes in which the stars of God were stilly shining, and with a smile wonderful to behold. Around the heavy locks of his black hair the long dead painter of missals had set a faint glow of light like a halo.

"Son of Stefan Loristan," the old priest said, in a shaken voice, "it is the Lost Prince! It is Ivor!"

Then every man in the room fell on his knees. Even the men who had upheld the archway of swords dropped their weapons with a crash and knelt also. He was their saint--this boy! Dead for five hundred years, he was their saint still.

"Ivor! Ivor!" the voices broke into a heavy murmur. "Ivor! Ivor!" as if they chanted a litany.

Marco started forward, staring at the picture, his breath caught in his throat, his lips apart.

"But--but--" he stammered, "but if my father were as young as he is--he would be like him!"

"When you are as old as he is, you will be like him--you!" said the priest. And he let the curtain fall.

The Rat stood staring with wide eyes from Marco to the picture and from the picture to Marco. And he breathed faster and faster and gnawed his finger ends. But he did not utter a word. He could not have done it, if he tried.

Then Marco stepped down from the dais as if he were in a dream, and the old man followed him. The men with swords sprang to their feet and made their archway again with a new clash of steel. The old man and the boy passed under it together. Now every man's eyes were fixed on Marco. At the heavy door by which he had entered, he stopped and turned to meet their glances. He looked very young and thin and pale, but suddenly his father's smile was lighted in his face. He said a few words in Samavian clearly and gravely, saluted, and passed out.

"What did you say to them?" gasped The Rat, stumbling after him as the door closed behind them and shut in the murmur of impassioned sound.

"There was only one thing to say," was the answer. "They are men--I am only a boy. I thanked them for my father, and told them he would never--never forget."