

'TWIXT NIGHT AND MORNING

After this, they waited. They did not know what they waited for, nor could they guess even vaguely how the waiting would end. All that Lazarus could tell them he told. He would have been willing to stand respectfully for hours relating to Marco the story of how the period of their absence had passed for his Master and himself. He told how Loristan had spoken each day of his son, how he had often been pale with anxiousness, how in the evenings he had walked to and fro in his room, deep in thought, as he looked down unseeingly at the carpet.

"He permitted me to talk of you, sir," Lazarus said. "I saw that he wished to hear your name often. I reminded him of the times when you had been so young that most children of your age would have been in the hands of nurses, and yet you were strong and silent and sturdy and traveled with us as if you were not a child at all--never crying when you were tired and were not properly fed. As if you understood--as if you understood," he added, proudly. "If, through the power of God a creature can be a man at six years old, you were that one. Many a dark day I have looked into your solemn, watching eyes, and have been half afraid; because that a child should answer one's gaze so gravely seemed almost an unearthly thing."

"The chief thing I remember of those days," said Marco, "is that he was with me, and that whenever I was hungry or tired, I knew he must be, too."

The feeling that they were "waiting" was so intense that it filled the days with strangeness. When the postman's knock was heard at the door, each of them endeavored not to start. A letter might some day come which would tell them--they did not know what. But no letters came. When they went out into the streets, they found themselves hurrying on their way back in spite of themselves. Something might have happened. Lazarus read the papers faithfully, and in the evening told Marco and The Rat all the news it was "well that they should hear." But the disorders of Samavia had ceased to occupy much space. They had become an old story, and after the excitement of the assassination of Michael Maranovitch had died out, there seemed to be a lull in events. Michael's son had not dared to try to take his father's place, and there were rumors that he also had been killed. The head of the Iarovitch had declared himself king but had not been crowned because of disorders in his own party. The country seemed existing in a nightmare of suffering, famine and suspense.

"Samavia is 'waiting' too," The Rat broke forth one night as they talked together, "but it won't wait long--it can't. If I were a Samavian and in Samavia--"

"My father is a Samavian and he is in Samavia," Marco's grave young voice interposed. The Rat flushed red as he realized what he had said.

"What a fool I am!" he groaned. "I--I beg your pardon--sir." He stood up when he said the last words and added the "sir" as if he suddenly realized that there was a distance between them which was something akin to the distance between youth and maturity--but yet was not the same.

"You are a good Samavian but--you forget," was Marco's answer.

Lazarus' intense grimness increased with each day that passed. The ceremonious respectfulness of his manner toward Marco increased also. It seemed as if the more anxious he felt the more formal and stately his bearing became. It was as though he braced his own courage by doing the smallest things life in the back sitting-room required as if they were of the dignity of services performed in a much larger place and under much more imposing circumstances. The Rat found himself feeling almost as if he were an equerry in a court, and that dignity and ceremony were necessary on his own part. He began to experience a sense of being somehow a person of rank, for whom doors were opened grandly and who had vassals at his command. The watchful obedience of fifty vassals embodied itself in the manner of Lazarus.

"I am glad," The Rat said once, reflectively, "that, after all my father was once--different. It makes it easier to learn things perhaps. If he had not talked to me about people who--well, who had never seen places like Bone Court--this might have been harder for me to understand."

When at last they managed to call The Squad together, and went to spend a morning at the Barracks behind the churchyard, that body of armed men stared at their commander in great and amazed uncertainty. They felt that something had happened to him. They did not know what had happened, but it was some experience which had made him mysteriously different. He did not look like Marco, but in some extraordinary way he seemed more akin to him. They only knew that some necessity in Loristan's affairs had taken the two away from London and the Game. Now they had come back, and they seemed older.

At first, The Squad felt awkward and shuffled its feet uncomfortably. After the first greetings it did not know exactly what to say. It was Marco who saved the situation.

"Drill us first," he said to The Rat, "then we can talk about the Game."

"Attention!" shouted The Rat, magnificently. And then they forgot everything else and sprang into line. After the drill was ended, and they sat in a circle on the broken flags, the Game became more resplendent than it had ever been.

"I've had time to read and work out new things," The Rat said. "Reading is like traveling."

Marco himself sat and listened, enthralled by the adroitness of the

imagination he displayed. Without revealing a single dangerous fact he built up, of their journeyings and experiences, a totally new structure of adventures which would have fired the whole being of any group of lads. It was safe to describe places and people, and he so described them that The Squad squirmed in its delight at feeling itself marching in a procession attending the Emperor in Vienna; standing in line before palaces; climbing, with knapsacks strapped tight, up precipitous mountain roads; defending mountain-fortresses; and storming Samavian castles.

The Squad glowed and exulted. The Rat glowed and exulted himself. Marco watched his sharp-featured, burning-eyed face with wonder and admiration. This strange power of making things alive was, he knew, what his father would call "genius."

"Let's take the oath of 'legiance again," shouted Cad, when the Game was over for the morning.

"The papers never said nothin' more about the Lost Prince, but we are all for him yet! Let's take it!" So they stood in line again, Marco at the head, and renewed their oath.

"The sword in my hand--for Samavia!

"The heart in my breast--for Samavia!

"The swiftness of my sight, the thought of my brain, the life of my life--for Samavia.

"Here grow twelve men--for Samavia.

"God be thanked!"

It was more solemn than it had been the first time. The Squad felt it tremendously. Both Cad and Ben were conscious that thrills ran down their spines into their boots. When Marco and The Rat left them, they first stood at salute and then broke out into a ringing cheer.

On their way home, The Rat asked Marco a question.

"Did you see Mrs. Beedle standing at the top of the basement steps and looking after us when we went out this morning?"

Mrs. Beedle was the landlady of the lodgings at No. 7 Philibert Place. She was a mysterious and dusty female, who lived in the "cellar kitchen" part of the house and was seldom seen by her lodgers.

"Yes," answered Marco, "I have seen her two or three times lately, and I do not think I ever saw her before. My father has never seen her, though Lazarus says she used to watch him round corners. Why is she suddenly so curious about us?"

"I'd like to know," said The Rat. "I've been trying to work it out. Ever since we came back, she's been peeping round the door of the kitchen stairs, or over balustrades, or through the cellar-kitchen windows. I believe she wants to speak to you, and knows Lazarus won't let her if he catches her at it. When Lazarus is about, she always darts back."

"What does she want to say?" said Marco.

"I'd like to know," said The Rat again.

When they reached No. 7 Philibert Place, they found out, because when the door opened they saw at the top of cellar-kitchen stairs at the end of the passage, the mysterious Mrs. Beedle, in her dusty black dress and with a dusty black cap on, evidently having that minute mounted from her subterranean hiding-place. She had come up the steps so quickly that Lazarus had not yet seen her.

"Young Master Loristan!" she called out authoritatively. Lazarus wheeled about fiercely.

"Silence!" he commanded. "How dare you address the young Master?"

She snapped her fingers at him, and marched forward folding her arms tightly. "You mind your own business," she said. "It's young Master Loristan I'm speaking to, not his servant. It's time he was talked to about this."

"Silence, woman!" shouted Lazarus.

"Let her speak," said Marco. "I want to hear. What is it you wish to say, Madam? My father is not here."

"That's just what I want to find out about," put in the woman. "When is he coming back?"

"I do not know," answered Marco.

"That's it," said Mrs. Beedle. "You're old enough to understand that two big lads and a big fellow like that can't have food and lodgin's for nothing. You may say you don't live high--and you don't--but lodgin's are lodgin's and rent is rent. If your father's coming back and you can tell me when, I mayn't be obliged to let the rooms over your heads; but I know too much about foreigners to let bills run when they are out of sight. Your father's out of sight. He," jerking her head towards Lazarus, "paid me for last week. How do I know he will pay me for this week!"

"The money is ready," roared Lazarus.

The Rat longed to burst forth. He knew what people in Bone Court said to a woman like that; he knew the exact words and phrases. But they were not words and phrases an aide-de-camp might deliver himself of in the

presence of his superior officer; they were not words and phrases an equerry uses at court. He dare not allow himself to burst forth. He stood with flaming eyes and a flaming face, and bit his lips till they bled. He wanted to strike with his crutches. The son of Stefan Loristan! The Bearer of the Sign! There sprang up before his furious eyes the picture of the luridly lighted cavern and the frenzied crowd of men kneeling at this same boy's feet, kissing them, kissing his hands, his garments, the very earth he stood upon, worshipping him, while above the altar the kingly young face looked on with the nimbus of light like a halo above it. If he dared speak his mind now, he felt he could have endured it better. But being an aide-de-camp he could not.

"Do you want the money now?" asked Marco. "It is only the beginning of the week and we do not owe it to you until the week is over. Is it that you want to have it now?"

Lazarus had become deadly pale. He looked huge in his fury, and he looked dangerous.

"Young Master," he said slowly, in a voice as deadly as his pallor, and he actually spoke low, "this woman--"

Mrs. Beedle drew back towards the cellar-kitchen steps.

"There's police outside," she shrilled. "Young Master Loristan, order him to stand back."

"No one will hurt you," said Marco. "If you have the money here, Lazarus, please give it to me."

Lazarus literally ground his teeth. But he drew himself up and saluted with ceremony. He put his hand in his breast pocket and produced an old leather wallet. There were but a few coins in it. He pointed to a gold one.

"I obey you, sir--since I must--" he said, breathing hard. "That one will pay her for the week."

Marco took out the sovereign and held it out to the woman.

"You hear what he says," he said. "At the end of this week if there is not enough to pay for the next, we will go."

Lazarus looked so like a hyena, only held back from springing by chains of steel, that the dusty Mrs. Beedle was afraid to take the money.

"If you say that I shall not lose it, I'll wait until the week's ended," she said. "You're nothing but a lad, but you're like your father. You've got a way that a body can trust. If he was here and said he hadn't the money but he'd have it in time, I'd wait if it was for a month. He'd pay it if he said he would. But he's gone; and two boys and a fellow like that one don't seem much to depend on. But I'll trust you."

"Be good enough to take it," said Marco. And he put the coin in her hand and turned into the back sitting-room as if he did not see her.

The Rat and Lazarus followed him.

"Is there so little money left?" said Marco. "We have always had very little. When we had less than usual, we lived in poorer places and were hungry if it was necessary. We know how to go hungry. One does not die of it."

The big eyes under Lazarus' beetling brows filled with tears.

"No, sir," he said, "one does not die of hunger. But the insult--the insult! That is not endurable."

"She would not have spoken if my father had been here," Marco said. "And it is true that boys like us have no money. Is there enough to pay for another week?"

"Yes, sir," answered Lazarus, swallowing hard as if he had a lump in his throat, "perhaps enough for two--if we eat but little. If--if the Master would accept money from those who would give it, he would always have had

enough. But how could such a one as he? How could he? When he went away,

he thought--he thought that--" but there he stopped himself suddenly.

"Never mind," said Marco. "Never mind. We will go away the day we can pay no more."

"I can go out and sell newspapers," said The Rat's sharp voice.

"I've done it before. Crutches help you to sell them. The platform would sell 'em faster still. I'll go out on the platform."

"I can sell newspapers, too," said Marco.

Lazarus uttered an exclamation like a groan.

"Sir," he cried, "no, no! Am I not here to go out and look for work? I can carry loads. I can run errands."

"We will all three begin to see what we can do," Marco said.

Then--exactly as had happened on the day of their return from their journey--there arose in the road outside the sound of newsboys shouting. This time the outcry seemed even more excited than before. The boys were running and yelling and there seemed more of them than usual. And above all other words was heard "Samavia! Samavia!" But to-day The Rat did not rush to the door at the first cry. He stood still--for several seconds they all three stood still--listening. Afterwards each one remembered and told the others that he had stood still because some strange, strong

feeling held him waiting as if to hear some great thing.

It was Lazarus who went out of the room first and The Rat and Marco followed him.

One of the upstairs lodgers had run down in haste and opened the door to buy newspapers and ask questions. The newsboys were wild with excitement and danced about as they shouted. The piece of news they were yelling had evidently a popular quality.

The lodger bought two papers and was handing out coppers to a lad who was talking loud and fast.

"Here's a go!" he was saying. "A Secret Party's risen up and taken Samavia! 'Twixt night and mornin' they done it! That there Lost Prince descendant 'as turned up, an' they've crowned him--'twixt night and mornin' they done it! Clapt 'is crown on 'is 'ead, so's they'd lose no time." And off he bolted, shouting, "'Cendant of Lost Prince! 'Cendant of Lost Prince made King of Samavia!"

It was then that Lazarus, forgetting even ceremony, bolted also. He bolted back to the sitting-room, rushed in, and the door fell to behind him.

Marco and The Rat found it shut when, having secured a newspaper, they

went down the passage. At the closed door, Marco stopped. He did not turn the handle. From the inside of the room there came the sound of big convulsive sobs and passionate Samavian words of prayer and worshipping gratitude.

"Let us wait," Marco said, trembling a little. "He will not want any one to see him. Let us wait."

His black pits of eyes looked immense, and he stood at his tallest, but he was trembling slightly from head to foot. The Rat had begun to shake, as if from an ague. His face was scarcely human in its fierce unboyish emotion.

"Marco! Marco!" his whisper was a cry. "That was what he went for--because he knew!"

"Yes," answered Marco, "that was what he went for." And his voice was unsteady, as his body was.

Presently the sobs inside the room choked themselves back suddenly. Lazarus had remembered. They had guessed he had been leaning against the wall during his outburst. Now it was evident that he stood upright, probably shocked at the forgetfulness of his frenzy.

So Marco turned the handle of the door and went into the room. He shut

the door behind him, and they all three stood together.

When the Samavian gives way to his emotions, he is emotional indeed. Lazarus looked as if a storm had swept over him. He had choked back his sobs, but tears still swept down his cheeks.

"Sir," he said hoarsely, "your pardon! It was as if a convulsion seized me. I forgot everything--even my duty. Pardon, pardon!" And there on the worn carpet of the dingy back sitting-room in the Marylebone Road, he actually went on one knee and kissed the boy's hand with adoration.

"You mustn't ask pardon," said Marco. "You have waited so long, good friend. You have given your life as my father has. You have known all the suffering a boy has not lived long enough to understand. Your big heart--your faithful heart--" his voice broke and he stood and looked at him with an appeal which seemed to ask him to remember his boyhood and understand the rest.

"Don't kneel," he said next. "You mustn't kneel." And Lazarus, kissing his hand again, rose to his feet.

"Now--we shall hear!" said Marco. "Now the waiting will soon be over."

"Yes, sir. Now, we shall receive commands!" Lazarus answered.

The Rat held out the newspapers.

"May we read them yet?" he asked.

"Until further orders, sir," said Lazarus hurriedly and apologetically
--"until further orders, it is still better that I should read them
first."