

CHAPTER II

South of the armory of Westminster Palace lay the gardens, and here, on the third day following the King's affront to De Vac, might have been seen a black-haired woman gowned in a violet cyclas, richly embroidered with gold about the yoke and at the bottom of the loose-pointed sleeves, which reached almost to the similar bordering on the lower hem of the garment. A richly wrought leathern girdle, studded with precious stones, and held in place by a huge carved buckle of gold, clasped the garment about her waist so that the upper portion fell outward over the girdle after the manner of a blouse. In the girdle was a long dagger of beautiful workmanship. Dainty sandals encased her feet, while a wimple of violet silk bordered in gold fringe, lay becomingly over her head and shoulders.

By her side walked a handsome boy of about three, clad, like his companion, in gay colors. His tiny surcoat of scarlet velvet was rich with embroidery, while beneath was a close-fitting tunic of white silk. His doublet was of scarlet, while his long hose of white were cross-gartered with scarlet from his tiny sandals to his knees. On the back of his brown curls sat a flat-brimmed, round-crowned hat in which a single plume of white waved and nodded bravely at each move of the proud little head.

The child's features were well molded, and his frank, bright eyes gave an expression of boyish generosity to a face which otherwise would have been too arrogant and haughty for such a mere baby. As he talked with his companion, little flashes of peremptory authority and dignity, which sat strangely upon one so tiny, caused the young woman at times to turn her head from him that he might not see the smiles which she could scarce repress.

Presently the boy took a ball from his tunic, and, pointing at a little bush near them, said, "Stand you there, Lady Maud, by yonder bush. I would play at toss."

The young woman did as she was bid, and when she had taken her place and turned to face him the boy threw the ball to her. Thus they played beneath the windows of the armory, the boy running blithely after the ball when he missed it, and laughing and shouting in happy glee when he made a particularly good catch.

In one of the windows of the armory overlooking the garden stood a grim, gray, old man, leaning upon his folded arms, his brows drawn together in a malignant scowl, the corners of his mouth set in a stern, cold line.

He looked upon the garden and the playing child, and upon the lovely young woman beneath him, but with eyes which did not see, for De Vac was working out a great problem, the greatest of all his life.

For three days, the old man had brooded over his grievance, seeking for some means to be revenged upon the King for the insult which Henry had put upon him. Many schemes had presented themselves to his shrewd and cunning mind, but so far all had been rejected as unworthy of the terrible satisfaction which his wounded pride demanded.

His fancies had, for the most part, revolved about the unsettled political conditions of Henry's reign, for from these he felt he might wrest that opportunity which could be turned to his own personal uses and to the harm, and possibly the undoing, of the King.

For years an inmate of the palace, and often a listener in the armory when the King played at sword with his friends and favorites, De Vac had heard much which passed between Henry III and his intimates that could well be turned to the King's harm by a shrewd and resourceful enemy.

With all England, he knew the utter contempt in which Henry held the terms of the Magna Charta which he so often violated along with his kingly oath to maintain it. But what all England did not know, De Vac had gleaned from scraps of conversation dropped in the armory: that Henry was even now negotiating with the leaders of foreign mercenaries, and with Louis IX of France, for a sufficient force of knights and men-at-arms to wage a relentless war upon his own barons that he might effectively put a stop to all future interference by them with the royal prerogative of the Plantagenets to misrule England.

If he could but learn the details of this plan, thought De Vac: the point of landing of the foreign troops; their numbers; the first point of attack. Ah, would it not be sweet revenge indeed to balk the King in this venture so dear to his heart!

A word to De Clare, or De Montfort would bring the barons and their retainers forty thousand strong to overwhelm the King's forces.

And he would let the King know to whom, and for what cause, he was beholden for his defeat and discomfiture. Possibly the barons would depose

Henry, and place a new king upon England's throne, and then De Vac would mock the Plantagenet to his face. Sweet, kind, delectable vengeance, indeed! And the old man licked his thin lips as though to taste the last sweet vestige of some dainty morsel.

And then Chance carried a little leather ball beneath the window where the old man stood; and as the child ran, laughing, to recover it, De Vac's eyes fell upon him, and his former plan for revenge melted as the fog before the noonday sun; and in its stead there opened to him the whole hideous plot of fearsome vengeance as clearly as it were writ upon the leaves of a great book that had been thrown wide before him. And, in so far as he could direct, he varied not one jot from the details of that vividly conceived masterpiece of hellishness during the twenty years which followed.

The little boy who so innocently played in the garden of his royal father was Prince Richard, the three-year-old son of Henry III of England. No published history mentions this little lost prince; only the secret archives of the kings of England tell the story of his strange and adventurous life. His name has been blotted from the records of men; and the revenge of De Vac has passed from the eyes of the world; though in his time it was a real and terrible thing in the hearts of the English.