

### CHAPTER III

For nearly a month, the old man haunted the palace, and watched in the gardens for the little Prince until he knew the daily routine of his tiny life with his nurses and governesses.

He saw that when the Lady Maud accompanied him, they were wont to repair to the farthest extremities of the palace grounds where, by a little postern gate, she admitted a certain officer of the Guards to whom the Queen had forbidden the privilege of the court.

There, in a secluded bower, the two lovers whispered their hopes and plans, unmindful of the royal charge playing neglected among the flowers and shrubbery of the garden.

Toward the middle of July De Vac had his plans well laid. He had managed to coax old Brus, the gardener, into letting him have the key to the little postern gate on the plea that he wished to indulge in a midnight escapade, hinting broadly of a fair lady who was to be the partner of his adventure, and, what was more to the point with Brus, at the same time slipping a couple of golden zecchins into the gardener's palm.

Brus, like the other palace servants, considered De Vac a loyal retainer of the house of Plantagenet. Whatever else of mischief De Vac might be up to, Brus was quite sure that in so far as the King was concerned, the key to the postern gate was as safe in De Vac's hands as though Henry himself had it.

The old fellow wondered a little that the morose old master of fence should, at his time in life, indulge in frivolous escapades more befitting the younger sprigs of gentility, but, then, what concern was it of his? Did he not have enough to think about to keep the gardens so that his royal master and mistress might find pleasure in the shaded walks, the well-kept sward, and the gorgeous beds of foliage plants and blooming flowers which he set with such wondrous precision in the formal garden?

Further, two gold zecchins were not often come by so easily as this; and if the dear Lord Jesus saw fit, in his infinite wisdom, to take this means of rewarding his poor servant, it ill became such a worm as he to ignore the divine favor. So Brus took the gold zecchins and De Vac the key, and the little prince played happily among the flowers of his royal father's garden, and all were satisfied; which was as it should have been.

That night, De Vac took the key to a locksmith on the far side of London; one who could not possibly know him or recognize the key as belonging to the palace. Here he had a duplicate made, waiting impatiently while the old man fashioned it with the crude instruments of his time.

From this little shop, De Vac threaded his way through the dirty lanes and alleys of ancient London, lighted at far intervals by an occasional smoky lantern, until he came to a squalid tenement but a short distance from the palace.

A narrow alley ran past the building, ending abruptly at the bank of the Thames in a moldering wooden dock, beneath which the inky waters of the river rose and fell, lapping the decaying piles and surging far beneath the dock to the remote fastnesses inhabited by the great fierce dock rats and their fiercer human antitypes.

Several times De Vac paced the length of this black alley in search of the little doorway of the building he sought. At length he came upon it, and, after repeated pounding with the pommel of his sword, it was opened by a slatternly old hag.

"What would ye of a decent woman at such an ungodly hour?" she grumbled. "Ah, 'tis ye, my lord?" she added, hastily, as the flickering rays of the candle she bore lighted up De Vac's face. "Welcome, my Lord, thrice welcome. The daughter of the devil welcomes her brother."

"Silence, old hag," cried De Vac. "Is it not enough that you leech me of good marks of such a quantity that you may ever after wear mantles of villosa and feast on simnel bread and malmsey, that you must needs burden me still further with the affliction of thy vile tongue?"

"Hast thou the clothes ready bundled and the key, also, to this gate to perdition? And the room: didst set to rights the furnishings I had delivered here, and sweep the century-old accumulation of filth and cobwebs from the floor and rafters? Why, the very air reeked of the dead Romans who builded London twelve hundred years ago. Methinks, too, from the stink, they must have been Roman swineherd who habited this sty with their herds, an' I venture that thou, old sow, hast never touched broom to the place for fear of disturbing the ancient relics of thy kin."

"Cease thy babbling, Lord Satan," cried the woman. "I would rather hear thy money talk than thou, for though it come accursed and tainted from thy rogue hand, yet it speaks with the same sweet and commanding voice as it were fresh from the coffers of the holy church."

"The bundle is ready," she continued, closing the door after De Vac, who had now entered, "and here be the key; but first let us have a payment. I know not what thy foul work may be, but foul it is I know from the secrecy which you have demanded, an' I dare say there will be some who would pay well to learn the whereabouts of the old woman and the child, thy sister and her son you tell me they be, who you are so anxious to hide away in old Til's garret. So it be well for you, my Lord, to pay old Til well and add a few guilders for the peace of her tongue if you would that your prisoner find peace in old Til's house."

"Fetch me the bundle, hag," replied De Vac, "and you shall have gold against a final settlement; more even than we bargained for if all goes well and thou holdest thy vile tongue."

But the old woman's threats had already caused De Vac a feeling of uneasiness, which would have been reflected to an exaggerated degree in the old woman had she known the determination her words had caused in the mind of the old master of fence.

His venture was far too serious, and the results of exposure too fraught with danger, to permit of his taking any chances with a disloyal fellow-conspirator. True, he had not even hinted at the enormity of the plot in which he was involving the old woman, but, as she had said, his stern commands for secrecy had told enough to arouse her suspicions, and with them her curiosity and cupidity. So it was that old Til might well have quailed in her tattered sandals had she but even vaguely guessed the thoughts which passed in De Vac's mind; but the extra gold pieces he dropped into her withered palm as she delivered the bundle to him, together with the promise of more, quite effectually won her loyalty and her silence for the time being.

Slipping the key into the pocket of his tunic and covering the bundle with his long surcoat, De Vac stepped out into the darkness of the alley and hastened toward the dock.

Beneath the planks he found a skiff which he had moored there earlier in the evening, and underneath one of the thwarts he hid the bundle. Then, casting off, he rowed slowly up the Thames until, below the palace walls, he moored near to the little postern gate which let into the lower end of the garden.

Hiding the skiff as best he could in some tangled bushes which grew to the water's edge, set there by order of the King to add to the beauty of the aspect

from the river side, De Vac crept warily to the postern and, unchallenged, entered and sought his apartments in the palace.

The next day, he returned the original key to Brus, telling the old man that he had not used it after all, since mature reflection had convinced him of the folly of his contemplated adventure, especially in one whose youth was past, and in whose joints the night damp of the Thames might find lodgement for rheumatism.

"Ha, Sir Jules," laughed the old gardener, "Virtue and Vice be twin sisters who come running to do the bidding of the same father, Desire. Were there no desire there would be no virtue, and because one man desires what another does not, who shall say whether the child of his desire be vice or virtue? Or on the other hand if my friend desires his own wife and if that be virtue, then if I also desire his wife, is not that likewise virtue, since we desire the same thing? But if to obtain our desire it be necessary to expose our joints to the Thames' fog, then it were virtue to remain at home."

"Right you sound, old mole," said De Vac, smiling, "would that I might learn to reason by your wondrous logic; methinks it might stand me in good stead before I be much older."

"The best sword arm in all Christendom needs no other logic than the sword, I should think," said Brus, returning to his work.

That afternoon, De Vac stood in a window of the armory looking out upon the beautiful garden which spread before him to the river wall two hundred yards away. In the foreground were box-bordered walks, smooth, sleek lawns, and formal beds of gorgeous flowering plants, while here and there marble statues of wood nymph and satyr gleamed, sparkling in the brilliant sunlight, or, half shaded by an overhanging bush, took on a semblance of life from the riotous play of light and shadow as the leaves above them moved to and fro in the faint breeze. Farther in the distance, the river wall was hidden by more closely massed bushes, and the formal, geometric precision of the nearer view was relieved by a background of vine-colored bowers, and a profusion of small trees and flowering shrubs arranged in studied disorder.

Through this seeming jungle ran tortuous paths, and the carved stone benches of the open garden gave place to rustic seats, and swings suspended from the branches of fruit trees.

Toward this enchanting spot slowly were walking the Lady Maud and her little charge, Prince Richard; all ignorant of the malicious watcher in the window behind them.

A great peacock strutted proudly across the walk before them, and, as Richard ran, childlike, after it, Lady Maud hastened on to the little postern gate which she quickly unlocked, admitting her lover, who had been waiting without. Relocking the gate the two strolled arm in arm to the little bower which was their trysting place.

As the lovers talked, all self-engrossed, the little Prince played happily about among the trees and flowers, and none saw the stern, determined face which peered through the foliage at a little distance from the playing boy.

Richard was devoting his royal energies to chasing an elusive butterfly which fate led nearer and nearer to the cold, hard watcher in the bushes. Closer and closer came the little Prince, and in another moment, he had burst through the flowering shrubs, and stood facing the implacable master of fence.

"Your Highness," said De Vac, bowing to the little fellow, "let old DeVac help you catch the pretty insect."

Richard, having often seen De Vac, did not fear him, and so together they started in pursuit of the butterfly which by now had passed out of sight. De Vac turned their steps toward the little postern gate, but when he would have passed through with the tiny Prince, the latter rebelled.

"Come, My Lord Prince," urged De Vac, "methinks the butterfly did but alight without the wall, we can have it and return within the garden in an instant."

"Go thyself and fetch it," replied the Prince; "the King, my father, has forbid me stepping without the palace grounds."

"Come," commanded De Vac, more sternly, "no harm can come to you."

But the child hung back and would not go with him so that De Vac was forced to grasp him roughly by the arm. There was a cry of rage and alarm from the royal child.

"Unhand me, sirrah," screamed the boy. "How dare you lay hands on a prince of England?"

De Vac clapped his hand over the child's mouth to still his cries, but it was too late. The Lady Maud and her lover had heard and, in an instant, they were rushing toward the postern gate, the officer drawing his sword as he ran.

When they reached the wall, De Vac and the Prince were upon the outside, and the Frenchman had closed and was endeavoring to lock the gate. But, handicapped by the struggling boy, he had not time to turn the key before the officer threw himself against the panels and burst out before the master of fence, closely followed by the Lady Maud.

De Vac dropped the key and, still grasping the now thoroughly affrightened Prince with his left hand, drew his sword and confronted the officer.

There were no words, there was no need of words; De Vac's intentions were too plain to necessitate any parley, so the two fell upon each other with grim fury; the brave officer facing the best swordsman that France had ever produced in a futile attempt to rescue his young prince.

In a moment, De Vac had disarmed him, but, contrary to the laws of chivalry, he did not lower his point until it had first plunged through the heart of his brave antagonist. Then, with a bound, he leaped between Lady Maud and the gate, so that she could not retreat into the garden and give the alarm.

Still grasping the trembling child in his iron grip, he stood facing the lady in waiting, his back against the door.

"Mon Dieu, Sir Jules," she cried, "hast thou gone mad?"

"No, My Lady," he answered, "but I had not thought to do the work which now lies before me. Why didst thou not keep a still tongue in thy head and let his patron saint look after the welfare of this princeling? Your rashness has brought you to a pretty pass, for it must be either you or I, My Lady, and it cannot be I. Say thy prayers and compose thyself for death."

Henry III, King of England, sat in his council chamber surrounded by the great lords and nobles who composed his suit. He awaited Simon de Montfort, Earl of Leicester, whom he had summoned that he might heap still further indignities upon him with the intention of degrading and humiliating him that he might leave England forever. The King feared this mighty kinsman who so boldly advised him against the weak follies which were bringing his kingdom to a condition of revolution.

What the outcome of this audience would have been none may say, for Leicester had but just entered and saluted his sovereign when there came an interruption which drowned the petty wrangles of king and courtier in a common affliction that touched the hearts of all.

There was a commotion at one side of the room, the arras parted, and Eleanor, Queen of England, staggered toward the throne, tears streaming down her pale cheeks.

"Oh, My Lord! My Lord!" she cried, "Richard, our son, has been assassinated and thrown into the Thames."

In an instant, all was confusion and turmoil, and it was with the greatest difficulty that the King finally obtained a coherent statement from his queen.

It seemed that when the Lady Maud had not returned to the palace with Prince Richard at the proper time, the Queen had been notified and an immediate search had been instituted--a search which did not end for over twenty years; but the first fruits of it turned the hearts of the court to stone, for there beside the open postern gate lay the dead bodies of Lady Maud and a certain officer of the Guards, but nowhere was there a sign or trace of Prince Richard, second son of Henry III of England, and at that time the youngest prince of the realm.

It was two days before the absence of De Vac was noted, and then it was that one of the lords in waiting to the King reminded his majesty of the episode of the fencing bout, and a motive for the abduction of the King's little son became apparent.

An edict was issued requiring the examination of every child in England, for on the left breast of the little Prince was a birthmark which closely resembled a lily and, when after a year no child was found bearing such a mark and no trace of De Vac uncovered, the search was carried into France, nor was it ever wholly relinquished at any time for more than twenty years.

The first theory, of assassination, was quickly abandoned when it was subjected to the light of reason, for it was evident that an assassin could have dispatched the little Prince at the same time that he killed the Lady Maud and her lover, had such been his desire.

The most eager factor in the search for Prince Richard was Simon de Montfort, Earl of Leicester, whose affection for his royal nephew had always been so marked as to have been commented upon by the members of the King's household.

Thus for a time the rupture between De Montfort and his king was healed, and although the great nobleman was divested of his authority in Gascony, he suffered little further oppression at the hands of his royal master.