

CHAPTER IV

As De Vac drew his sword from the heart of the Lady Maud, he winced, for, merciless though he was, he had shrunk from this cruel task. Too far he had gone, however, to back down now, and, had he left the Lady Maud alive, the whole of the palace guard and all the city of London would have been on his heels in ten minutes; there would have been no escape.

The little Prince was now so terrified that he could but tremble and whimper in his fright. So fearful was he of the terrible De Vac that a threat of death easily stilled his tongue, and so the grim, old man led him to the boat hidden deep in the dense bushes.

De Vac did not dare remain in this retreat until dark, as he had first intended. Instead, he drew a dingy, ragged dress from the bundle beneath the thwart and in this disguised himself as an old woman, drawing a cotton wimple low over his head and forehead to hide his short hair. Concealing the child beneath the other articles of clothing, he pushed off from the bank, and, rowing close to the shore, hastened down the Thames toward the old dock where, the previous night, he had concealed his skiff. He reached his destination unnoticed, and, running in beneath the dock, worked the boat far into the dark recess of the cave-like retreat.

Here he determined to hide until darkness had fallen, for he knew that the search would be on for the little lost Prince at any moment, and that none might traverse the streets of London without being subject to the closest scrutiny.

Taking advantage of the forced wait, De Vac undressed the Prince and clothed him in other garments, which had been wrapped in the bundle hidden beneath the thwart; a little red cotton tunic with hose to match, a black doublet and a tiny leather jerkin and leather cap.

The discarded clothing of the Prince he wrapped about a huge stone torn from the disintegrating masonry of the river wall, and consigned the bundle to the voiceless river.

The Prince had by now regained some of his former assurance and, finding that De Vac seemed not to intend harming him, the little fellow commenced questioning his grim companion, his childish wonder at this strange adventure getting the better of his former apprehension.

"What do we here, Sir Jules?" he asked. "Take me back to the King's, my father's palace. I like not this dark hole nor the strange garments you have placed upon me."

"Silence, boy!" commanded the old man. "Sir Jules be dead, nor are you a king's son. Remember these two things well, nor ever again let me hear you speak the name Sir Jules, or call yourself a prince."

The boy went silent, again cowed by the fierce tone of his captor. Presently he began to whimper, for he was tired and hungry and frightened--just a poor little baby, helpless and hopeless in the hands of this cruel enemy--all his royalty as nothing, all gone with the silken finery which lay in the thick mud at the bottom of the Thames, and presently he dropped into a fitful sleep in the bottom of the skiff.

When darkness had settled, De Vac pushed the skiff outward to the side of the dock and, gathering the sleeping child in his arms, stood listening, preparatory to mounting to the alley which led to old Til's place.

As he stood thus, a faint sound of clanking armor came to his attentive ears; louder and louder it grew until there could be no doubt but that a number of men were approaching.

De Vac resumed his place in the skiff, and again drew it far beneath the dock. Scarcely had he done so ere a party of armored knights and men-at-arms clanked out upon the planks above him from the mouth of the dark alley. Here they stopped as though for consultation and plainly could the listener below hear every word of their conversation.

"De Montfort," said one, "what thinkest thou of it? Can it be that the Queen is right and that Richard lies dead beneath these black waters?"

"No, De Clare," replied a deep voice, which De Vac recognized as that of the Earl of Leicester. "The hand that could steal the Prince from out of the very gardens of his sire without the knowledge of Lady Maud or her companion, which must evidently have been the case, could more easily and safely have dispatched him within the gardens had that been the object of this strange attack. I think, My Lord, that presently we shall hear from some bold adventurer who holds the little Prince for ransom. God give that such may be the case, for of all the winsome and affectionate little fellows I have ever seen, not even excepting mine own dear son, the little Richard was the most to be beloved. Would that I might get my hands upon the foul devil who has done this horrid deed."

Beneath the planks, not four feet from where Leicester stood, lay the object of his search. The clanking armor, the heavy spurred feet, and the voices above him had awakened the little Prince and, with a startled cry, he sat upright in the bottom of the skiff. Instantly De Vac's iron band clapped over the tiny mouth, but not before a single faint wail had reached the ears of the men above.

"Hark! What was that, My Lord?" cried one of the men-at-arms.

In tense silence they listened for a repetition of the sound and then De Montfort cried out:

"What ho, below there! Who is it beneath the dock? Answer, in the name of the King!"

Richard, recognizing the voice of his favorite uncle, struggled to free himself, but De Vac's ruthless hand crushed out the weak efforts of the babe, and all was quiet as the tomb, while those above stood listening for a repetition of the sound.

"Dock rats," said De Clare, and then as though the devil guided them to protect his own, two huge rats scurried upward from between the loose boards, and ran squealing up the dark alley.

"Right you are," said De Montfort, "but I could have sworn 'twas a child's feeble wail had I not seen the two filthy rodents with mine own eyes. Come, let us to the next vile alley. We have met with no success here, though that old hag who called herself Til seemed overanxious to bargain for the future information she seemed hopeful of being able to give us."

As they moved off, their voices grew fainter in the ears of the listeners beneath the dock and soon were lost in the distance.

"A close shave," thought De Vac, as he again took up the child and prepared to gain the dock. No further noises occurring to frighten him, he soon reached the door to Til's house and, inserting the key, crept noiselessly to the garret room which he had rented from his ill-favored hostess.

There were no stairs from the upper floor to the garret above, this ascent being made by means of a wooden ladder which De Vac pulled up after him, closing and securing the aperture, through which he climbed with his burden, by means of a heavy trapdoor equipped with thick bars.

The apartment which they now entered extended across the entire east end of the building, and had windows upon three sides. These were heavily

curtained. The apartment was lighted by a small cresset hanging from a rafter near the center of the room.

The walls were unplastered and the rafters unceiled; the whole bearing a most barnlike and unhospitable appearance.

In one corner was a huge bed, and across the room a smaller cot; a cupboard, a table, and two benches completed the furnishings. These articles De Vac had purchased for the room against the time when he should occupy it with his little prisoner.

On the table were a loaf of black bread, an earthenware jar containing honey, a pitcher of milk and two drinking horns. To these, De Vac immediately gave his attention, commanding the child to partake of what he wished.

Hunger for the moment overcame the little Prince's fears, and he set to with avidity upon the strange, rough fare, made doubly coarse by the rude utensils and the bare surroundings, so unlike the royal magnificence of his palace apartments.

While the child ate, De Vac hastened to the lower floor of the building in search of Til, whom he now thoroughly mistrusted and feared. The words of De Montfort, which he had overheard at the dock, convinced him that here was one more obstacle to the fulfillment of his revenge which must be removed as had the Lady Maud; but in this instance there was neither youth nor beauty to plead the cause of the intended victim, or to cause the grim executioner a pang of remorse.

When he found the old hag, she was already dressed to go upon the street, in fact he intercepted her at the very door of the building. Still clad as he was in the mantle and wimple of an old woman, Til did not, at first, recognize him, and when he spoke, she burst into a nervous, cackling laugh, as one caught in the perpetration of some questionable act, nor did her manner escape the shrewd notice of the wily master of fence.

"Whither, old hag?" he asked.

"To visit Mag Tunk at the alley's end, by the river, My Lord," she replied, with more respect than she had been wont to accord him.

"Then, I will accompany you part way, my friend, and, perchance, you can give me a hand with some packages I left behind me in the skiff I have moored there."

And so the two walked together through the dark alley to the end of the rickety, dismantled dock; the one thinking of the vast reward the King would lavish upon her for the information she felt sure she alone could give; the other feeling beneath his mantle for the hilt of a long dagger which nestled there.

As they reached the water's edge, De Vac was walking with his right shoulder behind his companion's left, in his hand was gripped the keen blade and, as the woman halted on the dock, the point that hovered just below her left shoulder-blade plunged, soundless, into her heart at the same instant that De Vac's left hand swung up and grasped her throat in a grip of steel.

There was no sound, barely a struggle of the convulsively stiffening old muscles, and then, with a push from De Vac, the body lunged forward into the Thames, where a dull splash marked the end of the last hope that Prince Richard might be rescued from the clutches of his Nemesis.