

MARTIN VALLIANT

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MARTIN VALLIANT

Chapter I

Brother Geraint pulled his black cowl forward over his head, and stepped out into the porch. Some one thrust the door to behind him, and there was the sound of an oak bar being dropped into the slots.

A full moon stared at Brother Geraint over the top of a thorn hedge. He stood there for a while in the deep shadow, licking his lips, and listening.

Somewhere down the valley a dog was baying the moon, a little trickle of discord running through the supreme silence of the night. Brother Geraint tucked his hands into his sleeves, grinned at the moon, and started down the path with his shadow following at his heels. He loitered a moment at the gate, glancing back over his shoulder at the house that blinked never a light at him, but stood solid and black and silent in the thick of a smother of apple trees.

The man at the gate nodded his head gloatingly.

“Peace be with you.”

He gave a self-pleased, triumphant snuffle, swung the gate open, glanced up and down the path that crossed the meadows, and then turned homewards through the moonlight.

In Orchard Valley the dew lay like silver samite on the grass, and the boughs of the apple trees were white as snow. Between the willows the Rondel river ran toward the sea, sleek and still

and glassy, save where it thundered over the weir beside the prior's mill. The bell-tower of Paradise cut the northern sky into two steel-bright halves. Over yonder beyond the river the Forest held up a cloak of mystery across the west. Its great beech trees were glimmering into green splendor and lifting a thousand crowded domes against the brilliance of the moon.

Brother Geraint had no care for any of these things. He swung along toward Paradise like a dog returning from an adventure, his fat chin showing white under his cowl, his arms folded across his chest. The cluster of hovels and cottages that stretched between the river and the priory gate was discreetly dark and silent, with no Peeping Tom to watch the devout figure moving between the hedges and under the orchard trees. Paradise slept peacefully in its valley, and left the ordering of things spiritual to St. Benedict.

The priory, lying there in the midst of the smooth meadows, looked white and chaste and very beautiful. The night was so still that even the aspen trees that sheltered it on the north would not have fluttered their leaves had the month been June. The gold weathercock at the top of the flèche glittered in the moonlight. The bell-tower, with its four pinnacles, seemed up among the stars. Sanctity, calm, devout splendor! And yet the gargoyles ranged below the battlements of the gate opened their black mouths with a suggestion of obscene and gloating laughter. It was as though they hailed Brother Geraint as a boon comrade, a human hungry creature with wanton eyes and scoffing lips:

“Ho, you sly sinner! Hallo, you dog!”

The black holes in the stone masks up above mouthed at him in silent exultation.

Brother Geraint did not make his entry by the great gate. There was a door in the precinct wall that opened into the kitchen court, and this door served. The monk passed along the slope under the infirmary, and so into the cloisters. He had taken off his shoes, and went noiselessly on his stockinged feet.

Suddenly he paused like a big, black, listening bird, his head on one side. For some one was chanting in the priory church. Geraint knew the voice, and his teeth showed in the dark slit of his mouth.

“Brre—pious bastard!”

Hate gleamed under his black cowl. He crept noiselessly up the steps that led to the doorway, and along the transept, and craning his head around the pillar of the chancel arch, looked up into the choir. The great window was lit by the moon, its tracery dead black in a sheet of silver. The light shone on the lower half of Brother Geraint’s face, but his eyes were in the shadow.

A man was kneeling in one of the choir stalls, a young man with his hood turned back and his hair shining like golden wire. He knelt very straight and erect, his head thrown back, his arms folded over his chest. He had ceased his chanting, and his eyes seemed to be looking at something a long way off.

There was a grotesque and ferocious sneer on Brother Geraint’s face. Then his lips moved silently. He was speaking to his own heart.

“How bold the whelp is before God! A bladder of lard hung up in a shop could not look more innocent. Innocent! Damnation! This bit of green pork needs curing.”

He nodded his head significantly at the man in the choir, and crept back out of the church. In going from the cloisters toward the prior’s house he met a little old fellow carrying a leather bottle, and walking with his head thrust forward as though he were in a hurry.

“God’s speed, brother.”

They stood close together under the wall, leering at each other in the darkness.

“Is the prior abed yet?”

The little man held up the bottle.

“I have just been filling his jack for him.”

“Empty, is it?”

“Try, brother.”

Geraint took the bottle and drank.

“Burgundy.”

He licked his lips.

“Ale is all very well, Holt, but a stomachful of this red stuff is good after a night of prayer.”

The little man sniggered, and nodded his head.

“Warms up the blood again. Ssst—listen to that young dog yelping.”

They could hear Brother Martin chanting in the choir. Geraint’s hand shot out and gripped the cellarer’s shoulder.

“Assuredly you love him, friend Holt. Why, the young man is a saint; he brings us glory and reputation.”

“Stuffed glory and geese!”

Holt mouthed and jiggered like an angry ape.

“It was a bad day for us when old Valliant renounced the devil and dedicated his bastard to God. Why, the young hound is getting too big for his kennel.”

“Even preaches against the leather jack, my friend!”

“Aye, more than that. Sniffing at older men’s heels, hunting them when they go a-hunting.”

Geraint laughed.

“We’ll find a cure for that. He shall be one of us before Abbot Hilary comes poking his holy nose into Paradise. Why, the young fool is green as grass, but there must be some of old Valliant’s blood in him.”

“The blood of Simon Zelotes.”

“We shall see, Holt; we shall see.”

The prior’s parlor was a noble room carried upon arches, its three windows looking out on the prior’s garden and the fruit

trees of the orchard. A roofed staircase, the roof carried by carved stone balustrades, led up to the vestibule. Geraint, still carrying his shoes, went up the stairway with the briskness of a man who did not vex his soul with ceremonious deliberations. Nor did he trouble to rap on the prior's door, but thrust it open and walked in.

An old man was sitting in an oak chair before the fire, his paunch making a very visible outline, his feet cocked up so that their soles caught the blaze. His lower lip hung querulously. His bold, high forehead glistened in the fire-light, and his rather protuberant blue eyes had a bemused, dull look.

He turned, glanced at Brother Geraint, and grunted.

“So you are not abed.”

“No, I am here—as you see.”

“Shut the door, brother. What a man it is for draughts and windy adventures!”

Geraint closed the door, and throwing back his cowl, pulled a stool up to the fire. He was a lusty, lean, big-jawed creature, as unlike Prior Globulus as an eagle is unlike a fat farmyard cock. His eyes were restless and very shrewd. The backs of his hands were covered with black hair, and one guessed that his chest was like the chest of an ape. He had a trick of moistening his lower lip with his tongue, a big red lip that jutted out like the spout of a jug.

“It is passing cold, sir, when a man has to walk without his shoes.”

He thrust his gray-stockinged feet close to the fire.

“You observe, sir, I am a careful man. Our young house-dog is awake.”

He watched Prior Globulus with shrewd, sidelong attention; but the old man lay inert in his chair and blinked at the fire.

“Brother Martin is very careful for our reputation, sir. He has become the thorn in our mortal flesh. It is notorious that he eschews wine, fasts like a saint, and has no eyes or ears for anything that is carnal—save, sir, when he discovers such frailties in others.”

The prior turned on Geraint with peevish impatience.

“A pest on the fellow; he is no more than a vexatious fool. Let him be, brother.”

Geraint leaned forward and spread his hands before the fire.

“Brother Martin is no fool, sir; I am beginning to believe that the fellow is very sly. He watches and says but little, yet there is a something in those eyes of his. He lives like a fanatic, while we, sir, are but mortal men.”

He smiled and rubbed his hands together.

“As you know, sir, it was mooted that Abbot Hilary has his eyes on Paradise. Some one whispered shame of us, and Abbot Hilary is the devil.”

Prior Globulus sat up straight in his chair, his face full of querulous anger and dismay.

“Foul lies, brother.”

“Foul lies, sir.”

Geraint’s voice was ironical. His eyes met the older man’s, and Prior Globulus could not meet the look.

“Well, well,” and he grinned peevisly. “What does your wisdom say, my brother?”

Geraint edged his stool a little closer.

“Brother Martin must be taught to be mortal,” he said; “he must become one of us.”

“And how shall that befall?”

“I will tell you, sir. Is not the fellow old Valliant’s son—old Valliant whose blood was like Spanish wine? Brother Martin is a young man, and the spring is here.”

They talked together for a long while before the fire, their heads almost touching, their eyes watching the flames playing in the throat of the chimney.

Chapter II

White mist filled the valley, for there was no wind moving, and the night had been very still. The moon had sunk into the Forest, but though the sun had not yet climbed over the edge of the day a faint yellow radiance showed in the east. As for the birds, they had begun their piping, and the whole valley was filled with a mysterious exultation.

Into this world of white mist and of song walked Brother Martin, old Roger Valliant's son—old Valliant, the soldier of fortune who had fought for pay under all manner of kings and captains, and had come back to take his peace in England with an iron box full of silver and gold. Old Valliant was dead, with the flavor of sundry rude romances still clinging to his memory, for even when his hair was gray he had caught the eyes of the women. Then in his later years a sudden devoutness had fallen upon him; there had been a toddling boy in his house and no mother to care for the child. Old Valliant had made great efforts to escape the devil; that was what his neighbors had said of him. At all events, he had left the child and his money to the monks of Paradise, and had made a most comely and tranquil end.

Brother Martin was three-and-twenty, and the tallest man in Orchard Valley. The women whispered that it was a pity that such a man should be a monk and take his state so seriously. There was a tinge of red in his hair; his blue eyes looked at life with a bold mildness; men said that he was built more finely than his father, and old Valliant had been a mighty man-at-

arms. Yet Brother Martin often had the look of a dreamer, though his flesh was so rich and admirable in its youth. He loved the forest, he loved the soft meadows and the orchards, the path beside the river where the willows trailed their branches in the water, his stall in the choir, the mill where the wheel thundered. The children could not let him be when he walked through the village. As for the white pigeons in the priory dovecot, they would perch on his hands and shoulders. And yet there was a mild severity about the man, a clear-sighted and unfoolish chastity that brooked no meanness. He was awake even though he could dream. He had had his wrestling matches with the devil.

Brother Martin went down to the river that May morning, stripped himself, piled his clothes on the trunk of a fallen pollard willow, and took his swim. He let himself drift within ten yards of the weir, and then struck back against the swiftly gliding water. There had been heavy rains on the Forest ridge, and the Rondel was running fast—so fast that Martin had to fight hard to make headway against the stream. The youth in him had challenged the river; it was a favorite trick of his to let himself be carried close to the weir and then to fight back against the suck of the water.

And a woman was watching him. She had been standing all the while under a willow, leaning her body against the trunk of the tree, her gray cloak and hood part of the grayness of the dawn. Nothing could be seen of her face save the white curve of her chin. She kept absolutely still, so still that Martin did not notice her.

The Rondel river gave Martin a fair fight that morning. All his liveness and his strength were needed in the tussle; he conquered the river by inches, and drew away very slowly from the thundering weir. The woman hidden behind the willow leaned forward and watched him.

The sun had risen, a great yellow circle, when Martin reached the spot where he had left his clothes. The mist was rising, and long yellow slants of light struck the water and lined the scalloped ripples with gold. The water was very black under the near bank, and as Martin climbed out, holding to the trailing branches of a willow, he saw the dew-wet meadows shining like a sheet of silver. The birds were still exulting. The sunlight struck his dripping body and made it gleam like the body of a god.

Martin had frocked himself and was knotting his girdle when he heard the woman speak.

“Oh, Mother Mary, but I thought death had you!” She threw herself on her knees and seized one of his hands in both of hers. “The saints be thanked, holy father; but we in Paradise would be wrath with you for thinking so little of us.”

Martin stared at her, and in his astonishment he suffered her to keep a hold upon his hand. Her hood had fallen back, and showed her ripe, audacious face, and her black-brown eyes that were full of a seeming innocence. Her hair was the color of polished bronze, and her teeth very white behind her soft, red lips.

“What are you doing here, child?”

He was austere, yet gentle, and strangely unembarrassed. The girl was a ward of Widow Greensleeve's, of Cherry Acre.

She made a show of confusion.

"I was out to gather herbs, holy father—herbs that must have the dew on them—and I saw you struggling in the river—and was afraid."

He smiled at her, and withdrew his hand.

"I thank you for your fear, child."

"Sir, you are so well loved in the valley."

She stood up, smoothing her gown, and looking shyly at the grass.

"You are not angry with me, Father Martin?"

"How should I be angry?"

"In truth, but my fear for you ran away with me."

She gave him a quick and eloquent flash of the eyes, and turned to go.

"I must gather my herbs, holy father."

"Peace be with you," he said simply.

Martin went on his way, as though nothing singular had happened. The girl loitered under the willows, looking back at him with mischievous curiosity. He was very innocent, but somehow she liked him none the less for that.

“Maybe it is very pleasant to be so saintly,” she said; “yet he is a fine figure of a man. I wonder how long it will be before Father Satan comes stalking across the meadows.”

Kate Succory made a pretense of searching for herbs, so ordering her steps that she found herself on the path that led to the house at Cherry Acre. The path ran between high hawthorn hedges that sheltered the orchards, and since the hedges were in green leaf, the way was like a narrow winding alley between high walls. She did not hurry herself, and presently she heard some one following her along the path.

“Good-morrow, Kate.”

She halted and turned a mock-demure face.

“Good-morrow, holy father.”

Geraint was grinning under his cowl.

“You are up betimes, sweeting.”

She walked on with a shrug of the shoulders.

“I have been gathering herbs, and I have the cow to milk.”

“Excellent maid. And nothing wonderful has happened to you?”

“Oh, I have fallen in love with some one,” she said tartly; “it is a girl’s business to fall in love.”

Geraint sniggered.

“I commend such humanity.”

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