

Chapter 37

WHAT M. DE GUISE CAME TO DO AT THE LOUVRE.

Behind M. de Guise there entered a great number of officers, courtiers, and gentlemen, and behind them a concourse of the people; an escort less brilliant, but more formidable, and it was their cries that had resounded as the duke entered the Louvre.

"Ah! it is you, my cousin," said the king; "what a noise you bring with you! Did I not hear the trumpets sound?"

"Sire, the trumpets sound in Paris only for the king, and in campaigns for the general. Here the trumpets would make too much noise for a subject; there they do not make enough for a prince."

Henri bit his lips. "Have you arrived from the siege of La Charité only to-day?"

"Only to-day, sire," replied the duke, with a heightened color.

"Ma foi! your visit is a great honor to us."

"Your majesty jests, no doubt. How can my visit honor him from whom all honor comes?"

"I mean, M. de Guise," replied Henri, "that every good Catholic is in the habit, on returning from a campaign, to visit God first in one of his temple's--the king only comes second. 'Honor God, serve the king,' you know, my cousin."

The heightened color of the duke became now still more distinct; and the king, happening to turn towards his brother, saw with astonishment, that he was as pale as the duke was red. He was struck by this emotion in each, but he said:

"At all events, duke, nothing equals my joy to see that you have escaped all the dangers of war, although you sought them, I was told in the rashest manner; but danger knows you and flies you."

The duke bowed.

"But I must beg you, my cousin, not to be so ambitious of mortal perils, for you put to shame sluggards like us, who sleep, eat, and invent new prayers."

"Yes, sire," replied the duke, "we know you to be a pious prince, and that no pleasure can make you forget the glory of God and the interests of the Church. That is why we have come with so much confidence to your majesty."

"With confidence! Do you not always come to me with confidence, my cousin?"

"Sire, the confidence of which I speak refers to the proposition I am about to make to you."

"You have a proposition to make to me! Well, speak, as you say, with confidence. What have you to propose?"

"The execution of one of the most beautiful ideas which has been originated since the Crusades."

"Continue, duke."

"Sire, the title of most Christian king is not a vain one; it makes an ardent zeal for religion incumbent on its possessor."

"Is the Church menaced by the Saracens once more?"

"Sire, the great concourse of people who followed me, blessing my name, honored me with this reception only because of my zeal to defend the Church. I have already had the honor of speaking to your majesty of an alliance between all true Catholics."

"Yes, yes," said Chicot, "the League; ventre de biche, Henri, the League. By St. Bartholomew! how can you forget so splendid an idea, my son?"

The duke cast a disdainful glance on Chicot, while d'Anjou, who stood by, as pale as death, tried by signs, to make the duke stop.

"Look at your brother, Henri," whispered Chicot.

"Sire," continued the Duc de Guise, "the Catholics have indeed called this association the Holy League, and its aim is to fortify the throne against the Huguenots, its mortal enemies; but to form an association is not enough, and in a kingdom like France, several millions of men cannot assemble without the consent of the king."

"Several millions!" cried Henri, almost with terror.

"Several millions!" repeated Chicot; "a small number of malcontents, which may bring forth pretty results."

"Sire," cried the duke, "I am astonished that your majesty allows me to be interrupted so often, when I am speaking on serious matters."

"Quite right," said Chicot; "silence there."

"Several millions!" repeated the king; "and against these millions, how many Huguenots are there in my kingdom?"

"Four," said Chicot.

This new sally made the king and his friends laugh, but the duke frowned, and his gentlemen murmured loudly.

Henri, becoming once more serious, said, "Well, duke, what do you wish? To the point."

"I wish, sire--for your popularity is dearer to me than my own--that your majesty should be superior to us in your zeal for religion--I wish you to choose a chief for the League."

"Well!" said the king, to those who surrounded him, "what do you think of it, my friends?"

Chicot, without saying a word, drew out a lion's skin from a corner, and threw himself on it.

"What are you doing, Chicot?" asked the king.

"Sire, they say that night brings good counsel; that must be because of sleep; therefore I am going to sleep, and to-morrow I will reply to my cousin Guise."

The duke cast a furious glance on Chicot, who replied by a loud snore.

"Well, sire!" said the duke, "what does your majesty say?"

"I think that, as usual, you are in the right, my cousin; convoke, then, your principal leaguers, come at their head, and I will choose the chief."

"When, sire?"

"To-morrow."

The Duc de Guise then took leave, and the Duc d'Anjou was about to do the same, when the king said,--

"Stay, my brother, I wish to speak to you."