

Chapter 39

IN WHICH IT IS PROVED THAT LISTENING IS THE BEST WAY TO HEAR.

The Duc d'Anjou was well aware that there were few rooms in the Louvre which were not built so that what was said in them could be heard from the outside; but, completely seduced by his brother's manner, he forgot to take any precautions.

"Why, monseigneur," said the Duc de Guise. "how pale you are!"

"Visibly?"

"Yes, to me."

"The king saw nothing?"

"I think not; but he retained you?"

"Yes."

"And what did he say, monseigneur?"

"He approves the idea, but the more gigantic it appears, the more he hesitates to place a man like you at the head."

"Then we are likely to fail."

"I fear so, my dear duke; the League seems likely to fail."

"Before it begins."

At this moment Henri, hearing a noise, turned and saw Chicot by his side, listening also. "You followed me, Knave!" said he.

"Hush, my son," said Chicot; "you prevent me from hearing."

"Monseigneur," said the Duc de Guise, "it seems to me that in this case the king would have refused at once. Does he wish to dispossess me?"

"I believe so."

"Then he would ruin the enterprise?"

"Yes; but I aided you with all my power."

"How, monseigneur?"

"In this--the king has left me almost master, to kill or reanimate the League."

"How so?" cried the duke, with sparkling eyes.

"Why, if, instead of dissolving the League, he named me chief----"

"Ah!" cried the duke, while the blood mounted to his face.

"Ah! the dogs are going to fight over their bones," said Chicot; but to his surprise, and the king's, the Duc de Guise suddenly became calm, and exclaimed, in an almost joyful tone:

"You are an adroit politician, monseigneur, if you did this."

"Yes, I did; but I would not conclude anything without speaking to you."

"Why so, monseigneur?"

"Because I did not know what it would lead us to."

"Well, I will tell you, monseigneur, not to what it will lead us--that God alone knows--but how it will serve us. The League is a second army, and as I hold the first, and my brother the Church, nothing can resist us as long as we are united."

"Without counting," said the Duc d'Anjou, "that I am heir presumptive to the throne."

"True, but still calculate your bad chances."

"I have done so a hundred times."

"There is, first, the King of Navarre."

"Oh! I do not mind him; he is entirely occupied by his amours with La Fosseuse."

"He, monseigneur, will dispute every inch with you; he watches you and your brother; he hungers for the throne. If any accident should happen to your brother, see if he will not be here with a bound from Pau to Paris."

"An accident to my brother," repeated François.

"Listen, Henri," said Chicot.

"Yes, monseigneur," said the Duc de Guise, "an accident. Accidents are not rare in your family; you know that, as well as I do. One prince is in good health, and all at once he falls ill of a lingering malady; another is counting on long years, when, perhaps, he has but a few hours to live."

"Do you hear, Henri?" said Chicot, taking the hand of the king, who shuddered at what he heard.

"Yes, it is true," said the Duc d'Anjou, "the princes of my house are born under fatal influences; but my brother Henri is, thank God, strong and well; he supported formerly the fatigues of war, and now that his life is nothing but recreation--"

"Yes; but, monseigneur, remember one thing; these recreations are not always without danger. How did your father, Henri II., die, for example? He, who also had happily escaped the dangers of war. The wound by M. de Montgomery's lance was an accident. Then your poor brother, François, one would hardly call a pain in the ears an accident, and yet it was one; at least, I have often heard it said that this mortal malady was poured into his ear by some one well known."

"Duke!" murmured François, reddening.

"Yes, monseigneur; the name of king has long brought misfortune with it. Look at Antoine de Bourbon, who died from a spot in the shoulder. Then there was Jeanne d'Albret, the mother of the Béarnais, who died from smelling a pair of perfumed gloves, an accident very unexpected although there were people who had great interest in this death. Then Charles IX., who died neither by the eye, the ear, nor the shoulder, but by the mouth----"

"What do you say?" cried François, starting back.

"Yes, monseigneur, by the mouth. Those hunting books are very dangerous, of which the pages stick together, and can only be opened by wetting the finger constantly."

"Duke! duke! I believe you invent crimes."

"Crimes! who speaks of crimes? I speak of accidents. Was it not also an accident that happened to Charles IX. at the chase? You know what chase I mean; that of the boar, where, intending to kill the wild boar, which had turned on your brother, you, who never before had missed your aim, did so then, and the king would have been killed, as he had fallen from his horse, had not Henri of Navarre slain the animal which you had missed."

"But," said the Duc d'Anjou, trying to recover himself, "what interest could I have had in the death of Charles IX., when the next king would be Henri III.?"

"Oh! monseigneur, there was already one throne vacant, that of Poland. The death of Charles IX. would have left another, that of France; and even the kingdom of Poland might not have been despised. Besides, the death of Charles would have brought you a degree nearer the throne, and the next accident would have benefited you."

"What do you conclude from all this, duke?" said the Duc d'Anjou.

"Monseigneur, I conclude that each king has his accident, and that you are the inevitable accident of Henri III., particularly if you are chief of the League."

"Then I am to accept?"

"Oh! I beg you to do so."

"And you?"

"Oh! be easy; my men are ready, and to-night Paris will be curious."

"What are they going to do in Paris to-night?" asked Henri.

"Oh! how foolish you are, my friend; to-night they sign the League publicly."

"It is well," said the Duc d'Anjou, "till this evening then."

"Yes, till this evening," said Henri.

"How!" said Chicot, "you will not risk going into the streets to-night?"

"Yes, I shall."

"You are wrong, Henri; remember the accidents."

"Oh! I shall be well accompanied; will you come with me?"

"What! do you take me for a Huguenot? I shall go and sign the League ten times. However, Henri, you have a great advantage over your predecessors, in being warned, for you know your brother, do you not?"

"Yes, and, mordieu! before long he shall find it out."