

Chapter 45

CHICOT MORE THAN EVER KING OF FRANCE.

The gates of the Louvre were generally closed at twelve, but the king gave orders that they should be left open on this night till one. At a quarter to one Quelus came up.

"Sire," said he, "the duke has come in."

"What is Maugiron doing?"

"Watching that he does not go out again."

"There is no danger."

"Then----"

"Let him go to bed quietly. Whom has he with him?"

"M. de Monsoreau and his ordinary gentlemen."

"And M. de Bussy?"

"No; he is not there."

"So much the better."

"What are your orders, sire?"

"Tell Schomberg and D'Epernon to be quick, and let M. de Monsoreau know that I wish to speak to him."

Five minutes after, Schomberg and D'Epernon entered; the former with only a slight blue tint left, which it would take several baths to eradicate, and the latter newly clothed. After them, M. de Monsoreau appeared. "The captain of the guards has just announced to me that your majesty did me the honor to send for me," said he.

"Yes, monsieur; when I was out this evening, I saw the stars so brilliant, and the moon so clear, that I thought it would be splendid weather for the chase to-morrow; so, M. le Comte, set off at once for Vincennes, and get a stag turned out ready for me."

"But, sire, I thought that to-morrow your majesty had given a rendezvous to Monsieur le Duc d'Anjou and M. de Guise, in order to name a chief for the League."

"Well, monsieur?" said the king haughtily.

"Sire, there might not be time."

"There is always time, monsieur, for those who know how to employ it; that is why I tell you to set off at once, so that you may have all ready for to-morrow morning at ten. Quelus, Schomberg, have the door of the Louvre opened for M. de Monsoreau, and have it closed behind him."

The chief huntsman retired in astonishment. "It is a whim of the king's," said he to the young men.

"Yes."

They watched him out, and then returned to the king.

"Now," said Henri, "silence, and all four of you follow me."

"Where are we going, sire?" said D'Epernon.

"Those who follow will see."

The king took a lantern in his hand, and led the young men along the secret corridor, which led to his brother's rooms. A valet-de-chambre watched here; but before he had time to warn his master, Henri ordered him to be silent, and the young men pushed him into a room and locked the door.

Henri opened his brother's door. François had gone to bed full of dreams of ambition, which the events of the evening had nourished; he had heard his name exalted, and the king's abused. Conducted by the Duc de Guise, he had seen the Parisians open everywhere for him and his gentlemen, while those of the king were insulted and hooted. Never since the commencement of his career had he been so popular, and consequently so hopeful. He had placed on the table a letter from M. de Guise, which had been brought to him by M. de Monsoreau. His surprise and terror were great when he saw the secret door open, and still more when he recognized the king. Henri signed to his companions to remain on the threshold, and advanced to the bed, frowning, but silent.

"Sire," stammered the duke, "the honor that your majesty does me is so unlooked for----"

"That it frightens you, does it not? But stay where you are, my brother; do not rise."

"But, sire, only--permit me----" and he drew towards him the letter of M. de Guise.

"You are reading?" asked the king.

"Yes, sire."

"Something interesting to keep you awake at this time of night?"

"Oh, sire, nothing very important; the evening courier----"

"Oh, yes, I understand--Courier of Venus; but no, I see I am wrong--they do not seal billet-doux with seals of that size."

The duke hid the letter altogether.

"How discreet this dear François is!" said the king, with a smile which frightened his brother. However, making an effort to recover himself, he said:

"Did your majesty wish to say anything particular to me?"

"What I have to say to you, monsieur, I wish to say before witnesses. Here, gentlemen," continued he, turning to the four young men, "listen to us; I order you."

"Sire," said the duke, with a glance full of rage and hatred, "before insulting a man of my rank, you should have refused me the hospitality of the Louvre; in the Hotel d'Anjou, at least, I should have been free to reply to you."

"Really, you forget, then, that wherever you are, you are my subject; that I am the king, and that every house is mine."

"Sire, I am at the Louvre, at my mother's."

"And your mother is in my house. But to the point--give me that paper."

"Which?"

"That which you were reading, which was on your table, and which you hid when I came in."

"Sire, reflect."

"On what?"

"On this, that you are making a request unworthy of a gentleman, and fit only for a police-officer."

The king grew livid. "That letter, monsieur!"

"A woman's letter, sire."

"There are some women's letters very good to see, and dangerous not to see--such as those our mother writes."

"Brother!"

"This letter, monsieur!" cried the king, stamping his foot, "or I will have it torn from you by my Swiss!"

The duke jumped out of bed, with the letter crumpled in his hand, evidently with the intention of approaching the fire. But Henri, divining his intention, placed himself between him and the fire.

"You would not treat your brother thus?" cried the duke.

"Not my brother, but my mortal enemy. Not my brother, but the Duc D'Anjou, who went all through Paris with M. de Guise, who tries to hide from me a letter from one of his accomplices, the Lorraine princes."

"This time," said the duke, "your police are wrong."

"I tell you I saw on the seal the three merlets of Lorraine. Give it to me, mordieu! or----"

Henri advanced towards his brother and laid his hand on his shoulder. François had no sooner felt the touch of his hand than, falling on his knees, he cried out, "Help! help! my brother is going to kill me."

These words, uttered in an accent of profound terror, startled the king and mitigated his rage. The idea passed quickly through his mind that in their family, as by a curse, brother had always assassinated brother.

"No, my brother," said he, "you are wrong; I do not wish to hurt you, but you cannot contend with me. I am the master, and if you did not know it before, you know it now."

"Yes, my brother, I acknowledge it."

"Very well, then give me that letter; the king orders it."

The duke let it fall, and the king picked it up, but without reading it put it in his pocket-book.

"Is that all?" said the duke, with his sinister glance.

"No, monsieur, you must keep your room until my suspicions with respect to you are completely dissipated. The room is commodious, and not much like a prison; stay here. You will have good company--at least, outside the door, for this night these four gentlemen will guard you; to-morrow they will be relieved by a guard of Swiss."

"But, my friends--cannot I see them?"

"Who do you call your friends?"

"M. de Monsoreau, M. de Ribeirac, M. Antragues, and M. de Bussy."

"Oh, yes, he, of course."

"Has he had the misfortune to displease your majesty?"

"Yes."

"When, sire?"

"Always, but particularly to-night."

"To-night! what did he do?"

"Insulted me in the streets of Paris."

"You?"

"My followers, which is the same thing."

"Bussy! you have been deceived, sire."

"I know what I say."

"Sire, M. de Bussy has not been out of his hotel for two days. He is at home, ill in bed, burning with fever."

The king turned to Schomberg, who said, "If he had fever, at all events he had it in the Rue Coquillière."

"Who told you he was there?" said the duke.



"I saw him."

"You saw Bussy out of doors?"

"Yes, looking well and happy, and accompanied by his ordinary follower, that R my."

"Then I do not understand it; I saw him in bed myself; he must have deceived me."

"It is well; he will be punished with the rest," said the king.

"If M. de Bussy went out alone after refusing to go out with me----"

"You hear, gentlemen, what my brother says. But we will talk of him another time; now I recommend my brother to your care; you will have the honor of serving as guard to a prince of the blood."

"Oh! sire," said Quelus, "be satisfied; we know what we owe to M. le Duc."

"It is well; adieu, gentlemen."

"Sire," cried the duke, "am I really a prisoner, are my friends not to visit me, and am I not to go out?" And the idea of the next day presented itself to his mind, when his presence would be so necessary to M. de Guise. "Sire," cried he again, "let me at least remain near your majesty; it is my place, and I can be as well guarded there as elsewhere. Sire, grant me this favor."

The king was about to yield to this request and say, "Yes," when his attention was attracted to the door, where a long body, with its arms, its head, and everything that it could move, was making signs to him to say "No." It was Chicot.

"No," said Henri to his brother; "you are very well here, and here you must stay."

"Sire----"

"It is my pleasure, and that is enough," said the king, haughtily.

"I said I was the real King of France," murmured Chicot.