

Chapter 48

THE RECEPTION OF THE CHIEFS OF THE LEAGUE.

The time for the great reception drew near. Paris, nearly as tumultuous as the evening before, had sent towards the Louvre its deputation of leaguers, its bodies of workmen, its sheriffs, its militia, and its constantly-increasing masses of spectators.

The king, on his throne in the great hall, was surrounded by his officers, his friends, his courtiers, and his family, waiting for all the corporations to defile before him, when M. de Monsoreau entered abruptly.

"Look, Henriquet," said Chicot, who was standing near the king.

"At what?"

"At your chief huntsman; pardieu, he is well worth it. See how pale and dirty he is!"

Henri made a sign to M. de Monsoreau, who approached.

"How is it that you are at the Louvre, monsieur? I thought you at Vincennes."

"Sire, the stag was turned off at seven o'clock this morning, but when noon came, and I had no news, I feared that some misfortune had happened to your majesty, and I returned."

"Really!"

"Sire, if I have done wrong, attribute it to an excess of devotion."

"Yes, monsieur, and I appreciate it."

"Now," said the count, hesitatingly, "if your majesty wishes me to return to Vincennes, as I am reassured----"

"No, no, stay; this chase was a fancy which came into our head, and which went as it came; do not go away, I want near me devoted subjects, and you have just classed yourself as such."

Monsoreau bowed, and said, "Where does your majesty wish me to remain?"

"Will you give him to me for half an hour?" said Chicot to the king, in a low voice.

"What for?"

"To torment him a little. You owe me some compensation for obliging me to be present at this tiresome ceremony."

"Well, take him."

"Where does your majesty wish me to stand?" again asked M. de Monsoreau.

"Where you like; go behind my armchair, that is where I put my friends."

"Come here," said Chicot, making room for M. de Monsoreau, "come and get the scent of these fellows. Here is game which can be tracked without a hound. Here are the shoemakers who pass, or rather, who have passed; then here are the tanners. Mort de ma vie! if you lose their scent, I will take away your place."

M. de Monsoreau listened mechanically; he seemed preoccupied, and looked around him anxiously.

"Do you know what your chief huntsman is hunting for now?" said Chicot, in an undertone, to the king.

"No."

"Your brother."

"The game is not in sight."

"Just ask him where his countess is."

"What for?"

"Just ask."

"M. le Comte," said Henri, "what have you done with Madame de Monsoreau? I do not see her here."

The count started, but replied, "Sire, she is ill, the air of Paris did not agree with her; so having obtained leave from the queen, she set out last night, with her father, for Méridor."

"Paris is not good for women in her situation," said Chicot.

Monsoreau grew pale and looked furiously at him.

"This poor countess!" continued Chicot, "she will die of ennui by the way."

"I said that she traveled with her father."

"A father is very respectable, I allow, but not very amusing; and if she had only that worthy baron to amuse her it would be sad; but luckily----"

"What!" cried the count.

"What?"

"What do you mean by 'luckily'?"

"Ah, it was an ellipsis I used."

The count shrugged his shoulders.

"Oh, but it was. Ask Henri, who is a man of letters."

"Yes," said the king; "but what did your adverb mean?"

"What adverb?"

"'Luckily.'"

"'Luckily' means luckily. Luckily, then, there exist some of our friends, and very amusing ones, who, if they meet the countess, will amuse her, and as they are going the same way, it is probable they will. Oh, I see them from here; do you not, Henri; you, who are a man of imagination? There they go, on a good road, well mounted, and saying sweet things to Madame la Comtesse, which she likes very much, dear lady."

M. de Monsoreau was furious, but he could not show it before the king; so he said as mildly as he could, "What, have you friends traveling to Anjou?"

"Good; pretend to be mysterious."

"I swear to you----"

"Oh! you know they are there, although I saw you just now seeking for them mechanically among the crowd."

"You saw me?"

"Yes, you, the palest of all chief huntsmen, past, present, and future, from Nimrod to M. d'Aulefort, your predecessor."

"M. Chicot!"

"The palest, I repeat."

"Monsieur, will you return to the friends of whom you spoke, and be so good as to name them, if your super-abundant imagination will let you."

"Seek, monsieur. Morbleu, it is your occupation to hunt out animals, witness the unlucky stag whom you deranged this morning, and who thought it very unkind of you. Seek."

The eyes of M. de Monsoreau wandered anxiously again.

"What!" cried he, seeing a vacant place by the king, "not the Duc d'Anjou?"

"Taint! Taint! the beast is found."

"He is gone to-day."

"He is gone to-day, but it is possible that he set out last night. When did your brother disappear, Henri?"

"Last night."

"The duke gone!" murmured Monsoreau, paler than ever.

"I do not say he is gone, I say only that he disappeared last night, and that his best friends do not know where he is," said the king.

"Oh!" cried the count, "if I thought so----"

"Well; what should you do? Besides, what harm if he does talk nonsense to Madame de Monsoreau? He is the gallant of the family, you know."

"I am lost!" murmured the count, trying to go away. But Chicot detained him.

"Keep still; mordieu! you shake the king's chair. Mort de ma vie, your wife will be quite happy with the prince to talk to, and M. Aurilly to play the lute to her." Monsoreau trembled with anger.

"Quietly, monsieur," continued Chicot; "hide your joy, here is the business beginning; you should not show your feelings so openly; listen to the discourse of the king."

M. de Monsoreau was forced to keep quiet. M. de Guise entered and knelt before the king, not without throwing an uneasy glance of surprise on the vacant seat of M. d'Anjou. The king rose, and the heralds commanded silence,