

Chapter 94

THE MORNING OF THE COMBAT.

The king did not sleep all night, and very early in the morning he set off, accompanied by Chicot, to examine the ground where the combat was to take place.

"Quelus will be exposed to the sun," said he; "he will have it at his right, just in his only eye; whereas Maugiron, who has good eyes, will be in the shade. That is badly managed. As for Schomberg, his place is good; but Quelus, my poor Quelus!"

"Do not torment yourself so, my king, it is useless."

"And D'Epernon; I am really unjust not to think of him; he, who is to fight Bussy. Look at his place, Chicot, he who will have to give way constantly, for Bussy is like a tiger, he has a tree on his right and a ditch on his left."

"Bah!" said Chicot, "I am not concerned about D'Epernon."

"You are wrong; he will be killed."

"Not he; be sure he has taken precautions."

"How so?"

"He will not fight."

"Did you not hear what he said before going to bed?"

"That is just why I think he will not fight."

"Incredulous and distrustful!"

"I know my Gasçon, Henri; but if you will take my advice, you will return to the Louvre."

"Do you think I can stay there during the combat?"

"I do not wish you not to love your friends, but I do wish you not to leave M. d'Anjou alone at the Louvre."

"Is not Crillon there?"

"Crillon is only a buffalo--a rhinoceros--a wild boar; while your brother is the serpent, whose strength lies in his cunning."

"You are right; I should have sent him to the Bastile."

When Chicot and the king entered, the young men were being dressed by their valets.

"Good morning, gentlemen," said he; "I find you all in good spirits, I hope?"

"Yes, sire," said Quelus.

"You look gloomy, Maugiron."

"Sire, I am superstitious, and I had bad dreams last night, so I am drinking a little wine to keep up my spirits."

"My friend, remember that dreams are the impressions of the previous day, and have no influence on the morrow."

"Yes, sire," said D'Epernon, "I also had bad dreams last night; but, in spite of that, my hand is steady and fit for action."

"Yes," said Chicot, "you dreamed you had blood on your boots; that is not a bad dream, for it signifies that you will be a conqueror, like Alexander or Cæsar."

"My friends," said Henri, "remember you fight only for honor; the past night has seated me firmly on my throne, therefore do not think of me; and, above all things, no false bravery; you wish to kill your enemies, not to die yourselves."

The gentlemen were now ready, and it only remained to take leave of their master.

"Do you go on horseback?" asked he.

"No, sire, on foot."

They each kissed his hand, and D'Epernon said, "Sire, bless my sword."

"Not so, D'Epernon; give tip your sword--I have a better one for each of you. Chicot, bring them here."

"No, sire, send your captain of the guards; I am but a Pagan, and they might lose their virtue by coming through my hands."

"What are these swords, sire?" said Schomberg.

"Italian swords, my son, forged at Milan."

"Thanks, sire."

"Now go, it is time," said the king, who could hardly control his emotion.

"Sire," said Quelus, "shall we not have your majesty's presence to encourage us?"

"No, that would not be right; you will be supposed to fight without any one being cognizant of it, and without my sanction. Let it appear to be the result of a private quarrel."

When they were gone, the king threw himself down in tears.

"Now," said Chicot, "I will go to see this duel, for I have an idea that something curious will happen with regard to D'Epernon." And he went off.

Henri shut himself up in his own room, first saying to Crillon, who knew what was to take place, "If we are conquerors, Crillon, come and tell me; if not, strike three blows on the door."