

Chapter 4

HIS MAJESTY HENRI THE THIRD.

M. Friard was right when he talked of 100,000 persons as the number of spectators who would meet on the Place de Greve and its environs, to witness the execution of Salcede. All Paris appeared to have a rendezvous at the Hotel de Ville; and Paris is very exact, and never misses a fete; and the death of a man is a fete, especially when he has raised so many passions that some curse and others bless him.

The spectators who succeeded in reaching the Place saw the archers and a large number of Swiss and light horse surrounding a little scaffold raised about four feet from the ground. It was so low as to be visible only to those immediately surrounding it, or to those who had windows overlooking the Place. Four vigorous white horses beat the ground impatiently with their hoofs, to the great terror of the women, who had either chosen this place willingly, or had been forcibly pushed there.

These horses were unused, and had never done more work than to support, by some chance, on their broad backs the chubby children of the peasants. After the scaffold and the horses, what next attracted all looks was the principal window of the Hotel de Ville, which was hung with red velvet and gold, and ornamented with the royal arms. This was for the king. Half-past one had just struck when this window was filled. First came Henri III., pale, almost bald, although he was at that time

only thirty-five, and with a somber expression, always a mystery to his subjects, who, when they saw him appear, never knew whether to say "Vive le Roi!" or to pray for his soul. He was dressed in black, without jewels or orders, and a single diamond shone in his cap, serving as a fastening to three short plumes. He carried in his hand a little black dog that his sister-in-law Marie Stuart had sent him from her prison, and on which his fingers looked as white as alabaster.

Behind the king came Catherine de Medicis, almost bowed by age, for she might be sixty-six or sixty-seven, but still carrying her head firm and erect, and darting bitter glances from under her thick eyebrows. At her side appeared the melancholy but sweet face of the queen, Louise de Torraine. Catherine came as a triumph, she as a punishment. Behind them came two handsome young men, brothers, the eldest of whom smiled with wonderful beauty, and the younger with great melancholy. The one was Anne, duc de Joyeuse, and the other Henri de Joyeuse, comte de Bouchage. The people had for these favorites of the king none of the hatred which they had felt toward Maugiron, Quelus, and Schomberg.

Henri saluted the people gravely; then, turning to the young men, he said, "Anne, lean against the tapestry; it may last a long time."

"I hope so," said Catherine.

"You think, then, that Salcede will speak, mother?"

"God will, I trust, give this confusion to our enemies."

Henri looked doubtful.

"My son," said Catherine, "do I not see some tumult yonder?"

"What clear sight you have! I believe you are right. I have such bad eyes, and yet I am not old. Yes, here comes Salcede."

"He fears," said Catherine; "he will speak."

"If he has strength," said the king. "See, his head falls about like that of a corpse."

"He is frightful," said Joyeuse.

"How should a man be handsome whose thoughts are so ugly? Have I not explained to you, Anne, the secret connection of the physical and the moral, as Hippocrates and Galen understood and expounded them?"

"I admit it, sire, but I am not a good pupil. I have sometimes seen very ugly men very good soldiers. Have you not, Henri?" said he, turning to his brother: but he looked without seeing, and heard without understanding, so the king answered for him.

"Eh, mon Dieu! my dear Anne, who says this man is not brave? He is brave, pardieu, like a wolf, a bear, or a serpent. He burned in his house a Norman gentleman, his enemy; he has fought ten duels, and killed

three of his adversaries. He has now been taken in the act of coining, for which he has been condemned to death."

"That is a well-filled existence, but which will soon finish."

"On the contrary," said Catherine, "I trust it will finish as slowly as possible."

"Madame," said Joyeuse, "I see those four stout horses, who appear to me so impatient of their state of inactivity that I do not believe in a long resistance of the muscles, tendons, and cartilages of M. de Salcede."

"Yes, but my son is merciful," replied she, with the smile peculiar to herself, "and he will tell the men to go gently."

"But, madame," said the queen timidly, "I heard you say this morning that there were only to be two draws?"

"Yes, if he conducts himself well; in that case all will be finished as soon as possible, and, as you interest yourself so much in him, you had better let him know as much, my daughter."

"Madame," said the queen, "I have not your strength when looking at suffering."

"Do not look, then."

The king heard nothing; he was all eyes. They were lifting Salcede from the car on to the scaffold, round which the archers had cleared a large space, so that it was distinctly visible to all eyes.

Salcede was about thirty-five years of age, strong and vigorous; and his pale features, on which stood drops of blood, were animated alternately by hope and anguish. He was no vulgar assassin; he was of good birth, and even distantly related to the queen, and had been a captain of some renown. Those bound hands had valiantly borne the sword, and that livid head, on which were depicted the terrors of death, had conceived great designs. Therefore, to many of the spectators, he was a hero; to others, a victim; some looked on him as an assassin; but the crowd seldom despises those very great criminals who are registered in the book of history as well as in that of justice. Thus they told, in the crowd, that Salcede was of a race of warriors; that his father had fought against the Cardinal de Lorraine, but that the son had joined with the Guises to destroy in Flanders the rising power of the Duc d'Anjou, so hated by the French.

He had been arrested and conducted to France, and had hoped to be rescued by the way; but unfortunately for him, M. de Bellièvre had kept such good watch, that neither Spaniards nor Lorraines, nor leaguers, had been able to approach. In the prison Salcede hoped; during the torture, on the car, even on the scaffold, he still hoped. He wanted neither courage nor resignation; but he was one of those who defend themselves to their last breath. He darted curious glances toward the crowd, but

constantly turned away, with a look of disappointment.

At this moment, an usher, raising the tapestry of the royal tent, announced that the president Brisson and four councilors desired the honor of an instant's conversation with the king on the subject of the execution.

"Good," said the king. "Mother, you will be satisfied."

"Sire, a favor," said Joyeuse.

"Speak, Joyeuse; and provided it be not the pardon of the criminal--"

"Sire, permit my brother and me to retire."

"What! you take so little interest in my affairs that you wish to retire at such a moment!"

"Do not say so, sire; all that concerns your majesty profoundly interests me; but I am of a miserable organization, and the weakest woman is stronger than I am on this point. I cannot see an execution without being ill for a week; and as I am the only person who ever laughs at the Louvre, since my brother--I know not why--has given it up, think what would become of the Louvre--so sad already--if I were sad also."

"You wish to leave me then, Anne."

"Peste! sire, you are exacting; an execution is a spectacle of which, unlike me, you are fond. Is not that enough for you, or must you also enjoy the weakness of your friends?"

"If you will remain, Joyeuse, you will see that it is interesting."

"I do not doubt it, sire; I only think that the interest will be carried to a point that I cannot bear;" and he turned toward the door.

"Go, then," said Henri, sighing; "my destiny is to live alone."

"Quick! Du Bouchage," said Anne to his brother. "The king says yes now; but in five minutes he will say no."

"Thanks, my brother," said Bouchage; "I was as anxious as you to get away."