

Chapter 12

THE CHAMBER OF HIS MAJESTY HENRI III.

In a great room at the Louvre sat Henri, pale and unquiet. Since his favorites, Schomberg, Quelus and Maugiron had been killed in a duel, St. Megrin had been assassinated by M. de Mayenne, and the wounds left by their deaths were still fresh and bleeding. The affection he bore his new favorites was very different from what he had felt for the old. He had overwhelmed D'Epernon with benefits, but he only loved him by fits and starts, and at certain times he even hated him, and accused him of cowardice and avarice.

D'Epernon knew how to hide his ambition, which was indeed vague in its aspirations; but his cupidity governed him completely. When he was rich, he was laughing and good-tempered; but when he was in want of money, he used to shut himself up in one of his castles, where, frowning and sad, he bemoaned his fate, until he had drawn from the weakness of the king some new gift.

Joyeuse was very different. He loved the king, who, in turn, had for him almost a fatherly affection. Young and impulsive, he was, perhaps, somewhat egotistical, and cared for little but to be happy. Handsome, brave and rich, Nature had done so much for him that Henri often regretted that she had left so little for him to add. The king knew his men well, for he was remarkably clear-sighted: and though often

betrayed, was never deceived. But ennui was the curse of his life; he was ennuyé now, and was wondering if any one would come and amuse him, when M. le Duc d'Epéron was announced. Henri was delighted.

"Ah! good-evening, duke; I am enchanted to see you. Why were you not present at the execution of Salcede?--I told you there would be room in my box."

"Sire, I was unable to avail myself of your majesty's kindness."

"Unable?"

"Yes, sire; I was busy."

"One would think that you were my minister, coming to announce, with a long face, that some subsidy had not been paid."

"Ma foi! your majesty is right; the subsidy has not been paid, and I am penniless. But it was not that which occupied me."

"What then?"

"Your majesty knows what passed at the execution of Salcede?"

"Parbleu! I was there."

"They tried to carry off the criminal."

"I did not see that."

"It is the rumor all through the city, however."

"A groundless one."

"I believe your majesty is wrong."

"On what do you found your belief?"

"Because Salcede denied before the people what he had confessed to the judges."

"Ah! you know that, already."

"I try to know all that interests your majesty."

"Thanks; but what do you conclude from all this?"

"That a man who dies like Salcede was a good servant, sire."

"Well?"

"And the master who has such followers is fortunate."

"You mean to say that I have none such; or, rather, that I no longer have them. You are right, if that be what you mean."

"I did not mean that; your majesty would find, I am sure, were there occasion, followers as devoted as Salcede."

"Well, duke, do not look gloomy; I am sad enough already. Do be gay."

"Gayety cannot be forced, sire."

The king struck the table angrily. "You are a bad friend," said he; "I lost all, when I lost my former ones."

"May I dare to say to your majesty that you hardly encourage the new ones."

The king looked at him with an expression which he well understood.

"Ah! your majesty reproaches me with your benefits," said he, "but I do not reproach you with my devotion."

"Lavalette," cried Henri, "you make me sad; you who are so clever, and could so easily make me joyful. It is not your nature to fight continually, like my old favorites; but you are facetious and amusing, and give good counsel. You know all my affairs, like that other more humble friend, with whom I never experienced a moment's ennui."

"Of whom does your majesty speak?"

"Of my poor jester, Chicot. Alas! where is he?"

D'Epernon rose, piqued. "Your majesty's souvenirs, to-day, are not very amusing for other people," said he.

"Why so?"

"Your majesty, without intending it, perhaps, compared me to Chicot, which is not very flattering."

"You are wrong, D'Epernon; I could only compare to Chicot a man who loves me, and whom I love."

"It was not to resemble Chicot, I suppose, that your majesty made me a duke?"

"Chicot loved me, and I miss him; that is all I can say. Oh! when I think that in the same place where you now are have been all those young men, handsome, brave, and faithful--that there, on that very chair on which you have placed your hat, Chicot has slept more than a hundred times--"

"Perhaps that was very amusing," interrupted the duke, "but certainly not very respectful."

"Alas! he has now neither mind nor body."--"What became of him?"

"He died, like all who loved me."

"Well, sire, I think he did well to die; he was growing old, and I have heard that sobriety was not one of his virtues. Of what did he die--indigestion?"

"Of grief."

"Oh! he told you so, to make you laugh once more."

"You are wrong; he would not sadden me with the news of his illness. He knew how I regretted my friends--he, who had so often seen me weep for them."

"Then it was his shade that came to tell you?"

"No; I did not even see his shade. It was his friend, the worthy prior Gorenflot, who wrote me this sad news."

"I see that if he lived your majesty would make him chancellor."

"I beg, duke, that you will not laugh at those who loved me, and whom I loved."

"Oh! sire, I do not desire to laugh, but just now you reproached me with

want of gayety, parfandious!"

"Well, now I am in the mood to hear bad news, if you have any to tell. Luckily I have strength to bear it, or I should be dead ten times a day."

"Which would not displease certain people of our acquaintance."

"Oh! against them I have the arms of my Swiss."

"I could find you a better guard than that."

"You?"--"Yes, sire."

"What is it?"

"Will your majesty be so good as to accompany me to the old buildings of the Louvre?"

"On the site of the Rue de l'Astruce?"

"Precisely."

"What shall I see there?"

"Oh! come first."

"It is a long way, duke."

"We can go in five minutes through the galleries."

"D'Epernon--"

"Well, sire?"

"If what you are about to show me be not worth seeing, take care."

"I answer for it, sire."

"Come, then," said the king, rising.

The duke took his cloak, presented the king's sword to him, then, taking a light, preceded his majesty.