

Chapter 14

THE SHADE OF CHICOT.

The king, as we have said, was never deceived as to the character of his friends; he knew perfectly well that D'Epernon was working for his own advantage, but as he expected to have had to give and receive nothing in return, whereas he had got forty-five guards, he had thought it a good idea. Besides, it was a novelty, which was a thing that a poor king of France could not always get, and especially Henri III., who, when he had gone through his processions, counted his dogs, and uttered his usual number of sighs, had nothing left to do. Therefore he became more and more pleased with the idea as he returned to his room.

"These men are doubtless brave, and will be perhaps very devoted," thought he; "and forty-five swords always ready to leap from their scabbards are a grand thing."

This thought brought to his mind the other devoted swords that he regretted so bitterly. He became sad again, and inquired for Joyeuse. They replied that he had not returned.

"Then call my valets-de-chambre."

When he was in bed, they asked if his reader should attend, for Henri was subject to long fits of wakefulness, and was often read to sleep.

"No," replied the king, "I want no one; only if M. de Joyeuse returns, bring him to me."

"If he returns late, sire?"

"Alas! he is always late; but whatever be the hour, bring him here."

The servants extinguished the candles and lighted a lamp of essences, which gave a pale blue flame, that the king liked. Henri was tired, and soon slept, but not for long; he awoke, thinking he heard a noise in the room.

"Joyeuse," he asked; "is it you?"

No one replied. The light burned dim, and only threw faint circles on the ceiling of carved oak.

"Alone, still!" murmured the king. "Mon Dieu! I am alone all my life, as I shall be after death."

"'Alone after death'; that is not certain," said a powerful voice near the bed.

The king started up and looked round him in terror. "I know that voice," cried he.

"Ah! that is lucky," replied the voice.

"It is like the voice of Chicot."

"You burn, Henri: you burn."

Then the king, getting half out of bed, saw a man sitting in the very chair which he had pointed out to D'Epernon.

"Heaven protect me!" cried he; "it is the shade of Chicot."

"Ah! my poor Henriquet, are you still so foolish?"

"What do you mean?"

"That shades cannot speak, having no body, and consequently no tongue."

"Then you are Chicot, himself?" cried the king, joyfully.

"Do not be too sure."

"Then you are not dead, my poor Chicot?"

"On the contrary; I am dead."

"Chicot, my only friend."

"You, at least, are not changed."

"But you, Chicot, are you changed?"

"I hope so."

"Chicot, my friend, why did you leave me?"

"Because I am dead."

"You said just now that you were not dead."

"Dead to some--alive to others."

"And to me?"--"Dead."

"Why dead to me?"

"It is easy to comprehend that you are not the master here."

"How?"

"You can do nothing for those who serve you."

"Chicot!"

"Do not be angry, or I shall be so, also."

"Speak then, my friend," said the king, fearful that Chicot would vanish.

"Well, I had a little affair to settle with M. de Mayenne, you remember?"

"Perfectly."

"I settled it; I beat this valiant captain without mercy. He sought for me to hang me; and you, whom I thought would protect me, abandoned me, and made peace with him. Then I declared myself dead and buried by the aid of my friend Gorenflot, so that M. de Mayenne has ceased to search for me."

"What a frightful courage you had, Chicot; did you not know the grief your death would cause me?"

"I have never lived so tranquilly as since the world thought me dead."

"Chicot, my head turns; you frighten me--I know not what to think."

"Well! settle something."

"I think that you are dead and--"

"Then I lie; you are polite."

"You commence by concealing some things from me; but presently, like the orators of antiquity, you will tell me terrible truths."

"Oh! as to that, I do not say no. Prepare, poor king!"

"If you are not a shade, how could you come unnoticed into my room, through the guarded corridors?" And Henri, abandoning himself to new terrors, threw himself down in the bed and covered up his head.

"Come, come," cried Chicot; "you have only to touch me to be convinced."

"But how did you come?"

"Why, I have still the key that you gave me, and which I hung round my neck to enrage your gentlemen, and with this I entered."

"By the secret door, then?"

"Certainly."

"And why to-day more than yesterday?"

"Ah! that you shall hear."

Henri, sitting up again, said like a child, "Do not tell me anything disagreeable, Chicot; I am so glad to see you again."

"I will tell the truth; so much the worse if it be disagreeable."

"But your fear of Mayenne is not serious?"

"Very serious, on the contrary. You understand that M. de Mayenne gave me fifty blows with a stirrup leather, in return for which I gave him one hundred with the sheath of my sword. No doubt he thinks, therefore, that he still owes me fifty, so that I should not have come to you now, however great your need, had I not known him to be at Soissons."

"Well, Chicot, I take you now under my protection, and I wish that you should be resuscitated and appear openly."

"What folly!"

"I will protect you, on my royal word."

"Bah! I have better than that."

"What?"

"My hole, where I remain."

"I forbid it," cried the king, jumping out of bed.

"Henri, you will catch cold; go back to bed, I pray."

"You are right, but you exasperated me. How, when I have enough guards, Swiss, Scotch, and French, for my own defense, should I not have enough for yours?"

"Let us see: you have the Swiss--"

"Yes, commanded by Tocquenot."

"Good! then you have the Scotch--"

"Commanded by Larchant."

"Very well! and you have the French guards--"

"Commanded by Crillon. And then--but I do not know if I ought to tell you--"

"I did not ask you."

"A novelty, Chicot!"

"A novelty?"

"Yes; imagine forty-five brave gentlemen."

"Forty-five? What do you mean?"

"Forty-five gentlemen."

"Where did you find them? Not in Paris, I suppose?"

"No, but they arrived here yesterday."

"Oh!" cried Chicot, with a sudden illumination, "I know these gentlemen."

"Really!"

"Forty-five beggars, who only want the wallet; figures to make one die with laughter."

"Chicot, there are splendid men among them."

"Gascons, like your colonel-general of infantry."

"And like you, Chicot. However, I have forty-five formidable swords at command."

"Commanded by the 46th, whom they call D'Epernon."

"Not exactly."

"By whom, then?"

"De Loignac."

"And it is with them you think to defend yourself?"

"Yes, mordieu! yes."

"Well, I have more troops than you."

"You have troops?"

"Why not?"

"What are they?"

"You shall hear. First, all the army that MM. de Guise are raising in Lorraine."

"Are you mad?"

"No; a real army--at least six thousand men."

"But how can you, who fear M. de Mayenne so much, be defended by the soldiers of M. de Guise?"

"Because I am dead."

"Again this joke!"

"No; I have changed my name and position."

"What are you, then?"

"I am Robert Briquet, merchant and leaguer."

"You a leaguer?"

"A devoted one, so that I keep away from M. de Mayenne. I have, then, for me, first, the army of Lorraine--six thousand men; remember that number."

"I listen."

"Then, at least one hundred thousand Parisians."

"Famous soldiers!"

"Sufficiently so to annoy you much: 6,000 and 100,000 are 106,000; then there is the pope, the Spaniards, M. de Bourbon, the Flemings, Henry of Navarre, the Duc d'Anjou--"

"Have you done?" interrupted Henri, impatiently.

"There still remain three classes of people."

"What are they?"

"First the Catholics, who hate you because you only three parts exterminated the Huguenots: then the Huguenots, who hate you because you have three parts exterminated them; and the third party is that which desires neither you, nor your brother, nor M. de Guise, but your brother-in-law, Henri of Navarre."

"Provided that he abjure. But these people of whom you speak are all France."

"Just so. These are my troops as a leaguer; now add, and compare."

"You are joking, are you not, Chicot?"

"Is it a time to joke, when you are alone, against all the world?"

Henri assumed an air of royal dignity. "Alone I am," said he, "but at the same time I alone command. You show me an army, but where is the chief? You will say, M. de Guise; but do I not keep him at Nancy? M. de Mayenne, you say yourself, is at Soissons, the Duc d'Anjou is at Brussels, and the king of Navarre at Pau; so that if I am alone, I am free. I am like a hunter in the midst of a plain, waiting to see his prey come within his reach."

"On the contrary; you are the game whom the hunters track to his lair."

"Chicot!"

"Well! let me hear whom you have seen come."

"No one."

"Yet some one has come."

"Of those whom I named?"

"Not exactly, but nearly."

"Who?"

"A woman."

"My sister Margot?"

"No; the Duchesse de Montpensier."

"She! at Paris?"

"Mon Dieu! yes."

"Well, if she be; I do not fear women."

"True; but she comes as the avant courier to announce the arrival of her brother."

"Of M. de Guise?"

"Yes."

"And do you think that embarrasses me? Give me ink and paper."

"What for? To sign an order for M. de Guise to remain at Nancy?"

"Exactly; the idea must be good, since you had it also."

"Execrable, on the contrary."

"Why?"

"As soon as he receives it he will know he is wanted at Paris, and he will come."

The king grew angry. "If you only returned to talk like this," said he, "you had better have stayed away."

"What would you have? Phantoms never flatter. But be reasonable; why do you think M. de Guise remains at Nancy?"

"To organize an army."

"Well; and for what purpose does he destine this army?"

"Ah, Chicot! you fatigue me with all these questions."

"You will sleep better after it. He destines this army--"

"To attack the Huguenots in the north--"

"Or rather, to thwart your brother of Anjou, who has called himself Duke of Brabant, and wishes to build himself a throne in Flanders, for which he solicits your aid--"

"Which I never sent."

"To the great joy of the Duc de Guise. Well, if you were to feign to send this aid--if they only went half way--"

"Ah! yes, I understand; M. de Guise would not leave the frontier."

"And the promise of Madame de Montpensier that her brother would be here in a week--"

"Would be broken."

"You see, then?"

"So far, good; but in the south--"

"Ah, yes; the Béarnais--"

"Do you know what he is at?"

"No."

"He claims the towns which were his wife's dowry," said the king.

"Insolent! to claim what belongs to him."

"Cahors, for example; as if it would be good policy to give up such a town to an enemy."

"No; but it would be like an honest man."

"But to return to Flanders. I will send some one to my brother--but whom can I trust? Oh! now I think of it, you shall go, Chicot."

"I, a dead man?"

"No; you shall go as Robert Briquet."

"As a bagman?"

"Do you refuse?"--"Certainly."

"You disobey me!"

"I owe you no obedience--"

Henri was about to reply, when the door opened and the Duc de Joyeuse was announced.

"Ah! there is your man," said Chicot; "who could make a better ambassador?"

Chicot then buried himself in the great chair, so as to be quite invisible in the dim light. M. de Joyeuse did not see him. The king uttered a cry of joy on seeing his favorite, and held out his hand.

"Sit down, Joyeuse, my child," said he; "how late you are."

"Your majesty is very good," answered Joyeuse, approaching the bed, on which he sat down.