

Chapter 45

THE AVENUE THREE THOUSAND FEET LONG.

The queen inhabited the other wing of the castle. The famous avenue began at her very window, and her eyes rested only on grass and flowers. A native poet (Marguerite, in the provinces as in Paris, was always the star of the poets) had composed a sonnet about her.

"She wishes," said he, "by all these agreeable sights to chase away painful souvenirs."

Daughter, sister, and wife of a king as she was, she had indeed suffered much. Her philosophy, although more boasted of than that of the king, was less solid; for it was due only to study, while his was natural. Therefore, stoical as she tried to be, time and grief had already begun to leave their marks on her countenance. Still she was remarkably beautiful. With her joyous yet sweet smile, her brilliant and yet soft eyes, Marguerite was still an adorable creature. She was idolized at Nerac, where she brought elegance, joy, and life. She, a Parisian princess, supported patiently a provincial life, and this alone was a virtue in the eyes of the inhabitants. Every one loved her, both as queen and as woman.

Full of hatred for her enemies, but patient that she might avenge herself better--feeling instinctively that under the mask of

carelessness and long-suffering worn by Henri of Navarre he had a bad feeling toward her--she had accustomed herself to replace by poetry, and by the semblance of love, relations, husband, and friends.

No one, excepting Catherine de Medicis, Chicot, or some melancholy ghosts returned from the realms of death, could have told why Marguerite's cheeks were often so pale, why her eyes often filled with tears, or why her heart often betrayed its melancholy void. Marguerite had no more confidantes; she had been betrayed too often.

However, the bad feeling which she believed Henri to have for her was only an instinct, and came rather from the consciousness of her own faults than from his behavior. He treated her like a daughter of France, always spoke to her with respectful politeness, or grateful kindness, and was always the husband and friend.

When Chicot arrived at the place indicated to him by Henri, he found no one; Marguerite, they said, was at the end of the famous avenue. When he had gone about two-thirds down it, he saw at the end, in an arbor covered with jasmine, clematis, and broom, a group covered with ribbons, feathers, velvets, and swords. Perhaps all this finery was slightly old-fashioned, but for Nerac it was brilliant, and even Chicot, coming straight from Paris, was satisfied with the coup d'oeil. A page preceded Chicot.

"What do you want, D' Aubiac?" asked the queen, when she saw him.

"Madame, a gentleman from Paris, an envoy from the Louvre to the king of Navarre, and sent by his majesty to you, desires to speak to your majesty."

A sudden flush passed over Marguerite's face, and she turned quickly. Chicot was standing near; Marguerite quitted the circle, and waving an adieu to the company, advanced toward the Gascon.

"M. Chicot!" cried she in astonishment.

"Here I am at your majesty's feet," said he, "and find you ever good and beautiful, and queen here, as at the Louvre."

"It is a miracle to see you here, monsieur; they said you were dead."

"I pretended to be so."

"And what do you want with us, M. Chicot? Am I happy enough to be still remembered in France?"

"Oh, madame," said Chicot, smiling, "we do not forget queens of your age and your beauty. The king of France even writes on this subject to the king of Navarre."

Marguerite colored. "He writes?"

"Yes, madame."

"And you have brought the letter?"

"I have not brought it, madame, for reasons that the king of Navarre will explain to you, but learned it by heart and repeated it."

"I understand. This letter was important, and you feared to lose it, or have it stolen."

"That is the truth, madame; but the letter was written in Latin."

"Oh, very well; you know I know Latin."

"And the king of Navarre, does he know it?"

"Dear M. Chicot, it is very difficult to find out what he does or does not know. If one can believe appearances, he knows very little of it, for he never seems to understand when I speak to any one in that language. Then you told him the purport of the letter?"

"It was to him it was addressed."

"And did he seem to understand?"

"Only two words."

"What were they?"

"Turennius et Margota."

"Turennius et Margota?"

"Yes; those two words were in the letter."

"Then what did he do?"

"He sent me to you, madame."

"To me?"

"Yes, saying that the letter contained things of too much importance to be confided to a stranger, and that it was better to take it to you, who were the most beautiful of learned ladies, and the most learned of beautiful ones."

"I will listen to you, M. Chicot, since such are the king's orders."

"Thank you, madame; where would you please it to be?"

"Come to my room."

Marguerite looked earnestly at Chicot, who, through pity for her, had let her have a glimpse of the truth. Perhaps she felt the need of a support, for she turned toward a gentleman in the group, and said: "M.

de Turenne, your arm to the castle. Precede us, M. Chicot."