

Chapter 48

THE SPANISH AMBASSADOR.

The king rejoined Chicot, who was still agitated with fears as to the explanation.

"Well, Chicot," said Henri, "do you know what the queen says?"

"No."

"She pretends that your cursed Latin will disturb our peace."

"Oh! sire, forget it, and all will be at an end. It is not with a piece of spoken Latin as though it were written; the wind carries away the one, fire cannot sometimes destroy the other."

"I! I think of it no more."

"That is right."

"I have something else to do."

"Your majesty prefers amusing yourself."

"Oh! mon cher, here we do everything openly; love, war, and politics."

"The first more than the two last; do you not, sire?"

"Ma foi! yes; I confess it, my dear friend. This country is so fine, and its women so beautiful."

"Oh! sire, you forget the queen; can the Navarrese women be more pleasing and beautiful than she is? If they are, I compliment them."

"Ventre St. Gris, you are right, Chicot; and I, who forgot that you are an ambassador, and represent King Henri III., and that he is the brother of Marguerite, and that consequently, before you, I ought to place her before every one--but you must excuse my imprudence, I am not accustomed to ambassadors."

At this moment the door of the room opened, and D'Aubiac announced, "The ambassador from Spain."

Chicot gave a start which made the king smile.

"Ma foi!" said Henri, "that is a contradiction that I did not expect. And what the devil can he want here?"

"Yes," said Chicot, "what the devil does he want here?"

"We shall soon know; perhaps our Spanish neighbor has some frontier

dispute to settle with us."

"I will retire," said Chicot. "This is doubtless a real ambassador from his majesty Philippe II., while I--"

"Open that library door, Chicot, and go in there."

"But from there I shall hear all, in spite of myself."

"Oh! Never mind; I have nothing to hide. Apropos; have you nothing more to say to me from your king?"

"Nothing at all, sire."

"Very well, then, you have nothing to do but to see and hear, like all other ambassadors, and the library will do excellently for that purpose. Look with all your eyes, and listen with all your ears, my dear Chicot. D'Aubiac, let the ambassador enter."

Chicot hastened to his place of concealment, and drew the tapestry close.

When the first preliminaries of etiquette were over, the ambassador said:

"Can I speak freely to your majesty?"

"You may, monsieur."

"Sire, I bring the answer from his Catholic majesty."

"An answer," thought Chicot; "then there was a question."

"An answer to what?" said Henri.

"To your proposals of last month."

"Ma foi! I am very forgetful! please to recall to me what they were."

"About the invasions of the Lorraine princes."

"Yes, I remember, particularly those of M. de Guise; go on, monsieur."

"Sire, the king, my master, although much begged to sign a treaty of alliance with Lorraine, prefers one with Navarre. I know my master's intentions with regard to you."

"May I also know them?"

"Sire, my master will refuse nothing to Navarre."

Chicot bit his fingers to convince himself that he was not dreaming.

"What can I ask then?" said Henri.

"Whatever your majesty pleases."

"Diable!"

"If your majesty will speak openly and frankly?"

"Ventre St. Gris, it is embarrassing."

"Shall I tell you his majesty the king of Spain's proposal?"

"I listen."

"The king of France treats the queen of Navarre as an enemy, he repudiates her as a sister, and covers her with opprobrium. All this, but I beg your majesty's pardon for touching on so delicate a subject--"

"Go on."

"All this, then, is public."

"Well! monsieur, and what of all this?"

"It is consequently easy for your majesty to repudiate as a wife her whom her brother disclaims as a sister. This once done, the alliance between the king of Navarre and the king of Spain is concluded, and the king of Spain will give the infanta, his daughter, to your majesty, and

he himself will marry Madame Catherine de Navarre, your majesty's sister."

A movement of pride shook Henri, while Chicot shuddered with terror. The one saw his star rising, radiant like the morning sun; the other saw the scepter of the Valois ready to decline and fall.

For an instant there was profound silence, and then Henri said:

"The proposal, monsieur, is magnificent, and crowns me with honor."

"His majesty," said the negotiator, who already calculated on an enthusiastic acceptance, "proposes only one condition."

"Ah! a condition! that is but just; let me hear it."

"In aiding your majesty against the Lorraine princes, that is to say, in opening to your majesty a way to the throne, my master desires to facilitate by your alliance the safety of Flanders, which the Duc d'Anjou is already attacking; your majesty will understand that it is pure preference on my master's part for you over the Lorraine princes, since MM. de Guise, his natural allies, as Catholic princes, make of themselves a party against the Duc d'Anjou in Flanders. Now, this is the only condition, which you must think reasonable. His majesty the king of Spain, allied to you by a double marriage, will help you to--" the ambassador seemed to seek for the right word, "to succeed to the king of France, and you will guarantee Flanders to him. I may then, now, knowing

your majesty's wisdom, regard the negotiation as happily terminated."

Henri took two or three turns up and down the room.

"This, then," said he at last, "is the answer you were charged to bring me?"

"Yes, sire."

"Nothing else?"

"Nothing else, sire."

"Well! I refuse the offer of the king of Spain."

"You refuse the hand of the infanta!" cried the Spaniard, with a start, as though he had received a sudden wound.

"It would be a great honor, but I cannot think it a greater one than that of having married a daughter of France."

"No; but that alliance brought you nearly to the tomb, and this will bring you to the throne."

"An incomparable piece of good fortune, monsieur, I know; but I will never buy it with the blood and honor of my future subjects. What! monsieur. I draw the sword against the king of France, my

brother-in-law, for the Spaniards; I arrest the standard of France in its career of glory; I kill brothers by brothers' hands; I bring the stranger into my country! No, monsieur; I asked the king of Spain for aid against the Guises, who wish to rob me of my inheritance, but not against the Duc d'Anjou, my brother-in-law; not against Henri III., my friend; not against my wife, sister of my king. You will aid the Guises, you will say, and lend them your support. Do so, and I will let loose on you and on them all the Protestants of Germany and France. The king of Spain wishes to reconquer Flanders, which is slipping from him; let him do what his father, Charles V., did, and ask a free passage to go and claim his title of first bourgeois of Ghent, and Henri III., I am certain, will grant it to him, as Francois I. did. I wish for the throne of France, says his Catholic majesty; it is possible, but I do not need him to aid me in getting it; I will do that for myself, once it is vacant, in spite of all the kings in the world. Adieu, then, monsieur. Tell my brother Philippe that I am grateful for his offers, but cannot believe for a moment that he thought me capable of accepting them. Adieu, monsieur."

"Take care, sire," said the ambassador; "the good understanding between two neighbors may be destroyed by a hasty word."

"Monsieur, my crown is so light that I should scarcely feel the difference if it slipped off; besides, I believe I can guard it. Therefore, once more adieu, monsieur, and tell the king your master that I have greater ambitions than he dreams of." And the Béarnais, becoming once more, not himself, but what he generally seemed to be, conducted

the ambassador, with a courteous smile, to the door.