

Chapter 49

THE POOR OF HENRI OF NAVARRE.

Chicot remained plunged in profound surprise. Henri lifted the tapestry, and, striking him on the shoulder, said:

"Well, M. Chicot, how do you think I managed?"

"Wonderfully, sire; and really, for a king who is not accustomed to ambassadors--"

"It is my brother Henri who sends me such ambassadors."

"How so, sire?"

"If he did not incessantly persecute his poor sister, others would not dream of it. Do you believe that if the king of Spain had not heard of the public insult offered to the queen, when a captain of the guards searched her litter, that he would have proposed to me to repudiate her?"

"I see with pleasure, sire," replied Chicot, "that all attempts will be useless, and that nothing can interrupt the harmony that exists between the queen and yourself."

"Oh, my friend, the interest they have in making us quarrel is too clear."

"I confess to you, sire, that I am not so penetrating as you are."

"Doubtless Henri would be delighted if I repudiated his sister."

"How so? Pray explain to me."

"You know they forgot to pay me my wife's dowry."

"I guessed as much, sire."

"This dowry was to consist of 300,000 golden crowns and some towns; among others, Cahors."

"A pretty town, mordieu!"

"I have claimed, not the money, but Cahors."

"Ventre de biche! sire, in your place, I should have done the same."

"And that is why--do you understand now?"

"No, indeed, sire."

"Why they wish me to quarrel with my wife and repudiate her. No wife, no

dowry, no more 300,000 crowns, no Cahors. It is one way of eluding a promise, and Henri is clever in laying snares."

"You would much like to hold Cahors, sire?"

"Doubtless; for after all, what is my principality of Béarn? A poor little place, clipped by the avarice of my mother-in-law and brother-in-law."

"While Cahors--"

"Cahors would be my rampart, the safeguard of my religion."

"Well, sire, go into mourning for Cahors; for, whether you break with Madame Marguerite or not, the king of France will never give it to you, and unless you take it--"

"Oh, I would soon take it, if it was not so strong, and, above all, if I did not hate war."

"Cahors is impregnable, sire."

"Oh! impregnable! But if I had an army, which I have not--"

"Listen, sire. We are not here to flatter each other. To take Cahors, which is held by M. de Vesin, one must be a Hannibal or a Cæsar; and your majesty--"

"Well?" said Henri, with a smile.

"Has just said, you do not like war."

Henri sighed, and his eyes flashed for a minute; then he said:

"It is true I have never drawn the sword, and perhaps never shall. I am a king of straw, a man of peace; but, by a singular contrast, I love to think of warlike things--that is in my blood. St. Louis, my ancestor, pious by education and gentle by nature, became on occasion a brave soldier and a skillful swordsman. Let us talk, if you please, of M. Vesin, who is a Cæsar and a Hannibal."

"Sire, pardon me if I have wounded or annoyed you. I spoke only of M. de Vesin to extinguish all hope in your heart. Cahors, you see, is so well guarded because it is the key of the south."

"Alas! I know it well. I wished so much to possess Cahors, that I told my poor mother to make it a sine quâ non of our marriage. See, I am speaking Latin now. Cahors, then, was my wife's dowry; they owe it to me--"

"Sire, to owe and pay--"

"Are two different things, I know. So your opinion is, that they will never pay me?"

"I fear not."

"Diable!"

"And frankly--"

"Well?"

"They will be right, sire."

"Why so?"

"Because you did not know your part of king; you should have got it at once."

"Do you not, then, remember the tocsin of St. Germain l'Auxerrois?" said Henri, bitterly. "It seems to me that a husband whom they try to murder on the night of his marriage might think less of his dowry than of his life."

"Yes; but since then, sire, we have had peace; and excuse me, sire, you should have profited by it, and, instead of making love, have negotiated. It is less amusing, I know, but more profitable. I speak, sire, as much for my king as for you. If Henri of France had a strong ally in Henri of Navarre, he would be stronger than any one; and if the Protestants and Catholics of France and Navarre would unite in a common

political interest, they would make the rest of the world tremble."

"Oh, I do not pretend to make others tremble, so long as I do not tremble myself. But if I cannot get Cahors, then, and you think I cannot--"

"I think so, sire, for three reasons."

"Tell them to me, Chicot."

"Willingly. The first is that Cahors is a town of good produce, which Henri III. will like to keep for himself."

"That is not very honest."

"It is very royal, sire."

"Ah! it is royal to take what you like."

"Yes; that is called taking the lion's share, and the lion is the king of animals."

"I shall remember your lesson, Chicot. Now, your second reason."

"Madame Catherine--"

"Oh! does my good mother still mix in politics?"

"Always; and she would rather see her daughter at Paris than at Nerac--near her than near you."

"You think so? Yet she does not love her daughter to distraction."

"No; but Madame Marguerite serves you as a hostage, sire."

"You are cunning, Chicot. Devil take me, if I thought of that! But you may be right; a daughter of France would be a hostage in case of need. Well, the third?"

"Between the Duc d'Anjou, who seeks to make a throne for himself in Flanders, between MM. de Guise, who wish for a crown, and shake that of France, and his majesty the king of Spain, who wishes for universal monarchy, you hold the balance and maintain a certain equilibrium."

"I, without weight?"

"Just so. If you became powerful, that is to say, heavy, you would turn the scale, and would be no longer a counterpoise, but a weight."

"Ah! I like that reason, and it is admirably argued. This is the explanation of my situation?"

"Complete."

"And I, who did not see all this, and went on hoping."

"Well, sire, I counsel you to cease to hope."

"Then I must do for this debt what I do for those of my farmers who cannot pay their rent; I put a P against their names."

"Which means paid."

"Just so."

"Put two P's, sire, and give a sigh."

"So be it, Chicot; you see I can live in Béarn, even without Cahors."

"I see that, and also that you are a wise and philosophical king. But what is that noise?"

"Noise, where?"

"In the courtyard, I think."

"Look out of the window."

"Sire, there are below a dozen of poorly-clothed people."

"Ah! they are my poor," said the king, rising.

"Your majesty has poor?"

"Doubtless; does not God recommend charity? If I am not a Catholic, Chicot, I am a Christian."

"Bravo, sire!"

"Come, Chicot, we will give alms together, and then go to supper."

"Sire, I follow you."

"Take that purse lying on the table, near my sword--do you see?"

They went down, but Henri seemed thoughtful and preoccupied. Chicot looked at him, and thought, "What the devil made me talk politics to this brave prince, and make him sad? Fool that I was!"

Once in the court, Henri approached the group of mendicants. There were a dozen men in different costumes. Henri took the purse from the hands of Chicot and made a sign, and then each man came forward and saluted Henri with an air of humility, which did not preclude a glance full of intelligence at the king. Henri replied by a motion of the head; then, putting his fingers into the purse, which Chicot held open, he took out a piece.

"Do you know that it is gold, sire?" said Chicot.

"Yes, my friend, I know."

"Peste! you are rich."

"Do you not see that each of these pieces serves for two? On the contrary, I am so poor that I am forced to cut my gold in two."

"It is true," said Chicot, with surprise: "they are half-pieces, with fantastic designs."

"Oh, I am like my brother Henri, who amuses himself in cutting out images: I amuse myself with clipping my ducats."

"Nevertheless, sire, it is an odd method of giving charity," said Chicot, who divined some hidden mystery.

"What would you do?"

"Instead of cutting the gold, I would give one piece between two."

"They would fight, and I should do harm instead of good."

Henry then took one of the pieces, and, placing himself before the first beggar, looked at him inquiringly.

"Agen," said the man.

"How many?" asked Henri.

"Five hundred."

"Cahors;" and he gave him the piece and took a second.

The man bowed and withdrew.

The next advanced and said, "Auch."

"How many?"

"Three hundred and fifty."

"Cahors;" and he gave him his piece.

"Narbonne," said the third.

"How many?"

"Eight hundred."

"Cahors;" and he gave him his piece.

"Montauban," said the fourth.

"How many?"

"Six hundred."--"Cahors."

Each one in this way pronounced a name and a number, and received a piece of gold, and to each Henri replied, "Cahors."

This over, there were no pieces left in the purse.

"That is all, sire," said Chicot.

"Yes; I have finished."

"Sire, am I permitted to be curious?"

"Why not? Curiosity is natural."

"What did these beggars say, and what did you reply?"

Henri smiled.

"Indeed," continued Chicot, "all is mysterious here."

"Do you think so?"

"Yes; I have never seen alms given in that way."

"It is the custom at Nerac."

"A singular one, sire."

"No, nothing is more simple; each of those men came from a different city."

"Well, sire?"

"Well, that I may not always give to the same, they each tell me the name of their town, so that I can distribute my benefits equally among all the unfortunates in my kingdom."

"Yes, sire; but why did you answer 'Cahors'?"

"Ah!" cried Henri, with a most natural air of surprise, "did I say 'Cahors'?"

"Yes, sire."

"You think so?"

"I am sure of it."

"It must have been because we had been talking so much about it. I wish for it so much that I must have spoken of it without meaning to do so."

"Hum!" said Chicot, suspiciously, "and then there was something else."

"What! something else?"

"A number that each one pronounced, and which, added together, made more

than eight thousand."

"Ah! as to that, Chicot, I did not understand it myself; unless, as the beggars are divided into corporations, they each named the number of members, which seems to me probable."

"Sire, sire!"

"Come and sup, my friend, nothing enlightens the mind like eating and drinking. Let us go to table, and you shall see that if my pistoles are cut, my bottles are full."

Then, passing his arm familiarly through Chicot's, the king went back to his room, where supper was served. Passing by the queen's room, he glanced at it, and saw no light.

"Page," said he, "is not her majesty at home?"

"Her majesty is gone to see Mademoiselle de Montmorency, who is ill."

"Ah! poor Fosseuse!" said Henri: "it is true, the queen has such a good

heart. Come to supper, Chicot."