

Chapter 50

THE TRUE MISTRESS OF THE KING OF NAVARRE.

The repast was joyous. Henri seemed no longer to have any weight either on his heart or his mind, and he was an excellent companion. As for Chicot, he dissembled the uneasiness he had felt since the coming of the Spanish ambassador and the scene with the mendicants. He endeavored to drink little and keep cool, to observe everything; but this Henri would not allow. However, Chicot had a head of iron, and as for Henri, he said he could drink these wines of the country like milk.

"I envy you," said Chicot to the king; "your court is delightful, and your life pleasant."

"If my wife were here, Chicot, I would not say what I am about to say, but in her absence I will tell you that the best part of my life is that which you do not see."

"Ah! sire, they tell, indeed, fine tales of you."

Henri leaned back in his chair to laugh. "They say I reign more over my female than my male subjects, do they not?" said he.

"Yes, sire, and it astonishes me."

"Why so?"

"Because, sire, you have much of that restless spirit which makes great kings."

"Ah, Chicot! you are wrong; I am lazy, and the proof of it is in my life. If I have a love to choose, I take the nearest; if a wine, the bottle close to my hand. To your health, Chicot."

"Sire, you do me honor," said Chicot, emptying his glass.

"Thus," continued the king, "what quarrels in my household!"

"Yes, I understand; all the ladies-in-waiting adore you, sire."

"They are my neighbors, Chicot."

"Then, sire, it might result from this, that if you lived at St. Denis instead of Nerac, the king might not live very tranquilly."

"The king! what do you say, Chicot? Do you think I am a Guise? I wish for Cahors, it is true, because it is near to me."

"Ventre de biche, sire, this ambition for things within the reach of your hand resembles much that of Cæsar Borgia, who gathered together a kingdom, city by city; saying that Italy was an artichoke to be eaten leaf by leaf."

"This Cæsar Borgia was not a bad politician, it seems to me, compere."

"No, but he was a very dangerous neighbor and a bad brother."

"Ah! would you compare me to the son of a pope--I, a Huguenot chief?"

"Sire, I compare you to no one."

"Why not?"

"I believe he would be wrong who should liken you to any other than yourself. You are ambitious, sire."

"Here is a man determined to make me want something," cried Henri.

"God forbid, sire; I desire with all my heart, on the contrary, that your majesty should want nothing."

"Nothing calls you back to Paris, does it, Chicot?"

"No, sire."

"Then you will pass some days with me?"

"If your majesty does me the honor to wish for my company, I ask no better than to give you a week."

"So be it; in a week you will know me like a brother. Drink, Chicot."

"Sire, I am no longer thirsty," said Chicot, who had given up all hopes of seeing the king take too much.

"Then, I will leave you; a man should not stay at table when he does nothing. Drink, I tell you."

"Why, sire?"

"To sleep better. Do you like the chase, Chicot?"

"Not much, sire; and you?"

"Passionately; since I lived at the court of Charles IX."

"Why did your majesty do me the honor to ask me?"

"Because I hunt to-morrow, and thought to take you with me."

"Sire, it would be a great honor, but--"

"Oh! this chase will rejoice all eyes; besides, I am a good hunter, and I wish you to see me to advantage."

"Sire, I am at your orders."

"Good! then it is settled. Ah! here is a page to disturb us."

"Some important business, sire?"

"Business at table! You think you are still at the court of France, my dear Chicot. Learn one thing; at Nerac, when we have supped, we go to bed."

"But this page?"

"Well, cannot he come for anything but business?"

"Ah! I understand: and I will go to bed."

Chicot rose; the king did the same, and took his arm. This haste to send him away appeared suspicious to Chicot, and he determined not to leave the room if he could help it.

"Oh! oh!" said he, tottering, "it is astonishing, sire."

The king smiled. "What is astonishing?"

"Ventre de biche! my head turns; while I sat still, it was all very well, but when I rise--"

"Bah!" said Henri, "we only tasted the wine."

"You call that tasting, sire? You are a drinker, and I do you homage, as to my superior."

"Chicot, my friend," said Henri, endeavoring to make out by one of his keen glances if Chicot were really drunk or pretending, "the best thing you can do is to go to bed."

"Yes, sire; good-night."

"Good-evening, Chicot."

"Yes, sire, you are right; the best thing Chicot can do is to go to bed." And he lay down on the floor.

Henri glanced toward the door, and then, approaching him, said, "You are so drunk, my poor Chicot, that you have taken my floor for your bed."

"Chicot does not mind little things."

"But I expect some one."

"For supper; yes, let us sup--" And Chicot made a fruitless effort to rise.

"Ventre St. Gris! how quickly you get drunk. But go along, mordieu! she is getting impatient."

"She, who?"

"The lady I expect."

"A lady; why did you not say, Henriquet? Ah! pardon, I thought I was speaking--to the king of France. He has spoiled me, that good Henriquet. Ah! I will go."

"You are a gentleman, Chicot. Now go quickly."

"Adieu, sire; a good night to you."

"Adieu! and sleep well. You will find the page in the gallery, who will show you your room."

Chicot went out; but, after taking a few steps, returned just in time to see Henri let in--not a woman, but a man. Chicot put his eye to the large keyhole.

The man took off his hat, and Chicot saw the noble but severe face of Duplessis-Mornay, the rigid and vigilant counselor of Henri of Navarre.

"Ah!" thought Chicot, "this will annoy our lover more than I did."

But Henri's face showed only joy; and after locking the door, he sat down eagerly to examine some maps, plans, and letters, which his

minister had brought him. The king then began to write and to mark the maps.

"Oh! this is the way Henri of Navarre makes love," thought Chicot.

At this moment he heard steps behind him, and fearful of being surprised, he turned hastily away, and, seeing the page, asked for his room.

"Come with me, if you please, monsieur," said D'Aubiac, "and I will conduct you."

Chicot began to understand the king of Navarre. Therefore, instead of going to sleep, he sat somber and thoughtful on his bed, while the moon shed its silver light over stream and meadows.

"Henri is a real king, and he conspires," thought Chicot. "All this palace, park, town--the whole province--is a focus of conspiracy. All the women make love, but it is political love; and all the men live in the hope of a future. Henri is clever, his talent borders on genius, and he is in communication with Spain, the land of deceit. Who knows if even his noble answer to the ambassador was not a farce, and if he did not warn the ambassador of it by some sign unknown to me? Henri has spies; those beggars were nothing more nor less than gentlemen in disguise. Those pieces of gold, so artistically cut, were pledges of recognition--rallying signs.

"Henri feigns to care for nothing but love and pleasure, and then passes his time working with Mornay, who never seems to sleep, and does not know what love means. Queen Marguerite has lovers, and the king knows it, and tolerates them, because he has need of them, or of her--perhaps of both. Happily, God, in giving him the genius for intrigue, did not add to it that of war; for they say he is afraid of the noise of musketry, and that when he was taken, when quite young, to battle, he could not stay more than a quarter of an hour in the saddle. It is lucky, for if he had the arm, as well as the head, this man might do anything.

"There is certainly the Duc de Guise, who has both, but he has the disadvantage of being known as brave and skillful, so that every one is on their guard against him, while no one fears the Béarnais. I alone have seen through him. Well, having seen through him, I have no more to do here; so while he works or sleeps, I will go quietly out of the city. There are not many ambassadors, I think, who can boast of having fulfilled their mission in one day, as I have. So I will leave Nerac, and gallop till I am in France." And he began to put on his spurs.