

Chapter 53

HOW HENRI OF NAVARRE BEHAVED IN BATTLE.

The little army advanced near the town, then they breakfasted. The repast over, two hours were given for the officers and men to rest.

Henri was very pale, and his hands trembled visibly, when at three o'clock in the afternoon the officers appeared under his tent.

"Gentlemen," said he, "we are here to take Cahors; therefore we must take it--by force. Do you understand? M. de Biron, who has sworn to hang every Huguenot, is only forty-five leagues from here, and doubtless a messenger is already dispatched to him by M. de Vezin. In four or five days he will be on us, and as he has 10,000 men with him, we should be taken between the city and him. Let us, then, take Cahors before he comes, that we may receive him well. Come, gentlemen, I will put myself at your head, and let the blows fall as thick as hail."

The men replied to this speech by enthusiastic cries.

"Well said," said Chicot to himself. "It was lucky he had not to speak with his hands, though, or he would have stammered finely. Let us see him at the work."

As they were setting off, the king said to Chicot:

"Pardon me, friend Chicot, I deceived you by talking of wolves, hunting, and such things, but you see Henri will not pay me his sister's dowry, and Margot cries out for her dear Cahors. One must do what one's wife wants, for peace' sake; therefore I am going to try and take Cahors."

"Why did she not ask you for the moon, sire, as you are such a complaisant husband?"

"I would have tried for it, Chicot, I love my dear Margot so much!"

"You will have quite enough to do with Cahors, and we shall see how you will get out of it."

"Ah! yes, the moment is critical and very disagreeable. Ah! I am not brave, and my nature revolts at every cannonade. Chicot, my friend, do not laugh too much at the poor Béarnais, your compatriot and friend. If I am afraid and you find it out, tell no one."

"If you are afraid?"

"Yes."

"Are you, then, afraid of being afraid?"

"I am."

"But then, ventre de biche, why the devil do you undertake such a

thing?"

"I must."

"M. de Vezin is a terrible person."

"I know it well."

"Who gives quarter to no one."

"You think so, Chicot?"

"I am sure of it; red plume or white, he will not care, but cry, Fire!"

"You say that for my white feather, Chicot."

"Yes, sire, and as you are the only one who wears that color--"

"Well!"

"I would take it off."

"But I put it on that I might be recognized."

"Then you will keep it?"

"Yes, decidedly." And Henri trembled again as he said it.

"Come, sire," said Chicot, who did not understand this difference between words and gestures, "there is still time; do not commit a folly; you cannot mount on horseback in that state."

"Am I, then, very pale, Chicot?"

"As pale as death, sire."

"Good."

"How good?"

At this moment the noise of cannon and a furious fire of musketry was heard; it was M. de Vezin's reply to the summons to surrender given by Mornay.

"Hem!" said Chicot, "what do you think of this music, sire?"

"It makes me cold in the marrow of my bones," replied Henri. "Here, my horse! my horse!" cried he.

Chicot looked and listened, unable to understand him. Henry mounted, and then said--

"Come, Chicot, get on horseback too; you are not a warrior, either, are you?"

"No, sire."

"Well, come, we will be afraid together; come and see, my friend. A good horse here, for M. Chicot."

Henri set off at full gallop, and Chicot followed him. On arriving in front of his little army, Henri raised his visor, and cried:

"Out with the banner! out with the new banner!"

They drew forth the banner, which had the double scutcheon of Navarre and Bourbon; it was white, and had chains of gold on one side, and fleur-de-lis on the other.

Again the cannon from Cahors were fired, and the balls tore through a file of infantry near the king.

"Ventre St. Gris! did you see, Chicot?" said the king, whose teeth chattered.

"He will be ill," thought Chicot.

"Cursed body," murmured Henri, "ah! you fear, you tremble; wait till you have something to tremble for." And striking his spurs into his horse, he rushed onward before cavalry, infantry, and artillery, and arrived at a hundred feet from the place, red with the fire of the batteries which

thundered from above. There, he kept his horse immovable for ten minutes, his face turned toward the gate of the city, and crying, "The fascines! ventre St. Gris! the fascines!"

Mornay had followed him, sword in hand, and then came Chicot; behind them the young Huguenot gentlemen, crying, "Vive Navarre!" and each with a fascine, which he threw in, and the fosse was soon filled. Then came the artillery, and with the loss of thirty men succeeded in placing their petards under the gate. The shot whistled like a whirlwind of iron round Henri's head, and twenty men fell in an instant before his eyes. "Forward!" cried he, and rushed on through the midst of the fire, and arrived just as the soldiers had fired the first petard. The gate was broken in two places; the second petard was lighted, and a new opening was made in the wood; but twenty arquebuses immediately passed through, vomiting balls on the soldiers and officers, and the men fell like mowed grass.

"Sire," cried Chicot, "in Heaven's name retire!"

Mornay said nothing; he was proud of his pupil, but from time to time he tried to place himself before him. Once Henri felt the damp on his brow, and a cloud pass over his eyes.

"Ah, cursed nature," cried he, "you shall not conquer me!" Then, jumping off his horse, "An ax!" cried he, and with a vigorous arm he struck down wood and iron. At last a beam gave way, and a part of the gate and a portion of the wall fell, and one hundred men rushed to the breach,

crying, "Navarre! Navarre! Cahors is ours!"

[Illustration: "AN AX!" CRIED HENRI, AND WITH A VIGOROUS ARM HE STRUCK

DOWN WOOD AND IRON.]

Chicot had not quitted the king; he was with him under the gate when he entered, one of the first, but at each discharge he saw him shudder and lower his head.

"Ventre St. Gris! did you ever see such a coward, Chicot?" said he.

"No, sire, I have never seen a coward like you."

The soldiers of M. de Vezin now tried to dislodge Henri and his advanced guards, who received them sword in hand; but the besieged were the strongest, and succeeded in forcing Henri and his troops back beyond the fosse.

"Ventre St. Gris!" cried the king, "I believe my flag retreats; I must carry it myself." And snatching it from the hands of those who held it, he was the first to rush forward again, half enveloped in its folds. The balls whistled round him, and pierced the flag with a hollow sound. A long hand-to-hand fight ensued, above all the uproar of which M. de Vezin's voice was heard crying, "Barricade the streets! let trenches be dug! and the houses garrisoned!"

"Oh!" cried M. de Turenne, "the siege of the city is over, Vezin." And as he spoke he fired at him and wounded him in the arm.

"You are wrong, Turenne," cried M. de Vezin, "there are twenty sieges in Cahors; so if one is over, there are nineteen to come."

M. de Vezin defended himself during five days and nights from street to street and from house to house. Luckily for the rising fortunes of Henri of Navarre, he had counted too much on the walls and garrison of Cahors, and had neglected to send to M. de Biron.

During these five days and nights, Henri commanded like a captain and fought like a soldier, slept with his head on a stone, and awoke sword in hand. Each day they conquered a street or a square, which each night the garrison tried to retake. On the fourth night the enemy seemed willing to give some rest to the Protestant army. Then it was Henri who attacked in his turn. He forced an intrenched position, but it cost him seven hundred men. M. de Turenne and nearly all the officers were wounded, but the king remained untouched. To the fear that he had felt at first, and which he had so heroically vanquished, succeeded a feverish restlessness, a rash audacity. All the fastenings of his armor were broken, as much by his own efforts as by the blows of the enemy. He struck so vigorously that he always killed his man. When this last post was forced, the king entered into the inclosure, followed by the eternal Chicot, who, silent and sad, had for five days seen growing at his sides the phantom of a monarchy destined to destroy that of the Valois.

"Well, Chicot, of what are you thinking?" said Henri to him.

"Sire, that you are a real king."

"And I, sire, that you are too imprudent," said Mornay, "to put up your vizor when they are firing at you from all sides."

As he spoke a dozen arquebuses were fired at them; one ball struck off a plume from Henri's helmet, his horse was killed by another, and Mornay's had his leg broken. The king fell, and there might have finished his career; but Chicot, whirling his sword round to keep off the nearest, helped Henri up and gave him his own horse, saying, "Sire, you will testify to the king of France that, if I drew the sword against him, I killed no one."--"Ventre St. Gris! you must be mine, Chicot!" cried Henri. "You shall live and die with me."

"Sire, I have but one service to follow--that of my king. His star diminishes, but I shall be faithful to his adverse fortunes. Let me serve and love him as long as I live, sire. I shall soon be alone with him; do not envy him his last servant."

"Chicot, you will be always dear to me, and, after Henri of France, you will have Henri of Navarre for a friend."

"Yes, sire," said Chicot simple, kissing his hand.

The siege was soon over after this. M. de Vezin was taken, and the

garrison surrendered.

Then Henri dictated to Mornay a letter, which Chicot was to carry to the king of France. It was written in bad Latin, and finished with these words:

"Quod mihi dixisti profuit multum. Cognosco meos devotos; nosce tuos. Chicotos cætera expedit."

Which means, "What you told me was very useful. I know my faithful followers; know yours. Chicot will tell you the rest."

"And now, friend Chicot," said Henri, "embrace me; but take care not to soil yourself, for, mordieu, I am as bloody as a butcher. Take my ring, and adieu, Chicot; I keep you no longer, gallop to France, and tell all you have seen."