

Chapter 54

WHAT WAS PASSING AT THE LOUVRE ABOUT THE TIME CHICOT ENTERED NÉRAC.

The necessity of following Chicot to the end of his mission has kept us a long time away from the Louvre. The king, after having passed so bravely through his adventurous return from Vincennes, experienced that retrospective emotion which sometimes is felt by the bravest heart after the danger is over. He entered the Louvre without saying anything, made his prayers longer than usual, forgetting to thank the officers and guards who had served him so well. Then he went to bed, astonishing his valets by the rapidity of his toilet; and D'Epéron, who remained in his room to the last, expecting thanks at least, went away in a very bad humor.

At two o'clock every one slept in the Louvre. The next day, Henri took four bouillons in bed instead of two, and then sent for MM. de Villeguie and D'O to come to his room, to speak about a new financial edict. The queen received the order to dine alone, but it was added that in the evening the king would receive. All day he played with Love, saying, every time that the animal showed his white teeth, "Ah, rebel! you want to bite me also; you attack your king also; but you are conquered, M. Love--conquered, wretched leaguer--conquered." His secretaries of state were somewhat astonished at all this, particularly as he said nothing else, and signed everything without looking at it. At three o'clock in

the afternoon he asked for D'Epernon. They replied that he was reviewing the light horse; then he inquired for De Loignac, but he also was absent. He asked for lunch, and, while he ate, had an edifying discourse read to him, which he interrupted by saying to the reader, "Was it not Plutarch who wrote the life of Sylla?"

"Yes, sire," said the reader, much astonished at being interrupted in his pious reading by this profane question.

"Do you remember that passage where the historian recounts how the dictator avoided death?"

The reader hesitated.

"Not precisely, sire; it is a long time since I read Plutarch."

At this moment, the Cardinal de Joyeuse was announced.

"Ah! here is a learned man, he will tell me at once!" cried the king.

"Sire," said the cardinal, "am I lucky enough to arrive apropos--it is a rare thing in this world."

"Ma foi! yes; you heard my question?"

"Your majesty asked, I think, in what manner, and when, Sylla narrowly escaped death?"

"Just so--can you answer me, cardinal?"

"Nothing more easy, sire."

"So much the better."

"Sylla, who had killed so many men, never risked his life but in combats; did your majesty mean in one of those?"

"Yes; in one in which I think I recollect he was very near death. Open a Plutarch, cardinal; there should be one there translated by Amyot, and read me the passage where he escaped the javelins of his enemies, thanks to the swiftness of his white horse."

"Sire, there is no need of opening Plutarch; the event took place in the combat with Telescrius the Samnite, and Lamponius the Lucanian."

"You are so learned, my dear cardinal."

"Your majesty is too good."

"Now explain to me how this Roman lion, who was so cruel, was never annoyed by his enemies."

"Sire, I will reply to your majesty in the words of this same Plutarch."

"Go on, Joyeuse."

"Carbon, the enemy of Sylla, said often, 'I have to fight at once a lion and a fox who inhabit the soul of Sylla, but it is the fox who gives me most trouble.'"

"Ah! it was the fox?"

"Plutarch says so, sire."

"And he is right, cardinal. But apropos of combats, have you any news of your brother?"

"Of which brother, sire? I have two."

"Of the Duc d'Arques, my friend."

"Not yet, sire."

"If M. d'Anjou, who always plays the fox, will only play the lion a little for once."

The cardinal did not reply, so Henri, signing to him to remain, dressed himself sumptuously, and passed into the room where the court waited for him. He entered, looking full of good humor, kissed the hands of his wife and mother, paid all sorts of compliments to the ladies, and even offered them sweetmeats.

"We were unquiet about your health, my son," said Catherine.

"You were wrong, madame; I have never been better."

"And to what happy influence do you owe this amelioration, my son?"

"To having laughed much, madame."

Every one looked astonished.

"Laughed! you can laugh much, my son; then you are very happy?"

"It is true, madame."

"And about what were you so much amused?"

"I must tell you, mother, that yesterday I went to Vincennes."

"I knew it."

"Oh! you knew it; well, my people told me, before my return, of an enemy's army whose muskets shone on the road."

"An enemy's army on the road to Vincennes?"

"Yes, mother."

"And where?"

"In front of the Jacobins, near the house of our good cousin."

"Near Madame de Montpensier's?"

"Precisely so, near Bel-Esbat. I approached, bravely to give battle, and I perceived--"

"What, sire?" cried the queen, in alarm.

"Reassure yourself, madame, I perceived an entire priory of good monks, who presented arms to me with acclamations."

Every one laughed, and the king continued:

"Yes, you are right to laugh; I have in France more than ten thousand monks, of whom I can make, if necessary, ten thousand musketeers; then I will create a Grand-Master of the Tonsured Musketeers, and give the place to you, cardinal."

"Sire, I accept."

The ladies now, according to etiquette, rose, and, bowing to the king, retired. The queen followed with her ladies of honor. The queen-mother remained: the king's gayety was a mystery that she wished to fathom.

"Cardinal," said the king, "what has become of your brother, Du Bouchage?"

"I do not know, sire."

"How! you do not know?"

"No; I never see him, now."

A grave, sad voice from the end of the room said, "Here I am, sire."

"Ah! it is he," cried Henri. "Approach, comte; approach."

The young man obeyed.

"Mon Dieu!" cried the king, "he is no longer a man, but a shade."

"Sire, he works hard," said the cardinal, stupefied himself at the change in his brother during the last week. He was as pale as wax, and looked thin and wan.

"Come here, young man," said the king. "Thanks, cardinal, for your quotation from Plutarch; in a similar case I shall apply to you again."

The cardinal saw that Henri wished to be left alone with his brother, and took his leave.

There only remained the queen-mother, D'Epernon, and Du Bouchage. The king beckoned to the latter, and said:

"Why do you hide thus behind the ladies; do you not know it gives me pleasure to see you?"

"Your kind words do me honor, sire," said the young man, bowing.

"Then how is it that we never see you here now?"

"If your majesty has not seen me, it is because you have not deigned to cast an eye on the corner of the room. I am here every day regularly; I never have failed, and never will, as long as I can stand upright: it is a sacred duty to me."

"And is it that that makes you so sad?"

"Oh! your majesty cannot think so?"

"No, for you and your brother love me, and I love you. Apropos, do you know that poor Anne has written to me from Dieppe?"

"I did not, sire."

"Yes; but you know he did not like going?"

"He confided to me his regrets at leaving Paris."

"Yes; but do you know what he said? That there existed a man who would have regretted Paris much more; and that if I gave you this order you would die."

"Perhaps, sire."

"He said yet more, for your brother talks fast when he is not sulky; he said that if I had given such an order you would have disobeyed it."

"Your majesty was right to place my death before my disobedience; it would have been a greater grief to me to disobey than to die, and yet I should have disobeyed."

"You are a little mad, I think, my poor comte," said Henri.

"I am quite so, I believe."

"Then the case is serious."

Joyeuse sighed.

"What is it? tell me."

Joyeuse tried to smile. "A great king like you, sire, would not care for such confidences."

"Yes, Henri, yes; tell me. It will amuse me," said the king.

"Sire, you deceive yourself; there is nothing in my grief that could amuse a noble heart like yours."

The king took the young man's hand.

"Do not be angry, Du Bouchage," said he; "you know that your king also has known the griefs of an unrequited love."

"I know it, sire, formerly."

"Therefore, I feel for your sufferings."

"Your majesty is too good."

"Not so; but when I suffered what you suffer, no one could aid me, because no one was more powerful than myself, whereas I can aid you."

"Sire?"

"And, consequently, hope soon for an end of your sorrows."

The young man shook his head.

"Du Bouchage, you shall be happy, or I am no longer king of France!"

cried Henri.

"Happy! alas, sire, it is impossible," said the young man with a bitter smile.

"And why so?"

"Because my happiness is not of this world."

"Henri, your brother, when he went, recommended you to my friendship. I wish, since you consult neither the experience of your father, nor the wisdom of your brother the cardinal, to be an elder brother to you. Come, be confiding, and tell me all. I assure you, Du Bouchage, that for everything except death my power and love shall find you a remedy."

"Sire," replied the young man, falling at the king's feet, "do not confound me by the expression of a goodness to which I cannot reply. My misfortune is without remedy, for it is that which makes my only happiness."

"Du Bouchage, you are mad; you will kill yourself with fancies."

"I know it well, sire."

"But," cried the king, impatiently, "is it a marriage you wish for?"

"Sire, my wish is to inspire love. You see that the whole world is

powerless to aid me in this; I alone can obtain it for myself."--"Then why despair?"

"Because I feel that I shall never inspire it."

"Try, try, my child; you are young and rich. Where is the woman that can resist at once beauty, youth and wealth? There are none, Du Bouchage."

"Sire, your goodness is great."

"If you wish to be discreet, and tell me nothing, do so; I will find out, and then act. You know what I have done for your brother, I will do as much for you; a hundred thousand crowns shall not stop me."

Du Bouchage seized the king's hand, and pressed his lips to it.

"May your majesty ask one day for my blood, and I will shed it to the last drop to show you how grateful I am for the protection that I refuse!"

Henri III. turned on his heel angrily.

"Really," said he, "these Joyeuses are more obstinate than a Valois. Here is one who will bring me every day his long face and eyes circled with black; that will be delightful."

"Oh! sire, I will smile so, when I am here, that every one shall think

me the happiest of men."

"Yes, but I shall know the contrary, and that will sadden me."

"Does your majesty permit me to retire?" asked Du Bouchage.

"Go, my child, and try to be a man."

When he was gone the king approached D'Epernon, and said:

"Lavalette, have money distributed this evening to the Forty-five, and give them holiday for a night and a day to amuse themselves. By the mass! they saved me like Sylla's white horse."

"Saved?" said Catherine.

"Yes, mother."

"From what?"

"Ah! ask D'Epernon."

"I ask you, my son."

"Well, madame, our dear cousin, the sister of your good friend M. de Guise--oh! do not deny it; you, know he is your good friend--laid an ambush for me."

"An ambush!"

"Yes, madame, and I narrowly escaped imprisonment or assassination."

"By M. de Guise?"

"You do not believe it?"

"I confess I do not."

"D'Epernon, my friend, relate the adventure to my mother. If I go on speaking, and she goes on shrugging her shoulders, I shall get angry, and that does not suit my health. Adieu, madame; cherish M. de Guise as much as you please, but I would advise them not to forget Salcede."