

Chapter 78

HOW, AFTER RECEIVING NEWS FROM THE SOUTH, HENRI RECEIVED
NEWS FROM THE
NORTH.

The king, highly exasperated, could hardly read the letter which Chicot gave to him. While he deciphered the Latin with every sign of impatience, Chicot, before a great Venetian mirror, which hung over a gilt table, was admiring the infinite grace of his own person under his military dress.

"Oh! I am betrayed," cried Henri, when he had finished the letter; "the Béarnais had a plan, and I never suspected it."

"My son," said Chicot, "you know the proverb, 'Still waters run deepest'?"

"Go to the devil with your proverbs."

Chicot went to the door as if to obey.

"No, remain."

Chicot stopped.

"Cahors taken!" continued Henri.

"Yes, and very well done, too."

"Then he has generals and engineers?"

"No, he is too poor for that; he could not pay them; he does it all himself."

"He fight!" said Henri, disdainfully.

"I do not say that he rushes into it with enthusiasm; no, he resembles those people who try the water before they bathe; he just dips the ends of his fingers with a little shudder, which augurs badly, then his breast; all this takes him about ten minutes, and then he rushes into action, and through fire, like a salamander."

"Diable!"

"And I assure you, Henri, the fire was hot there."

The king rose and walked up and down the room.

"Here is a misfortune for me," cried he; "they will laugh at it: they will sing about it. Mordieu! it is lucky I thought of sending the promised aid to Antwerp; Antwerp will compensate for Cahors; the north will blot out the south."

"Amen!" said Chicot, plunging his hands into the king's sweetmeat-box to finish his desert.

At this moment the door opened, and the usher announced "M. le Comte du Bouchage."

"Ah!" cried Henri, "I told you so; here are news. Enter, comte, enter."

The usher opened the door, and Henri du Bouchage entered slowly and bent a knee to the king.

"Still pale and sad," said the king. "Come, friend, take a holiday air for a little while, and do not tell me good news with a doleful face: speak quickly, Du Bouchage, for I want to hear. You come from Flanders?"

"Yes, sire."

"And quickly?"

"As quickly, sire, as a man can ride."

"You are welcome. And now, what of Antwerp?"

"Antwerp belongs to the Prince of Orange."

"To the Prince of Orange!"

"Yes, to William."

"But did not my brother attack Antwerp?"

"Yes, sire; but now he is traveling to Chateau-Thierry."

"He has left the army?"

"Sire, there is no longer an army."

"Oh!" cried the king, sinking back in his armchair, "but Joyeuse--"

"Sire, my brother, after having done wonders with his sailors, after having conducted the whole of the retreat, rallied the few men who escaped the disaster, and sent me home with an escort for M. le Duc d'Anjou."

"A defeat!" murmured the king.

But all at once, with a strange look.

"Then Flanders is lost to my brother?"

"Absolutely, sire."

"Without hope?"

"I fear so, sire."

The clouds gradually cleared from the king's brow.

"That poor Francois," said he, smiling; "he is unlucky in his search for a crown. He missed that of Navarre, he has stretched out his hand for that of England, and has touched that of Flanders; I would wager, Du Bouchage, that he will never reign, although he desires it so much. And how many prisoners were taken?"

"About two thousand."

"How many killed?"

"At least as many; and among them M. de St. Aignan."

"What! poor St. Aignan dead!"

"Drowned."

"Drowned! Did you throw yourselves into the Scheldt?"

"No, the Scheldt threw itself upon us."

The comte then gave the king a description of the battle, and of the inundations. Henri listened silently. When the recital was over, he

rose, and kneeling down on his prie-Dieu, said some prayers, and then returned with a perfectly calm face.

"Well," said he, "I trust I bear things like a king; and you, comte, since your brother is saved, like mine, thank God, and smile a little."

"Sire, I am at your orders."

"What do you ask as payment for your services, Du Bouchage?"

"Sire, I have rendered no service."

"I dispute that; but at least your brother has."--"Immense, sire."

"He has saved the army, you say, or rather, its remnants?"

"There is not a man left who does not say that he owes his life to my brother."

"Well! Du Bouchage, my will is to extend my benefits to both, and I only imitate in that Him who made you both rich, brave, and handsome; besides, I should imitate those great politicians who always rewarded the bearers of bad news."

"Oh!" said Chicot, "I have known men hung for bringing bad news."

"That is possible," said the king; "but remember the senate that thanked

Varron."

"You cite republicans, Valois; misfortune makes you humble."

"Come, Du Bouchage, what will you have--what would you like?"

"Since your majesty does me the honor to speak to me so kindly, I will dare to profit by your goodness. I am tired of life, sire, and yet have a repugnance to shortening it myself, for God forbids it, and all the subterfuges that a man of honor employs in such a case are mortal sins. To get one's self killed in battle or to let one's self die of hunger are only different forms of suicide. I renounce the idea, therefore, of dying before the term which God has fixed for my life, and yet the world fatigues me, and I must leave it."

"My friend!" said the king.

Chicot looked with interest at the young man, so beautiful, so brave, so rich, and yet speaking in this desponding tone.

"Sire," continued the comte, "everything that has happened to me for some time has strengthened my resolution. I wish to throw myself into the arms of God, who is the sovereign consoler of the afflicted, as he is of the happy. Deign then, sire, to facilitate my entrance into a religious life, for my heart is sad unto death."

The king was moved at this doleful request.

"Ah! I understand," said he; "you wish to become a monk, but you fear the probation."

"I do not fear the austerities, sire, but the time they leave one in indecision. It is not to soften my life, nor to spare my body any physical suffering, or my mind any moral privation, but it is to pass at once from this world to the grating which separates me from it, and which one generally attains so slowly."

"Poor boy!" said the king. "I think he will make a good preacher; will he not, Chicot?"

Chicot did not reply. Du Bouchage continued:

"You see, sire, that it is with my own family that the struggle will take place, and with my relations that I shall meet with the greatest opposition. My brother, the cardinal, at once so good and so worldly, will find a thousand reasons to persuade me against it. At Rome your majesty is all-powerful; you have asked me what I wish for, and promised to grant it; my wish is this, obtain from Rome an authority that my novitiate be dispensed with."

The king rose smiling, and taking the comte's hand, said--

"I will do what you ask, my son. You wish to serve God, and you are right; he is a better master than I am. You have my promise, dear

comte."

"Your majesty overwhelms me with joy," cried the young man, kissing Henri's hand as though he had made him duke, peer, or marshal of France.

"Then it is settled?"

"On my word as a king and a gentleman."

Something like a smile passed over the lips of Du Bouchage; he bowed respectfully to the king and took leave.

"What a happy young man," said Henri.

"Oh!" said Chicot, "you need not envy him; he is not more doleful than yourself."

"But, Chicot, he is going to give himself up to religion."

"And who the devil prevents you from doing the same? I know a cardinal who will give all necessary aid, and he has more interest at Rome than you have; do you not know him? I mean the Cardinal de Guise."

"Chicot!"

"And if the tonsure disquiets you, for it is rather a delicate operation, the prettiest hands and the prettiest scissors--golden scissors, ma foi!--will give you this precious symbol, which would raise

to three the number of the crowns you have worn, and will justify the device, 'Manet ultima coelo.'

"Pretty hands, do you say?"

"Yes, do you mean to abuse the hands of Madame de Montpensier? How severe you are upon your subjects."

The king frowned, and passed over his eyes a hand as white as those spoken of, but more trembling.

"Well!" said Chicot, "let us leave that, for I see that the conversation does not please you, and let us return to subjects that interest me personally."

The king made a gesture, half indifferent, half approving.

"Have you heard, Henri," continued Chicot, "whether those Joyeuses carried off any woman?"

"Not that I know of."

"Have they burned anything?"

"What?"

"How should I know what a great lord burns to amuse himself; the house

of some poor devil, perhaps."

"Are you mad, Chicot? Burn a house for amusement in my city of Paris!"

"Oh! why not?"

"Chicot!"

"Then they have done nothing that you know of?"

"Ma foi, no."

"Oh! so much the better," said Chicot, drawing a long breath like a man much relieved.

"Do you know one thing, Chicot?" said Henri.

"No, I do not."

"It is that you have become wicked."

"I?"

"Yes, you."

"My sojourn in the tomb had sweetened me, but your presence, great king, has destroyed the effect."

"You become insupportable, Chicot; and I now attribute to you ambitious projects and intrigues of which I formerly believed you incapable."

"Projects of ambition! I ambitious! Henriquet, my son, you used to be only foolish, now you are mad; you have progressed."

"And I tell you, M. Chicot, that you wish to separate from me all my old friends, by attributing to them intentions which they have not, and crimes of which they never thought; in fact, you wish to monopolize me."

"I monopolize you! what for? God forbid! you are too tiresome, without counting the difficulty of pleasing you with your food. Oh! no, indeed! Explain to me whence comes this strange idea."

"You began by listening coldly to my praises of your old friend, Dom Modeste, to whom you owe much."

"I owe much to Dom Modeste! Good."

"Then you tried to calumniate the Joyeuses, my true friends."

"I do not say no."

"Then you launched a shaft at the Guises."

"Ah! you love them now; you love all the world to-day, it seems."

"No, I do not love them; but, as just now they keep themselves close and quiet, and do not do me the least harm, I do not fear them, and I cling to all old and well-known faces. All these Guises, with their fierce looks and great swords, have never done me any harm, after all, and they resemble--shall I tell you what?"

"Do, Henri; I know how clever you are at comparisons."

"They resemble those perch that they let loose in the ponds to chase the great fish and prevent them growing too fat; but suppose that the great fish are not afraid?"

"Well!"

"Then the teeth of the perch are not strong enough to get through their scales."

"Oh! Henri! my friend, how clever you are!"

"While your Béarnais--"

"Well, have you a comparison for him also?"

"While your Béarnais, who mews like a cat, bites like a tiger."

"Well, my son, I will tell you what to do; divorce the queen and marry

Madame de Montpensier; was she not once in love with you?"

"Yes, and that is the source of all her menaces, Chicot; she has a woman's spite against me, and she provokes me now and then, but luckily I am a man, and can laugh at it."

As Henri finished these words, the usher cried at the door, "A messenger from M. le Duc de Guise for his majesty."

"Is it a courier or a gentleman?" asked the king.

"It is a captain, sire."

"Let him enter; he is welcome."