Marguerite de Valois

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By Alexandre Dumas

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CHAPTER I

A HUSBAND SHE DOES NOT WANT

THE midnight of Monday, the 18th of August, 1572, was already past but the windows of the royal residence of the Louvre were still brilliantly alight, as were those of the Hotel de Bourbon on the opposite side of the way, and in the squares and streets below the crowds still surged, a dark, threatening, turbulent sea, the waves of which beat against the palace walls with more of menace than festivity in their tone.

It was the night of the marriage of the French King's sister, Marguerite de Valois, to Henry, King of Navarre.

The marriage of a princess is most often a matter of state policy. It may be welcome or not to the one who is most concerned, but reasons which have led to its arrangement are usually easy to see. Yet this marriage had been an astonishment to the world.

It was a union of Protestant and Catholic, at a time when the political enmity of the two religions was intense and bitter.

How, it was asked, was reconciliation possible? Would the young prince, de Condé, forget his father's assassination at Jarnac? Would the young Duke of Guise forgive his father's assassination at Orleans? And had not the bridegroom's mother, Jeanne of Navarre, died only two months ago, under such circumstances that the whisper of poison was almost audible through the corridors of the Louvre?

But it was said that the young King, Charles IX, had set his heart on this marriage, which was not merely to re-establish peace throughout the kingdom, but would draw to Paris the scattered I Huguenot chiefs who had been causing trouble in many parts of the land.

As the betrothed were of different faiths, the marriage had been delayed until a dispensation could be obtained from Rome; and this had been slow to arrive.

Jeanne of Navarre (before her sudden surprising death) had expressed to the

young French King her uneasiness at this delay, and Charles had been heard to reply: “Dear aunt, don’t have any such foolish doubt. I honour you more than the Pope, and my regard for my sister is more than any fear of him. Because I am not a Huguenot, it doesn’t follow that I’m a fool. If Gregory should try to upset our plans, I’d celebrate the marriage myself, in my own way. You needn’t worry about that.”

Widely repeated, they were words that made the Protestants glad. But Catholics looked at one another with uncertain eyes. Did the king intend their betrayal, or (as they had the more confident hope) was he leading the hated Huguenots on to some end which they did not guess?

It was in regard to the venerated Admiral de Coligny that wonder and speculation were most deeply stirred. It was not long since Charles had offered the huge reward of a hundred and fifty thousand crowns to anyone who would bring his head. Now he called him his father, and declared openly that the Flanders war should be entrusted in future to him alone. Even the king’s mother, Catherine de Medici, who was reputed to rule his policy, was said to have shown some uneasiness over this, which was not surprising, for Coligny, despite all his wisdom, had been indiscreet enough to let it become known that the king had warned him against Catherine. “The queen, my mother,” he had said, “must hear nothing of this, for she will meddle, and ruin all.”

Coligny had come to Paris, at the royal invitation, with suspicion alert. When he had left Chatillon, a peasant woman had thrown herself at his feet, imploring him not to go: “For, if you do, you will die - you will die,” she had cried, and he had felt that her words were too probably true. But now these suspicions were lulled to rest.

To his son-in-law, Teligny, also, the king had been kind, calling him brother, as he called Coligny father, and treating him as one of his closest friends.

A mood of optimism had become general among the Huguenots, which only a few of the more morose and suspicious among them refused to share. It was a pleurisy which had been fatal to the Queen of Navarre. They filled the spacious apartments of the Louvre, seeing in the marriage of their young chief, Henry of Navarre, to the king’s sister, assurance of peaceful days.

Now they were fêted and praised by those, the highest in the land, who had been

their most bitter foes. The King, the Queen-Mother, the King's two younger brothers, Dukes of Anjou and Alençon, even the de Guises, were gracious to the reputed enemies of their House and cause. They congratulated the young prince, Henry de Condé, on his recent marriage. The Duke of Mayenne engaged in friendly discussion with the Admiral and M. de Tavanne on the probability of an outbreak of war with Spain.

Among these various groups, moving quickly, observing all, was a young man of no more than nineteen years, with his black, close-cropped head carried a little on one side, having thick eyebrows, and a nose that curved like an eagle's beak. He had already won a name for himself at the battle of Arnay-le-Duc. He was the dearly beloved pupil of Coligny. Three months earlier, he had been Prince of Béarn. Then his mother had died, and he had become King of Navarre.

Did he think now that they who spoke to him, who were so gracious in congratulating him on his royal bride, might be those who were responsible for his mother's death?… If he had cares, they were cares which he did not show.

Some paces distant, with a brow as gloomy as that of Navarre was clear stood the young Duke of Guise. Three years older than the Béarnais, he had already attained a reputation which almost rivalled that of his father François, the elder Duke of Guise. He was taller than most of those around him, and with a haughtiness of aspect, a natural majesty, which caused it to be said that princes in his company seemed to be no more than the common herd.

He had become known as the Prince de Joinville, until his father had died in his arms at the siege of Orleans, denouncing Admiral Coligny as his assassin. The young prince had taken then a fierce oath to have revenge for his father's death. He had gone beyond that. He had sworn to pursue the foes of his faith without respite of mercy, until the last heretic should be dead.

Now, to the general astonishment, he who had sworn such oaths, and who was regarded by the Catholics as their natural leader since his father was dead, had held out the hand of fellowship, and entered into familiar conversation with Teligny - the son-in-law of the man he had sworn to kill.

But it was an evening of wonder…

It was amid an atmosphere of smiles, and a murmur softer and more flattering than had been heard before, that the young bride, who had withdrawn to lay

aside her toilette of ceremony, her long mantle and flowing veil, returned to the ballroom, with her inseparable friend, the lovely Duchess de Nevers, at her side, and led by her brother, King Charles IX, who presented his “dear sister Margot,” as he would affectionately call her, to the principal guests.

Marguerite was scarcely twenty. She had black hair, a fine complexion, voluptuous eyes which long lashes veiled, a red and lovely mouth, a graceful neck, an enchanting figure, and a foot which, in its satin slipper, was of scarcely more than an infant’s size. Amid the loveliest women of the time and land, which Catherine had assembled in the French court, she was commonly admitted to be the first. The court poets compared her to Aurora or Cytheria. Never was there a more flattering reception, never one more fully deserved, than that which awaited the new Queen of Navarre.

She was not merely a lovely girl. Foreigners who had the privilege of meeting her said that she was equally conspicuous both for learning and wit. It had been said: “To see the court without seeing Marguerite of Valois is to have seen neither the court nor France.”

It may be supposed that, as Charles introduced her to the Huguenots, whose chief she had married, compliments were not wanting now. The Huguenots had the reputation of being adroit with them. But Charles, with a dissembling smile on his pale lips, had the same answer for all: “In giving my sister to Henry of Navarre, I give her to every Protestant in the land.”

They were ambiguous words, by which some were pleased, and at which others smiled, for they could be construed in a way which was injurious alike to the bride, her husband, and him from whose lips they came. For there had been scandalous rumours about the conduct of the young princess, which, whether false or true, had not been hard to believe of one who had been reared in the dissolute court which Catherine of Medici ruled…

The young Duke de Guise might be conversing with M. Teligny, but he was not too fully occupied to glance frequently at the group of ladies in the midst of whom stood the glittering Queen of Navarre. Once her eyes met his, and a shadow of disquieting thought passed over a brow crowned by the tremulous starry light of the diamond circlet she wore, and was confirmed by the restless impatient gesture which followed.

Her eldest sister, the Princess Claude, now married to the Duke of Lorraine, noticed this sign of disquiet, and would have reached her side to enquire its cause, but was deterred by the approach of the Queen-Mother, who was leaning, with apparent affection, upon the arm of the Prince de Condé.

As the group gave way before Catherine, the Duke de Guise took advantage of the general movement to approach the bride. As he passed her he murmured: Ipse atulli (I have brought it), and was answered in the same tongue: Noctu pro more (Tonight, as usual), in a tone as low as his own.

The Duchess of Lorraine, whose eyes were still on her sister, was not close enough to observe that any words had passed between them, but she saw the sudden blush that came to Marguerite's cheek, and that, while she remained as one preoccupied by her own thoughts, the duke had moved away with the aspect of one whose mind was somewhat relieved.

The King of Navarre, who might be thought to have been most concerned in this episode, had not observed it at all. His eyes were not on Marguerite, but on one of Catherine's ladies-in-waiting, Charlotte de Beaune-Semblançay, the young and lovely wife of the Baron de Sauve.

Henry's infatuation for Madame de Sauve had been evident for several weeks. That his feelings had met any favourable return was less clear to the watchful, curious court. Delicately beautiful, vivacious or melancholy in quick-changing moods, ever ready for love or intrigue, a woman in every use of the word, and every attraction that it can hold, she had so completely occupied the thoughts of the youthful King of Navarre that it had been evident to all that he had no admiration to spare for the royal beauty of the bride he had won. It was an additional bewilderment that, while Catherine de Medici had been pressing forward the union of her daughter with Henry, she had appeared to encourage, almost openly, his infatuation for Madame de Sauve.

But despite this powerful support, and the licentious habit of the French court of that period, it was correctly supposed that Charlotte had resisted all his advances, and it was evident that this sustained attitude had roused an unrestrained passion, which had overcome both caution and pride, and the customary attitude, half indolence and half philosophy, which was the basis of the character of the young King of Navarre.

Madame de Sauve, whether from mere petulance or a stronger feeling, had absented herself from the marriage ceremony at which the Baron (who was a secretary of state) had appeared alone, saying that his wife was unwell. But a note from Catherine de Medici had reached her room, and its contents were such that she rose at once, and had appeared in the gallery a few minutes earlier.

Henry may have felt some relief amidst his disappointment when he had first observed her absence, which gave him freedom to pay attention to the lovely girl whom he was condemned, if not to love, least to treat as his wife; but now that, after having ceased to expect her, he saw her rise, as it were, from the far end of the gallery, his wife was, in a moment, forgotten, and he advanced toward her, as though oblivious of all besides. As he did so, a movement of complaisant courtesy among those around gave him a clear space, so that no one could overhear the low-voiced conversation that followed.

“Ma mie,” Henry began, speaking in French, but with something of he accent of Gascony, “you come after I had been told that you were unwell, and when hope was gone.”

“Your majesty wishes me to believe that it was a disappointment?”

“It was more than that. To me you are the noonday’s sun, and the midnight’s star. I was in darkness until you came.”

“Then I should have done you a better service to stay away, as I had first meant. He who has just won the loveliest bride in France can wish for nothing more than that the light should go, and the happiness of the darkness come.”

“You know that my happiness is in the hands of the one woman who mocks me now.”

“On the contrary, I have supposed that she has been the jest of the King of Navarre.”

“You are unjust. I did not expect to hear such cruel words from so sweet a mouth. It is not Marguerite I marry. You know that well.”

“Perhaps you will say next that you marry me!”

“You pretend that you will not see ! It is not Henry of Navarre who marries

Marguerite de Valois. It is the Reformed Religion that marries the Pope."

"But you must love her? Surely she is lovely enough!"

Henry paused. He looked at her thoughtfully, and a smile came to his lips. He said deliberately: "Baroness, you are seeking to quarrel with me without a cause. What have you offered me which should have hindered my marriage to her? You have rejected everything I have offered. I have only married her because you have driven me to despair."

"But you should be glad that I do not love you, for, if I did, I should be dead in the next hour."

"May I ask from what cause?"

"From jealousy. For in an hour you will be alone with her who is now Queen of Navarre."

"Ma mie, are you vexed at that?"

"I have not said so. I said if."

"And suppose you should have imagined something for which there is no foundation at all?"

"It is an incredible suggestion. It is absurd."

"But if I should give you proof?"

"It would be impossible."

"But it would not. There are four Henrys here, but there is only one Henry of Navarre. You admit that?"

"Of course. But —"

"And if Henry of Navarre were in your own room - for the whole night? Would you believe that he loved you then?"

Charlotte's eyes fell. It was without raising them that she asked: "You say you would do that?"

“On my honour I will.” She raised shining eyes, in which there was the promise of love, and his heart beat fast with joy. “And what,” he asked: “do you say now?”

“I shall say that your majesty loves me beyond a doubt.”

“You have a waiting-woman whom you can trust?”

“Yes. Dariole will do anything for me.”

“Then tell her that when I am King of France, as the astrologers foretell, there will be a fortune for her.”

Charlotte smiled, for the prodigality of his Gascon promises had been observed already at the court.

“What,” she asked, “do you want her to do?”

“Very little, though much for me. Your room is above mine?”

“Yes.”

“Let her wait at the door. I will give three taps.”

Madame de Sauve hesitated for a moment. She looked round. She saw that the eyes of the Queen-Mother were on her. Their glances met. She looked at Henry again, and spoke with a siren’s tone against which Ulysses himself would have found resistance vain. “Sire,” she said, “I will hold you to your promise for Dariole when you are King of France.”

CHAPTER II

OF HENRY AND MARGUERITE

THE Duke de Guise left the Louvre for his apartment, but he did not retire to rest. He changed his dress, putting on a night-cloak, and armed himself with one of those poniards, short and sharp, which were often carried at the-period, when swords would have been inconvenient to wear. But as he lifted it from the table on which it lay he observed a note which had been fastened into the sheath. He read: “M. de Guise will be wise not to return to the Louvre. But, if he must, let him take a good sword, and a coat of mail.”

“It is a strange note,” he said, “but it sounds like the advice of a friend.”

He called his valet, and was soon clad in a mail coat of steel rings so fine that it was scarcely thicker than velvet. Over this he drew a pardessus and pourpoint of grey and silver, which were his favourite colours, and with a page following him to carry his sword, he returned to the Louvre, which he reached without incident.

A deep fosse surrounded the royal chateau, over which were the windows of most of the princes who lived in the place. Marguerite’s room was on the first floor, and might have been easily reached but for the ditch which descended for thirty feet below the level of the ground. But the Duke de Guise acted as one who saw no difficulty. He had scarcely paused when a window on the ground floor opened. It was grated with heavy bars, but a hand thrust out between them dropped a silk cord, which fell at his feet.

“That you, Gillonne?” he called softly.

“Yes, monseigneur.”

“And Marguerite?”

“She is waiting.”

The page took a fine rope ladder from under his coat. It was fastened to the silk cord, and Gillonne drew it up. The prince ascended it, after buckling his sword to his side. A bar in the window was moved out of place, and he entered. A

moment later, the bar was replaced, and the window closed. The page lay down to rest on the grass of the fosse until his master should need him again.

The night had become very dark. There had been a few heavy drops of rain. As Gillonne guided the duke along the dark corridor, vivid flashes of lightning lit up the dark apartments, and increased the blackness that followed. So, and still without light, they came to a stair in the wall which ascended to the floor above. Through a secret and invisible door they entered the ante-chamber of Marguerite's apartment.

They were still in darkness, as Gillonne whispered: "Have you brought what the Queen wants?"

"Yes, but I can only give it to her."

Marguerite's voice startled him from the darkness: "Come then, for there is not a moment to waste."

As she spoke, she lifted a curtain of violet velvet, embroidered with fleurs-de-lys. He passed through it, leaving Gillonne in the darkness of the ante-chamber.

Marguerite led him on to the bedchamber. She turned to ask: "Well, are you content now?"

"Content with what?"

"Of the proof I give you that I have married a man who, even on the night of his marriage, considers me of so small account that he does not even come to thank me for what I have done, not in selecting, but in accepting him as my husband?"

There was a slight note of vexation in her voice, as she said this, to which he replied with gravity: "If you should wish it, be assured that he would be here ."

"I wish it? Henry, can you suggest that? You know the contrary. Had I such a wish, should I have asked you to come here?"

"You have asked me to come because you are anxious to destroy every evidence of the past, and because that past does not live in my memory only, but in the silver casket I have here."

“Henry, you are less like a prince than a silly boy! Why should I deny that I loved you? You can keep the casket I gave you, and all the letters but one. I asked for that because it is as dangerous for yourself as for me.”

“They are all yours, if you will.”

She took the casket, turning over a dozen letters with no more than a hasty glance. She was pale as she looked up. “Henry, have you mislaid it? It isn’t here?”

“Which letter is it you want?”

“That in which I told you to marry quickly.”

“As an excuse for your own disloyalty?”

“No. But to save your life. Did I not tell you that the king, when he learned that I had tried to break your engagement to the Infante of Portugal, had shown Angoulême two swords, and said: ‘You must kill Henry of Guise with one today, or tomorrow the other will be for you.’ Where is that letter?”

“I have it here,” said the duke, drawing it from his breast. She snatched it eagerly, glanced at it, and with an exclamation of relief held it to the flame of a candle, by which it was quickly consumed.

“Well, Marguerite, are you content now?”

“Yes. Now you are married, my brother will forgive what is past. But he would never have forgiven, had he known of the warning you had from me.”

“Then it was a proof that you loved me still?”

“Yes … and I still do. And never did I need a true friend as I need him now. Am I not a wife without a husband? A queen, and have no throne?”

The young prince shook his head sadly. His eyes expressed a great doubt.

“Henry, must I repeat it? My husband is not merely indifferent. He despises - hates. Isn’t there proof of his contempt in your presence here?”

“It is not late yet. At any moment he may be here.”

“And I tell you he will not come.”

Gillonne lifted the curtain. “Madame, the King of Navarre is on his way here.”

“Ah, I knew it!” exclaimed the duke.

“Henry, you shall learn whether I speak truth.” She seized his hand. Enter this closet, and you shall hear all.”

“Marguerite, let me go. I warn you if I hear you accepting his love I shall come out, and you will be responsible for what may occur.”

“Are you mad? Of course I will be responsible. Go in, while there is time.”

As she closed the door of the closet, Henry of Navarre entered the room. He looked round with satisfaction. He appeared to be in good spirits, and free from care.

“You have not yet retired? Perhaps you were waiting for me?” he asked.

“No. For it was only yesterday that you told me, as you had done before, that our alliance is political only, and that you would let me do as I would.”

“That is true. But there is no reason that we should not talk together. Gillonne, shut the door and leave us.”

Marguerite rose, as though disconcerted by this suggestion.

Henry smiled at her reaction. “Do you mean that you would prefer to have your women here?” he asked. “I will call them, if you will. But I should have preferred to talk to you alone.”

The King of Navarre advanced toward the closet as he spoke, and Marguerite hastily barred his way. “No,” she said, “there is no occasion to call anyone. I will hear what you have to say.”

He had learned what he wished to know. His gaze was on the cabinet as though it sought to penetrate the thick curtain, and explore its secrets. Then he looked

again at his lovely wife, from whose face all colour had gone. He said quietly: “Then let us talk for a few minutes.”

He sat down beside her. “Marguerite,” he said, “I call our marriage good, whatever others may say. I stand well with you, as you do with me. It follows that w e should be faithful allies, having been allied in the presence of God. Don’t you agree?”

“Yes.”

“I know how well trained you are to observe the pitfalls which intersect the grounds of a royal court. Now I am very young, even younger than you, and, though I have injured no one, I have many enemies. On which side am I to count one who has pledged me her faith in the sight of God?”

“Could you think —”

“I think nothing I hope, and ask… It is certain that our marriage is no more than a pretext - or else a snare.”

Marguerite started at this assertion of an idea which had not been entirely absent from her own mind. But she said nothing, and he went on: “Which of the two is it to be? Your brothers hate me. Your mother hated mine too much not to hate me also.”

“Oh, what are you saying?”

“No more than the truth, as we both know. And I wish that someone were present to hear me. I do not wish to be thought the dupe of de Mouy’s death, and my mother’s poisoning.”

“Oh, Henry —”

“Well, ma mie, what is it?” He observed her perturbation with amused eyes.

“They are things which, true or not, it is most dangerous to say.”

“Not when we are alone!”

Her distress had become evident. He saw that she wished to stop him, but he

continued indifferently.

“I was telling you that I am threatened on every side. By your three brothers - the king, and the dukes of Anjou and d’Alençon. By your mother. By the Duke of Guise. By the Duke of Mayenne. By the Cardinal of Lorraine. You may say, by everyone round me. It is an instinctive perception, which you will easily understand. And against all these threats, which must become attacks at no distant day, I can defend myself if I have your help, for you are loved by all who show their hatred of me.”

“I?”

“Yes, you are beloved by King Charles, by the Duke d’Alençon, by Queen Catherine… and you are beloved by the Duke of Guise.”

“Sir!”

“But what could be more natural? They are all brothers or relatives. To love them is well pleasing to God.”

“What do you wish me to do?”

“I will not ask you to love me. But if you will be my ally, I can face whatever may come. If you are my enemy, I am lost.”

“I would not be that.”

“But to love me - never that either?”

“Perhaps —”

“But my ally?”

“Yes. That will be sure.”

As she spoke, she stretched out her hand to the king, who kissed it gallantly, and continued to hold it, perhaps more from policy than any impulse of tenderness, as he replied: “I will take your word, and accept the alliance. They married us without our knowing each other… Without our loving… Without asking us what we wished. We owe nothing to each other as man and wife… But we ally

ourselves freely, without the constraint of others, as two true hearts who need the mutual protection such an alliance gives. Do you understand it so?”

“Yes,” she said, trying to withdraw her hand as she spoke.

“Then,” he said, with his eyes alertly upon the cabinet, “as proof of my perfect confidence in your word, I will tell you in every detail the plans that are in my mind, that we may be united in victory.” Without appearing to notice the uneasiness of his wife, he went on: “What I intend - ” but she rose quickly, and caught his arm.

“I am faint,” she said. “It must be the heat. I am overpowered.”

Indeed, she was as white and trembling as though she were about to fall to the floor.

Henry made no reply. He went to the window, and opened it, letting in the night air.

Marguerite followed him. “Silence,” she whispered faintly. “Silence, for pity’s sake,”

“But did you not say we were alone?”

“Have you not heard it said that by a tube fixed in ceiling or wall everything can be heard in the next room?”

“Well,” he replied, keeping his voice low, “you do not love me, but you are at least honourable.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“I mean that, if you had been prepared to betray me, you would have let me betray myself. I mean that you are an unfaithful wife, but may prove a faithful ally. And, as I am placed, I need fidelity more than love… When we know each other better, there will be more to be said.”

Then, disregarding her confusion and raising his voice, he said: “Well, are you breathing more freely now?”

“Yes… Oh, yes.”

“Then I will intrude no longer. I owed you my respect, and an opportunity for better acquaintance, which I now offer without reserve… Goodnight, and happy dreams!”

Marguerite raised eyes shining with gratitude. She extended her hand. “It is a bargain,” she said.

“Political alliance only, but frank and loyal?”

“Frank and loyal.

The Béarnais turned to go, and Marguerite followed him to the outer room. As the curtain fell behind them, he raised her hand to his lips. “Thanks,” he said, “Marguerite, thanks. You are a true daughter of France, and my apprehensions are gone. I have no hope of your love, but I have your friendship, and I am sure that it will not fail. I trust you, and you may trust me.”

He went hastily, and in some confusion of mind. “Who is with her,” he asked himself, “in the devil’s name? The king? Anjou? d’Alençon? de Guise? Brothers, lover or both?” He was half sorry that he had committed himself to Madame de Sauve. “But my word is pledged,” he thought, “and Dariole must be waiting now… All the same, I have an adorable wife.”

Meanwhile Marguerite faced the Duke de Guise, whose eyes showed the bitterness of his thoughts. “You are neutral today. You will be hostile within a week.”

“You have been listening.”

“What else could I do?”

“And did I behave otherwise than as Queen of Navarre?”

“Otherwise than as a mistress of the Duke of Guise.”

“Can you not see that, though I have no love for my husband, it would be impossible for me to betray him? You have married the Princess de Porcian. How much love have you for her? Would you betray her secrets to others?”

“What I see is that you are already changed. You do not love me as you did when you wrote to warn me of the king’s plot.”

“The king was strong and you were weak. Now my husband is weak and his foes are strong. You see I play a consistent part.”

“Only you pass from one camp to another.”

“It was a right I earned when I wrote to you, saving your life.”

“But when lovers part, they return all the gifts that have passed between them. I must save your life in turn, and we shall be quits.”

Bowing coldly, he left the room, and she made no effort to restrain him.

She returned to the open window, beneath which he was now rejoining his waiting page.

“What a night!” she thought. “My lover goes, and my husband does not wish to be here. How can such a marriage endure?” She called Gillonne, and prepared for her lonely bed.

CHAPTER III

THE KING IS A POET

THE days passed in festivities. Catherine de Medici seemed to be too busy with the supervision of these gaieties to have time to sleep. The pale face of the young king showed less than its usual melancholy, as though a strange excitement was in his blood.

The Huguenots, gaining assurance, began to adopt more of the silken luxuries of the court.

The king, following his declared policy of reconciling those who had been the deadliest enemies, invited Henry of Navarre and Henry of Guise to sup with him, and when the meal was over he took them into his own room to explain the mechanism of a wolf-trap of his own invention, for his delight was in hunting of every kind, and in the excitement of the chase he appeared to overcome the fits of melancholy and the evidences of ill health which were apparent at other times.

Interrupting himself in this occupation, he said suddenly: “I have not seen Admiral Coligny today, Has he been about?”

“I can reassure your majesty,” Navarre replied, “if you are anxious about his health. I was with him at six this morning, and again this evening.”

“For a newly-married man,” the king said, with a keenly questioning glance, “you were early out.”

“I had occasion to see him,” Henry replied, without appearing to notice the implication, “because I am expecting some of my gentlemen to arrive in Paris, and I thought I should hear of them from him.”

“More gentlemen! You had eight hundred here on the day of your wedding, and more arrive every day. You do not propose the invasion of Paris?”

The king smiled as he spoke, though with unsmiling eyes, for he had seen the frown on the face of the Duke of Guise.

“Sire,” the Béarnais replied quietly, “there is a tale of a Flanders war. I have summoned such of my gentlemen as could be useful to you at such a time.”

“Then the more the better,” the king replied, with the same cold smile. “I trust they are valiant men?”

“I would not say they are equal to those of your majesty, or of the Duke of Guise, but they are men who will do their best.”

“There are many?”

“Perhaps ten or twelve.”

“Perhaps I should know them, if they were named.”

“I could not recall all. One is De La Mole, whom Teligny has recommended with particular praise.”

“You mean Serac de la Mole? Is he not a Provençal?”

“Yes. There are Huguenots even in Provence.”

“And I,” the Duke of Guise added, in a tone the sarcasm of which was not hard to hear, “can recruit Catholics in Piedmont.”

“I care not which they are, if they are brave men,” the king said, with an indifference in his voice at which even the duke was surprised.

“Your majesty’s thoughts are on the coming war.” It was Coligny who spoke. He had entered unannounced, as he was permitted to do, by the special favour of Charles.

The young king opened his arms to him, with a gesture of affection such as he seldom showed to any but those of his own family. “We speak of battles and brave men, and he comes,” he said. “It is as the magnet attracts the iron. My father, Navarre and my cousin Guise were talking of reinforcements to make us more ready for war.”

“And I am come to tell you that they are here.”

“You have news?” asked the Béarnais.

“Yes. In particular, M. de la Mole, of whom you enquired, was at Orleans yesterday, and may he here by tomorrow.”

“You must be a wizard, M. l’Admiral,” the Duke of Guise said smoothly, but with venom behind the words, “to know what happens so far away. I would give much to know what has happened at Orleans, even though it were staler news.”

They all knew what he meant by that. It was at Orleans that his father had died. But the admiral gave no sign that he understood. “My courier,” he replied, “by changing post horses, can cover thirty leagues in a day. M. de la Mole travels no more than ten. There is no magic in that.”

The king, watching them, interposed.

“My father misses nothing,” he said, “being wise in war, and it is with him that I must confer. Good councillors make good kings… .Gentlemen, we would be alone.”

At this word, the two young men rose and withdrew together, followed by the admiral’s uneasy eyes. Charles laid an affectionate hand on his arm. “Fear nothing, my father. I have said that there shall be peace, and they must obey. You must know that I am really king, and the queen-mother will rule no more.”

“The Queen Catherine —”

“Is too quarrelsome. To her, peace is impossible. As you know, the Italian Catholics are bent on the extermination of their opponents. But I look at it differently. I wish to unite all my subjects.” He lowered his voice, as though to impress Coligny with the confidential nature of what he said, though they were in his most private room. “I will tell you this. I wish to protect those of the Reformed Faith. The others are too licentious. I can tolerate neither their quarrels nor their amours. I distrust all but my new friends. One is ambitious beyond restraint; another would betray his best friend for a cask of wine; another lives for his dogs. De Retz is Spanish. The Guises are of Lorraine.

“Who is there who thinks first of France except ourselves, and my new brother Navarre? And I am king. I am held here. I cannot lead my troops in the field. Navarre is too young. And, like his father, he is too easily drawn by a woman’s

eyes. There is only you. I would have your advice beside me, and at the same time have you in command in the field. If you counsel me, who will command? If you command, who will advise?”

“Sire, we must conquer first, and the time for counsel will follow.”

“You are right, as always. On Monday you shall set out for Flanders, and I will go to Amboise.”

“Your majesty leaves Paris?”

“Yes. I was not born for bustle and fetes. I am not one for action. I prefer dreams. I am poet rather than king… There are papers that you should have. A plan of campaign has been drawn up. And there is the correspondence with Philip of Spain. You should see that. They shall be ready for you in the morning.”

“Sire, at what hour?”

“At ten o’clock. I may not be here. I may be making verses. Who knows? But the papers will be ready for you. They will be in this portfolio, which you cannot mistake, and which you can take away.”

He indicated a portfolio of red morocco. He parted with the admiral with affectionate demonstrations. Coligny, a man more than twice his age, for all his shrewdness, did not doubt his sincerity.

Left alone, Charles stood still until the sound of the retreating footsteps had ceased, and then turned aside to enter his armoury - the room he loved most of all, where his favourite weapons were round him. That very morning a splendid arquebus had been delivered with a verse of his own composition inscribed upon it:

“Pour maintenir la foy

Je suis belle et fidele,

Aux enemis du Roi Je suis belle et crulle.”

Now he closed the door by which he had entered, crossed the room, and drew a

tapestry aside which disclosed a passage into a further apartment.

Noiselessly on a thick carpet he went on to a further chamber The woman who knelt at prayer did not hear him. She was of about thirty-five, and of a masculine beauty well set off by her costume, which was that of the peasants of Caux. On the velvet of the carved oak prie-dieu, a bible lay before her, for she was of the Reformed Religion.

“Madelini,” said the king.

She turned her head, and rose with a smile.

“Yes, my son.”

“Is he here, nurse?”

“He has been waiting for half an hour.”

“Send him in to me.”

When she had gone, the king returned to the armoury. He went behind a table on which were scattered arms of various kinds. A large greyhound, which seldom left him, stood at his side.

The tapestry was lifted next moment, and a man of about forty entered. His eyes were treacherous, his cheekbones prominent, his nose was a screech-owl’s beak. He strove to face the king with look of proper respect, but his face was livid with fear.

Charles looked at him in silence, laying his hand as he did so on the butt of a pistol of a new make, which, in place of the usual match, could be discharged by a flint and a revolving wheel. He began to whistle, with the most perfect accuracy, a favourite hunting air. Till it was concluded, he kept his eyes steadily on the man, who grew more evidently troubled before his gaze.

“You are Maurevel?”

“Yes, sire.”

“Captain of the musqueteers?”

“Yes, sire.”

“You know” - with slow emphasis - “that I love all my subjects alike?”

The man stammered: “Your majesty is the father of your people.”

“Of both Huguenots and Catholics?”

The man made no reply, but his agitation increased.

“Hating the Huguenots as you do, you are annoyed when I say that?”

Maurevel fell on his knees.

“Sire, believe —”

“I believe” - and as he spoke his cold glance changed to one of threatening malignity - “that at Moncontour you would have killed the admiral who has just left me, had you not missed your aim. I believe that you then entered the army of my brother, the Duke of Anjou, enlisting in the company of M. de Mouy de St. Phale, a brave gentleman from Picardy.”

“Oh, sire —”

“He was a brave soldier,” continued Charles, whose expression was now one of ferocious and gratified cruelty, “who treated you as a son. He fed you - lodged you - clothed you.”

The wretched man uttered a groan of despair.

“You called him father, and there was a tender friendship between you and the young de Mouy, his son.”

Maurevel grovelled lower. The king stood as still as a statue. Only his lips moved.

“One day the Sieur de Mouy let his whip fall, and dismounted to pick it up. You shot him in the back, and escaped on the horse he had given you. Is not that your own story of what occurred?… And, by the way, had you slain the admiral, was not the Duke of Guise to have paid you ten thousand crowns?”

The man remained dumb beneath these accusations, for they were precisely true. The king began to whistle again.

When he had concluded the tune, he said: “Murderer, do you know that I have a great fancy that you shall hang?”

“Sire —”

“The young de Mouy asked me yesterday for your life. It was no more than a just request.”

“Sire, my life is yours, but —”

“So it is, and I would not say it is worth a sou.”

“But sire - is there no way to atone?”

“I know of none. Yet - were I in your place - as, thank God, I am not —”

“Sire, were you in my place?”

“I think I could find a way.”

Maurevel raised himself on one hand and knee, fixing his eyes on the king’s face.

“I am fond of de Mouy,” Charles went on, “but I am also fond of my cousin of Guise. It would be awkward if he should ask me to spare one whom the other would have me hang. But de Mouy, although a brave gentleman, cannot be compared with a prince of Lorraine. I think I should let the man go.”

Maurevel rose slowly, as one whose life was saved after a great fear.

“Listen,” the king said, “since it is so important to you to gain his favour. Listen to what he said to me last night. ‘Every morning,’ he said, ‘my worst enemy passes down the Rue St. Germain. I see him through the barred window of a room which belonged to my old preceptor, the Canon Pierre Pile, and I pray the devil to open the earth and swallow him.’ Now, Maurevel, if you were the devil, would not the duke be glad?”

“But sire, I cannot open the earth.”

“You could for de Mouy… Have you that pistol still?”

“Sire, I am a better shot with an arquebus.” The man was quite at ease now.

“M. de Guise will not care how it be done.”

“But sire, I must have one on which I can rely, for it will be a long shot.”

“I have ten in this room, with any of which I can hit a crown-piece at fifty paces. Will you try one… No, not that. Any other you will. That is for a hunt of my own, which I hope may be at no distant day.”

Maurevel chose his weapon. “Who,” he asked, “is this enemy of M. de Guise?”

The king shrugged his shoulders. “How should I know? There are questions which are not asked. It is for those who would avoid hanging to guess.”

“But —”

“I have told you he passed the Canon’s house at ten o’clock.”

“Sire, so many pass.”

“Tomorrow he may carry a red leather portfolio under his arm… You still have the horse on which you fled after killing M. de Mouy?”

“Sire, my horse is the swiftest in France.”

“That is nothing to me. But I let you know there is a back door.”

“Thanks, sire. Pray heaven for me.”

“It is to the devil that you should pray, if you would be saved from the rope…

“And remember, Maurevel, if I do not hear of you in the right way, there is still an oubliette at the Louvre.”

And having said that, Charles began again, with extreme precision, to whistle his favourite air.

CHAPTER IV

THE EVE OF ST. BARTHOLOMEW

M DE la Mole rode into Paris by St. Marcel's gate on the evening of the 24th of August, 1572. Disregarding the signs of many less central hostelries, he rode into the heart of the city, crossed the bridge of Notre Dame, turned along the quays, and came to the end of the Rue de L'Arbre-Sec.

It seemed that he was pleased by the name, for he turned up it and paused beneath the sign of La belle Etoile.

It was a pleasing sign, representing a fowl roasting against a black sky, while a man in a red cloak held out hands and purse towards it.

As he looked up in admiration of its ingenuity and anticipation of that which it promised, another gentleman, who had approached from the opposite end of the street, also drew his rein to observe it.

De la Mole, whose name, at least, we already know, rode a white horse, and his doublet was black, and ornamented with jet. His cloak was violet velvet: his boots black leather. The hilts of sword and dagger were of steel, very finely worked.

His age was not more than twenty-five. He was blue-eyed, of dark complexion, with a small moustache shading a beautifully cut mouth. When he smiled, his whole face would light up with an expression which was both sweet and sad.

The other traveller was of a widely different type. Reddish-brown hair was profuse under his slouched hat. He had large grey eyes which would light up so fiercely on provocation as to appear black. His complexion was fair: his moustache tawny over large white teeth. His white skin and fine form gave him an appearance at which most ladies would look for a second time.

"Mordi! Monsieur," he said, with the accent of Piedmont, "we are close to the Louvre, are we not? Anyway, I think your choice is the same as mine, which is an honour to me."

“Monsieur, we are close to the Louvre, but I am undecided as to this inn.”

“It has a good sign.”

“Which I mistrust. For Paris is full of rogues.”

“Mordi! What do I care? The host shall give me a chicken as good as that, or he shall roast on his own spit.”

“You have decided me,” said the Provencal. “If you will lead the way —”

“Impossible, Monsieur. I am no more than your humble servant, the Count Annibal de Coconnas.”

“And I am no more than the Count Joseph Boniface de Lerac de la Mole, equally at your service.”

“Then let us take arms, and go in together.”

The two young men dismounted and threw their bridles to the waiting ostler. The host stood at the door of the inn but did not observe them, being engaged in talk with a tall man who was wrapped in a sad coloured cloak, like an owl buried in its feathers.

Coconnas impatiently touched his sleeve, at which he closed the conversation abruptly with: “Well, let me know the hour… Pardon, gentlemen, I did not see you.”

“Mordi! Then you should have done so. And you may say count, not gentlemen, when you speak to either of us.”

“Well, what is your wish, monsieur le comte?”

“We wish to sup and sleep here tonight.”

“I am sorry, but I have only one room.”

“Then,” said de la Mole, who had left the conversation to Coconnas to this point, “all is well; for I will find lodging elsewhere.”

“Then I will stop here,” said Coconnas, “for my horse is tired.”

“Ah! that is different,” said the host coolly, “for then I cannot lodge you at all.”

“Mordi! Here’s a fine fellow. What did you say a moment ago?”

“Since you take that tone, I will give you a plain answer. I would prefer not to lodge you at all.”

Coconnas was now pale with anger. “Then,” he said, “you will tell me why.”

“Because you have no servants. I should have one master’s room full, and two others empty, which I might then be unable to let.”

“M. de la Mole, do you not think we should lay a whip on his back?”

The host retreated a step or two at this suggestion, but did not appear greatly perturbed.

“I can see,” he said, “that you are from the country. Killing innkeepers is out of fashion in Paris now. It is the great who are treated thus. My neighbours would see who would be thrashed, if you should make a disturbance here.”

“Mordi!” Coconnas cried angrily, “Shall he mock us thus?”

“Gregoire, fetch my arquebus,” the host said as quietly as though he had said: “Fetch these gentlemen a chair.”

Coconnas had his sword out. “Will you not rouse yourself, M. de la Mole?”

“No. For while we get heated our supper cools.”

“What, you think —”

“I think M. de la belle Etoile is right, only that he does not know how a gentleman should be addressed. He should have said: ‘Gentlemen, come in. But I must charge you each so much for a servant’s room’.”

“Saying this, de la Mole pushed his way past the host, and, followed by Coconnas, entered the inn.

“Patience, my friend,” he said. “Have you thought that all Paris must be full of gentlemen who have come to the marriage of the King of Navarre? Suppose that

we might have trouble in finding another room?”

“Well, you are one who can keep cool! But let him beware. If the meat be not good, or the bed hard —”

But the landlord, who was now sharpening his knife, answered easily: “You need not fear for that. You have come to a land of plenty for those who pay.” And then, in a lower tone, he muttered to himself: “These will be two Huguenots. How insolent they have grown since the Béarnais has been married to our Princess. And how strange it will be if I have two of them in my own house tonight!”

The last words were said with a sinister smile which it may have been fortunate for the peace of mind of those whom it concerned that they did not see.

“While our room is being prepared, M. de la Mole, may I ask do you find that Paris has the appearance of a gay city?”

“Ma foi! no. All the Parisians I have seen have a black look, as though fearing a storm, and it is true that there is a dark sky, and a heavy air.”

“You will be looking for the Louvre?”

“Yes. And you?”

“Yes. So let us do so together.”

“It is getting late.”

“That makes no difference to me. My orders do not allow delay. They said: You will come to Paris at once, and communicate immediately with the Duke de Guise.”

“But I think that rascal is listening,” he added, without lowering his voice, and with an angry look at the landlord, who hovered near.

“Gentlemen, so I was. But it was to do you any service I may. I heard the name of the great duke.”

“It is magical indeed, if it can make you polite. What is your name?”

“La Hurière.”

“Well, La Hurière, do you think my arm to be lighter than that of the Duke of Guise?”

“It may not be lighter, but it is not so long… Besides, the great Henry is the idol of all Parisians.”

“Which Henry?” asked La Mole.

“There is only one.”

“On the contrary there are at least three. There is Henry of

Navarre, of whom I must insist that you speak no ill. And Henry of Condé is a good name.”

“I do not know them.”

“But I do, and as I am accredited to the King of Navarre, I must require that he be spoken of with respect.”

The landlord continued to direct his talk to Coconnas: “You will see the great Duke of Guise. It is for - for the fête, he has called you here?”

“For all the fêtes, I suppose. I hear that Paris has a gay time.”

“There will be a gayer to come.”

La Mole interposed again: “If you do not know the King of Navarre, I may still suppose that Admiral Coligny is one of whom you have heard? As I have letters for him, I should be glad to know where he lives.”

“He did live in the Rue de Bethisy,” the man replied, with a satisfaction he made no effort to hide.

“He did live? You mean he has left?”

“Yes - this world, at a good guess.”

“What!” the two gentlemen exclaimed together. “Is the admiral dead?”

“You say you are a friend of M. de Guise, M. de Coconnas, and you did not know?”

“Know what?”

“That the admiral was shot at the day before yesterday.”

“You mean he was killed?” La Mole asked.

“No. His arm was broken, and he lost two fingers, but it is hoped that the balls were poisoned.”

“Hoped, you scoundrel?”

The host winked at Coconnas. “Believed, I should have said. It was a slip of the tongue.”

“I must go at once to the Louvre,” said La Mole.

“And I,” Coconnas echoed.

“But your supper, gentlemen?”

“I shall probably sup with the King of Navarre.”

“And I with the Duke of Guise.”

“And I,” said the host to himself, as they went out, “shall sharpen my partisan.”

CHAPTER V

AT THE LOUVRE

AS the two young men approached the Royal Palace, they saw that it was strongly guarded, and realised that access might not be easy.

But Coconnas, who was of a more confident nature than his companion, and had more reason for expecting a good reception, was undaunted by the gloom of the great building, whose narrow windows and pointed belfries were now being lost in the obscurity of a clouded night. He remembered that he had found the name of the Duke of Guise to act as talisman on all who heard it, and he approached the drawbridge boldly, to try it upon the sentinel there.

It appeared to have its usual effect upon the soldier, who no less required the countersign, which Coconnas could not give.

“Then,” he said, “you must stand back.”

But a gentleman who was standing by, in conversation with the officer of the guard, turned to observe him.

“What,” he asked, “do you want with the Duke of Guise?”

“I want to see him.”

“That is impossible. He is with the king.”

“But I have a letter for him.”

“Who are you?”

“The Count Annibal de Coconnas.”

“Will you give me the letter?”

“I do not know who you are.”

“I am M. de Besme.”

He appealed to the sentinel for confirmation.

“I will gladly give it to M. de Besme.”

“I also have a letter,” said La Mole. “Will you kindly do the same service for me as for my friend?”

“And who are you?”

“The Count Lerac de la Mole.”

“From where do you come?”

“From Provence.”

“Your letter is also for the Duke of Guise?”

“No. It is for the King of Navarre.”

“I am not in his service,” de Besme answered coldly. Asking Coconnas to follow him, he led the way into the Louvre, leaving La Mole standing without.

It was at this moment that about a hundred cavaliers came crowding out of the Louvre.

“Here,” he heard it said, “are De Mouy and his Huguenots. See in what high spirits they are! The king must have promised them the execution of the admiral’s assailant. It was the same man who killed De Mouy’s father. They will have two birds with one stone.”

La Mole interposed. “That is really de Mouy?”

“Surely.”

La Mole approached him. “May I speak with you for a moment?”

“You are - ?”

“The Count Lerac de la Mole.”

The two young men bowed to one another.

“In what way can I serve you?”

“I am seeking entrance to the Louvre. I wish to see the King of Navarre.”

“You can enter the Louvre. I cannot say that you will be able to see the king at this hour. But I will guide you to his rooms, and you can make your enquiries there.”

Leaving his companions, De Mouy led La Mole over the drawbridge, past the sentinel, and through the corridors of the Louvre, until they reached the door of the apartment of the King of Navarre. Here he saluted, and left him.

La Mole looked round a deserted ante room. As he hesitated, a door opened, and two pages appeared, lighting the way for a lady young, beautiful, and of regal aspect.

She stopped at the sight of La Mole, and for a long moment the two looked at each other in silence.

“What is it you wish?” she said, and the sweetness of her voice added to the charm by which he was already conquered.

“Oh, madame, pardon me,” he answered, scarcely aware of his own words. “I seek the King of Navarre.”

“Is it something you cannot say to the queen?”

“But surely. If I could gain audience.”

“You have it now.”

La Mole was confused. “Oh, madame —”

“You should speak quickly. The queen-mother is waiting for me.”

“Then it must be left for another time. I can think of nothing now but the admiration which fills my mind.”

Marguerite was pleased by a compliment so perfect and so sincere. She smiled on a young man whose aspect she could approve.

“Recover yourself. I will wait.”

“Pardon me that I did not salute you with the respect which is your due.”

“You took me for one of my ladies?”

“Rather for Diana of Poictiers, whose ghost is known to walk the corridors of the Louvre.”

“You will make your fortune at court! You do not need any letter for that. But you can give it to me. I will give it to the King of Navarre.”

As he handed it to her, she gave it a glance, and asked: “Your name is M. de la Mole?”

“Yes, madame. Can I hope that it is known to you?”

“I have heard it from the King of Navarre, and from my brother the Duke d’Alençon. I knew that you were expected. Now you can go below, and wait till you are sent for. A page will guide you.”

Saying this, she slipped the letter into her corsage, and disappeared like a dream.

The page led him to a gallery on a lower floor, which was deserted except for one gentleman who was pacing its further end. As he turned, and they approached one another, he exclaimed: “Mordi! Here is M. de la Mole again. Have you had your audience with the King of Navarre?”

“No. Have you seen M. de Guise?”

“No. I was told to wait here. We seem inseperables. We shall be invited next to some grand supper, and seated together. Are you hungry?”

As he spoke, M. de Besme entered, and motioned Coconnas to follow him. Outside the room, he looked cautiously round, and then asked in a low voice: “M. Coconnas, where are you lodging?”

“At the Belle Etoile.”

“Return there, and tonight, when you hear the tocsin, come here, with a white

cross in your hat. The password will be Guise."

It was not much later that a page had come to La Mole with a message that the King of Navarre would send for him at a later hour, or else would receive him in the morning, when the countersign of Navarre would secure his admission.

He therefore returned to the Belle Etoile, where his first sight was of Coconnas seated before a large omelette.

Coconnas greeted him with a laugh. "I see you no more supped with the King of Navarre than I with the Duke of Guise. Are you hungry now?… Then sit down. This omelette is enough for both… Did I not say we are inseparable? Do you sleep here?"

"I don't know."

"Then I prophesy that we shall sleep together."

CHAPTER VI

CATHERINE DE MEDICI SEES THE KING

AT fifty-three, Catherine de Medici, widow of Henry II, and mother of the present king, still preserved much of her beauty, thanks in part to the ministrations of her perfumier, René, who was also reputed to be her private poisoner.

Now she sat alone, dressed in her habitual mourning, an open prayer-book before her, and a smile on her lips at her own thoughts, which were disturbed by the young Duke of Guise, who entered with little ceremony, and a downcast countenance. As the tapestry fell behind him he said: “It goes ill.”

“How is that?”

“The king is still infatuated by those accursed Huguenots. If we await his signal, we may wait for ever.”

“What has happened?” she asked, with undisturbed tranquillity.

“He has just told me that I am naturally suspected of instigating the assault on the admiral - his father, he called him! - and that I must defend myself as I can. After that, he would say no more. He must feed his dogs!… So I came to you.”

“You did rightly.”

“And what are we to do now?”

“Make another attempt.”

“Who shall do that?”

“Is the king alone?”

“Tavannes is with him.”

“Follow me, but not at once.”

Catherine rose, and went to the king’s room. His favourite greyhounds were there, stretched on Turkey carpet and velvet cushions, and on perches along the wall were two or three falcons, and a small pied hawk which he used for killing the little birds which built in the palace grounds.

On her way, the queen-mother had composed her face to an expression of agony and resignation, and, as she approached him from behind, she spoke in a shaking voice, so cleverly managed that the king started. “My son - ” she said.

He turned abruptly. “What is it, madame?”

“I would ask you leave to retire to one of my châteaux - no matter which, so that it will be furthest from Paris.”

“And why, madame?” he replied fixing on his mother eyes that, on occasion, could be at once glassy and penetrating.

“Because each day I am subjected to further insults from men of the new faith. Because today I hear that they have threatened you, even here in your own palace. I do not wish to be present where such things are allowed to happen.”

“But, mother,” he said, in a tone of sincerity, “has there not been an attempt to kill their admiral? Has not the good de Mouy died at the hands of a despicable assassin? Mort de ma vie! Shall there not be justice for all?”

“Oh, be easy for that, my son! Even should you refuse it, they will take it in their own way. Today on M. de Guise, tomorrow upon myself, and on you on the next day.”

“Oh, madame!” Charles answered, allowing himself the first accent of doubt, “do you really believe that?”

“Oh, my son!” Catherine exclaimed, speaking now with unrestrained violence, “do you not see that it is no longer a question of Catholic and Protestant, but whether you or Navarre shall sit on the throne of France?”

“I think you exaggerate when you say that.”

“So what would your wisdom do?”

“I would wait, wait and watch. There is always wisdom in that.”

“You may do as you will, but it is a time of action for me.”

Catherine made a motion of retirement, but stayed at a gesture from the king.

“Now, but really, mother,” he said, “what is to be done? I wish to be just, and to give satisfaction to all my subjects.”

“Count,” Catherine said to Tavannes, who had been caressing the pied hawk, while he listened silently, “tell His Majesty what you would do.”

“Sire, may I ask what you do in the hunt if you are assailed by a wounded boar?”

“I meet him with a firm foot and a steady hand, till my sword point is on his throat.”

“To secure your safety?”

“Yes… And for the pleasure it gives.” As Charles said this added, “the Huguenots are my subjects, they are not swine.”

“Then,” Catherine said, “they will do as the boar will do if the sword slip.”

“Pah, mother! Will you say I am in danger from them?”

“But have you not seen M. Mouy and his supporters today?” ‘

“Yes. But for what did he ask which is not just? The death of the man who shot Coligny, and who was his father’s murderer also. Shall I not grant him that, as a just king?”

Even Catherine’s subtlety was baffled by this attitude. She knew her son too well to accept his words as of a simple sincerity, but she was unable even to guess what he aimed to do. Her vexation was plain, as she replied: “Very well, sire. Your majesty is under direct protection of God, who gives you wisdom and power. You will take no ill. But a poor woman, whom God forsakes for her sins, may fear and flee. I will say no more.”

She withdrew, with an appearance of tears, but made a sign, which she supposed

Charles did not see, to the Duke of Guise, who entered as she went out, to make a final effort.

As she retired, Charles started to whistle his favourite hunting air, and it was not till its conclusion that he appeared to notice Guise, and said affably: “Now has not my mother got a truly royal spirit? It is a cool proposal to kill some dozens of Huguenots because they ask for a murderer’s death!”

“Some dozens, sire?”

“So I understand her to mean. Now if someone should come to me, and say: “Sire, I will kill off all your enemies, so that none should remain to reproach you with what is done - why then, I do not say —”

“Why then, sire?”

The king turned carelessly away. “Tavanne,” he said, “put Margot back on her perch. That she has my sister’s name is no reason that all the world should caress her.”

Guise persisted: “But, sire, if anyone should say that you should be delivered from all your enemies?”

“A miracle! What friendly saint would aid me to that?”

“Today is the 24th. It would be by St. Bartholomew’s aid.”

“The worthy saint who was skinned alive?”

“All the better. The more he suffered, the more brightly the desire for vengeance should burn in his heart.”

“So it is you, cousin, with that pretty gold-hilted sword, by whom ten thousand Huguenots will be slain?”

“Sire, I have eleven hundred gentlemen, and the Swiss guard. There are the light horse. There are your majesty’s own guards. The citizens are on our side. We should be twenty to one.”

“Then, cousin, since you are so strong, why do you come pestering me? You can

act yourself, if you will act - ” and the king’s laughter, as it rang out in the room, had a sinister, scarcely human sound. He turned away to caress his dogs.

As he did so, the tapestry moved aside. Catherine appeared. She spoke to Guise in an urgent whisper: “Go on. Press him, and he will yield.”

She withdrew without Charles having appeared to observe her.

“But if I act,” Guise said, “I must know that your majesty will approve.”

“Really, cousin, it is as though you put the knife to my throat! But I refuse to be coerced in this way. Am I not the king?”

“No, sire. Not on a safe throne. But by tomorrow you may be, if you will.”

“What can you mean by that? Would you kill Navarre and Condé in my own palace?…” His voice fell to an almost inaudible mutter as he went on; “Even had it been outside the walls. There would be some difference in that!”

“Sire, they are both going out tonight.”

Charles turned to Tavannes: “You are annoying Actaeon,” he said. “Here, boy, here.” And with the greyhound bounding beside him he left the room.

The two men who remained looked at one another in doubt. Had they the king’s consent? It was hard to say.

Meanwhile Catherine had returned to her own apartment, where she had dismissed her women. Only Marguerite remained, seated, deep in thought, upon a coffer near the open window.

Catherine, watching her closely, seemed more than once on the point of speech, but remained silent until the tapestry was lifted aside, and Henry of Navarre entered the room.

“You here, my son?” exclaimed Catherine, starting slightly. “Do you sup in the Louvre tonight?”

“No, madame. I am going into the city tonight, with Messieurs d’Alençon and de Condé. I thought I should have found them here.”

“Ah, you men have freedom to go where you will! Are they not privileged, Margot, to have such liberty?”

Margot turned her head, as though roused from her sombre thoughts. “Liberty,” she said, “is a glorious thing.”

Henry smiled on his wife: “Madame, do I restrict yours?”

“No. I have no complaint for myself. It is for all women I speak.”

“Who is that?” Catherine asked sharply, for the tapestry stirred again, and, next moment, Madame de Sauve showed her lovely head.

“Madame, René, whom you sent for, is here.”

Catherine’s eyes were on Henry, whose face had flushed and then paled at the name of the man who, he did not doubt, had supplied the poison from which his mother had died, but he said nothing, and turned away to look out of the window, conscious that his face betrayed more than he would often allow it to do.

A little greyhound, which he had been caressing, growled, as though conscious of a changed atmosphere in the room.

René entered the room, and almost at the same moment another, who had no need to be announced - Marguerite’s eldest sister, the Duchess of Lorraine. She was pale and trembling as she entered, and appeared to wish to avoid her mother’s attention as she seated herself at her sister’s side.

At this instant, Catherine, who had been examining a box René had brought, raised her eyes, “Well, Henry,” she said, “you can go to amuse yourself in the city and” (to Marguerite) “you had better go to your own room.”

Claude, who had Marguerite’s hand in hers, whispered hurriedly: “Don’t go. Don’t go out. Stay here. You saved Henry of Guise, and he wishes to save you now.”

“Claude, what are you saying?” Catherine asked sharply.

“Nothing, mother.”

“What were you whispering?”

“Only a message from the Duchess of Nevers.”

“And where is she?”

“With M. de Guise.”

“Come here, Claude.”

Claude rose and crossed the room to her mother’s side.

Catherine’s fingers closed on her wrist till she could have screamed with pain. “Foolish girl, what did you say?” Without answering, she burst into tears.

Meanwhile Henry had approached his wife, as though to take formal leave. “Madame, may I kiss your hand?” And then, as he stooped toward it, he whispered: “What did she say?”

“Not to go out… Nor must you, therefore, in Heaven’s name.”

She raised her voice to say: “I have a letter for you here from M. de la Mole,”

“Thanks,” he said, taking it. With no sign of his thoughts, but having himself now under full control, he turned away from his wife, and placed his hand on the shoulder of the Florentine.

“Well, Master René,” he said, “how is business with you?”

“Fairly good, monseigneur, fairly good,” the poisoner replied.

“I should think it must be. Do you not supply half the crowned heads in Europe?”

“Except the King of Navarre,” the man answered impudently.

“Ventre-saint-gris, Master René, you are right. And yet my mother recommended you to me. You must come to me tomorrow, and bring the best perfumes you have.”

It was at this point that the sobs of the Duchess of Lorraine could be heard

through the room, but Henry did not appear to notice.

Marguerite went to her side. “Dearest, what is it?”

“It is nothing,” their mother replied, interposing between them. “We know she has these nervous attacks… Margot, did I not direct you to retire some minutes ago?”

Marguerite controlled her voice with difficulty, as she replied with differential formality: “Excuse me, madame. I wish your majesty a good night.”

“That is what I hope it may be… Goodnight… Goodnight.”

Henry and Marguerite were both leaving the room, but not together. She looked in vain for a glance or word from the husband she had warned, but he took no more notice of her.

“Good evening, madame,” he replied politely to Catherine, and then: “Well, Phoebe, what is it now?”

“Phoebe,” Catherine called angrily to the little greyhound, “come here to me.”

“Yes. Call her. She will not let me go out.”

The queen-mother rose, and took the little dog by the collar, and Henry went out smiling, and with the certainty that he was in deadly peril. He heard the little dog break into a long mournful howl.

CHAPTER VII

MASSACRE

COCONNAS pushed his chair back from the table, and stretched his legs;

“I can eat no more, and I cannot go to bed, for I may be required at the Louvre. Do you play cards?”

“So I do. But I have little to lose. A hundred golden crowns in my valise is the whole fortune I have.”

“A hundred crowns! And you complain! Mordi! I have only six.”

“Yet I saw you draw from your pocket a bursting purse.”

“Ah! But that is to settle an old debt which must be repaid to a friend of my father, who, I believe, is somewhat like yourself of the Huguenot brand. There are a hundred rose-nobles here,” he added, slapping his pocket, “but they are Master Mercandon’s rather than mine.”

“Then how can you afford to play?”

“Why, is not that the reason I must? Besides, I have an idea. Have we not both come to Paris on similar business, each having a strong patron, in whom we trust? Let us play first for money, and then for the first favour that either of us shall gain, be it from court or mistress.”

La Mole smiled, but showed no disposition to accept a gamble of such a kind. “Why,” he said, “it is an ingenious thought, but the first favour that would be offered to either might be a lifetime’s affair. It is too much to risk on the way that a die may fall. Let us play till your six crowns be lost or doubled, and if we go beyond that, you are a gentleman, and your word is good.”

“So it is,” Coconnas replied, “especially that of one who has credit at court. By which argument you would not have risked too much had you accepted the offer I made.”

“Which there was another reason against. For being on the part of Navarre, I could not have taken a favour from Guise.”

La Huriére at this time was polishing an old casque. He had seated himself behind La Mole, near enough to hear the conversation, and in such a position that he could make signs to Coconnas which La Mole could not see.

Now he crossed himself, muttering: “Ah, the Huguenot! Did I not smell him out?”

Coconnas shuffled the cards. “You are of the new religion?”

“Why, so I am,” La Mole answered, smiling. “Have you anything against us?”

“I hate the New Faith; but I do not therefore hate all who profess it. - And you are in fashion now.”

“As the attempt to kill the admiral shows. But let us play.”

“So we will. If I lose a hundred crowns, I may pay you tomorrow. It is not for nothing that I am to be received by the Duke of Guise during the night.”

“It is odd that we should both have appointments in the Louvre for this night. You with Guise and I with Navarre.”

“Have you the countersign?”

“Yes.”

“And a rallying sign?”

“No. What is that?”

Coconnas did not reply, for the host had made him a most urgent gesture for silence. He stopped abruptly, and La Mole looked up in surprise. But not having seen what occurred, he let it pass. “Had you not better,” he said, “give more regard to the game? You have lost three crowns, which may soon be six.”

“Mordi! That is true. It is almost making me of a mind to turn Huguenot. I have always heard that they are lucky at cards.”

“Do, and you would be well received. It is a path which is simple and pure and __”

“And, you will say, it is in fashion. And it enables you to hold all the aces. For I have watched that you do not cheat. Unless it is the religion, what can it be?”

“Now you owe me six crowns more,” La Mole said quietly.

“How you tempt me!”

“But you would displease many, including our host… What is he doing now?”

The man had left his seat to talk to one who had appeared at the door.

“The devil!” exclaimed Coconnas, who was in the better position to see. “It is that nightbird with whom he was talking when we arrived. And how earnest they are!”

La Hurière came hurriedly back to his seat. He leaned forward to whisper: “Silence, on your life. And get rid of your friend.”

Coconnas rose. “You must excuse me. I lose too much. I will play no more for tonight.”

“As you please. And I shall not be sorry to rest. Host, if a messenger should come from the king of Navarre, will you wake me? I shall be ready dressed to go out at once.”

“And so shall I,” Coconnas replied, “and, to save him, I will get the sign ready now. Master Hurière, some white paper and scissors!”

La Mole went up the staircase, and the host followed him.

The stranger took Coconnas by the arm. “Sir,” he said, “you were near to death a moment ago. Rather than you should have divulged that secret, I would have shot you without regret.”

“And who are you?”

“Have you heard of Maurevel?”

“The man who shot at the admiral?”

“And who killed de Mouy.”

“Yes.”

“I am he.”

“Oh, you are?”

The conversation was interrupted by the return of the host. They heard him bolt a door in the corridor. He sat down with them. “Maurevel,” he said, “all is close. We can talk now.”

Maurevel turned to Coconnas. “You are a good Catholic?”

“I believe so.”

“You are devoted to King and Faith?”

“Yes.”

“Will you join us?”

“For what?”

“You must not ask, but obey.”

“I have an appointment already. At midnight, at the Louvre.”

“So have we.”

“Mine is with M. de Guise.”

“So are ours.”

“But I have a private password.”

“So have we.”

“And a sign of recognition?”

Maurevel drew out a handful of white crosses. He handed two to his companions, and fixed one on his hat. Le Hurière fastened one on his helmet.

“Then,” said Coconnas, “the appointment, the countersign, and the rallying mark were not for me only, but for everyone.”

“For all faithful Catholics.”

“There is a fête at the Louvre, from which Huguenots are excluded?”

“Yes. There is a banquet of royal kind. But the Huguenots will not be shut out! We are inviting them all. And the admiral will be the one on whom we will call, and you will join us in that.”

“And that,” Hurière added, “is why I was mending my helmet, and putting a good edge to my sword.”

Coconnas turned pale, for he began to understand the dreadful meaning of what they said.

“Then this festival - this banquet - ” he faltered, and Maurevel answered impatiently: “You are slow to guess, and it is very easy to see that you are not as tired of these Huguenots as a good Catholic may be expected to be… Come and look here.”

He drew Coconnas to the window, and pointed to a troop, dimly visible in the darkness behind the church: “You see them?”

“Yes.”

“And, like ourselves, every man will have a cross in his hat.”

“They are Toquenot’s Swiss - you know they will do anything that the king commands… You see the troop of horse who are now passing along the quay? Do you recognise their leader?”

“How can I, having been here for no more than a few hours?”

“Well, it is the Duke of Guise, and at his side is Jean Choron, the provost. They are calling out the companies. Do you see that man who goes knocking from

door to door? And that the doors at which he knocks are those on which is a white cross?”

“Yes. I see armed men coming out of each door.”

“And now he will knock on ours, and we shall go out.”

“But is all the world afoot for the murder of one man - and he not very young?”

“Young man, if you would not kill those who are old, you may choose from what age you will. There are Huguenots enough, and those who will fight well. You will find use for a good sword.”

“But would you kill all?”

“That is what we mean to do.”

“Have you the king’s order for that?”

“Yes. And the Duke of Guise.”

“Then it was for that M. de Besme —”

“You know him? He is there in the street below.”

Maurevel opened the window. He shouted: “Guise and Lorraine.” Besme looked up.

“This is the Belle Etoile? Is a Monsieur Coconnas there?” He called to Maurevel, whom he evidently recognised.

Coconnas looked out. “I am here, M. de Besme.”

“Are you ready?”

“For what?”

“To do what Maurevel will tell you. The hunt is up.”

He went on, and Maurevel closed the window. He turned to Coconnas: “It is Huguenots whom we hunt tonight. But should you have any private enemy who

is not exactly a Huguenot - well, you could not choose a better time. He would pass with the rest."

He drew a paper from his pocket. "Here," he said, "is my list. There are three hundred names. If all do a tenth as much as I, there will not be a heretic alive when the dawn breaks."

As he spoke they heard the first stroke of the bell of St. Germain l'Auxerrois, proclaiming the hour of midnight

"It is the signal," Maurevel cried. "Let us set to work."

"One moment!" Hurière exclaimed. "I do not want to find my wife murdered when I come back. There is a Huguneot in the house."

"What!" said Coconnas, who had been standing in a bewildered silence, "would you murder your guest?"

"It was for him that I put an extra edge on my sword."

"Mordi! I dislike that. He had been my friend, though but for a few hours. We have eaten and gamed together."

"And he won fifty crowns."

"But I am sure they were fairly won."

"Yet you must pay if he live. And if I kill him the score is settled."

"You are wasting time," Maurevel exclaimed impatiently. "We shall be late at the admiral's if you dally more."

"I'll make haste," cried La Hurière. "Wait but a moment."

He ran to the stairs, and Coconnas, after a moment's hesitation, followed.

"Mordi!" he said to himself, "he will half-kill the man, and not know how to finish him off. And he will certainly rob him of all he has. I can at least prevent that." So, with this happy thought, he ran up the stairs, and caught up with La Hurière, whose pace had slackened as it approached La Mole's door.

As Coconnas reached his side, there was a discharge of muskets in the street. “Diable!” muttered the host, “I will wager he is awake now.”

“It is a safe guess,” Coconnas answered, “and I should say he is one who would be quick to defend himself. Now, if he were to kill you? That would be droll, would it not?”

La Hurière looked far from happy at this suggestion, but, taking courage as he remembered the arquebus in his hand, he knocked on the door.

La Mole was dressed. He crouched behind the bed with a pistol in each hand, and his drawn sword lying before him.

“Ah, ah!” Coconnas exclaimed, his excitement rising, and his nostrils expanding as will those of a wild beast at the scent of blood “this is becoming interesting. Hurry on, M. Hurière!”

“So you would murder me, would you?” La Mole cried, watching warily the two men who had paused in the doorway.

La Hurière discharged his arquebus in reply, but La Mole sank to the floor, and the ball passed over his head.

“You will surely help me, M. Coconnas?” cried La Mole.

“Help! M, de Maurevel!” the landlord cried.

“Ma foi!” Coconnas answered. “If I do not aid the attack on you, I do all I can. The king has ordered that all Huguenots shall be killed tonight. You must defend yourself if you can.”

“Assassins! Then take this.”

La Mole discharged a pistol. The ball was meant for La Hurière, but the man had drawn backward as the weapon was raised, and it was Coconnas whose shoulder was grazed.

“Mordi!” he said, “I am hit… Well, have it your own way,” and he drew his sword, and rushed at La Mole, who, seeing that they were two to one, and might soon be three, retreated quickly into a small closet at his rear, and turned the key

upon them.

While Coconnas, now roused to fury, beat at the door, shouting abusive words, La Hurière reloaded his gun, and fired into the lock.

The door flew back, disclosing an empty closet, and an open window, showing where La Mole must have gone.

“He must be killed,” the host exclaimed. “It is the fourth storey. Who could make such a jump as that?”

Coconnas put a leg over the sill. “It is by the roof he has gone.” It was plain that he would have followed by that difficult and dangerous way, but La Hurière and Maurevel united to pull him back.

“Are you mad? You will kill yourself!”

“Bah! I am mountain-born. When a man wounds me thus I will follow him, either to heaven or hell. Let me go.”

“But,” said Maurevel, “he is dead or distant by now. Come with us, and there are a thousand who will be less dangerous prey.”

Coconnas gave way, and the three descended the stairs together. “To the admiral’s!” cried his companions, and Coconnas, now thoroughly roused, echoed the cry.

The three now hurried towards the Rue de Bethisy, a bright light, and the sound of shooting, guiding their way.

As they did so, a man ran towards them, having neither doublet nor scarf.

“Here is one,” cried Coconnas, drawing his sword.

“Let me shoot,” cried the host. “Give me time.”

“And he will escape.” Coconnas ran after him, calling on him to turn, for he was not of the kind to strike a man in the back. As he did so a ball whistled past his ears, and the fugitive fell.

The Piedmontese turned round, and saw La Hurière brandishing his weapon wildly, “I have had my first shot!” he shouted in triumph. “I have killed one.”

“And you barely missed making a hole through me.”

“Take care! Look to yourself now.”

Coconnas looked round, and jumped quickly aside.

The wounded man had struggled to his knee, and was about to stab him with a dagger which he had drawn.

“Would you, viper?” Coconnas cried. He thrust at the wounded man, withdrew his sword, and thrust again.

He was mad with excitement now, and the hunt of men.

CHAPTER VIII

THE SLAYERS AND THE SLAIN

THE hotel of the Admiral Coligny was a large house, with two wings which flanked a wide court. Now the doors had been beaten in, but the court was crowded with armed men.

In their centre was one whom they surrounded respectfully. He stood leaning on his sword, looking up at a balcony fifteen feet above him, and stamping with angry impatience.

“Du Gast,” he exclaimed, “we hear nothing. We shall be fooled. He had been warned, and has fled.”

“Monseigneur, it is impossible. The hotel has been surrounded since he went in.”

The three companions were now pushing into the crowd. “Look,” said Coconnas. “Is it not the Duke of Guise himself?”

So it was. Now there was a sound of shots within the hotel, cries, and the clashing of swords. Silence followed, and the impatient duke seemed disposed to rush into the house, but Du Gast restrained him respectfully. “Monseigneur, monseigneur, your dignity requires that you do not go!”

“Yes. I know. But my anxiety! If he should escape —”

A man came out on the balcony, his face disfigured with blood.

“At last, Besme!” the duke cried. “What news?”

“Here he is,” the German answered coolly. As he spoke he lifted a heavy body. “If you will stand back —”

The duke withdrew a few paces, as Besme raised, with difficulty, the heavy body of a man of about fifty, poised it on the balcony for a moment, and then threw it, with a great effort, at de Guise’s feet.

The torches threw their light on a venerable face with a greying beard. With the impact of the fall, blood gushed from the mouth of the dying man.

A murmur of “The Admiral,” mingling exultation and awe, passed through the crowd.

The young duke looked down upon him. “At last,” he said, “my father’s murder has been avenged.” He put a foot on his breast.

The dying man heard. He opened his eyes, which met those of the one who stood in triumph above him. “Henry of Guise,” he said, in a voice strong enough to be heard by many of those around, “I did not kill your father. But one day an assassin’s foot shall be on your own breast.”

The duke paled at the words. He passed a hand across his eyes, as though to shut out that which he saw. When he looked again, it was at a dead man. He made a gesture of resolution, regaining his self-control, and lifted his sword.

Besme called from the balcony: “Are you satisfied, monseigneur?”

“Yes. It is - the Catholic religion you have avenged.” He turned to the crowd of soldiers and citizens behind him. “To work, my friends! The night is only begun.”

As they began to scatter, there were cries from the long gallery which formed one wing of the hotel, where two men were seen to be fleeing from a body of assassins. As they came into sight, an arquebus ball killed one, but the other leapt boldly down to the ground, regardless of the height, or of the enemies he must meet below.

As he did so, his sword fell from his hand, but he caught it up, avoided several soldiers, ran one through the body, and would have escaped from the court when Coconnas barred his way.

“Touché,” cried the Piedmontese, as his sword caught the arm of the fleeing man, who was too short of space to use his own in the same way, but, with a cry of “Coward!” struck him flatly on the face with the blade.

“Thousand devils! It is La Mole.”

“He warned the admiral!” shouted his pursuers. “Kill him! Kill him!”

La Mole, bloodstained now, and in the state of desperation which rouses the last resources of human strength, dashed through the streets with Coconnas, La Hurière, Maurevel and a dozen others hot in pursuit. More than once a following arquebus ball gave fresh speed to his feet. His pourpoint seemed to compress his labouring heart, and he tore it off as he ran. He cast his sword away to avoid its weight. Blood and sweat blinded his eyes. As some pursuers were left behind it seemed that there were fresh ones to join the chase.

Now the Louvre rose, dark and ominous on his right. On the drawbridge, steel glittered, and soldiers moved. At his left, the black river moved silently on. Like the hard-pressed stag, he had an instinctive urge to leap in, to avoid his foes.

But the Louvre was the better hope. There, he supposed, would be the King of Navarre. He would seek protection from him, as he had vainly sought it from Coligny before… He ran on to the bridge.

He broke through the weapons of the sentinels, though not without taking a wound, and rushed through the vestibule and up two flights of stairs, not pausing in his breathless race till he came to the suite where his one hope of protection lay.

Here he leaned on a door he knew, which did not yield, though he beat on it with hands and feet.

“Who is there?” cried a woman’s voice.

In his extremity the password came to his mind. “Navarre - Navarre,” he called, and the door opened at once.

He scarcely saw Gillonne as he pushed her aside and rushed on along the corridor, and through empty rooms, till he came to one which was brightly lit by a lamp which hung from the ceiling, and containing a bed, the occupant of which raised herself on her elbow and looked at him with frightened eyes.

He ran forward, and knelt at the bedside. “Madame,” he cried, “they are killing us all - we of the New Religion. You are the queen. You can save me, if any can.”

Marguerite, troubled by the warning she had received, had lain down without undressing. Her first reaction, on seeing a man, bloodstained and dishevelled, rush into her room, had been to call aloud for help.

“Madame,” he protested desperately, “if you cry out, I am lost. My pursuers were close behind.”

But his protest was too late. Next moment, a body of men, with arquebuses and naked swords, their faces blackened with powder and smeared with blood, broke, like a pack of pursuing wolves, into the room.

Coconnas, his red hair disordered, his face blackened where it had been struck by La Mole’s sword, his eyes glaring with the excitement of his vengeful chase, was terrible to behold.

“Mordi!” he cried, “we have got him now.”

Marguerite half rose from the bed, pulling back the blue velvet curtain, golden with fleur-de-lys. Her eyes were pitiful for the exhausted man at her feet, and fearless of those she confronted.

La Mole looked wildly round for a weapon, but there was none in sight, even had he had time to reach it, and strength for its use. As Coconnas ran forward, thrusting with his long rapier, he could only shrink aside. The point pierced his shoulder, and a stream of blood gushed upon the snowy scented sheets of the royal bed.

“Quick,” Marguerite said. “To this side.” She drew him over the bed, to the recess between it and the wall. It was none too soon, for with a final cry of “Oh, Madame, save me,” he sank unconscious upon the floor.

Coconnas rushed round the bed, and Marguerite stood in his way. For a moment it seemed that Coconnas, wild as he was with excitement, and angered by the wound he had received, would thrust through the unconscious man, and perhaps the woman who interposed. But Marguerite did not forget that she was the daughter of kings, even in that moment of deadly peril. She drew herself to her full height, and gave a cry of such mingled indignation, anger and fear, that even the rage of Coconnas was checked, and he stood as though petrified, with his sword drawn back for the thrust.

And, at that moment, a concealed door opened on the further side of the room, and a youth of about sixteen or seventeen, clothed in black, and showing something of the confusion of the night in his disordered hair, entered.

“What is it, sister?” he cried. “Hold! Stand back. Marguerite, what does this mean?”

“It is the Duke d’Alençon,” La Hurière, who was now at the side of Coconnas, his arquebus levelled upon the fallen man, said in a low and urgent voice.

“Mordi!” Coconnas said, drawing, back sobered enough at the sound of so great a name.

“Save me, Henry,” Marguerite cried. “They would have killed me if you had not come.”

The duke was unarmed, and he was not one whose courage was always easy to see. But anger at this invasion of his sister’s room, and the apparent peril in which she stood, joined to the confidence which his rank gave, sustained him to confront the men, who retreated before him.

His face scarlet with anger, he advanced upon them. “Ha!” he cried, is it thus? Perhaps you will murder a son of France also?” And then, as they retreated in consternation, he called more loudly: “Ha! without there! Captain of the Guard! There are men here who should hang.”

More frightened at this unarmed youth than he would have been at a troop of horse, the sobered Coconnas had already sprung for the door, the others pushing and jostling one another as they fought their way through the narrow space. Meantime Marguerite had thrown the damask covering of her bed over the unconscious man, and come out of the recess.

As the room cleared, the duke turned to his sister, “Are you hurt? You are stained with blood.”

“No, I don’t think so. It is nothing much if I am.”

“But the blood —”

“One of the ruffians may have touched me. It is not mine.”

“Show me the one who dared —”

“How could I now? You had better go.”

“But you must not be alone… Shall I call Gillonne?”

“No. Leave me, Francis… please!”

D’Alençon went with reluctance, and he had scarcely disappeared before Marguerite hurriedly bolted the door of the secret passage by which he had entered, and then secured the outer entrance in the same way.

Then, by a great effort, she dragged the wounded man into the centre of the floor, and, seeing that he still breathed, took his head on her knee, and bathed his face with water. It was only then that she recognised the good-looking youth, who, full of life and hope, had seen her, only a few hours before, to solicit the protection of the King of Navarre, and who, while dazzled by her beauty, had drawn her by his own attraction. As she continued her ministration of mercy, her thoughts were little for her own husband, and still less for the Duke of Guise.

It was more than an impulse of abstract pity that moved her now. It was concern for one who was no longer a stranger: who was almost a friend.

La Mole opened his eyes. “Mon Dieu!” he said. “What - where am I?”

“You are saved,” she said. “You are safe.”

As he looked at her, memory faintly returned. “Loveliest,” he said, “loveliest in the world.” Then his head sank back, as a new wave of oblivion submerged his mind.

Marguerite thought he was dying. “Heaven have pity,” she said. And then a loud knocking was on the door.

“Madame,” cried a woman’s voice, “let me in. It is I - Henriette.”

The noise had roused La Mole to a better consciousness than before. The instinct of self-preservation caused him to raise himself on one arm, looking desperately round the room for a place of refuge.

“There is no danger,” Marguerite said. “It is the Duchess de Nevers. A friend.”

Outside there was a rattle of arms. Marguerite called: “Are you alone?”

“No. I have twelve guards from De Guise.”

“Wait a moment.” Marguerite turned to La Mole. “I will try to hide you. Can you make an effort?”

With difficulty, she assisted him to the cabinet, turned the key, and dropped it into her alms-purse. Then she opened the door to her friend.

“You are unhurt?”

“Quite.”

Marguerite had caught up a cloak which she now drew more closely round her, to hide the blood on her dress.

“I am glad. But I came to leave you six of the guards. Six from M. de Guise are worth more than a regiment of the king’s tonight.”

CHAPTER IX

HOW COCONNAS PAID HIS DEBT

LIKE a baffled tiger, Coconnas withdrew from the Louvre, while, La Hurière slipped away with the speed of a startled wolf. They had not gone far before they came on Maurevel, who had begged three soldiers from the commander of a passing troop, and was now hurrying along with the aspect of one who had his destination clearly in mind.

“Where the deuce,” Coconnas asked, “are you going now?”

“To the Rue de Chaume.”

“That is near the Temple?”

“Yes. Why?”

“That is where a man lives to whom I have to pay a hundred rose nobles.”

“Then,” Maurevel replied, “you are in luck. For this is a time at which such scores can be wiped out in an easy way.”

“Oh!” said Coconnas. “Yes, I see what you mean. But what is that great building across the way?”

“That is the Hotel de Guise.”

“It is quiet here.”

“So it is. They are good Catholics for the most part around here. But there is still one on whom I would call.”

As he said this, he stopped at the corner of the Rue des Quatre-Fils.

“Sir,” said Coconnas, “now I understand. You also have a creditor who lives near the temple?”

“It is M. de Mouy. La Hurière, give your arquebus to M. de Coconnas, and go up

to the door. Pretend that you are a Huguenot and that you must see M. de Mouy. When he hears what is happening, he will come down. He is a brave man."

"M. de Mouy lives here?"

"No. But his mistress does, and he know he is here."

La Hurière had gone up to the door, and was knocking loudly. A window opened on the first floor, and a man appeared, unarmed, and in night attire. He called out: "Who's there?"

Maurevel, Coconnas, and the Swiss had drawn closely against the wall.

"Ah! M. de Mouy," La Hurière began, in his blandest tone, "do you know what is happening? They have murdered the admiral. They are hunting all of us of the New Faith through the streets. Will you not bring your sword to our aid?"

"Ah!" De Mouy answered. "It is what I have feared. Wait for me a moment, and I will arm."

Saying this, he withdrew, and through the open window they heard a woman's cry of alarm.

Maurevel took the arquebus from Coconnas, blew on the match, and gave it back to La Hurière.

"Be ready," he said. "He will soon appear."

"It would be more profit for me," Coconnas grumbled, "if Mercandon were also here."

"We shall find M. de Mouy enough. He is a brave man. Six may be none too many for him."

Saying this, Maurevel crept up to the door, pushing the Swiss on the other side, that de Mouy might be assailed the moment he should slip out.

"Ha!" said Coconnas. "This is not quite what I expected to see."

From a feeling of honour, he stepped back.

Now they could hear the bar being withdrawn. The door was already half open when a young woman came out on the balcony. She leaned over, and saw the little group of would-be assassins round the door. She gave a loud scream. Come back," she cried. "I can see swords."

At her cry, the door shut.

La Hurière raised his arquebus, pointing at the window, where, a moment later, De Mouy appeared, holding two pistols of such length that the innkeeper reflected, even as he was taking aim: "I may kill him, but it is equally likely that he may kill me," and he withdrew at the thought into an angle of the Rue de Vrac, where he was too distant for certain aim.

"Well," cried de Mouy, leaning over the rail of the balcony, "I am here. What do you say now?"

"Here," thought Coconnas, "is a brave man." He advanced, raising his hat. "Sir," he said, "we are seeking a duel, not an assassination. Eh, mordi! M. de Maurevel, do not turn away. The gentleman will oblige you, I have no doubt."

"Maurevel!" exclaimed de Mouy. "My father's murderer. Ah, but I will!" He fired as he spoke, his ball going through the hat of Maurevel, who had turned away to knock for assistance at the door of the Hotel de Guise. His second bullet killed a soldier at Maurevel's side, and then, as a group of gentlemen, followed by their pages, came out of the hotel, he withdrew from the balcony.

Many windows were opening now, and heads looked out. De Mouy, appearing again, called to a man of mature age who was leaning from an opposite window: "Help, Mercandon! They are murdering Protestants. "And, as he spoke, there came the noise of the discharge of La Hurière's arquebus, and he ducked, just in time to avoid its bullet.

"Mercandon!" exclaimed Coconnas. "Rue des Chaume! There it is! It seems that many scores may be settled tonight!"

Seizing a paving stone, he began to batter at his creditor's door, while the gentlemen from the Hotel de Guise broke in that of De Mouy, and Maurevel, torch in hand, was endeavouring to set it alight.

Mercandon, ignoring his solitary assailant, had fetched an arquebus, and was

firing for De Mouy's support, when the scene changed, for a group of Huguenots came running out of the Hotel de Montmorency, and charged so fiercely that their opponents fled before them, or ran back into the Hotel de Guise.

Coconnas, who had failed to break down the door, found himself isolated by this sudden rush. He turned round fiercely, and, with his back to the wall, began not merely to defend himself, but to bear back his assailants. He thrust, and drew back a sword that was dripping blood. He shouted defiance, so that his voice rose above the tumult that filled the street.

De Mouy, his bare sword in one hand, his mistress, half dressed, and half fainting, on the other arm, broke out of his burning house. "Maurevel," he cried. "Where is the murdering dog?" But Maurevel had fled.

La Hurière, shrinking from De Mouy's sword, came too near to the furious Coconnas, who did not recognise him. The innkeeper shrieked for mercy between the two, and drew the attention of Mercandon, who saw, by his white scarf, that he was one of the assassins.

He fired, and, with a loud scream, the wretched man staggered, tried vainly to reach the wall, and fell, face forward, in a pool of his own blood.

Favoured by the circumstance, De Mouy turned the corner of the Rue de Paradis and was soon out of sight.

But Coconnas, now maddened by blood and riot, after the manner of his southern land, was running blindly across the street when old Mercandon, followed by his son and two nephews, came running out of their home to support a victory which was already won, for the Huguenots had, in a momentary and local triumph, chased their enemies back into the Hotel de Guise.

"There he is!" they cried, recognising Coconnas as the man who had battered against their door. Like a chamois of his native hills, the mountaineer leapt for the wall. With his back secure, he laughed tauntingly: "Ho, ho, Father Mercandon, don't you remember who I am?"

"Yes. I know you now, scoundrel! Do you seek the life of your father's friend?"

"Are you not his creditor also?"

“Yes.”

“I came to Paris to pay the debt.”

“Seize him! Bind him!” cried the old man.

Coconnas laughed in derision. “But wait a minute! You forget. You must have a writ before you can do that.”

As he spoke his sword shot out against the foremost of the younger men, who were closing in around him. The point pierced his wrist to the bone, and he jumped back with a cry of agony.

“So the four are three,” laughed the Piedmontese.

As he spoke, he heard a window open behind him in the wall of the Hotel de Guise against which he had taken shelter.

He looked up, fearing a new foe, but he saw only a lovely girl, who threw a flower at his feet.

Foolishly, he stooped to pick it up, and, as he did so, he heard the warning of the voice above him: “Guard yourself, brave Catholic, guard yourself!”

He rose quickly, but not before the dagger of the second nephew had pierced his cloak and wounded his shoulder.

There was a sharp cry of fear from the lady who watched above, but Coconnas, having recovered his poise, engaged the young man so vigorously that he gave ground, and, his foot slipping as he did so on the bloody pavement, he lost his balance, and fell as his breast was pierced by his opponent’s sword.

Coconnas had now two opponents only before him - an old man with a dagger and an empty arquebus, and a slim pale youth of about seventeen years, whose sword was about half as long as his own. To him, only lightly wounded, and in the full vigour of twenty-four years, it might well seem that the fight was done.

“Hold on, brave cavalier,” he heard the voice of the fair friend above him. “Hold on. I will send you help.”

“Do not trouble for that,” he replied. “Watch and see how Count Annibal de Coconnas will dispose of these Huguenot dogs.”

But at the same moment there came a cry of rage from the window of Mercandon’s home, and a flower-pot shot through the air, and was shattered against his knee.

“Thanks, mother, thanks,” he cried, looking up at the old woman from whose hands it came. “Some throw me flower-pots, and others flowers!”

Intoxicated with the excitement of the moment, and conscious above all of the vision of loveliness above him who watched the fight, he ran upon the youth, who was no match for him, either in sword-arm or sword. In two passes the youth stood weaponless, and Coconnas, conscious both that Mercandon’s dagger was near his throat, and that the old woman was waiting her chance to hurl a marble ornament at his head, clutched his adversary round the body, and made him a living buckler against his foes.

The youth struggled and then collapsed in the powerful, merciless grip. “Help me, father,” he cried. “He is breaking my bones.”

The old man ceased to attack. He began to entreat. “Monsieur de Coconnas, pity. He is my only son.”

The old mother joined in with the same cry.

Coconnas laughed: “What would he have done to me? Why did he bring dagger and sword?”

“Sir,” cried Mercandon, “I will give ten thousand crowns of gold. I will give jewels. There is nothing I have that shall not be yours.”

“Brave cavalier,” said the soft voice above, “have pity and have my love.”

Coconnas paused. “Are you a Huguenot?”

“Yes,” moaned the youth.

“Then you must die.” He lifted his dagger, but paused at the wild cries of entreaty that came from both parents.

The father looked up to the lady who watched above. “Oh, Madame la duchesse!” he cried, “intercede for us, and you shall be remembered every night in our prayers.”

“Will they be Catholic prayers?”

“That is it,” Coconnas cried. “win he abjure? Will he die or abjure?” The dagger was lifted again.

“Oliver, abjure,” entreated his father. His mother screamed the same words from above.

“You shall all abjure,” Coconnas cried. “It shall be three credos - three souls and one life!”

“I will,” cried the boy, and the anxious parents echoed the words. Coconnas loosed him. “Kneel,” he said, “and repeat what shall say.”

Father and son now knelt side by side, but, whether by craft or chance, the boy placed himself so that the sword which had been struck from his grasp lay very near to his hand.

As he repeated the words which Coconnas dictated his fingers moved, inch by inch, toward it.

Coconnas was aware of this, but gave no sign that he was until the hand actually grasped the hilt, when, with a movement as swift as that of the other had been slow, he leapt forward, and drove his dagger into the throat of the kneeling boy. “Traitor,” he cried, “did you think you would kill me thus?”

“Ruffian,” screamed the father, “for a hundred nobles, you kill us all.”

“Mordi, no! Here’s proof of that.” Coconnas pulled out the bag of rose-nobles, and cast them at his creditor’s feet.

“And here’s your death!”… “Beware, count, beware.” The voices of the two women came to his ears together, but too late to save him from the falling masonry which struck him on the head, and prostrated him unconscious on the pavement.

It was his salvation now that the door of the Hotel de Guise opened, and Mercandon, whose dagger was already lifted to kill him, saw the glitter of swords, and fled hastily to the shelter of his own roof, while the lady whom he had called duchess leaned from her window, glittering with diamonds and gems, her beauty lit by the glare of surrounding fires, her hand stretched out to guide her gentlemen to the one in whom her interest lay: “There, in front of you. The one in the red doublet… Yes, that is he.”

CHAPTER X

DEATH OR THE MASS

“OH,” Marguerite said, with royal boldness, “how beautiful he is.”

“Yes, madame,” Gillonne answered, “but will he live?”

The unconscious man had shoulders which would not have shamed Adonis, but Gillonne’s eyes were upon the wounds which they had bared.

“We shall soon know.”

Marguerite, using a silver needle with a round point, probed the wounds as skilfully and delicately as would have been done by Ambrose Paré himself, while Gillonne with a cloth dipped in fresh water, wiped away the blood that flowed from shoulder and breast.

“It is a dangerous but should not be a mortal wound, acerrimum humeri vulnus, non autem lethale,” said the lovely and learned surgeon, whose command of the Latin tongue was as renowned as her beauty in Europe’s courts. “Hand me the salve, Gillonne, and have the lint ready.”

La Mole stirred, heaving a sigh. He was deliciously aware of freshness instead of throbbing heat, and the perfume of Marguerite’s applications in place of the stench of blood.

He opened his eyes. “Oh, madame,” he said, “that you should stain your hands with my blood! I were better dead.”

“Your blood,” Gillonne answered, smiling, “had already stained the bed and apartment of her majesty.”

Marguerite drew her mantle more closely over her cambric dressing-gown, which was bespattered with small red spots.

“Madame,” La Mole went on, “could you not put me into a surgeon’s care?”

“Of a Catholic surgeon - yes,” she answered significantly. He shuddered and became silent.

At that moment there came a sound of loud knocking.

“I will go,” Marguerite said. She left the cabinet, closing the door, and went through her chamber to the entrance of the secret passage which led to the king’s and queen-mother’s apartments, from which the knocking came.

“Madame de Sauve!” she exclaimed, in astonishment, and with no friendliness in her eyes, for even a wife who has no love for her husband may resent the fact that his own preference lies elsewhere.

Charlotte fell on her knees.

“Madame, I know - But forgive a fault which is hardly mine. The queen-mother - ” She checked herself, as though she feared she had said too much.

“Get up!” Marguerite answered, unmoved either by her beauty or her distress. “You’d better tell me why you have come. It wasn’t to justify what you have done to me.”

But Charlotte did not rise. “Madame,” she said, with terror in her voice, “I came to ask if he were here.”

“Here? Who?”

“The King of Navarre.”

“What! Would you follow him to my rooms? You know whether he comes here.”

“Ah, would to heaven he had.”

“But why?”

“Mon Dieu! madame. Do you not know that they are murdering the Huguenots?”

Marguerite pulled the frightened girl to her feet. “I was forgetting. I did not think the danger could reach to him. But I warned him not to go out. Has he done so?”

“No, madame. But if he is not here - The queen-mother has sworn his death.”

“It is impossible.”

“Madame, I tell you no one knows where he is now.”

“Where is the queen-mother?”

“In her own apartment.”

“I will see her, and let you know what I learn… And I will thank you, though I know you act from no kindness to me.”

“Oh, madame, I dare not come with you. But if you can forgive —”

Marguerite extended her hand. “The King of Navarre is under my protection. I have promised him my alliance. You will find I shall keep my word.”

“But if she will not see you?”

“There is still my brother, the king.”

Marguerite hurried to the queen-mother’s apartment. In place of the eager courtiers whom she would normally have met, greeting her with respect, and opening the way before her, she saw gentlemen who came and went with garments reddened and torn. She saw faces-blackened with powder, bloodstained weapons, excitement, confusion, haste.

But she went bravely on until she was confronted by the guard at the entrance to her mother’s apartment. They demanded a countersign which she could not give, and then, respectfully, but firmly, they barred her way.

Though she could not reach her mother, she saw her at times through the opening door, excited, active, vivacious as a girl of twenty, with smiles for all, but most for those whose garments were most disordered by dust and blood.

As she paused in doubt of what it would be best to do, the Duke de Guise passed her. “Oh, Henry, where is the King of Navarre?”

The duke bowed, smiled, and passed the guards without making any reply.

René, the queen-mother's perfumier, came out, and she put the same question to him.

"Madame," he answered, with an evil smile, "I am not in his confidence, I have even heard that he lays his mother's death at my door."

"No, my good René, do not believe that. Tell me what I ask."

"It is no matter what is believed. He and his party are done." He went on, with a mocking smile.

Her eyes turned to M. Tavannes.

"Monsieur, can you tell me where I may find my husband?"

He answered in a voice that all around them could hear: "Ma foi! He is in the city with M. d'Alençon, so it is said." And then in a lower tone: "Your majesty, try the king's armoury."

"Thanks, Tavannes, thanks."

She hurried on, thinking: "I gave my promise. He shall not die. And when de Guise was in my closet, was he not generous to me?"

There were guards at the entrance to the king's apartment, who refused admission. Their officer came forward: "No one can see the king."

"But I —"

"The order is strict."

"But I am his sister."

"No exception is to be made, madame."

Marguerite thought: "He is to be killed, and it was I who baited the trap. Though they kill me, I will go in."

She turned away, seeking another entrance, and as she passed along the corridors she heard the sound of a Huguenot psalm.

“It is Charles’ nurse,” she thought. “Heaven help me now!”

With new hope she knocked at the door…

After the warning which Marguerite had given him, Henry had retired to his own apartment, where he had soon been surrounded by a score of Huguenot gentlemen, vaguely aware of the growing atmosphere of hostility which surrounded them, and looking to him, as their source of strength. There they had remained unmolested till the bell of midnight struck, when Tavannes had entered, and said that the King of France desired that Henry should wait upon him.

It was a summons which did not admit of denial, and Henry followed Tavannes to a small gallery close to the king’s apartment, where he left him alone, to the thought of friends he might not be destined to see again, and apprehension of his own safety that became hard to control.

He had seen that the corridors had been full of soldiers as he had come through them, and that Catholic gentlemen moved among them completely armed. Now he heard a rising commotion outside the walls, with the sound of firearms and cries of pursuit and fear.

He had courage enough, but it was moral rather than physical - less of the body than of the mind. He might smile at open danger, ruling his fear. But this uncertainty, with no more than surmise of the extent of the dreadful truth, gave him the most terrible two hours that his life would know.

Then a captain entered, and led him to the king’s armoury, where Charles was sitting, his hands on the arms of the chair, and his head sunk forward. As he raised it, Henry saw that his forehead was beaded with sweat.

“Leave me, Le Chastre,” he said harshly, at which the captain retired, and a deep silence followed.

Suddenly the king rose. “Mordieu!” he said, wiping his brows, “you are pleased to see me, Henry? Is it not so?”

“I am always glad to see your majesty.”

“More than if you were down below?”

“I do not understand.”

“Then look out, and you will.”

With an abrupt movement, he pulled his brother-in-law to the window, pointing to the dark river, where men could be seen on a boat’s deck, cutting the throats of victims who were brought to them every minute, and casting them into the water to drown.

“In the name of Heaven,” Henry exclaimed, “what is happening tonight!”

“Tonight they are freeing me from the Huguenots. Look over the Hotel de Bourbon. Do you see the flames of the admiral’s house? Do you see the body which those brave Catholics are bearing along? Is it not Teligny, your friend?”

“What does it mean?” asked the King of Navarre, feeling vainly at his side for the hilt of a dagger which was not there.

“It means,” Charles answered, with an outburst of the almost insane violence to which he was subject, “that I will no longer have Huguenots in the land. Do you hear me, Henry? Do I rule? Am I king or not?”

“Your majesty —”

“My majesty slays all that is not Catholic to my will. Are you Catholic? Tell me, what are you?”

“Sire, I would remind you of your own words. ‘What matters the religion of those who serve me well?’ “

Charles burst into a discordant laugh. “Do I remember my words? Verba volant, as Margot would say. Have not these served me well who are being butchered below? Were they not loyal, and brave and wise? Are they helped by that? They are Huguenots. And I tell you I will have Catholic subjects, and none besides.”

Henry made no answer, and Charles cried angrily: “Henry, do you understand now?”

“I understand.”

“Well?”

“I do not see why the King of Navarre should not go by the same path that his subjects tread. I suppose the choice has been put to them, and we can see what their answer has been.”

Charles seized his arm. “Do you think,” he asked, with a fierce scowl, “that I have troubled to offer the choice of the mass to the scum who are being slaughtered below?”

Henry threw off the king’s grasp. “Sire, will you not die in your father’s faith?”

“Yes, mordieu! And you?”

“I will do so too.”

Charles uttered a scream of almost bestial fury at an obstinacy he had not thought to meet. With a shaking hand, he picked up an arquebus from the table. Henry looked on with an appearance of unconcern, though his heartbeats quickened.

Charles cocked the arquebus. Brandishing it wildly, he cried: “Will you accept the mass?”

Henry remained silent and motionless.

Charles IX shook the vaults of the Louvre with the most terrible oath which ever came from the lips of man. He took aim at Henry.

“Speak!” he cried. “Death, the mass, or the Bastille?”

Henry had the presence of mind to avoid a direct answer, and so probably saved his life.

“Oh, sire, would you murder me, your brother-in-law?”

The fury into which Charles had worked himself had already, through its very intensity, begun to abate. “But I must kill someone!” he cried: He turned to the open window, and seeing a fugitive running along the quay, he took careful aim. The man fell.

Henry thought: “It will be all over with me when there is no one left outside at which to take aim.” But he stood silently, awaiting the end.

It came in an unexpected voice behind him, as the king laid down his weapon: “Well, is it over now?”

He turned to see Catherine standing in the doorway.

“No,” Charles answered. “It is not! The obstinate fool will not agree.”

Her look seemed to ask: “Then why does he live?”

And Charles answered it: “He lives because he married Margot. There is no reason but that.”

Henry saw the smile on the queen-mother’s face as she heard the reply, and he knew who was his most dangerous foe.

“Madame,” he said boldly, “I understand now. It is you who drew me into this trap, and made your daughter the bait to destroy us all. It is you who have separated me from Marguerite, that she should not see me slain in her sight.”

“Which you shall not be!” said a breathless and eager voice, and Charles turned in surprise, and Catherine in fury, to see Marguerite at the door.

“Marguerite!” Henry exclaimed.

“Margot!” exclaimed Charles IX.

“Henry,” she said, advancing into the room, “your last words were an accusation against me, and they were both right and wrong. You were right, for I was the bait. You were wrong, for I did not know that they meant that you should die. I may not love you, but I know where my honour lies. If they imprison you, I shall be there. If they exile you, I will go with you. If they kill you, I will die, too.”

And she stretched out her hand to her husband, who took it, if not with love, at least with admiration and gratitude in his eyes.

“Margot,” her brother said, “you would do better to beg him to become a Catholic.”

Marguerite answered with the dignity which was natural to her: “Sire, he has become a prince of your own house. Would you have him act as a coward?”

Charles stood in an obvious indecision, between his mother’s implacable determination and the supplicating glance of a sister whom he loved, and who had always been able to influence him. But in the end he said: “Faith, madame, Margot is right. Harry is my brother now.”

Catherine saw that, for the moment, she had been foiled. She withdrew without further words.

CHAPTER XI

FOREWARNED IS FOREARMED

IT was during the next morning, while Henry of Navarre remained in the seclusion of his own apartment, and the outcries of pursuit and massacre still sounded in the streets of Paris, that Marguerite was distracted by a knock at the secret panel, to which none but her mother or brothers would be likely to come.

Giving a signal of silence to Gillonne and La Mole, and closing the door of the inner cabinet upon them, she went to that of the private passage, and opened it to the Duke d'Alençon, her youngest brother.

The boy - he was little more - was dressed with his usual elegance. He pressed his cold thin lips against his sister's forehead, and sat down to tell her, with that love of horror peculiar to himself and his two brothers, the bloody details of the night.

Listening silently, she let him go on, and it was only when he appeared to have concluded his ghastly narrative that she said: "You didn't come here only to tell me this."

"No. I am waiting to hear something from you."

"Waiting? For what?"

"Didn't you tell me you never wanted to marry Navarre?"

"Yes. When it was first proposed, he was a stranger to me."

"And when you saw him you felt the same?"

"I said so, and it was the truth."

"Then you are miserable?"

"Such a marriage is not likely to be otherwise."

"Then I am waiting for you to show your joy."

“What for?”

“For the opportunity of regaining your freedom.”

“Freedom?” Marguerite fixed her brother with a glance before which his eyes shifted and fell. “Will you tell me how? I should be thankful to understand.”

The boy stammered, confused by his sister’s attitude: “He’s a Huguenot. You know that.”

“I knew that when we were married. So did you all.”

Henry’s voice gained more confidence as he replied: “Yes. But what has been his conduct since then?”

“You should know better than I. At mall, at tennis, at the chase - you have been with him far more than I.”

“Yes, in the day. But at night?”

Marguerite was silent, and he repeated with more assurance: “What of his nights?”

She must say something. “Well, what of them?”

“Does he not spend them with Madame de Sauve?”

“How do you know that?”

He picked the embroidery of his sleeve as he replied: “Well, I do. I am interested.”

“Do you come here to remind me that I am without natural protection or love? That my family used me as a bait which my husband does not desire?”

The young duke drew his chair nearer to his sister. “You are unkind! I love you, and will guard you. Only leave it to me.”

“I suppose it was our mother who sent you here?”

“What could make you think that?”

“Because you are trying to persuade me to agree to my husband’s death.”

“But it has become inevitable.”

“But why?”

“Because the king and the queen-mother have decided to end the Huguenots. In a week there will not be fifty alive in the whole land. I joined the new religion myself when I thought it would be coming into favour. But now I see my mistake. And will you hesitate because you have a husband who treats you with such contempt? You, who are the cleverest as well as the most beautiful woman in France?”

“If you think me wise, will you listen to me? I saw Charles yesterday in one of his fits of passion. They have become beyond his control, and I should say that each one shortens his life by ten years. Anyone can see that he will not live long. And the King of Poland is dead, and you know the rumour that the crown is to be offered to one of our own house. Is it a time to pick quarrels, or seek allies to support our hopes?”

The duke rose and paced the chamber, as though bewildered by what she said.

“What,” he asked irritably, “is the use of a dead ally? I tell you Navarre will not be alive in a week’s time. And, if you will not listen, you must not complain of what may happen to you.”

Marguerite turned pale at this double threat, but watched him depart without further words. A moment later he returned.

“Margot,” he said, “can you not see that you have a better ally in the Duke of Guise? In destroying the Huguenots, has he not become king of all who hold the Catholic faith?”

“Is it a son of Henry II, who gives that name to a duke of Lorraine?”

“You won’t look at things as they really are!”

“I admit that your real thoughts are an enigma to me.”

“The Princess de Porcian is not immortal. Suppose our brother D’Anjou shall

accept the Polish crown? Suppose Charles shall die? Suppose I am King of France? Could you not reign beside me as Queen of the Catholics?”

Marguerite was surprised at the far-reaching thoughts of this cowardly and foppish youth, who was not commonly credited even with average common sense, but she responded coldly: “There is one thing which is itself enough to upset all your splendid plan. I have no love for the Duke of Guise.”

“Then who would you prefer to marry?”

“No one.”

D’Alençon gazed at her as though confounded by a folly he could not probe. Pressing an icy hand to a forehead which ached to distraction, he went out again, and this time did not return.

Marguerite remained in unquiet thought until a messenger arrived from the queen-mother requesting that she would accompany her on a pilgrimage to the Cemetery of the Innocents.

“Yes,” she said at once, and ordered her horse.

She joined a gay group of about twenty, among whom were the king, and the queen-mother, with Tavannes at her side. Henry of Navarre, for whom she looked, was not there.

But her glance met that of Madame de Sauve, and she understood that Henry’s mistress had something she would be glad of an opportunity to say. So they waited their chance, which came as they entered the cemetery. Here the cavalcade was met by its clergy, and Catherine’s attention was occupied for a moment by the address which they presented. Madame de Sauve pushed her horse to Marguerite’s side. “Madame,” she said, “may I kiss your hand?”

Marguerite extended it, and as Madame de Sauve’s lips touched it, she felt something slipped up her sleeve.

At that moment, Catherine turned her head, and when the ceremony was over she called Marguerite, with a smile. “Are you,” she asked, “on such affectionate terms with Madame de Sauve, that you take her public salute?”

“A viper,” Marguerite replied, “is always ready to sting.”

“So you are jealous?” Catherine asked, with her usual smile.

“You are wrong, mother. The King of Navarre is no more to me than I am to him. But I know my enemies from my friends. If I did not, should I be your child?”

Catherine turned away, her suspicion allayed, and at that moment other pilgrims arrived. The Duke of Guise, with many gentlemen round him, fresh from recent bloodshed; and there was a litter, draped in rich tapestry, which halted before the king.

“The Duchess de Nevers,” Charles cried. “A true Catholic who deserves our thanks! They tell me, cousin, that you made war from your window, and slew one Huguenot with a stone.”

Henriette blushed deliciously: “Sire, it was another part which I played. It was a wounded Catholic whom I had the pleasure to save.”

“Do you go back with us?” Catherine asked.

The duchess looked at Marguerite, and read her friend’s glance aright. “No, madame, unless such be your desire. I am going into the city with the Queen of Navarre.”

“And what shall you do there?”

Marguerite answered: “We have to inspect some Greek books which have been taken from a Huguenot pastor, and are now at the Tower of St. Jacques la Boucherie.”

“You would do better to see the last Huguenot flung into the Seine.”

“So we will, if your majesty command us,” Henriette answered readily.

Catherine looked doubtfully at the two young women, and Marguerite, conscious of this, cast her eyes around as though seeking someone.

“What are you looking for?”

“Madame de Sauve. She must have gone back to the Louvre.”

“Did I not say you were jealous? What folly! Come, Henriette, take her along with you.”

Marguerite, still looking round, feigned reluctance to go, but as soon as they were beyond Catherine’s hearing she said: “Take me away at once. I have important things to tell you.”

“Will your majesty deign to enter my litter?”

“Yes. But you will have to take me back to the Louvre.”

“My litter, like myself, is at your majesty’s disposal.”

Marguerite entered the litter, and, as soon as she felt it move, drew out the note of Madame de Sauve, and read: “I am commanded to send two keys tonight to the King of Navarre. One will let him out of the chamber in which he is confined. The other will let him into mine, where I am told that I must keep him till six in the morning. Your majesty must decide what shall be done. My life is nothing.”

“What is that?” asked the Duchess de Nevers.

Marguerite tore it to fragments. “I have a lot to tell you,” she said.

CHAPTER XII

THE FRIENDS CONFIDE

“WHERE are we going?” Marguerite asked.

“I am taking the liberty of conducting your majesty to the Hotel de Guise.”

“My majesty commands you to forget my majesty. You know the compact we made… The duke and your husband will not be there?”

“No. I am as free as a bird!… But your majesty promised me your confidence. What do you want me to do?”

“Your majesty again! I shall be angry, Henriette, if —”

“I will remember. Always your respectful servant in public: your friend and confidant when alone. Is that it, Marguerite!”

“Just that, dear one. Let it be proved by a kiss.”

And the two beautiful women, the one so full of lighthearted life, the other pale with apprehension and doubt, joined their lips as they were ready to join their thoughts.

“Tell me now,” said Henriette. “Are you really married?”

“No. But that is the trouble. I must be now.”

“When?”

“Tomorrow.”

“Oh, poor Marguerite. Is it really necessary?”

“Absolutely.”

“And you don’t want to? Mordi! as someone is always saying, but that is sad!”

“You know someone who says Mordi?” Marguerite asked smiling.

“You ask questions instead of answering. Finish your tale first, and you shall have mine.”

“It is this. The King of Navarre is in love, but certainly not with me. I am not in love, or certainly not with him. But we must both change, or appear to, before morning comes.”

“Well, change! He’ll soon do the same.”

“It is impossible. I am less inclined to it than ever.”

“Less inclined? Only in regard to your husband, I hope.”

“Henriette, I have a doubt. It is about religion. Do you regard Catholics and Huguenots differently?”

“In politics?”

“No. In love.”

“My dear! There is only one deity there. He who is named Eros - Cupido - Amor. He whose eyes are bandaged. Mordi, vive la devotion!”

“You have an odd way of praying. - You, who hurl stones at Huguenots!”

“Oh, but the king had it all wrong! Did you hear my reply?”

“No, you spoke so quickly.”

“That is well. I will tell it you my own way. But end your tale

“I am afraid,” Marguerite laughed, “when I think of the stones you throw.”

“Then you have chosen a Huguenot! Well, I will promise to do the same next time myself.”

“Meaning that you have chosen a Catholic now?”

“Mordi!”

“I understand.”

“Then tell me who this Huguenot is.”

“I have not chosen him. He is nothing to me. Probably he never will be anything. You must understand that.”

“But what kind of a man is he? You know how curious I am.”

“He is as beautiful as Benvenuto Cellini’s Nisus. He took sanctuary in my room.”

“Oh, he did! Of course, without any invitation from you?”

“Don’t laugh, Henriette. He is between life and death.”

“He is ill?”

“He is dangerously wounded.”

“It sounds troublesome. And what have you done with this young man who is nothing to you?”

“I have hidden him in my cabinet.”

“Young - handsome - wounded. And you hide, and desire to save him. He will be most ungrateful unless he show himself very grateful for that.”

“He is already more grateful than I desire.”

“And the poor young man interests the Queen of Navarre?”

“Only for pity’s sake.”

“It is the virtue which ruins us all.”

“And the trouble is that my brothers, or even my husband, may find him there.”

“So you are going to ask me to hide your Huguenot while he is ill, and return him when he is well.”

“I am not looking forward so far as that. But if you could hide him - if you could save his life - I should be grateful to you. You can do what you will in the Hotel de Guise. You have a cabinet like mine in your room, and it is one to which no one comes. Keep him there, and when he is well, you can set him free.”

“There is one difficulty, dearest. The cage has one bird in it already.”

“What! You have saved someone too?”

“That is what I told your brother… Look, Marguerite. The tale is as romantic as yours. I was looking out of my room at the Hotel de Guise, at a house that was burning opposite. In the street below men were shouting and cursing, and women moaned, and I looked over the balcony, and there was a hero - an Ajax-Telamon - fighting alone. I like heroes! I trembled at every blow till he fell.”

“How was that?”

“An old woman threw something on him from a window across the road. Then I sent out the guard, and they brought him in.”

“And from that point your story is like my own?”

“Except that it is a Catholic whom I helped. The Count Annibal de Coconnas is one whom I have no reason to hide.”

Marguerite laughed. “What a dreadful name!”

“Well, he makes it one of whom no one need feel ashamed. But put on your mask.”

“Why?”

“Because I intend to show you my hero.”

“He is handsome?”

“I thought so when he was fighting. I admit he didn’t look quite the same next morning. But I don’t think you’ll see very much wrong.”

“Then I mustn’t bring my own friend?”

“Of course you can. They can share the room

“And kill each other as soon as they’re able to stand?”

“Oh, there’s no danger of that! M. Coconnas can only see out of one eye. And your Huguenot is too badly wounded. You have only to tell him not to talk religion.”

“Thanks,” Marguerite said, pressing her friend’s hand, which was withdrawn with the remark: “But here we are. Your majesty allow me to do the honours of the Hotel de Guise to the Queen of Navarre.”

Leaving the litter, and passing the saluting guard, Henriette led the way to her own apartment, where she asked a soft-voiced Sicilian maid: “Mica, how does he do now?”

“Well, madame, if we judge by the way he eats!”

“Very well, you can go now.”

As she withdrew, Marguerite’s lively companion asked: “Shall I call him out; or will you go in to him?”

“Can’t I see him without being seen?”

“But you are masked!”

“Still, he might recognise me.”

“How prudent you have become now that you are Queen of Navarre!”

As Marguerite only smiled in reply, Henriette went on: “Well, then, we must see what can be done.”

Softly, she approached the door of the cabinet, before which a tapestry hung, and, lifting this, applied her eye to the keyhole.

“You are in luck. He is at the table, facing this way.”

Curiosity conquering dignity, Marguerite followed her friend’s example. She drew back next moment with an exclamation of incredulity. “It is impossible…

But it is true!”

“What is?”

“Hush! Not so loud. It is the man who tried to kill my Huguenot. He broke into my bedchamber. He struck him while I protected him with my arms. How fortunate that I have not been seen.”

“Then, if you have seen him in action, you know how handsome he is.”

“I did not regard him. It was M. de la Mole who had my attention.”

“And what do you think of him now?”

“M. de la Mole?”

“No. M. de Coconnas.”

Marguerite hesitated. “Well, really, you know —”

“You haven’t forgiven him for wounding your Huguenot?” Marguerite laughed. “Considering that slash under the eye, I should say that the debt was paid.”

“Then we can make them friends. Send him to me.”

“Yes. But not yet.”

“When then?”

“When you have introduced your friend to another chamber.”

The two young women looked at each other with comprehending eyes.

“Very well,” Henriette said. “That makes us better friends than before.”

“Always friends,” said the Queen of Navarre.

The two friends embraced.

“And the password, if we have need?” the duchess asked. “It shall be that of your own god: Eros-Cupido-Amor.” After that, they embraced again.

CHAPTER XIII

A KEY TO MORE DOORS THAN ONE

WHEN Marguerite returned to the Louvre, and reached her own apartment, she found Gillonne in a state of impatient excitement.

“Madame de Sauve,” she said, “has been here, and has brought this key. She said it was given to her by the queen-mother, and that you would understand why she had brought it to you.”

Marguerite took the key, pondering what it would mean. It was clear that Catherine wished the King of Navarre to spend the night in Madame de Sauve’s room, and that there was some evil purpose in that.

At last she took a small piece of paper, and wrote: “Don’t go to Madame de Sauve. Come to my apartment, Marguerite.”

Then she rolled it up, and put it into the hollow end of the key. She told Gillonne to wait till evening should come, and then slip it under Henry’s door.

After that, her thoughts turned to her own wounded prisoner. She entered the cabinet, and was surprised to find La Mole no longer in bed, but dressed in his torn and bloodstained clothes, and seated on the couch, from which he made a faint effort to rise.

“What is this!” Marguerite exclaimed. “Is this how you obey your physician’s orders? Did I not tell you to lie quietly till I returned?”

“I did all I could,” Gillonne said. “But he wouldn’t listen to me. He says he must leave at once.”

“Leave the Louvre? Are you mad? You are too weak to walk. Your shoulder was bleeding again this morning.”

“Even so, I cannot stay here.”

Marguerite changed her tone to reproach: “I did not think you would be so

ungrateful as that.”

“Ungrateful? I shall be grateful to my inmost soul while my life endures.”

“Which would not be Long. You would die from fresh loss of blood, or you would be recognised as a Huguenot, and that means being killed at once.”

“All the same, I must go.”

Marguerite looked at him with troubled reproachful eyes. “There is doubtless some one you can trust - someone dear to you - to whom you prefer to go.”

“Madame, believe me, it is not that. I am a stranger here. You were the first woman to whom I spoke after I entered Paris.”

“Then in heaven’s name —”

“Madame, last night you did not rest, and tonight —”

Marguerite dropped her eyes, but there was a blush she could not hide. “Gillonne,” she said,” it is night now. You can take the key.”

Gillonne, smiling, withdrew.

“But if you are friendless in Paris,” she asked, “what will you do?”

“I shall find friends enough. I should tell you that my mother was a Catholic. It was a great grief to her that I changed my faith. When I was being hunted, I seemed to see her pleading before me, and I made a vow that, if I should escape, I would return to the old religion. God not only saved my life, he sent me an angel to make

worth while to live.”

Marguerite made no answer to this. She was not often beaten a battle of wits which she meant to win. She thought a moment, and changed the direction of her attack.

“But you say nothing of your mission to the King of Navarre. Are you casting off your old allegiance with your old faith?”

“Surely no. But it is for that very reason I cannot stay.”

“Will you explain that’?”

“Madame, I know how great is the danger that surrounds the King of Navarre… Everything can be heard in this cabinet.”

“Then what did you hear?”

“I heard your conversation with your brother this morning.”

“With François?” Marguerite said, blushing again at the confused recollection of what the subject of that conversation had been.

“With the Duke d’Alençon. Yes, madame. And between Madame de Sauve and Gillonne this afternoon.”

“And from what you heard?”

“I know that your husband will come - that you love him - that you will have confidences which I must not - I will not hear.”

Marguerite looked at him in a pleased, considering way which he was unable to understand. “You poor child!” were the words which came at last to his astonished ears. For a time they looked at each other in silence.

Marguerite leaned back in her chair. Half-hidden by a heavy curtain she was aware that she was in shadow to him, while she could read every thought that disturbed his mind.

“Then you feel yourself incapable of keeping secrets?” she asked.

“Madame,” he said, without making a direct reply, “I am a miserable nature. I am made more wretched by watching happiness which I cannot share.”

“Do you mean the happiness of the King of Navarre?”

“Obviously.”

“And why so?”

“Has he not your majesty’s pity?”

Marguerite restlessly crumpled the silk of her girdle purse, tearing the golden twist. “Then,” she said, “you refuse to see the King of Navarre?”

“I would not be in his way here.”

“And the Duke d’Alençon?”

“No. Certainly not him.”

“Why?”

“Because, though I may be resolved to leave the Protestant faith, I am not the kind of Catholic who can be counted a friend of the Duke d’Alençon, or the Duke of Guise.”

Marguerite lowered her eyes. The words were quietly spoken, but she felt their sting, and at that moment Gillonne returned.

An exchange of glances was sufficient to tell her that the key had been safely delivered. Her glance returned to La Mole. “M. de la Mole is so proud,” she said, “that I hesitate to make a proposition to him.”

“Madame,” he protested, rising, and was checked by so sharp a pain that he swayed uncertainly, and clutched the tapestry.

Marguerite sprang up, and gave him the support of her arm. “Don’t you see that you can’t do without me?”

“It is true,” he said, “I want you as I want heaven’s light, or the air I breathe.”

There was no time for her to reply before three loud knocks sounded upon the door.

“Shall I open?” Gillonne asked, in a frightened voice.

“Wait a moment. It may be the King of Navarre.”

“Madame,” pleaded La Mole, “I entreat you to let me go.”

Marguerite closed his mouth with a warm and perfumed hand. “Will you be silent?” she whispered. “Who is this rebel who will not obey his Queen?”

Then she withdrew her hand, and, giving him no time to reply, darted out of the cabinet, and stood leaning against the door, conscious of the wild beating of her heart, which she could not still.

“Open, Gillonne,” she said.

Henry entered, quiet and self-possessed as usual, but with some evidence of uneasiness in his eyes.

“You have sent for me, madame?”

“Yes. You had my letter?”

“Yes.”

“Which impressed you?”

“Yes.”

“And perhaps caused you some apprehension?”

“Yes. It did. But I remembered two things. I remembered the bright light of generosity in your eyes when we met on our wedding night. I remembered the flash of courage in the same eyes at the moment which had been designed for my death… I am surrounded by deadly foes. I have no hope but in you. I said, if that hope be false, I shall yet die a death which will be remembered in after days - Henry of Navarre who was betrayed by his own wife.”

“I think,” Marguerite said quietly, “that you will speak differently when you know what is being done for you now by one who loves you - and whom you love.”

Henry looked both startled and puzzled by this reply. His grey eyes, under black brows, gazed at her in piercing curiosity

She laughed aloud, with the change of mood which was as quick with her as lightning in summer skies. “Don’t be so frightened,” she said, “I wasn’t talking

about myself."

"Yet it was you who sent me the key. This is your note, is it not?"

"Yes. The letter is mine. But as for the key! It was through the hands of four women before it came to you."

"Four?"

"Yes. The queen-mother, Madame de Sauve, Gillonne's and mine. And now let us talk seriously. Is it true, as was being said yesterday, that you have consented to abjure?"

"No."

"But you have decided in your own mind?"

"I am thinking… When one is only twenty, and almost a king, - ventre-saint-gris! - there are things that are worth a mass."

"Such as life, I suppose?"

Henry smiled slightly.

"You are fencing with me. You are not really frank."

"I keep frankness for my allies. If you were my ally and —"

"And your wife, you would like to say?"

"Yes - and my wife. Then I might wish to remain King of the Huguenots - I might wish to live."

Marguerite gazed at him with a glance as intense, as questioning, as he had given her a few minutes before.

"You think you can keep your life?"

"I have some expectation. We are in a world in which nothing is sure."

It was an attitude which received little encouragement from Marguerite's reply:

“You have shown - shall I say such moderation? - in considering the renunciation of your crown and your religion, that you may look forward also to renouncing your alliance with a daughter of France.”

Henry was perceptibly disconcerted by the directness of this attack, but he recovered himself instantly. “Madame,” he said, “will you consider that for the moment I am without free will? I shall be very slow to decline anything which the King of France, in whose power I am, may require me to do. Were I free to choose, I would rather live the life of a cloistered monk, or a gamekeeper on some country estate, than owe my safety to a marriage which was forced upon me.”

“Your majesty,” she answered, in a bantering tone which was not far from contempt, “has little confidence in his own star.”

“The storm is such that it is not easy to see.”

“And if the breath of a woman should blow it aside, so that the star would be as bright as before?”

“It would not be easy,”

“You doubt the woman?”

“I doubt her power.”

“You rather mean that you doubt her will.”

“I said that I doubt her power. A woman’s strength is her love. She is the one on whose love I have no cause to rely.”

As Marguerite made no reply, he went on: “Listen. When you heard the bell of St. Germain, you must have thought that it might bring recovered liberty to you. I know that. To me, the most temporarily important thing was to save my own life. It may have cost me the throne of Navarre. I know that too. But it is something to regain the right to speak freely here, as I could not do on that night, knowing, as I did, that you had someone concealed in your cabinet.”

With these words he rose, as though to go, and then checked himself with the recollection of how he had been summoned there. “But,” he asked, “you still

have something to tell me? Or did you only wish that I should thank you for saving my life, as I know you did?”

Marguerite clutched his arm, as he turned to go. He saw that she was pale to the lips, as she said bitterly: “Are you crazed? Can you not see that I have not saved your life? That the danger is no less than it was before? Are you so blind that you can see nothing in my letter but an invitation, as though I weary of your coldness, and make advances to you?”

“But, madame - ” Henry began, in a voice of surprise and protestation, but at the same time there came the sound of a little scratching noise at the other side of the secret door. Marguerite signalled for silence. “Listen,” she said.

The low trembling voice of Madame de Sauve came through the door. “The queen-mother,” it said, “has just left her apartment.”

“Where is she going?”

“She is coming here.”

“I was sure she would,” Marguerite said.

“And I feared it,” Henry answered. “See this.”

He opened a black velvet doublet, to show a coat of fine mail below, and a long Milanese dagger which flashed as he drew it out like a viper in the warm grass.

“They are useless here,” Marguerite repeated. “Put the dagger back. If she comes this way, she will come alone.”

“But —”

“It is she! Be quiet.” Marguerite stooped to his ear and whispered a few words which he heard with a look of astonishment, and then obediently concealed himself behind the curtains of the bed.

It was little more than a minute later that a key turned in the lock - for Catherine had a master key for every door in the Louvre.

The queen-mother stood at the door. There were four gentlemen behind her,

whom she ordered to stand back.

Marguerite leapt from the bed, as though frightened by this sudden intrusion into her room, and then, emerging from the curtains, appeared to recognise Catherine, and with an expression of surprise so natural that even her mother was deceived, came forward and kissed her hand.

CHAPTER XIV

BETWEEN MOTHER AND DAUGHTER

CATHERINE glanced round with eyes which missed nothing. She saw Marguerite's scattered clothes - the velvet slippers which had been kicked off at the foot of the bed. She did not doubt that her daughter's slumbers had been disturbed. With a satisfied smile she seated herself in an armchair.

"It is time," she said, "that you should understand how much your brother and I desire to see you happy… You must be aware that, in arranging your marriage we acted under one of the political necessities which are inevitable to those who rule. But I must confess that I did not foresee that the attitude of the King of Navarre toward one so young, so beautiful, and so seductive, would have been as contemptuous as it has."

Marguerite, blushing prettily, as though pleased by her mother's praise, and with a mind otherwise at ease, drew her night-dress more closely across her breasts. Catherine continued: "It was only this evening I heard - or I should have come before now - that he does not know what is due either to a lovely woman, or to a daughter of France. I know now that he is involved with one of my own-ladies-in-waiting, and from your own melancholy appearance, from the way in which you have spoken this lady's name before I had any key to what you might mean, I can see that you bear a wound which cannot be allowed to bleed only inwardly."

Marguerite stared at this interpretation of her own feelings, and there was a slight movement of the bed curtains, which Catherine did not observe.

Feeling that she was progressing beyond her expectation, she went on in an affectionate and almost caressing manner: "It is an insult which might be avenged in blood by the meanest gentleman in the land: a wound which my hand shall heal. That a kinglet such as he should insult a daughter of France, and one of your beauty and exalted qualities, gives me both the right and the duty to separate you from him, so that you may be free to make a worthier and happier choice."

"Yet, madame, in spite of all you have said, I must reply that I am married to the

King of Navarre."

"Married to him! Is a marriage made by the church alone? It is a word which Madame de Sauve might more truly use. Come child, this key will open her chamber door. Come, and see for yourself!"

"Madame, I respectfully entreat you to speak more softly. For not only are you entirely wrong, but I am afraid that my husband may be awakened, and hear your words."

Marguerite rose as she said this, her night-dress flying open as she did so, and its short sleeve exposing the lovely modelling of her naked arm, as she drew back the curtain and revealed the King of Navarre, who appeared to be in profound slumber on the disordered bed.

"You see," Marguerite said smiling, "you have been badly informed."

She stood thus for a long moment, the sight appearing to have the effect of Medusa's head on the older woman, and then dropped the curtain.

"You were saying, madame - " she said, as she resumed her seat, looking with innocently smiling eyes at the baffled fury which she confronted.

But Catherine had no more to say. Additionally maddened by her daughter's inscrutable calmness, she yet had sufficient self-control to restrain further words as she rose, and left the room by the way she had come.

As the door closed upon her, Henry rose. Flushed with excitement, with a hand that trembled, he seized that of his wife, and fell on his knees beside her.

"Marguerite," he said, "how can I ever show my gratitude?"

She laughed in reply. "How droll you look!" she said. "Under-garments and shirt of mail!"

He kissed her hands, and his lips moved upward along her arm.

She withdrew gently. "Do you forget," she asked, "that a woman to whom you owe your life suffers and sighs? It was she through whose sacrifice you are here, and she may even now be paying with her life, for my mother's anger has no

mercy at all."

Henry's expression altered. He rose and moved toward the door.

"But," Marguerite continued, with a smiling glance, and one of her bewildering changes of tone. "I recollect, and become more easy of mind! The key is supposed to have reached you without any message. It will be your own choice alone that you came to me!"

"And my choice it is - if you can only forget."

"Oh, sire, speak lower!" Marguerite replied, with a repetition of the tone and manner she had used to her mother a few minutes before. "You can be heard from the cabinet!"

"Oh!" Henry replied, with a look in which amusement contended with disappointment. "I was forgetting the probability that I was not cast for the last scene of the play tonight. May I ask who you have in there?"

"You had better see for yourself. You will meet a brave and loyal gentleman, who was badly wounded on the night of the massacre in attempting to bring a warning to you."

With this somewhat imaginative account of the course of events which had brought La Mole to her rooms, she opened the door, and gave her husband a sight of the wounded man.

Sustaining his ironical glance with entire composure, "sire," she continued, "as I know that this gentleman goes in danger of constant death, I desire to place him under your protection."

"I am the Count Lerac de la Mole, whose letter of introduction you have already had."

"Yes," Henry replied, "the queen gave me your letter. But had you not another from the Governor of Languedoc?"

"I have it here, sire… It was to be given only to your own hands."

Henry broke the seal. "You did rightly," he said. "But it is a warning that comes

too late. D'Auriac is a Catholic, and would know what goes on. But he is not an assassin. He tells me to flee at once to Béarn."

"I came instantly to the Louvre, but was told that you could not receive me."

"It is no fault of yours. Yet had I had it three days ago I might now be safe in Rochelle's walls, with a regiment of horse around me."

"Henry," Marguerite said, "what is done is done. It is to things as they are that you should direct your mind."

"In my place, should you think that that could be hopefully done?"

"Yes. I call it a game of three tricks, of which the first only is lost."

"If I thought you were my partner in such a game!"

"Had I wished to play on the other side, should I have done as have tonight?"

"You make me ashamed! I am not ungrateful. I will believe that there will be a good end."

"But, madame," he continued, after a short pause, "this gentleman cannot remain here without inconvenience to you, nor without scandal should he be found. What are you proposing to do?"

"Sire, they are points on which we agree. How can he be got out of the Louvre?"

"It will be difficult."

"Cannot he find a place in your retinue?"

"Ah, madame, if it were yesterday! Today, I am half a Catholic, and I have no followers at all."

"Perhaps M. de la Mole also —"

"I know," the king answered, "that he had a Catholic mother."

La Mole said nothing. In the dangerous atmosphere of that court, he was learning the value of silence.

Marguerite dealt with the position adroitly: “Sire, we forget that he is wounded, and needing rest I am half asleep myself.”

“Well, let him rest here for tonight.”

“Sire, you should honour him who has served you loyally. Your bed shall be yonder couch, and you shall permit him to sleep at its foot… I will call Gillonne, and return to my own bed, or I shall go to sleep as I stand.”

Henry knew that he had forfeited his right to object to such a proposal, and his sense of gratitude was too strong and recent to allow the obtrusion of baser feelings. He said: “If M. de la Mole can walk so far, he shall have my own couch.”

“Which would protect neither of you. Prudence demands that you remain here for tonight.” And, as she said this, she called Gillonne, and they began to prepare the cushions for the two gentlemen to repose as she had designed.

Back in her own room, she whispered to Gillonne: “You must think of some pretext which will bring the Duke d’Alençon here before eight in the morning.”

As Gillonne went, two o’clock struck. Marguerite, safe now behind well-bolted doors, soon heard the sound of the king’s snoring from the cabinet, but she could not sleep. She thought: “He has fine eyes… He is devoted to me… But he was flying. Is he a coward?… He offered to abjure. I don’t like that. He is timid of me… Will it end abruptly?… Anyway, it is a dream that begins well.”

She turned over restlessly. “Well, let Henriette’s god decide. Eros-Cupido-Amor!” And on this abjuration she went to sleep.

CHAPTER XV

WHAT WOMAN WILLS, HEAVEN DECREES

MADAME de Sauve lay in bed, half-dressed, with a fearfully beating heart, when she heard the key turn in the lock, and knew that the approaching steps were not those of the youthful and eager king.

Catherine appeared calm, but for two years Charlotte had learned to know and fear the apparent tranquillity of that cold and crafty nature.

She was about to rise, but Catherine signed to her not to do so, so that she remained lying while Catherine stood close to her.

“Did you take the key to the King of Navarre?”

“I did, madame.”

“And you have seen him?”

“No, madame. He should be here any moment. When your key turned, I thought it was he.”

Catherine looked at her in a menacing doubt. Was it simplicity or dissimulation?

“How could that be?” she asked. “You know quite well he is not likely to come here.”

“I believe,” Charlotte replied, sustaining with difficulty the glance which was fixed upon her, “that nothing but death would keep him away.”

“And you doubtless wrote to him?”

“No, madame. Was I wrong in that? I cannot recall that that was what you told me to do.”

Catherine continued to look at her as a serpent is said to look at a bird.

“You think yourself beautiful, and one who can intrigue well?”

“No, indeed, madame. Though there have been times when you have praised me for both.”

“And now I call you an ugly fool, when compared with my own daughter.”

“Madame, that is a comparison which I should not deny.”

“So it follows that the King of Navarre prefers her to you. Do you like that?” Charlotte burst into tears, which came easily to her support. “If it be so, it is the more sorrow for me.”

“Then take my royal word for its truth.”

“But how can your majesty know?”

“Go to her apartment, you doubting fool! You will find him there. Does that make you jealous?”

“Jealous?” Charlotte echoed, gaining wits and courage as she saw how far deception had prevailed. “It is my vanity which is hurt. My interest in the King of Navarre was no more than to obey your majesty’s wish.”

Catherine looked at her keenly. “If that be true - I do not say it is not - am I to believe that you are entirely devoted to me?”

“Command me, madame, and you will see.”

“Well, then, Charlotte, you must pretend (to serve me only, you understand) that you are madly in love with him. You must be violently jealous - as an Italian would be.”

“How, madame, would an Italian lady behave?”

“I will advise you,” Catherine said, and rose, and left her without further words…

Marguerite’s sleep had been short, but she awoke at an early hour. She dressed herself in a negligée of too conspicuous a style to be overlooked, and then knocked at the door where the two men lay.

“It is not enough,” she said to her husband, “that you have made my mother believe that all is well between us. You must make it the talk of the whole court… But,” she added, laughing, “I can promise you that it is the last time that you will be subjected to so severe a trial.”

Henry admitted the prudence of this admonition, and having gone out to seek some of his gentlemen, he exclaimed suddenly that he had left his mantle on the queen’s bed. He then led the way to Marguerite’s apartment, from whom he received it. With looks of open astonishment they watched her, blushing prettily, and not yet fully dressed, as she clasped it on his shoulder with her own hands. And while this little ceremony was still proceeding; an attendant entered to say that the Duke d’Alençon was coming to see his sister.

Gillonne had found that she need use no more than a true tale to bring him there at so early an hour. He glanced first at Henry, next at Marguerite. He was met by a polite salutation, and a calm glance of utter happiness and content. He saw the two pillows at the head of the disordered couch, the king’s hat thrown carelessly on a chair beside it. He was conscious that the colour had left his cheeks as he asked, with affected carelessness: “Does my royal brother join the king at his game of tennis today?”

“Has his majesty done me the honour to choose me as his, partner?” Henry replied acutely, “or is it only, my dear brother a polite suggestion from you?”

“His majesty has not sent me,” the duke replied, not without some confusion of manner. “But you are his companion so often —”

“I shall willingly join his majesty’s game.”

“Henry,” Marguerite said to her brother, “are you in a great hurry to go?”

“Yes. Why?”

“Because I want a few words with you first.”

The two Henrys stood at the door. Navarre surprised, d’Alençon obviously uncomfortable, and both aware of the gravity of her tone.

Without waiting for further reply, she opened the door of the cabinet, and called to La Mole to come out. She addressed her husband: “It is for your majesty to

explain.”

Navarre saw how skilfully he had been trapped. He remembered that d’Alençon, from no religious conviction, but from a political desire to have some popularity of his own to offset the Catholicism of the king, had profferred friendliness to the Huguenot cause - as he himself was now hesitating toward a profession of Catholic faith. He said: “This gentleman, M. de la Mole, brought me a letter from the Governor of Languedoc, and was badly wounded when he arrived in Paris.”

D’Alençon looked at the fine physique, and pale handsome countenance of the wounded man, and there were only envy, anger, and mistrust in his eyes.

Disregarding his evident reluctance, Marguerite drew him aside. “Henry,” she whispered urgently: “you are ambitious. You are third from the succession to the throne. Is it nothing to you to have friends? In this gentleman, you might have a loyal supporter, as he would have a powerful protector in you. I could say more at a better time.” She raised her voice as she continued: “The King of Navarre does not regard my apartment as a suitable place in which M. de la Mole should remain, but perhaps that is a point of view which you do not share.”

Henry admired his sister, who had always found it easy, so long as she left his vanity undisturbed, to influence an inferior intellect and a weaker will.

Now he said: “Of course, I see that, Margot. He oughtn’t to stay here for an hour, and there is no reason he should. Let him come to my apartment. If he serve me well, he will have nothing to fear, nor will he go short of reward.”

The two Henrys departed together, neither of them well pleased with the part he had been constrained to play, and half an hour later La Mole, after being well lectured by Marguerite on that which she had designed for him, ascended the stairs to d’Alençon’s apartment, with a step strangely buoyant for one who had suffered so recent and deep a wound.

For several days after this, the course of events moved so quickly and peacefully in the Louvre as to give a delusive hope that Marguerite’s stratagem would have more than temporary success. Henry would frequently go to his wife’s room at night, as was known to all, and if he subsequently left for that of Madame de Sauve by the secret door, it was known only by those who were most intimately concerned. He made no public recantation, but he went to confession, and

openly to the mass. The queen-mother had changed her manner, and treated him as a beloved son.

The massacre of Huguenots did not cease, but it diminished, for the supply of victims failed. They were dead, in flight, or had abjured. Such barbarities as were still perpetuated were far from Paris.

Charles IX, who had taken a monstrous pleasure in hunting his human prey, must content himself with the noise of a distant chase.

One day he entered his mother's chamber in a state of evident excitement, with a train of courtiers at his heels.

"Mother," he said, "you know the admiral's body was taken away? Well, it has been found! I feared it had been eaten by dogs. But my good people have treated it in a better way. They have dangled it from Montfaucon's gibbet."

"Well?" said Catherine.

"Mother, I should like to see him again - To see the dear old man in his proper place on this lovely day. Shall we not go to Montfaucon, and will you not join us for such a ride?"

"Yes, gladly. But not today. It is an occasion that all should have an invitation to join. Let us go tomorrow, and we shall learn much when we see who come, and who stay away."

"Very well, mother. So let it be. I will go and have an exercise on the horn."

"It is too strenuous for you. You will kill yourself with such exertions."

"Kill myself? Bah! I wish I were sure I should die in no other way. There would be many previous burials then, including that of my dear brother-in-law, who will one day succeed us all - if Nostradamus be a true seer."

Catherine frowned. She said: "My son, I have learned to be most wary of those things which appear least probable. Do as you will, but take care of yourself."

"I will do no more than to blow two or three good blasts to excite my dogs, who get bored if they are not let out for the chase. I should have turned them on to the

Huguenots, and given them better sport."

So he went to the recreation he loved. He took down a horn… It was hard to understand how so strong a blast could come from so weak a frame through such pallid lips.

Meanwhile, Catherine was receiving another visitor in her private room.

René, the Florentine with whom the King of Navarre had fenced so diplomatically on the eve of the massacre, entered.

"René," she asked, "have you renewed the trial of Ruggieri's horoscope?"

"Yes, madame. Do I not always obey your will?"

"And the result?"

"It is still the same."

"The black lamb bleated three times?"

"Yes, madame."

"Being the signs of three cruel deaths in my family?"

"Alas, yes, madame. The prophesy of Nostradamus has been confirmed in every respect."

"What else did you observe?"

"There was a strange displacement of the liver, which we have had before."

"Meaning a change of dynasty? René, we must find some means of preventing that."

"Yes, your majesty. Yet destiny governs all."

"Who can tell? You remember d'Albret's horoscope?"

"Yes, madame. Vives honorata, morieris reformidata, regina amplificabere"

“Which means that she should live honoured, should die feared, and should be more than a queen thereafter? And we know how much she lacked when alive, how we laughed at her when she was dead, and that she is now in her tomb in the common way?”

“Your majesty, it may be interpreted differently. The Queen of Navarre, while alive, enjoyed the love of her children, and the respect of her supporters: she would not have died had you feared her less; and, as queen and martyr, she has doubtless been translated to a celestial crown. Besides, who knows to what eminence her heirs may be destined to rise?”

Catherine was superstitious, even beyond the tendency of the times. The astrologer’s cool assurance daunted her even more than the auguries that he told. She changed the subject abruptly: “Have the Italian perfumes arrived?”

“Yes, madame.”

“Send me a box.”

“Of which kind?”

“The same as - ” She stopped abruptly.

“The same that you recommended to the Queen of Navarre?” René suggested coolly.

“Yes.”

“I need not mix them. Your majesty is now as skilled as myself.”

“Certainly they do not fail.”

“Your majesty has no other instructions to give me?”

“Nothing. Except that we will leave the lamb, and try fowl.”

“Alas, madame, I fear —”

“But you will do as I say.”

René bowed silently, and withdrew.

As soon as he had gone, Catherine called her women, and instructed them to inform the palace of the expedition which she would take on the following day; at which there was a general bustle of preparation.

To La Mole, taken by d'Alençon into his apartment to oblige his sister, and then entirely forgotten, it was like the withdrawal of a bolt in a prison door. He at once sought d'Alençon's permission to attend him. The duke, without even troubling to consider whether he could yet be fit for such an exertion, said: "You will need a horse. You can have one of mine."

Having this permission, La Mole consulted Pare, who was attending him, and asked him to dress and bind his wounds with especial care. This he did, pronouncing them to be healing well, and covering them with gummed taffetas, according to the custom of the time.

Hurrying out he reduced his small store of gold by the purchase of a doublet of fine white satin, a richly embroidered cloak, and a pair of boots of perfumed leather, such as were popular in the court at that period.

While he had been in d'Alençon's apartment, he had had no relief of his loneliness, except that Gillonne had come once to enquire of his health, as though of her own accord, but he was hoping to see once more the face which had filled his thoughts.

And at the same moment that he looked in the mirror to assure himself that there was no fault in his fine attire, a tall red-headed gentleman at the Hotel de Guise was examining, before his own glass, a red mark across his face which his vanity disapproved, and which he found that no cosmetics would hide. He had put on a splendid dress which a tailor had brought to his room without any order from him, or any payment being required, and thus attired scented, and armed, he descended the staircase, patted the neck of the black charger which awaited him at its foot, and, having mounted, began to show his skill in subduing a spirited horse, until the noise of neighings and Mordis brought a lady to the window above whom he saluted with deference, and was rewarded with her kindest smile.

CHAPTER XVI

SWEET IS THE BODY OF A DEAD FOE

IT was about two in the afternoon when the long procession of cavaliers, splendid in gold and jewels and coloured clothes, passed along the Rue St. Denis. The rich and elegant fashions of Francis I had not yet been transformed into the staider, more sombre vestments of a subsequent period. Rather, they had acquired an additional refinement of excellence in harmonies both of line and colour. It was a gay and magnificent cavalcade that, with a following of eager hounds, made its way through the crowded street.

That morning, in the court, and choosing a moment when Henry of Navarre could not fail to hear, Catherine had spoken of the proposed visit to the gibbet of Montfaucon, and its dreadful burden, as though it were a natural recreation to take. And Henry, aware of the side-glance which she gave to the Duke of Guise, which he had not been intended to see, surprised and disconcerted them by the readiness with which he said: “Well, why not? It will be a good ride on a lovely day.”

So he had ordered his horse, and as he rode at the side of the French king, this son of a poisoned mother - this king without a kingdom - this Huguenot turned Catholic - this prince with the peasant manners of the mountaineer, the habit of familiarity with his inferiors which he would never attempt to change - was the one who most drew the eyes of the curious crowd, some of whom assailed him with cries of: “To mass, Henry! To mass!”

He turned to them to reply: “Ventre-saint-gris, I went yesterday. I went today, I am going tomorrow. Do you want more than that?” at which the cries ceased.

Marguerite rode a short distance behind him, so fresh, so beautiful, so elegant, that she was the admiration of all who saw, though these glances of approbation might include the lively figure of the Duchess de Nevers, who rode beside her.

In low voices, drowned by the clatter of many horses, they exchanged confidences as they rode.

“What have you done with your Huguenot?”

“He is safe. And the wholesale murderer - what have you done with him?”

“He wished to come, so we gave him my husband’s warhorse, a great black beast as big as himself. You should have seen how he reined it!… I thought he could come without risk of bloodshed, as your Huguenot will be too weak to appear.”

“So he must be. But, ma foi! I do not think he would fight anyone, if he were here. He is not a hawk, but a dove. After all,” she concluded, with a shrug which would be difficult to describe, he may not be a Huguenot, but a Buddhist, sworn to avoid the shedding of blood… But here comes my brother riding down all who are not quick enough to get out of the way.”

She spoke of the Duke d’Alençon, who came at the head of his gentlemen, by way of the Porte-montmartre to join the procession, and it was just as the two parties met that Henriette exclaimed: “But look! It is my hero. On the black horse. See how he rides?”

Marguerite laughed: “That is more than he is doing himself. He is looking only at you. Unless he have more care where he is - ” She checked herself as that which had seemed likely occurred. A cavalier of the suite of d’Alençon, who already had sufficient difficulty in controlling a high-spirited horse, found it impossible to avoid collision with one who was reining his horse in a blind way.

The black charger stumbled and swerved, Coconnas nearly losing his seat, and retaining his hat with difficulty.

As he set it more firmly upon his head, he turned angrily to see whom it was into whom he had ridden.

“Dieu!” Marguerite said quietly. “It is my Huguenot.”

“That pale, handsome young man?”

“Yes. He who almost upset your Piedmontese.”

“Oh, something awful will happen now! They know each other. You can tell that.”

So they did. They stared at each other in equal anger, Coconnas showing the more surprise, for he had thought his enemy to be desperately wounded, if not

already dead. Then La Mole spurred his horse to regain his place in d'Alençon's troop, while Coconnas remained twirling his long moustache until it almost entered his eye.

Marguerite's tone was sadly contemptuous, as she said to her friend: "Then I was not deceived! He is what I feared." She bit her lip till it bled.

"But think how handsome he is!" Henriette replied, being disposed to console her friend.

It was at this moment that, as d'Alençon took his place behind the king, his suite passed the two friends, and La Mole, bowing to his horse's neck, remained uncovered, in anticipation of Marguerite's recognition. But he was met with a scornful glance, after which she turned her head, and looked steadfastly in another direction.

"Oh, how unkind you are!" Henriette exclaimed. "I declare he has gone so pale. I should not be surprised if he should swoon!"

"It only needs that," Marguerite answered. "Where are your salts?"

But now the gibbet was in sight. They heard the croaking of angry crows which flew off reluctantly as they were disturbed by the advancing guards who were forming a large ring which could be entered only by the retinue of the king.

Into this ring rode the king, and the queen-mother, followed by the king's two brothers, the Dukes of Anjou and d'Alençon; the King of Navarre; M. de Guise; and their immediate followers. After them came Queen Marguerite with the Duchess of Nevers, and behind them all the ladies of the household, the flying squadron of the queen-mother, as they were called, and then all the miscellaneous retinue of a great court, pages, squires, and servitors - in all, the concourse may not have been less than ten thousand people.

The king halted before the high set gibbet on which the admiral's headless body had been hanged by the legs, forming a hideous spectacle, covered with dirt, and torn by the hungry crows.

It was a sight at once awful and grotesque as the long column of handsome lords and dainty ladies defiled and halted before the row of gibbets with their blackening carcasses and long ill-omened arms.

Henry of Navarre, in spite of his self-control and powers of dissimulation, felt it to be more than he could sustain.

“Sire,” he said to the king, “do you not think the stench is too strong to be longer endured?”

The king’s eyes sparkled with a devilish glee. “Do you think so, Henry? Have you forgotten the proverb: The body of a dead foe has a sweet scent?”

“Faith, sire,” said Tavannes, “you might have asked Ronsard for an epitaph had you known we should be coming here today.”

“There was no need, Gentlemen, listen to this, which I have been composing myself:

“Ci-git, - mais c’est mal entendu,

Pour lui le mot est trop honnéte, -

Ici l’amiral est pendu

Par les pieds, à faute de tête.”

“Bravo! bravo!” cried the Catholic courtiers, while such as still remained alive of the Huguenots affected not to hear what was said. Henry had already turned away, and was talking to his wife, and to Henriette.

“Come, sire,” Catherine said, “after all, we have endured the sweet savour more than enough. Let us take our last farewell of the admiral and return to Paris.”

Waving her hand ironically at the gibbet, as one who bids adieu to a friend, she put her horse in motion, and the long train was soon defiling backward on to the Paris road.

In a few minutes, the whole procession had moved away, leaving only one gentleman, mounted on a black horse, who remained gazing, as though in ecstasy, at the stone pillars, chains, hooks and gibbets, and the foul burdens they bore. But it was for only a moment that he was alone. Another cavalier, in a white satin doublet, and with a gallant plume, rode back to join the gentleman whose black horse now showed gigantic in relief against a horizon reddened by

the setting sun.

They were not entirely unobserved, for the Duchess of Nevers looked back, and said to her companion: “We were both wrong Marguerite. The Piedmontese has remained behind, and de la Mole is meeting him now.”

“Mordi! as your friend would say. Then something is going to happen. I am truly glad I was wrong.”

They were now passing a lane, having high hedges on both sides, which slanted back to the neighbourhood of the gibbets. A word passed between the two girls, and then to Gillonne and to the captain whom the duchess had brought for escort. The four horses turned into the lane.

A few moments later the three women were seated on a hillock of turf such as princesses may often wish for in vain, while the captain stood by, holding the horses’ bridles. They could not see all that happened. They were too secluded to be observed, and too distant to hear more than an occasional word.

La Mole rode up behind the Piedmontese, who turned to meet him.

“Is it not a dream? You are really alive?”

“Yes. It is no thanks to you.”

“Yet it is curious for a Huguenot to be alive to see the admiral swing on his iron hook.”

“I am no longer a Huguenot.”

“Bah! You are converted at so convenient a time? That is well contrived.”

“Monsieur,” La Mole replied, maintaining the air of polite gravity with which he had carried on the conversation to this point. “I had made a vow to be converted if I were spared.”

“It was a most prudent resolution. Have you made others of the same kind?”

“I have made one.”

“And that?”

“To hang you to the nail below the admiral’s body.”

“While I am alive?”

“No. When my sword has passed through you.”

“My little gentleman, it is a nail which you could not reach.”

“Then I will stand on your horse, you great slayer of men… You may assassinate when you are a hundred to one, but the hour comes when you stand alone, and that hour is now… If my hand were not still unsteady from a treacherous wound, I would put a ball through your ugly head.”

“My ugly head?” Coconnas roared, as he dismounted hastily. “Get down, and defend yourself.”

“I thought I heard ‘ugly head’,” Henriette whispered. “Would you say it is that?”

“No,” Marguerite laughed. “M. La Mole is unjust. He has a most charming head.”

More slowly than Coconnas, La Mole came down from his horse. He took off his cherry-coloured cloak, showing the white satin doublet, drew his sword, and remained on the defensive.

“Oh!” cried Coconnas, as he made a first pass, and the sharp movement disturbed his wound.

“Oh!” cried La Mole? as he parried that opening thrust, for his shoulder also rebelled at the sudden strain. An uncontrollable burst of laughter came from the bushes, which reached the ears of the two combatants, and caused them to glance aside with what might have been a fatal laxity, had they not been equally oblivious of the risks they ran.

Recognising their audience, they turned back to engage in such a combat as soon caused them to forget the pain of reopened wounds.

“But,” Marguerite said, “this is going beyond a joke.” She began to call aloud:

“Hold, gentlemen! Hold!”

Henriette caught her arm. “Let them alone,” she said. “It will be such a fight as I love to watch. Where have you seen better fencing than that?”

Reckless of consequences as she was always disposed to be, she may also have had the greater confidence in the ability of her champion to survive the strife.

Marguerite became silent from an opposite cause. Should she appear to lack faith in La Mole, and interpose as one who protected a coward?

“Yes,” she said, controlling her fear, “they fight well. But I should say La Mole has the greater skill.”

So it seemed, for Coconnas, conscious of a guard which he could not pass, was retiring, slowly it was true, but retiring, till he had fallen back to the very edge of the ditch.

To this point the two men had fought with the concentration that the deadly ordeal required, and with the caution of those who do not know their opponent’s skill. But now La Mole, seeing Coconnas to be already upon the ditch’s brink, and thinking that the game was in his own hands, made a thrust which went wide, and, at the same moment, Coconnas, as though he had been retiring merely to come more closely under the observation of his mistress, attacked furiously.

La Mole recovered himself quickly, but he met a thrust which he could only partially parry. Those who watched saw a red patch which spread rapidly on the white doublet.

It brought a cry of distress from Marguerite, which La Mole heard. He glanced at her - such a glance as may be a lifetime’s memory, though it be of no more than a second’s space - and attacked Coconnas with a madder fury, which would quickly have consumed his remaining strength. But it was enough. The next instant the fight was done.

Those who watched saw La Mole’s rapier pass his opponent’s guard, and then its point shone through the back of the Piedmontese.

For a brief moment they stood, facing one another, and swaying unsteadily, Coconnas transfixed by La Mole’s sword. Then Coconnas drew his dagger, and

at the threat La Mole drew back, wrenching his sword free. Coconnas fell forward, clutching at La Mole, who was already faint from his own wound, and the adversaries came down together, so that both rolled into the ditch.

The young women ran forward, followed by the captain of the guard. They looked on two men who had lost consciousness, and now lay in a pool of blood which was spreading rapidly.

“Alas!” cried Henriette, “did you ever see two more fearless lovers?” She began to sob bitterly.

“Pardon me that I doubted you,” Marguerite said in contrition and grief, to one who was no longer able to hear her voice.

The captain was on his knees trying to staunch Coconnas’ quickly flowing blood. “Ho!” he cried, “whoever you may be, you are wanted here.”

He heard a noise of wheels, for a man approached, seated on a cart that was painted red, and singing the old song that had been recalled to his mind by the Miracle of the Cemetery of the Innocents.

“Bel aubespin fleurissant

Verdissant

Le long de ce beau rivage

Tu est vetu, jusqu’au bas,

De longs bras

D’une lambrusche sauvage.”

The man, at a second call, stopped his horse, climbed down, and approached through the evening gloom. He was of a rough countenance and repellant aspect, strangely at variance with the song which had reached their ears.

“Ah,” he said, “there are some good wounds. But I can do better than that.”

“Who are you?” Marguerite asked, with a sense of repulsion she controlled, but

could not repress.

“Madame,” the man answered, “I am Maître Caboche, the executioner, and I have brought some bodies to hang beside that of the admiral.”

“I am the Queen of Navarre, and I tell you to take out the dead bodies at once, spread your horsecloths in the cart, and bring these wounded gentlemen slowly behind us to the Louvre.”

CHAPTER XVII

THE DRAUGHT OF AN UNKNOWN DOCTOR

THE wounded men were taken to the apartment of the Duke d'Alençon, and Maître Pare was summoned.

He found that La Mole's wound was no more than a deep cut under the right armpit, but for Coconnas, whose lung had been pierced, he said that he could give no assurance of recovery.

Henriette's grief was acute, for it was she who had prevailed on Marguerite not to interfere, when the conflict might have stopped; and she knew that she had done it because she had wished to see the victory of the Piedmontese, and had been sure that he would be able to vanquish La Mole. She would have taken Coconnas to the Hotel de Guise, to nurse him with her own hands, but that she was expecting her husband's return, and there would have been more to explain than even she would have felt equal to do.

So the two young men lay side by side, and went through the stages of convalescence which followed from the relative gravity of their wounds. For while La Mole made a speedy recovery, Coconnas developed a violent fever, with fits of delirium during which he seemed unconscious of where he was, or of the identities of those around him.

As the days passed, and consciousness resumed its control, he became aware of a dream from which he could not escape. He believed that La Mole was dead. Had he not killed him a second time, rather than once only? And yet his shadow moved in the room. It had been in the neighbouring bed at first, attended by the same surgeon, a mere reflection of his own condition. But now it stood upright. It came closer. It looked fixedly at him. It had an expression of gentleness and compassion which seemed ironic derision to the fevered man. He hated La Mole with all the fierceness of his passionate temperament. It stirred a blind desire for vengeance against this shadow which would not leave him alone.

His dagger lay among other effects which had been left on a bedside stool. For three nights, while La Mole slept, he tried to reach it, and found that his arm was too weak to lift. On the fourth, his fingers closed feebly round it… he hid it

under the pillow.

The next day the vision changed. The shadow moved several times round the room, and then adjusted its cloak, buckled on its sword, put on a huge brimmed hat, opened the door, and went out.

Coconnas breathed a sigh of relief. Perhaps it was over now, and he would not be haunted again.

For the next two hours his blood ran more calmly, feeling that a dreaded menace had been removed, and had La Mole remained absent for a longer time, he might have regained the normal use of his faculties, but, as it was, the shock of his appearance brought an instant return of delirium, and though he was not alone, Coconnas saw him only, and was not even aware of the existence of his companion.

Yet the man was worth more than a casual glance.

He was short, stout, vigorous, about forty years of age, with black hair which grew low over his forehead, and a black beard which defied the convention of the time, as did his dress, which consisted of a leather doublet covered with brown spots, a red woollen waistcoat, reddish leather breeches, and heavy leather boots which came over his ankles. His cap was of the same colour as his waistcoat. A sheathed knife hung at his side from a leather belt.

Throwing a brown cloak on to a chair, he approached the bed of the sick man, who continued to fix his fevered gaze solely upon La Mole.

The visitor shook his head: “You should have fetched me sooner.”

“I could not get out.”

“Then you should have sent.”

“How could I?”

“Yes. I forget. I did speak to the ladies, but they would not listen. They preferred to trust that stolid idiot Ambroise Pare. My prescription would have put him on his legs before now… Put out your tongue, my gentleman.”

Coconnas obeyed, but his eyes were still fixed on La Mole, and he did it with so menacing a scowl that the physician shook his head ominously.

“There is no time,” he said, “to be lost. I will send you a potion which must be taken in three doses - the first at midnight, the second at one, and the third at two o’clock. You will give it thus?”

“Yes… And for payment?”

“He shall settle with me himself when he gets well.”

“Which he will be able to do.”

“So I can well believe,” the physician replied, smiling to himself, as though at some knowledge he would not speak. Then he went, and Coconnas, who had understood nothing of what was said, but had heard the word midnight stressed, so that it remained on his mind, watched with hot feverish eyes the dreaded form of La Mole, as it paced up and down the room.

An hour later the potion arrived, and La Mole, having placed it over a silver chafing dish, in accordance with instructions he had received, lay down until midnight came, giving Coconnas a respite from the phantom by which he was haunted, though the feverish drowsiness into which he fell was only a continuation of his waking delirium.

Suddenly came the clanging sound of the clock, which vibrated twelve times through the still night air. It roused Coconnas to a fear which sharpened as he saw his enemy rise from the bed. He moved twice through the room, and then approached, with his fist raised. Desperately, Coconnas groped for the dagger, and prepared to rip up his enemy.

“There you are,” he thought. “It is always you. You think to make an end of me, but it is I who will have the last laugh. You smile, do you? You do not guess what I hold concealed. Nearer - nearer - now at last you are in my power!” From beneath the bedclothes, the dagger flashed.

It flashed, but it did not rise. The effort was beyond the feeble strength of the Piedmontese. The dagger fell to the floor, and La Mole stooped to pick it up, and place it again on the table beside the bed.

The exhausted man’s head fell feebly back on to the pillow, and La Mole, disregarding his abortive gesture, put an arm behind it. “Drink this,” he said gently, as he raised Coconnas slightly, and put the cup to his lips.

His patient drank, while being only half-conscious of what he did, but, as he absorbed a refreshing life-giving draught, its comfort brought consciousness to his mind, and with that consciousness he became aware of the kindness in the eyes of the man who held the cup to his lips.

“Mordi!” he murmured, as he sank back on to the pillow, “if I get through this, you will have a friend.”

“You will get through it,” La Mole replied, “if you have two more doses, and can sleep without ugly dreams.”

CHAPTER XVIII

A CALL ON THE EXECUTIONER

LA Mole, whose wounds were less serious, soon recovered his full strength, but the convalescence of the Piedmontese was a longer matter. It was, however, assisted not only by his natural vigour, but by the careful nursing of his new friend, who would raise him in his bed as long as weakness confined him to it, helped him to walk when he found that he had strength to stand, and gave him all the care which came easily from a disposition of natural gentleness.

And during all this time the two young men were tormented by the same thought. Each believed that, while in the fever of delirium, he had seen the face of the woman he had come to love, Each knew more certainly that she had not visited him since his natural consciousness had returned. That, at least, was easy to understand. Could the Queen of Navarre, could the sister-in-law of the Duke of Guise, show public interest in two simple gentlemen whom they scarcely had occasion to know?

Obviously not. Yet there was little satisfaction in that. For was not indifference a more probable explanation?

It was true that the captain who had been present at the duel had called, as though on his own behalf, to enquire concerning the health of the wounded man, and Gillonne had come once; but La Mole had not dared to speak to her of the Queen of Navarre, nor had Coconnas found courage to speak of Madame de Nevers.

For some time they were silent alike upon the subjects which filled their thoughts, but there came a day of mutual confidences when each confessed to the other the wild passion he had - the one for a princess, and the other for a queen.

If no one came, there was evidence enough that they were not forgotten by all. As each had been fit to rise, he had found a dressing-gown on his chair. When able to dress, there had been a complete suit of clothes. In the pocket of each doublet, there had been a well-filled purse.

Did these attentions come from the Duke d'Alençon, in whose apartment they were? It seemed improbable, for he had shown no other sign that he was aware of whether they lived or died. A vague hope was in each heart that the help came from the woman he loved. If so, they were debts which must be repaid, but it was no less a pleasant imagination to have.

There had been an unspoken understanding between them that La Mole would not go out alone; but, after two weary months, there came a day when, after dressing themselves with unusual care, they went out from the Louvre, leaning on each other's arm. Neither had been indifferent to the mirror, nor was his appearance inadequate to the rich clothes he wore.

La Mole, naturally pale and elegant, had the beauty of distinction; La Coconnas, large-boned and high coloured, had that of strength. He had more than that, for his illness had been actually advantageous, making him thinner and paler, while the scar, which had crossed his face with the rainbow's colours, had disappeared.

Coconnas accepted the guidance of his friend, knowing that he was being led to the unknown physician whose potion had cured him when the drugs of Master Paré were doing no more than to somewhat delay his death. A hundred rose nobles - half the gold which he had found in his purse - was the fee he proposed to pay. He might not fear death, but it was far more satisfactory to be alive and well.

La Mole stopped at a stone building near the ancient fountain in the Place des Halles. This building was surmounted by a huge wooden lantern, having eight sets of holes cut around it, each divided in the middle to admit the head and hands of a culprit sentenced to this exposure.

At the side of this pillory was an ill-built, crooked house, its roof covered with moss like a leper's skin. It was where the executioner lived.

Coconnas at first supposed that his friend had paused here to feast his eyes on the spectacle of a wretched man who was exposed in this way to the derision of the crowd, and who was sticking out his tongue at those who shouted jests and abuse.

Naturally callous himself, he was amused by the sight, and when the lantern was rotated, to show the pilloried thief to another portion of the crowd, he would have moved round after it, had not La Mole expostulated: "It was not for this

that we came," and led him to a small window in the adjoining house, from which a man was leaning who wore a red cap over his thick black hair.

He raised his cap as they approached, and Coconnas looked with puzzled eyes on a face which it seemed to him that he had seen before, but rather in a delirious dream than in actual fact. "Who is that?" he asked.

"It is he who saved your life."

"In that case, my friend - " Coconnas held out his hand to the man, who had now come to his door. But instead of taking it, he stepped back. "Perhaps," he said, "you do not know who I am."

"Ma foi! Do I care? If you were the devil himself, you have saved my life."

"There are many who would rather see the devil than me."

"Then who are you?"

"I am Maître Caboche, the executioner of Paris."

With a shudder of irrepressible repulsion, Coconnas withdrew his hand.

"So I supposed," said Caboche.

"No, no! I will take your hand, or may the devil make off with me."

"You mean it?"

"Yes… Open it wider than that."

Coconnas took from his pocket the purse of gold he had brought, and placed it on the extended hand.

"I thank you. But I would have thanked you more for your hand alone. I do not lack gold, but there are few hands that are extended to mine. But all the same, God bless you, gentlemen!"

Coconnas looked with curiosity at the executioner. "It is really you who break men on the wheel, who rack them and smash their bones? Who cut off their heads? I am very glad to have met you."

“Sir, I do not do everything with my own hands. It is only when I have to deal with gentlemen of quality, like yourselves, that I take matters entirely into my own hands, from the first questioning till the axe falls.”

The two friends were conscious alike of a sensation as though they were already in his power, and the wedge were being driven beside their legs, but Coconnas overcame it the more easily, feeling ashamed, and threw it off with a jest.

“Well, it is a promise I will not forget. When my turn for scaffold or gallows comes, I shall expect that you alone will touch me.”

“I will promise that.”

“Then this time I will give you an empty hand.”

He extended his hand as he spoke, which the headsman took. Coconnas turned pale at the touch, but the smile did not leave his lips.

La Mole touched his cloak. He had noticed that the lantern was coming round to them again. and it was a sight of which he had had enough.

Coconnas had no wish to remain longer. They had soon turned into the next street, and the pillory was no longer in sight.

“Faith,” said La Mole, “we breathe more freely here than in the Place des Halles.”

“So we do… but it is always well to have plenty of friends.”

CHAPTER XIX

INTERVIEW WITH THE QUEEN-MOTHER'S PERFUMIER

THE house stood on the Pont-Saint-Michel. Facing a small islet it was in the midst of those which bordered the line of the bridge.

It was panelled with wood; and had a projecting porch, like a huge eyelid. There was a single window on the first floor, extending over the door and window below, and from this window shone a red light, which drew the attention of those who passed to the low façade, painted blue, with heavy mouldings of gold. There was a frieze dividing the ground floor from the first floor, which represented devils in grotesque attitudes, and bore this inscription in gold on a blue ground: "René, Florentine, Perfumier to Her Majesty the Queen-Mother."

The shop was bolted well, but the reputation of its occupant was a better protection than any bolts. Indeed, those who crossed the bridge would be likely to keep to the further side, as though there might be death even in the scent of the perfumes the house exhaled.

From a kindred feeling, the houses on either side had been vacated, yet it was said that those who passed during the night would see moving lights within them, and hear groans, but whether these were of earthly or unearthly origin was a point on which men did not agree.

There was a law at this time that no lights should be shown after a curfew hour, but it was one which the queen-mother's countryman and perfumier evidently considered could not be meant for him, and no night watchman would have been so bold as to protest at that dreaded door.

The shop, which was stocked with perfumes, cosmetics, and all the articles which would be sold by a chemist of that period, had been closed at eight. The two apprentices had left for their own homes. It was dark and deserted now.

In the shop were two doors, both opening upon staircases. One was unconcealed, and could be seen from the street. It led to the room above, which was of the same extent as the shop, but heavy tapestry divided it into two compartments.

The second staircase, which led to the rear compartment, was concealed in the wall. The door at its head was hidden by a large carved cupboard, which opened with it. Besides René, only Catherine knew the secret of this door, which enabled anyone who looked through holes in the cupboard to see and hear all that went on in the front chamber.

There were two other doors in the rear compartment. One led to a small laboratory, lighted only from the roof, and containing nothing but a large stove, crucibles and retorts. The other was of a stranger character. It had neither carpets nor furniture. In its midst was a stone altar, from which the floor sloped downward to the back of the room along which a gutter ran to a funnel in the corner. Anyone who looked down this funnel would see the dark waters of the Seine flowing below.

Strange instruments hung from the walls, having points like needles and edges of razor-sharpness. Some were bright, and some murky blue. In a corner lay two black fowls, tied by the legs, and making spasmodic efforts for freedom.

This was the Chamber of Augury.

The first compartment of the main chamber - that in which the majority of clients were interviewed - was lighted by two small silver lamps, each suspended by three blackened chains. They cast a murky light on the crocodile that yawned from the ceiling, on Egyptian ibises, on mummies with gilded bands, on eyeless skulls, on musty books which were scattered upon the floor… It was in the rear compartment that René waited, pacing the floor with rapid, impatient strides, his arms crossed, and his head shaking at times, as though he mused upon matters of which it was not pleasant to think…

He looked at an hour glass, and saw that it had already run out. He turned to the window to judge the time by a moon that struggled clear of a black cloud which lay like a pall over Notre Dame. He said aloud: “It is no more than nine. It is at half-past ten she will come, if at all. There will be time before that.”

But even as he spoke there was a noise of steps and voices upon the bridge. He put his ear to a long tube which brought him the sounds of the street. “It is not she,” he muttered, “nor is it they. They are certainly men, and they have stopped at the door.”

So they had. Three loud knocks resounded through the empty shop. René

descended, and put his ear to the door. “Who is there?”

“Must we tell you that?”

“Yes. If you wish to enter at this hour.”

“I am Count Annabel de Coconnas. The Count Lerac de la Mole is here also.”

They heard the withdrawing of bolts and bars. The door opened to admit them, and was then secured as before.

René led them by the open staircase to the front room above, and then, raising the tapestry, to the rear compartment.

La Mole was aware that his hand shook beyond control as he made the sign of the cross under his cloak, but Coconnas looked round with a bold glance. He approached the Chamber of Augury, as though he would have investigated that which its door might hide, at which René said, in a deferential and yet warning voice:

“Remember, gentlemen, that those who visit me have access to this room alone.”

“Right,” said Coconnas. “And, besides, I want to sit down.”

So he did, and after that there was a full minute of silence, René waiting for them to speak, which they did not find easy.

Then Coconnas asked: “Master René, shall I always have the shortness of breath from which I have suffered since I was wounded?”

René put his ear to his chest. He listened carefully. “No, count. You will get well.”

“I am happy to hear it.”

Silence again.

“Gentlemen, is that all that you came to know?”

“I wish to know,” Coconnas replied, “whether I am in love?”

“So you are, or you would not ask.”

“Mordi! I am answered well. But with whom?”

“With her who has adopted the use of your own oath.”

“Master René, you are a wonderful man… Now, La Mole, it is your turn.”

La Mole blushed. It was very evident that he spoke with embarrassment. “M. René,” he said, “I do not ask that which I know. I ask whether I am also loved. For all seemed to go well at first, but is altered now.”

“Perhaps that is your own fault.”

“But what can be done beyond showing by devotion that love is profound?”

“Such demonstrations are often made when they mean little.”

“Then I must despair?”

“Not at all. Science remains. Human nature is like iron. It is not a lodestone, but can be impregnated thereby, till its qualities are the same.

“But I have an objection to sorcery.”

“Then you should not be here.”

“This is silly,” Coconnas interrupted. “M. René, can you raise the devil?”

“No, M. le Comte.”

“That’s a pity. There were one or two questions I could have asked him which it would have done my friend good to hear.”

“We had better come to the point,” La Mole said. “We have been told that if figures of wax are modelled to resemble those whom we love - Is there truly such a device?”

“One which always succeeds.”

“And can the experiment do any injury to those we love?”

“None whatever.”

“Then let us try.”

“Shall I try first?” Coconnas asked.

“No. It was my idea. I will try first. There may be less need for you.”

It was at this moment that a knock came on the street door - a tap so light that only René, who had been expecting it, heard. He said to La Mole: “Then think well of your wish, and fix your mind on the person of her you love.” As he spoke, he rose, and went down the stair.

He returned in a short time, carrying a short figure of wax, crudely modelled, dressed in a crown and mantle.

“You wish,” the perfumier asked, “that you may always be loved by your royal mistress?”

“Yes, though my life be the price I pay.”

René went to a basin, muttered some Latin words, and sprinkled the image.

La Mole shuddered, for the action had an aspect of sacrilege. “What are you doing?” he asked.

“I am christening the figure with the name of Marguerite.”

He traced some cabalistic characters on a narrow strip of red paper, and slipped it through the eye of a large steel needle, which he then thrust into the wax model over the heart.

Those who watched saw a small drop of blood appear where the needle had been withdrawn.

“Thus,” said René, as he burned the strip of paper, “your love shall be potent to pierce her heart.”

Coconnas, the less sensitive and the less credulous of the two, watched with contemptuous eyes. But La Mole, at once more religious and more superstitious,

and now shaken from his usual judgement by the desperation of a love which he felt that he could not hold, was conscious of the perspiration of fear.

“Now,” said René, “press your lips to the lips of the figure, and say: ‘Marguerite, I love you. Come, Marguerite, come!’ “

As La Mole did this, there was a sound of light steps in the adjoining room.

Coconnas, curious and doubtful, and fearing that René would refuse a request, stepped suddenly to the tapestry, and drew it aside.

La Mole started at the sound, the figure slipping from his hand, and being caught by René. “What is it?” he asked.

“The Duchess of Nevers,” Coconnas answered, “is here. And so is the Queen of Navarre.”

“Well,” said René gloomily, making the best of that which had gone beyond his control, “do you still doubt my power?”

La Mole crossed himself, not doubting that it was the ghost of Marguerite which he saw, raised by René‘s sorcerous power; but Coconnas, who did not hesitate to accept a more rational explanation, seeing the astonishment in the eyes of Henriette, and a smile on Marguerite’s lips which was certainly not of a loving kind, judged that the moment was critical, either for good or ill.

Knowing that a friend may say that which a man may not urge on his own behalf, he addressed himself, not to Henriette, but to Marguerite.

“Madame,” he said, “it was but a moment ago that my friend, the Count de la Mole, evoked your spirit, and, to my astonishment, your ghost is accompanied by a body most dear to me. Shade of the Queen of Navarre, will you not entreat the body of your companion to come on this side of the curtain?”

Marguerite laughed. “Come, Henriette,” she said, and the two women advanced into the rear compartment.

“Now, La Mole,” Coconnas went on, “be eloquent for me, be Demosthenes, be Cicero, to persuade Madame de Nevers that my life is done unless she will believe me to be her devoted slave.”

La Mole attempted to speak, stammered, and became silent again.

“Mordi!” Marguerite said to Coconnas, “I can see that it is you who are the sensible man. What have you to say?”

“I have to say, madame, that the shadow of my friend - and he is a shadow only, as you can see, for he is unable to speak, has prayed me to use the faculty which material bodies possess, and to entreat your shadow (as I dare not do to the sister of King Charles and the wife of the King of Navarre, if she were truly here) to persuade your earthly body to give a little love to my friend. For I know that ghosts are not cruel, and are not troubled by earthly prides.”

Marguerite laughed at this tirade, and though she did not speak (as a spirit should be unable to do), she extended her hand.

“The shade of my friend,” Coconnas continued, as La Mole did not move, “is a fairly shrewd shade, and should understand what you expect him to do. Shade of my friend, bring your handsome brown face into contact with the hand which is extended to you.”

La Mole seemed to awaken from a dream. He knelt to kiss the extended hand, and then, turning to Madame de Nevers, he addressed her in the style of his friend: “Loveliest and most charming of women!” - His words were to Henriette, but it was on Marguerite that his eyes were fixed - “I speak of living women, and not of ghosts. Allow a ghost divorced from its natural body to do for that which one who is still in the flesh has lacked the courage. M. de Coconnas is a man, and no ghost. And this champion, although you know him to be of bold and hardy frame, and one who can give good blows, and though you have heard how eloquent he can be when it is a spirit to whom he speaks, yet cannot dare to speak to a female body which is still in its mortal frame. I therefore - I who am agreed by all to be no more than a ghost - must tell you that he lays himself, both soul and heart, at your lovely feet: that he entreats a glance of pity from heavenly eyes: that your divine voice may speak to him unforgettable words. For, if not, he will pray for another thing - that my sword may pass through his body again, for he has no wish to live, unless you require him to live for you.”

Henriette’s eyes, which had not been free from a flicker of jealousy as Coconnas had addressed himself to the Queen of Navarre, now looked at that gentleman, as though to judge whether his expression were equal to the eloquence of his friend.

She must have been satisfied with what she saw, for she was blushing and breathless as she asked him. “Is all this true?”

“Mordi!” said Coconnas, “it is true indeed. True on my life - on my death.”

“Then - ” Henriette said, and extended her hand to him, as Marguerite has done to La Mole before.

It was at this moment that René, who had withdrawn from them unnoticed by the lovers, came hurriedly back.

“Silence,” he said in so urgent a voice that the conversation in which they had been engaged was instantly forgotten. “Silence!” And as he spoke they heard the sound of a key in a lock, and then of a door that grated on its hinges.

“How!” Marguerite exclaimed angrily, “do you let others intrude when I am here? They have no right —”

“Not the queen-mother?” René whispered.

In a moment they were gone down the open stair. They fled like love-making birds on whom the shadow of a hawk falls from the sky.

CHAPTER XX

THE QUEEN-MOTHER READS THE FUTURE

CATHERINE looked suspiciously round. “Who is that?” she asked.

“Some lovers, who are content because I have told them they are in love.”

“Never mind them. Are we alone now?”

“Absolutely.”

“Are the black fowl ready?”

“Yes, madame.”

“It is a pity you were not born a Jew.”

“Why, madame?”

“Because you might then have read the Hebrew books. I have had one translated, and it appears that they did not seek for omens in head or liver. It was the brain in which they read lessons traced by the hand of fate.”

“Yes, madame. A rabbi told me the same thing.”

“But it says that the Chaldean seers recommend —”

“What, madame?” For Catherine paused. “That the experiment be tried on the human brain.”

“Alas! Your majesty knows that that is beyond our power.”

“Do I? If we had known this on Bartholomew’s eve, what a harvest we might have had! But the next time there is one to be hanged, I will see what can be done. Meantime, we must do what we can. Is everything ready now?”

“Yes, madame.”

René lighted a taper, and led the way into the cell. He took up one of the fowl from the corner, while Catherine selected a knife of blue steel.

“How shall we proceed?” he asked.

“We will examine the liver of one, and the brain of the other. If we get the same result as before from both, I shall be convinced. We will begin with the liver.”

René tied the living fowl down to two rings of the altar, so that it could only struggle; but could not move, and Catherine opened its breast with one stroke of her knife. It gave three cries, and then, after some convulsions, expired.

“Always three cries!” she said, as she proceeded to open the body. “Always three signs of death! And see, René, the liver inclines to the left again, which means the same thing. René, it is awful! We must try what the brain will say.”

René threw the dead fowl into a corner, and went to pick up the other. Seeing itself cornered, it flew suddenly over his head, and extinguished the taper which Catherine had held as she had peered into the entrails of the dying fowl.

“Thus shall our race be extinguished,” she said sadly. “Three sons! Three sons!… René, catch the bird, and I will see that it does not cry three times, for I will cut off its head with one stroke.”

So she did, as soon as it had been tied down. But the beak opened and closed three times, and then closed for ever.

“Did you see that?” Catherine asked, in a voice of awe… “All three will die!… But let us look at the brain.”

Cutting away the comb, she peered, with the relighted taper, into the cavity of the brain, trying to trace any letter which might appear.

“It is always so,” she said, laying the taper down, and twisting her hands. “It is clearer than I have seen it before… René, look. What can you see?”

“I see the letter H”

“How many times?”

“Four.”

“Yes… Henry IV… I am cursed in my posterity.” Pale as a corpse, lighted only by the dismal taper, she stood wringing her blood-wet hands.

“He will reign,” she said. “There is no doubt he will reign.”

“Yes, he will reign,” René agreed.

Then a thought came to her, on which her expression changed.

“René, do you recall the story of a Perugian doctor who killed his daughter and her lover at once, by the same pomade?”

“Yes, madame. It was King Ladislaus who died… I have it in a book in the next room.”

“Well, you shall show it to me now. And the next time there is an execution you must bargain with Caboche to sell you the head.”

René found her the book. Sitting down at his table, she turned over its pages for some time by the dim light of the taper, which he held obsequiously beside her. Then she rose. “That,” she said, “is what I wanted to know.”

She made no further allusion to it, though it was to bear fruit on a later day, but after a period of silence during which she paced restlessly round the room, she said suddenly: “Own that she has had a love potion from you!”

“Whom, madame?”

“La Sauve!”

“Never, madame. I swear it.”

“Yet there is evident magic. For he is wildly in love with her, and he has no reputation for constancy.”

“Who, madame?”

“Henry the accursed - he who is destined to take the throne when the last of my sons is dead.”

“It is said that he is in love with his wife now.”

“René, it is deceit! I know not why, but they deceive me on every hand. Even my daughter Marguerite is against me. Does she hope to be queen of France when all her brothers are dead?”

“So it may be.”

“Well, we shall see about that… Madame de Sauve has beautiful hands and lips. What pomade does she use?”

“Heliotrope.”

“For the hands?”

“Yes.”

“What for the lips?”

“She is about to try a new composition of mine.”

“She is truly beautiful, and Henry’s devotion to her is astonishing.”

“She is devoted to your majesty also.”

“When a woman loves she is faithful to only one… You must have given her a love-potion, René?”

“I swear I have not.”

“Well, let it pass. Show me the pomades which you have made for her lips.”

René opened a drawer, and produced six small silver boxes.

“This,” he said, “is the only spell for which she has asked. I have composed it specially because her lips are so tender that they are affected both by wind and sun.”

Catherine opened one of the boxes, and looked at the rich carmine paste which it contained.

“René,” she said. “I shall want some of the usual paste for my hands. Get it for me now.”

He was absent for a moment only. When he came back Catherine took the box he offered indifferently. She was evidently about to leave. “Do not give that paste to Madame de Sauve for a few days, René,” she said. “I may like to try it myself.”

When she had gone, he opened the drawer again, and saw that the six boxes had become five.

Knowing the ways of the queen-mother, he was not surprised.

CHAPTER XXI

POISON

CATHERINE had not spoken without knowledge when she told René that whatever attempts might have been made to deceive her, Henry of Navarre's real devotion was not for his own queen, but to the lady-in-waiting who had first been led to seduce him by her own instructions.

Indeed, his almost constant nightly visits to her apartment were made with less and less care for concealment, until the whole court was aware that, whatever might be the relations between himself and Marguerite, it was the lovely Charlotte who held his heart.

The rooms allotted to attendants upon members of the royal family were on the floor above those they themselves occupied, and whatever might be their internal luxury, they were generally small, gloomy and inconvenient: and the approaches to them were ill-lit both by day and night. During the winter months, the lamps in the corridors had to be lit by two-o'clock in the afternoon, and, the oil they contained being only sufficient to supply them for a few hours, the corridors would be left in complete darkness long before midnight came.

The suite of rooms occupied by Madame de Sauve on this floor consisted of one small waiting-room hung with yellow damask, a reception room hung with blue velvet, and a bedroom, having a bed of curiously-carved wood with heavy curtains of rose-coloured satin, and tester of looking-glass set in silver and ornamented with paintings representing the loves of Aphrodite and Adonis. There was also a toilette table abundantly and luxuriously supplied with all the accessories of beauty, and opposite to it was a door which led into a small oratory.

Anyone passing that door would have found a carved prieu-dieu elevated by two steps from the floor. Besides this, it contained only three or four pictures concerning episodes in the lives of saints, and some weapons hanging upon the walls, for, at this period, it was customary for ladies of quality to have within their reach both offensive and defensive arms.

Such was the apartment of one who was not only lady-in-waiting to the queen-

mother, but herself a duchess, and sister-in-law to the Duke de Guise. And here it was that she received the King of Navarre in her bedchamber on the evening following Catherine's visit to René.

She had put on a simple white dressing-gown in which she was aware that she appeared more than usually attractive, but she was finding Henry in one of his colder and more thoughtful moods, so that she looked at him in some anxiety, doubting the depth and constancy of his affection, as her ambiguous position must dispose her to do, and trying in vain to break through the reserve which he would show even at the most ardent moments of love.

"Charlotte," he said at last, "I want to ask you something, and I rely upon you to answer frankly. How was it that you, who, up to the hour of my marriage, always refused me, suddenly became complaisant and loving? Have I not to thank the queen-mother, even more than you, for that happy change?"

"It is a question," Charlotte replied, "which should be answered by requesting that you will not see me again… But will you say what you mean?"

"I mean this, dear one, and nothing more. That, though you loved me all the time in your heart, you did not dare to yield till you had permission from her. You must not doubt that I believe in your love, nor that my love is as great as yours. But it is for that very reason that I can tell no secrets to you, for they might be dangerous to yourself… A mother-in-law is not always a constant friend."

"Your majesty will pardon me" Charlotte replied, in a tone which showed how deeply she resented this impenetrable barrier which he was determined to erect between them, "but I must remind you that it is late, and I am commanded to attend the queen-mother at an early hour."

"In other words, you are tired of me, and would like me to go?"

"No, but I am tired, and might say things which it would hurt you to hear. Will you not leave me to the sadness of my own thoughts?"

"As you will. But you will let me stay while that lovely hair is arranged for the night?"

Charlotte rose with a sigh, and seated herself before her toilette-table. Henry drew a chair to her side, placing his knee upon it, and leaning upon the back.

“Mercy!” he said, “Charlotte, what an array of things you have here! Who would dream that so much is needed to make your beauty perfect?”

“Yet it seems I lack the one thing which would be sufficient to hold your love.”

“Charlotte, don’t let us quarrel… Tell me, what is the use of this tiny pencil? Is it to trace your brows?”

“Your majesty has guessed right.”

“And this little ivory rake?”

“To ensure a perfect parting of the hair.”

“And this little silver box?”

“That has just come from René. It is for the lips which your majesty deigns to praise.”

She lifted the box, intending to show its contents, but was interrupted by a low tap at the door.

“Madame,” said Dariole, lifting the curtain that hung over the door, “Master René is asking to see you.”

Charlotte looked at Henry, and saw the frown with which he heard the name of the man whom he believed to be responsible for his mother’s death. She asked: “Shall I send him away?”

“No. He does nothing without a motive. Do not let him think that you hesitate to receive him now.”

“You will retire to the oratory?”

“Not at all. I expect he knows I am here.”

Next moment René entered the room, looking round with an observation which missed nothing. He saw Madame de Sauve seated in a white dressing-gown at her toilet. He saw the King of Navarre stretched on a couch at the other end of the room, to which the light of the lamp scarcely extended.

“Madame,” he said with a kind of respectful familiarity, “I have come to apologise.”

“My good René! Why?”

“Because I have been delayed in sending you the new beautifier I promised for those lovely lips.”

“But you sent an hour ago.”

René looked startled for an instant, and then controlled himself to say smoothly: “My messenger has been more speedy than I supposed… Have you tried it yet, madame?”

“I was just going to when you knocked.”

“René,” Henry, who had been watching him keenly, asked suddenly, “what is the matter?”

“Nothing, sire. I was only waiting till you should deign to address me before taking my leave.”

“But you could not doubt but I should be pleased to see you!… René, what really brought you here at so late an hour?”

“Has it been my misfortune to disturb your majesty?” the perfumier asked uneasily, retreating toward the door as he spoke.

Henry had an instinctive perception, not merely that there was something here to be explained, but that the man was tortured by indecision, and he resolved to press him to the utmost before he would allow him to go.

“You did not disturb me at all,” he said, in his friendliest voice, “but tell me, René, did you expect that I should be here?”

“I knew your majesty would be nowhere else.”

“So you came here to see me.”

“I am always happy to sec your majesty.”

“You have something to tell me? Come, come, it is useless to deny it.”

René‘s indecision was now obvious. “Possibly I might have something to say to your majesty.”

Charlotte had listened to this conversation with uneasiness, though without appearing to notice it. She knew René to be a creature of the queen-mother, which made him no friend to her. What might he be going to say, which he seemed unwilling for her to hear? She interrupted hastily: “René, I think I will try the salve now. There could not be a better time than when you are here.” As she spoke, she opened the box. She dipped her finger in the vermillion paste, and was about to raise it to her lips.

Henry, watching closely, saw the man turn deadly pale. He rose quickly, but René was quicker than he. He rushed forward, and seized her arm.

Noiselessly, the king sank back on the couch.

“One moment, madame,” René said, with an unnatural smile. “The salve should only be used in a certain way.”

“Which you will explain?”

“Certainly, madame.”

“Well?”

“With your permission, I will explain when I have finished what I have to say to the King of Navarre.”

CHAPTER XXII

YOU WILL BE KING

“THERE is a matter on which I have wished to speak to your majesty for a long while.”

“About perfumes, of course?”

“Yes,” René replied, with a strange smile of acquiescence. “It is about perfumes.”

“Well, go on. It is a subject of interest.”

“A friend of mine recently arrived from Florence. He is a keen astrologer.”

“Many Florentines are”

“He has drawn the horoscopes of most of the princes of Europe.”

“Yes. What of that?”

“He has not omitted that of the King of Navarre.”

“And you doubtless remember it?”

“It is one which could not be forgotten.”

“Really?” Henry’s voice was sarcastic.

“It foretold a most brilliant destiny.”

“All oracles flatter, and he who flatters must lie. I suppose I was to command armies. That is what they most often say.”

“The horoscope goes beyond that.”

“I suppose I am to win battles.”

“It is more than that.”

“Then I am to be a great conqueror?”

“Sire, you are destined to be a king.”

Henry was aware of a sudden heartbeat, which he controlled.

“Is that all?” he said indifferently. “I am already a king.”

“You are to be one who rules.”

“And your friend doubtless requires ten golden crowns for this prophecy! René, I am a poor man. I will give him five now, and five when it has come true.”

“Sire, will you let me go on?”

“What! There is more? Has he made me an emperor? I suppose he must have twenty for that.”

“Sire, there was a secret which he confided to me. I have done the horoscope myself now, and the result is the same.”

Charlotte broke in. “It is a secret which his majesty ought to know.”

“That is what I think.”

“Then say what it is.”

René spoke slowly, choosing his words with care. “It concerns reports of poisonings, which have been whispered about the court.”

“They are poisonings of which your friend, the Florentine. knows?”

“Yes, sire.”

“And how, René,” the king asked, still endeavouring to answer in the voice of one who discussed a matter about which he had little interest or concern, “can you confide to me a secret of such a nature, and which is not your own?”

“My friend seeks your advice.”

“Why mine?”

“That is natural. When my friend spoke to me you were the head of the Huguenot party, and M. de Condé was next to you.”

“Well?”

“My friend hoped that you would use your great influence with M. de Condé, that he should not be hostile to him.”

“Which is he now?”

“Your majesty will understand all when I say that there was an attempt to poison M. de Condé a week ago.”

“What!” Henry exclaimed, as though astonished, “to poison M. de Condé! And who would attempt that?”

“An enemy who knows your majesty well, and is known to you.”

“Tell me how it was tried?”

“A scented apple came to the prince’s hands, but his physician was there, who did no more than smell it, and cast it away. Yet from that alone there are cancerous sores which eat into his cheeks.”

“Being half a Catholic, I can no longer influence M. de Condé.”

“Your majesty might also have influence with the new Prince de Porcion.”

“What! Your friend knows how his brother also was poisoned?”

“Yes. It was learnt that he left a lamp burning by his bedside all night. The oil was poisoned, so that he was suffocated by the fumes.”

Henry still restrained the indignation that caused him to drive his nails into his palms. “Doubtless,” he asked, “your friend, knowing the methods of these poisonings, knows their author also?”

“Yes, sire. That is why I come to you to ask your influence with the new prince to pardon - not his brother’s murderer, but him who supplied the means by which

it was done.”

“Being half a Huguenot, I have no influence with the Prince de Porcion.”

“But what should you think their inclinations would be?”

“How can I tell? I am not God. Can I read men’s hearts?”

“But your majesty’s own inclination? lf you should come to a place of power? What would they be?”

René looked from the king, whose lace, being in the shadow, he could not read, to where Charlotte impatiently toyed with the silver box. Henry saw the intense urgency and appeal - almost desperation - in his eyes, which his voice confirmed.

They saw that Charlotte was again about to apply the salve to her lips, as though unconscious of what she did.

René now made no movement to restrain her. But his voice was urgent as he exclaimed: “In the name of God, sire, reply! In their place, what would you do?”

“If I were in their place - if I were king - I would do as God does, and forgive.”

René snatched at the box. “Madame, give me that! I will send you one in the morning which it will be more pleasant to use.”

CHAPTER XXIII

A NEW CONVERT

THERE was to be a coursing match in the forest of St. Germain next morning, and Henry was down in the courtyard of the Louvre at an early hour to try a little Béarnais horse which he had procured, with the intention of giving it to Madame de Sauve, if it should prove suitable for a lady's riding.

He was about to cross the court, seeing that horse and groom awaited him on the further side, when his attention was drawn to a sentinel in the uniform of the Swiss guard, who stood alone at the door, and said in a low voice: "Heaven keep the King of Navarre

"Surely it was a voice he knew! He stopped. "De Mouy, what are you doing here?"

"I was seeking you."

"To come here was to risk your head."

"Yes, I know that."

Henry turned pale, for he saw that the risk was equally his, if they should be seen together. And there was d'Alençon looking out from a window above!

He took the musket from D'Mouy, as though to examine it. "It must be a powerful motive which has brought you thus into the wolf's den."

"I wished to see you."

"And why in this perilous guise?"

"The captain is a Protestant, and is friendly to me."

"We are being watched. I will see you later."

The Duke d'Alençon spoke from the window. "That horse doesn't look fit for a man."

“It is meant for a lady.”

“Then we shall soon see where your favours go.”

“No, you will not. For the lady is unwell this morning.”

“What can be the matter with the beautiful Charlotte?”

“Dariole says it may be no more than a severe headache.”

“But you are intending to come?”

“Yes. It is a sport I should be sorry to miss.”

“Yet you must. The king has just told me it will not take place.”

“Why is that?”

“There are despatches from the Duke de Nevers, and a Royal Council is to be held to consider news of importance.”

Henry had mounted the horse, but now he got down near to where De Mouy stood, “In that case,” he said, “I will leave this animal till the ground is less slippery,” and then to De Mouy, in a lower tone: “Ask one of your fellows to take your duty. Help the groom to unsaddle the horse, put the saddle on your head, and take it to the goldsmith of the stables. Ask him if he can have the embroidery repaired by this time tomorrow, and bring his answer to me.”

De Mouy acted quickly, for he thought that d’Alençon had watched with some suspicion as Henry spoke to him again, and he had left the window. A minute later the duke appeared in the courtyard, but by then another sentry - an unmistakable Swiss - stood at the door.

D’Alençon looked at him and said: “This is not the man you were talking to a moment ago.”

“No. I sent him on an errand for me. The saddle needed repair.”

The answer appeared to satisfy whatever curiosity may have been aroused. The duke changed the subject: “How is Marguerite this morning?”

“I was just going to enquire.”

“You have not seen her since yesterday?”

“Gillonne told me last evening that she was indisposed, and had gone to bed.”

“You won’t find her in her apartment now.”

“I know that. She will have gone to the convent of the Annonciade.”

Finding that Henry would do no more than answer questions, d’Alençon wandered away, and Henry returned to his own rooms. He had not been there

many moments before he was told that a soldier wished to see him with a message from the stable workshops.

De Mouy was shown in, and the moment that the door was closed, he said: “Sire, I have come because it is time to act.”

Henry looked as though these were words which it was no pleasure to hear, but De Mouy went on earnestly: “Fear nothing, sire. We are alone, and my time is short. I shall ask you for but one word which will give back to us of the New Faith all that the last year has taken away.”

“I am listening.”

“I ask you, is it true that you have renounced the Protestant faith?”

“Yes.”

“With the lips only, or with the heart?”

“Is it not natural to be grateful to God when your lives are spared? And I was spared on that dreadful night.”

“But can you not say that you did not act from conviction, but that your life should not remain in that danger?”

“Our motives are often not unmixed, or simple to ascertain, even to ourselves. But you must understand that I am a Catholic now.”

“True. But if you had liberty of conscience? Would you not recant?… Sire, the moment has come! La Rochelle is in insurrection now. Rousillon and Béarn wait only for a signal from you. In Guienne all is prepared. Tell me that you are a Catholic only by duress, and I will answer for the events that follow.”

“I am not one to be forced, De Mouy. What I did, I did freely.”

“But, sire, do you not see that when you desert us you betray yourself?”

Henry remained unmoved; and De Mouy went on with a mounting passion: “You are betraying yourself, for we have come at our lives’ risks - many of us have come - to give you freedom and power. You could choose your throne. In two months, it could be either France or Navarre.”

“De Mouy, listen to me. I am safe here. I am a Catholic. I am the husband of a daughter of France. I am a brother to the French king. I am a son-in-law to the queen-mother. In taking this position, I have calculated all that it must mean. I have taken not only its benefits, but its obligations also.”

“But, sire, what am I to believe? It is said on all sides that there is no real marriage between you and the queen, and that Catherine’s hatred —”

Henry interrupted him sharply: “They are lies - lies. Marguerite is my loyal wife, Catherine has shown herself to be a mother to me, and King Charles is the lord and master both of my life and heart.”

“Then, sire,” De Mouy replied, with a contempt he made no effort to hide, “I am to tell my friends that the King of Navarre holds out his hand to our assassins, that he has become the queen-mother’s flatterer, and Maurevel’s friend?”

“My dear De Mouy, the king will be leaving the Council Chamber, and it is time that I should go to enquire what can have been so urgent as to cause him to give up a day’s hunting… Adieu. Be a wise man. Give up politics. Return to your allegiance, and the holy mass.”

With these words, Henry hustled the young man, in whom astonishment had given way to anger, out of the room.

Scarcely had the door closed when De Mouy gave way to the passion which had been aroused by this unexpected reception. He crushed his hat in his hand, and

then threw it down, and trampled upon it, as the bull will tread the matador's cloak.

"Par la mort," he cried, "and I have risked my life for this paltry coward! I have half a mind to let myself be discovered that my death should be his enduring shame."

A door, which had been ajar, opened slightly. A voice said: "Hush, M. de Mouy. Others might hear as well as I." Next moment the speaker appeared.

De Mouy turned round sharply. "M. the Duke d'Alençon!" he exclaimed. "I am lost indeed."

"On the contrary, you may have found what you came to seek. And the first proof is that I shall not allow you to kill yourself at this door, merely to annoy the King of Navarre. Come in here with me."

Astonished by this reception, De Mouy followed the duke into a chamber the door of which d'Alençon closed as sharply as Henry had done when he thrust him out.

"Listen, M. De Mouy. I thought I recognised you, despite your disguise, when you stood as a sentinel at the door. When you presented arms to the King of Navarre, and engaged in conversation with him, my last doubt went. Well, you have seen him - and are you satisfied now?… Come, speak out. I may be your friend."

"You, monseigneur?"

"Yes, I. You may answer frankly, and without fear."

"Monseigneur, I scarcely know how to reply. The things of which we spoke were of so trivial a kind."

"Trifles for which you thought it well to risk your life here?… You, who are the recognised leader of the Huguenots, only after the King of Navarre and the Prince de Condé!"

"If you believe that, why do you not act toward me as Queen Catherine's son and King Charles's brother would be expected to do?"

“But I have told you I am your friend, if you will only be frank with me.

“Monseigneur, I swear —”

“I have heard that the reformed religion forbids oaths, and especially those which are false.”

De Mouy remained silent, and the prince went on in a tone of affectionate obstinacy: “Well, I must convince you. Tell me this - did you not propose a few minutes ago to establish my brother-in-law in his kingdom of Navarre?”

De Mouy’s expression showed that he was startled by the accuracy of this suggestion, but he made no reply.

“And did he not reject your proposition with terror?”

De Mouy was still silent, and the duke went on: “Did you not appeal to him on the grounds of your loyalty, and the faith you hold? Did you not attempt to delude him with the false hope that. he might become King of France?”

“Monseigneur, it is so exactly true that I am in doubt whether I should not give your highness the lie direct, and force a combat upon you which, whatever might be its subsequent results for myself, would ensure the extinction of what you know.”

D’Alençon, though he had never had a reputation for courage, appeared unmoved by this threat. He replied smoothly: “Gently, M. De Mouy! If you will listen to me for a few minutes, you will see that the secret will be better kept if we both live than if one of us should die. Can you not stop fidgeting with your sword, and answer as you would to a friend - which I tell you I am willing to be? Has not the King of Navarre refused every proposal you made to him?”

“Yes. I will admit that, for by so doing I compromise only myself.”

“Did you not denounce him as you left his chamber, as a cowardly prince, unworthy of the brave service you were willing to give?”

“Yes. That is true.”

“Then tell me that I who am a son of France, a son of Henry II - am I worthy to

lead your Huguenot troops, perhaps to become King of Navarre?”

“You, monseigneur!”

“Yes, I. Is it not a time of quick conversions? If Henry becomes Catholic, why should I not become Protestant in as short a time?”

“There is no reason whatever… I can only await your explanation.

“It is simplicity itself. I will give you everybody’s politics in a few words, including my own: My brother Charles kills Huguenots to show that he is one who may kill whoever he will. My brother of Anjou kills them because he is to succeed Charles, who is often ill. But I am in a different position. Having two elder brothers, I shall never be king. And I am excluded from such prospects even more surely by the hatred of my mother and brothers than by the law of nature which makes me younger than they.

“I have no family affection to consider. No coming glory. No prospect of any throne. Is it wonderful if, with ambitions as keen as theirs, I plan to win a throne at the sword’s point?

“Listen, De Mouy. I wish to become King of Navarre, not by birth, but by free election, I should not be usurping Henry’s throne, for you have said yourself that he rejects your offers. He will give you nothing. I can give you both a sword and a name. What have you to say to that?”

“I am dazzled, monseigneur.”

“De Mouy, De Mouy, we shall have many difficulties to overcome together. Do not be too exacting to the brother and son of a king, who offers himself to lead you.”

“Monseigneur, if it were my matter alone, it would be accepted now. But we have a council whom I am obliged to consult. And on a matter of such importance - an opportunity so brilliant - and perhaps all the more because of that brilliance - there must surely be conditions to be agreed.”

“That is an honest answer. It confirms my belief in your probity. If I believe yours, will you not give me an equal trust? Do not flatter a prince, but answer as you would to a friend. Have I a chance?”

“You have more than that, in view of the answer I am taking back from the King of Navarre. But I repeat that it is an offer which I have no authority either to accept or refuse.”

“Then when may I expect an answer?”

De Mouy considered silently. Then he said: “If a son of France will give me his hand on this, I shall be sure that I shall not be betrayed.”

D’Alençon extended his hand. He not merely took the one which was offered, but clasped it closely as he replied: “Then believe me… When will the answer come?”

“If I reply ‘tonight,’ it is telling you that the chiefs of the party are here in Paris. It might be to betray my friends.”

“Then you still doubt? You will know me better in time. But I will expect the answer tonight.”

It was at this moment that steps were heard approaching the door. The duke hastily shot the bolt.

“Where,” De Mouy asked, “shall we meet?”

“Here.”

“But - ” De Mouy’s eyes went to the two beds.

“It is a room which two of my own gentlemen —”

The door was being shaken roughly from the outside.

De Mouy said urgently: “I cannot come here. I should be recognised.”

The duke picked up a cherry-coloured cloak that lay on one of the beds, with a white-feathered cap beside it. The cloak was rich with embroidering gold, the cap had a twisted cord of golden daises Beneath them lay a doublet of grey satin and pearl. They appeared to be about the last things that anyone who wished to pass unobserved would be likely to choose.

“You see these?” he said. “I will give you the tailor’s address. Pay him double, and you will find that he will have their duplicates ready by when you need them tonight, In that attire you may come here, and you will be questioned by none, for it is well known to be that which one of my gentlemen wears.” Having said this, he turned his attention to the impatient voice at the door.

“Who is that?”

“Par dieu! That is surely for me to ask. Who shuts me out from my own room?”

“Is that M. de la Mole?”

“Yes, it is. Who are you?”

D’Alençon turned to De Mouy. “Does he know you?”

“I should say not.”

“Then look out of the window.”

La Mole came in angrily, but his expression changed as he saw the duke. “Pardon, monseigneur,” he said.

“It is I who should say that. I required your room to receive a

“Monseigneur, have you seen M. de Coconnas this morning?”

“No, I cannot say that I have, though I recollect that he should have been on duty today.”

“Then they have assassinated my friend.”

La Mole turned as he spoke, and hurried away.

CHAPTER XXIV

CONCERNING A HOUSE IN TWO STREETS

LA Mole stopped on the Quai de la Grève. He had not found Coconnas, but he had come to a spot where he had himself been in deadly peril during the night. He saw the portion of a feather on the ground, and recognised it as one that had been shorn from his own hat. He picked it up, with the instinctive impulse to recover his own possession, though its value had become dubious, and stood a moment in hesitation as to whether he should cast it back to the ground; and while he did so a litter, preceded by two pages, came past, and halted beside him.

A hand, satin-soft and white, drew the curtain back, and a low voice called: “M. de la Mole.”

He stepped to the side of the litter.

“With a feather in your hand!” said the laughing voice. “M. de la Mole is in love, and the treasured relic —”

“Your highness, I am very deeply in love, but this feather is mine. It was shorn off when I was assaulted here during the night…But may I be allowed to enquire as to your majesty’s health?”

“It is excellent. I never felt better in my life. That is because I spent the night in retreat.”

“In retreat, madame!”

“Yes. Do you doubt my word?”

“Without indiscretion, may I ask where?”

“Surely. There is no secret in that. It was at the Convent of the Annonciade. But why do you look so strange?”

“Madame, I also was in retreat. I must have passed the night very near to that convent myself. But this morning I am looking for a friend whom I cannot find.”

“And you find his feather? You alarm me, for this place has a bad name.”

“No. The feather is mine. It was here that four bandits attacked me this morning.”

“You must tell me about it.”

“It was about five this morning —”

“And you were already out!”

“Your majesty will excuse me. I had not been home.”

Marguerite gave him what he thought to be an adorable smile. “But M. de la Mole! At that hour! You were rightly punished.”

“I do not complain,” he replied. “Had I been killed, I should have been a hundred times happier than I deserve. Anyway, I was returning from that happy home where I had passed the night in retreat when four scoundrels rushed upon me with swords like cabbage-cutters. Was it not grotesque? I had to run, for I had no sword.”

“Oh, I understand now,” Marguerite replied, in a voice of demure simplicity, “you are going back to look for your sword?”

“So I would, but I do not know where the house is.”

“Not know the house where you spent the night! But this is quite a romance. I must hear more.”

“Madame, it would be an incredible tale.”

“But it is credulity in which I excel.”

“Your majesty commands: I obey. Last evening, after meeting two adorable women, my friend and I supped at La belle Etoile.”

“Where is that?”

“In the Rue de l’Arbre-Sec.”

“Yes. I can see it from here. So you supped there with your friend?”

“Yes, and a messenger entered, and gave each of us a note. They were alike.

“You are expected. Rue St. Antoine, facing the Rue de Jouy.”

“Unsigned?”

“Yes. Except for these charming words: Eros, Cupido, Amor.”

“They are certainly charming words. Was their promise kept?”

“Yes. A hundred times.”

“You must tell me more.”

“We went to the spot, and were met by two women, each having a handkerchief in her hand. We were required to have our eyes bandaged, though we were already in the blackness of night. Your majesty may suppose that we did not object! My guide led me to the left. My friend went the opposite way.”

“And then?” Marguerite continued, as though mischievously resolved that nothing should be left untold.

“I do not know what happened to my friend. He may have been led to Hades for all I know. But it was Paradise to which I was taken.”

“And for curiosity you were driven out?”

“Madame, how accurately you surmise! I waited for light to come that I might know all. But at half-past four my eyes were bandaged again, and I was led back to the Rue St. Antoine, where it joins the Rue de Jouy.”

“And then —”

“I was in such ecstasy, that I scarcely noticed the four bandits till they were upon me. So I am still, but I am troubled as to what has become of my friend.”

“You are sure he did not return to the Louvre?”

“Certain.”

“But your doublet is slashed, and it is not the one that you wear by day. If you went back to your room, why is it unchanged?”

“Because someone was there.”

“In your own room?”

“Yes. The Duke d’Alençon.”

“Alone?”

“No. There was a man with him who was a stranger to me “

“Well, continue your search. Though I expect that your friend will be safe.”

As she said this, Marguerite put her finger upon her lips, which could not have referred to anything she had said, for she had told no secrets to him. She entered the litter to go on to the Louvre, and La Mole made his way to the Rue St. Antoine where it faces the Rue de Jouy.

When he had been led from there during the night, he had had the prudence to count his steps. He did this again, and found himself in front of a wall, in which was a door, giving access to a house that stood far back from the street. It was in the Rue Cloche-Percée, a street that was narrow and short.

The door was studded with large nails, and there was a penthouse above.

“I could swear,” he thought, “that this is the place. I remember the two steps, and I felt the nails.”

He knocked, and a concierge with huge moustaches opened the door.

“I have come for my sword, which I left here last night.”

The man answered in German: “I do not understand.”

La Mole repeated the words more slowly. The man answered rudely: “Devil take you!” and closed the door.

He went back to the spot of the rendezvous, walked about the same distance in the opposite direction, and came to the Rue Tigon, another little street in all

respects similar to the Rue Cloche-Percée, and running parallel to it.

He went down it, and came again to a wall, having a door studded with large nails, and approached by two steps. “It is the same house,” he thought, “which can be entered from either street.” He knocked, but got no answer at all.

He thought of buying another sword, and knocking till the porter should come again, when he would disembowel him if he could not get a more courteous word. But he thought again that Marguerite might not wish this to happen to the porter of the convent where she went into retreat. So he looked at his slashed doublet again, and saw the expediency of going back to the Louvre.

He found that his room was vacant now, and his grey doublet lay on the bed; but he was surprised to see that his sword now lay beside it - the sword that he had left behind in the night. “Ah!” he thought, “if Coconnas could be returned in the same way!” But what more could he do?

It was evening, and darkness had come when the iron studded door in the Rue Tigon opened quietly, and a woman in a long fur-lined cloak, with a female companion, slipped out. They went to a little side-door in the Hotel d’Argenson, knocked softly, and were instantly admitted. A little later they came out by the main entrance, and crossed to the Hotel de Guise, which they entered by a side-door of which they had a key.

Soon after, Coconnas was led from the Rue Tigon, with his eyes bandaged as before. At the corner of the Rue de Jouy, he was told to count fifty before removing the bandage, which he was scrupulous to do.

“Mordi!” he said. “So I am back at the same place? I wonder what can have become of La Mole?”

He hurried back to the Louvre, where he found their room empty, but La Mole’s slashed doublet now lay on the bed.

Well, the Belle Etoile would be a likely place. It was there they had been when their invitations had come. There he went, and was soon reassured by the host, La Mole had breakfasted there. So he settled to a good supper with a mind fully at rest.

He had fed well, and was in boisterous mood when he went back to the Louvre.

He was actually apologising to a woman whose husband he had upset, when he caught sight of a cloak of cherry-coloured velvet, and a white-plumed cap. There could be no mistake about them. He hurried after his friend.

“Ho, La Mole!” he shouted, but the figure before him did not turn or halt. Rather it went on more rapidly than before, scarcely pausing, even as it gave a slight gesture of recognition to the sentry at the gates of the Louvre.

“And I thought I had a good voice! Well, I must see what my legs will do.”

But, in spite of his utmost effort, the red cloak continued to get further ahead. It escaladed rather than ran up the stairs to the second floor.

“Ah, do you bear malice?” Coconnas cried. “Mordi! I can run no more.”

Though he had slackened his pace, his eyes continued to follow the figure which he did not doubt to be that of his friend. He saw him reach the apartment of Marguerite, and, as he did so, a woman came out, caught his arm, and almost dragged him towards the door.

“Oh,” thought Coconnas, “so he was expected there. I can’t wonder he would not stop.” For he had no doubt that it was the Queen of Navarre herself whose hand was on the arm of his friend, and who was now drawing him through the door.

Coconnas mounted the stairs. He sat down on a velvet-covered settee in the corridor. But it was cold, and the waiting might not be short. “It will be better sense to go to our own room,” he thought, and had risen again when he was astonished to see La Mole descending the stairs from the floor above.

Seeing Coconnas, La Mole increased his pace. He came down two stairs at a time.

“Oh, Mordi! How the devil did you get out?”

“From where? From the Rue Cloche-Percée?”

“No. From the queen’s apartment.”

“I have not been there.”

“Don’t tell me that.”

“But it is the truth. I have been waiting for you in our room.”

“I didn’t run after you in the Place du Louvre?”

“When?”

“Just now.”

“No.”

“You didn’t run up the stairs as though the devil were on your back?”

“I didn’t come up at all.”

“Then the wine of the Belle Etoile is stronger than I supposed… I tell you I saw you - I saw someone in that cloak and cap, which nobody could mistake, rush up the stairs, and go into the queen’s apartment.”

“Mon Dieu! There is some treachery here. It must be intended to trap the queen.”

“Interpret it how you will. But I am certain of what I saw.”

La Mole hesitated a moment, and then, impelled by a confusion of motives, among which jealousy may have had a place, knocked loudly upon the door.

“Steady,” Coconnas said. “We shall get arrested if you do that. It is a queer affair, all the same. Do you believe in ghosts?”

“I am hoping to see one now.”

“Then don’t make so much noise. Any ghost would be frightened away.”

La Mole knocked again, but in a gentler way, having realised the folly of what he had done before.

CHAPTER XXV

THE WEARER OF THE RED CLOAK

COCONNAS had made no mistake when he recognised the Queen of Navarre. De Mouy did not doubt that she had mistaken who he was when she laid her hand on his arm, but he did not dare to protest while they were in the open corridor, not knowing to what it might lead.

He felt the soft pressure upon his arm. He heard the intimate inviting words which she whispered in the Latin tongue, in which she was notoriously proficient. “Sola sum; introito, carissime.”

In the ante-room, better lit than the corridor, she saw her mistake.

“Silence for silence, madame.”

He was answered by the exclamation he had anticipated: “Monsieur De Mouy!” But they were alone now.

“Yes. I beg your majesty to allow me to go my way without disclosing that I am in the Louvre.”

“But what a mistake I made!”

“Your majesty doubtless took me for the King of Navarre. know I am about his size, and I have a white feather, such as it is his custom to wear.”

“Do you understand Latin?”

De Mouy smiled. “Madame, I once did. But I forget much.” Marguerite smiled in reply. “M. De Mouy, you may count on me. But I suppose J know whom you would see. Could I not help you by leading you to him?”

“Madame, I must doubt whether you do.”

“It is surely the King of Navarre.”

“On the contrary, it is he, above all, who should not know I am here.”

Marguerite looked her astonishment. “M. De Mouy, I have regarded you as one of the most loyal of the Huguenot chiefs. Will you say I am wrong?”

“Madame, till this morning you would have been right.”

“But you have changed since then?”

“Madame, do not press me to answer.” As he spoke he moved toward the door.

“And yet, monsieur, I am one you might safely trust.”

“Madame, it is indeed an imperative reason for silence which can induce me to refuse such a plea.”

“But —”

“You may ruin me, if you will. But I will not betray my friends.”

“Have your old friends no claim?”

“Those who are loyal to us, as we were to them - yes. Those who abandon us - no.”

Marguerite would have continued these skilful questions through which De Mouy was gradually revealing that which he was resolved to hide, but at this moment Gillonne appeared at the door. “Madame,” she whispered urgently, “it is the King of Navarre.”

“Which way is he coming?”

“By the private passage.”

“Let this gentleman out by the other door.”

“It has become impossible, madame. Someone is knocking.”

“On the other door?”

“Yes.”

“See who it is.”

“Madame,” De Mouy said, “if the King of Navarre should see me here in this disguise, I am lost.”

Marguerite drew him toward the cabinet in which others had been hidden before. “You will be as safe there as in your own home. You are under the protection of the Queen of Navarre.”

The door had scarcely closed when Henry appeared. This time she had nothing to hide from him. She was gloomy, and love was a hundred miles from her thoughts.

Henry entered, nervously observant of even the smallest things, a disposition in which his protection lay. He saw the shadow upon her face.

“You were engaged? I have perhaps come at the wrong time?”

“I was thinking.”

“I cannot blame you for that. And its expression makes you more beautiful rather than less. I also was thinking. But they were thoughts which I am anxious to share with you.”

Marguerite smiled her response. She pointed to an armchair, and took one of carved ebony for herself.

“I remember,” he said, after a pause of silence, “that we agreed that, though we are separated matrimonially, our interests are the same.”

“Yes. That is so.”

“And, beyond that, I was to count on you, in any plans I might form, as not merely a faithful, but an active ally.”

“Yes. And I only ask that by acting quickly you may give me the opportunity of doing the same.”

“I am delighted to hear it. I hope that there has been no moment when you have doubted that my plans are those which I indicated on the night when you gave me expectation of life.”

“Henry, I believe that your assumption of indifference is no more than a political mask. I believe not so much in the predictions of the astrologers as in your own genius, which will make them sure.”

“What would you say if someone were to act in such a way as would reduce us permanently to an inferior status?”

“I would struggle with you against him, either openly or secretly, as you might prefer.”

“Well, you can prove that at once. You can enter your brother Alençon’s room at any time, You have his confidence, and he has a warm affection for you. Will you find out now if he has anyone with him in secret conference?”

Marguerite looked startled at this suggestion. “You suspect someone?” she asked

“Yes. De Mouy.”

“Why?” she asked, finding difficulty in maintaining her self-control.

“Because it threatens all our hopes, or, at least, mine.”

“Speak lower,” she whispered, pointing to the cabinet.

“Oh!” Henry exclaimed. “It is so often occupied that your bedchamber is unapproachable. Still,” as Marguerite met this remark with a smile, “if it were always M. de la Mole!”

“But it is not he. It is M. De Mouy,”

“The very man!” Henry exclaimed, with joy overcoming surprise. “Then he is not where I feared. Will you bring him out?”

Marguerite entered the cabinet, and drew De Mouy out by the hand. “Ah, madame,” he said reproachfully, “so you betray me, despite your promise. What would you say if I were to avenge myself by saying —”

Henry interrupted him, “You had better listen to me before you talk in that way. You may find that you have no cause for complaint. Marguerite, may we be assured that we shall not be disturbed?”

It was at this moment that Gillonne came in with a frightened face, and whispered something to Marguerite which caused her to start from her chair. She went out quickly with Gillonne to the outer chamber. De Mouy loosed his sword in its sheath. Henry moved round the room, sounding the walls with his fingers, and even examining the bed - the alcove - the tapestry.

Meanwhile Marguerite found herself face to face with La Mole, behind whom Coconnas stood ready to advance or retreat as developments might require.

“What is the matter, M. de la Mole? Why are you so agitated?”

“Madame,” Gillonne said indignantly, “he made such a noise at the door that I was obliged to open it, despite your orders, and he wished to force his presence upon you.”

Marguerite’s face clouded ominously. “Is this true, sir?” she asked. “Madame, I wished to warn you that someone has introduced himself into your apartment wearing my cloak and hat.”

“Sir, you must be mad. I see your cloak is on your own shoulders, and do I not see - Dieu me pardonne! - your hat is on your own head while you talk to a queen.”

“Oh, forgive me, madame! Believe that it was not from lack of respect. But I was distracted by what I saw.”

“No, you do not lack respect, you lack faith.”

“Humbly I implore your forgiveness. But when I am told that a man enters your apartment disguised as myself, what am I to suppose?”

“A man?” Marguerite said softly, pressing his arm. “Oh, how foolish you are! Look through the tapestry, and you will see two.”

As she spoke, Marguerite pulled back the embroidered velvet curtain, and La Mole, looking through, saw King Henry talking to the man who impersonated himself. Coconnas, pressing behind, saw them also, and recognised De Mouy.

“Now,” Marguerite said to La Mole, “if you are satisfied, will you stand at the door, and on your life let no one enter. Warn me even if anyone comes into the

corridor.”

La Mole, with a sign to Coconnas to follow, went out in immediate obedience to this request, and Marguerite returned to the inner room.

“Marguerite,” Henry asked, “do you think it possible for us to be overheard?”

“This room,” she replied, “has a double wainscote, and its walls are lined with mattresses. Gillonne is watching in the private passage, and M. De la Mole in the corridor. Could you have more than that?”

“I will trust to you,” Henry answered, smiling at her, and then to De Mouy, but in a low voice, as though suspicion were not wholly removed: “Now tell me why you have come here?”

“Here?”

“He did not intend to come here,” Marguerite interposed. “I invited him.”

“Then you knew —”

“I have guessed everything.”

“You see, De Mouy,” Henry went on, “people can guess. I was quite sure that you had been approached by the Duke d’Alençon. “

“If I 1istened, sire, the fault was yours in rejecting every offer I made.”

“You refused!” Marguerite exclaimed. “Then —”

“You both make me laugh,” Henry replied. “A man comes to me to one who has saved his life by becoming a Catholic, who is tolerated only so long as he be humble - and speaks to me of leading revolts, of gaining thrones, in a room which is not lined with mattresses, and where we were likely to be overheard - as no doubt we were. Ventre-saint-gris! you are mad.”

“But if you had given me hope, even the faintest sign!”

“What did d’Alençon say to yon?”

“Sire, I cannot reveal that.”

“De Mouy, don’t be a fool. I don’t ask you to repeat his proposals. I ask, had he been listening? Had he heard?”

“Yes, sire. It was evident that he had.”

“You see it yourself! One word, and I had been lost. What a poor conspirator you are. You do not know the walls of the Louvre Have they not given birth to the proverb that walls have ears? If you thought me such a fool as to talk there, you should have offered your crown to a better man.”

“But if you had made a sign?”

“If he could hear, might he not also see?… Repeat your proposition here, and I may answer you in a different way.”

“But I am pledged to d’Alençon now.”

“You mean,” Marguerite exclaimed, “that it is too late?”

“Not at all,” Henry replied. “You may call it the act of God. Go on with d’Alençon, and he will be the safeguard of all. Do you think I could save you? On the contrary. You are in the shadow of death if you are connected with me. But a son of France! Make him give you guarantees. Yet you are so simple that you may have pledged your word with no safeguards at all.”

“Sire, it was despair at your refusal which caused me to listen to him. And there was the fact that he knew our secret already.”

“Well then, go on by the road he opens to you. Would he be King of Navarre? Promise him the crown. Would he quit the court? Help him to get away. Serve him as though you were serving me. He will be the buckler which will cause blows to glance aside from my bead… When the time comes, you will find me in the field… And when I reign, I will reign alone.”

“But,” Marguerite added, “you must beware of my brother, for he is cunning and cold. He has never made friends, because he neither loves nor hates. He just plots for himself, and he will treat his friends as enemies, or take his enemies for friends, as he thinks it may be advantageous to him.”

“He is expecting you now, De Mouy?”

“Yes, sire.”

“When?”

“At midnight. I am to wait in the chamber of two of his gentlemen.”

“Then there is time. It is not eleven yet.”

“When shall I be able to see you again?”

“You will be able to come into the Louvre. D’Alençon will see to that. And I will give you a key to my own room, so that you can enter quietly at your own time, either by night or day. I will take you out by the private passage now, while the queen will call the real red-cloak into the room. You must keep to that disguise, and no one must suspect that there are two.” Henry turned to Marguerite with a smile: “Is not that how it should be done?”

“Yes. For La Mole is one of my brother’s gentlemen.”

“Then win him wholly to our side,” Henry said more seriously. “Give him what you will - promises or gold.”

Marguerite laughed: “I will do the best I can.”

CHAPTER XXVI

MARGUERITE MAKES A PROMISE

COCONNAS and La Mole stood outside in the corridor. La Mole asked: “What can it mean?”

“It means,” Coconnas replied, “that we are on the edge of some court intrigue, out of which you will be wise to keep, as I certainly mean to do. For where the King of Navarre may lose a feather, or the Duke d’Alençon a strip of his coat, we should lose our lives. The queen has a caprice for you, and you have a fancy for her. That is lucky for both. But set your heart on love and let politics go”

“It is no fancy Annibal. It may be folly, but I love her with all my soul. If I can help her, there is nothing I will not do. But you are outside this. Go back to our room now, and don’t compromise yourself by standing on guard here.”

Coconnas considered this. He said: “We are both right. You love her, and must act accordingly. I think that life is worth far more than a woman’s kiss. If I risk my life, I will make a bargain about the price. You will be a wise man if you do the same.”

With these words he went. Ten minutes later Marguerite opened the door cautiously, and beckoned La Mole in. Having shot the bolt, she led him to the inner room, seated herself, took his hand in hers, and said: “Now we are alone, let us talk seriously”

“Seriously?”

“Amorously, if you prefer. But we must be serious too. There are serious things in love, particularly if you love a queen.”

“I will be serious, madame, if I may be foolish as well.”

“You may be as foolish as you please, if you do not call me madame or queen. When we are alone I am Marguerite.”

“You are always a pearl to me.”

“That will do quite nicely. Now to begin. You were jealous tonight.”

“I was jealous enough to feel mad.”

“Jealous of whom?”

“Well, say of the king to begin.”

“I should have though you would have seen enough to know how causeless that is.”

“Then I am jealous of De Mouy, of whom I knew nothing before today, and who is so intimate with you now.”

“Why?”

“It is an instinctive feeling. And I know he was with d’Alençon this morning.”

“What of that?”

“He is your brother. It is said that it is to him only that you tell your secrets, as he tells his to you. Has he not introduced De Mouy at your request?… Marguerite, love has a right to frankness. If what you feel for me is no more than a passing whim, I give all your promises freely back. I will go to the war. I will be killed at Rochelle if misery does not give me an earlier grave.”

Marguerite bent her head toward him. “You love me that much”’ she whispered happily.

“More than life, more than salvation, more than anything that the world contains. But you do not love me like that.”

“Silly,” she murmured contentedly.

“Did I not tell you I am a fool?”

“Love is the greatest thing in your life?”

“It is everything.”

“You want to be always near me?”

“It is my one prayer to God.”

“Then that is how it shall be. I want you also.”

“The sun wants the glowworm?”

“If I tell you I love you truly, will you always be true to me?”

“Am I not already?”

“No. For you doubt me at times.”

“I was wrong - ungrateful - mad. But it was that cloak! And it was not you, it was your brother I did not trust.”

“Could you believe that he would introduce a lover to me - his own sister? Don’t you understand that he would kill you - if he had the courage, he would kill you with his own sword - if he knew you were kneeling here? And now listen to me. It was not for my! sake that De Mouy wore that cloak. It was at my brother’s orders, so that he might have secret access to him. But it deceived me, so that I brought him in, thinking it was you. He knows our secret now, and we must be civil to him.”

“I would rather kill him. It would be a more certain way.”

“And I would rather he live. I want you to know everything. Should you be glad if I should become a real queen?”

“I love you enough to wish for your happiness, whatever it might mean for me.”

“Then will you help me to realise that ambition?”

“And lose you by it?”

“Not at all. You would be the first of my subjects still.” She held out her hands to him, which he covered with kisses, “Well?” she asked.

“Yes,” he answered. “Yes… And I think I understand what

your plans are. Except only, where does the Duke of Alençon come in?”

“He conspires for his separate gain, and in doing so he ensures our lives, for his own would answer for ours.”

“But I am still in his service. Can I betray him?”

“How should you do that? What has he confided to you?”

La Mole rose to his feet. “I see,” he said, “Coconnas was right. Intrigue has me in its net. It will destroy me at last.”

“Well?” Marguerite asked again.

“Well, this is my reply. Before I came to Paris I heard - it is the talk of all France - that you have had more than one lover already, and that your love has been fatal to them.”

“La Mole!”

“False or true, so it is said - and you do not look as though it is wholly false. And I believe, if I go on, you will be my death. Will you swear to me that, if I should die for you - if, shall we say, I should die on the scaffold, which we both know to be quite a possible thing - that you will preserve my heart - that you will keep it so that I shall not be entirely forgotten? Swear this, and I will be your accomplice in whatever your plans may be - wary, devoted, mute.”

“You are talking folly, my love. Can you not put such sombre thoughts, such wild imaginations aside? What have I asked you to do?”

“Then you will not swear?”

“Do you ask me seriously?”

“Yes, on that silver crucifix over the coffer, I entreat you to swear.”

“Then I do swear it. If, which heaven forbid! - your gloomy presentiment should become sure, I swear by that cross that you shall be with me as long as I live myself. If there should be a peril into which I should lead, and then be too weak to save you, it would be no more than your due.”

“One word more. I may not die. I may love, and you may be a real Queen of

Navarre. Shall you not then be a real wife to the king? You have promised me what will happen if I should die. Promise me what will happen if I should live."

"I promise that I will be yours, body and soul. If I leave Paris, you will come also. Otherwise, I would remain here."

"You would not resist the king, even to that?"

"Well - beloved, you do not know Henry. He intends to be king. There is nothing he would not sacrifice for that, and little else that he values at all. And now you had better go."

"You send me away?"

"It is very late."

"M. de Mouy may still be in my room with the duke." Marguerite answered with the smile that he loved to see. "Then you must stay for a time - and go on talking about intrigues and conspiracies, for what else is there to do?"

From that day La Mole walked with a high head, as one for whom a high destiny was reserved. He had a great happiness, though the gaiety had gone from him.

CHAPTER XXVII

CATHERINE'S PLAN FAILS

WHEN Henry left Madame de Sauve, he had said: "Stay in bed tomorrow. Receive no one. Pretend you are ill."

So she did, assuming symptoms which he had suggested. She complained of a strange dizziness during the night. In the morning she attempted to rise, but found herself too weak, and returned to bed. Catherine heard of this when she quietly asked why Charlotte did not appear.

Madame de Lorraine said she had heard that she was ill.

"Ill! It is most likely no more than a lazy mood."

"No, mother. She has a headache, and is so weak that she cannot walk."

Catherine made no answer to this, but when she was alone in her own room she went to a secret cupboard, concealed by one of the panels, and drew out a book, the condition of which showed that it was in constant use.

"That is it," she said to herself, as she came to the page she sought. "Headache, debility, pains in the eyes, swelling of the palate. The first symptoms have appeared, and the others will follow."

She read further. There would be six hours of fever. Twelve of general inflamation. Twelve more during which the gangrene would appear. Six hours of final agony. Thirty-six hours in all. It was a book on which she had learnt to rely.

But suppose that absorption should be less rapid than swallowing in its effects? Well, say forty-eight hours. It would not be likely to be more than that.

But why was Henry still able to move about? He was a robust man. And perhaps after kissing her he drank, and then wiped his lips?

She waited impatiently for the hour when Henry would appear, as he always did, to dine at the royal table. He came as usual, but he did not eat. He said that he

had pains in his head. He rose almost at once. He would go to bed. Perhaps, he said, he had been up too late the night before. But she thought she knew better than that.

She listened to his slow uncertain steps as he went away. She was told that he had gone to Madame de Sauve's room. She thought that by the next day they would both be dead.

Next day, Henry did not appear. A rumour that he was ill spread through the court; and it was known that Madame de Sauve was worse.

Catherine rejoiced. She had sent Ambroise Pare away to the assistance of a valet who was ill at St. Germain. The doctor who was most likely to be summoned in his absence was a creature of hers. But if suspicion of poisoning should arise, would not Marguerite's jealousy be the most probable explanation?

So she waited quietly till someone should rush in crying: "Your majesty, the King of Navarre and Madame de Sauve have been found dead together."

At four o'clock she was finishing her lunch in the aviary, throwing crumbs to the birds, when the captain of the guard opened the door.

"Your majesty, the King of Navarre —"

"Is ill?"

"No, madame. He seemed in good health. He wishes to present you with a monkey of a rare kind."

Henry entered, smiling, carrying a basket in his hand, and seeming to be wholly occupied with the little creature within it.

Catherine for once lost her nerve and her self-control. She turned pale, and said foolishly: "My son, I am pleased to see you so well. I had heard a different report."

"I have been very ill, madame. But I was cured by a remedy which we of the mountains know."

"You must give me that prescription," she answered honestly.

“Some antidote,” she thought bitterly. “He saw Charlotte ill, and was on his guard. I believe God protects this man.”

At night, she asked after Madame de Sauve again, and was told she was worse - dying, so it was said.

At night, she allowed herself to be put to bed by her woman, and then, when everyone else had retired, she rose, put on a long black dressing-gown, took up a lamp, and then, key in hand, ascended to the apartment of her maid of honour.

Cautiously and quietly, she opened, the outer door, and glided into the bedroom. She saw that there was a night-light beside the bed, and put down her lamp. Dariole slept in a huge armchair beside her mistress’s bed, the curtains of which were closed.

She heard a faint sigh from within, and drew them apart, her mind prepared for an aspect of livid pallor, or the high colour of fever, but what she saw was a soft cheek lying on a beautifully-rounded arm, while the other lay at ease on the crimson damask of the bed. The rosy lips smiled as though aware of a charming dream.

Catherine could not restrain an exclamation of astonishment, at which Dariole stirred, but she sank back into slumber as the queen-mother quietly withdrew behind the curtains.

After a few minutes she came out again and moved cautiously about the room.

She saw on the table a half-empty flagon of wine, fruit cakes, and two glasses. Evidently Henry and Charlotte had supped together, and she was as well as himself.

Catherine went to the toilet table. The silver box lay there, now two-thirds empty. She scooped out a piece of the paste, the size of a small pearl, on the tip of a golden needle. Then she went back to her room, and offered it to the little monkey that Henry had given her. Attracted by the scent, it licked it greedily. Then it curled up and went to sleep.

Catherine watched it for a quarter of an hour, but its slumbers were undisturbed.

“With half the quantity this animal has eaten,” she thought, “I have seen a dog

swell and die in ten minutes. I have been tricked, Could it have been René? Impossible, for I supplied the poison myself. Then it must be Henry who was on the watch. Oh, fatality! He is to reign, and he cannot die. But it is only poison that I have tried, and the sword remains."

Next morning her mind was alert with a new plan. She called the captain of the guard, and gave him a letter which was to be delivered to the hand of Sire de Louviers de Maurevel.

CHAPTER XXVIII

A LETTER FROM ROME

IT was a few days after the queen-mother's night visit that Madame de Sauve called upon the Queen of Navarre, this being the first time she had left her room after the illness which she had feigned.

"You will come," Marguerite asked, "to the great hunt to morrow?"

"I fear I may not be sufficiently recovered for that."

"Oh, you must make an effort! Henry has a little Béarn horse, which he meant for me, but you shall have it, and it will carry you well."

"You are too good. If you command I must come."

"You must remember, baroness, that in public we were not friends, for I am jealous of you."

"But in private?"

"In private I forgive, and perhaps I thank."

Marguerite extended her hand, which Charlotte kissed, and she withdrew as the Duchess de Nevers was announced.

Henriette seated herself as Gillonne fastened the door.

Marguerite asked: "Your bold swordsman - what do you do with him now?"

"My dear queen, he is really a mythological being, incomparable in mind, and unequalled in humour. I am really fond of him. And how goes it with your own Apollo?"

"Alas!" said Marguerite. "You alarm me. What can be wrong with him?"

"Nothing with him. It is myself. I fear I am really in love."

“Not really?”

“Yes. On my woman’s word.”

“It is all the better, as he is so faithful to you. It seems that we are to spend a most pleasant year.”

“Do you think so? Things appear much blacker to me… Can you learn if your Annibal is really devoted to my brother? It is important to know.”

“He devoted to anything! You do not know him. He is devoted to his own ambitions alone. Sometimes he is so tigerish that he almost makes me afraid. Only yesterday I said: “Annibal, if you should be false to me! And what do you think he replied?”

“Well, what did he?”

“He said: ‘And if you are false to me! Although you are a princess - !’ And he threatened me with his finger. His nail was cut like a spear-point; I trembled, he looked so fierce.”

“He actually threatened you!”

“Yes. Mordi! But I had threatened him first.”

“You have brought me news?”

“Yes. From Rome.”

“And of Poland? You have heard from the duke?”

“Matters go well. In a few days you may be freed from your brother d’Anjou.”

“Then the pope has ratified his election.”

“Yes. That is sure.”

“Why did you not tell me at once? Come, the details now!”

“Oh, ma foi! There is no more to tell. But here is my husband’s letter. No, that is one which I want you to ask La Mole to give Annibal. Here it is.”

Marguerite read it eagerly, but it told her no more than she had heard already.

“How did you get it?” she asked.

“One of my husband’s couriers had orders to stop on his way to the Louvre, and leave it with me. I asked him to do this, because I know you like to have the news before it comes to you from the king. And now you are the only one who knows this besides myself and the king. Unless another courier who was riding closely behind ours has brought the same news to someone else in the palace.”

“You know there was such a man?”

“Yes. It must have been a horrible business. The poor courier rode for a week, day and night, jaded and dusty, with a fierce-looking man always behind him, with equal relays of horses. He was expecting every moment to have a ball in his back. They rode into Paris side by side, and it was only at the bridge of Notre Dame that they parted, our courier coming first to me, and the other riding at his utmost speed to the Louvre.”

“Thanks, Henriette. Your news is important, indeed. I must find out who this other courier is. We will meet tonight in the Rue Tigon? I will tell you then what I want Coconnas to find out.”

“Be sure to remember my letter.”

“Yes. He shall have it.”

Henriette went; and the queen sent for Henry, to whom she told what she had heard.

“Yes,” Henry said, “I saw the man enter the Louvre.”

“Perhaps it was for the queen-mother.”

“No. I was in the corridor. No one entered her apartment.”

“Then it was for —”

“D’Alençon?”

“Yes. But how can we be sure?”

“Could we not learn through one of the two gentlemen who - ?”

“Yes. I will send for La Mole.”

Henry sat down at the table, opened a book of engravings, and affected to be too occupied with them to hear what Marguerite said to La Mole when he entered a moment later.

“M. de la Mole, can you say who is on guard at M. d’Alençon’s?”

“Coconnas, madame.”

“Will you learn whether a man has entered there this morning covered with mud, as though he has ridden for many days?”

“Madame, he may decline to say. He has been very reserved during recent days.”

“Give him this letter, and he will owe something to you.”

“From the duchess? Then madame, I will answer for all.”

He hurried away, and Marguerite turned to her husband to say: “We shall soon know whether d’Alençon has had a letter from Poland.”

“M. de la Mole,” Henry replied, with an enigmatic smile, “is a most excellent servant, and, by the mass, I will make his fortune.”

CHAPTER XXIX

A WARRANT OF ARREST

FOR two hours the court had bristled with preparations for the hunt before the dull red disc of the sun appeared in the winter sky.

A splendid barb moved restlessly in the courtyard, awaiting the king, whose own impatience was hindered by the queen-mother. She would not understand that when he hunted he had no time for affairs of state.

They stood in the great gallery. Charles biting his nails, and giving less heed to his mother's words than to his two favourite dogs which stood beside him, now clothed in coats of mail to protect them from the boar's tusks, and having shields on their breasts, gaily blazoned with the royal arms.

"Listen, Charles," Catherine said, with the cold persistence which he might resent, but which would most often prevail. "No one but you and I know that the Polish ambassadors must be nearly here, yet Henry acts as though he expects them. That is not all. He is corresponding with the Huguenots again. For the first time in his life, he has money to spend. He is buying horses and weapons, and he practices fencing when it is wet."

"Bah! Mother. You will say next that he means to kill Anjou or myself. He will need more lessons for that. Do you know I touched the buttons of his doublet eleven times yesterday? - and there are but six. And Anjou is more skilful than I."

"Charles, do be serious! The ambassadors will soon be here. You will find that Henry will do all he can to gain their attention. He is insinuating and crafty. And Marguerite, who supports him, I don't know why, will chatter to them in Latin and Greek and Hungarian and half a dozen other languages which we don't know. I tell you that there is something going on that you've got to stop."

"I'm not going to stop now anyway. You can hear it's striking seven, and that means it will be nine before we get to the wood. Mort de ma vie. Down Risque-tout! Down, you rogue!" And he struck the astonished hound, which had expected a caress, a savage blow.

“Charles, listen! Do you care nothing for your own fortune, or that of France? The hunt! Can it not wait till another day?”

“Bah! mother,” Charles retorted, now white with anger. “Say what you are driving at in a word, and have done.”

“M. de Mouy is in Paris. He has been seen by Maurevel. Do you see nothing to arouse suspicion in that?”

“Oh, you are after poor Harry again! I suppose you want me to kill him? Or perhaps banish him? Don’t you see that he would be more dangerous away than he is here, where we can watch all he does?”

“I don’t want you to do either.”

“Well, be quick. What is it?”

“I want you to confine him in the Bastille while the Poles are here.”

“Ma foi! No. I am going hunting, and Harry is the best companion I have. You are always worrying about something.”

“But I did not say today. Tomorrow will do.”

“Oh, that is another matter. After the hunt, if you like.”

“But you can sign the warrant now,” Catherine said, laying a hand on his arm, “although it need not be executed.”

“Write it now? Hunt for the seal, while I should be hunting the boar? Devil take me if I do that.”

He wrenched impatiently away, but her persistence continued.

“Charles, I have it ready. It is here.” She drew him towards her cabinet. He saw parchment, ink, seal, wax and taper laid out in readiness. He glanced at the document, ‘To arrest and conduct to the Bastille our brother Henry of Navarre.’

“Oh, well,” he said, “if that’s all.” He scrawled his signature and hurried away, glad to escape so easily.

Charles was not often late for the hunt. The waiting crowd in courtyard, puzzled by the delay, now cheered his appearance. Colour came to his pale face. For the brief moment he was a happy man.

He greeted d'Alençon, waved a; hand to Marguerite, affected not to see Henry, and mounted his waiting steed.

While they had waited, Marguerite had whispered to Henry: "Coconnas admitted the courier to d'Alençon a quarter of an hour before de Nevers' messenger saw the king."

"Then he knows everything."

"He must. Look at him now. He has a satisfaction he cannot easily hide. He is hunting for three thrones - Poland, France, and Navarre."

It was a quarter past eight when the cavalcade halted at Boudy, and Charles enquired of the huntsmen whether the boar had broken cover.

Learning that it had not, he ordered a collation to be prepared, and went off to inspect the kennels. Then the Duke de Guise rode up with thirty gentlemen who looked to be armed for war rather than the chase. He went to seek the king, and returned conversing with him.

At nine, the king ordered the signal for departure to be blown. As they moved away, Henry drew to his wife's side.

"Have you noticed," she said, "how uneasy the king is when he looks at you?"

"Yes."

"You will be on your guard?"

"I am wearing a coat of mail; and my Spanish hunting-knife would go through a crown-piece."

"Well, God keep you!" The long cavalcade halted. They had come to the lair of the boar.

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CHAPTER XXX

MAUREVEL'S ORDERS

CATHERINE rolled up the parchment the king had signed. She ordered that Maurevel should be shown in.

He entered wearing a large thick cloak, and with a whole arsenal of weapons beneath it. His face showed high cheekbones, and a great nose like an eagle's beak. A great bandage of sarsanet covered one of his eyes, and obscured the other.

The queen-mother seated herself. "I promised to reward you on the night of St. Batholomew. Now the time has come."

"I humbly thank your majesty."

"I am giving you something which a Guise might not think it degrading to undertake. Read that."

She handed him the warrant as she spoke, and as he read he turned pale.

"Your majesty, to arrest a king! I fear I am not —"

"You are not gentleman enough to do that? By my commission you may become the first gentleman in the land."

"I thank your majesty," he replied, but his hesitation was still evident in his tone.

"You will obey?"

"If your majesty commands, I have no choice."

"I do command… How shall you proceed?"

"I desire your majesty's guidance."

"You would wish to proceed quietly?"

“Yes.”

“Take twelve men - more if you prefer.”

“Your majesty intends that it shall be easy for me. Where can I arrest the King of Navarre?”

“Where would you prefer?”

“I should prefer a place where it would be clear that —”

“A royal place, for instance? Such as the Louvre?”

“If your majesty would permit that?”

“So I do. You may arrest him in his own apartment.”

“When, your majesty?”

“Tonight.”

“What respect must be shown to his rank?”

“Rank? The King of France has no equal here. His orders must be obeyed.”

“One final question, your majesty. Should the King of Navarre refuse to admit the authority of this order? It is unlikely, but —”

“On the contrary, it is most probable.”

“So that he may refuse to obey?”

“So I expect.”

“In that case —”

“In what case?”

“Should he resist.”

“What would you do should a private gentleman refuse to obey the warrant of

the King of France?”

“I must kill him, your majesty, should he resist or attempt escape.”

“I have told you that, when the King of France orders, distinctions of rank do not exist.”

“Madame! Shall I kill the King of Navarre?”

“Who said kill? Your order is to lodge him in the Bastille. But you may defend yourself. In your loyal service you are not expected to allow yourself to be killed. Do you understand now?”

Maurevel said: “Yes, your majesty,” but he was even paler than before. It was clear that it was an order he did not like. Catherine saw where the danger of failure lay, and there had been too many failures already.

“I suppose,” she said, “you think it should say, ‘dead or alive’ ?”

“It would be much better so!”

“Well, so it shall be.” She took the warrant back, and wrote the three words upon it.

He took it back, evidently relieved, but still hesitant.

“Well, are you satisfied now?”

“If your majesty would leave the details entirely to me.”

“So I do. What do you mean?”

“You said take twelve men. It is too many. There could be no excuse for killing him so that he could not escape.”

“Do as you will. Take six. But do not leave the Louvre till it is done.”

“But I must collect my men.”

“You have a servant who should be equal to that. You will wait in my oratory till we know that Henry has returned to his room.”

“If he should decline to come out?”

“The bolts are being taken off now, and I shall give you a key.”

CHAPTER XXXI

THE BOAR HUNT

THE boar, an animal of exceptional size and ferocity, broke cover almost immediately. For a moment, he was followed only by the hound which had roused him, but soon twenty others were uncoupled, and baying upon his track.

Hunting was Charles's passion, and he dashed after them instantly, followed by d'Alençon and Henry, with others closely behind.

For a quarter of an hour the chase continued, with the boar no great distance ahead. but it then plunged into thickets too dense for the riders to follow, and Charles turned aside with such curses as he was accustomed to use.

"Zounds! d'Alençon! Zounds! Harry," he said. "You come as quietly as nuns following an abbess. Do you call that hunting? d'Alençon, you are scented enough to confuse the dogs. And where is your arquebus, Harry? Even your board-spear seems to have been left behind."

"Sire. what use would an arquebus be to me? I know your majesty likes to shoot the boar himself when he is at bay. And in my country - in the Pyrenees - we hunt bears, and we do not kill them with a boarspear, but a knife."

"Mordieu! You shall send me a cartload of bears when you get back to the Pyrenees. That must be glorious fun… But listen! Have they got him out?… Seen! Seen!"

With this shout, he turned his horse, and spurred madly away: The ground was rough. The king had a splendid horse. Others tried to keep up to him, but, one by one, many of them drew rein. The ladies first, then some of the gentlemen, then the two princes. Tavannes kept longest at the king's side, but he was distanced at last.

The boar had doubled back, and they were now in a long forest path approaching the glade in which the hunt had begun.

D'Alençon and Henry rode side by side, the king being some distance ahead.

The Duke of Guise rode near, but kept to himself with a compact body of his own attendants.

“He acts,” d’Alençon said angrily, “as though he were the real king. He does not even give us a glance.”

“Why should he treat us better than our own relations think it necessary to do? We are only the hostages of our party at court.”

D’Alençon stared. “What do you mean by that?”

“I mean that those who ride behind him are not intent on the hunt. They look to me like an armed guard who would interfere if two persons should attempt to escape.”

“To escape?” d’Alençon echoed, as though he were unable to understand.

“You have a fine horse,” Henry continued. “I am sure he could do fourteen miles an hour. It would be forty by noon. And the crossroad is ahead. Does it not tempt you? I should like a gallop myself.”

D’Alençon flushed, but made no reply, and tried to act as one who had not heard what was said.

“The news from Poland,” Henry thought, “has had its effect. He has a new plan, and would be willing for me to go. But I am not going alone.”

It was at this moment that several gentlemen who had belonged to the Huguenot party, but who had recently followed the example of the King of Navarre in embracing Catholicism, rode up, and saluted the duke in a meaning manner. For a moment they were around him on every side, and he could not doubt that they were giving him an opportunity of flight, and that they would, if necessary, have opposed any interference from those who rode with de Guise. But d’Alençon turned his head away, as though unconscious of the significance of what they did.

Perhaps they supposed that his hesitation arose only from the nearness of the Guise party, for they continued to screen him, and gradually improved their position. As the crossroad was reached, a gentleman who had not appeared before came out of the woods. When he was not more than ten paces away, he

raised his hat, and Henry recognised the Vicomte de Turenne, a Protestant leader, who was believed to be in Poictou. He made a sign that asked plainly: “Are you coming, or not?”

Henry looked at the blank countenance of d’Alençon, and then turned his head once or twice, as though his collar were uncomfortable. Next moment, the vicomte was gone, and those who had been round them were breaking away.

Suddenly the sounds of the hunt became louder. The boar, which had doubled on its tracks in a last effort to foil the dogs, broke from the thicket, with the whole pack close at his heels. After them came three or four huntsmen, of whom Charles was the first. He looked now like a wild man. He was blowing his horn and shouting, as in a drunken excitement. Hat and mantle were gone. His clothing was torn by the thorns, and his face had become smeared with blood.

Seeing that the chase must be near its end, d’Alençon put spurs to his horse, and followed the king. Next moment, Henry did the same.

The boar turned, having his back to a rock, prepared for a final struggle. Forty dogs, breathless with a chase that had lasted three hours, rushed upon him.

As they came up, the huntsmen ranged themselves in a semi-circle around the scene of conflict. The king was somewhat in advance. D’Alençon, close behind, blew on the match of his arquebus. Henry’s hand went to the handle of his knife, which was the only weapon he had.

The Duke of Guise, who scorned to be more than a spectator at such sports, kept a short distance away, with his gentlemen round him.

A piqueur who had been holding back the king’s two huge boar hounds till now, advanced with them to the king’s side. Struggling and baying, they awaited, with fierce impatience, the moment when they would be loosed to join in the fray.

The king saw that the time had come. Already half the pack had been killed or crippled by the sweeping tusks of the boar, as they surged round him like an angry sea. “Loose the hounds,” he said.

The two great beasts rushed eagerly forward. Protected by their armour, they were indifferent to the slashing strokes with which they were met. They soon had the boar firmly gripped by his ears.

“Bravo, Risque-Tout! Bravo, DureDent,” Charles screamed. “Give me a spear, a spear.”

“Will you have my arquebus?” d’Alençon asked.

“No. I want to feel the spear enter.”

“Be careful, Charles,” Marguerite called to him, for the ladies had now come up.

“Sire, don’t miss him. Stick the heretic well,” the Duchess de Nevers called, in her laughing voice.

“Never fear,” answered Charles. He had been handed a spear now and he rode at the boar.

The wily animal saw the flash of the steel. and moved quickly. The point glanced off his shoulder, and snapped as it struck the rock. “Milles noms d’un diable,” Charles screamed angrily. “I have missed; give me another.” He reined his horse back for a second charge, but the great brute, desperate now, and fighting-mad as the king, did not wait for that.

Shaking off the great dogs, he rushed forward at this new enemy. It was no more than Charles had been trained to meet, and he caused his horse to rear in the approved manner, but he may have pulled too much on the curb, or the horse’s terror may have caused it to fall back.

A cry rose from those who watched, for the king’s thigh was pinned beneath the saddle.

“Loose the bridle, sire,” Henry cried.

Charles did this, and tried with his right hand to reach his hunting-knife, but it was wedged too tightly for him to get it out.

As the boar’s rush came, the horse, having its head free, rose to its forefeet, and at the same moment d’Alençon, who had the reputation of being a certain marksman, levelled his arquebus. The bullet struck the left foreleg of the horse, which sank back on to the ground.

D’Alençon had become deadly pale. Had he blundered from nervous excitement,

or had the bullet gone where he meant? His thought now was: “D’Anjou will be king of France, and the Polish crown will be mine.”

So it seemed it would be likely to be. The boar’s tusk was already within a few inches of Charles’ thigh when a hunting-knife flashed past his eyes, and buried itself in the neck of the charging beast. At the same moment an iron-gauntletted hand was interposed to protect him from the gashing stroke of the deadly tusk.

Charles freed himself from the struggling horse, and rose to his feet. He was shaking and pale. He looked down on his hose, which was soaked with blood, and became paler still.

Henry was still on one knee, wrenching his knife from the throat of the dying beast, which had rolled over, with blood gushing from its mouth. He looked up, and saw fear in the king’s eyes.

“Sire,” he said, “you are not hurt. I was just in time. The blood is not yours.”

Charles replied with a note of gratitude in his voice which may not have been heard from him in twenty-four previous years: Thanks, Harry.”

He was surrounded now by an excited, voluble, congratulatory crowd, among whom d’Alençon was prominent. “My dear brother!” he said affectionately. Charles recovered his natural manner as he replied: “Ah, Francis! What a splendid marksman you always are. Where did the ball go?”

“It must have flattened upon the boar’s skull, I suppose.”

“Mon Dieu!” Henry said, with well-similated surprise, “it has broken the horse’s leg.”

D’Alençon stammered: “My hand shook, I suppose.”

“It was a queer miss for a good marksman to make,” Charles said, with his blackest frown. “Thanks, Harry, again.”

Marguerite came up to thank her husband, and congratulate her brother.

“Ah, Margot,” Charles said, “you may thank him well. But for him the king of France would be Henry III, now.”

“Alas!” Henry said, “M. d’Anjou was already my enemy. What will he be now? But one does one’s best. M. d’Alençon can tell us that.”

CHAPTER XXXII

CONCERNING BROTHERLY LOVE

IN saving the life of Charles, it is probable that Henry changed the course of three monarchies. For had he been killed, Henry of Anjou would have become king of France, while his younger brother, d'Alençon would have been the alternative choice for the vacant Polish throne. Finally, as Anjou was in love with Madame de Condé, it is more than likely that he would have supported her husband in claiming the crown of Navarre, as payment for his wife's complaisance.

None of these changes would have been advantageous to Henry, while in changing Charles for Anjou he would have parted with one, who, however brutal and capricious, had shown a disposition to tolerate him, for one who agreed with his mother, Catherine, in being determined upon his death.

It is possible that Henry had a lightning consciousness of this as he had sprung to the king's aid: that he had seen that his fortune and that of Charles were bound up together. It is certain that Marguerite saw it, as she thought over what had occurred. An act of splendid successful courage had not only saved her brother's life, it had supported their own plans. She saw that Henry had a quality which, like lightning, shone most brightly in moments of storm and gloom.

Henry pondered over the event and its probable consequences as he rode back to the Louvre, and on arrival, covered with dirt and blood as he was, he went straight to d'Alençon's room.

He found the young duke pacing up and down in a state of agitation which he was finding hard to control.

"I expect," Henry said at once, "that you are angry because I called the king's attention to the fact that your ball hit the horse's leg. But it was an exclamation I could hardly control. And, in any case, he would have been certain to see it."

"So he might, but I cannot acquit you of an unfriendly motive. You made Charles suspect me, and have caused a cloud to arise between us."

“As to that, we will talk later. But I have come to make a proposal to you from which you will be able to judge whether I am friendly or not.”

“Humph.”

“I must tell you this first. One of the Huguenot leaders, De Mouy, has been here, at the risk of his life, to make certain proposals to me.”

“And what reply did you make?”

“I remembered that Charles had saved my life, and that the queen-mother has been a true mother to me. I refused them all.”

“What were they?”

“They wished me to take my rightful place on the throne of Navarre.”

“And you have thought better of your refusal since?”

“No. But I have found out that De Mouy, angry at my refusal, is now looking elsewhere.”

“Where?” Francis asked sharply.

“The Prince of Condé would be a probable guess.”

“Very likely.”

“But I can find out who it is.”

D’Alençon turned pale, but made no reply.

“But,” Henry continued, “the Huguenots are divided among themselves. De Mouy does not represent all. Some would still prefer to have me on the throne, and it is possible for me to change my mind.”

“As you will?”

“I have not said that. But did you notice the signal Turenne gave me when he rode out of the wood?”

“Yes. I could see they proposed that you should flee.”

“Then it is evident that there are some who prefer me to you. There are two parties - those of De Mouy and Turenne - and they must be united, or all will fail. Otherwise all is ready - there are troops and weapons and plans. And so I have come to you to make a friendly proposal, by which the difficulty will be removed.

“First, let me explain how I feel. I am not ambitious. I have neither the desire nor the capacity for a throne. I am poor. I am indolent. I am afraid of being drawn into political intrigues, the dangers of which I have had occasion to see. Beyond that, I feel that there is an atmosphere of dishonour in plotting, even to gain

“But,” Francis objected, “what you say is beyond easy belief. There is no position more miserable than that of a prince whose fortune is overshadowed by those of others, or whose material career is blocked by another’s life.”

“Yet that is how I feel,” Henry replied, “and if I had a sure friend - but what hope is there of that? - I would give him all that the party favour would give to me.”

“You may have a better friend than you are aware.”

“I have no one but you - and perhaps the king, whom I must warn of this new plot against the peace of the state. I shall name no one. I shall give no place and no date. But I shall prevent a catastrophe.”

“Mon Dieu!” d’Alençon replied, in an agitation he could not control, “you would not do that? They are your brothers - your friends. You were a Huguenot yourself a few weeks ago. You will start a new massacre all over the country from which not one will survive. It is just such a pretext my mother seeks.”

“What!” Henry replied, with an affectation of surprise, “do you fear that? But I would get the king’s guarantee that no harm should come to either their new leader or to themselves.”

“You would depend on my brother’s word? Did not Coligny have it. Did not Teligny? If you should do this, you will destroy not only the conspirators, but all who are in any way connected with them.”

Henry appeared to reflect on this argument. “Of course,” he said, “if I were a

powerful prince, such as yourself - if I were a son of France - I might act differently."

"What should you do then?"

"I might place myself at the head of the movement, which would then lose its seditious character, and control it in such a way that there would be peace in France."

D'Alençon's face changed to an expression of relief and satisfaction. "Do you surely think that it could be done?"

"Yes. I do. Your character for moderation and modesty. Your high and interesting position - are you not a probable heir to the crown of France? - And the kindness you have always shown to those of the new religion, would all dispose them to serve you."

"But you have told me that there is a division within the party. Would those who prefer you be persuaded to follow me?"

"I would persuade them to it. Brother, do not hesitate. Take the chance which is yours. Reign in Navarre. Give me a place at your table, and the hunting I love, and you will have no subject more contented than I."

"To reign in Navarre… But —"

"You are thinking that Anjou may become King of Poland, and, if Charles should die after that - But the distance from Pau to Paris is not more than two hundred leagues, and Poland is much further away… If that should happen, you could give the crown of Navarre to me. It would be no more than a dependancy of France, and I would accept it from you… Think, Francis, you are nothing here but a prince with two elder brothers whose servant you are - whose caprice might consign you at any moment to the Bastille. In Navarre, you would reign. At the worst - immediately - you would be in safety as the guest of Marguerite and myself."

"Yes. It is all so clear that I cannot understand why you reject that which you present so attractively to me."

"My position is very different from yours. And burdens which some can bear are

too heavy for others."

"Then you seriously renounce your claim?"

"That is what I told De Mouy, and I say it to you again."

"But on a matter of such importance it is usual to ask for proofs."

"I will prove it this evening, when the names of those who lead the conspiracy, and the plan of action shall be handed to you."

At this promise, Francis held out his hand, which Henry pressed warmly, and at the same moment Catherine entered unannounced, as it was her habit to do.

"Like two dear brothers!" she said, with an affectionate smile, but not without observing that, while Henry appeared quite at his ease, Francis had turned pale with fear.

She drew him aside, and showed him a magnificent jewel. "I have had this," she said, "from Florence this morning. I give it you, my dear son, to grace the hilt of your sword." Then she said, in a lower voice: "If you hear a noise in Henry's room this evening, do nothing to interfere."

She saw that he understood, though he made no reply. He said: "I must show this to Henry."

"Do better than that," she replied. "Give it to him, with a mother's love, and I will get another for you."

Henry received the costly present with suitable expressions of gratitude, and Catherine continued: "I am not very well, tonight, and I shall go to bed. Charles is shaken by his fall, and will also retire early. Consequently, we shall not sup together tonight… But Henry, I must compliment you upon your courage, which shall be rewarded suitably."

"I am rewarded already."

"By the conviction that you have done your duty? We must provide something more substantial than that."

“It must be as you will,” he responded, smiling.

He went away, thinking that when the queen-mother offered gifts and flattering words she was the more to be feared. He would talk it over with Marguerite.

CHAPTER XXXIII

THE GRATITUDE OF THE KING

LIKE most kings, Charles had a wife - Elizabeth of Austria - but she had as slight a place in his affections as she has in this narrative. He did not trouble to visit her after the experience he had undergone, but sent a message by his nurse that he was unwell, and would take supper in his own room. Then he settled down to the making of verses, in which he had some small ability, which he thought to be much more than it was.

He had been told that his mother was keeping Maurevel in the Louvre, which brought back to his mind the order he had been persuaded to sign, and he had an impulse to go to his mother and point out that the day on which Henry had saved his life was ill-chosen for that which she had in mind.

But then he hesitated. “Mordieu! What a talk she will make. I can change my mind without asking her. I will go my own way.”

Thinking this, he resolved to go to Henry’s room, and take him under his own protection before the hour at which he had learned that she was instructing Maurevel to act, but the making of verses is a pursuit which may render anyone oblivious to the passage of time, and when he heard a clock strike, and counted the strokes thinking that they would be seven, they were far more than he expected to hear. “Nom d’un diable!” he exclaimed. “it is nine now. They will be at it before I can intervene.”

Catching up his sword, he ran out by a door he had made in the panelling, of which even Catherine was not aware.

But when he reached Henry’s room, it was deserted and dark. When he left d’Alençon, Henry had only remained there long enough to change his clothes, and had left some time before.

“He is on good terms with Marguerite,” Charles thought. “He will have gone there,” and he went on to her apartment.

He knocked at a bolted door, but when Gillonne opened it she uttered a cry of

astonishment or alarm, but did not dare to stand in the way of the king.

From the next room there came sounds of revelry. “He is enjoying himself,” Charles thought, “unsuspecting the danger in which he lies.”

“Here I am, Margot,” he said, and lifted the tapestry with a smiling face.

Margot, like other members of the royal family, had decided to sup in her own room, when she had heard that the king would not appear. Now she sat facing the entrance to the room. There were two men with her, who had their backs to the king. Though his face showed its most affable expression, it acted on her like a Medusa’s head. She sprang up with a terrified cry of: “His majesty!” and at the word one of the men rose quickly, and by an apparent awkwardness, upset the table. Glass, plate, and wax candles crashed to the floor, and the lights went out.

La Mole, rising more slowly, felt a hand on his arm: “Let us get out,” Coconnas whispered, “before we are seen.”

La Mole, one hand on the wall, drew him toward the closet he knew so well, but, as he reached it, he collided with another man who had entered by the private passage.

“Henry,” Charles called impatiently, “what is the matter? Get a light, someone. Henry, why don’t you answer?”

Marguerite heard the movement of her guests toward the closet. She laid a hand, as she thought, on the arm of Coconnas to guide him in the darkness. “Stay quietly,” she whispered. “The king thinks my husband is here.”

“And he shall continue to think so,” Henry’s voice replied, in a low tone.

“Grand Dieu!” she said, withdrawing her hand abruptly.

“Hush,” Henry said.

“Ten thousand devils!” Charles exclaimed. “What does all this whispering mean? Where are you, Henry?”

“I am here, sire,” said the King of Navarre.

“The devil you are! It gets worse than ever,” Coconnas thought.

“And we are doubly lost,” thought the Duchess of Nevers, who had been the fourth of the little party.

Coconnas, with a courage that always approached rashness, decided that the situation had to be faced. He went to the stove, opened it, picked up a taper, and lit one of the candles which had been scattered upon the floor.

Charles looked round curiously.

Coconnas, in the centre of the room, held up the candle. Henry stood close to his wife. The Duchess de Nevers was by herself in a corner of the room. La Mole had disappeared.

“You must excuse us,” Marguerite said, her self-control now recovered, and her wits awake, “we did not expect you.”

“And you did give us a fright!” Henriette added, with wide reproachful eyes.

“I was so startled,” Henry said, “that I upset the table.”

Coconnas thought: “Now that is a husband worth having!”

“What a mess!” Charles said, appearing willing to accept their explanations, “but, Henry, your supper is spoilt. You must come with me.”

“Your majesty will do me that honour?”

“Yes. You shall go out with me, if you will… Lend him to me, Margot, and I will return him safely tomorrow.”

“Sire,” Henry said, “I will go for a better cloak, and return at once.”

“No, don’t do that. The one you have is good enough.”

“But, sire —”

Charles burst into a sudden fury. “Mille nombres d’un diable.” I tell you not to go back to your room. Can you hear me? Come!”

“Yes, go,” Marguerite whispered hastily, knowing her brother well enough to judge that some urgent purpose lay behind the singular invitation, and the burst of anger which had met the proposal of brief delay.

“I am ready, sire,” Henry said.

But Charles had now turned his attention to Coconnas, who was lighting the other candles. He frowned at him, as though puzzled by what he saw.

“Who is this gentleman?” he asked Henry. “Is he M. de la Mole?”

Marguerite wondered uneasily: “Who has been talking about de la Mole to him?” while Henry answered: “No. I am sorry that M. de la Mole is not here. I would have been glad to have the honour of presenting him to your majesty. This is his friend, M. de Coconnas. They are both in the suite of M. d’Alençon.”

“Ah! Our splendid marksman! But,” frowning as he spoke, “did I not hear it said that La Mole is Huguenot?”

“Converted, sire. I answer for him as for myself.”

“After what you did for me today, I will doubt no one for whom you vouch. Doubtless I shall see him some other time.” He slipped his hand under Henry’s arm and drew him out of the room.

They were at the gate of the Louvre when Henry stopped to speak to someone, and was hurried forward by Charles. “I tell you,” he said irritably, “the air of the Louvre is not good for you tonight. Why the devil do you not believe me?”

“Ventre-saint-gris,” Henry thought, “if the air of the Louvre is not good for me, what will it be for De Mouy, who will be alone in my room?”

But Charles was speaking again. “Does it suit you, Harry,” he asked, “that gentlemen in d’Alençon’s service should be making love to your wife?”

“Sire, how should that be?”

“This Coconnas —”

“You have heard?”

“Yes, I have heard such talk.”

“It must be jest. M. de Coconnas is enamoured, I do not doubt. But it is with the Duchess of Nevers, not Marguerite.”

“Ah, bah!”

“I assure your majesty.”

“Well, perhaps it was not he. Perhaps it was De la Mole of whom I was told.” He laughed loudly. “The next time Guise comes with his gossip to me, I can lengthen his face with a tale of how his sister-in-law behaves.”

He whistled, as they came to the street, and four gentlemen came out of the shadows to be their guard.

Meanwhile Marguerite was saying: “They will not return. Shall we have supper relaid?”

“No,” Henriette answered, “I have had too much of a shock to settle down again. I say let us go to the little house in the Rue Cloche-Percée. No one can enter unexpectedly there, and if they should try there would be two good swords on our side.”

“It is impossible,” La Mole said, “we are both on duty tonight. We must, at least, attend the duke till he retires.”

“All the same, we can go,” Henriette replied, and the two gentlemen took their leave, and ascended to d’Alençon’s apartment

They found the duke alone, and apparently waiting for them.

“Gentlemen, you are late.”

“Monseigneur, it is only ten.”

“Yes… but everyone in the Louvre seems to have gone to bed.”

“We are at your command.”

“Then send everyone away. I shall not want you before tomorrow.”

“Well,” Coconnas said, as the two friends rushed upstairs, three steps at a time, to get their cloaks and swords, “everyone seems to be out on the spree. The devil should have a good haul tonight.”

They caught up the two ladies at the corner of the Rue de Coq-Saint-Honoré.

Meanwhile d’Alençon remained in his room, his ears alert for the important event which he had been warned to expect.

CHAPTER XXXIV

MAN PROPOSES BUT GOD DISPOSES

CATHERINE had gone to bed. She was in an unusually good temper. Madame de Sauve sat at her side reading Italian stories, at the drollery of which the queen-mother was laughing freely.

She sent a page to invite Marguerite to join them. He came back with Gillonne.

“Madame,” she said, “the Queen of Navarre has gone out with the Duchess de Nevers.”

“Gone out! At this hour! Where can they have gone?”

“To the Hotel de Guise, madame. There is a seance of alchemists being held there. It will go on till a late hour. I expect they will stay at the Hotel de Guise till the-morning.”

“Margot is fortunate. She is a queen, and yet she has friends… Very well. It is best as it is. You may go… Go on reading, Charlotte… And, by the way, tell the guards in the gallery that they may go.”

That was the signal on which she had told Maurevel to act. Charlotte did what she had been told, and resumed her reading. She had gone on for about a quarter of an hour when a prolonged and terrible cry sounded along the corridor. A pistol shot followed.

“Why have you stopped reading, Charlotte?”

“Madame, did you not hear?”

“What?”

“That terrible cry,” answered the trembling girl.

“And the pistol shot,” added M. de Nancy, the captain of the guard, who stood at the door. His hand was on the hilt of his sword, but he did not dare to leave

without the order of the queen-mother.

“A cry? A pistol shot?” Catherine answered calmly. “Are they so uncommon in the Louvre? Go on reading, Charlotte!”

“But, madame, do you not hear the sound of feet?”

“Shall I not make enquiries?” de Nancy persisted.

“Certainly not. Who would be left to protect me? Probably some of the Swiss guard have got drunk and are fighting among themselves.”

The queen’s calm was so unnatural that even the timid Charlotte was roused to a mood of remonstrance.

“But, madame, surely someone is being killed?”

“Whom should they be killing?”

“The noise came from the direction of the King of Navarre’s apartment.”

“Silly fool! You always think of him… Captain, it must be all over now. But if there has been any scandalous conduct among the guard I trust you will see in the morning that it is duly punished.”

Her voice was calm as she spoke, but Charlotte noticed that she was of an unnatural pallor. A conviction came to her that the man she loved, if he were still alive, was in mortal peril. Her words failed as she read, and she slipped fainting on to the floor.

At this moment a fresh commotion arose. A rush of feet shook the corridor. Two pistol shots came so closely outside the door that the glass of the windows shook.

Catherine, astonished at this prolonged turmoil, sat up, staring with astonishment, and colourless with apprehension of what might have occurred.

“Madame,” the captain asked, “you will let me ascertain what has occurred?”

“No. Stay here. I will go myself.”

Never lacking in courage, she went out to deal as might seem best with whatever development had occurred.

What had happened was this:

At half-past nine, De Mouy entered the Louvre, wearing the cherry-coloured cloak on which he relied for his security from any close investigation, and having a coat of chain-mail under his doublet, and two pistols in his sword-belt.

He entered Henry's apartment with the key which had been sent to him for that purpose, and after walking up and down for some time in an empty room, he put his pistols and the lamp on to the table beside the bed, yawned, and stretched himself on its vast expanse, within the dark hangings, with his sword near to his hand.

The hour grew late, Henry did not come, and De Mouy passed into a sound sleep.

Such was the position when six men, with Maurevel at their head, came quietly along the corridor, and halted before Henry's apartment.

Maurevel, using the key given to him by Catherine, opened the outer door, at which he left two of the men. He ordered two of the others to wait at the door of the bedchamber, and two to enter with him.

"You will remember," he said, "that our orders are to arrest the king, and that he must be taken alive or dead. If he should resist or attempt escape, his blood will be on his own head. Anything will be excused, except that we should let him escape."

He had no doubt that the king was there, for he had heard a sound of deep snoring as he had entered the outer door, but it had ceased as he advanced into the bedchamber. As he drew back the bed curtain, he was confronted, not by an unarmed and defenceless man, but by one who sat on the bedside with a pistol in each hand, and his sword lying beside him.

De Mouy and Maurevel recognised each other with natural wonder or misconception.

De Mouy leapt to his feet, and advanced as the other drew back in bewilderment.

“Ah, wretch,” he said, “you have come to kill me, as you killed my father!”

As he spoke, he levelled his pistol, and Maurevel was equally quick upon the trigger of his own weapon. Maurevel was also quick to duck as he fired, so that the bullet from his opponent’s weapon passed over his head, with fatal consequence to one of the men behind him, while his own struck vainly upon the mail coat that De Mouy’s doublet concealed.

Without attempting to use his second pistol, De Mouy leapt forward, and met the second man, who had advanced at Maurevel’s side, with a thrust which made subsequent happenings of no importance to him.

By this time, Maurevel had risen, and his sword was out. For a moment their blades clashed in what had the appearance of an equal encounter. But Maurevel’s professional swordsmanship and malignant hatred, made him no match for his antagonist either in fury or skill. At the fourth thrust, he felt the steel at his throat, and fell back with a choking cry, his fall upsetting the bedside table, from which the lamp rolled on the floor of a room which became suddenly dark.

De Mouy, taking instant advantage of the confusion, broke past the two men who were now entering the darkened room, before they could understand what had happened or who he was.

Next moment, he was upon the two who stood at guard at the outer door. With longer warning they might have stood their ground stoutly enough. But, before his sudden rush, each of them drew slightly aside, as though willing that his companion should be the first to meet the point of that threatening sword. Had De Mouy been disposed to engage them, their postures might have been such as the occasion required. But he only aimed to escape. He broke past them, and the two hurried pistol-shots which followed him down the corridor had no effect, except to increase the speed of his flight.

To seek Henry further would have been a madness he did not attempt. Leaping down the stairs, he made for the main entrance. The password which Henry had given him was his salvation now. Shouting it as he rushed past the alarmed sentries, he added: “Go up, go up. There is murder being done on the second floor.” And he disappeared into the night.

Meanwhile, Catherine, lamp in hand, had advanced fearlessly along the smoke-filled corridor, until she came to Henry’s apartment.

All was silent; the guards who were left alive having run in futile pursuit of the fleeing man, whom they still thought to be the one they had been ordered to arrest. But when she entered the inner room, she almost stumbled over the body of the man who had died by De Mouy's sword. A few paces away lay his companion, shot through the body, and now in a dying condition. Near the bed, Maurevel lay, bleeding profusely from a wound in the throat, but still conscious, and making a vain effort to rise when he saw the queen-mother.

Catherine went on to the bed, searching for the other body she hoped to see. Finding it empty, she turned her attention to the wounded man.

"Speak," she said imperiously, "if you can. Where is the King of Navarre?"

Maurevel strove for utterance, but could produce no more than inarticulate sounds, which ended in a kind of gurgle as he sank back unconscious, faint from loss of blood, and the effort that he had made.

Catherine heard a movement behind her, and turned to see the Duke d'Alençon standing in the doorway.

His curiosity having been aroused by his mother's warning, he had been alert for any noise in the corridor, and he had actually watched the men enter Henry's room - with satisfaction that so dangerous an associate should be destroyed.

He had heard the shots in the room, and seen a man in a cerise cloak burst out immediately afterwards. "De Mouy!" he had thought; and then: "Could De Mouy be in the apartment of the King of Navarre, with whom he had quarrelled so bitterly?" No, it must be La Mole. But it was a doubt he felt that he must resolve.

He went up to the room occupied by Coconnas and La Mole. It was empty, but the cerise cloak was hanging upon the wall. Certainly it must be De Mouy whom he had seen. He decided that he must know more of what had occurred, and went to see for himself.

"You here?" Catherine asked.

"In heaven's name, what has happened?"

"You will learn that soon enough… Go back to your room now."

“Yes, mother,” he said, affecting indifference, while his mind was in a tumult of apprehension as to what had occurred, and what it might mean to him.

As he went, Catherine summoned the captain of the guard, and ordered him to have the bodies recovered, and to see that Maurevel’s wound should have attention.

Then she went back to her own room.

“Oh, madame, what has happened?” Charlotte, who had recovered from her faint, asked, in a terror of apprehension. “

“Nothing… Only a quarrel.”

“Oh, you say nothing has happened! And every step you take marks the floor with blood.”

CHAPTER XXXV

THE SIEGE

“WHEN I escape from the Louvre,” Charles said, “I have the feeling of a captured animal which escapes into the forest again. I live: I am free.”

“You would like my mountains of Béarn.”

“Perhaps you would like to return?… But take the advice of a friend. My mother loves you too much to let you go.”

Henry changed the subject deliberately: “What is your majesty intending to do tonight?”

“I want to introduce you to someone, and hear your opinion of her.”

“As your majesty wills.”

“Then come on. We are going to the Rue de Barres.”

They walked on, followed by their escort, until they had come level to the Hotel de Condé, when they saw two men, wrapped in heavy cloaks, come out from a side-door, which one of them closed carefully behind him.

“Ah!” said Charles, “here is something which should be looked into.”

“Why, sire?”

“Oh, not for your sake, Henry! You may feel sure of your wife. But our cousin of Condé is not sure of his… Or, if he be so, he is wrong.”

“But why should those gentlemen have been visiting Madame de Condé?”

“Just a presentiment. And the way they behave. Do you not see that they have withdrawn into a doorway, as though they hope they may have escaped our notice? And the look of the smaller man… Pardieu! That would be strange indeed.”

“What would be strange?”

“Nothing. I just had an idea. Come on. We will see who they are.”

The two men, seeing that they had been observed, were now moving away.

“Hold!” cried the king. “I say stop!”

“Do you speak to us?” the shorter of the two replied in a haughty voice, which startled both Henry and the king.

“Do you recognise that, Henry?”

“If your brother, the Duke of Anjou, were not at Rochelle, I should have sworn that the voice is his.”

“Then I say he is not at the siege. And don’t you recognise who is with him?”

“No, sire.”

“Then you soon will. Doesn’t his height alone give him away? Hi!… Hi! Mordieu! Are you deaf when I speak?”

“Are you the watch?” asked the taller of the two men, beginning to feel for his sword.

“Suppose we are. Why don’t you stop when you are told?”

“You will keep your distance if you are wise.”

“The Duke of Guise,” Henry exclaimed.

“Yes, our cousin of Lorraine,” said the king.

“The king!” cried the Duke of Guise, while his companion drew back a pace and covered himself more completely in his cloak.

“Sire,” said the duke, “I have been visiting my sister-in-law, Madame de Condé.”

“And you took one of your gentlemen with you. How natural! Which does it

happen to be?”

“Your majesty would not know him.”

“Then I will make his acquaintance now… Jacques, bring a torch.” With these words Charles walked up to the cloaked figure, which he identified by the light which the lackey bore.

“Pardon, brother,” said the Duke of Anjou, as he threw the cloak back, and bowed to the king, with an annoyance he did not conceal.

“But it cannot be you, Henry! I must be deceived. My brother of Anjou would not have visited anyone in Paris without first coming to see me. He knows the etiquette of the Louvre too well.”

“Pardon me, sire. It was an error of judgment for which I ask your forgiveness.”

“Oh, of course!” answered the king, with a note of mockery in his voice, “and what business had you in the Hotel de Condé?”

“Except,” the King of Navarre interrupted in a tone of levity, “that which your majesty suggested a moment ago.”

The Duke of Guise turned to Henry, incensed less by the words than by the tone in which they were uttered. That which must be endured from the king was intolerable from the uncrowned king of Navarre. “And why,” he asked “should not the Duke of Anjou visit his sister-in-law? Does not the Duke d’Alençon do the same?”

“I was not aware,” Charles replied, “that he had any except Madame de Condé and the queen.”

“I meant his sister Margaret, whose litter passed us a few minutes ago, with a gallant trotting at either door.”

“Really?” said Charles… “Harry, what do you say to that?”

“I say the Queen of Navarre is free to go where she likes, but I don’t think she has left the Louvre tonight.”

“And I am sure she has.”

The Duke of Anjou, glad to turn the subject from his own presence in Paris, added: “We saw it stop in the Rue Cloche-Percée.”

“Then it must be your sister-in-law,” Charles said to the Duke of Guise, “for we left them together, and we know that they hunt in couples.”

“I have no idea what your majesty means.”

“But it is clear to me, and that is why there was a gallant at either door.”

“Pardieu!” said Henry, “cannot we leave Madame de Condé and the Duchess de Nevers alone? The king trusts his sister, and I have confidence in my wife.”

“Not at all,” Charles replied. “I mean to see it cleared up. You would know the place where the litter stopped?”

“Yes, sire.”

“We will go there at once. lf it be necessary to burn down the house to make those who are in it come out - well, we will burn it down.”

So, with this ominous threat against those who might be within it, the four most important gentlemen in the Christian world made their way to the Rue Cloche-Percée, after Charles had dismissed his suite, not knowing what might be the nature of the discovery which he was determined to make.

There were only three houses in the Rue Cloche-Percée, two of which opened readily, and soon satisfied the king that they were not that which he sought.

But the third was a more difficult proposition. Here the German concierge answered them through the grating of the outer door, and neither the imperious threats of the Duke de Guise, the assertion of Charles that he was the lieutenant of the guard, nor even the gold which was offered by Henry of Anjou had any effect upon him.

Seeing that they would not go, he thrust an arquebus through the grating, but they could laugh at that, for he could only point it in one direction, so that none but a blind man would have reason to fear it.

Finally, the Duke of Guise, finding a loose paving-stone at the street corner, bore it, like Ajax or Telamon, on his shoulder, and dashed it against the door, at which the lock burst, and they rushed into the courtyard, but not quickly enough to prevent the porter from retiring through the inner door and shooting its bolts against them.

The noise of the crashing door, and a warning cry from the porter, alarmed the inmates of the house.

At that moment La Mole and Marguerite were engaged upon the translation of an idyll of Theocritus, while Coconnas, under the pretext that he was a Greek, was drinking Syracusan wine with Henriette.

Quickly they blew out the tapers, and ran together to the balcony overlooking the door, to discover who the intruders might be.

Seeing no more than that they appeared to be four revellers of the night, and having confidence in the bolts beneath them, they commenced, in the hilarious spirit which is born of festivity in the night hours, to cast whatever came to their hands upon the heads of the gentlemen underneath.

Charles received a silver aigrette on his shoulder: the Duke of Anjou a basin containing a stew of lemons and oranges: while Henriette gaily flung a joint of venison upon the head of the Duke of Guise.

Only Henry, standing back from an enterprise which he would have preferred to avoid, remained undamaged by this discharge of an artillery to which there was no means of replying.

“Death of the devil!” Charles cried, as a stool struck him, and forced his hat down on to his eyes. “If they don’t open, I’ll hang the lot.”

“It is my brother,” Marguerite said in a low tone to La Mole. “It is the king,” he whispered to Henriette, at his other side. “The king,” she repeated to Coconnas, who was now heaving up a huge trunk with the special purpose of annihilating the Duke of Guise, against whom, without knowing who he was, he appeared to nourish a special spite.

“The king!” he gasped. “Then we’d better go.”

“Yes. The others are gone already.”

Henriette seized his hand, and leading him through a house which she knew better than he, followed the others to the door which opened on to the Rue Tigon.

“Oh,” said Charles, looking up to a balcony from which no more missiles descended, “I think the garrison has surrendered.”

“They knew your voice, and ran,” said Anjou.

De Guise did not agree: “It is a trap, more likely than not.”

“Well, “said Charles, “we can wait till they come out.”

“Unless there are two exits.”

“Then get your stone again, and smash in the door.”

But the inner door was not of the strength of that which they had broken before. It gave way to a good kick.

Entering with bare swords, they met the concierge, who did not dare to contest their passage further. Sullenly he obeyed the king’s sharp order to fetch a torch. Charles took this into his own hand, and led the way to the upper floor.

But they could learn little from the litter of the supper table, which had supplied most of the missiles which had descended upon them.

They passed on to the salon. Greek and Latin books, and musical instruments - what, beyond the occupation of those who had used the room, could be learned from them? The bedroom was even more negative. A night-light burned in an alabaster bowl which hung from the ceiling, but the room did not appear to have been occupied at all.

“There must be a second exit,” said the king.

They were agreed upon that. But where was it? They searched in vain, for the connecting door had been very cunningly hidden.

“We must question the porter,” said the king.

“If he is still here,” said Anjou.

“I tied him to the grille,” de Guise assured them.

“I will fetch him,” Henry volunteered.

He came back alone. “Someone,” he said, “must have loosed him, and let him go.”

CHAPTER XXXVI

MARIE TOUCHET AND THE KING

“SIRE,” Henry said, “you can see that there is no evidence that either my wife or the sister-in-law of M. de Guise have been here at all.”

“That is true,” said the king, and De Guise agreed, adding: “What shall we do now?”

“I should think,” answered the king, “that you will go somewhere where you can get rid of that greasy doublet, and d’Anjou where he can get the syrup wiped from his cloak. Harry is coming to supper with me. We will speak of other things at a better time.”

Parting thus, the two kings went on to the end of the Rue-Garnier-sur-d’Eau, turned a short distance towards the Rue Mortellerie, and came to a little house that stood solitary in a garden surrounded by high walls.

Charles drew out a key, and opened the garden door. As he entered, he pointed to a single light in the upper part of the house. “When I leave the Louvre,” he said, “I leave hell. I ascend to my heaven here.” His voice and manner were so unlike those of the Charles whom Henry had learned to know, that he had to subdue his astonishment before he could make a suitable reply: “I am honoured that you should share your heaven with me.”

They were now in the house, ascending the stair. “It is narrow,” Charles said, “which makes the comparison more exact.”

“It is an Eden which holds an eve?”

“You shall see.”

The king opened a door, and looked into an empty room. He tried another, opening it so softly that he was unheard. “Look,” he said.

Henry advanced into the room. He saw a bed, and a sleeping child. At the foot of the bed, a girl of not more than nineteen knelt asleep, her lips close to the small

feet and her hair scattered over all in a golden shower. It reminded him of one of Albano's Madonnas.

"Here," said Charles, "is the angel of my Paradise - she loved me before she knew that I was a king."

"And now that she knows?"

"Well - she loves me still. Judge for yourself"

He advanced lightly, and kissed her cheek.

Her eyes opened. "Charles!" she exclaimed.

"You see," he said, "I am Charles to her. My wife calls me sire."

"Oh," she said, "you are not alone."

"No. I have brought another king to see you. He is happier than I, for he has no crown, and more miserable, for he has no Marie."

"It is the King of Navarre?"

"Yes, Marie. He has proved a good friend to me today. You should take his hand, but for which our child would be fatherless now."

Marie kissed Henry's hand. "You must tell me," she said. "And how can you requite him?"

"I have done that already. As he saved my life. I have saved his."

Henry looked his astonishment.

"You will understand," he said, "before long." He looked down at the sleeping child.

"If that youngster," he said, "slept in the Louvre, many things would be changed."

"Charles, he sleeps better here."

“Then let him sleep on.”

“Supper is ready,” she said, leading the way into the adjoining room. “You must pardon that there are no servants,” she said to Henry, “but when the king comes he likes to find me alone.”

“I do not blame him for that… But there are only two places set.”

“I will wait on you both.”

“Henry, shall we endure that?”

“I am a bird of ill omen to you?”

“Not at all. But, Marie, you must bring another plate, and sit close to me, and between us both.”

So she did, waiting on them, and sharing the meal.

“Henry,” the king said, “it is good to have one place where there is no need that someone shall taste my food.”

“There is one, at least, who can appreciate that.”

“Then tell Marie not to meddle in politics, whether I am alive or dead, and to keep away from my mother.”

“The queen-mother does indeed love your majesty so much that she might be jealous of any other devotion.”

“Marie, the King of Navarre is clever with his tongue. He is also clever in making anagrams. I wonder what he could make of yours.”

Henry drew out his tablets; after a few minutes he said: “That is easy.” He handed her the writing which he had made:

Marie Touchet.

Je charme tout.

“I have done no more,” he said, “than change the ‘i’ to a ‘j’ as the rules allow,

and your name is there."

"Thanks, Harry," the king said gratefully. "It is just what it should be. I will give it her written in diamonds… And now, can you make that armchair serve for a bed? I want you to promise me that you will not go out during the night, and especially not to the Louvre. In the morning, we will go back together."

The King of Navarre had had worse beds than that. He felt secure, and he slept well. It was still dark when Charles roused him, and said it was time to return to the Louvre.

Before they left, Charles led him back into the bedroom. Marie slept in the bed. The child slept in the cot. They both smiled in their sleep.

"Henry," Charles said, "I have done you a service tonight, as you may soon learn. If harm should come to me, and you live, do not forget that child."

It was a promise which Henry willingly gave. It was honestly meant, and was not forgotten in later years, but as he gave it he did not fail to observe that it might be an insurance of his own life…

They walked through the darkness of dawn to the Bastille, where Charles had arranged to have horses await. Then they rode out by the garden of the Arbalète, and followed the outer boulevard.

"Where are we going now?" Henry asked.

"We are going to find out whether my brother really came back to Paris for the sake of Madame de Condé. Whether he were drawn by ambition or love."

Henry, understanding nothing, made no reply.

As they reached the Marais, they saw a baggage wagon approaching slowly in the grey gloom of the dawn. Behind it rode a group of men heavily cloaked and furred, and chatting with them rode one who wore a long brown cloak, and having a wide-brimmed hat drawn low over his eyes.

"Sire," Henry said, "it is the Duke of Anjou. But who are they he is with?"

"They are the Polish ambassadors, and the baggage wagon contains a crown…

Come, I do not wish to be seen. I have learnt all that I wanted to know.”

CHAPTER XXXVII

BACK IN THE LOUVRE

WHEN Charles left the Louvre for the night, he confided in no one but his nurse. She alone knew certainly that he was gone till the next morning, and where he could be found if an event of urgency should occur. He would dismiss his attendants, saying that he did not wish to be disturbed till the next day. They might think what they would, but they would say less, if they had a prudent regard for their own advancement.

But the queen-mother went where she would, being even more feared than the king.

She had come there after a sleepless night, during which she had evolved new plans in a troubled mind. Was it destiny, or no more than chance, that had saved Henry from one more of her subtle plots? It was hard to say. But she was not one who admits defeat. She would talk to Charles, and convince him that he must work with her, or it would be the end of a line of kings.

At an early hour she rose and went to the king's room for one of the private talks which she knew he would avoid, if he could, at a later hour, and found that his bed had not been occupied during the night. So she sat down to await his return.

When she saw him ride in with Henry of Navarre at his side, she muttered: "Blind! Blind!" Seeing proof of that which she had suspected before.

A few minutes later, he lifted the tapestry, and saw her confronting him. He shrugged and frowned, and turned round to Henry, who was close behind him.

"There's no getting out of it," he said, "so the sooner it's through the better."

"My son," Catherine said, with severity in her voice, "I wish to see you alone."

"That's what I meant," he said, and then, as Henry withdrew he went on quickly: "I know what you're going to say, mother. I spoilt your little plot. But I couldn't have you killing Harry the very day that he saved my life. And I'm a good son. I didn't want to quarrel with you, so I took him out. You must forgive that, and we

will laugh at it together, as a good joke."

He spoke with such confidence as he could, but was not surprised when his mother failed to respond in the same tone.

It is no joke," she said, "It is a great plan spoiled by your fault."

"Oh, a plan! Do you worry for that - You who can think of more than there are days in the year. You shall make another, and I will help you in that."

"It is too late. He is warned, and will be on his guard."

"What have you got against Harry that you can never leave him alone?"

"He is conspiring."

"Of course he is. Does not everyone conspire in this charming Louvre?"

"But he is the more dangerous because no one takes him seriously."

"Who'd have thought it! The Lorenzino!"

Catherine frowned angrily, being annoyed both by the sarcasm of the reply and the allusion to one whose name recalled one of the most sanguinary episodes in the history of Florence. "Listen," she said. "There is a way of proving whether I am right. Ask Henry who it was who fled from his room last night."

"In his room? Last night?"

"Yes. He wounded Maurevel, and killed two of his men. Let him answer that question, and if you are satisfied then, I may admit I am wrong."

"Mon Dieu! He must have been a brave fellow. But you are right, mother. I must know who it was."

"Well, you will find Henry will refuse to tell you."

"But perhaps you can do so? Surely, he left some trace - some clue?"

"All that was noticed was that he wore a cerise cloak."

“A cerise cloak! I know of one only of that colour, such as would draw attention to itself.”

“Well, come to my room later, and I may have something more to tell you.”

Catherine went out, and Charles began to pace restlessly up and down, whistling a hunting-air, with one hand in his doublet, and the other hanging down for his hound to lick.

Meanwhile Henry had gone by the private staircase to his own apartment on the upper floor. Charlotte met him, and might have passed unrecognised in the gloom of the windowless stair, had she not exclaimed: “Oh, thank heaven that you are safe! I have been so afraid. But God has answered my prayers.”

“What has happened?”

“You will see when you get to your rooms. But I must not stay.”

Like a shadow, she was gone, and he continued to mount the stair in greater uneasiness than before.

At the stairhead, he met d’Alençon, who also spoke in a tone of mystery and alarm.

“Hush! Don’t mention my name here. Come to my rooms when you are sure that you are not observed.”

And he too disappeared down the stair, as stage phantoms go down a trap.

Henry went on to his apartment. Opening the door, he looked down on dark stains that had only partly been washed away. He saw the broken furniture, the slashed hangings of the bed. On the wall, he saw the mark of a bloody hand. It was clear that his room had been the scene of a murderous struggle during the night.

“Now,” he thought. “I understand what the king has done. But what of De Mouy? Have they killed him in place of me?”

And, anxious to hear the news as d’Alençon could be to communicate it, he hurried to the duke’s apartment, where he was drawn by him into his most

private chamber, and from there to a small cabinet in one of the towers, where it would be impossible for them to be overheard.

“What has happened?” Henry asked.

“They wanted to arrest you.”

“But why?”

“I don’t know. Where were you?”

“The king took me out.”

“Then he knew. But who was in your room?”

“There was someone there?”

“Yes. A man. When I heard the noise, I ran to your assistance, but I was too late.”

“The man has doubtless been caught?”

“No, he got away, after wounding Maurevel, and killing two other men.”

“Brave De Mouy!”

“De Mouy!”

Henry saw that he had been indiscreet, but he made the best of his error, with some adroitness of explanation.

“That is what I should guess, for I had summoned him to make arrangements for your flight, and to make it clear that I surrender my own rights to the crown.”

D’Alençon turned pale as he heard. “Then, if the thing be known, we are lost.”

“Yes. For Maurevel will speak.”

“Maurevel has a cut in the throat. I know from the surgeon that he will not talk for the next week.”

“A week? De Mouy will be safe before that.”

“But,” d’Alençon went on, “need it be known that it was he?”

“Can it be concealed?”

“Yes. He rushed out so quickly that nothing was recognised but a cerise cloak.”

“A cerise cloak? It is not a soldier’s wear, but rather that of court gallant. No one will suspect him from that.”

“No. If anyone were suspected - ” He stopped, and Henry finished for him. “It would be La Mole.”

“Certainly. Even I, who saw him escape, had that idea.”

“You doubted? Well, suppose it were really he?”

“Does he know anything that he could betray?”

“Nothing of consequence.”

“I believe,” d’Alençon said, with significant deliberation, “that it must have been he.”

“But, the devil,” Henry said, “Margot will be annoyed if it should bring trouble to him, for he is a favourite with her.”

“Yes, I remember, it was she who recommended him to me.” And then he added, in a voice of intentional insincerity: “That must have been why I remembered that he might be compromised by that cloak, and fetched it from his room, bringing it to the privacy of my own apartment.”

“That was certainly an act of prudence,” Henry replied. “It might give me confidence not merely to assert but to swear that it was he.”

“Even before a court?”

“I could presume that he had brought me a message from Marguerite.”

“If I were sure that I should be supported by you, I would denounce him

myself.”

“I should not contradict.”

“But the queen - we must know what she would say.”

“I will find out.”

“Peste, Henry, why should she contradict? Do we not give him the reputation of a valiant hero, which he has done nothing to earn, even though there may be a price for him to pay?”

“Nothing can be expected without a price,” Henry replied, and so, after cautiously ascertaining that the passage was clear, he left d’Alençon’s apartment, and proceeded to that of Marguerite.

Marguerite, though from a different cause, had been as perturbed as were her husband and brother.

She felt that her flight had been momentarily successful, as she could not have been recognised. But it was not reasonable to suppose that her husband and her three noble relatives had combined on such an adventure without some information on which to act.

She had spent the night with the Duchess of Nevers, come home early, and retired to her own bed, when Gillonne reported that Henry was at the door.

“Ask him in,” she said, “and leave us alone.”

She was on her guard, and would not be easy to surprise, but was about to hear something she did not expect.

Henry made no allusion to what had happened in the Rue Cloche-Percée during the night. He was grave, but showed his usual friendliness of manner as he opened the conversation.

“I fear I bring you bad news.”

“Bad news?”

“One of our most faithful servants is much compromised.”

“Who is it?”

“Count de la Mole.”

“Compromised? What about?”

“About last night’s adventure.”

It was a reply which she was certain to misinterpret. Henry’s eyes were on her intently though with no change in their expression. Her self-control could not prevent the blush that rose in her cheeks. “What adventure?” she asked.

“You did not hear the commotion last night?”

“No.”

“Then you sleep soundly.”

“But what did happen?”

“The queen-mother, in her inscrutable wisdom, sent Maurevel with some of his men to arrest me.”

“Why on earth should she have done that?”

“Who can dive into a mind so profound?”

“And you were not there?”

“The king had invited me to accompany him into the town. But, unfortunately, though I was not in my room, someone else was.”

“Who?”

“M. de la Mole. It appears that he is a terrible fellow. He wounded Maurevel, and killed two of his men.”

“It is an impossible tale.”

“You doubt his courage?”

“No. I say he could not have been in your apartment at all.”

“Why?”

“Because he was elsewhere.”

“Then he will have to prove where he was, and, so far as he is concerned, the matter will be at an end.”

“Where he was?”

“Yes. There should be no difficulty about that. But it is certain that he will be arrested and questioned almost at once… And, unfortunately, they have proofs.”

“Proofs?”

“He was identified by his cerise cloak.”

“But others may wear such cloaks. We know one who does.”

“That is the trouble. If it were not La Mole, it was he.”

“Heavens!”

“That is how it is. Admit that it was De Mouy, and I will tell you plainly we risk a throne. I risk my life also - if you place any value on that. But if it were La Mole, we are not compromised at all. Not unless he should invent a tale of supping in a queen’s room, or of any later adventures.”

Marguerite had become very pale. She said at last, in a low voice, as though emotion had become hard to control: “That is all you fear? Then you may be easy of mind, for he will not speak.”

“You are sure?”

“Sure.”

“Then I go to get us out of all the trouble that has been caused by the wearer of that cloak.”

Henry went, and Marguerite, being alone, broke into a passion of tears.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

SUGGESTION OF THE QUEEN-MOTHER

CHARLES was lighthearted enough as he whistled in his mother's apartment, waiting for her to appear. He felt that he had handled her well, and that the worst of the storm has passed.

But ten minutes after her return their positions were so far reversed that a smile of satisfaction was on her face, and he was pale with mingled rage, suspicion, and doubt.

"I tell you," she said, "you can send for Henry, and you can send for Francis if you will, but you will learn nothing from them. There is a plot between them, and whatever else it may mean, it is intending no good for you.

"But, if you question them, you will rouse their suspicions. They will become guarded in what they do. It will be far wiser to let them think you have observed nothing, and they will be emboldened to give you a better excuse for action."

Charles walked up and down in a fury of indecision, physically distressed by the beating of his suspicious heart.

"No," he exclaimed at last. "I will not wait! I will know… If La Mole be innocent, it will be the better for him. But I shall not be sorry to know where he spent the night - a night when I was being thrashed in the Rue Cloche-Percée, and my officers were being killed in the Louvre. We will have Francis first, and then Harry. And you shall stay, and hear all that is said."

Catherine made no objection to this, though it was contrary to the advice she had given. She was confident that she could control the event to the end she would.

D'Alençon came first. His short interview with Henry had prepared him for such a development, and his answers were ready and precise.

Warned by his mother, he had remained obediently in his own apartment until he had been disturbed by a sound of shots in the corridor. He had then opened his door, and had seen a man in a red cloak running away.

Charles asked sharply: “And that made you suspect someone?” D’Alençon strove to lie convincingly. “I thought I recognised the cloak of one of my gentlemen.”

“Which?”

“M. de la Mole.”

“Good. You can go… Not that way. Take the other door.”

He wished to avoid a meeting with Henry as he went out, not guessing that there was already a sufficient understanding between them.

Henry entered. He did not wait to be questioned, but-started the conversation in his own way: “Sire, you do well to send for me, for I was coming to ask for justice.”

Henry ignored the frown with which this was received, and went on steadily: “But I must first thank you for taking me out last night, for I can see that you saved my life. But what have I done that there should be an attempt to assassinate me in my own room?”

“It was not assassination,” Catherine said coldly, “It was arrest.”

“But what crime have I committed? If I were guilty then, I am guilty now. Sire, tell me what the accusation is.”

Charles looked at his mother in embarrassment, but she replied for him with cold severity: “You receive suspected people in your apartment.”

“And they compromise me, madame?”

“Yes.”

“And their names are?”

“Yes,” Charles said. “He has a right to be told.”

“And I demand it!” Henry said, feeling the strength of the position he had taken. “I ask it of my brother Charles: of my mother Catherine, Have I not conducted

myself-like a good husband since my marriage? Ask Marguerite. Have I not conducted myself as a good Catholic? Ask my confessors. Have I not behaved loyally to the family? Ask those who were at the hunt yesterday."

"All this is true, Harry," the king replied, "But they say you conspire."

"Sire, had I been conspiring against you, should I not have left the boar yesterday to do as he would?"

"Death of the devil! mother, he is right there."

"But the question is, who was in his room last night?"

"Madame," Henry replied, "when people can hardly answer for themselves how can they answer for others? I left my apartment early yesterday morning. In the evening the king took me away for the whole night. How could I be with him and know what went on there?"

"Yet while you were away someone in your service killed two of his majesty's men, besides wounding M. Maurevel."

"Some one in my service? Then who was it?"

"M. de la Mole."

"But he is not in my service. He serves d'Alençon."

"The point is," said Charles, "was he in your apartment?"

"How can I say? He is a gallant gentleman, who is devoted to Marguerite, and grateful to her for recommending him to his present service. He sometimes brings me messages from her, and sometimes from the duke. I cannot say more than that."

"He has a cerise cloak?"

"Yes, he has a cerise cloak."

"And so had he who did such murderous work last night."

"Then it seems that you should not have sent for me, but for M. de la Mole. But

there is one thing I must say to your majesty. Had I been there, and resisted arrest (as I certainly should not have done) I should have deserved blame, for the warrant was meant for me. But it was not I. It was an unknown, who may have defended himself too well, but he did no more than his right, for they had no warrant for him. Was it indicated on the warrant that anyone found in my place should be detained?"

"No," Charles answered."

"Then, till it can be shown that I was conspiring, and that he was conspiring with me, he is an innocent man. For myself, T am prepared at any moment to go into any prison of state which your majesty may desire. But, until the contrary be proved, I am entitled to say that I am a true subject and a loyal brother to you."

And having said this, Henry saluted the king, and withdrew with dignity, and without waiting for a reply.

"Bravo, Harry!" said Charles.

"Bravo because you are defeated again?" Catherine asked bitterly.

"Well, why not? That is what I should say if we were fencing, and he gave me a touch. Mother, you are wrong to despise him as you do."

"I do not despise: I fear."

"And you are wrong in that. He is my friend. Would he not otherwise have let the boar have its way?"

"So that the Duke of Anjou should become king, who is one of the worst enemies that he has?"

"Mother, whatever his motive, it was one that saved my life, and might do so again. So he shall be left alone. I'll have another talk with Francis about La Mole."

Catherine saw that there was nothing more which could be usefully said, and withdrew to her own apartment, where she found Marguerite waiting to see her.

"So you are here now?" she said. "I sent for you last night, and you did not

come.”

“I had gone out.”

“Why do you come now?”

“To save you from committing an unjust act.”

“What is that?”

“Is not M. de la Mole about to be arrested?”

“Probably, yes.”

“Accused of killing men in Henry’s apartment?”

“That is the charge.”

“And he is not guilty.”

Catherine’s eyes glittered on hearing these confident words. She was not satisfied with La Mole. She would rather suppose that the man who had been in the apartment of the king of Navarre was more important than he.

“How do you know that?”

“Because he was not in Henry’s rooms at all.”

“How can you be sure?”

“Because he was in mine.”

Catherine stared at her daughter, as she made this confession, in speechless anger. To do justice to an evil woman, her errors had never been of that kind.

“So,” she said, “if La Mole were arrested, and put to torture —”

“Naturally, he would say where he was.” Marguerite did not believe this, but it was what she had come to say.

“Then there must be no arrest of M. de la Mole.”

That was precisely what Marguerite had come to secure, but there was a sinister tone in her mother's voice which gave her a new fear. Yet what could she say?

Catherine went on: "If it were not La Mole, it was someone else. That is what we must find out."

Marguerite made no answer to that.

Catherine said acutely. "I see you know who it was."

"No, mother."

"Do not make confessions by halves."

Marguerite became deadly pale, perhaps seeing more clearly than before the probable consequences of what love had impelled her to do, but she repeated her denial with more emphasis in her voice.

Catherine heard her with an affectation of indifference. She said: "Then you may go. You may be sure that I shall protect your honour."

Marguerite went, and Catherine thought: "I see how it is. The husband is to be blind as long as the wife is dumb. I have clever children, but I may be more than equal to them. It will not be long before Maurevel can speak or write."

She went at once to the king, whom she found talking to d'Alençon. He frowned at her. "Here you are, mother," he said, in the brutal tone which he would sometimes use, even to her.

"Why did you not say 'again'? It was on your tongue."

"What I think is my business. What do you want now? Say it quickly."

"I have come to say you were right - and, Francis, you were right too. It was not La Mole."

Francis turned pale. Charles said sharply: "Then who was it?"

"We may not know that until Maurevel can speak. Let us talk of La Mole now."

"But if he were not —"

“He was not in the king’s apartment, he was in the queen’s.”

“That is impossible,” Charles replied. “De Guise told me he met her litter last night.”

“That is it. - She has a house in the city.”

“In the Rue Cloche-Percée?” Charles exclaimed. “It must have been he who bruised my shoulder last night.”

“So that,” said d’Alençon, “was why she recommended him to me.”

The brothers looked at each other, and Catherine answered them, as though they had spoken aloud.

“You are right. It would only need a moment of drunkenness to ruin the reputation of a daughter of France.”

“Or an impulse of vanity,” d’Alençon added.

“You cannot,” Catherine went on, “average the honour of your house as a simple gentleman would be able to do. But as princes you should know how to act.”

With these words she retired, and Charles said: “You had better find Henry for me… But no, I will go myself. You can tell d’Anjou and Guise.”

CHAPTER XXXIX

PLANS FOR REVENGE

“HARRY,” Charles said, as he entered the apartment of the King of Navarre, “I love you more every day.”

“Your majesty overwhelms me.”

“You have only one fault.”

“Which is that I prefer coursing to hawking. So you have told me before.

“No. It is different from that.”

“Then tell me what it is, and I will cure myself of it.”

Henry spoke easily, for that Charles was in an exceptionally good humour was plain to see.

“It is that you are short-sighted, though you have excellent eyes. Worse than that, J may call you blind.”

“God said ‘Let there be light’ and there was light. You represent God on earth.”

“When Guise told you that a gallant escorted your wife’s litter, you refused to believe.”

“Sire, she is your majesty’s sister. Could I think she would err?”

“Even when he said she had gone to the Rue Cloche-Percée, you declined to listen.”

“Could I suppose that a daughter of France would risk her reputation in such a way?”

“When we besieged the house, two women and two men came out on the balcony?”

“I did not see them. I was questioning the porter

“Yes, but J did!”

“If your majesty saw them, they certainly must have been there.”

“I know now, beyond any doubt, that one of the four was Marguerite, and one La Mole.”

“Then, if La Mole were there, he was not here!”

“No, he was not. As to who he was, we may be content to wait till Maurevel can speak or write. But Margot is deceiving you.”

“Why listen to idle tales?”

“Did I not say you are blind? Death of the devil! I tell you Margot is false to you, and we will strangle the object of her affections tonight.”

Henry gave a start, as though of surprise, and gave the king a stupefied stare.

“Admit,” Charles went on, “that you will not be angered by what we do. Margot will howl like hell, but that is her own affair. That Condé should be deceived by d’Anjou is not any business of mine. D’Anjou is my brother, and Condé is not my friend. But you are both friend and brother to me.”

“But, sire —”

“And I will not have you turned into ridicule. Tomorrow all will know the fate of one who does not regard the honour of the house of Navarre.”

“This is quite settled?”

“Settled, decided, resolved. Who will dare to question what is done when we go together, I, d’Anjou, d’Alençon, and Guise? Not to mention you.”

“I, sire?”

“Yes, you shall stab the rascal while he is strangled by us.”

“Sire, I am overpowered. How did you learn this?”

“Why the fellow has bragged about it… Bring a good dagger and you shall have satisfaction for that.”

Henry appeared to reflect. “Sire,” he said, “there is a good reason why I should not be there. If the fellow has made such a boast, it is natural that it should be avenged by brothers to whom a sister’s honour is dear. But we must not make it appear that we think Margot guilty, as would be the case if I were there. For myself I still believe her innocent. But, be that as it may, it must appear so to the world. It must be an act of justice, not of revenge. If I were there, my wife would not be calumniated, she would be guilty.”

“Mordieu! Harry. Your words are golden. I told my mother that you have the wit of a demon… All the same, you will be glad when La Mole is dead.”

“Whatever your majesty may do will be satisfactory to me.”

“You shall have no cause to complain.”

“I trust your majesty.”

“Tell me the hour at which he visits your wife.”

“About nine, J believe.”

“And goes?”

“He has always gone before I arrive.”

“When is that?”

“About eleven.”

“Then don’t go till midnight tonight, and it will have been done.”

“Ventre-saint-gris!” Henry swore as the door closed on the king, “I suppose this is the work of the queen-mother again, seeking to make a quarrel between me and Marguerite - the happy couple we are!” And he laughed, as he would only do when he was sure that no one would overhear.

So the day passed, La Mole remaining the centre of a storm of which he was

unaware. It was seven in the evening when Coconnas, stretched lazily on a couch, observed that he was dressing to go out, and asked what his intentions might be.

“I am going to pay my respects to the queen.”

“There is a little house in the Rue Cloche-Percée which I am inclined to visit again.”

“It would be imprudent after last night. Besides, we promised not to go there alone… You might hand me my cloak.”

“I had forgotten that… but where is it? Will this one do?”

“No. Not the black one. The queen likes to see me in red.”

“Well, it isn’t here.”

“Then where can it be?”

“I suppose you have sold it.”

“Why should I? I have six crowns.”

“You can have mine.”

“A yellow cloak with a green doublet? What a popinjay I should look.”

There was a knock on the door, and La Mole, who was now searching angrily, and muttering that even the Louvre was not free from thieves, paused to open it. He saw a page of d’Alençon standing there, with the cloak over his arm.

“Monseigneur returns your cloak, monsieur, which he sent for to decide a bet as to its shade.”

La Mole cast it over his shoulders, and went out into the corridor, where he met the Duke d’Alençon, who had been watching to intercept him.

“M. de la Mole, are you going out?”

“No, monseigneur. I am about to pay my respects to her majesty the Queen of

Navarre.”

“At what time shall you be leaving?”

“Your highness has orders for me?”

“Not now. I should like to see you between nine and ten.”

La Mole said he would be in attendance at that hour, and went away, puzzled by the duke’s manner. “Why,” he thought, “should he seem so nervous in speaking to me?”

Gillonne opened to him, and he was at once admitted to Marguerite. She had a volume of Socrates before her, and a paper on which she had been writing, with many erasures. She signed to him to be silent till she had finished, but soon threw down her pen, and invited him to sit beside her.

He was in radiant spirits, and she looked at him happily, thinking that she had never seen him so handsome, never so gay.

“Greek?” he asked. “Oh, but I see it is Latin you write. You are going to make a speech to those barbarians?”

“I must, for they cannot speak French.”

“How can you answer a speech you have not heard?”

“They have sent me a copy of what they intend to say.”

“The ambassadors will be here soon?”

“They came this morning, but it is not publicly known. But don’t let us waste time upon them. Let us talk about what has happened to you.”

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“What did the queen-mother say to you?”

“Nothing. I have not even seen her.”

“Nor King Charles?”

“No.”

“Nor the King of Navarre?”

“No.”

“But you have seen the Duke d’Alençon?”

“I met him a few minutes ago.”

“And what did he say?”

“He wanted me to be with him between nine and ten.”

“It is strange that you have heard nothing, while, during the whole day, you have been on the edge of an abyss.”

“But why?”

“Listen, if you don’t know. Last night De Mouy was surprised in the apartment of the King of Navarre. He killed two or three men, and escaped. He was not recognised, but he was seen to be wearing a cerise cloak.”

“What of that?”

“It was a cloak of the same colour as yours. Consequently, De Mouy was supposed to be you. This morning there was talk of your arrest, and I feared you would not say where you had been.”

“You were right in that. I would die singing to spare you a tear.”

“Which it would not do. Do you not know how I would weep for that?”

“But how can the difficulty be met?”

“There was one way only. I told my mother the truth.”

“You did that?”

“Yes. I told her you were my lover.”

“Marguerite, it was more than my life is worth - Now surely it is entirely yours.”

“I hope it is, for I certainly saved it today.”

“My queen.”

There was a shattering of glass, as a stone came through the window, and clattered upon the floor.

La Mole started at the sudden crash, and Marguerite gave a little cry of alarm. “Look,” she said, “there is something fastened to the stone.”

She rose quickly as she spoke, and snatched at a thin strip of paper which had been twisted round it. She looked at it, and passed it to him in silence, but the misery in her eyes prepared him for what he read: “In the corridor leading to the apartment of the Duke d’Alençon, long swords wait for M. de la Mole. Would he not prefer to leave by the window, and join M. de Mouy at Mantes?”

“The swords,” La Mole said, “might not be longer than mine.”

“They might be ten to one.”

“Who can have sent this?”

Marguerite looked at the writing closely. “It is Henry’s,” she said. “If he warns you thus, you may be sure there is cause.”

“But how can I go?”

“The note mentions the window.”

“If you command me, I must endeavour to fly.”

“The string which was attached to the stone is still hanging tightly from the broken glass. You had better see what is holding it thus.”

They drew in the twine, and a ladder of silk and horsehair came into view.

“You are saved,” she said joyfully.

“Yes. If it be not a trap. Suppose the ladder should break with my weight?”

“That is possible.” She moved toward the door.

“What are you going to do?”

“To find out if they are really there.”

“You must not incur any such danger for me.”

“Danger? Don’t be absurd. I am a woman; and I am a daughter of France. There can be no danger for me.”

La Mole felt the rebuke that lay in the dignity with which this was said, and became silent.

Marguerite took the way of the corridor which, by a semi-circular route, passed the library and several reception rooms before coming to the apartments of the king and the queen-mother, and hen to the staircase which led to the apartments of Henry and the Duke d’Alençon.

Though it was scarcely nine, there were no lights remaining, and the corridor was in complete darkness, except for a faint glimmer at its further end.

She went quietly but confidently, taking a way that she knew well, but checked herself at once when she heard a sound of whispering, menacing by its very caution, which ceased next moment, and the light at the end of the corridor disappeared.

Her heart was beating fast, but she remembered the boast she had made to La Mole, and went firmly on to face whatever danger the darkness held.

Suddenly, a hand which had shaded the light withdrew,

A voice said: “Here he is.”

She made an effort to smile naturally as she answered the king:

“Here she is, you mean, sire.”

“What are you doing here, Margot?”

“Is it so late?”

“I mean where are you going?”

“I want a Cicero which I left in our mother’s room.”

“Without a light?”

“Oh, I can find my way.”

“Then you have come from your own apartment?”

“Yes. Of course.”

“What have you been doing this evening?”

“Preparing my reply to the Polish envoys. That is why I require the book.”

“And you doubtless have someone to help your work?”

“Yes. M. de la Mole. He is a better scholar than I.”

“He is so learned,” d’Alençon said, “that I begged him to come to my aid when he had finished with you. For mine is the greater need.”

“So you were expecting him?” Marguerite asked, in a natural tone.

“Yes. We were,” the duke answered impatiently

“Then I will send him to you. I have finished with him myself.”

“You forget that you came for a book.”

“Gillonne can fetch it.”

She went back, but as the turn of the corridor would have hidden them from her, she looked round, and saw that they were conferring together. Once out of hearing she ran on to her own room. “Open, Gillonne.” She saw La Mole standing ready for whatever might come, his sword bare in his hand.

“You must fly at once. They are waiting there.”

“It is your command.”

“Yes. We must part now or we shall never meet again.”

He had already fastened the ladder. Now he kissed her hand. “If it be a trap, you will remember the promise you made?”

“It was not a promise, it was an oath.”

La Mole disappeared through the window, and at the same moment someone knocked on the door.

Marguerite took no notice. She watched La Mole’s descent until he had reached the ground.

“Madame,” Gillonne said, “madame, the king is knocking.”

“Well, let him in.”

Charles, with his three companions, advanced into the room.

“What are you looking for, brother?” Marguerite asked, with a smile.

“I am looking for M. de la Mole.” She took him to the window, and showed him the ladder. She pointed to two horsemen who were just galloping away.

“What is the meaning of this?”

“It means that your swords will be useless now.”

CHAPTER XL

THE ATRIDES

HENRY d'Anjou was Catherine's favourite son. He had courage, and a more handsome exterior than his brothers could boast. There was real affection between them, and anyone who knew the queen-mother only in her coldly calculating and ruthless moods might have been astonished at the effusion of maternal love with which she embraced him.

"You are well, my dearest? But you are not happy?"

"I am the most miserable man alive."

"Mon Dieu! What has happened now?"

"Nothing you do not know. I am in love, and it is returned, but there is misery even in that."

"Why?"

"Because the ambassadors are here, and I may have to depart."

"Yes. They are here, and the time is short."

"I don't see why I should go. But Charles urges it. You know what his hatred is. He will rid himself of me at any cost."

"By presenting you with a throne?"

"I don't want it. It is a land of unlettered peasants. Of darkness, and frightful cold. I loathe it, and will not go."

"Why not say what your real reason is?"

D'Anjou lowered his eyes, as though reluctant that his mother should read his heart. "

"Is there another reason," she persisted, "of a more practical kind?"

“Mother, it was you who first put the idea into my mind. Did you not say that Charles’ horoscope foretells that he will die young?”

“Yes. But they sometimes err. And he speaks of twenty-five years, without making it clear whether that is the period during which he will live, or will reign.”

“Then let me remain. He is twenty-four, and a year will show.”

Catherine pondered deeply. “Yes,” she said, “if it could be arranged that way —”

“Think of my despair, if I should find that I had lost the crown of France by taking that of Poland! To remember always that I might have reigned in the Louvre with the best mother in the world to share the burdens of state.”

“Have you thought of a way by which this could be contrived?”

“Yes. Charles thinks I hurried here to see Madame de Condé but it really was to meet the ambassadors. I have talked in such a way to them as to make myself unpopular.”

“That is wrong. The interests of France come before any feelings of yours.”

“Mother, if there should be some mishap to Charles, does the interest of France require that d’Alençon or the King of Navarre should reign?”

“Henry of Navarre? Heaven forbid!”

“Ma foi! D’Alençon loves you no more than he… Could not the Poles accept him in place of me?”

“It is difficult, if not impossible.”

“Still, you could try! Say I am crazy with love for Madame de Condé. He saw me leaving her hotel with M. Guise, who has been my good friend with her.”

“Yes. To form his league. You do not look deeply enough into the motives of men.”

“So he may think. But meanwhile I make use of him.”

“Well, I will do what I can. But you know how obstinate Charles can be.”

“He hates me, and will be glad for me to go.”

“He is jealous of you, because you are more handsome than he. But do not show everyone how you feel. Seem resigned, and leave everything to me.” And kissing him tenderly, she left the room, and his brothers came in.

Charles was in a good temper, for the boldness of Marguerite had pleased rather than angered him. He had no real bitterness toward La Mole, and his attitude in the corridor had been simply that of one to whom hunting was a passion in any form.

D’Alençon was in a gloomier mood. His feeling toward La Mole, which had previously been a mingling of dislike and suspicion, had become an active hate since he had learnt that he was loved by Marguerite.

She came in with her brothers, thoughtful and alert. They had come together to discuss the Latin replies which must be made to the Polish envoys, copies of whose speeches had been supplied to them.

Charles did not criticize that which his sister had prepared, but he made difficulties about what d’Alençon should say, and a violent attack upon that which d’Anjou proposed to deliver. It must be altered radically, both by deletions and additions.

The tempers of all of them had been frayed before the discussion ended, and d’Anjou went sullenly away to make the alteration on which Charles insisted, and Charles, whose mind was on a new boarspear which he was making on his own forge, was in no amicable mood, when Catherine stopped him, in a manner which, he knew, by many previous experiences, indicated that she was intending to cross his will.

“What,” he asked angrily, “is it now?”

“A word only, but on a matter of much importance. We have not fixed the day on which the public reception will be held.”

“Which day would you suggest?”

“I would have no haste. The Poles should not be allowed to think that we are eager to take their crown.”

“On the other hand, they have come by forced marches to us. Honour for honour. They have been polite to us, and we must be so to them. Why should you wish to delay it?”

“I think only of your glory. Do you wish it said that you are in haste to relieve yourself of the cost of maintaining your brother here?”

“Mother, when my brother leaves France, I will endow him with such riches that such talk would be silenced, or rather —”

“But still, they are a warlike race, and will respect us by our display of troops, which it will take time to assemble. If you would —”

“Mother, all that is arranged. I have summoned two battalions from Normandy and one from Guienne. The Brittany archers arrived yesterday. The Lorraine light horse enter Paris today. I shall have twenty-thousand men ready at once.”

“Then only one thing is needed.”

“What is that?”

“Money. There will be some time necessary to arrange —”

“You are wrong again,” Charles answered, with growing impatience. “I have fourteen hundred thousand crowns in the Bastille. I have eight hundred thousand crowns from my own estates here in the Louvre, and Nantouillet has three hundred thousand crowns upon which I can draw if I will.”

Catherine felt the foreboding of defeat, and a consciousness of the implacable purpose which must have been impelling these preparations. She had often known him passionate, but never prudent before.

“You have done admirably,” she said, “if tailors, embroiderers and jewellers do their part now, we should be ready in six weeks at the most.”

“Six weeks! They have been at work from the day I heard that my brother had been nominated. They could be ready today.”

“You have been in greater haste than I thought.”

“Honour for honour, as I said before.”

“You think this is an honour for us?”

“Yes. I do.”

“But you would not care which —”

“No, no, mother. It’s no use suggesting that Francis should be the one. The Poles want a soldier. The victor of Jarnac and Mont-contour! D’Alençon is a coward, as we all know. My brother Henry will be in his element with the Poles. On to the field of battle! Long live the King! This will be for the fame of France, and the honour of our great House of Valois! He may be killed of course. But what a glorious death to die!”

“I believe you hate him.”

Charles, now in a state of high excitement, burst into a nervous laugh.

“Ah!” he cried, “so you have guessed that I do not love him? - that that is why I send him away? And why should I? You make me laugh. Does he love me? Do you? Does anyone love me except my dogs, my nurse, and Marie Touchet? No, I do not love him! I love myself.”

“You speak at last from the heart. I will do the same. You are acting the part of a foolish king. You send away the brother who is next to yourself, and should be a support to your throne - and the one who is fit to succeed to it, if misfortune should come to you. You leave the crown in jeopardy, for Francis is young, foolish, weak - and cowardly, as you said yourself a moment ago, and behind him the Béarnais waits!”

“Well, death of all the devils! What shall I care when I am dead? You say the Béarnais waits? Well, so much the better! I said I loved no one, but I was wrong. I love Harry. He has an easy manner, and a warm hand, and all other eyes are false, and all hands are cold. “

Besides, he has proved that he is incapable of treason to me. And I owe him something for the poisoning of his mother, which, rumour says, was done by one

of my own house.

“Besides I am in good health. But were I ill, it is he on whom I should rely I should take nothing except from his hand. And if I should die, I would make him king both of France and Navarre.”

Catherine stood aghast at this outburst from her son, who was now trembling with rage and excitement.

“Henry of Navarre!” she cried. “Henry to be King of France, and my children to be put aside for him? Sacred Madonna! And it is for that you would send my son away?”

“Your son!” Charles retorted, in a fresh outburst of anger, “and what am I? Romulus? Son of a wolf? But you are right. I am King of France! The King of France has no mother, He has no brothers. But he is King of France, and must be obeyed!”

“You mistake what I meant,” Catherine replied, quailing somewhat before the rage which she now faced, “I called him my son because he is the one who is about to leave me. I did not mean that you were less to me than he. Is it a crime to wish that he should not go?”

“And I tell you he shall! He shall go in two days. And if you say another word he shall go tomorrow. Of if you look at me with that glare in your eyes he shall not go at all, for I will have him strangled tonight.”

“My poor child!” Catherine cried. “Your brother would kill you! But I shall be sufficient for your defence.”

“Do you brave me?” Charles cried, having now worked himself into one of the frenzies of rage in which he might commit any folly, or any crime. “Than he shall not die tonight. He shall die at this hour! Where is a dagger?”

He looked wildly round, and his eyes fell on the stiletto at his mother’s belt. He snatched at it, and was rushing from the room as though to murder his brother. when he stopped, staggered, screamed: “Help! They are killing me! Help!” and he fell forward upon the floor, with blood gushing from his mouth.

Catherine looked down on him for a moment of considering silence, and then

went to the door: “Help! The king is ill! Help!”

A woman broke through the crowd of courtiers, officers, and servants which surged into the room. She knelt beside him, raising his head.

“They are killing me, nurse. They are killing me,” he moaned.

“Who is killing my Charles?” the good woman cried, looking round with a glance which even Catherine shrank to meet.

Ambroise Paré, the king’s doctor, hurried into the room, and the queen-mother withdrew. She went to the oratory where d’Anjou waited to hear her report on this interview, which was to decide his own future.

“The king is ill,” she said. “We must agree to the delay.”

CHAPTER XLI

THE HOROSCOPE OF THE KING

CATHERINE sent for René, whom she received in her chamber. “Can Maurevel write yet?”

“I tried, but he only traced two letters - an M and an O, and then fainted.”

“Perhaps,” she said, “it was really La Mole.” She wondered whether Marguerite might have made a false confession to avert suspicion.

“Madame,” René said, “if I may give my opinion, M. de la Mole is too much in love with the Queen of Navarre to concern himself about politics, and especially to serve those of her husband, for there is no love without jealousy.”

“He is in love with her?”

“Desperately.”

“He has consulted you?”

“He engaged me to make him a wax image.”

“Pierced to the heart?”

“Yes.”

“You still have it?”

“Yes.”

“I wonder whether these things really have any power.”

“Your majesty knows that they have.”

“Marguerite loves La Mole?”

“Sufficiently to ruin herself for him. Consider what she told you yesterday. Can

you doubt after that?”

“Doubt what?”

“Science.”

“I must doubt, because science has deceived me.” She looked hard at René as she said this.

“How?”

“René, have your perfumes lost their power?”

“No, madame. Not when I prepare them.”

“We will leave that. How can you tell the length of anyone’s life?”

“First, I must have his age, and the day of his birth. I must ascertain the constellation under which he was born.”

“Next?”

“I must have some of his blood and hair.”

“If you have them you can tell when he will die?”

“Yes. Within a few days.”

“I can get you those.”

“Was he born in the day or the night?”

“In the evening. At twenty-three minutes past five”

“Then the experiment must be made at that hour.’

“I will be with you at five o’clock tomorrow.”

It was an appointment which Catherine would be certain to keep, and punctually in the winter darkness she entered the necromancer’s room. The Duke of Anjou, masked and cloaked, and his hair covered by a wig, came behind her.

The previous night having been clear, René had been able to consult the stars, and as the medical practice of the time prescribed bleeding for all manners of illness, Catherine had had little difficulty in procuring the sample which he required.

Now he led them into the chamber of sacrifice. The book of fate lay on the altar. On a charcoal brazier a steel knife covered with arabesques was being heated.

“You have consulted the stars?”

“Yes, madame. The person concerning whom you enquire, being born under Cancer, is of fiery disposition. He has wealth and power, and he has lived nearly twenty-five years.”

“That may be so.”

“You have brought the hair and the blood?”

“Yes. They are here.”

René took the phial of blood. He drew the knife from the brazier, and poured a few drops upon it, where they hissed loudly, and spread into fantastic shapes on the hot steel.

“How he groans!” René exclaimed. “I see him convulsed in agony, and round his deathbed is warfare. Do you not see lances and swords?”

Hand in hand, Catherine and her son leaned over the knife.

“Will it be soon?” she asked anxiously.

René repeated a cabalistic prayer. He threw the hair on to the fire, and poured the remainder of the blood on to the steel. It seemed, to the imaginations of those who gazed, that they saw a corpse wrapped in a winding-sheet, and a woman leaning over him.

“Within a year,” René said, “he will die, and one woman only will weep his death. But no, see, at the top of the knife there is another, with a child in her arms.”

He kneeled by the brazier, pouring the last drop of blood into the hollow of his hand. He said: “How little can human knowledge compete with ours! To others, it would be healthy blood, but it shows surely to us that he will not live for a year.”

Catherine rose to go. “He will die surely within a year?”

“Yes. His blood shows promise of life. It is an accident that the fates foretell.”

“An accident!” Anjou exclaimed to his mother, as they withdrew. It is the stronger reason for staying.”

“It is impossible.”

“I should be four hundred leagues away.”

“It could be covered within a week.”

“But suppose I were not allowed to return?”

“Suppose rather that this illness may be the accident which the stars reveal.”

CHAPTER XLII

CONFIDENCES

ON returning to the Louvre, the Duke of Anjou learnt that Charles had recovered sufficiently to deal with the matter which was most on his mind, and had arranged that the formal reception of the Polish envoys should be held in five days. Tailors and jewellers awaited him with splendid costumes which the king had ordered.

At the same time, Henry of Navarre had received evidence of the royal favour by the gift of a magnificent collar of emeralds and a gold-hilted sword.

Coconnas had been enquiring for his friend from everyone he met, seeking information which they were either unable or reluctant to give. But a version of the affair in the corridor began to be whispered about, and proved the depth of the curious friendship which had developed between the one-time antagonists by plunging him into inconsolable grief.

He could not doubt that such a combination of kings and princes would have succeeded in destroying his friend, and casting his body into a nameless tomb.

He could not seek the aid of the Duchess of Nevers, for she had found his arrogance so difficult to endure that they had quarrelled seriously a few days before, and so, learning that the Duke d'Alençon had been of the party, he resolved that, though he was a prince of the royal house, he should give a true explanation of what had occurred.

He went to him immediately that this resolution was formed, and made his request in such a manner that d'Alençon's first impulse was to show him the door; but he reflected prudently that Coconnas had been engaged in three recent duels, and now his eyes glared with so much rage as he thought of his friend's probable fate that the duke considered it more prudent to adopt a conciliatory manner.

"My dear Coconnas," he said, "it is true that when a king receives a silver ewer on his shoulder, or when a prince of the blood has orange syrup poured on his head, it is an incident that he is disposed to resent; and that there was a plan to

kill M. de la Mole is a matter which I am not prepared to deny. But he has a friend who frustrated the plan."

"Ah, mordi! monseigneur, that is well. I should like to show my gratitude to that friend, if you will tell me his name."

The duke made no answer to this, but his smile was such as to lead Coconnas to the belief that he himself was the unnamed friend. He went on: "And you can doubtless tell me where he can be found now?"

"No. I believe he has disappeared. That is the worst news that I have to give you."

"Mordi! I will know where he is," Coconnas exclaimed with some return to his earlier manner.

"Then why not go to the Queen of Navarre? But do not say it was on my suggestion, or she may refuse to reply."

"Magnanimous prince!" Coconnas thought foolishly, as he went on to the Queen of Navarre.

Marguerite received him at once, having heard of his enquiries his solicitude for La Mole condoning to her mind his rudeness to Henriette, of which she had also heard.

He was never at ease with Marguerite, being overawed by her wit, even more than by her rank or beauty. But she met him with a smile which went far to restore his confidence.

"Oh, madame," he said, with his usual extravagance of expression, "restore my friend to me, I entreat you, or, at least, tell me where I may find him. Could Euryalus live without Nisus? Damon without Pythias? Orestes without Pylades? Without my friend life is of no more value to me."

Marguerite smiled, but after binding him to secrecy told him of the escape from the window, and though she refused to say whether she knew where La Mole was, she said that he was free to enquire from the King of Navarre, who might say more than she was prepared to do. "I can at least assure you," she concluded, "that he lives, and is well."

“I have more than your word for that,” he replied, “for I see that there have been no tears in those lovely eyes,” and thinking, quite correctly, that he was unlikely to improve on this speech, he withdrew immediately, deciding to seek reconciliation with Henriette, who might then be able, and would certainly be disposed, to tell him more than he had obtained from the Queen of Navarre.

It was after Coconnas had gone that Marguerite opened her window, and she may not have been entirely surprised when a stone, thrown with commendable accuracy, fell at her feet. But she was not prepared to find that two notes were attached to it, one of which said:

“My lady and queen: Speak to me. I am waiting.”

And the other:

“Madame: I must speak on a most urgent matter to the King of Navarre. I am waiting.”

It was while she was still considering what course she should take concerning the second note that Henry tapped on the door, as his custom was, and Marguerite, shutting the window hastily, and pushing the first note away, called him to enter.

Gently as she had shut the window, the sound had come to his ears and been understood, for the constant peril which surrounded him had given him almost the alertness of hearing which men acquire in a savage state. But he was not one to object if his wife liked the night air, or the night stars.

“Margot,” he said, with unruffled geniality, “while others are trying on their fine clothes, I have come to have a few words on my affairs, which you may still regard as your own.”

“Have we not agreed that our interests are the same?”

“Yes, and that is why I have come to tell you that d’Alençon avoids me. Do you think he is planning to go away alone, or not to go at all? I have an opinion, but should like to know if yours is the same.”

“I have noticed the same thing. I think that, circumstances having changed, he has changed too.”

“You mean that, Charles being ill, and Anjou likely to go to Poland, he would prefer to remain in Paris, with his eye on the crown of France?”

“Yes.”

“Then I agree. And it will be as I wish. But I must have larger guarantees if I go alone. De Mouy’s silence is strange. Can you throw any light on that?”

Not unless it be in this note, which was thrown through the window a few minutes ago.”

Saying this, she handed Henry the second note. “Is not this,” he asked, as he read it, “the writing of de la Mole?”

“I cannot say. It is possible that it is forged.”

“Well, he says he is waiting now.”

“What of that?”

“Ventre-saint-gris! I want him to come in.”

Marguerite stared in amazement. “How can he do that? The king has tried to kill him. Are doors to be used by those who have —”

“Have to go out by the window, you would say? Surely not. But may they not return by the way they went?”

“Do you think so?” she answered, a flush of pleasure coming to her face as she thought of having La Mole at her side again.

“I am sure.”

“But how can he come up?”

“I provided a ladder once. Is it still here?”

“Yes.”

“Then it is simple. Throw out the ladder, and let it hang. If it be De Mouy, as we will suppose, he will doubtless catch the idea.”

And, with a grave face, Henry joined her in searching for the ladder, which did not prove hard to find.

“And now,” he said, “perhaps you will be kind enough to suspend it from the balcony.”

“Why will you not do it?”

“Because I am a prudent conspirator. I do not wish to be seen.”

Marguerite smiled, and fastened the ladder.

“And now,” Henry said, with a smile to equal her own, “I am sure De Mouy will come up.”

Next moment, it became evident that someone was ascending the ladder, and a man’s head appeared at the window sill.

“Ah!” Henry said. “It appears that it is not De Mouy. Good evening, M. de la Mole. Pray come in.”

As La Mole looked to be somewhat taken aback on being so addressed, though he was only faced by the man he had asked to meet, Marguerite said quickly: “You asked to see the king on urgent business, so I have arranged for him to meet you here.”

Henry went to the window and shut it.

Marguerite whispered: “I love you,” in the moment this movement gave, and then Henry turned to offer a chair, and ask:

“What is it you have to say?”

“I left De Mouy at the barrier. He wishes to know whether Maurevel has spoken, and whether his presence here has become known.”

“No. But it is a position which cannot last.”

“So De Mouy has thought. If d’Alençon will be ready tomorrow evening, you will be met by a hundred and fifty men at the St. Marcel gate. There are five

hundred at Fontainebleau from where you can proceed by Blois, Angoulême and Bordeaux."

Henry looked keenly at his wife. "Margot," he said, "I shall be ready. Shall you?"

La Mole looked at her with equal anxiety.

"You have my word," she replied. "Where you go, I shall be. But d'Alençon must come, or we must not make the attempt. He will betray us, if he does not come."

"Has he been informed of the plan?" Henry asked.

"He had a letter from De Mouy some days ago."

"Of which he has told me nothing."

"Yet you need have no anxiety," La Mole replied, "for a fortnight will suffice to adjust our plans."

"How can I send De Mouy an answer?"

"Easily He will be present at the reception of the ambassadors tomorrow. A word inserted in the queen's speech will be sufficient to inform him whether you come or stay."

"Can you manage that, Marguerite?"

"Yes. Easily."

"Then I will see d'Alençon in the morning, and decide what it will be best to do… La Mole, you must not go out by the window. It might compromise the queen. I will give the password, and you can come out with me… I will go first to see that the ground is clear."

So, whether by intention or not, he left the lovers for a brief moment alone.

He returned to say that the corridor was clear, and that they should go at once. "But," he added, with his usual smile, "you should take care of the ladder, which

may be useful for other times.”

CHAPTER XLIII

THE POLES ASK FOR ANJOU

WITH furred mantles and caps, and gaily splendid in yellow and red, the Polish envoys rode through the shouting streets. Before them a troop of cavaliers, their drawn swords like scimitars, clad in almost oriental magnificence, bravely sustained the honour of the far country from which they came.

Charles, pale as a ghost, but magnificent in the royal robes, met them in the great reception hall of the Louvre.

The set speeches began. A Polish envoy, speaking Latin, asked the consent of the king to the Duke of Anjou becoming king of Poland.

The king replied briefly, speaking in French, which a translator rendered, sentence by sentence, into the Polish tongue. He assented to the request, and spoke eulogistically of the qualities of the Duke of Anjou.

When he had finished, the Polish envoy addressed Anjou in Latin, offering him the Polish crown.

The duke replied, also in Latin, accepting the offer, the king watching him the while with compressed lips, and the eyes of a beast of prey.

Then the crown of Poland was brought forward on a velvet cushion, d'Anjou knelt, and Charles himself put it on his head, after which the brothers embraced and exchanged kisses of deathless hate.

A herald loudly proclaimed: "Alexander Edward Henry of France is crowned King of Poland. God save the King!"

And all present gave a responsive cry: "God save the King of Poland!"

After that, it was Marguerite's turn. After having been complimented by the Polish envoy, she spoke in Latin of her own composition, congratulating her brother, and regretting that it was impossible for her to go with him. There was a sentence which Charles did not recognise as having been in the speech when she

had rehearsed it to him, but it was a matter to which he gave little attention, and his knowledge of Latin was not very great. When she said: “We are sorry to be separated. We should have preferred going with you… Go, dear brother, go without us,” she gave enough emphasis to make their meaning clear to an old man with piercing black eyes, and a long white beard, who, by the connivance of the captain of the Swiss guard, had gained a place behind the Polish envoys, and almost opposite to the Queen of Navarre.

Catherine, ever suspicious, had noticed that the eyes of both Henry and Marguerite had been upon this old man, but she would not have known him in that disguise, had not a note been put into her hand: “Maurevel has written at last. It was De Mouy with whom he fought.”

“De Mouy,” she thought. “So I have guessed before now. The old man… it is he.”

Her eyes sought him, and as they did she became aware that Henry was watching, and that he had made a warning sign to the stranger, almost imperceptible, but evidently understood, for the old man was slipping away.

She signalled to the captain of the guard, and when he came to her side she told him to follow an old man with a flowing beard and a black velvet dress. He was to invite him to dinner, in the king’s name. But, should he resist, he was to take him alive or dead.

Henry understood what was happening as well as though he had: overheard. He had no peace of mind till he saw the captain return alone - obviously to report that he had been unsuccessful.

He watched the king rise like a sick man, and salute the ambassadors, and retire, leaning on the arm of Ambroise Pare.

D’Anjou retired with his mother. “I shall die an exile,” he said bitterly.

“Do not despair,” Catherine answered. “Remember the prediction. A horse shall always be saddled in my stable, and a courier booted to start for Poland.”

D’Alençon had been a mere cypher throughout the ceremony, noticed by none.

CHAPTER XLIV

THE INSEPARABLES

AFTER the departure of the King of Poland, a time of peace and apparent amity came to the Louvre.

Charles regained his normal degree of health, and resumed his hunting habits, in which Henry of Navarre became his chosen companion, their only difference being upon the subject of hawking, which was a passion with Charles, but to which Henry was comparatively indifferent.

Even the queen-mother, whatever may have been the thoughts of her dark heart, was affectionate to her children, gracious to Henry.

La Mole did not re-enter the Louvre, nor was the silken ladder dropped down again, but he found means to exchange letters with Marguerite, in which he protested the undying affection that filled his heart, and reminded her more than once that there was a little house with two exits which stood, dark and solitary through the winter nights, in the Rue Cloche-Percée.

So there was a measure of happiness for all - except for the Piedmontese. lt was something to him to know that La Mole still lived, something to be the decided if temporary choice of a lady as charming and vivacious as the Duchess de Nevers, but he would have given up all their tender meetings, without a moment of hesitation, for an hour of his friend’s company.

It was from the urging of her own heart, as well as from the despair of Coconnas and the entreaties of her lover, that Marguerite at last arranged to meet Henriette in the little house to discuss what could be done.

It was agreed that Coconnas should be there, and he received, in no very gracious mood, a note from Henriette, inviting him to meet her at half-past nine.

Still he was not far from punctual, and was surprised to find that Henriette had arrived, and was annoyed that she should have been first,

“Fie!” she said, “you have the invitation of a lady - I will not say a princess! -

and you keep her waiting for you.”

“Waiting!” Coconnas exclaimed indignantly. “I’ll bet anything we’re both here too soon.”

Henriette recognised this mood of her uncouth lover, and replied with her usual meekness: “I was certainly here before time “

“And so I should have been, but for something or other. It isn’t ten now.”

“What was it more important than I?”

“Well, I saw a man at the corner of the Rue de Grenelle, and I thought he was La Mole.”

“You are always thinking of him!”

“And so I shall, whether you like it or not.”

“You needn’t be such a brute about it.”

“Well we are both paying compliments tonight.”

“Anyway, what happened? How comes that blood on your doublet?”

“Oh, it’s not mine. J must have got some of his.”

“You mean you’ve been fighting?”

“It wasn’t my fault. He didn’t like being followed. A man should stop when he’s called.”

“You’re always getting into quarrels about La Mole “

“Well, what should a man fight for? About women? I’ve got too much sense.”

“You are flattering! I don’t believe you love me at all.”

“Duchess, I adore you. But may I not spend my spare time in praising a friend?”

“You mean that this is your spare time? - the time that you spend with me?”

“I can’t help it, anyway. I am always thinking about him.”

“Annibal, how I hate you! Why not say straight out that you prefer him to me? Only, I warn you - if you dare to —”

“Henriette, if you don’t want to make trouble, you’ll be careful in what you say. Be content that I love you more than any other woman. But that doesn’t prevent me loving him more than other men.”

“It was a good answer,” a laughing voice said from behind him, and a large damask curtain was lifted, showing a sliding panel opening into the adjoining room through which La Mole had come, so that he stood like one of Titian’s paintings set in a golden frame. Coconnas, ignoring Marguerite, who had been a silent auditor of the verbal skirmish, sprang forward with an impetuosity which overturned a small table, and embraced his friend with an ardour which was warmly returned.

“You see, Henriette,” Marguerite said, “I have kept my word.”

“You brought him, madame!” Coconnas exclaimed, and kneeling down, with characteristic extravagance, kissed the hem of her dress.

“Well!” said Henriette, “have you forgotten that I exist

I suppose that I have become quite unbearable now.”

“Mordi! no. You are the goddess of my idolatry. I can tell you so now with a lighter heart. Were a host around us, I would protest that no country can produce anything so perfect or so lovely as you

“Gently, Coconnas. You forget the Queen.”

“That makes no difference,” Coconnas replied in his half-serious, half-jesting manner. “I assert that Henriette is a queen of beauty, and Marguerite is a beauty of a queen.”

“All the same, beautiful queen,” Henriette said, “I think we had better leave these friends for an hour’s chat together. M. Coconnas may be more rational after that”

Marguerite whispered “patience!” to La Mole, and passed through the panel with her friend, to the room in which supper had been laid.

Left to themselves, Coconnas questioned La Mole concerning the events which had led to his flight, and heard the tale with increasing excitement and indignation.

“But why,” he asked,” instead of distracting me by playing hide-and-seek as you have, did you not take refuge with the duke, who would have given you his protection?”

“What duke?”

“The Duke d’Alençon, of course.”

“I saw him holding a cord with which I was to have been strangled.”

“Mordi! Are you sure of that? The sickly paleface! That currish mongrel think that he could lay his hands on my friend! Strangle you, indeed! By this time tomorrow he will have heard my opinion of that.”

“Are you mad? When you have cooled down you may observe that it is half-past ten. Are you not in waiting tonight at the Louvre?”

“What do I care for that! Let the duke wait. Do you suppose that I will continue to serve a man who has tried to murder my friend? Mordi! before this time tomorrow he will know what think of that.”

“For the love of heaven, think what you are about! Are you

sober or not?”

“It is lucky I am, or I should be setting the Louvre on fire.”

“Then be reasonable. You must either return to your duty,

or let the duke know that you have left his service.”

“That is true. I will write him a letter at once.”

“You think that is the way? You remember he is a prince of the blood?”

“It is my friend’s blood of which I think,” Coconnas replied, with his fiercest expression. “Do not rouse me, or I may do worse than write a letter telling him that I can no longer serve him… Where is a pen?”

Coconnas settled down to write, and, in a few minutes, had

composed this letter, which he read aloud:

“My Lord,

You are doubtless aware of the story of Orestes and Pylades, celebrated for their friendship and their misfortunes. My friend, La Mole, is as unfortunate as Orestes, and I have for him the same ardent affection as that which possessed Pylades.

“There are affairs of importance which render it impossible for me to leave him. I therefore beg your highness to believe the sorrow I feel that I must withdraw from your service, as also the deep respect with which I am

Your highness’s

Most humble servant,

Annibal, Count de Coconnas,

M. de la Mole’s inseparable friend.”

“Well, what do you think?” he asked, affecting to ignore the fact that La Mole had shrugged his shoulders as he heard it.

“I think the duke will laugh at us, as a pair of simpletons.”

“Better than strangle us, anyhow.”

As he spoke, the panel slid back. “How are Orestes and Pylades now?” the princesses asked in one breath.

“Mordi!” Coconnas answered. “They are dying with hunger and love.”

CHAPTER XLV

DEATH OF A PAGE

WHATEVER Henry thought of d'Alençon's refusal to move, he saw that his own danger would be increased if he should show distrust, and he maintained an intimacy which Catherine did not fail to observe.

Its meaning was not easy for Catherine to read, for Marguerite, who might have told her much, was as skilful as she herself at the verbal fencing which, under a mask of candour, will mystify rather than inform. But Catherine saw that Henry's alliance with d'Alençon increased his strength, and their separation became one of the major aims of her subtle and tireless mind.

With this object before her, she showed an increase of affection for d'Alençon, which he received with satisfaction, and Henry observed with a resolution to be additionally on his guard.

It was on a bright spring morning, while events paused, as though awaiting the guidance of fate, that Maurevel came feebly out of a small house near the arsenal, and slowly dragged his way, with the assistance of a stick, by way of the Rue de Petit-Musc, to the Archery Garden.

His long moustache and military aspect, weakened by long sickness, and suggesting that he was a wounded officer, seeking to regain strength in the sunny air, would have drawn the sympathy of any who might have seen him, had not the park been deserted at that hour, but when the cloak which, in spite of the warm weather, was wrapped closely round him, flew open for a moment, it revealed that even now he did not move without an arsenal of weapons. Pistols hung by silver clasps from his belt, in which a large dagger was thrust: and a heavy sword hung at his side, seeming out of place against his shrunken and shaking limbs.

Entering the gardens, he made his way to a small covered arbour separated by a thick hedge and a narrow ditch from the street beneath.

He had been supplied by an attendant with what appeared to be an accustomed cordial, and had sat sipping it for about ten minutes when he observed the

approach of a man in the street below, at which his face assumed an expression of astonishment and ferocious hatred.

He had recognised De Mouy, who had appointed a place which page of Henry of Navarre, who was now approaching from an opposite direction.

They looked round to assure that they were alone, while Maurevel actually held his breath in his anxiety not to be observed, but the hedge and his somewhat elevated position concealed him from them.

“Speak quickly,” the page said, “while the street is clear.”

“Listen carefully, Orthon. I want you to go to Madame de Sauve, and give this note to her own hands. But if she should not be in her apartment, place it behind her mirror, where the king is in the habit of leaving his letters to her. Wait at the Louvre long enough to ascertain whether there is a reply, and, if there be, you will know where to bring it. If there should be none, meet me tonight with a petronel, at the same place.”

“Yes. I understand that.”

Maurevel had been fingering a pistol while this conversation proceeded, debating whether a ball fired through so thick a hedge would be certain in its direction and effects, and what his own fate would be, in his feeble condition, should it be fired in vain. But he saw now that he might be on the track of something for which the queen-mother would thank him even more than for the death of the Huguenot chief. Within a minute of De Mouy’s withdrawal, he had risen, and was hurrying away with more vigour than would have seemed possible an hour before.

Having obtained a horse, he rode to the Louvre at the risk of opening his half-healed wound, and five minutes later Catherine had heard all he had to tell, and had rewarded him with an order for the payment of the thousand gold crowns which was to have been his reward for the arrest or murder of the King of Navarre.

It was a quarter of an hour later that Orthon reached the Louvre, and went straight to the apartment of Madame de Sauve, where Dariole informed him that her mistress had been summoned away by the queen-mother a few moments before.

Using a freedom which he was allowed, he wandered into the bedroom, and slipped the note behind the mirror. He was withdrawing his hand when he was startled by the voice of the queen-mother behind him: “What are you doing here?”

“I am waiting for Madame de Sauve.”

“It is useless to wait. She is detained by duties for me.”

Orthon stood irresolute. Had she seen the note? Ought he to go?

She misread his hesitation, not being sure herself whether he had deposited the note, or had been disturbed a moment too soon. As he lingered, she supposed that his errand was still undone. If that were so, it would be well to leave him there. So she withdrew.

Orthon still hesitated. But in the end the instinct of caution prevailed, and he withdrew the note.

As he left the room, he met the queen-mother returning to it, but she passed him without further questioning. His fear, vague but acute, was not lessened by observing that the captain of the guard stood in the corridor, evidently at her call. Catherine went straight to the mirror. She was surprised that no note was there. “Foolish boy,” she thought, “he is measuring his wits against mine. He has a lesson to learn.”

“De Nancey!” she called, and when the captain entered she said: Follow that boy who has just left. Do not harm him, but bring him to me. You must not fail in that.”

The captain caught sight of Orthon half-way down the stairs, and called on him to stop. Realising that it would be fatal to attempt flight, he looked back: “What do you want?”

“I want you.”

“I am in a hurry.”

“The queen-mother commands that you return.”

He went back, but he was too young to control his feelings, and he was in a state of visible terror when he faced Catherine again.

“Your majesty wishes to speak to me?” he asked, with a rapidly beating heart.

“Your face pleases me,” she said graciously, “and I wish to interest myself in you. Can you ride?”

“Oh, yes, madame.”

“Then come with me, and I will give you a message to take to St. Germains. M. de Nancey, you will order that a horse be saddled.”

The captain having gone on this errand, Catherine led the way to the floor below, passed along the corridor that led to the king’s apartment, descended another flight of stairs, and unlocked a door leading to a circular gallery to which only the king and she had access, it being intended as a resort if sudden danger should threaten.

When they had entered, she closed and locked the door behind them. There was little light in the corridor, along which she led them for a few steps, and then turned abruptly.

Now her eyes shone balefully upon him, and her face seemed terrible in the gloom.

“Where,” she asked, “is the note you were to give to the King of Navarre?”

“The note, madame? I do not understand.”

“The note you received from M. de Mouy outside the Archery Gardens an hour ago.”

“Some one has misinformed your majesty.”

“Liar! Give me the note, and all I promised for you shall be done.”

“Madame, believe me. I have none.”

“Don’t be silly. What is a piece of paper to you? Give it to me here, and a

thousand crowns of gold shall be yours."

"Madame, I cannot. I have no such note to give."

"Two thousand crowns?"

"Madame, it is useless to ask."

"Say ten thousand crowns?"

The offer was munificent, but there was a growing menace in the queen-mother's voice which filled its hearer with dread.

It seemed to his frightened loyalty that there was only one thing left to do. He must swallow the note. But quick though his action was, the queen-mother was quicker than he. He had pulled it out of his pocket, and it was half-way to his mouth, when she grasped his wrist.

"There is not need to do that," she said with a resumption of her gentler manner, "I was only trying your fidelity, which shall be rewarded as it deserves. You can take the note to your master now, and this purse is an earnest of my future favours. Go back the way we have come. The door will open from this side."

She walked on a few steps, and pressed her hand upon a stud in the wall.

"Then you pardon me, gracious madame?"

"I do not only pardon, I praise. But you forget that your master waits."

The boy turned quickly at this reminder, but he had only gone a few steps when the ground opened beneath his feet. His hands grasped the air, as, with a loud scream, he disappeared into one of the dreadful oubliettes of the Louvre.

"Now," the queen-mother thought angrily, "thanks to that stubborn fool I must go down nearly two hundred steps."

CHAPTER XLVI

AT LA BELLE ETOILE

TWO hours later Henry and Madame de Sauve entered her apartment together. In the meantime Catherine, having taken the note from the murdered boy, had decided, now that she knew its contents, that it would serve her purpose best if it should reach the king.

Hearing that Orthon had been there, Henry looked behind' the mirror at once. He found the note, and had no reason to think it had been read by any eyes but his own. It said: "This evening at ten. Rue de l'Arbre Sec. Hotel de la belle Etoile. There is no need ro reply."

Henry read it without remark. He went to dinner at the King's table, and was in good spirits. Charles was as friendly as ever, only reproaching him for some awkwardness while hawking during the day.

Henry said that he was of the mountains, not of the plains, but he was always willing to learn. He was studying all the books on the subject that he could get.

Catherine was in her most charming mood. As she rose from the table she begged her dear Marguerite to spend the whole evening with her.

At eight o'clock Henry went out with two gentlemen. He went by the Porte St. Honore, made a long round, and returned by the Tour de Bois, crossed the Seine by the De Nesle ferry, and dismissed the two gentlemen in the Rue St. Jacques, as though he were bent on some adventure of gallantry during the night.

At the corner of the Rue des Mathurins, a thickly cloaked horseman had pulled up. His horse was covered with mud, and steamed in the night air. Henry approached. The man bent towards him

"Mantes," he whispered. "Pau," the king answered.

The man slid off the horse. He gave the king his cloak, which he put on, and mounted. He rode a long way round, crossing the river twice, and came at last, by way of the quay, to the inn of La belle Etoile.

It happened that La Mole was there. He was writing a letter to Marguerite. Coconnas was in the kitchen. He watched six partridges being roasted, and discussed with the host the exact moment at which they should be taken off the spit.

The ostler took Henry's horse to the stable, while he entered the inn, and stood for a moment, stamping his feet, as though to warm them, or to call attention to himself.

La Mole, without interrupting his writing, called to the host: "Maitre la Hurière! here is a gentleman asking for you."

The host advanced, gave a glance at the rough serge coat, and said shortly: "And who may you be?"

"Eh, Sang Dieu! I am a gentleman from Gascony, who has come to make his fortune at court."

"What do you want?"

"A room and a meal."

"Have you a lackey?"

"No. I must make my fortune before that."

"I don't let masters' rooms without servants' rooms. This is not the kind of inn you require."

"Even if I give you a rose noble tonight, and leave it till tomorrow to talk over the change?"

"You are very generous," the host answered, with suspicion evident in his voice.

"Not at all. But I must stay here, for a gentleman in the country recommended it, and I have invited someone to join me at supper here. Have you wine of Artois?"

"That I have. The Béarnais never drank better."

"Then I will pay for that separately… I think my friend is at the door now."

A man older than Henry entered. He wore a heavy sword at his side.

“My young friend,” he said, “considering how far you have travelled, you are a most punctual man.”

Henry took his hand. “This,” he said, “is the friend I expected. Can you let us have supper now?”

“It shall be served in number two, on the third floor. Will you go up, gentlemen?”

La Mole watched them go up without showing any recognition of who they were. He saw Coconnas looking through the kitchen door. Eyes and mouth were equally wide open, giving his face an expression of grotesque astonishment.

“Mordi!” he said, “did you see —”

“What?”

“I could swear they were the King of Navarre, and the man who has your taste in cloaks.”

“Swear if you like, but not as loudly as that.”

“You knew them?”

“Of course.”

“What can they be after?”

“Some love affair, more likely than not.”

“Give me sword-thrusts, not amourettes. I won’t swear, I will bet now.”

“Bet what?”

“That they are conspiring together.”

“If they are, it is no business of ours.”

“That is true. I am no longer in d’Alençon’s service. Let them conspire if they

will.”

He turned back to the partridges, which he now considered fit to be removed from the spit.

Upstairs, Henry was saying to De Mouy: “You are sure no one can know that I am meeting you here?”

“Not if we can rely on Orthon, and the note was delivered safely to you.”

“So it was. But I hear that he was questioned by the queen-mother. Have you seen him since?”

“He is to meet me at midnight.”

“It should be safe enough. Orthon is one I can trust. And I have La Mole on the watch below.”

“That is well. Can you tell me, sire, what d’Alençon intends to do?”

“He has made up his mind not to go. The king’s recent illness, and the fact that d’Anjou is now king of Poland, have changed his plans.”

“He betrays us?”

“Not yet. He will do so at any time that suits his plans.”

“He is a treacherous hound.”

“It is bad fortune for us?”

“On the contrary, sire. He was unwelcome to all except the Prince de Condé, and he says that he only feigned to welcome him because that would be a protection for you. Now I have them all united to serve you. In eight days fifteen hundred horsemen will be waiting for you on the road to Pau. It will be a retreat, not a flight. You will not fear the venture when an army is round you?”

“You are the only one who knows that the King of Navarre is not as easily frightened as people think.”

“Mon Dieu! I know it. I hope all France may know it too before long.”

“But those who conspire should succeed, for which decision is necessary. Action must be rapid and sure.”

“Sire, when shall you be hunting next?”

“The king hunts or hawks every eight or ten days. We were out today.”

“Then in about eight days from now you will hunt again?”

“Yes. Perhaps earlier.”

“Then I propose that you shall continue to persuade d’Alençon that you will do nothing without him.”

“You can rely on that.”

“You are sure that he believes what you tell him?”

“I know that he will believe my wife.”

“And the Queen of Navarre is entirely with us?”

“She has proved that more than once. Besides, she is ambitious. Is she not a Valois? She would be a real Queen of Navarre.”

“Then give us as much notice as you can when the next hunt will be, and in which direction it will leave the city. Three days will be enough. Do nothing till you see La Mole riding immediately before you. When he spurs, follow him, and ride hard. The queen-mother may have you followed, but we shall have Spanish and Barbary horses in waiting which her Normandy hunters will never catch.”

“It is well planned.”

“You have money, sire?”

Henry grimaced - ” Have I ever? But Margot has.”

“It will be well to bring all you can.”

“Are you remaining in Paris?”

“Yes. Till a little private affair of my own is settled. I have heard that Maurevel is crawling about again, and warming himself in the sun, like the snake he is. If my rapier can put an end to that, I shall go with a lighter heart than I have now.”

“It will be a good work… You are satisfied with La Mole?”

“Entirely. He is devoted to you. He is charming and brave.”

“He is more than that. He is discreet. He shall follow us to Navarre, and there he shall be rewarded as he deserves.”

Henry said this with an ambiguous smile, so that his inner thoughts were not easy to read, and at the same moment the man of whom they spoke burst into the room.

“Alert, sire! The house is surrounded.”

“By whom?”

“By the royal guards.” De Mouy drew his pistols. “So we must fight our way out?

“Nonsense,” La Mole answered impatiently. “What could you do against fifty men?”

“You are right,” Henry answered, “providing there be any way of retreat.”

“There is one which I used successfully when I was cornered here. But you must come quickly.”

“And De Mouy?”

“He can please himself, but there is not a moment to lose.”

As he spoke, they heard steps ascending the stairs.

“If they could be kept back for five minutes,” La Mole exclaimed.

“Then be easy,” De Mouy answered. “I can do that.”

“But what will you do?” Henry asked.

“Don’t worry about that. lf only you will go while you can!”

As De Mouy spoke, he had already removed the plate and glass the king had used, so that it might appear that he had been supping alone.

“Come,” La Mole said urgently. He caught the king’s arm, dragged him from the room, and, guiding him through the darkness of the passage, he led him up two floors into a garret, the door of which he bolted, and then opened a skylight. “Is your majesty willing to risk yourself on the roof?”

“Am I not a mountaineer?”

“Then follow me.”

La Mole led the way along a stout gutter at the end of which two roofs sloped together. Going between them they came to another garret. They looked into an open lumber room.

“It is simple now,” La Mole said, “This room opens on to the stairs, they descend to an alley, and the alley leads to the street.”

“Very well. Go ahead.”

La Mole led the way. He indicated a rope bannister by the ill-lit stairs. When they were half-way down, they came to a window which opened toward a similar one in the inn they had just left. They saw soldiers running down - torches - the flash of swords. For a moment, De Mouy appeared, weaponless, and descending quickly.

“He has sacrificed himself for me!” Henry exclaimed.

“Sire, I would not be uneasy for him. I thought he laughed as he passed, which he seldom does. He will have some trick on his mind.”

“And the young man who was with you?”

“M. de Coconnas? I am not anxious for him. ‘Do we risk anything?’ he asked. I answered: ‘Only our heads.’ ‘But you will escape?’ he asked. I said I hoped to, and he said: ‘And so shall I.’ He will not be taken against his will.”

“Then, if you are right, we haw only to consider ourselves.

“We have only to wrap ourselves in our cloaks, and go out.”

“Then we will return to the Louvre.”

The street was filled with a dense crowd, among whom they mingled without being observed, but as they went on they saw De Mouy, with an escort headed by De Nancey, being conducted toward the Louvre.

“Diable!” Henry said. “We shall find that the wicket-gate at the Louvre will be closed, and they will be taking the names of all who go in. I shall be observed to return after De Mouy, and the deduction will be that I was with him.”

“Then, sire, you should enter another way.”

“What do you suggest?”

“There is the window of the Queen of Navarre.”

“But how shall we let her know what we require?”

“Is not your majesty an expert in the throwing of stones?”

CHAPTER XLVII

DE MOUY CAN EXPLAIN

CATHERlNE felt that she had at last contrived a certain success. She kept Marguerite with her till ten o'clock, by which time she had become convinced that her daughter had no knowledge of the movements of the King of Navarre, and then went to visit Charles.

Charles observed an air of triumph which her habitual dissimulation could not wholly suppress, and enquired the source of her satisfaction.

"I can only say that your majesty will be delivered from two of your bitterest enemies tonight."

Charles frowned over this reply, but said no more, and a few minutes of silence followed. Then there was the sound of a pistol-shot in the courtyard of the Louvre.

"What does that mean?" Charles asked sharply.

"It means that your only real enemy is no longer able to injure you."

"Some one has been killed?" he continued, In a voice which implied that no one had the right to do that, except upon his own authority.

"No, sire. No one has been killed, but two have been arrested."

"Mort diable!" Charles answered irritably. "Will you ever learn that I am old enough to take care of myself? You hunt out plots and conspiracies till I have no peace. If you want to reign, why not go to Poland, and do it there?"

"Charles, it is the last time I shall interfere. I am finishing something on which I have been engaged for a long time. I know that I have been right, though you have called me wrong, and it is about to be proved."

There was a noise in the corridor as she said this. There were heavy footsteps, and the noise of gun-butts grounded upon the floor.

M. de Nancey was announced. He entered, saluted the king, and turned to Catherine to say: “Madame, he is taken, your order has been obeyed.”

“He?” Catherine asked, with an expression of anxiety. “You have arrested one only?”

“He was alone.”

“He did not defend himself?”

“No. He was at supper. He handed his sword over at once.”

“Who did?” Charles interposed.

“You will see in a moment,” Catherine answered. “Bring him in.”

“De Mouy!” the king exclaimed in surprise, as he was led in. “What does this mean?”

“If your majesty would allow me the liberty,” the captured man answered calmly, “I would like to ask the same question.”

“Instead of asking questions,” Catherine said, “will you tell the king who was in the bedroom of the King of Navarre on a certain night when someone resisted his orders by wounding M. de Maurevel, and killing two of his men?”

“It was I, sire.”

“What!” exclaimed Charles, “you resist the orders of the king?”

“No, sire. I must reply in the first place that I was told nothing of any order from you. I saw only that I was assailed by the man who murdered my father, and on whom I had your own promise that justice should be done. I struck him down as a murderer, and his men as those who assisted him in his crimes.”

The queen-mother, who had been struck dumb for a moment at the audacity of De Mouy’s avowal, saw that the king was hesitating as to how he should receive his explanation, and now interposed: “Perhaps you will tell the king also what you were doing at that hour in the room.”

“Yes” Charles answered. “It is what I wish to know.”

“Sire, I came to the King of Navarre as the deputy of your faithful subjects of the reformed religion —”

Catherine looked at the king, as though calling his attention to the damning nature of that admission. “Be quiet, madame,” he said irritably. “I am not missing a word.”

” - to inform him that by his abjuration he had lost the confidence of the Huguenots, but in deference to the memory of his father, and more especially that of his courageous and revered mother, they wished to ask him to make a voluntary resignation of his claim to the crown of Navarre.”

“And what did he say to that?” Catherine asked, not all her duplicity and self-control being sufficient to prevent her wincing somewhat at the sound of this utterly unexpected statement.

“But,” Charles exclaimed, “the disposition of this crown of Navarre which is jumping from head to head, belongs first to me.”

“That is recognised, sire, by the Huguenots, and they hope that you may place it on some head which is dear to you.”

“Death of the devil! What head is that?”

“They had thought of the Duke d’Alençon.”

The colour left the queen-mother’s face as she heard this, and her eyes glared balefully at the Huguenot leader, but he looked at her calmly, as though unconscious of the passion of anger which he had raised.

“Did my brother know of this?” Charles asked.

“Yes, sire.”

“And he consented?”

“Subject only to your approval, sire, he said he should be happy to accept the crown.”

“Ah!” Charles exclaimed, showing his real feelings at last, “it is a crown which should suit Francis extremely well, I wonder I had never had the idea! Thanks, De Mouy, thanks. You will always be welcome here while you have such excellent proposals to make.”

“Sire, I should have put this proposal to you before, but for that unlucky affair of which we have spoken, from which I feared that I had lost your favour.”

“But,” Catherine said, “you have not told us how your proposals were received by him who is already King of Navarre.”

“The king, madame, said that he would accept the decision, and he wrote out a renunciation which I could use as it should be required.”

“And, of course,” she continued, “you have that document on you?”

“It happens that I have. It is both signed and dated.”

“And the date is earlier than that of the murderous affair in the king’s room?”

“It is the day before,” and, as he said this, he drew out the document, which had been prepared for such an occasion.

“Ma foi! yes,” Charles said, after examining it, “it is as he says.”

“And what,” Catherine demanded, “was Henry to get in exchange for that which he surrendered?”

“He said, madame, that he had the friendship of King Charles, which was more to him than any crown.”

Catherine bit her lips. Her fingers twisted in anger, but she was still slow to admit defeat.

“If all was settled,” she asked, “why did you seek an interview with the King of Navarre this evening?”

“I, madame? Who has told you that? The officer who arrested me will testify that I was supping alone.”

“Call M. de Nancey,” Charles ordered, and the captain of the guard entered the room.

Catherine spoke quickly: “M. de Nancey, when you arrested M. de Mouy, was he absolutely alone?”

“In his chamber, yes, madame. In the hostelry, no.”

“Ah! And who was his companion?”

“I cannot say that he was a companion of M. de Mouy. He was in the kitchen, and escaped by the backdoor, after knocking down two of my men.”

“You recognised him, no doubt?”

“No. But my men did.”

“And he was?”

“M. the Count Annibal de Coconnas.”

“That was he,” Charles said, frowning as though over an unwelcome memory, “who made such slaughter of Huguenots on Bartholomew’s Eve.”

“He is a gentleman of the Duke d’Alençon,” de Nancey replied.

“De Nancey,” the king answered, “you may withdraw. But in future you will remember that you are in my service, and take your orders from me.”

He went out, and a moment of silence followed. Catherine’s hands fidgeted with the tassels of her cordeliere. De Mouy looked at her with an ironic smile. Charles caressed his dogs.

“De Mouy,” Charles said, “I have thought of this, and approve. You will return to your brethren and say that from this moment they have a king, and his name is Francis. Give him but eight days to prepare to leave Paris, and it shall be done with the state that a king should have.”

“Sire, may I kiss your hand?”

Charles extended it graciously, and De Mouy bent his knee as he kissed it.

“De Mouy, did I not promise you justice against Maurevel?”

“Yes, sire.”

“I know not where he is, but if you meet him you can take justice into your own hands. You have my warrant for that.”

“Your majesty,” De Mouy replied, “may rest assured that I shall find him.”

Catherine thought desperately: “How may Satan aid a poor queen for whom God will do nothing more?”

CHAPTER XLVIII

TWO HEADS: ONE CROWN

“FETCH M. d’Alençon to me,” Charles said, as Catherine withdrew. De Nancey, who had decided that his future safety would be in obeying only the king, went at once, and took no care to soften the order he had received.

D’Alençon, always in terror of his brother, and conscious of conspiracies which he must seek to conceal, trembled as he went to the king’s apartment with simulated alacrity.

Charles was walking about, whistling between his teeth. He gave his brother a glance of venomous hatred, such as d’Alençon had often encountered before.

“I wish to tell you, dear brother, that to reward your loyalty to myself I am about to give you that which you most desire.”

“Sire, that which I most desire is the continuance of your good health.”

“You can be content about that. I am fully recovered. Thanks to Harry, I escaped from the boar, and thanks to my own constitution I am as strong as ever. You can think of something else for yourself.”

“I want nothing, sire.”

“But you do! You do! You want the crown of Navarre. I have heard all. Harry has renounced, and De Mouy has secured it for you… Well, death of the devil! It shall be yours.”

“But sire, I do not desire - I have never asked —”

“No. You have been discreet. But others have been bolder to ask.”

“Sire, I swear —”

“It would be better not.”

“Then you exile me —”

“Peste! You are hard to please. What better do you expect if you stay here?”

D’Alençon was silent in his despair.

“Ma foi!” Charles went on. “Shall I not have a brother who loves me at the head of a faction which has warred against us for thirty years? And shall not we all be kings? Only poor Harry will be nothing except my friend. But he is not ambitious, and shall have that title for which no one else cares.”

“Your majesty, I entreat —”

“It is immutably settled. You will have good hunting in the mountains of Béarn, and you, who can shoot a magpie at a hundred yards, will become capable of shooting a wild boar at a shorter distance. You will have power and honour, as our brother Henry has, and, like him, you will bless me from afar off.”

Charles said this in a bantering tone, but his eyes were terrible.

D’Alençon’s glance could not meet his, and his ineffectual protests were borne down by a fresh tide of sarcasm.

“Brother,” Charles went on, “I do not doubt your love. How can I, when I see the emotion with which the thought of parting disturbs your mind? But emotion is a dangerous thing. It may cause the hand to shake. Another time it might kill the man instead of the horse. So little will change so much! When Montmorency killed our father by accident, who knows what emotions he may have had?”

He became silent, gazing with rancorous contempt on the brother who stood abashed before him, livid with anger and fear, and no longer able to murmur the protestations which brought fresh and more violent outbursts from the brother he hated, and whom he knew in his cowardly heart he had once intended should die from a boar’s tusks.

After this moment of pregnant silence, Charles resumed in a more normal tone, as though dealing with the details of that which had been freely agreed.

“Navarre,” he said, “should be proud to have for its ruler a brother of the King of France. And when you are settled there you can depend upon me to find you a wife - perhaps one who will bring you another throne.”

D’Alençon had a desperate thought that he might delay his departure until something might supervene. “You wish me,” he said, “to make preparations to __”

“Not at all. I will see to everything for you. You can be sure that there will be no omissions - and no delay.”

“But you are surely forgetting that Henry is your friend.”

“Henry! Had I not told you he has resigned to make way for you? He prefers to enjoy life rather than to be pressed down by the weight of crowns which you and I cannot escape.”

There was nothing more to be said. D’Alençon went to find Henry and his mother, to see whether there might be any help from them. Henry was avoiding him, but he found Catherine. He did not confide in her, as d’Anjou would have done, for there was no love between them. He used his habitual dissimulation, as he sought some ground of alliance by which his brother’s purpose might be upset.

“You have heard the great news, mother?”

“That you are to be a king? Yes.”

“I expect I should thank you for it. But I am sorry for Henry.”

“You think he is your friend?”

“We have become very intimate lately.”

“There is no friendship among kings.”

“But we were not kings. Henry has no wish to be one, and I had no expectation. We were like brothers.”

“Brothers! Is there brotherhood among kings? And who knows that you will not both become kings?”

“Both, mother?” d’Alençon stared, and then flushed angrily, so that Catherine saw that the shaft had not missed its mark. “What kingdom is there for him?”

“Perhaps one of the most magnificent in the world.”

“What do you mean?”

“It is a throne of which you have often thought.”

“Mother, I have thought of nothing.”

“Well, Henry has. He is clever and cunning, and keeps his secrets much better than you keep yours. You should talk less, and think more. Have you thought that De Mouy acts as an agent for him?”

“Mother, Henry is poor. He has no resources and few friends. How can you think that he could be a menace to us?”

“Child,” Catherine replied, with a smile of conscious superiority, “you are indeed ill informed. There is an army of thirty thousand men waiting his word to assemble - Huguenot soldiers, which is to say that they are some of the best in the world… And, besides that, he has a protection which you have not had the adroitness to see.”

“What is that?”

“He has Charles’s friendship. - Charles, who from jealousy of your brother, and spite toward you, looks round for other possible successors. Only - which you have not had the wit to see he looks for them outside his own family.”

“I know he is fond of Henry.”

“And you see that Henry, whom he sought to kill a few months ago, lies down like a dog and licks the hand that beat him.”

“I know he is always very humble to the king.”

“And always striving to please him.”

“Yes. It was only yesterday that he asked me for a good book on hawking, because Charles had said that he did something wrongly.”

Catherine’s eyes lit with a sudden thought. “Wait a minute. What did you say?”

“I said I would have a look.”

“Well, he shall have it.”

“But I could find nothing.”

“Never mind. I can. Will you trust your mother in this?”

“Yes.”

“You do not really love Henry? No? Well, I detest him. You will ask no questions, and do just as I say?”

“Yes.”

“Then come to me the day after tomorrow, and I shall have found the book.”

D’Alençon left her room in better spirits than he had entered. He did not understand her design, but he had more confidence in her than in himself.

It was at about the same time that Marguerite received a letter from De Mouy, enclosed in one from La Mole, and having read it, she went swiftly and cautiously to her husband’s apartment. She found him alone, and held out the letter. “Read it quickly.”

He read: “Sire, we are ready. Come to the falcon hunt with a coat of mail under your doublet, and on the best horse you have.

“We have learnt that the hunt will be from St. Germain to Maisons. Fifty of our people will be concealed in the pavilion of Francis I.

“At the right. moment, which should be about noon, turn aside at the Avenue des Violettes, either alone, or with the queen, if she will come also. In a little clearing to the right of the avenue, M. de la Mole and Coconnas will be waiting with two led horses, in case yours should be tired.

“Adieu, sire. We shall not fail you.”

“Sire,” Marguerite said, “the road is clear. You will be a hero yourself, and will be making a throne for me.” Gaily, she held out her hand, which he bent to kiss.

There was a sound of someone approaching the door, and she withdrew instantly behind the tapestry. Next moment Henry had given d'Alençon permission to enter, and the duke came in, casting cautious glances round the room.

"You are alone?"

"Absolutely. You look agitated."

"So I am. Everything is discovered."

"How?"

"De Mouy has been arrested."

"Yes. I know that."

"He told the king everything."

"What did he say?"

"That I was conspiring to take the throne of Navarre."

"Then how is it you are not arrested?"

"The king mocked me, offering me the throne of Navarre, but I admitted nothing."

"Splendid! Stand firm, and our lives are safe."

"I came to ask your advice. Shall I remain or fly?"

"Follow your own inspiration."

"I should prefer to remain."

"Then do so."

"And you?"

"If you remain, why should I go?"

“So our plans are at an end? You give way at the first misfortune?”

“It is no misfortune to remain here. I am w ell content.”

D’Alençon withdrew, and Marguerite came out.

“There is something stirring,” Henry said. “What can it be?”

“I do not know, but I will discover… Come to my apartment tomorrow.”

“I shall be there.”

The falcon hunt was two days ahead.

CHAPTER XLIX

THE BOOK OF VENERIE

EARLY in the morning of the hunt, d'Alençon came to his mother's apartment seeking the promised book.

His mother came from an inner room, bringing it to him. There were large reddish spots on her hands, which she endeavoured to conceal under a dressing-gown which she wore. An acrid smell came from the inner room, which she explained: "I have been burning some old parchments, and they smelt so badly that I put some juniper into the brazier." Perhaps that also explained some hanging vapour which d'Alençon had seen through the opened door.

"Have you seen Henry?" she asked.

"Yes. He refuses to leave."

"You believe that?"

"No. He must be stopped."

"On the contrary, it is essential that he shall get away."

"You will let him escape us?"

"Listen. This book was given to me by a physician who attends the King of Navarre. He assures me that he has a mortal disease, of which he will soon die. It will be better that he should die elsewhere."

"I see that. And are you sure he will go?"

"Yes. I know all their plans. Fifty men are already assembled who will escort him to Fontainebleau, where he will be met by five hundred more."

"Margot goes with him?"

"If she does, she will return when he is dead."

“You are sure he will die?”

“The physician who gave me this book was quite sure.”

“What is the book?”

“What he wants. It is a treatise of falconry written by the Italian prince, Castracani of Lucca.”

“What am I to do with it?”

“Give it to Henry. Has he not asked you for such a book? He will look at it at once, having arranged to go hawking today.”

“I dare not do that.”

“But why not? It is like any other book, except that the leaves stick together. That is because it has been laid aside, and has become damp. Do not attempt to read it yourself. It would be necessary to wet your finger continually, which it is boring to do.”

“So it will only be read by a man who is studying falconry?”

“Yes. I see that you understand.”

“I can hear Henry in the court. I don’t mind putting it in his room while he is away.”

“It would be better to give it into his hands.”

“I daren’t do that.”

“Then place it where he will be sure to see it at once.”

“Will it be better to leave it open?”

“Yes. Don’t be afraid of it. You have gloves.”

D’Alençon took it in a hand that shook visibly. He put it under his doublet, and went up to Henry’s room.

He saw a sword, a poniard, and a full purse set out ready to be picked up. He saw ashes in the grate, showing that many papers had perished there.

“My mother was right,” d’Alençon thought. “He is a traitor to me.” The knowledge gave him resolution for what he did.

He placed the book by the weapons, opening it at an engraving. Then he drew off the glove that had touched it, and threw it on to the still-smouldering ashes, watching till it was entirely consumed.

As he closed his own door, he heard the sound of ascending footsteps. - So he had been just in time!

He tried to read, but his mind was filled with imaginations of what was happening in Henry’s room. Was he in agony now? But no, his mother had said that he would be able to leave the court. The poison must be as slow as it was certain in its effects.

He went to the window, and looked out. He was surprised to see Henry in the court. He was superintending the loading of two mules. Then it was not Henry he had heard before? No matter, he was coming up now.

That was certain. He heard his feet on the stairs, recognising the tread. He heard his door open and shut. By now, he thought - No, he would not stay thus. He went down to the king’s apartment.

Charles was seated in a chair of carved oak, having its back to the door. He was reading.

“Pardieu!” he said to himself, “I did not think there was such a work in France. But devil take the leaves!”

He raised his hand to his mouth, wetting his thumb.

D’Alençon came forward quickly. His first impulse was to dash the book from the king’s hand. But then a devilish thought came to his mind.

“Sire,” he said, “how did you get that book?”

“Oh, I went into Harry’s room, having something to settle with him, and I found

this book, which I brought down with me to read." Wetting his finger again, he turned a fresh page.

"Sire, I came to tell you —"

"Then tell me some other time. I have never seen such engravings as these. I have read - or at least glanced at fifty pages already, and there are a hundred to come. But the way they stick!"

D'Alençon said no more. "He must have tasted the poison," he thought, "twenty-five times already. He is a dead man."

CHAPTER L

THE HAWKING PARTY

CHARLES continued to turn the pages quickly, while d'Alençon, in a kind of frozen horror and tumult of mind, stood watching him silently. His thoughts were a chaos of wild forecasts, expectations and fears. Would the king die? Would he himself be absent in Navarre? Would Henry be able to seize the throne before he could return? Then Henry must not go. The position was entirely changed from when he had thought that it would be best not to interfere. It had become imperative that he should not go… Would it be suspected that Charles had been poisoned? Would the poison be traced to the book? Would he be suspected? But how could he? He had not brought it to Charles. No one had even seen him take it to Henry's room… Could suspicion be thrown upon Henry? It would be worth while to consider that…

Charles had finished the chapter, and raised his head.

"Brother," he said, "when you are disposed to listen, I have things of importance to say."

"If," Charles said irritably, "you have come to speak to me of the same thing again, you shall go off like d'Anjou. I will give you no time at all."

"But it is not about that. Your majesty made accusations against me which were unjust, and which I cannot forget. I wish to prove to you that, at least, I am not a traitor."

Charles crossed his legs, and leaned his elbow upon the book. His look was that of one who will be patient to hear that which he will not believe. "Another rumour?" he asked. "A new plot for the new day?"

"It is more than that. It is a most certain thing. It is only an absurd sensitiveness on my part which has held me back from revealing it before now."

"Another plot! Always a plot!"

"Sire, when you are hawking at Vesinet, the King of Navarre will ride off

through St. Germain’s forest, where a troop of his friends is waiting to join him now.”

“I knew it! Another calumny against poor Henry. Will you never let him alone?”

“You will not have to wait long to learn whether I tell you the truth. By this evening he will be gone.”

“Listen, Francis. For the last time I will appear to believe you. But I warn you and your mother that my patience is almost done… I will send for Henry now.”

“Then you will learn nothing. He will deny it, and his accomplices will be warned.”

“Then what do you propose?”

“That you will so act that my loyalty will be proved, and he who has been deceiving you for so long shall be convicted by an infallible proof, and punished as justice will require.”

Charles was now working himself into one of his moods of uncontrollable excitement. He went to the window and threw it open, as though feeling the need of air. He turned round sharply: “I asked you what you propose.”

“Sire, I would surround the forest with three companies of light horses which would, at a set hour, say eleven o’clock, close in upon the pavilion of St. Francis, which, as though by chance, will have been chosen as the rendezvous for dinner. You will find that Henry will be taken with his accomplices there.”

“Call the captain of the guard.”

When de Nancey came, Charles gave him orders in a tone too low for d’Alençon to hear, and then, as the captain retired, he turned round, and burst out with a terrible oath. His great hound, Actaeon, had pulled the precious book - it was said that there were but three copies in the whole world - on to the floor, where he was tossing it, and tearing it with his teeth.

Charles seized a whip, and the long lash, mercilessly brought down, wrapped the animal in a triple knot. With a howl of pain, he withdrew under the table, the heavy cloth of which, falling to the floor, protected him from his angry master.

Charles picked up the book. A page of illustration was torn out, but the text was still intact. He placed the book on a high shelf.

Then the clock struck, and he knew that the hour of assembly had come. He went down to the courtyard, after clearing the room, locking it, and putting the key in his pocket.

As he descended the stairs, he stopped, and put his hand to his forehead. “The air is heavy,” d’Alençon said, “there must be thunder about.”

“Thunder in March? No. But I have a vertigo. My skin has become dry. I am not well.” He went down the stairs, muttering to himself: “They will kill me with their hates, and their endless plots.”

But the fresh air of the courtyard, and the bustle of the hunt, which he loved, had their usual effect upon him. He breathed freely again.

He looked round for Henry. There he was, with Marguerite at his side. Henry left her, and rode over to him.

Charles said: “Harry, you knew we were hawking, and yet you have chosen such a horse as a stag-hunter would be glad to have.” And then, without giving him. time to reply: “Away, gentlemen! We must be at the rendezvous at the right time.” He was frowning darkly now, and there was a tone in his voice which it was; not pleasant to hear.

He rode gloomily at the head of the gaily gilded, embroidered, perfumed crowd, which now jostled through the wicket of the Louvre, and poured like an avalanche upon the St. Germain’s road, amidst the cheers of a populace which was dazzled by the magnificence of the court.

Henry was back at Marguerite’s side. “What did he say to you?” she asked.

“He congratulated me on having so swift a horse.”

“Nothing more?”

“Nothing.”

“Then he suspects something?”

“So I fear.”

“Be very cautious.”

The subtle smile which was Henry’s reply said: “Trust me for that, ma mie.”

Catherine had watched the cavalcade depart, from her window in the Louvre. She saw Henry ride to the king’s side, and then rejoin his wife, and as he talked to Marguerite she was shrewd enough to judge that he was not in a carefree or joyous mood, but knowing nothing of d’Alençon’s conversation with Charles, she misread what she saw. “Already,” she thought, “the poison begins to work. He will have told Margot he is not well.”

She took her master key, and ascended to his apartment. It was certain that no one would be there - especially so since the disappearance of Orthon, whom he had not replaced. She looked for the book, which she could not find, though she made a most thorough search. “D’Alençon,” she thought, “has been up and taken it away. It was a prudent thing. And he was nervous about it. It was just what he would be likely to do.” She felt confident now that she had won the success she sought.

Meanwhile Charles had set a good pace for the meadows which had been chosen for the day’s sport. After riding rapidly for over an hour, the hunt came to a place where a fleet of flag-covered barges had been assembled to ferry it over the river.

Gaining the further bank, the gay crowd spread out upon the wide prairie which slopes downward from St. Germain’s wooded height, until it assumed the aspect of a many-coloured tapestry, of which the river, reflecting a sombre sky, seemed to resemble a silver fringe.

Charles rode on his favourite charger, a magnificent stallion of speckless white, his chosen falcon upon his wrist. Before him, green-doubleted grooms moved through the rushes in heavy boots, cheering half-a-dozen terriers to beat up the game.

At this moment, the sun broke through the grey ocean of cloud. A shaft of light fell on the splendid train, and was returned by bright jewels and glittering gold, so that the whole procession flashed like a flame. And then, as though it had only waited for that illumination of its probable fate, a heron rose from the reeds with a prolonged and wailing cry.

“Haw! Haw!” cried the king, as he unhooded the falcon upon his wrist. “Haw! Haw!” came a chorus from many throats.

Blinded for a moment by the sudden light, the falcon flew at random, while the heron, now soaring almost vertically, increased its distance. Then the falcon saw it, and rose also on powerful wings.

As they soared, the falcon strove both to approach the heron, and to gain the higher position - a disadvantage which the heron strove desperately to avoid.

At their first encounter, it seemed that the wings of ferocity were weaker than those of fear. The falcon passed closely beneath. the heron, and received a thrust from its long beak, at which it wheeled away, and lost height, as though stunned by the blow.

But a moment later it appeared to have recovered, and rose again, pursuing the heron upward with a fierce and menacing cry.

The heron had used the time to fly toward the forest, where the hope of safety lay, but it now began to soar again, and the two birds seemed likely to disappear entirely in the immensity of the sky and the summer clouds. The heron looked to be no more than a lark, and the falcon was a dark speck which only good eyes could see. No one was riding now. They had reined their horses, and were gazing upward at the soaring birds.

“Bravo!” Charles suddenly exclaimed. “Bravo! Bec-de-fer! See, he is uppermost now!”

“I can see neither of them,” Henry admitted.

“Neither can I,” Marguerite said.

“But you can hear him?” Charles cried. “You can hear him, Harry? He is asking for mercy now.”

In fact, two or three sharp cries, only audible to the keenest ears. came down from the distant heights.

And now they began to appear again. They were no more than black specks in the blue, but from the size of the specks it was soon clear that the falcon had the

higher place.

“Look! Look!” Charles cried, in an excitement difficult to control. “Bec-de-fer has him now!”

In fact, the heron, conquered by the bird of prey, had ceased to defend himself, and was descending rapidly. The falcon struck him incessantly, and was only answered by cries of pain.

Suddenly, the heron closed his wings, and let himself fall like a stone, but it was a useless manoeuvre. The falcon did the same, and when the heron spread his wings to recover himself before reaching the ground, the falcon struck him fiercely again.

It was the end. The heron was falling now beyond his own control, turning over and over, and as he reached the ground the falcon settled upon him, giving a scream of victory which drowned the cry of the dying bird.

Charles spurred to a gallop to reach them. But suddenly he checked the speed of his horse, giving a loud cry of pain. He loosed the reins. One hand caught the horse’s mane, and the other clutched at his stomach, as though in an agony of pain.

“It is nothing,” he said next moment, to the courtiers who had pulled up around him. “I felt for a second as though I were transfixed by a burning iron. Come on. It is nothing.“He rode on, but his face was still inflamed, and his eyes were haggard.

“What can it have been?” Henry asked.

“I do not know,” Marguerite answered. “His face was purple. I have never seen him like that.”

“Nor have I.”

They came upon the two birds. The falcon was now pecking at the heron’s brain. Charles got down from his horse. As he did so, he reeled, clutching the saddle. He seemed likely to swoon.

“Charles,” Marguerite cried, “what is the matter?”

“I feel as though I had swallowed a burning coal… But it is nothing. It does not last. It is passing now… On with the hunt. See, they are raising several herons at once. Let the falcons loose!”

By this time his own bird had been caught, and rehooded. They mounted, and rode on.

“What do you say now?” Henry asked.

“The time has come.” Marguerite replied.

Henry called to the varlet who was carrying the dead heron away. He remained behind, as though he were examining the bird.

CHAPTER LI

THE PAVILION OF FRANCIS I

THERE is a large open glade on the right of the Allée des Violettes. It is too distant to be observed from the road, but the road can be seen from it.

Here La Mole and Coconnas lay on the grass, with a traveller's cloak beneath them.

La Mole waited quietly for the expected event, but his companion was in a more excited state.

Now he rose to one knee, and put his hand to his ear, listening 1ike a hare. "I can hear them cheering the falcon," he said, "they must be approaching us very nearly."

"And now," La Mole retorted, "I cannot hear them at all, so they must be very distant indeed… Can't you have patience? The horses are well hidden. De Mouy chose the place well. He knows that conspirators cannot be too careful, if they are to succeed."

"So you've used the right word at last! Conspirators. That's what we are."

"I don't really think we are conspirators. We are serving the king and queen."

"Have it your own way. But we shall lose our heads all the same if we get caught." And with this cheerful forecast Coconnas appeared to resign himself to his fate. He lay down at full length, and closed his eyes, as though having abandoned interest in events he did not control, but next moment he rose alertly again.

He made a motion for silence. A sound of the distant galloping of horses came to the ears of the waiting men.

La Mole sprang to his feet. "We must have the horses ready," he said.

The horses, tethered ten paces away, had also become restless. A horse neighed,

unexpectedly near. Then, at the head of the glade, for one instant, Marguerite appeared. She made a sign to them, and next instant had ridden away.

“What did that mean?” Coconnas asked.

“She waved her arms, meaning, ‘Be prepared’.”

“She swept her arm round. It meant: ‘Go at once,” Coconnas retorted, with more reason in what he said

She meant we were to await her return.”

“She meant we couldn’t be too quick in getting away.”

“Very well. Let each have his own opinion. You can go, and I will remain.”

Coconnas said no more. He shrugged his shoulders, and lay down on the grass.

There was a noise of hooves, and along the alley, from which the queen had appeared, but coming from the direction to which she had returned, a body of horsemen appeared and vanished, urging their mounts to their utmost speed as they passed.

“Those are your Huguenot friends,” Coconnas said, “and they seem to agree with me that it is time to be gone. If you still differ, shall we ride to the Pavilion of Francis I, and find out how things are there?”

“There would be little wisdom in that. If our plans have been betrayed, it is the place of all others which will be watched.”

“Well, you may be right there,” Coconnas grumblingly admitted, “but it seems that someone is coming here.”

So it was. A horseman was approaching them rapidly. One who did not ride through the open glades, but recklessly through the trees, breaking down the undergrowth, or leaping the obstacles in his path.

For a moment De Mouy drew rein at their side. His sword was out, and there was a pistol in his bridle-hand. His horse steamed.

“Fly!” he said. “I have come to warn you. There is not an instant to lose.”

“But the queen?” La Mole called to a man whose horse was in motion again, and who either did not hear, or felt that there was not time for a reply.

Coconnas lost no time. He ran to the horses, mounted his own, and brought La Mole’s to his side.

“Come!” he cried urgently, to a man who showed no inclination to move. “Come, or it will be too late!”

“You forget the purpose for which we came.”

“Unless it were to get hanged —”

“It was to be a guard for the queen.”

“When De Mouy sees cause to fly —”

“De Mouy was not charged with the care of Queen Marguerite. He does not love her.”

“De Mouy knows that we are conspiring, and men who conspire should get away while there is time. Mount, La Mole! Mount!”

La Mole turned uncertainly. He put a hand on the saddle. A voice behind him said: “Halt!” in a peremptory tone.

They turned to confront a group of dismounted dragoons who had been ordered to search the woods.

“What did I tell you?” Coconnas muttered, and then to the advancing soldiers: Gentlemen, what do you want with us?”

The answer was a curt order to dismount, and the levelling of firearms. There must have been thirty soldiers around them now.

Coconnas raised his sword in the air. “Gentlemen, we surrender. But will you tell us what we have done?”

An officer answered: “The King of Navarre should be able to answer that.”

Coconnas had dismounted now, and the two friends, leading their horses, and surrounded by the dragoons, were led to the Pavilion of Francis.

“You wished to see it,” Coconnas said. “Well, there it is!”

La Mole made no reply. He extended his hand silently to the friend his obstinacy had betrayed.

At the side of the pretty Gothic pavilion, a hut had been erected for the use of huntsmen and verderers. It was now surrounded by a forest of pikes and halberds through which the captives were led. Here they halted, and to understand what they saw it is necessary to go back to that which had already occurred.

The Huguenot gentlemen had assembled at the pavilion, as had been arranged, and De Mouy had placed sentinels in the woods to prevent surprise. But he had not anticipated that those woods would be the scene of an organised search. Nor could he have anticipated that De Nancey would exchange the white scarves of his dragoons for the red ones the Huguenots were accustomed to wear. As it was, the sentinels were captured, and the pavilion surrounded before any alarm was given.

It was owing to De Mouy’s personal vigilance, and the excellence of his horse, that Henry himself did not fall into the trap.

Watching from the cover of a high thicket, De Mouy saw a troop of dragoons beating the wood. He knew that they were no men of his, and there was therefore no mistaking what they must be.

“D’Alençon has betrayed us,” he thought at once, and turned his horse toward the main avenue of the forest. At the far end, he saw the King of Navarre, riding alone, and made the sign of a cross with his hat, which was the agreed signal that the plan must be abandoned. Henry vanished at once, and almost at the same time De Mouy saw the white aigrettes and glittering weapons of the king’s guard appearing at the other end of the avenue.

He swung his horse round, and rode through the trees to give warning to Coconnas and La Mole, and then fled from a scene where his presence could only add to the danger of those who might be unable, or think it imprudent, to attempt to get away.

King Charles, whose ill-humour had been increased by his illness, had not failed to notice that both Henry and Marguerite had disappeared, and could not fail to regard it as confirmation of d'Alençon's accusation. He had ordered that all who should be found in the forest should be taken to the Pavilion, while those who were already there should not be allowed to leave.

Now it was surrounded by his guards, and those within it were ordered to come out. Neither Charles nor d'Alençon - who had now stationed himself confidently at his side - doubted that Henry, Marguerite and De Mouy would be among those who would appear. But the Huguenot gentlemen who were there now filed out through the door at De Nancey's order, and none of those for whom the king was watching with scowling eyes appeared among them.

"Is that all, M. de Nancey?" he called as the procession ended.

"Yes, sire, it is empty now."

"There is no doubt of that?"

"No doubt at all, sire."

The king turned to d'Alençon. "Where is Henry?" he asked. "Where is Margot? You promised they would be here. I must have them found."

"And here they are," Madame de Nevers cried from behind the king.

Charles turned sharply. He saw Henry and Marguerite approaching by a bridlepath which led up from the river. They came side by side, at a walking pace, their horses caressing each other's neck, Their falcons were on their wrists, and their faces were turned laughingly to each other, as though they jested with easy minds.

CHAPTER LII

CHARLES SEEKS THE TRUTH

D’Alençon looked at the approaching couple, who seemed unconscious that there was any crisis to face. He thought: “They will escape me again.” His mind was a confusion of fury and cowardly fear.

Charles felt baffled and yet pleased. If Henry were plotting to get away, he would be merciless in his revenge. But if d’Alençon were wrong, he might be even better pleased to turn his wrath on the brother he hated, and who equally hated him.

But at this moment a new paroxysm of pain possessed him, so severe that he dropped the reins, and pressed his sides with his hands, screaming aloud.

Henry stirred his horse at the sound, and rode rapidly to his side, but before the hundred yards which divided them had been covered, the spasm had passed, and Charles asked, in his harshest tone: “Whence come you, monsieur?”

Marguerite, now a few yards behind, was the quicker to answer: “From the hunt, of course.”

“The hunt was not in the forest.”

“My falcon,” Henry said, “chased a pheasant, and I was obliged to follow.”

“Where is it?”

“Here,” Henry replied, in his most innocent tone. He produced a fine cock pheasant, splendid in purple, azure, and gold, asking the king to admire its plumpness.

But suspicion did not leave the king’s eyes.

“But when you had taken it, why did you not rejoin me?”

“The pheasant flew toward the park, sire. We came out on the bank of the river,

and saw that you were more than a mile away, so we rode to join you as quickly as possible."

"And so you invited all these gentlemen to join us?"

Henry appeared not to notice, or at least not to understand the sarcasm in the king's tone. He looked innocently surprised as he replied: "What gentlemen, sire?"

"Your own Huguenots. Pardieu! They were not invited by me."

"No, sire. The Duke d'Alençon would be a more likely-guess,"

"M. d'Alençon? Francis, what do you say to that?"

"I - " d'Alençon began hesitantly, alarmed at the direction the conversation was taking, and unable to decide instantly how much of his own duplicity could be successfully hidden, or how much could be safely told.

"Ah, yes, brother," Charles went on, ignoring his stammering attempt at reply, and with the deadly coolness that d'Alençon had learned to dread, "did you not announce yesterday that you had my consent to become King of Navarre? And have not these gentlemen come to thank you for accepting the crown, and at the same time to thank me for that consent?"

Twenty voices in chorus agreed that this was the correct interpretation of what had occurred: "Long live the Duke d'Alençon!" they cried. "Long live King Charles."

"I am not their king yet," Francis said furiously. He looked sideways at his brother. "I hope I never shall be," he concluded, under his breath.

Charles had finished with him. His eyes dwelt upon Henry in a way that showed how far from satisfied he was. He said: "It all looks very strange to me."

"Sire," Henry replied, with dignity, "if I had not had so many evidences of your regard, I should think I am being subjected to an examination."

"Well, suppose you are. What would your answer be?"

“That I am of royal blood, like yourself. I will answer you freely as my friend and brother. But I would not answer a judge.”

“All the same, I should like to know what to believe.”

“If you interrogate De Mouy,” d’Alençon suggested desperately. “you may find out even yet. He cannot have escaped.”

“He is not among those we have taken,” De Nancey replied. “Some of my men think they saw him, but no one is sure.”

D’Alençon cursed bitterly, and Marguerite, feeling that there were two on whose wits and loyalty she could rely, took a bold chance: “Brother,” she said, “there are two of the Duke d’Alençon’s gentlemen here. You might question them.”

The king looked at them, and started on recognising La Mole. It was to Coconnas that he spoke. “What are you doing here?”

“Sire, we were resting, and talking of love and war.”

“Armed, and mounted, ready to fly?”

“Your majesty had been misinformed. We had been resting upon the ground. We had had ample time to fly, but we had no such thought.”

“Oh, so you were lying down?” There was doubt, if not sarcasm, in the king’s reply.

Coconnas turned to the officer who had made their arrest.

“Sir, I ask you to tell his majesty what the fact was. We had horses. You were on foot. Could we not have fled if we would?”

“It is true,” the officer replied, “that they made no attempt to fly.”

“These gentlemen,” d’Alençon interposed, “were not here on any orders of mine. They have not been in my service for some days.”

Coconnas looked distressed. “I have the misfortune to be no longer in your excellency’s service?”

“Morbleu! who knows that better than yourself? Did you not resign in a rather unmannerly letter?”

“It was a letter written in a moment of ill-humour, which I hoped your highness would not take seriously. I had just heard that you had attempted to kill my friend in one of the corridors of the Louvre.”

The king interrupted sharply: “What has M. la Mole got to say?”

“Only, your majesty, that I had thought that M. the Duke d’Alençon had intended to assassinate me alone, but I have heard that he had three companions.”

“It was not of that - ” Charles began angrily. “But it is enough now! Henry, will you give me your word not to attempt to fly?”

“Surely, sire.”

“Then you will return to Paris with M. de Nancey, considering yourself under arrest. And these gentlemen will give up their swords… We must return. I feel cold… I burn.”

“Brother,” d’Alençon suggested, “have you thought that your anger may be the cause?”

“Perhaps it is… Oh, but it comes again! Help!… Help!”

He sank in the saddle, and would have fallen but for the out-stretched hands about him. He was senseless when they lifted him down, and was laid in a litter for the return journey.

Marguerite, over whose head the storm had passed harmlessly, and who retained both her liberty and her wits, exchanged a glance of intelligence with her husband, which seemed to say: “Be content. All goes well.” She rode near to La Mole for a moment, and let fall two Greek words for his ear alone. “What did she say?” Coconnas asked grumblingly. “She said there is nothing to fear.”

“Then,” Coconnas grumbled, “we can expect something worse than before. Every time I have been told that I have had a sword thrust, or a bullet has come my way, or a flower-pot at the least. Fear nothing, whether in Greek or Hebrew, Latin or French, always means that a storm is near.”

The cavalcade moved on at a pace suitable to the king's condition, and the litter on which he lay. By the time it had arrived at the Louvre, he had recovered sufficient strength to walk, leaning on the arm of M. Tavannes. But he said nothing of what had happened. The question of a possible conspiracy seemed to have left his mind. He said that he would go to his own rooms, where no one but M. Pare was to disturb him. He was brooding upon his own condition - upon symptoms which reminded him of those which preceded the death of the brother who had occupied the throne before him.

In the solitude of his own room, leaning his head back in a cushioned chair, he reviewed the events of the day in a gloomy mind. M. Paré did not come. He might be out. The pain did not recur. On a sudden resolution Charles decided that he would have a talk with the King of Navarre. It might at least dispose of one of the doubts in his tormented mind.

He sent a messenger for him, and then relaxed into a condition of semi-somnolence from which he was roused by Henry's voice.

"Sire, I am here."

Without opening his eyes, Charles stretched out a hand, which Henry made no motion to take.

"Your majesty forgets that I am no longer his brother. I am his prisoner."

Charles roused himself at the reminder.

"Ah! Thank you for recalling it. Did you not say that if we were alone you would answer me, frankly, as prince to prince?"

"I am ready to do so."

"Is what d'Alençon said true?"

"It was half the truth. He was to fly, and I was to go with him."

"And why should you have done that? Have I not satisfied you?"

"Yes. There was no cloud between us. You have acted to me as a brother, and as a king."

“Then is it natural to fly from those who love us, and whom we love?”

“Will your majesty permit me to reply with the frankness for which you have asked?”

“It is what I want you to do.”

“I was not flying from you, but from those who detest me, of whom I have a great fear.”

“Who are they?”

“M. d’Alençon, and the queen-mother.”

“You may be right about him, but the queen-mother has become most attentive to you.”

“That is why I am filled with dread.”

“You must explain more clearly than that.”

“So I will. Your majesty says that you love me?”

“I did, before these charges were made.”

“Well, suppose you did still?”

“Well, suppose.”

“Your majesty would then wish me to live?”

“I should be filled with sorrow if you should die.”

“Twice recently your majesty has been very near to that sorrow.”

“How was that?”

“I was twice saved by Providence. Once through your majesty, and once - of all persons! - by René‘s interposition.”

Charles frowned, remembering the plot that his mother had contrived, and all

that had happened on that day. He did not wish to discuss that. He asked: “How did René save you?”

“He saved me from poison.”

“Peste! Harry, you are a fortunate man. René‘s business is reported to be of an opposite kind.” Charles broke into a laugh which ceased abruptly. His face was distorted by spasms of pain.

“Yet so it was. His miracle of repentance and your miracle of kindness saved my life on those occasions. But I cannot expect that such miracles will be repeated. There is a proverb that heaven helps those who help themselves.”

“Why did you not say all this yesterday?”

“Because it would have meant denouncing others.”

“Then why say it today?”

“Because I am accused.”

“You are certain that poisoning was attempted?”

“As certain as of the attempt by violence.”

“What poison was used?”

“It was in a pomatum.”

“How could poison be used in that way?”

“Sire, ask René that. The Florentines can poison with gloves. Is your majesty satisfied with my explanation?”

“Yes, Henry. You are an excellent fellow. It is in the nature of everyone to fear death. And you think that new attempts will be made?”

“I am surprised that I am alive now.”

“I see it all. It is because I love you that they are anxious that you should die. But they shall suffer for their wickedness. And, meanwhile, you are free.”

“Free to leave Paris, sire?”

“No. Not that. I must have someone near me whom I can trust.”

“Then will you grant me a favour? Keep me here as a prisoner, not a friend.”

“Why that?”

“Because it is your friendship which is destroying me.”

“My hatred would suit you better?”

“Your apparent hatred would make them less anxious for my death.”

“Harry, I don’t know what you really mean to do. But I think you will get what you want.”

“Then I may rely on your severity?”

“Yes.”

“Then I shall have some ease of mind. What may be your majesty’s commands now?”

“You can return to your own room. I will see my dogs, and then go to bed. I am not well.”

“Your majesty should consult a doctor.”

“I have sent for Paré.”

“Then I shall be less worried than I was.”

“On my soul, I believe you have some affection for me, which no one else of my family has.”

“You believe that?”

“On my oath, I do.”

“Then talk of me to M. de Nancey as one who is on the edge of death, and I may

live longer to love you."

"That is how it shall be."

Charles summoned the captain of the guard. "M. de Nancey," he said, "I place the worst traitor in the land in your personal charge. You are responsible for him. If you cannot produce him when required, your head will pay."

Henry, appearing to be in a state of dejection, went out behind de Nancey.

CHAPTER LIII

DEATH OF A HOUND

AS Henry retired, it occurred to Charles that he had not seen the hound Actaeon, which was his constant companion, since he returned from the hunt. Then he remembered the savage blow which he had given him before he went out, and concluded that that was the explanation.

He called. He whistled. He took a candle, and went into the armoury. Throwing the light about the room, he called again, but there was no response. Then, in the further corner, he saw the dark bulk of the great dog stretched on the floor.

He went close to him, still calling, but there was no response. He saw that he lay stiff and cold. He thought that he had been in convulsions of agony when he died.

Rage seized him, which was not lessened by a return of the paroxysms of pain which came at almost regular intervals, and, though they were soon over, left him exhausted by their severity.

When he was somewhat recovered, and had satisfied the insatiable thirst which had become another feature of his condition, he was about to summon help to remove the dead hound, when it occurred to him that it would be better to investigate the cause of so strange a death.

He looked round attentively. Several pieces of torn paper were scattered upon the floor. On one of them he recognised part of an engraving which he had seen in the book he had been examining before he went out.

He put on his gloves, and lifted the livid lips. Small fragments of paper were visible between the sharp teeth. There could be no doubt of how the dog had died. The book had been poisoned.

Then an appalling recollection came to his mind. “A thousand devils,” he thought, “I moistened my finger at every page I turned. These agonies! These vomitings! These turns of faintness! I see what they mean now. I am a dead man.”

For a moment he stood motionless, overwhelmed by realisation of the deadly peril which was upon him. Then he went to the door. “I want M. René fetched,” he shouted harshly. “He must be here in ten minutes. Someone must go instantly. I will accept no excuse for delay… If M. Paré comes he can wait.”

“If I put everyone to the torture everyone in the Louvre,” he muttered, “I will find out who gave that book to Harry.”

He paced up and down in an agony of apprehension, until René knocked timidly on the door.

“Your majesty desired to see me?” the perfumer said in a shaking voice.

“You are a skilful chemist?”

“Sire —”

“You know all that the doctors know?”

“Your majesty flatters me.”

“No. It is what the queen-mother believes. Tell me why that dog died.”

René bent over the dog. He forced its mouth open. He examined its condition with a candle, giving particular attention to the bits of paper between the interstices of the teeth.

“The dog,” he said, “has been poisoned.”

“What kind of poison?”

“I think a mineral poison.”

“You can ascertain that?”

“Only by examining the stomach.”

“Then do it at once.”

“I should need your help.”

“I will help you…”

René made no further difficulty. He took a scalpel from his pocket, and with one stroke penetrated to the animal’s stomach, Charles kneeling beside him and holding a candle.

“See, sire. It is what I expected to find. Observe the red blotches and the turgid veins, like the roots of plants, which we call herborizations. It is a mineral poison, without a doubt.”

“Suppose a man took the poison, what would his symptoms be?”

“Burning pains in the stomach. Pains in the bowels. Vomiting.”

“Would he be thirsty?”

“Parchingly.”

“What would the antidote be?”

“There are many mineral poisons. Can your majesty suggest how the poison was given to the dog?”

“Yes. He has chewed the leaves of a book.”

“Your majesty has the book?”

“Here it is.”

Charles took down the book from the shelf on which he had put it when he rescued it from the hound. René saw it, and gave a start of surprise.

“He has chewed a leaf of this book?”

“Yes. See here, how it is torn.”

“Allow me to tear out another, sire.”

René tore out a leaf, and lit it in the flame of the candle. It gave out a strong smell of garlic as it burned.

“It was,” he said, “an arsenical preparation.”

“And the antidote?” René shook his head.

“What! You know of none?”

“The best is white of eggs, beaten in milk, but —”

“But what?”

“Its efficiency is conditional upon it being instantly taken.”

“If not?”

“Sire, it is a subtle poison.”

“Yet it does not kill immediately?”

“No. But it kills surely. The only doubt is how long the patient may live, though that may sometimes be calculated approximately.

Charles leaned on the marble table as though unable to stand steadily.

“Now, René,” he said, “you know the book?”

“I, sire?” René exclaimed, a pallor of fear spreading over his face.

“Yes. For you betrayed yourself when you first saw it. Now listen to me. You poisoned the Queen of Navarre with gloves. You poisoned the Prince de Porcian with the fumes of a lamp. You tried to poison M. de Condé with a scented apple. René, I will have the flesh torn off your bones shred by shred if you do not tell me the owner of this book.”

“And if I tell you, what guarantee have I that I shall not be tortured with equal cruelty?”

“On my honour as a gentleman, I will spare your life.”

“Sire, it is mine.”

“Yours?” Charles gazed at him with incredulous eyes.

“Yes, sire. Mine.”

“And how did it leave your hands?”

“Her majesty the queen-mother took it away from my house.”

“With what intention?”

“She said that she wished to show it to the King of Navarre, who had enquired for such a book.”

“Ah, I see it all! It is destiny from which none escapes.”

A fresh spasm of pain seized him as he spoke.

“Sire, what ails you?”

“I thirst. I must have water.”

René fetched him a glass, which he gulped down.

“I am better now… René, take a pen. Write in that book: ‘I gave this book to her majesty the queen-mother,’ and sign your name.”

The Florentine wrote as he was commanded. He looked up fearfully. “Sire, you promised my life.”

“I will keep my word.”

“But the queen-mother?”

“That is no matter of mine. If you are menaced you must think of some way of defending yourself.”

“May I quit France?”

“I will answer that in fifteen days. In the meantime you will be silent to all.”

“Rely on me, sire.” He left the room, glad to escape so easily.

Charles gave orders that if M. Pare should come, he should be told his services

were not required. He sent for his nurse. He said he would like some white of egg beaten in milk.

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CHAPTER LIV

VINCENNES

IN accordance with the king’s order, M. de Nancey conducted

Henry to the castle of Vincennes - a famous castle of which the colossal remaining fragment still gives evidence of its massive grandeur.

Henry went without reluctance, for every bolt that closed him in was one which separated him from the woman whom he had such reason to dread.

He crossed the drawbridge between two soldiers, and was then led by De Nancey through three-fold doors to the foot of a staircase which was guarded with the same triple security.

Ascending a flight of steps, they came to a corridor, at the end of which was a large and gloomy chamber round which Henry looked with some apprehension. “Where are we now?” he asked.

“In the chamber of torture, monseigneur.”

That was evident. Here were trestles and pitchers for the torture by water: wedges and mallets for the torture of the boot: stone benches for the wretched victims who would wait their turn: and everywhere, above the seats, on and below them, were iron rings arranged with no symmetry but that of the torturers’ art.

“So this,” Henry asked, “is the way to my apartment?”

“Yes, monseigneur, here it is,” said a dark figure appearing out of the gloom.

Henry recognised the voice: “Is that you, Beaulieu? What the devil do you do here?”

“Sire, I have just been appointed governor.”

“Then you have made a good start to have a king for your first prisoner.”

“Pardon me, sire. I have already received two gentlemen.”

“Who are they?”

“M. de la Mole, and M. de Coconnas.”

“They will be near me?”

“They are high up on the fourth floor… Your chamber is number two here.”

“Why not number one?”

“It is reserved.”

Henry wondered for whom it might be destined, but said no more. With many apologies for its deficiencies, Beaulieu installed him in the apartment, placed two soldiers at the door, and went on to visit his prisoners on the fourth floor.

Arriving at that height, the turnkey led the way through three successive doors, each closed with double locks and enormous bolts. As the third swung open, they were greeted by the voice of Coconnas exclaiming joyously: “Eh, mordi, you are welcome, if you only come to give me a little air. I am stifling with the heat of this stove.”

“I have not come to let you out,” the turnkey answered. “The governor has come to see you.”

“M. the Governor does me great honour, and is welcome.”

M. Beaulieu met this cordial reception with cold politeness. “Have you any money?”

“Not a crown.”

“Jewels?”

“I have a ring.”

“Allow me to search you.”

“Mordi, no!” Coconnas replied, reddening with anger

“We must suffer everything in the king’s service.”

“Very well. The mistake was mine. They who rob on the Pont Neuf, like you, are in the king’s service, and, mordi, I have called them thieves.”

M. Beaulieu made no answer to this. He took the ring - a lovely sapphire that Madame de Nevers had given him that he might not forget what her eyes were like. “Sir, good-day,” he said. “Jailer, lock the door… And now for the other.”

The game of the three doors, the six locks and the nine bolts was played over again. As the third door swung back they came upon La Mole, sitting with his head on his hand. He remained motionless, not even turning to observe who might be intruding upon him.

“Good evening, M. de la Mole,” the governor said. “I have come to search you.”

“It is needless. I will give you anything that I have.”

“What have you?”

“About three hundred crowns, these jewels and rings.”

“Nothing more?”

“Nothing.”

“What is the silk cord round your neck.”

“It is a relic, not a jewel.”

“All the same, you must give it to me.”

“Really? Well, here it is.”

He rose as though to approach the light, as he drew on the cord, producing a medallion in which a portrait was enclosed. As he raised it, he pressed it to his lips, and then dropped it, as though accidentally, turned to recover it, and pressed it with his heel, so that it-was crushed to fragments.

“Sir,” M. Beaulieu said, “I shall complain of this to the king.”

He withdrew in anger, but the turnkey entered again when he was gone. “Sir,” he said, “you did well to give me that hundred crowns before the governor came. You can give me no more now, but I am an honest man and will keep the bargain I made. You can see your friend now, if you wish.”

The jailer led him into the chamber which Coconnas occupied, and then withdrew to watch that no one should ascend the stairs and discover his fault.

The two friends embraced.

“That brute has been and taken everything from you?”

“Everything. And from you?”

“I had nothing but the jewel Henriette gave me.”

“Have you any idea what happened?”

“D’Alençon betrayed us. If I could twist his neck!”

“You think our position serious?”

“Yes. I do.”

“That we may anticipate torture?”

“I have always thought we were heading for that.”

“And what shall you do in that case?”

“What will you?”

La Mole flushed feverishly. “I shall be silent - if I can.”

“But I shall prefer to tell them a few things they do not expect.”

“What are they?”

“Nothing to worry you. It is d’Alençon’s sleep that I shall disturb.”

La Mole had no time to reply. The jailer had heard a noise below, and hurried

him back to his chamber.

CHAPTER LV

THE WAXEN IMAGE

FOR the next eight days the king lay in his bed, suffering at times pains of such violence that his cries alarmed the guards in the outer rooms, and then from periods of exhaustion when he lay in a semi-conscious condition.

To endeavour to probe what went on during this time in the dark souls of the queen-mother and her youngest son would be to expose the writhings that go on at the bottom of a nest of vipers.

They were aware that Henry had been sent to the strict confinement of Vincennes, and that even Marguerite had been unable to communicate with him, and they were content, thinking him lost.

Henry ate and drank peacefully, thinking himself forgotten.

The confinement of La Mole and Coconnas was equally strict, and though both Marguerite and Henriette had attempted to send letters to them, no possible channel had been discovered.

No one at court suspected the cause of the king's illness. His doctors said that he suffered from an inflamation of the stomach. They diagnosed the effect, without seeking the cause.

Charles persisted in the remedy which René had mentioned, taking it three times a day from the hand of his nurse.

His condition varied from day to day, and one morning, finding himself a little better, he said that he would like to receive the court.

Among the crowd of curious and observant courtiers who thronged into the royal chamber, Catherine entered with her usual calmness, d'Alençon with what he meant to be a brotherly smile, and Marguerite in a state of anxious grief which she had difficulty to control.

Catherine, without appearing to notice the look he gave her as she approached,

seated herself at the head of her son’s bed. D’Alençon stood at its foot.

Marguerite, seeing, as she entered, the dark eyes, the thin face, and the hollow cheeks - all the ravages which disease had made in the countenance of a brother for whom she had considerable natural affection, had an expression of sorrow and sympathy, which Charles, who missed little, did not overlook. He said nothing, but gave her a glance which raised some hope in one whose husband and lover were both in deadly peril, and in the power of the sick man.

“My dear son,” Catherine asked, “how are you feeling today?” Better, mother - better.”

“The doctors say so?”

Charles laughed in a mirthless way. “The doctors? Ah, what great doctors they are! I have heard them discuss my illness. It is the best pleasure I have had… Nurse, give me a drink.”

“And what do they prescribe for you, my son?”

“Oh, madame, who can say what their preparations are?”

“What would do you most good,” d’Alençon suggested,” would be to get out in the sun, and start hunting again.”

“Yes,” Charles answered, “the last one did me good, did it not?”

His tone was so strange as he said this that the conversation died. A minute later he made a sign to the courtiers, who had not ventured to join the conversation, that the reception was over. Silently, they withdrew.

D’Alençon hesitated, seemed about to approach his brother, changed his mind, and followed the others out of the room.

Charles held out a fleshless hand to Marguerite, who pressed and kissed it, and went out tearfully. Good Margot,” he murmured.

Catherine alone kept her place. Observing this, Charles withdrew to the further side of the bed, showing such repulsion as one may feel if a snake is near. His eyes opened by René‘s confession, and by subsequent meditation, he had no

longer the happiness even to doubt.

“You remain, madame?” he asked.

“I have to speak to you of important matters.”

“Then speak.”

“I heard you say that you have great doctors. What have they done for you?”

“Nothing. But their learned disquisitions are good to hear.”

“I suspect that they know nothing of the cause of your illness.”

“Really, madame?”

“They are treating the symptoms, not the disease.”

“On my soul, mother,” Charles replied in astonishment, “I believe you are right.”

“So, my son, as it is not good for yourself or the state that you should be ill so long, I have consulted some experts myself.”

“Of the medical profession?”

“No. Of a profounder science than theirs. Those who read not only the body, but the spirit of man.”

“A splendid art, surely! And your researches have not been in vain?”

“I am able to bring you what will cure both body and mind.” Charles shuddered. Did she think that he was lingering too long?

He raised himself on his elbow, and looked intently at his mother, as he asked: “You have brought this remedy with you?”

“Listen, my son. Have you not heard of secret enemies, whose vengeance can kill though they do not approach you?”

“By steel or poison?” Charles asked, never moving his eyes from his mother’s inscrutable face.

“No, by stranger and more terrible means. Have you faith in magic and the cabala?”

Charles checked an exclamation of contempt. He changed his mind, and said: “Much.”

“Then know that it is from that that your suffering comes… Can you not recall the attempts at evasion which were to secure the impunity of the murderer?”

“Of the murderer! But surely no one has been attempting to kill me?”

“Yes, my son. You may find it hard to believe, but I have discovered it to be true.”

“I never doubt anything that you say,” he replied bitterly. “How did they try it? I am most curious to know that.”

“By magic, my son.”

“Will you explain how?”

“It is a matter which might never have been penetrated. But fortunately you have a brother who watches your welfare.”

“Which one is that?”

“D’Alençon. He discovered the material side of the conspiracy. But while he sought for no more than the proof of a young man’s guilt, I went deeper, for I know the energy of the criminal mind.”

“But, mother, one might think that you speak of the King of Navarre.” And then, as Catherine lowered her hypocritical eyes, without replying, he went on: “I had him arrested, and locked up at Vincennes, for that escapade. Is he more guilty still?”

“Do you feel the fever devour you?”

“Certainly, I do.”

“And are there sharp pains in your head?”

“Yes. You seem to know.”

“It is so simple. Look at this.” Catherine drew a small object from under her cloak, and presented it to the king.

It was of yellow wax, about six inches long, clad in a dress starred with gold, and a royal cloak, all of the same material.

“What does this mean?”

“What is on its head?”

“A crown.”

“And in its heart?”

“A needle.”

“Do you not recognise yourself?”

“Myself!”

“Yes. - The crown and the cloak.”

“And who made this doll?” Charles said with irritation, for he was getting tired of the comedy. “Doubtless the King of Navarre.”

“No.”

“No? Then I am unable to understand.”

“I said no because you would wish me to be precise. I should have said yes had you asked in another way.”

Charles gazed at his mother in silence trying to penetrate to the depths of the dark soul whose intentions would so often elude him even when he had thought that he understood.

“Sire, this doll was found in the apartment of M. de la Mole. Will you look at the scroll which is attached to the dagger, and the letter which is written upon it?”

“I see an M.”

“Which means mort.”

“Then in your judgement, madame, the man who desires my death is M. de la Mole?”

“Yes - as the dagger desires the heart; but behind is the hand that strikes.”

“And that is the sole cause of my illness? And if the charm were broken I should be well immediately? Then how can that be contrived? You must instruct me, my dear mother, for I am very ignorant of these matters.”

“The death of the evil-doer would break the charm.”

“Really?” Charles exclaimed, with an air of astonishment.

“You did not know that?”

“I am not much of a sorcerer.”

“But now you know it, your mind is entirely relieved?”

“Absolutely.”

“You say it - sincerely?”

“I have no doubt whatsoever.”

“Then God be praised!”

“Yes, God be praised!” Charles echoed ironically. “I know as well as yourself to whom my illness is due, and so I can punish.”

“Yes, you must punish —”

“M. de la Mole. Did you not say that the fault is his?”

“I said he was the instrument”

“Well, we will begin with him That will make me well, which is the most urgent

matter; and I shall then be able to see clearly where the fault lies, so that no false suspicions may be aroused."

"Then M. de la Mole"

"Will suit me very well for the guilty person. We will begin with him. If he have an accomplice, he will doubtless confess."

"Yes. We can make him speak. We have infallible means for that… You are willing that the examination should be made?"

"It is my desire. And the sooner it is done the better I shall be pleased."

Catherine pressed the hand of her son as she rose to go. She did not understand the nervous trembling which agitated it as it touched hers, nor did she hear the sardonic laugh that followed the closing of the door, nor the terrible curse that followed.

Had he done wisely, Charles wondered, to allow her to go? She might work harm in the next few hours which it would be impossible to undo.

It was a doubt he had no time to pursue, for the tapestry, covering the way which led to his nurse's room was lifted aside, and Marguerite entered. She was trembling and pale, and the beating of her heart betrayed the most violent emotion, as she sank down at the side of the bed.

"Oh, Charles," she cried, "you know very well she lies!"

"Who lies?"

"Listen, Charles. It is terrible to accuse our mother, but I guessed she would stay behind to persecute them again. By my life, by yours, by both our souls, I tell you she lies."

"Whom does she persecute?"

They were both speaking very low, as though by instinct - as though they were afraid to hear themselves speak aloud.

"Your Henry first - your Harry, who loves you, as there are not many who do."

“You think so?”

“I am sure of it.”

“Well, if I tell you the truth, so am I.”

“Then why is he in Vincennes?”

“At his own request.”

“He asked you that?”

“Yes. He has queer ideas. He may be wrong or right - but he thinks himself safer in disgrace than when he is honoured by me.”

“Oh, I understand now! Then he is safe?”

“Beaulieu knows that his own head is at stake.”

“Thank you so much for that! But —”

“But, what?”

“There is another in whom - perhaps I am wrong - but in whom I am deeply interested.”

“M. de la Mole?”

“Alas, yes! He whom you once tried to kill, so that it was by a miracle he escaped.”

“That was for one crime alone. Now he is guilty of two.”

“You know that is false.”

“But, poor Margot, you heard what our mother said?”

“And I have told you she lied!”

“But you have not heard of the figure of wax which was found in his room?”

“I know all about that.”

“With a royal cloak, and a royal crown, and a needle through its heart?”

“Yes. I know.”

“Then what explanation have you to give?”

“It is the figure of a woman, not of a man. Anyone could see that.”

“And the needle piercing its heart?”

“It is a charm to attract a woman’s love, and not witchcraft to kill a man.”

“And the letter M?”

“It is meant for a woman’s name.”

“And that name is?”

“It is Marguerite.” As she made the confession, the Queen of Navarre sank her face on her brother’s hands, and broke into irrepressible tears.

“Hush!” Charles said angrily. “Suppose we were overheard.”

Marguerite raised her head. The eyes which met those of the king were as proud and angry as his. “What matter,” she said, “though the whole world knows! I say it is infamy to call a man an assassin because he loves.”

“Margot, suppose I tell you that I know the truth as fully as you?”

“Brother!”

“If I tell you that I know that La Mole is innocent?”

“You know it?”

“If I tell you that I know who the criminal is?”

“The criminal? Then you mean that there really has been a crime?”

“Yes. Unintentionally, perhaps, towards myself.”

“I don’t believe it.”

“Margot, you must believe. Look at me. I have been poisoned. I have not three months to live.”

Margot looked, and believed.

“Oh, Charles!” she cried, affection moving her now to a fresh outburst of tears.

“So you see it is to be thought that I have been murdered by magic arts.”

“But you know who it is?”

“Yes.”

“And you know it is not La Mole. And it is not Henry.”

“No, it is not he.”

“Then who - Grand Dieu - can it be?”

“Whom?”

“Francis?”

“He may have had something to do with it.”

“You mean it is our - ” She would have said mother, but the word failed.

Brother and sister looked at one another in a silence which was as revealing as speech.

“Oh, mon Dieu, mon Dieu,” she moaned, “but it cannot be.”

“Cannot?” Charles laughed harshly. “If René were here he would soon make you believe.”

“René?”

“He would tell you of a country-woman of his, who got from him an old falconry book - a book which has enough poison between its pages to kill a score and that was meant for someone else, but by chance, or the will of heaven perhaps, came into my hands. And as René is not here, I can show you the book itself. It is in that cabinet over there.”

“Oh, Charles, speak lower! Did you not warn me before?”

“Oh, I will be quiet. I will tell no one but you… But you see now why I must be shown to have been murdered by magic arts. It is for the honour of France, and for our great house of Valois.”

“But you cannot intend that! It is horrible. When you know he is innocent!”

“Yes. But he must be thought guilty. You must endure the death of your lover, for it is only so that you can preserve the honour of the rulers of France. I shall die in silence for the same reason.”

Marguerite rose silently. She knew her brother too well to waste words in pleading to him. If La Mole were to be saved, it must be by her own deed, in which she was resolved that she would not fail.

And while she had been talking with Charles, Catherine had written a letter to the Procureur-Général, which still exists to convince any who might doubt that things so dreadful are true. It says:

“This evening I received certain information that La Mole has been guilty of sacrilege… I wish you to summon the first president, and instruct him to investigate with the utmost expedition the affair of the wax figure, into which a needle has been driven which is meant for the king’s heart.”

CHAPTER LVI

THE INVISIBLE BUCKLERS

COCONNAS and La Mole, having been able to meet daily, had discussed their dilemma in every aspect of which they knew, and had decided to adopt an attitude of complete denial; and against that defence they had concluded that they were not likely to suffer any serious consequences.

Coconnas had an additional reason for confidence, the good-humoured jailor having hinted more than once that he was protected in some particular manner. In the man's own words he had an invisible buckler above his head.

So he prepared himself with adroit evasions or repartees for whatever interrogation would have to be faced, and was not greatly perturbed even when an ominous procession of two halberdiers and four black-garbed men entered his cell, and he was led down to a room where M. Laguesle and two judges confronted him.

But he found that the questions he had to answer were entirely different from those for which he had prepared his replies.

He might have been more disconcerted by this, had they not appeared to him to be of relative triviality. They did not concern the betrayal of a king, but only making a doll of a queen, and that not more than eight inches long.

He replied merrily that it was many years since he had handled a doll, and made other jests at which the judges laughed more than once, so that he returned to his cell in good spirits, and broke into song as he passed the door of La Mole's cell, which his friend rightly took as an intimation that he had little to fear.

La Mole was led down with the same guard, and was equally surprised to be interrogated in the same way. Had he visited René. Yes, once only. Had he ordered a wax doll to be made? No, but one had been shown to him. It represented a man? No, a woman. Was not the purpose of the charm to cause the death of a man? No, it was to win the love of a woman.

These questions were repeated in varied forms many times, but he always

replied to them in the same way, until the judges were weary of repetition, and it seemed likely that the examination would come to an abortive conclusion, when a note from the queen-mother was passed from hand to hand on the judges' bench, and La Mole found himself politely dismissed without further words.

The note said: "Put the accused to the torture unless he freely admits his guilt."

He returned to his room in a mood as assured, if not as joyous, as that of Coconnas had been, and it was only an hour later that he was raised to a heaven of joy by a note which was pushed under his door.

It said, in the dear writing he knew so well: "Courage, You are not forgotten."

"Ah," he said, "if she does not forget, I am saved indeed!"

But meanwhile Marguerite lay on a couch in that little room in the house in the Rue Cloche-Percée which brought so many recollections mingled of sweet and bitter, in an agony of indecision, and grief and fear.

She sprang up from a torment of thought she could not endure quietly. She paced the room, speaking her thoughts aloud; "I am a queen - I am young - I am beautiful - I am rich - and what avail is it all? What avail is it, if I should be powerless to save the man I love from a dreadful death?"

She paused to press her burning forehead on the cold marble of the mantel, and resumed her pacing again… The tapestry moved, and Henriette entered the room.

"Oh, I have been so impatient for you!" Marguerite exclaimed. "What news have you got?"

"Bad, for the time is shorter than we supposed. The queen-mother has gone to Vincennes to hurry the trial on. They have arrested René."

"And our dear prisoners?"

"The jailer lets them see each other every day. La Mole crushed your miniature under his foot rather than let them see whose it was."

"Dear La Mole!"

“They have been examined, but would admit nothing. Annibal laughed in their faces.”

“So he would. I knew they would say nothing, but that will not save them. We have got to face that.”

“We must and will.”

“You have thought over our plan?”

“I have done nothing else. Beaulieu is a greedy brute. His price is a man’s life and three hundred thousand crowns.”

“I call that nothing at all.”

“Nothing! It will cost us all the jewels we have.”

“I don’t mind the price. The King of Navarre will find something. I can get something from d’Alençon. I will make Charles find —”

“You need not trouble. I have diamonds enough to sell. And I have the man.”

“What man?”

“Did you not hear me say there is a man to be killed?”

“And you have found him?”

“Yes.”

“And what is the price for that?” Marguerite smiled. “It should make Beaulieu’s look small.”

“Beaulieu’s indeed! I should think not. I could have got a dozen for that. It is five hundred crowns.”

“Really?”

“Listen. This is the plan. The only place in Vincennes to which women who are not prisoners are admitted is the chapel. We shall enter there, and hide behind the altar. Coconnas will strike the jailer, who will fall down as though he were dead.

We shall then come out, each having a cloak which we can cast over the shoulders of our own friend. We shall slip together through the small door of the sacristy, and, as we shall have the password, we shall get out without difficulty."

"And then?"

"Two horses will be waiting for them, and they will ride for Lorraine."

"I believe we shall save them," Marguerite said, as though having difficulty in convincing herself. "Yes, I believe we shall."

"I am almost sure."

"How soon will it be?"

"Not more than three or four days. Beaulieu is to let us know."

"Did you learn anything of the King of Navarre?"

"Yes. He is well. He eats and sleeps well. He laughs and sings. All he asks is that he may be guarded well."

"He is right… Are you sure of Beaulieu?"

"I think so."

"And of the jailer?"

"We have his word."

"The horses?"

"Will be the best in the Duke de Nevers' stables."

"Oh, Henriette, I adore you!"

"Well, there are other things yet to be done."

"The same time tomorrow?"

"Yes. Here." They embraced, and parted.

CHAPTER LVII

THE JUDGES

“IT seems,” Coconnas said, “that all goes well, and that we shall soon be free.”

“So it does,” La Mole agreed. “The politeness which we receive, the friendliness of the jailer, the way our doors open and shut at our own desires - they prove what our friends can do. Only the attitude of M. Beaulieu puzzles me. If half that is said of him be true —”

“But it is no puzzle at all. Only it must be very expensive. But, after all, one is a princess, and the other a queen. Now all we have to do when we get to the chapel is to look for two hidden daggers, and I make a hole in the jailer’s stomach, and —”

“No, not in his stomach, or you would be robbing the poor man of five hundred crowns. Why not try his arm?”

“Not at all. That would ruin him in earnest. He would not be believed. On the right side, slipping adroitly along the ribs. It would be a very natural blow to go wrong.”

“Well, have it your own way. And then —”

“Then we shall barricade the great door with benches, while our two princesses come from where they are hidden, and Henriette will open the door. Ah, ma foi! but I love her now. She will have to be unfaithful to me, before I will let anyone else draw me away!”

“Oh!” La Mole exclaimed, his voice tremulous like music with the passion of his desire, “to be free again! To ride the woods, with a bare sword, and in no greater fear than is natural to adventurous life! What is fear in the open air?”

“Yes,” Coconnas agreed, “that is a true word. But fear in confining walls is a different thing. I will confess now that I have dreamed every night of d’Alençon’s ugly face, and wondered what more he might be planning to do.”

“So,” La Mole went on, following his own buoyant thoughts, “they have planned everything for us. We are to go to Lorraine… I will admit that I would have chosen Navarre, but Lorraine is nearer. At Nancy we shall be no more than eighty leagues away… There will be but one thing that I shall regret when I go.”

“And I shall regret nothing at all.”

“Well, I shall regret that we cannot get the jailer safely away.”

“But he would not come! He would lose too much! Five hundred gold crowns, besides the compensation he will probably get from the government for the wound I shall give him. After I have killed him, he will have the best time of his life… But what is the matter with you? You look as though you have seen a ghost.”

“So I have. I remember hearing that only those are transferred to the chapel who are condemned to torture or death.”

Coconnas turned pale at the thought. “Certainly,” he said, “we must be clear about that.” He shouted to the jailer, who was keeping watch in the corridor, “Here! Come here!”

The man came at once, but before he reached them Coconnas asked impatiently: “We are to escape from the chapel? Is not that the idea?”

“Hush, monsieur, hush! You will be heard.”

“Nonsense. There is no one near.”

“Yes. From the chapel.”

“But how do you know we shall be taken there?”

“It is usual.”

“Usual?”

“Yes. Condemned men pass the night in the chapel.”

“You think we shall be condemned to death?”

“Yes. You must surely expect that.”

“Why?”

“By the efforts which are being made to get you away.”

“There’s some reason in that,” Coconnas admitted.

“Yes,” La Mole agreed. “We are evidently playing for a big stake.”

“And do I not also run a great risk?” the turnkey asked. “Suppose one of you gentlemen were to make a mistake?”

“All the same,” Coconnas replied, “I should like to be in your place.”

“Condemned to death! It seems incredible!” La Mole murmured.

“Why should you think that?” the turnkey naively enquired.

“I hear someone opening a door below,” Coconnas said.

“So it is,” the jailer agreed hastily. “My gentleman, you must back to your chamber without delay.”

It was a matter in which Coconnas had as much concern as the jailer himself, and he retreated quickly, humming a tune as he went, which La Mole was of no disposition to do. He sighed heavily as the door closed, and his hours of solitude were resumed.

Coconnas sat in his own cell till his supper was brought, which he ate with his usual appetite. The night, dark with storm, had closed upon the great keep of Vincennes, and as he ate he listened to the wind and the heavy rain, and thought how good the hour would be for escape, and so went to bed in good spirits enough, and was wakened by the wind whistling under the door and the stove flaring as it would always do on a windy day if a door were opened along the passage.

He raised himself to listen, and was puzzled by the sound of steps, and the opening of doors - the doors to La Mole’s chamber he thought - as though several men were moving about, but they died away, and for more than an hour

after that he lay in silence and undisturbed.

But now he was unable to sleep. To the prisoner there is reason for apprehension in everything which he cannot explain. Had La Mole been ill? But he had not called. How would they have known?

He was roused from uneasy drowsing by the sound of a key in the lock of his own door. He sprang up. Surely the hour of freedom had come!

He was beginning to gaily question the jailer when a sign from the man, and the expression of his face, checked him abruptly.

Two helmeted figures appeared out of the gloom, and an unctious voice from behind said: “Sir, you must follow the halberdiers,” telling him that there was an officer in the rear, whom, by the flickering light of the candle he was unable to see.

“Mordi!” he thought, as he dressed hastily, “what a life it is! From one uncertainty to another. Never on firm ground. Up in the air of hope, or in the sloughs of despondency, a hundred feet down!… Where are you taking us now?”

“Follow the halberdiers,” said the same unctious voice, which came from a small humpbacked man whose black robe concealed the defects of his bandy legs.

Coconnas looked at the jailer, but got nothing more illuminating or encouraging than a sigh which was almost a groan. He saw that there was nothing to be done but to go blindly as he was led.

They descended the spiral stairway until they reached the first floor, where their guide stopped.

“One floor lower,” Coconnas thought, “would have been much better for me.”

A door opened. Coconnas, who had the eyes of a lynx and the scent of a hound, saw at one glance the row of judges, the row of clerks. La Mole seated aside, and in the rear a sinister figure with naked arms, at which he shuddered apprehensively. But he put on a confident air, and advanced almost jauntily into the room.

He was led to the front of the tribunal, gave a nod and a smile to La Mole, and

faced his judges with the mien of one who was not afraid of being asked anything which he could not explain.

The interrogation commenced at once: “What is your name, sir?”

“Marc-Annibal de Coconnas, Count de Montpantier and Chenaux”

“Where were you born?”

“At Colomban, near Zuza.”

“How old are you?”

“Twenty-seven.”

“What was your reason for leaving the service of the Duke d’Alençon?”

“To join my friend, M. de la Mole, who had quitted that service some days before.”

“What were you doing when you were arrested?”

“We were watching the chase.”

“The king was also there, and it was at that time that the first symptoms of his illness appeared.”

“I know nothing of that. I was not near him. I did not even know he had been ill.”

The judges looked at one another and he saw the incredulity in their eyes.

“Oh, so you know nothing of it?” the president asked.

“Nothing at all. And I am sorry to hear of it. The King of France is not my king, but I am loyal to him.”

“Truly?”

“On my honour. I could not say as much for his brother. I own that —”

“We are not discussing the Duke d’Alençon, but his majesty.”

“Whose humble servant I have told you I am.”

“Then, if that be true, tell us all you know concerning a certain wax figure.”

“Oh! So we are to return to that?”

“Does that disconcert you?”

“Not at all. I am amused.”

“How came it to be found in M. de la Mole’s possession?”

“You mean in René‘s?”

“Then you admit its existence?”

“Could it be shown to me?”

“Yes. It is here. Do you recognise it?”

“Yes. Easily.”

“Recorder, write down that the accused recognises the statue as the one in the possession of M. de la Mole.”

“No. Don’t write that. Say in that of René.”

“Very well. René it shall be. When?”

“The only time that M. de la Mole and myself were there.”

“You confess you were there?”

“Confess? That is not the word. Have I ever denied it?”

“Recorder, write that the accused confesses as to having gone to René‘s with M. de la Mole to work certain conjurations.”

“Stop! Not so fast, if you please. I said nothing of the sort, nor would it be true.”

“You deny it?”

“Absolutely. The conjuration which took place was utterly unforeseen by either of us.”

“Still it did take place?”

“A conjuration of a kind certainly did.”

“Recorder, you will write that the accused admits being present at the conjuration against the life of the king.”

“Against the king’s life! It is a vile lie. No such conjuration was even mentioned or thought of.”

“Gentlemen, you hear that?” La Mole exclaimed eagerly.

“Silence!” the president ordered angrily. “Recorder, you will write as I have said.”

“But I said no such thing,” Coconnas persisted, with an indignant intonation. “Besides, it was the statue of a woman, not of a man.”

“What did I tell you, gentlemen?” La Mole protested again.

“M. de la Mole, you will answer when you are asked. You must not interrupt the examination of other witnesses… You say it was the statue of a woman?”

“Yes, it was.”

“Then why was it royally robed and crowned?”

“Because - ” But as he spoke Coconnas saw his friend make an imperative signal for silence, and he checked his reply. “Pardieu? What need is there to answer that? As it was a woman’s statue, it could not have been one of the king.”

“Then you persist that it was a woman’s statue, and refuse to say who the woman is?”

La Mole broke in again: “It was a woman whom I love, and whom I wished to love me.”

“M. de la Mole,” the president said, “I warn you for the last time. You will be silent or you will be gagged.”

“Bring in René,” said Laguesle, the procureur-genéral.

“Yes, bring him in!” Coconnas said angrily. “We may get a little sense out of this then.”

René was brought in. He looked aged and haggard, as though bowed down by the crime he was about to commit more than all those of which he had been guilty before.

“Master René,” the judge asked. “Do you recognise the two accused here?”

“Yes.” was the trembling reply.

“Where have you seen them before?”

“In several places. Particularly at my own house.”

“How many times were they there?”

“Once.”

“Why did they come to you?”

The reply, for which Coconnas waited confidently, but La Mole with a dreadful apprehension, was slow to come. “To order a wax figure.”

“Pardon, pardon, Master René,” Coconnas exclaimed. “There is a slight mistake there.”

“Silence!” the president commanded… “Was it of a man or a woman?”

“Of a man.” Coconnas almost sprang into the air, as though he had received an electric shock. “Of a man?i” he cried.

“Yes, of a man,” René repeated feebly.

“Infamous liar.”

“Be quiet, Coconnas,” La Mole said. “Everyone is free to sell his soul to the devil if he thinks it is worth the price.”

“Mordi! But not the bodies of other men.”

“And what did the needle mean?”

“It was a dagger having the letter M, which means mort.”

Coconnas made a step forward towards René, his hands out-stretched as though to strangle him, but the guards interposed, and he had the sense to restrain his anger.

“The tribunal,” the president said, “has all the evidence it requires. Guards, take the prisoner to the waiting-room.”

“But,” Coconnas cried, “must I hear such lies without protesting against them?”

“Protest, monsieur. No one objects… Guards, do as you have been told.”

The guards then led La Mole and Coconnas separately from the room.

The president made a sign to the bare-armed executioner, whom Coconnas had seen as he entered the room: “I have work for you now.”

The man took off his cap respectfully. “With which one shall I begin?”

“With M. de la Mole.”

The president turned to René, who stood tremblingly waiting to be taken back to the place of detention: “Master René, be easy in mind. The queen-mother and the king shall know that it is through you we have learnt the truth.”

But René did not look like one who was easy of mind.

CHAPTER LVIII

THE TORTURE OF THE BOOT

COCONNAS went back to his cell in a gloomy mood. “I believe,” he thought, “they really wish to cut off our heads. We cannot get to the chapel too soon.”

Feeling this, he did not return to bed, and was still pacing the room restlessly when he heard a cry so shrill, so piercing in its agony that it penetrated through the thickness of doors and walls and raised a doubt of whether it could have come from a human throat.

He stool motionless, listening intently, and wondering what it could have been, when it came again, and this time he was sure. It was a human voice - and he thought it was that of La Mole.

For a moment, the Piedmontese forgot, in his passionate rage, that he was confined by three doors, and a twelve-foot wall. He wrenched madly at his own door, as thought he could tear open the lock with his naked hands.

“They are killing him,” he cried, “And with no weapon for his defence!”

Vainly he looked about for something which would avail for his own use, and while he did so the door opened, and the black-robed humpback appeared, with his wand of office.

“Come, sire,” he said. “The court requires you again.

“To hear my sentence, I suppose.”

“Yes, sire.”

“Then I shall be glad to come.” He felt the relief of action - of the measure of freedom there was in the opening door - for to his temperament almost anything was better than to be confined in ignorance of what was about to happen. He had courage, to a degree which is rarely equalled. But it was not that which endures in patience. Rather, it was that of a fighting beast.

He had expressed satisfaction, but he glanced anxiously round for one whom he did not see. - “I would give anything,” he though, “to have the jailer coming along,” But the man was not there.

Re-entering the judgement chamber, his eyes first encountered those of the attorney-general, who, under Catherine’s instructions, had been responsible for the animosity with which the enquiry had been conducted. But they went on to the observation of more terrifying things. For a curtain which had hung behind the judges’ bench had been drawn back, and now exposed such terrors that Coconnas felt his knees tremble beneath him.

“Mon dieu!” he thought, the chamber of torture is prepared for a victim here. What can it mean?”

“Kneel down, M. de Coconnas,” said the judge, in his hardest voice, “that your sentence may be delivered.”

Hands on his shoulders from either side pressed him down to his knees as the judge read: “The sentence of the court sitting at Vincennes upon Marc-Annibal de Coconnas, convicted of the crime of high treason, of attempt to poison, of sacrilege and magic against the person of his majesty the King of France, of conspiracy against the state, and of having led a prince of the blood into conspiracy by pernicious counsels. He will be taken from prison to the Place St.-Jean-en-Grave to be decapitated there. His property will be confiscated; his woods felled, his châteaux destroy; and a pillar bearing a copper plate inscribed with his crime and punishment will be planted were they have stood.”

Coconnas, who had been shaking his head in energetic denial of each charge that was made against him, now burst out: “Yes, I know that I am risking my head, but as to my châteaux and woods I am glad to think that they are beyond your reach. Your axes and picks will never do harm to them.”

“Silence,” said the judge angrily, being the more angered by the interruption because it was true, the jurisdiction of the King of France not extending to Piedmont. He continued: “And further, the said Coconnas —”

“What!” the irrepressible Piedmontese broke out again, “after my head is off? Shall you have more to do then?”

“No, monsieur,” the judge answered, “before.” He went on: “The said Coconnas

will undergo, before his execution, the extraordinary question consisting of ten wedges."

Coconnas sprang to his feet. There was fierce contempt in his eyes as he cried: "And for what should you order that?"

The judge, appearing to ignore the interruption, continued: "in order to compel him to disclose who were his accomplices."

Coconnas saw that it was the ruin of all his hopes. He would not be taken to the chapel until after the torture, even if he should survive it, which did not always happen, and he knew that, the more obstinate he should be in maintaining silence, the more severely it would be applied.

"Mordi!" he cried. "It is infamous! It is an outrage! What have I done?"

The judge, used to such outbursts, ignored them, and gave the sign on which the victim was seized by both arms and legs, and bound to the rack, before he could even see who his captors were,

"Wretches! Cowards!" he cried. "Do your worst. It is not torture which will make one of my race speak." And he strained the cords with such violence that, for a moment, those who had bound him drew back in alarm.

"Recorder," said the judge, "get ready to write."

"Yes, you scoundrels," Coconnas shouted. "Get ready to write, and if you write all I shall say you will need a quick pen."

"You are prepared to confess?"

"Never!"

"You should think while there is still time."

Coconnas was silent for once, and a man whom he recognised as Caboche advanced with a cord in his hand.

Giving no sign that he recognised Coconnas, he placed thick boards round his legs, which he bound into position with a strong rope. These formed what was

called the boot.

In the “ordinary” question, six wedges were driven in, crushing the flesh. In the “extraordinary” question ten were used, breaking the bones also.

Master Caboche inserted a wedge under the planks, poised his mallet, and looked at the judge.

“For the last time,” the judge asked, “will you admit your guilt?”

“Never!” Coconnas shouted, though his forehead was damp with anticipation of what he would have to endure.

Caboche brought the mallet down heavily on the wedge, but Coconnas made no sound - not even the groan which the most resolute would be likely to give as they felt the first stroke. He looked at Caboche, and it seemed that wonder was in his eyes.

The executioner looked at him blankly, raising the mallet again.

“Why did you conceal yourself in the forest?” the judge asked.

“I enjoy fresh air.”

The judge signed to Caboche, and he struck again, but Coconnas gave no sign.

The judge frowned. “Master Caboche,” he said, “has the wedge entered?”

The executioner bent down, as though to examine it, and muttered: “Cry out. Cry out.” And then aloud: “It is in up to the head, sir.”

“Then try a second.”

The muttered words had explained all to Coconnas. The executioner had remembered his promise. The cord was loosely tied. The wedges were of leather, the head only being wooden. He was to be spared the shame of confession, and left with strength to mount the scaffold on his own legs.

A larger wedge than the first was inserted, and the hammer came down again with a mighty swing, as though to demolish the whole tower of Vincennes.

“Ow! Ow!” Coconnas roared. “You are breaking my bones.”

“That,” said the judge, “seems to be having a better effect. Will you now say what you were doing in the forest?”

“I have told you the truth already.”

“Executioner, proceed.”

“Confess,” Caboche muttered. “Confess anything. Only confess.”

The mallet came down again, and Coconnas yelled: You want to know why I was there? It was on the orders of the Duke d’Alençon.”

“Write that,” said the judge.

“If I laid a snare for the King of Navarre, into which he declined to enter, I was only doing what I was told.”

He thought that he would be even with the man to whom he supposed he owed the position in which he lay, and he went on freely. He related the visits of d’Alençon to the King of Navarre, the interviews between d’Alençon and De Mouy, the history of the cerise cloak. He gave precise and damning testimony against d’Alençon, making it seem all the time as though confessions were extorted from him by the pain of blows at which he yelled and screamed in the most natural way, until the judge himself became alarmed at the nature of what was being written down against a prince of the royal house, and excused him the full measure of the wedges in recognition of the confession which he had made.

The court broke up, and Coconnas, still stretched on the rack, was left alone with the executioner.

“Well, sir, how do you find yourself?”

“Well, thanks to you. It is what I will not forget as long as I am destined to live.”

“So you should, for, if it had been discovered, there would have been harder wedges for me.”

“But how —”

“I heard that you had been arrested, and that the queen-mother had determined upon your death. I guessed that you would be put to the torture, and arranged accordingly.”

“At such risk to yourself?”

“Sir, you are the only gentleman who has ever given me your hand, which I do not forget. You will see how I shall perform my office tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow?… What office?”

Caboche stared. “Have you forgotten the sentence?”

“Ah! I had forgotten.” Not that he had, but he thought more of a hidden knife, of Henriette, of the sacristy door, and of horses in the dark forest beyond.

While Caboche spoke, he had been taking off the boot, and winding bloody bandages round the leg. “Now,” he said, “you must be carried from the rack to the litter. Do not forget that you have a broken leg, and that every movement is torture.”

Having said this, he called in two assistants, on the appearance of which Coconnas began to groan loudly.

“Be of a better courage,” the executioner said. “If you cry out before you are touched, what will you do later?”

“Master Caboche, will you not lift me yourself? You will be more skilful than younger men.”

The executioner made no answer, but he stooped and raised Coconnas, as though he were an infant, in his huge arms, and deposited him in the litter.

The jailer stood at the door, with a lantern in his hand, and the procession set off to the chapel.

CHAPTER LIX

THE CHAPEL

THE procession crossed the two drawbridges which separated the dungeon keep from the main court of the castle, on the further side of which they came to the chapel, faintly lighted within, so that the stained-glass windows glowed with the rich colours of red-cloaked apostles, and blue-garbed saints, and halos of golden light.

Coconnas drew in greedily the fresh damp air of the moonless night. He gazed with delight at the surrounding blackness. Was it not a perfect night for the dash for freedom which La Mole and he were about to make?

It was only by an utmost effort of prudence and self-control that he restrained himself from leaping off the litter as it entered the chapel, and he saw La Mole wrapped in a white cloak lying beside the altar.

The soldiers paused at the door, and he said, in the slow speech of a sick man: “Would you have the extreme kindness to lay me beside my friend?”

They made no objection to that, and laid his litter beside that of La Mole.

Coconnas, as had been arranged, then asked that a priest should be fetched, and the turnkey told the soldiers to go on this errand.

They had scarcely disappeared when Coconnas leapt up, and rushed to the altar, where he knew that the daggers would be concealed, and at the same moment the two women came from behind it, the very air of their presence seeming to vibrate with excitement and joy.

Marguerite ran to La Mole, who still lay on his litter, his black hair damp, and his face having the dim pallor of wax. She knelt, putting her arms around him, but the motion brought from him a scream of irrepressible pain. It was such a cry as had maddened Coconnas when he was aroused in the night.

“Oh, mon Dieu, what is it?” she cried, her face blanched with fear.

He groaned in reply, and put his hands to his eyes as though to shut out the vision of beauty which he was so soon to lose.

More terrified by this attitude even than by the horror of the cry he had given, she looked round to Coconnas: “Oh, what has happened? He is covered in blood.”

Coconnas had his arms round Henriette. They came forward together. Marguerite appealed to La Mole: “Can you not run? There is not a second to lose.”

A smile, terrible, eloquent and sad, which looked as though it might be his last, came to La Mole’s lips. “Dear queen,” he said, “you did not count on your mother’s malice. I have been tortured. My bones are broken. My whole body is one great wound. Even to kiss you once —”

And with a supreme effort that conquered pain he raised himself sufficiently for their lips to meet.

“The torture!” Coconnas said. “But I suffered that. Did not Caboche spare you, as he did me?” With hurried brevity he told what his experience had been.

“Ah!” La Mole said, “it is easy to understand. You gave him your hand, which I would not do. God has punished me for my pride.”

Coconnas and the two women gazed at one another, in a horror and desperation that found no words. It was the jailer who spoke. He had been listening at the door, and now approached them.

“Monsieur Coconnas,” he said, “don’t lose any more time. Give me the dagger stroke in a gentlemanly manner, and get away while you can. They may be here any moment now.”

Marguerite was kneeling beside La Mole in a motionless despair, like a marble statue beside a tomb.

“Come,” Coconnas said, “you must have courage. I am strong. I will lift you. I can hold you on your horse. If you are unfit for the saddle, I will hold you before me. But let us go. Let us go, or our lives will pay.”

La Mole made a supreme effort. “It is true,” he said. “It is for our lives.” And he tried to raise himself from the litter.

The strong arms of Coconnas were round him, raising him to his feet. The two women gave their aid. But Coconnas had to loose him for a moment, having the jailer to deal with, and as he did so the legs of the injured man gave way beneath him, and despite the convulsive effort of Marguerite’s supporting arm he collapsed to the floor, with a cry of agony that rose to the vaulted roof, and died in a slow echo away.

“You see, my queen,” he said, “it is useless to try. It is farewell now. And our secret is safe from all. I have not spoken a word.”

There was exultation in his voice as he said this. It was love’s triumph, even at what might seem to be the hour of its worst defeat. Marguerite knelt beside him, and their lips met in a kiss which surely was free from sin.

His eyes turned to Coconnas. “Fly,” he said, “while you can. Give me the consolation of knowing that I have not brought ruin upon you also.”

“Yes, make haste,” the jailer entreated. “Any moment it may be too late!”

Marguerite knelt beside La Mole, her eyes streaming with tears, and seeming oblivious of all but him. Henriette’s hand was on Coconnas, trying gently to draw him away.

“Annibal, fly!” La Mole entreated again. “Do not give our enemies the satisfaction of killing us both

“But Coconnas pushed Henriette back, with a dramatic gesture magnificent in its solemnity. “Madame,” he said, “will you first give this man his five hundred crowns?”

“Here they are,” Henriette said, producing the heavy bag.

“And as for you, La Mole,” Coconnas continued, “you insult me in suggesting that I should leave you, a wounded friend… But you are suffering, and must be forgiven.”

And as he spoke, he lay down on the litter beside him.

Marguerite had become quiet. She picked up the dagger which Coconnas had thrown to the ground.

La Mole raised a hand toward her. “Oh, my queen,” he pleaded, “do not forget that I am dying that our secret may not be known.”

“What can I do, if even to die with you is denied?”

“You can do that which will make me happy, even in death… Do you remember when I first offered you my life, and you made me a sacred promise?… Yes, I can see that you do.”

“Yes. And on my word it is a promise that shall be kept.”

A light came to La Mole’s face, as though Heaven itself had opened before his eyes.

The jailer’s voice broke upon them. “Ladies! Gentlemen! They are coming. There is not a moment to spare.”

Henriette knelt down, and kissed her hero. “I understand,” she said. “It is what I should have known you would do. I have always loved you for that… Whatever Marguerite has promised, I promise too.”

She rose, holding out her hand to Marguerite, to draw her away.

“You have understood,” Coconnas said, “as I knew you would.”

“Give me something,” La Mole pleaded, “before you go.”

Marguerite pulled off a golden reliquary that hung at her neck. “I have had it from birth,” she said. “It came from my uncle, Pope Clement. My mother gave it to me before - before we thought - when we were different from what we are.”

La Mole took, and kissed it.

Henriette had become urgent to go. She laid her hand again on her friend’s arm.

“Ladies! Ladies!” the jailer entreated in a voice that he dared not raise.

The two women disappeared behind the altar as the priest’s hand was on the

door.

CHAPTER LX

THE PLACE SAINT-JEAN-EN-GREVE

THE tumbril moved slowly through the crowded streets. The curious excited throngs were dense and turbulent in the squares, on the streets, and along the quays. They jostled and quarrelled to get a sight of the two black-clad figures which lay on the straw of the tumbril, and were being taken from torture to death.

People leaned eagerly out of the windows to see it pass. They climbed on stones. They clung to the projections of the walls. The crowds heaved and swayed; they were jammed too tightly to move.

There was a rumour that one would die without having made any admissions, but that the other had quailed before the torture and confessed completely. There were cries of: “Look at the red-. headed one! He’s the coward. He’s caused the death of them both.”

The two young men heard. La Mole reached out a hand to his friend, who looked down on the crowd with an expression of extreme contempt, as though the foul tumbril were his triumphal car.

The shadow of coming death had enobled his features, as it was soon to release his soul.

“Are we nearly there?” asked La Mole asked. “I am faint. I cannot endure it much longer.”

“Rouse yourself! We are passing the Rue Cloche-Percée.”

“Lift me a little, that I may see it for the last time.” Caboche was driving.

Coconnas reached forward and touched his shoulder. “Do me the kindness,” he said, “to pause a moment at the Rue Tigon.”

Caboche pulled up the horse.

La Mole raised himself with a supreme effort, and gazed with tear-filled eyes at the little house which now stood closed and quiet as a tomb. “Farewell,” he said, “Farewell to everything. To youth, to life, and to love.”

“Courage!” Coconnas said. “Who knows what will be ours when we are dead?”

“You believe that?”

“So the priest told me. And so I am determined to hope. But do not faint, or these wretches will laugh.”

Caboche whipped up his horse, and at the same time reached back a hand to Coconnas, having heard what had been said. Coconnas took from it a small sponge which had been soaked in a powerful stimulant. He rubbed his friend’s forehead, and La Mole revived, and kissed the reliquary at his neck.

Now they had come to the quay, and as they lay they could see the scaffold, raised high from the ground. “My friend,” La Mole said, “let me be the first.”

Coconnas touched the executioner’s shoulder. “M. de la Mole,” he said, “has suffered more than I have. He will need my support on the scaffold.”

“Be easy,” Caboche answered. “It shall be done as he asks.”

“And with one blow.”

“Be assured of that.”

The cart stopped. La Mole heard an incessant murmur around him, like that of the sea.

All around him was paved with heads. The steps of the Hotel de Ville were a thronged amphitheatre of spectators. Every window was crowded with expectant faces.

When they saw the handsome young nobleman make the effort to rise, fail, and then, supported by his companion, struggle to reach the scaffold, a vast sound, a mingling of groans and sighs, burst from the crowd.

“He was one of the handsomest at the court,” said one… “How handsome he is

now. And how pale. He is the one who would not confess."

"I cannot help it," La Mole said. "I cannot manage the steps."

Coconnas took him in his arms, and, as lightly as though he carried a child, he bore him up to the scaffold. There was a shout of applause. Coconnas raised his hat in acknowledgement, and then threw it aside.

"Are they here?" La Mole asked. "Are they here?"

Coconnas looked round. "Look," he said, "at the window of that little tower."

He pointed to a tower which may still be seen - a relic of a past age, where the Rue de la Vannerie and the Rue Monton meet. There were two ladies there, dressed in black, and drawn somewhat back from the window.

"I knew it," La Mole said. "I knew it, at whatever pain to herself, she would not fail to be here. Now I have seen her again I can be happy to die."

With his eyes fixed on the window, he raised the reliquary to his lips and covered it with kisses.

Coconnas saluted the two women with as much grace as though he were in a drawing-room. Handkerchiefs, wet with tears, fluttered out in response.

Caboche touched Coconnas on the shoulder, with a significance he did not mistake. They both looked at La Mole.

"It requires no courage to die first," he said, "suffering as I do."

The priest approached, extending the crucifix. La Mole smiled, shaking his head, and pointing to the reliquary in his hand.

"All the same," answered the priest, "you may pray for strength to Him who suffered as you are about to do."

"So I do," La Mole said, kissing the feet of the crucifix… "I am ready now."

"Can you hold your head upright?" Caboche asked.

"Yes, I think so."

“Then all will be well.”

“But you will not forget what I asked. The reliquary will gain you entrance.”

“You may be sure of that. Now hold you head perfectly straight.”

La Mole raised his head. He looked at the little tower. “Adieu, Marguerite! Bless - ” He did not finish. The keen sword had swept across, and his head rolled at his friend’s feet.

“Thanks, good friend. It was well done,” Coconnas said, extending his hand for the third time to the executioner, amid the applause of the watching crowd.

“My son,” said the priest, “have you nothing you would confess?”

“Nothing more. I did all that yesterday.”

He knelt down, taking the head of his dead friend in his hands, and raising it to the tower. “Now!” he said, and the word had scarcely passed his lips before the sword flashed again, and the queen-mother had completed her double crime.

The crowd had seen the look of fortitude and resignation with which he had knelt, and the last sound in his ears had been a murmur of admiration to soothe him, and please his pride.

Caboche took with some difficulty the little reliquary from the grasp of the dead hands, and covered up the bodies of the two friends which the tumbril would take back to his sinister abode.

CHAPTER LXI

THE TOWER OF THE PILLORY

THE same day on which Charles had ordered that the double execution should take place in the morning, had been chosen by him for an evening fête at the Louvre, and he had required an assurance from Marguerite that she would not fail to appear. It was a promise which she had given without demur, anticipating that La Mole would have escaped, and her anxieties would be relieved.

Now Charles gave another proof of the indomitable will which drove him on the path of honour, as it presented itself to his perverted soul. Having been bedridden for fifteen days, he rose at five o'clock, weak as a dying man, livid as a corpse, and, though he fainted in the process, he dressed himself in his richest robes…

At eight, as the hour of the reception approached, he asked about Marguerite, and learning that no one had seen her during the day, or knew where she was, he went by the private passage, leaning on the arm of M. de Nancey, and entered unannounced to the apartment of the Queen of Navarre.

He was anticipating a scene of misery, but what he saw exceeded anything he had expected to find.

Marguerite lay stretched on a couch. She had ceased to weep or pray, but lay as though resigned to her own death, while Henriette, who had been with her throughout the day, lay on the floor at the other side of the room, in the same motionless way.

Charles, after directing Nancey to stay outside, had pushed open the door. Neither of the two princesses observed his presence, but Gillonne, who had been on her knees beside Henriette, lifted frightened eyes.

Charles motioned her to leave the room, and then went to his sister's side. He looked down on her in silence, and then, as she appeared unconscious of his presence, he said, in a voice of unusual softness:

"Margot… sister."

She shivered, and sat up.

“Your majesty,” she said coldly.

“Come, Margot, have courage. I know how you feel. But listen to me.”

“I am listening.”

“You promised to come to the ball.”

“Did I?”

“Yes. And people are expecting you now, and it will cause comment if you do not appear.”

“You must excuse me. You can see how I am.”

“Make an effort.”

“No. I will not come.”

Charles sat down beside her, taking her hand. “I know you have lost a friend, Margot. But look at me. Have I a friend left - even my mother? You can weep as you will, but I am forcing myself to smile. You suffer. But I die. Come, Margot. Show the courage you have. I ask it in the name of our glorious house. As our Saviour carried the cross, so must we bear its renown. If we stumble, we must rise like Him, brave and resigned.”

“Ah, mon Dieu, mon Dieu,” Marguerite moaned.

“Yes, I know it is hard. But I say again, look at me. I am a dying man; but I try to smile. In a week - perhaps in a month, at most - you may weep for me if you will.”

“Brother!” Marguerite cried, throwing an arm round his neck.

“Come now, dress yourself. Conceal your pallor. I have already ordered that new jewellery shall be brought to you, with every other requisite that your beauty deserves.”

“I care nothing for them.”

“You will soon feel differently. Life is long - for you.”

Charles called Gillonne in. “Prepare for dressing the queen.”

“I shall not come.”

“Margot, there is one thing you forget. It is often when we control our own feelings that we most honour the memory of the dead.”

“Well,” Marguerite said, shivering, “if you think that, I will go.”

Charles said no more. He bent down to kiss his sister, and went out, with a glance at Henriette, who had remained motionless while the conversation persisted.

As the king left, several pages entered, bearing jewel-boxes and trunks of clothes.

Marguerite told them to put them down. To Gillonne’s surprise, she rose to dress.

“Yes,” she said, with indescribable bitterness, “I am going to dress! I am going to the ball! What a perfect day. Fête at Grève in the morning. Fête in the Louvre at night.”

“And madame the duchess?”

“Oh, she is happy! She can remain if she will. She can weep. She is not the daughter of a king, or the sister of a king, or the wife of a king. She is not a queen. Gillonne, help me to dress.”

The girl obeyed silently. The diamonds were dazzling, the dresses splendid. Never had Marguerite looked more lovely. She glanced at herself in the mirror.

“Charles is right,” she said. “But what contemptible creatures we are!”

“Madame,” Gillonne said, “there is a man outside who wishes to see you.”

“What sort is he?”

“He is a horrible man.”

“Ask him his name.”

Gillonne went to the outer door. She came back: “He will not say who he is, but he sent you this.” She held out the reliquary.

“Let him come in.”

A heavy step shook the floor, and Master Caboche entered.

“Who are you?” the queen asked.

“One whom you met one day near Montfaucon, and who brought two wounded gentlemen back to the Louvre.”

“You are Master Caboche?”

“Executioner, madame, to the Paris Prévote.”

It was the first time for the last hour that Henriette had appeared to notice anything which was spoken around her. Now she lifted her head, her emerald eyes directed upon the executioner with such burning hatred that they seemed to assail him with jets of fire.

“And you come?” Marguerite asked, in a trembling voice.

“I am charged to remind you of a promise made to the younger of the two gentlemen.”

“It is a promise that shall be kept. Where is it?”

“At my own house.”

“Why did you not bring it?”

“And be stopped at the gate, and asked to show what was under my cloak?”

“No. You were right. I will come for it tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow would be too late.”

“Why?”

“Because the queen-mother is to have the two next available heads for her experiments.”

“Profanation!… Henriette, did you hear that?”

“Yes. What can we do?”

“Go and fetch them now.”

Henriette rose reluctantly. “I was better off,” she said. “I was nearly dead. It was cruel to bring me back.”

Marguerite had picked up a velvet cloak, and drawn it round her bare shoulders. She only answered. “Come. We shall see them again.”

She sent Gillonne to order that her litter should be prepared with the speed and secrecy to which her trusted servants were accustomed. It was an additional precaution, common at that time in the courts of kings, that the litter-bearers were deaf and dumb.

In ten minutes, they had left the Louvre by the postern gate, and the litter was on its way, preceded by Caboche and his varlet, whose lantern lighted the way.

In another ten minutes, the litter stopped, and Marguerite, who was showing more resolute spirit than her companion, was helping her to alight.

The Pilori tower, huge and shapeless in the darkness, now rose before them, with two red beacons flaring upon its summit.

Caboche went in first, and was quickly back. “You may enter, ladies; everyone is asleep.”

He led them through an arched door, along a winding passage, over stones that were damp and rough.

They came to a low-ceiled, smoky room, containing a table on which were scattered plates and utensils of a meal which three people had shared. On the wall a great parchment, bearing the royal seal, had been fixed. It was the executioner’s warrant. In the corner, huge and bare, stood the sword of justice.

On the walls, repulsive pictures represented the execution of saints by every method by which human life can be taken.

“Your majesty,”, Caboche said, “will forgive that my promise has compelled me to bring you here.”

“I not only forgive: I reward,” Marguerite answered, handing the executioner a purse of gold, which he was unready to take.

“It is always gold,” he said. “I have gold enough… Madame, believe I would have given much not to have done what I did today.”

“I do believe it. We have to go further than this?”

“If you wait here, I will —”

“No. There is nothing now we can fear to see.”

Caboche said no more. He lit a torch, and opened a door of solid oak, from which steps went down, seemingly to the recesses of the earth, while a cold current of air, blowing upward, brought an odour of dampness, corruption and blood.

Henriette, her face like an alabaster statue, leaned on the arm of her friend, who now moved in a more resolute way. “I shall never do it,” she said, shrinking back with the words.

“To love truly,” Marguerite said, “is to love even to death.”

Henriette made no reply and the two women followed the executioner down the steps, resplendent youth and beauty and rich attires contrasting strangely with the grimy squalor of the damp steps, and the chalky walls of the dim vault into which they went.

At the foot of the steps they saw a black serge cloth spread over what could be distinguished as two human forms.

Caboche bent, raising his torch. He drew back the cloth. The two friends, victims of the foul crime which the king allowed that he might uphold thereby the honour of the royal house of Valois, lay side by side, their heads adjusted so that

no more than a red seam revealed the violence which had been done. They were not divided in death, for - was it chance, or the deliberate act of Caboche? - the right hand of La Mole lay on the left of the friend he had unwittingly brought to that sombre end. There was a smile now on his dead lips, as though he were content with the love he had not betrayed, but on those of Coconnas the smile was that of one who disdained his fate.

Marguerite knelt at her lover's side. In firm hands she lifted the head she had loved so well, and placed it in a pearl-embroidered bag which she had brought. The dead face looked purer than ever as it sank from her jewelled hands into its recess of velvet and gold, from which it would be lifted again to be embalmed in such a way that its beauty would remain through the changing years.

But meanwhile Henriette leaned against the wall, her eyes fixed in frightened misery on the face of the lover who had been gallant, handsome to her, overbearingly bold.

The woman who had been so gaily intrepid, so insolent in her happiness, who had been selfish in passion, and would laugh with careless scepticism at all religious belief - she had never before looked into the face of death.

After that, gaining strength from her friend's example, she came forward, and took her lover's head also, wrapping it in the folds of her cloak.

They ascended the stairs together, after Marguerite had cast one look around that unholy vault, where the bodies of the lowest criminals were deposited for such disposal as might be most profitable to him who had already taken their lives. It was a glance which Caboche did not fail to understand, and to which he gave a ready reply.

"Fear nothing, ladies. They shall be laid in consecrated ground." Henriette loosed the circlet of rubies about her neck. "Sell these," she said, "and have masses said."

They went to the Louvre as they had come. Marguerite left her friend in her own apartment, where their sad burdens had been deposited, and went to the ballroom. Paler, but more beautiful than she had appeared when we first saw her there, more than two years before.

All eyes turned to her as she entered, looking proud and almost joyous in the

consciousness that her promise had been redeemed.

Charles approached her slowly, his weakness controlled by the stubborn purpose that filled his mind.

“Sister,” he said, “I thank you,” and then in a lower voice, “Take care. There is a stain of blood on your arm.”

“What matter for that,” she answered, “if my lips smile?”

CHAPTER LXII

VENGEANCE OF GOD?

IT was May 30th, 1574. The king's illness had become worse after the exertion he had made to attend the fête which had followed the double murder which Catherine had planned, and he had permitted, and his physicians had recommended that he should transfer the court to Vincennes, for the benefit of a better air. A nurse came from the king's bedchamber. "Help," she cried, to those in the ante-chamber," the king is dying!"

De Nancey, whom the king now required to attend exclusively upon him, called for the doctors to be summoned, and others took up the cry; but, before they could arrive, Catherine emerged from an adjoining room, and entered the royal chamber.

Charles was lying across the bed; with his eyes closed. For some days he had been suffering from a haemorrhage of the skin, causing a reddish perspiration, which was said by the Huguenots to be the special vengeance of God for the blood he had caused to be shed on St. Bartholomew's eve. Now his condition was such that it actually seemed that there were drops of blood at his finger-tips.

He opened his eyes as his mother entered. "You will please to go," he said, in a voice that was harsh though weak. I will die n peace."

"Do not talk of dying," she said. "It is no more than a passing attack."

"Death of a thousand devils! Do I not know I am dying? And who else would know it as well as you?"

"Sire, it is your mind which is diseased. Now that the two assassins are dead your bodily condition cannot fail to improve; and as to the mental anguish you feel, if you will listen to me for ten minutes, I can prove to you —"

"Nurse," Charles cried, "for the next ten minutes let no one enter the room. The Queen Catherine de Medici wishes to speak to her beloved son, Charles IX."

"This interview," he continued, "had got to come, and now is the best time, for

tomorrow might be too late. But I must have a witness present."

"Why?"

"Because," he said, in a solemn and dreadful tone, "death is at the door of this room, and it is time I should arrange my affairs."

"Whom do you wish to have?"

"My brother."

Catherine turned with alacrity. "Nurse!" she called, and then as the woman came: "Summon M. de Nancey, and tell him to require M. d'Alençon in the king's name to come here at once."

Charles called the nurse back. "I said my brother," he repeated.

Catherine's eyes shone with anger, but quailed before those of her dying son.

"I wish," he went on, "to speak to Henry of Navarre. I call no one brother but him. You had better go."

"Do you think," Catherine replied, her hate of Henry strengthening her resolution to outface her son's hatred of her, "that I will renounce my rights as queen-mother to be with you, if you are dying, as you assert that you are?"

"Madame, I am still king. I do not argue. I command. I have still strength to fetch Henry myself if you do not obey." And as he spoke he made an effort to rise.

"Sire, think what you do! The laws of nature and of etiquette alike oblige me to stay."

"By what right do you claim that?"

"Am I not your mother?"

"You are no more my mother than d'Alençon is a brother to me."

"You are raving. There is no meaning in what you say."

“I say you lost the title of mother when you took away what you gave.

“What do you mean by that?”

Charles felt beneath his pillow, and drew out a small silver key.

“Open my travelling case over there, and you will see what I mean.

Catherine followed her son’s directions, and opened the casket to which he pointed, but drew back with a sharp involuntary movement when she saw what it contained.

“What alarms you?” Charles asked.

“Nothing.”

“Then bring me the book that is there - There is one, is there not?”

Catherine, in spite of her normal self-control, could give no more than a faltering “Yes.”

“A book on falconry?”

“Yes.”

“Bring it here.”

Catherine did so, muttering: “Oh, fatality!” under her breath.

“Listen!’ I read this book too much. Do you understand?”

“Yes.”

“Then burn it. Men should not know too much of the follies of kings.”

Catherine made no answer. She put the book on the fire. She stood motionless, and her face looked haggard as she watched the flames consuming the poisoned leaves.

“And now, madame,” Charles said, as the flames died, “summon my brother, Henry.”

Overwhelmed by emotions, too complicated for her own analysis, Catherine left the room, muttering as she did so: “Curse him! Curse him! He triumphs! He reaches the goal!” and pursued by her son’s voice: “You must fetch him instantly. Tell him that it is about the regency that I require him at once.”

As she left, Ambroise Paré, who had been waiting impatiently, hurried in.

“Who has been burning arsenic here?”

“I have.”

CHAPTER LXIII

THE BATTLEMENT OF VINCENNES

HENRY of Navarre walked the length of the terrace on the outside of the central keep of the castle, where he was still confined.

The day was azure and gold. The light glistened on the spring green of the forest trees in the valley below. It mellowed the grey stone of the castle wall. A breeze, pleasantly cool, brought the scent of wallflowers from the garden below.

But Henry's thoughts were not on the azure sky, nor on the light which made gold of the tops of the forest trees, nor on ancient walls, nor the scent of the summer flowers.

His glance went further, to where Paris lay - capital of France, and soon to be capital of the world. "Paris!" he thought. "It is joy and glory and power in a single word. Paris - containing the Louvre. The Louvre - which is the throne. And what holds me back but these stone ramparts behind which I have been confined by my own desire? These ramparts which now enclose my mortal enemy as well as myself!"

His gaze withdrew from Paris. It looked down on Vincennes. To his left, in a valley of almond blossom, he saw a horseman on whose cuirass the sunlight struck, so that there was a flash of light at each movement he made.

The horse stirred impatiently, as did another with an empty saddle, which he held on a short rein.

Did he also see the King of Navarre? It was hard to say. But he drew his sword, put a handkerchief on to its point, and waved it, as though a signal were being made.

At the same moment, upon the opposite hill, a similar signal rose, and then other horsemen appeared, and a belt of handkerchiefs could be seen.

Henry shaded his eyes, looking at the cavalier who had first appeared. "De Mouy!" he exclaimed, and, casting caution aside, he raised his hat, and waved

his scarf in the air.

He understood that the Huguenots, having heard that Charles was little better than a dead man, had assembled for his support if he should wish to strike for the crown, and ardent ambition stirred at the sight.

But the stone walls were a fact he could not ignore. He made a gesture of resignation, to which De Mouy waved a reply which gave assurance that they understood, and would wait his time.

He heard steps on the stone stairs within, and made a sign for them to withdraw. He turned to face Catherine at the stairhead, her breath quickened by the haste of her ascent. There were two guards behind her, whom she told to stand back, while she came forward to a stone seat at the side of the battlement.

Henry controlled the repulsion, born of loathing and fear, which he always felt at the sight of the queen-mother. He thought that there must be something of extreme urgency to cause her to seek an interview with him in that lofty place. He approached her with his most friendly smile.

“You are looking for me, my good mother?”

“Yes. I wish to give you a proof of my attachment you cannot doubt. The king is dying, and I have come to tell you that he will be glad to have a conference with you.”

“With me?” Henry inwardly thrilled with joy.

“Yes. He has been told that, though you renounce the crown of Navarre, you are ambitious for that of France.”

“I?”

“I am not saying it. It is what he thinks; and you may be sure that he will lay a trap to test you.”

“A trap for me?”

“Yes. He wishes, before he dies, to decide whether you are one to be trusted or feared, and on his opinion he will kill you or let you live.”

“Then what will he propose?”

“How can I tell? They may be impossible things.”

“But, dear mother, can you not even guess?”

“No. But suppose for example - ” Catherine hesitated.

“Suppose what?”

“Suppose he tempts you. Suppose - ” her eyes were searchingly fixed on Henry as she spoke - ” he were to offer you the rule of France, in the form of a regency?”

Henry’s heart beat with sudden joy, but he was alert to avoid the net which was being spread at his feet, and his mind, keen and subtle for his own protection, recovered itself instantly.

“Offer it to me? That will be too obvious a trap, while his brother d’Alençon is here.”

Catherine’s satisfaction with this reply was not easily concealed.

“Then you refuse the regency?”

Henry thought: “The king must be dead, and the trap is hers.”

“I must first see the king, and hear what he has to say, because, dear mother, on your own account this is no more than an improbable thing.”

“So it is. But you can surely say what your intentions are.”

“Oh, mon Dieu!” Henry replied. “Having no pretentions I have no intentions at all.”

“That is not answering,” Catherine replied, exasperation now being beyond even her control. “Will you decide one way or the other?”

“I cannot decide on suppositions. It is sometimes difficult to do so, even when the facts are known. I must wait till I learn what they are.”

“Listen, Henry! There is not a moment to lose, and we are wasting time by this useless fencing. Let us talk as a king and a queen should. If you accept the regency, you give the order for your own death.”

Henry thought: “Then the king lives.” He said aloud: God, in whose hands are all lives, both of common men and of kings, will give me wisdom to answer wisely. His majesty should be informed that I am ready to wait upon him.”

“You should reflect seriously.”

“Madame, during two perilous years - during a month of captivity - I have had much time to reflect, and I have reflected. Be pleased to go before me, and advise the king that I obey his command to wait upon him. These two soldiers will be sufficient guarantee that I shall not run away, which I have no wish to do.”

Henry spoke with a finality which made it plain to the queen-mother that further words would be a waste of time. As she began to descend the stairs, he looked over the parapet. De Mouy was still in sight. He had alighted, and the two horses were grazing near him.

Henry waved him a signal to be alert, and was pleased to see that he began at once to bring the horses nearer to the castle wall.

He himself ran down the steps, following the queen-mother. Her two guards, who had followed her, awaited him on the first landing.

They led him through a company of Swiss guards, and past a double row of halberdiers who guarded the entrance to the courtyard.

Catherine was waiting for him there. She told the soldiers to stand back, and put a hand on his arm. “There are two ways,” she said, “by which you may leave the king’s apartment. If you refuse the regency, you may go out by one which will give you freedom to mount the horse which your friends have waiting for you. - Did you suppose that I am not aware of that? - But, if you do not act wisely, you will return through this, and you will not pass it again alive. Which would you prefer to do?”

“Madame, you seem to forget that if the king should make me regent, it would not be you but I who would tell the soldiers what they should do. If I should

leave this chateau tonight, all these pikes and muskets will be lowered before me.”

“Madman!” she burst out desperately, “take my advice, and do not play so deadly a game with me.”

“Why not?” Henry said coolly. “Why not with you as much as any one else? So far, I have not been the loser.”

“You will believe nothing! You will understand nothing! Very well… Go on to the king’s apartment.”

She pointed to the stair with one hand, while the other moved to the hilt of a small poisoned dagger, of which she carried two in a black leather sheath at her belt - a sheath which has survived to this day. But Henry did not move. “I think,” he said calmly. “that you should go first. I am not regent yet, and the honour belongs to you.”

CHAPTER LXIV

THE REGENCY?

CHARLES had become impatient of waiting, and was on the point of sending De Nancey in search of Henry when he appeared. He uttered a cry of satisfaction, and ordered the two doctors and the priest who were with him to leave the chamber.

“Come here, Harry,” he said, with a faint smile. “I am glad to see you. Many things have happened which I regret, but even a king cannot always control events. I have been influenced by my mother - by d’Anjou and d’Alençon - and by something else, by state policy, which no longer controls my mind.”

“Sire, I will forget everything but the love which exists between us.”

“Thank you. That is how I would have it be. Do not think of the past. It is the future of which I am frightened to think.”

He became silent. His eyes closed. Henry waited patiently. Charles spoke as though thinking aloud. “We must save the state. We must save it from bigots and women.”

“Of women?” Henry echoed, being anxious that Charles should be more explicit.

“Yes. My mother wishes to be regent until d’Anjou returns. But he will not return.”

“How? Not return?” Henry exclaimed, his heart beating with sudden joy.

“No. The Poles will prevent that.”

“But will not the queen-mother have written to him already?”

“Yes. So she did. But De Nancey stopped the courier, and brought the letter to me. She said I was dying. I have written myself, and d’Anjou will be carefully watched. Here, there will be a vacant throne.”

Charles spoke in a low voice, but Henry thought he heard a slight sound behind the tapestry, like an exclamation of rage.

Charles continued: “I die, and have no male heirs…” And then, with sudden animation, he looked at Henry: “Do you remember the boy I showed you one night, sleeping peacefully with his guardian angel beside him?… I suppose they will kill him too.”

“No,” Henry replied, with genuine emotion in his voice, “that shall not happen, I swear. I would shield him at the risk of my own life.”

“Thanks, Harry, thanks,” Charles said gratefully… “But do not make him a king. It is his good fortune that he is not born to a throne. But make him happy. I have left him money enough. I am more resigned now I have your promise to guard him..”

“I have promised,” Henry said. “But how shall I be able to keep my word?”

“What do you mean?”

“I am a man. He is only a child. Shall I not be in more danger than he?”

“You are wrong. After my death you will come to a great power.” He drew a parchment from under his pillow. “Here. Look at this.”

Henry looked at the document. “You mean the regency is for me?”

“Yes. Till d’Anjou’s return. As he will not return, it will be the throne before long. First the regency, then the throne.”

“The throne?”

“Yes. You only are fit to fill it. I shall consign d’Alençon to prison. Leave him there. He would be a traitor to you, as he has been to me. My mother will kill you if she can. Send her out of the realm. D’Anjou is in Poland. See that he stays where he is. There will be a papal bull to assist you there. I have arranged that.”

“Oh, sire!”

“You need have no fear except civil war. But you - and you alone - can avert

that. Remain converted, and the Protestants will not rise. What is Condé? Not much… They say I feel remorse for St. Bartholomew. It is false. But I have doubts… They say I bleed at every pore with the blood which was shed that night. But I know better than that. It is arsenic, not blood."

"Sire, what do you mean?"

"Nothing. If He think fit, it is God who will avenge my death. I leave you a parliament you can trust, and an army that will obey. You have none but my mother and d'Alençon to fear."

From the vestibule there came a clash of arms.

Henry turned his head to listen. "I am lost," he muttered.

"You fear? You perhaps refuse?"

"On the contrary, I accept."

Charles reached for his hand.

"Nurse," he called, "summon my mother and M. d'Alençon here."

CHAPTER LXV

THE KING IS DEAD - LONG LIVE THE KING!

CATHERINE and d'Alençon entered the room. The queen had told her son all that had occurred, and the two were livid with rage, and trembling with apprehension.

Henry stood by the head of the king's bed, while he announced his will.

"Madame," he said, "I have no son, or he would be king, and you would be regent.

"As it is, d'Anjou must succeed me, and if I appoint d'Alençon to the regency he may strike for the crown, and the kingdom be shaken with bitter war. If I were to appoint you regent, you might have to decide between your sons, to support one and oppose the other, which no mother would wish to do.

"I have, therefore, chosen a regent who will protect the crown without attempting to put it on his own head. Madame, salute that regent! Salute him, brother. It is the King of Navarre."

And having given this order with a gesture of supreme authority, he himself saluted Henry.

Catherine and d'Alençon responded with gestures which might be taken for salutations or shrinkings of repulsion, and Charles turned to Henry as he continued: "Monseigneur regent, here is the parchment which gives you command of the armies, the keys of the treasury, and all manner of royal authority until the return of the King of Poland."

Francis looked at Henry with a white face, and fear in his eyes: Catherine, as though she would destroy him with burning hate. Both attitudes were apparent to Henry, and warned him of the dangers that he must face.

He looked back at them with a glance of warning: "Take care," it seemed to say. "I am master now."

And, as though he had said it aloud, Catherine broke out into passionate reply: “No! Never! Never shall my race bow to those of a foreign blood… Never shall a Bourbon reign in France while a Valois lives!”

Charles rose in his bed - a ghastly figure, wrapped in sheets that were reddened with bloody sweat. “Mother,” he cried, “take care! I am still king. I know it will not be for long, but an order is quickly given - and assassins and poisoners can be promptly executed.”

“Give that order, if you dare! I shall give mine! Come, Francis, come!”

She went out, dragging d’Alençon with her.

Charles’s voice rose to a scream. “Nancey! Help! Help! command! Arrest my brother! Arrest - ” The scream broke with a rush of blood to the mouth. Nancey ran in, to find the king lying in agony on the bed. He had heard nothing distinctly but his own name.

“Keep the door,” Henry said, “and let no one enter.”

Nancey hesitated for a moment, bowed, and went out.

Henry looked down on the king, who was breathing with difficulty.

“This is the crisis,” be said aloud. “Shall I reign? Shall I die?”

The tapestry moved behind him. A voice said: “You will not die. You will live.”

“René,” Henry said. “Yes, sire.”

“Your prediction was false. I shall not be king.”

“It was true. But the hour has not come.”

“Explain more clearly.”

“Come closer, and speak more quietly.”

René was at the opposite side of the bed. They bent toward one another over the body of the dying king.

“Listen,” René went on. “I would rather serve you than the queen-mother. I believe that it would be better for my body and soul.”

“Did the queen-mother tell you to say this?”

“No. But listen to a most secret thing.”

Henry leaned over still further.

“Listen,” René went on, “and I will tell it to you, if you swear over this dying man that you will forgive me your mother’s death.”

Henry’s face darkened. “I have promised that already.”

“But not sworn.”

“I swear it,” Henry said, raising his hand.

“Sire, the King of Poland is close at hand.”

“Oh, no. The courier was stopped by the king.”

“The king stopped one. But the queen-mother sent three by different roads.”

“That is bad news!”

“A messenger arrived this morning from Warsaw. The king left without opposition, for no one suspected his intention. He will be here in a few hours.”

“If only I had known this earlier!”

“There is still time, but not much. Did you not hear the noise of arms in the ante-room? They wait there to kill you when you leave the king’s presence.”

“The king is not yet dead.”

“He may have about ten minutes to live. That ten minutes is ours.”

“Then what should I do?”

“Fly, without an instant’s delay.”

“But how? If they are waiting outside the room?”

“There is another way. I risk everything if I show it. You will not forget that?”

“Be easy in mind. No.”

“There is a private passage. The queen-mother will think you have discovered it for yourself. I will guide you, and then, to give you time to get away, I will tell the queen-mother that I believe you have returned to your apartment.”

Henry stooped over the dying king. He kissed his forehead.

“Adieu, brother,” he said. “I shall not forget that, at the last, you wished me well. You wished that I should be king. In the name of my brethren, I forgive you for all the blood that has been shed.”

“Come!” René cried, “he is returning to consciousness. Come! Come!”

Charles stirred. “Nurse!” he cried.

Henry picked up the king’s sword, for which it was certain that he would have no further need, and disappeared behind the tapestry, as Charles repeated the call in a louder voice, and the woman ran into the room.

“Nurse,” Charles said, “while I slept - . There is light at last Oh! Mon Dieu! Mon Dieu! Forget the sins of the king! I am crownless now. Remember the sufferings of the man. Oh, forgive me, all-powerful God!”

He sank back exhausted into her arms, and became unconscious again.

Meanwhile René had led Henry to a postern gate, where a horse stood, saddled, and he had galloped in the direction in which he knew that Mouy would be.

“Who is that?” cried the queen-mother, at the sound of the flying hooves.

The sentries called from the battlement: “It is the King of Navarre!”

“Fire upon him,” she cried. “Fire!”

The sentries levelled their arquebuses, but Henry was already beyond their range.

“He flies,” said the queen-mother. “He confesses defeat.”

“He flies,” said d’Alençon. “I shall be king.”

A young man dashed in at a gallop. Behind him were four gentlemen covered with dust and sweat.

“My son,” Catherine cried, stretching out her arms from the window at which she had watched Henry’s flight.

“Mother!” cried the young man, as he leapt from his horse.

“My brother!” Francis cried, drawing back in fear.

“It is not too late?” Anjou asked, as he entered his mother’s presence.

“No. You are just in time. Listen to that.”

M. de Nancey had appeared on the balcony of the king’s chambers. He broke a rod in two pieces, holding one in each hand.

“The king is dead!” he cried. “Long live the king! Long live King Henry III.”

“I conquer,” Catherine said. “And the Béarnais is not destined to reign.”

CHAPTER LXVI

FINAL?

CALM after storm. A year passed, during which little happened. By the grace of God and the queen-mother, Henry III reigned in Paris, and Henry of Navarre reigned unmolested in his distant, mountainous land.

Marguerite had joined him, keeping her word, but the mountains of Navarre brought her no joy. At best, they could soothe a sadness born of the two greatest disasters of human life - absence and death.

As for Henry, rumour said that he had found consolation in a new love. A beautiful girl - a Montmorency - whom he called La Fosseuse from her dimpled cheeks, was his favoured companion now. And he had the mountains, which he may have loved more deeply than her.

The queen-mother, content now that her favourite son was king, and exercising an authority which he did not challenge, resided sometimes at the Louvre and sometimes at the Hotel de Soissons.

She still studied the stars with René, whose treachery she had not discovered, and who earned her gratitude by the false witness which he had borne against La Mole and Coconnas. And it was with him that she was engaged one evening when she was told that a man had asked to see her on a matter of urgent importance.

She went to her oratory, and found Maurevel waiting.

“HE is here!” he began, in an excitement which ignored the royal etiquette, by which he should have waited to be addressed.

“Who?”

“The King of Navarre.”

“He? Henry? What can the madman be doing here?”

“By appearances, he has come to see Madame de Sauve: by probability, he is conspiring against the king.”

“How do you know?”

“I saw him enter a house, to which Madame de Sauve came soon after.”

“You are sure?”

“I waited. At three o’clock in the night they came out together. The king did not leave Madame de Sauve until they were outside the wicket gate of the Louvre. Then she entered, and he went off humming a tune, as though he had no care in the world.”

“Where did he go?”

“To the Belle Etoile, which the two sorcerers used, whom you had executed.”

“Why did you not tell me earlier?”

“I wished to make certain.”

“Which you now are?”

“Absolutely, I saw him clearly as he looked out of the window, evidently looking out for Madame de Sauve, who has joined him again.”

“And we may suppose that she will be with him again till the same hour?”

“It is probable.”

“Does she know your handwriting?”

“No.”

“Sit down and write.”

Catherine dictated:

“While the Baron de Sauve is on duty at the Louvre, his wife entertains a lover at a house near the Croix-des-Petits-Champs, Rue St. Honoré. It can be

recognised by a red cross on the wall."

When Maurevel had finished, she said: "Make a second copy. Let one be given adroitly to the Baron, and the other dropped in a corridor of the Louvre."

"I don't understand."

"You don't think that a husband will be angry when he gets such a letter?"

"He didn't seem to care much before."

"There is a difference between a king and an exile, as Henry is now. Besides, if he doesn't care, you will do it for him."

"I?"

"Yes. Take several men. Burst the doors open. Surprise the lovers. Strike, in the baron's name. Before the next day, the second letter will have been picked up, and it will be evident that a jealous husband had revenged himself. It will be incidental that the dead lover is the King of Navarre…"

Madame de Sauve had found Henry waiting for her.

"Are you sure you have not been followed?" he asked anxiously.

"Not that I know of," Charlotte replied.

"But think I have. Both Yesterday and today."

"Oh, sire! You terrify me. If anything were to happen to you —"

"Fear nothing, dearest. Three faithful guardians protect me!"

"Only three?"

"They are enough when their names are De Mouy, Saucourt, and Barthélemy."

"De Mouy is in Paris? Has he also some poor lady whom he leaves desolate when he goes away?"

"No. He has a mortal enemy. Only hate leads men to such follies as are

committed by those who love.”

“Oh, thank you!”

“I didn’t mean that. But let it pass, for our time is short, and we may never meet again.”

“You are leaving Paris tonight?”

“Yes.”

“Your business is finished?”

“It was only to see you.”

“Gascon!”

“Dear, it is true. But we still have a few hours to be spent together.”

It was an hour later when the three Huguenots who were watching the house saw a man approach the door, followed at some distance by several others. He pulled out a large bunch of keys, which he tried successively in the lock.

De Mouy moved out of the shadow. He caught the man’s arm. “What are you doing here?”

The man turned. “De Mouy!”

“Maurevel.”

Fear and hate and astonishment were in the assassin’s voice, but De Mouy’s had the exaltation of the hunter who finds his prey.

“I was seeking you, and you come my way.”

Maurevel drew a pistol, but De Mouy’s rapier was the speedier weapon It struck the murderer’s belt, and went on to inflict a severe wound. Maurevel sprang back as he fired, and the ball went wide.

He gave a shrill cry as the sword pierced him, at which his followers thought he was killed, and ran off down the Rue St. Honoré.

Maurevel saw himself abandoned by the hired bullies on whom he relied. He began to call “Help! Help!”. as he ran.

De Mouy waited only to give the shepherd’s whistle, well known to Henry in his native hills, which was the agreed signal of danger, and pursued Maurevel at a pace which, weakened by his wound, the fugitive found it hard to equal.

A moment later, Henry, roused by the whistle, and judging by the pistol-shot that his friends might already be in conflict, leapt from a ground-floor window, his sword bare in his hand.

The noise of running feet, and Maurevel’s cries, guiding him to the Barrier des Sergens, where the hunted man, afraid of being run through the back, had turned desperately to bay. Each thrust at the other, more eager to take his opponent’s life than to save his own. Maurevel tore De Mouy’s scarf, at the same moment that he felt De Mouy’s sword in his own ribs. Wounded again, Maurevel resumed his flight, now with De Mouy close on his heels.

“Kill him quickly,” Henry cried. “There are soldiers ahead.”

Maurevel had seen them also. He turned, and fell on one knee, presenting his sword-point at De Mouy, while he shouted to the soldiers: “Fire! Fire! They are only two!”

So it was; for De Mouy’s two companions had gone in pursuit of Maurevel’s followers, and were only now returning from a vain chase, and some distance away.

The nearest soldier halted, and began to prepare his arquebus, but the firearms of those days were slower than the sword at a short range.

As Maurevel cried: “Fire,” again, De Mouy seized his sword in one hand, turning it aside, while he drove his own through the body of the kneeling man.

At the same moment, Henry’s sword entered the soldier’s side. He fell, with a loud cry, his arquebus, still undischarged, rattling upon the stones.

Seeing the result of the conflict, two other soldiers, coming up behind their comrade, halted, and withdrew somewhat.

“Come, De Mouy,” Henry cried. “There is not an instant to lose. If we are recognised, we are lost.”

“One moment, sire. I must recover my sword.”

The wounded man had sunk on to his side. He lay motionless as though dead. The sword had passed completely through him, the blade showing for some inches behind his back.

As De Mouy stooped, catching the hilt in both hands, and placing his foot on the-body of his foe, the dying man raised his head. His eyes blazed with implacable hate. He drew a pistol from his belt.

As the sword was withdrawn Maurevel sank back, never to rise again, but in the same instant his pistol was discharged within three inches of De Mouy’s breast.

De Mouy sank with no cry. He lay dead, at the side of his dying foe.

Henry rushed forward, but he was too late either to aid or avenge. He could but use his sword to hasten the end of one in whom little sign of life remained.

He saw that he could do nothing by remaining longer, except to add to his own peril. But he would still say farewell to Charlotte. He would risk that! The street had become empty now.

But when he came to the Croix-des-Petits-Champs, he found that it was not empty at all. It was loud with excited voices, and there was a crowd round the door he sought.

Who should know him in the darkness? Boldly, he asked what the trouble was.

“Oh, a terrible thing!” a bystander said. “A lady has been stabbed by her husband. Someone sent him a note that she was with her lover here.”

“Is the husband still there?”

“No. He has gone.”

“Is the lady dead?”

“They say she still lives.”

“Oh, cursed fate!” Henry said to himself. He went on into the house.

In a crowded room he came to Charlotte. She lay on a bed, dying from two dagger wounds in the breast.

“Oh, Charlotte! Charlotte!” Henry cried, falling on his knees beside her.

Her eyes opened. She made a motion to rise, at which the blood started from the two wounds. “I knew,” she said, “that I should not die till you came.” Their lips met, and as he kissed her she died.

He knew that it would be madness to stay. He rose, his eyes blinded with tears, and cut off one of the long fair tresses that he had so often praised.

He went out amid the sympathetic murmurs of those who had seen the tragedy, without identifying either Charlotte or him.

“Friend and mistress!” he said aloud. “I have lost both in an hour.”

A voice answered him from behind. “Yes, sire. But the throne remains.”

He turned round. “René!”

“Yes, sire. I watch over you always. I warn you to fly. The soldiers are searching now.”

The End