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Julia S. H. Pardoe

Excerpt

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BOOK I.

MARIE DE MEDICIS AS QUEEN.

VOL. I.

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CHAPTER I.

[1572.]

MARRIAGES OF HENRY IV.—MARGUERITE DE VALOIS—HER CHARACTER—HER MARRIAGE WITH THE KING OF NAVARRE—MASSACRE OF SAINT BARTHOLOMEW—HENRY, DUKE D'ANJOU, ELECTED SOVEREIGN OF POLAND—DEATH OF CHARLES IX.—ACCESSION OF HENRY III.—CONSPIRACY OF THE DUKE D'ALENCON—REVEALED BY MARGUERITE—HENRY OF NAVARRE ESCAPES FROM THE FRENCH COURT—HENRY OF NAVARRE PROTESTS AGAINST HIS ENFORCED OATH—MARGUERITE IS IMPRISONED BY HER BROTHER—THE DUKE D'ALENCON RETURNS TO HIS ALLEGIANCE—MARGUERITE JOINS HER HUSBAND AT BEARN—DOMESTIC DISCORD—MARRIAGE—PORTION OF MARGUERITE—COURT OF NAVARRE—DUPIN INSULTS THE QUEEN OF NAVARRE—CATHERINE DE MEDICIS INDUCES MARGUERITE TO RETURN TO FRANCE—THE DUKE D'ALENCON AGAIN REVOLTS—MARGUERITE ARRESTS A ROYAL COURIER—SHE IS BANISHED WITH IGNOMINY FROM THE FRENCH COURT—SHE IS DEPRIVED OF HER ATTENDANTS—HENRY OF NAVARRE REFUSES TO RECEIVE HER IN THE PALACE—MARGUERITE RETIRES TO AGEN—HER LICENTIOUSNESS—AGEN IS STORMED AND TAKEN BY THE MARSHAL DE MATIGNON—MARGUERITE ESCAPES TO THE FORTRESS OF CARLAT—THE INHABITANTS OF THE TOWN RESOLVE TO DELIVER HER UP TO THE FRENCH KING—SHE IS MADE PRISONER BY THE MARQUIS DE CANILLAC, AND CONVEYED TO USSON—SHE SEDUCES THE GOVERNOR OF THE FORTRESS—DEATH OF THE DUKE D'ALENCON—POVERTY OF MARGUERITE—ACCESSION OF HENRY IV.—HE EMBRACES THE CATHOLIC FAITH—HIS DISSIPATED HABITS—THE DUKE DE BOUILLON HEADS THE HUGUENOT PARTY—HENRY IV. PROCEEDS TO BRITTANY, AND THREATENS M. DE BOUILLON—FESTIVITIES AT RENNES—HENRY IV. BECOMES MELANCHOLY—HE RESOLVES TO DIVORCE MARGUERITE, AND TAKE A SECOND WIFE—EUROPEAN PRINCESSES—HENRY DESIRES TO MARRY LA BELLE GABRIELLE—SULLY EXPOSTULATES—SULLY PROPOSES A DIVORCE TO MARGUERITE—THE DUCHESS DE BEAUFORT INTRIGUES TO PREVENT THE MARRIAGE OF THE KING WITH MARIE DE MEDICIS—SHE BRIBES SILLERY—DIPLOMACY OF SILLERY—GABRIELLE ASPIRES TO THE THRONE OF FRANCE—HER DEATH—MARGUERITE CONSENTS TO A DIVORCE—THE POPE DECLARES THE NULLITY OF HER MARRIAGE—GRIEF OF THE KING AT THE DEATH OF GABRIELLE—ROYAL PLEASURES—A NEW INTRIGUE—MADEMOISELLE D'ENTRAGUES—HER TACT—HER CHARACTER—A LOVE-MESSENGER—VALUE OF A ROYAL FAVOURITE—COSTLY INDULGENCES—A PRACTICAL REBUKE—DIPLOMACY OF MADEMOISELLE D'ENTRAGUES—THE WRITTEN PROMISE—MADEMOISELLE D'ENTRAGUES IS CREATED MARQUISE DE VERNEUIL.

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THE LIFE
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CHAPTER I.

[1572.]

HOWEVER celebrated he was destined to become as a sovereign, Henri IV. of France was nevertheless fated to be singularly unfortunate as a husband. Immediately after the death of his mother, the high-hearted Jeanne d'Albret, whom he succeeded on the throne of Navarre, political considerations induced him to give his hand to Marguerite, the daughter of Henry II. and Catherine de Medicis, a princess whose surpassing beauty and rare accomplishments were the theme and marvel of all the European courts, and whose alliance was an object of ambition to many of the sovereign princes of Christendom.

Marguerite de Valois was born on the 14th of May, 1552, and became the wife of Henry of Navarre on

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the 18th of August, 1572, when she was in the full bloom of youth and loveliness; nor can there be any doubt that she was one of the most extraordinary women of her time; for while her grace and wit dazzled the less observant by their brilliancy, the depth of her erudition, her love of literature and the arts, and the solidity of her judgment, no less astonished those who were capable of appreciating the more valuable gifts which had been lavished upon her by nature. A dark shadow rested, however, upon the surface of this glorious picture. Marguerite possessed no moral self-government; her passions were at once the bane and the reproach of her existence; and while yet a mere girl her levity had already afforded ample subject for the comments of the courtiers.

Fortunately, in the rapid sketch which we are compelled to give of her career, it is unnecessary that we should do more than glance at the licentiousness of her private conduct; our business is simply to trace such an outline of her varying fortunes as may suffice to render intelligible the position of Henry IV. at the period of his second marriage.

After the death of Francis II., when internal commotion had succeeded to the feigned and hollow reconciliation which had taken place between Charles IX. and Henry de Lorraine, Duke de Guise,* Marguerite

* Henry de Lorraine, Duke de Guise, was the brother of Charles, Duke de Mayenne, and of Louis, Cardinal de Guise. He was the chief of the League, and excited a popular revolt on the

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and her younger brother, the Duke d'Alençon, were removed to the castle of Amboise for greater security; and she remained in that palace-fortress from her tenth year until 1564, when she returned to court, and thenceforward became one of the brightest ornaments of the royal circle. Henry de Guise was not long ere he declared himself her ardent admirer, and the manner in which the Princess received and encouraged his attentions left no doubt that the affection was reciprocal; so convinced, indeed, were those about her person of the fact, that M. du Gast, the favourite of the King her brother, earnestly entreated his Majesty no longer to confide to the Princess, as he had hitherto done, all the secrets of the state, as they could not, he averred fail, under existing circumstances, to be communicated to M. de Guise; and Charles IX. so fully appreciated the value of this advice, that he hastened to urge the same caution upon the Queen-mother. This sudden distrust and coldness on the part of her royal relatives was peculiarly irritating to Marguerite; nor was her mortification lessened by the fact that the Duke de Guise, first alarmed, and ultimately disgusted, by her unblushing irregularities, withdrew his pretensions to her hand; and, sacrificing his ambition to a

day of the Barricades, in the hope of possessing himself of the crown. Henry III. caused him to be assassinated at Blois, in the year 1588. He was distinguished as *le Balafré* by the people, in consequence of the deep scar of a wound across the face by which he was disfigured.

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sense of self-respect, selected as his wife, Catherine de Clèves, Princess de Portien.*

At this period Marguerite de Valois began to divide her existence between the most exaggerated devotional observances and the most sensual and degrading pleasures. Humbly kneeling before the altar, she would assist at several masses during the day; but at twilight she cast off every restraint; and careless of what was due, alike to her sex and to her rank, she plunged into the grossest dissipation; and after having played the guest at a riotous banquet, she might be seen sharing in the disgraceful orgies of a masquerade.† A short time after the marriage of the Duke de Guise, the hand of the Princess was demanded by Don Sebastian, King of Portugal; but the Queen-mother, who witnessed with alarm the increasing power of the Protestant party, and the utter impossibility of inspiring confidence in their leaders save by some bold and subtle stroke of policy, resolved to profit by the presence of the Huguenot King

* Catherine was the second daughter of François de Clèves, Duke de Nevers, and of Marguerite de Bourbon-Vendôme, the aunt of Henry IV. Her dower consisted of the county of Eu, in Normandy. She was twice married; first to Antoine de Croi, Prince de Portien, by whom she had no issue; and, secondly, to Henry de Lorraine, Duke de Guise. She died in 1633, at the age of eighty-five years.

† She heard three masses every day, one high and two low ones, and took the holy communion each week on the Thursdays, Fridays, and Sundays.—*Letter of Etienne Pasquier*, Book xxii, letter v, col. 666, of the folio edition.

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of Navarre, in order to overcome the distrust which not even the edict of 1570 had sufficed to remove; and to renew the project which had been already mooted during the lifetime of Jeanne d'Albret, of giving Marguerite in marriage to the young Prince, her son.

The consciousness that she was sacrificing her daughter by thus bestowing her hand upon the sovereign of a petty kingdom might perhaps have deterred Catherine, had she not already decided upon the means by which the bonds of so unequal an alliance might be rent asunder; and it is even possible that the hatred which she bore to the reformed faith would in itself have sufficed to render such an union impossible, had not the crafty and compunctionless spirit by which she was animated inspired her with a method which would more than expiate the temporary sin. It is at all events certain, that having summoned Henry of Navarre to her presence, she unhesitatingly, and with many professions of regard for himself, informed him of the overtures of the Portuguese monarch, assuring him at the same time, that although the King of Spain was opposed to the alliance from motives of personal interest, it was one which would prove highly gratifying to Gregory XIII.; but adding that both Charles IX. and herself were so anxious to perform the promise which they had made to his mother, and to prove their good faith to his own person, that they were willing to refuse the crown of Portugal, and to accept that of Navarre for the Princess.

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Henry of Bearn hesitated. He was aware that the chiefs of the Protestant party, especially the Admiral de Coligny whom he regarded as a father, were desirous that he should become the husband of Elizabeth of England. Past experience had rendered them suspicious of the French, while an alliance with the English promised them a strong and abiding protection. Nor was Henry himself more disposed to espouse Marguerite de Valois, as her early reputation for gallantry offended his sense of self-respect, while a strong attachment elsewhere rendered him insensible to her personal attractions. As a matter of ambition, the alliance was beyond his hopes, and brought him one step nearer to that throne which, by some extraordinary prescience, both he and his friends anticipated that he was destined one day to ascend;* but he could not forget that there were dark suspicions attached to the strange and sudden death of a mother to whom he had been devoted; and he felt doubly repugnant to receive a wife from the very hands which were secretly accused of having abridged his passage to the sovereignty of Navarre. Like Marguerite herself, moreover, he was not heart-whole; and thus he clung to the freedom of an unmarried life, and would fain have declined the honour which was pressed

* By some extraordinary presentiment they always imagined that they saw a King of France in the Prince of Navarre, even at a time when the greatest obstacles were opposed to such an idea.—*Dreux du Radier, Mémoires des Reines et Régentes de France*, vol. v, p. 130. See also “*Mémoires de Sully*,” vol. i, pp. 60—67.

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upon him ; but the wily Catherine, who instantly perceived his embarrassment, bade him carefully consider the position in which he stood, and the fearful responsibility which attached to his decision. Charles IX., in bestowing upon him the hand of his sister, gave to the Protestants the most decided and unequivocal proof of his sincerity. It was evident, she said, that despite the edict which assured protection to the Huguenot party, they still misdoubted the good-faith of the monarch ; but when he had also overlooked, or rather disregarded, the difference of faith so thoroughly as to give a Princess of France in marriage to one of their Princes, they would no longer have a pretext for discontent, and the immediate pacification of the kingdom must be the necessary consequence of such a concession. The ultimate issue of so unequal a conflict, could not, as she asserted, be for one moment doubtful ; but the struggle might be a bloody one, and he would do well to remember that the blood thus spilt would be upon his own head.

Henry then sought, as his mother had previously done, to create a difficulty by alleging that the difference of faith between himself and the Princess must tend to affect the validity of their marriage ; but the wily Italian met this objection by reminding him that Charles IX. had publicly declared that “rather than that the alliance should not take place, he would permit his sister to dispense with all the rites and ceremonies of both religions.”

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It is well known that the motive of the French king in thus urging, or rather insisting upon, a marriage greatly beneath the pretensions of the Princess, was simply to attract to court all the Huguenot leaders, who, placing little faith in the conciliatory edict, had resolutely abstained from appearing in the capital; but Catherine alluded so slightly to this fact that it awoke no misgivings in the mind of the young monarch.

Thus abjured, Henry of Navarre yielded; nor did the Princess on her part offer any violent opposition to the marriage. She objected, it is true, her religious scruples, and her attachment to her own creed; but her arguments were soon overruled, the hand of the King of Portugal was courteously declined, Philip of Spain was assured that his representations had decided the French court, and immediate preparations were made for the unhappy union, whose date was to be written in blood. The double ceremony, exacted by the difference of faith in the contracting parties, was performed, as we have said, on the 18th of August, 1572, the public betrothal having taken place on the preceding day at the Louvre; and it was accompanied by all the splendour of which it was susceptible. The marriage-service was performed by the Cardinal de Bourbon, on a platform erected in the front of the metropolitan church of Notre-Dame; whence, at its conclusion, the bridal train descended by a temporary gallery to the interior of the cathedral, and proceeded to the altar, where Henry, relinquishing the hand of his new-made