

THE MURDER AT BLOIS

DECEMBER 23RD, 1588.

TO us, who look back on it after three hundred and fifty years, the murder at Blois seems an inevitable climax to the continued provocation suffered by Henry III at the hands of his most powerful follower; but to the Duke of Guise, save in the last few minutes of all, it was a thing undreamed of and unfeared. 'So blind was that high mind of his to things as clear as daylight,' says Pierre de l'Estoile, that 'he could not bring himself to believe that the King intended to do him an ill-turn; for God had blinded his eyes, as he generally does to those whom he designs to chasten.'

In July of the year 1588, five months before the day of his death, the Duke, fresh from a victory in Alsace, rode triumphantly into Paris—and the King trembled at his subject's approach.

Henry de Guise was thirty-eight years of age. He was tall and well built. His hair was fair and curly, and he wore a close-trimmed beard. Across his left cheek still showed the scar which had been inflicted on him at the Battle of Dormans, thirteen years before, but he was none the less handsome for that. His was the perfect figure of a soldier. All were devoted to him, for his generosity, for his tireless energy, for his prompt actions and decisions. 'France went mad over this man,' said Balzac, 'to say they loved him is too weak an expression.'

At once, on the day of the Barricades, he won a personal triumph. The King fled to Chartres. Guise followed, forcing his terms upon him. He himself was to be appointed Lieutenant-General of France, and the States-General were to be convened at Blois.

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To this town the scene now shifts. On October 16th five hundred deputies are assembled to hear the opening speech of the King, and we catch one vivid glimpse of their true leader. 'Among them,' notes Matthieu, 'was conspicuous Henry, Duke of Guise, who, as great master of the royal household, sat near the throne, dressed in white satin, with his hood thrown carelessly backward; and from that elevated position he cast his eyes along the dense crowd before him that he might recognise and distinguish his followers, and encourage with a glance their reliance on his fortune and success; and thus, without uttering a word, might seem to say to each of them, 'I see you.'

Many were the warnings that the Duke received as November gave place to December, and the tension grew and grew. Even his close friend, the Archbishop of Lyons, urged a more modest bearing towards the King. 'You are wrong,' the Duke replied: 'I know him better than you do. You have to take him boldly. He is a king who likes to be frightened.' And, as he paced with his sovereign in the rose-gardens of the castle, with the crooked streets and red roofs spread below, he would forget too often who was Lord and Master—remembering only that this was a proved coward, a weak man surrounded by parrots, monkeys and little dogs—a man who, when the crown was placed on his head at Rheims, had loudly remarked that it hurt him!

On the evening of December 22nd a meeting of the Council dispersed at seven o'clock, and the King summoned it again for an early hour the following morning, on the pretext that he wished to prepare for Christmas celebrations. He instructed his chief equerry in a loud voice, that all could hear, to order his coach for four o'clock, as *he* intended to pray at a certain shrine. The Duke of Guise returned to his lodging, just outside the castle precincts, and on sit-

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ting down to dinner found a note lying on his napkin, which urged him to be on his guard. His cousin, the Duc d'Elboeuf, even told him distinctly that there would be an attempt on his life during the next day, but for all warnings he had only laughter and contempt. 'Plainly,' he answered, 'you have been searching the almanacs of the astrologers.'

It was three o'clock in the morning before the Duke came to his bedroom. There he found no fewer than five notes warning him to leave Blois immediately, and his servants—still awake and anxious—begged him to seek the protection of his troops. But he was tired, and had no thought for anything but sleep.

Within the castle walls a coach awaited the King's pious expedition in vain. At four o'clock he got up, it is true, but it was not to pray. Saying nothing to the Queen, who was frightened, he ascended to the top floor, where—one by one—he hid those young noblemen of his bodyguard whom he had chosen to rid him of the Duke.

At six, his Councillors slowly began to assemble. There was a clatter of hoofs and a creak of wheels in the courtyard as coaches drew up at the steps. Footmen ran to open doors and seize reins. The horses stamped impatiently because of the cold. It was not yet dawn, and the glare of torches lit up the scene in a strange half-light. Snow fell gently, flake by flake. Marshals d'Aumont and de Retz, Cardinals Vendôme and Gondi passed inside—half asleep, yawning—Rambouillet, d'O, Montholon—names full of history to France. At seven, the Cardinal de Guise, brother of the Duke, arrived with the Bishop of Lyons, and the King, looking from his window, was reassured to see that the plan was not suspected. But still the Duke himself had not come.

Guise did not wake until eight o'clock. He felt tired and unwell. Three further warnings had been sent

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him, but neither they nor the remonstrances of his valet made any impression. He dressed carelessly, putting on a new doublet of grey satin, far too light for the time of year, and—followed by his escort—walked rapidly over the drawbridge, through the castle gate, and into the courtyard. As he slowly climbed the handsome staircase to the Council chamber, yet another note was thrust into his hand. ‘That is the ninth to-day,’ he was heard to say laughingly, as he put it into his pocket. Larchant, Captain of the King’s bodyguard, ran up to him with some of his troops, begging payment of their wages. Vaguely, Guise promised to do his best for them, but his mind was on other things, and he was very tired. The soldiers fell back grumbling, and so blocked the way between the Duke and his escort. He passed through the tall doors into the great Council chamber.

He felt the cold through his thin coat and shivered a little. There was a twinge at his heart. He asked for a larger fire, and more logs were thrown on to the open hearth. His left eye, the one nearest the old scar, had tears in it—as was often the case when the Duke did not feel well. His nose began to bleed, and he sent a page out for a handkerchief. Holding his head in his hands, he sat bowed forwards on his seat. His usual jauntiness failed him to-day.

He remembered the household remedies prescribed for his weak heart, and leaned across to Monsieur de Morfontaine, the Treasurer. ‘I wonder if you would be so good as to ask M. de Saint-Prix—the King’s Steward—to give me some Damas currants, or some essence of roses,’ he said. After hurried inquiry in the kitchens, only some Brignolles plums could be found, and these the Duke began to eat, stuffing one or two into his little silver comfit-box as he did so.

One of the ‘*Maitres des Requêtes*’ began the reading of a report on the salt taxes, but little attention

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was given to it. The Councillors seemed anxious and uneasy. A cloud of impending tragedy hung over the long, panelled room, while the log fire crackled cheerfully, throwing faint shadows from the high-backed benches on to the floor. The pale light of early morning came fitfully through the dormer windows, pale as the features of the Duke himself. For the first time he was worried, frightened by the atmosphere of intrigue about this strange assembly. The eyes of the King's friends failed to meet his own, strove to hide their embarrassment, and waited—for a knock on the door. D'Aumont looked to the ground, tapping his foot impatiently. For the first time Guise felt himself absolutely in the King's hands, he began to realise that he was separated from his friends Then, more than he ever dreamed, was he at the mercy of the King—for Crillon, one of the leaders of that band of noblemen, the 'Quarante-cinq,' had just had the castle gate shut and ordered the doubling of the guard.

In the ante-chamber to his room, the King posted his eight assassins—young men they were, carefully chosen that they should have no love for Guise. When the Duke had been a few minutes in the Council chamber, he summoned one of his Secretaries of State, Revol, telling him to fetch Henry of Guise for a few minutes' conversation. The wretched fellow, guessing the import of his errand, went very white—but turned to carry out the order. 'My God, Revol, how pale you are!' exclaimed the King. 'Rub your cheeks, Revol, rub your cheeks!'

Suddenly the door of the Council chamber opened, and all eyes turned towards it, abruptly the report on the 'Gabelle' came to a stop. 'Monsieur, the King is asking for you; he is in his old room,' said Revol to the Duke, and withdrew as quickly as he had come. Guise, seeming not to notice his hurry or his emotion, slowly got to his feet, shutting the comfit-box with a

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snap. The rest of the plums he left on the table-cloth. 'Would any of you gentlemen care for them?' he asked. Leisurely, he threw his cloak over his left arm and held his long white gloves and the silver box in the same hand. For a moment, as an usher held open the door, he hesitated, thinking deeply, while his right hand fingered his beard—then, courteously saluting the Council, he strode quickly out. The usher closed the door behind him.

In a few steps he came to the door of the antechamber, where stood two guards—impassive as statues. He passed between them, and as he did so came his last warning, the tenth on that very day, a gesture that showed in what respect and confidence the soldiers held him—and gave him, even then, a chance to save his life. One of the guards stepped hard, and meaningly, on his toe.

Still, self-confidence did not fail the Duke, and, though the significance could hardly have escaped him, he went on his way 'as one who cannot avoid his fate.'

To his right, as he came into the antechamber, stood eight of the 'Quarante-cinq.' Slowly he walked through the room towards the curtain dividing off the King's bedchamber, as if expecting one of the company, in politeness, to draw it back for him. But, as no one made a move, he put up his right hand and touched it.

It was then that Saint-Maline struck him with his dagger on the back of the head, and the other seven threw themselves upon him.

Guise fought to draw his sword, but there was no time. He staggered into the bedroom. A chair was overturned with a crash. At last, dragging two of his assassins with him, he fell beside the King's bed—one hand clutching the rich hangings.

It was a peaceful room for cruel murder, with its raftered ceiling and handsome tapestries. Against the

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wall stood a 'prie-Dieu,' above it hung a large picture of the Crucifixion.

The noise of the disturbance reached the Council, and the Cardinal de Guise rose swiftly to his feet. 'Oh, they are killing my brother!' he shouted. 'Sit down, sir,' replied Marshal d'Aumont, as he drew his sword. 'The King has need of you as well.'

Hardly was the struggle over before Henry entered to inquire of its success. A glance at his conspirators was enough to show that the deed was done. One of the dogs sniffed the body up and down. The King spurned it with his foot. Over it they threw a worn carpet.

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It was a triumph not long enjoyed. A year later Henry was murdered by Clement the Jacobin: 'poorly and miserably slain,' says l'Estoile, 'in the flower of his age, in the midst of his garrison, surrounded, as always, by guards; in his chamber, close to his bed, by a little rascalion of a monk, with a jerk of his nasty little knife.'

'In his chamber, close to his bed.'

DEREK HUDSON.