Gaston de Latour

Pater, Walter, Monsman, Gerald

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CHAPTER VI

Shadows of Events

We all feel, I suppose, the pathos of that mythic situation in Homer, where the Greeks at the last throb of battle around the body of Patroclus find the horror of supernatural darkness added to their other foes; feel it through some touch of truth to our own experience how the malignancy of the forces against us may be doubled by their uncertainty and the resultant confusion of one's own mind—blindfold night there too, at the moment when daylight and self-possession are indispensable.

In that old dream-land of the Iliad such darkness is the work of a propitiable deity, and withdrawn at its pleasure; in life, it often persists obstinately. It was so with the agents on the terrible Eve of St. Bartholomew, 1572, when a man's foes were those of his own household. An ambiguity of motive and influence, a confusion of spirit amounting, as we approach the centre of action, to physical madness, encompasses those who are formally responsible for things; and the mist around that great crime, or great "accident," in which the gala weather of Gaston's coming to Paris broke up, leaving a sullenness behind it to remain for a generation, has never been penetrated. The doubt with which Charles the Ninth would seem to have left the world, doubt as to his own complicity therein, as well as to the precise nature, the course and scope, of the event itself, is still unresolved. So it was with Gaston also. The incident in his life which opened for him the profoundest sources of regret and pity, shaped as it was in a measure by those greater historic movements, owed its tragic significance there to an unfriendly shadow precluding knowledge how certain facts had really gone, a shadow which veiled from others a particular act of his and the true character of its motives.
For, the scene of events being now contracted very closely to Paris, the predestined actors therein were gradually drawn thither as into some narrow battle-field or slaughter-house or fell trap of destiny, and Gaston, all unconsciously, along with them—he and his private fortunes involved in those larger ones. Result of chance, or fate, or cunning prevision, there are in the acts great and little—the acts and the words alike—of the king and his associates, at this moment, coincidences which give them at least superficially the colour of an elaborate conspiracy. Certainly, as men looked back afterwards, all the seemingly random doings of those restless months ending in the Noces Vermeilles marriage of Henry of Navarre with Margaret of France, lent themselves agreeably to the theory of a great plot to crush out at one blow, in the interest of the reigning Valois, not the Huguenots only but the rival houses of Guise and Bourbon. The word, the act, from hour to hour through what presented itself at the time as a long-continued season of frivolity, suggested in retrospect alike to friend and foe the close connexion of a mathematical problem. And yet that damning coincidence of date, day and hour apparently so exactly timed, in the famous letter to the Governor of Lyons, by which Charles, the trap being now ready, seems to shut all the doors upon escaping victims, is admitted even by Huguenot historians to have been fortuitous. Gaston, recalling to mind the actual mien of Charles as he passed to and fro across the chimeric scene, timid, and therefore constitutionally trustful towards older persons, filially kissing the hand of the grim Coligni—Mon père! Mon père!—all his câlineries in that age of courtesy and assassinations—would wonder always in time to come, as the more equitable sort of historians have done, what amount of guilty foresight the young king had carried in his bosom. And this ambiguity regarding the nearest agent in so great a crime, adding itself to the general mystery of life, touched Gaston duly with a sense of the dim melancholy of man's position in the world. It might seem the function of some cruel or merely whimsical power, thus, by the flinging of mere dust through the air, to double our actual misfortunes. However carefully the critical intelligence in him might trim the balance, his imagination at all events would never be clear of the more plausible construction of events. In spite of efforts not to misjudge, in proportion to the clearness with which he recalled the visible footsteps of the "accursed" Valois, he saw them, irresistibly, in connexion with the end actually reached, moving to the sounds of wedding music, through a world of dainty gestures, amid sonnets and flowers, and perhaps the most refined art the world has seen, to their surfeit of blood.
And if those "accursed" Valois might plead to be judged refinedly, so would Gaston, had the opportunity come, have pleaded not to be misunderstood. Of the actual event he was not a spectator, and his sudden absence from Paris at that moment seemed to some of those he left there only a cruelly characteristic incident in the great treachery. Just before that delirious night set in, the news that his old grandfather lay mortally sick at Deux-manoirs had snatched him away to watch by the dying bed, amid the peaceful ministries of the religion which was even then filling the houses of Paris with blood. But the yellow-haired woman, light of soul, whose husband he had become by dubious and irregular Huguenot rites, the religious sanction of which he hardly recognised—flying after his last tender kiss, with the babe in her womb, from the ruins of her home, and the slaughter of her kinsmen, supposed herself treacherously deserted. For him, on the other hand, "the pity of it," the pity of the thing supplied all that had been wanting in its first consecration, and made the lost mistress really a wife. His recoil from that damaging theory of his conduct brought home to a sensitive conscience the fact that there had indeed been a measure of self-indulgent weakness in his acts, and made him the creature for the rest of his days of something like remorse.

The gaiety, the strange devils' gaiety of France, at least in all places whither its royalty came, ended appropriately in a marriage—a marriage of "The Reform" in the person of Prince Henry of Navarre, to Catholicism in the person of Margaret of Valois, Margaret of the "Memoirs," Charles's sister, in tacit defiance of, or indifference to, the Pope. With the great Huguenot leaders, with the princes of the house of Guise, and the Court, like one united family, all in gaudy evidence in its streets, Paris, ever with an eye for the chance of amusement, always preoccupied with the visible side of things, always Catholic—was hidden to be tolerant for a moment, to carry no firearms under penalties, "to renew no past quarrels," and draw no sword in any new one. It was the perfect stroke of Catherine's policy, the secret of her predominance over her sons, thus, with a flight of purchaseable fair women ever at command, to maintain perpetual holiday, perpetual idleness, with consequent perpetual, most often idle, thoughts about marriage, amid which the actual conduct of affairs would be left to herself. Yet for Paris thus Catholic, there was certainly, even if the Pope were induced to consent, and the Huguenot bridegroom to "conform," something illicit and inauspicious about this marriage within the prohibited degrees of kinship. In fact, the cunningly sought papal dispensation never came; Charles, with apparent unconcern, fulfilled his threat, and did without it; must needs however trick
the old Cardinal de Bourbon into performing his office, not indeed "in the face of the Church," but in the open air outside the doors of the cathedral of Notre-Dame, the Catholics quietly retreating to the interior, when that starveling ceremony was over, to hear the nuptial mass. Still, the open air, the August sunshine, had lent the occasion an irresistible physical gaiety in this hymeneal Assumption weather. Paris, suppressing its scruples, its conscientious and unconscientious hatreds, at least for a season, had adorned herself as that fascinating city always has been able to adorn herself, if with something of artifice, certainly with great completeness, almost to illusion. Whatever gloom the Middle Age with its sins and sorrows might have left there, was under gallant disguise to-day. In the train of the young married people, *jeunes premiers* in an engagement which was to turn out almost as transitory as a stage-play, a long month of masquerade meandered night and day through the public places. His carnality and hers, so startling in their later developments, showed now in fact but as the engaging force of youth, since youth, however unpromising its antecedents, can never have sinned irretrievably. Yet to curious retrospective minds not long afterwards, these graceful follies would seem tragic or allegoric, with an undercurrent of infernal irony throughout. Charles and his two brothers, keeping the gates of a mimic paradise in the court of the Louvre, while the fountains ran wine—were they already thinking of a time when they would keep those gates, with iron purpose, while the gutters ran blood?

If Huguenots were disgusted with the frivolities of the hour, passing on the other side of the street in sad attire, plotting, as some have thought, as their enemies will persuade the Pope, a yet more terrible massacre of their own, only anticipated by the superior force and shrewdness of the Catholics, on the very eve of its accomplishment—they did but serve just now to relieve the predominant white and red, and thereby double the brilliancy, of a gay picture. Yet a less than Machiavellian cunning might perhaps have detected, amid all this sudden fraternity—as in some unseasonably fine weather signs of coming distress—a risky element of exaggeration in those precipitately patched-up amities, a certain hollow ring in those improbable religious conversions, those unlikely reconciliations in what was after all an age of treachery as a fine art. With Gaston, however, the merely receptive and poetic sense of life was abundantly occupied with the spectacular value of the puissant figures in motion around him. If he went beyond the brilliancy of the present moment in his wonted pitiful, equitable after-thoughts, he was still concerned only with the more general aspects of the human lot, and did not reflect that every public movement, however generous in its tendency, is
really flushed to active force by identification with some narrower personal or purely selfish one. Coligni, "the Admiral," centre of Huguenot opposition, just, kind, grim, to the height of inspired genius, the grandest character his faith had yet produced—undeterred by those ominous voices (of aged women and the like) which are apt to beset all great actions, yielded readily to the womanish endearments of Charles, his filial words and fond touching of the hands, the face, aged at fifty-five—just this portion of his conduct let us hope being exclusive of his precise share in the "conspiracy." And the opportune death in Paris of the Huguenot Queen of Navarre only stirred question for a moment: autopsy revealed no traces of unfair play, though at a time credulous as to impossible poisoned perfumes and such things, romantic in its very suspicions.

Delirium was in the air already charged with thunder, and laid hold on Gaston too. It was as if through some unsettlement in the atmospheric medium the objects around no longer acted upon the senses with the normal result. Looking back afterwards, this singularly self-possessed person had to confess that under its influence he had lost for a while the exacter view of certain outlines, certain real differences and oppositions of things in that hotly coloured world of Paris (like a shaken tapestry about him) awaiting the Eve of Saint Bartholomew. Was the "undulant" philosophy of Monsieur de Montaigne, in collusion with this dislocating time, at work upon him, that, following with only too entire a mobility the experience of the hour, he found himself more than he could have thought possible the toy of external accident? Lodged in Abelard's quarter, he all but repeats Abelard's typical experience. His new Heloise, with capacities doubtless, as he reflected afterwards regretfully, for a refined and serious happiness, although actually so far only a man's plaything, sat daintily amid her posies and painted potteries in the window of a house itself as forbidding and stern as her kinsmen, busy Huguenot printers, well-to-do at a time not only fertile in new books and new editions, but profuse of tracts, sheets, satiric handbills for posting all over France. Gaston's curiosity, a kind of fascination he finds in their dark ways, takes him among them on occasion, to feel all the more keenly the contrast of that picture-like prettiness in this framing of their grim company, their grim abode. Her frivolity is redeemed by a sensitive affection for these people who protect her, by a self-accusing respect for their religion, for the somewhat surly goodness, the hard and unattractive pieties into which she cannot really enter; and she yearns after her like, for those harmless forbidden graces towards which she has a natural aptitude, loses her heart to Gaston as he goes to and fro, wastes her days in reminiscence of that bright
passage, notes the very fineness of his linen. To him, in turn, she seems, as all longing creatures ever have done, to have some claim upon him—a right to consideration—to an effort on his part: he finds a sister to encourage: she touches him, clings where she touches. The gloomy, honest, uncompromising Huguenot brothers interfere just in time to save her from the consequence of what to another than Gaston might have counted as only a passing fondness to be soon forgotten; and the marriage almost forced upon him seemed under its actual conditions no binding sacrament. A marriage really indissoluble in itself, and for the heart of Colombe sacramental, as he came afterwards to understand—for his own conscience at the moment, the transaction seemed to have but the transitoriness, as also the guilt of a vagrant love. A connexion so light of motive, so inexpressive of what seemed the leading forces of his character, he might, but for the sorrow which stained its actual issue, have regarded finally as a mere mistake, or an unmeaning accident in his career.

Coligni lay suffering in the fiery August from the shot of the ambiguous assassin which had missed his heart, amid the real or feigned regrets of the Guises, of the royal family, of his true friends, wondering as they watched whether the bullet had been a poisoned one. The other Huguenot leaders had had their warnings to go home, as the princes of the house of Navarre, Condé and Henry of Bearn, would fain have done—the gallant world about them being come just now to have certain suspicious resemblances to a prison or a trap. Under order of the king the various quarters of Paris had been distributed for some unrevealed purpose of offence or defence. To the officers in immediate charge it was intimated that "those of the new religion" designed "to rise against the king's authority, to the trouble of his subjects and the city of Paris. For the prevention of which conspiracy the king enjoined the Provost to possess himself of the keys of the various city gates, and seize all boats plying on the river, to the end that none might enter or depart." And just before the lists close around the doomed, Gaston has bounded away on his road homeward to the bed of the dying grandfather, after embracing his wife, anxious, if she might, to share his journey, with some forecast of coming evil among those dark people.

The white badges of Catholicism had been distributed, not to every Catholic (a large number of Catholics perished), to some Huguenots such as La Rochefoucauld, brave guerrier et joyeux compagnon, dear to Charles, hesitating still with some last word of conscience in his ear at the very gate of the Louvre, when a random pistol-shot, in the still undisturbed August night, rousing sudden fear for himself, precipitates the event, and as if in delirium he is driven forth on the scent of human blood. He had always hunted like a
madman. It was thus “the matins of Paris” began, in which not religious zealots only assisted, but the thieves, the wanton, the un-employed, the reckless children, les enfants massacreurs like those seen dragging an insulted dead body to the Seine, greed or malice or the desire for swift settlement of some long-pending law-suit finding here an opportunity. A religious pretext had brought into sudden evidence all the latent ferocities of a corrupt though dainty civilisation; and while the stairways of the Louvre, the streets, the vile trap-doors of Paris, run blood, far away at Deux-manoirs Gaston watches as the light creeps over the silent cornfields, the last sense of it in those aged eyes now ebbing softly away. The village priest, almost as aged, assists patiently with his immemorial consolations at this long, leisurely, scarce perceptible ending to a long, leisurely life, on the quiet double-holiday morning.

The wild news of public disaster, penetrating along the country roads now bristling afresh with signs of universal war, seemed of little consequence in comparison with that closer grief at home, which made just then the more effective demand on his sympathy, till the thought came of the position of Colombe—his wife left behind there in Paris. Immediate rumour, like subsequent history, gave variously the number—the number of thousands—who perished. The great Huguenot leader was dead, one party at least, the royal party, safe for the moment and in high spirits. As Charles himself put it, the ancient private quarrel between the houses of Guise and Châtillon was ended by the decease of the chief of the latter, Coligni de Châtillon—a death so saintly after its new fashion that the long-delayed vengeance of Henri de Guise on the presumed instigator of the murder of his father seemed a martyrdom. And around that central barbarity the slaughter had spread over Paris in widening circles. With conflicting thoughts, in wild terror and grief, Gaston seeks the footsteps of Colombe, of her people, from their rifled and deserted house to the abodes of their various acquaintance, like the traces of wrecked men under deep water. Yet even amid his private distress, queries on points of more general interest in the event would not be excluded. With whom precisely, in whose interest had the first guilty motion been?—Gaston on the morrow asked in vain as the historian asks still. And more and more as he picked his way among the direful records of the late massacre, not the cruelty only but the obscurity, the accidental character, yet, alas! also the treachery, of the public event seemed to identify themselves tragically with his own personal action. Those queries, those surmises were blent with the enigmatic sense of his own helplessness amid the obscure forces around him, which would fain compromise the indifferent, and had made him so far an
accomplice in their unfriendly action that he felt certainly not quite guiltless, thinking of his own irresponsible, self-centered, passage along the ways, through the weeks that had ended in the public crime and his own private sorrow. Pity for those unknown or half-known neighbours whose faces he must often have looked on—

"ces pauvres morts!"—took an almost remorseful character from his grief for the delicate creature whose vain longings had been perhaps but a rudimentary aptitude for the really high things himself had represented to her fancy, the refined happiness to which he might have helped her. The being whose one claim had lain in her incorrigible lightness, came to seem representative of the suffering of the whole world in its plenitude of piteous detail, in those unvalued caresses, that desire towards himself, that patient half-expressed claim not to be wholly despised, poignant now for ever. For he failed to find her: and her brothers being presumably dead, all he could discover of a certainty from the last survivor of her more distant kinsmen was the fact of her flight into the country, already in labour it was thought, and in the belief that she had been treacherously deserted, like many another at that great crisis. In the one place in the neighbourhood of Paris with which his knowledge connected her he seeks further tidings, but he hears only of her passing through it, as of a passage into vague infinite space; a little onward, dimly of her death, with the most damaging view of his own conduct presented with all the condemnatory resources of Huguenot tongues, but neither of the place nor the circumstances of that event, nor whether, as seemed hardly probable, the child survived. It was not till many years afterwards that he stood by her grave, still with no softening of the cruel picture driven then as with fire into his soul; her affection, her confidence in him still contending with the suspicions, the ill-concealed antipathy to him of her hostile brothers, the distress of her flight, half in dread to find the husband she was pursuing with the wildness of some lost child, who seeking its parents begins to suspect treacherous abandonment. That most mortifying view of his actions had doubtless been further enforced on her by others, the worst possible reading, to her own final discomiture, of a not unfaithful heart.