

St. Bartholomew's Day

In August 1572 the royal wedding took place. Three days later, Coligny, as he was walking to his lodgings, was shot at from a window by a servant of the young Duke of Guise. The admiral was, however, but slightly wounded.

When Charles heard what had happened, he was playing tennis with the duke. In one of his violent fits of anger, he dashed his racket to the ground, breaking it to pieces, while he cried, 'Shall I never have rest then?' He went to see Coligny the same day, and was with him a long while, telling him how grieved he was at the accident, and how determined he was to punish the Guises for the outrage. Thus the admiral's trust in the king remained unbroken.

But in this attack on Coligny, Catherine saw her chance. She went to her son and convinced him that the Guises would certainly accuse him of having encouraged the attack on the admiral, and that the Huguenots would then once more fly to arms.

'It would be better,' said the cruel queen-mother, 'to win a battle in Paris, where we hold all the chiefs in our clutches, than put it to hazard in the field.'

For more than an hour and a half Charles was true to the admiral, and refused to allow any attack to be made on the Huguenots. But when Catherine burst into tears, and again threatened to leave the court, his mother's influence proved too strong for the unstable king.

In one of his wild fits of passion he now rose from his seat, crying, 'Since you think proper to kill the admiral, I consent, but all the Huguenots as well, in order that there remain not one to reproach me afterwards. Give the orders at once.'

Catherine de Medici was not the woman to hesitate. It was Saturday when the king spoke. The next day, Sunday, August 24, 1572, the Feast of St. Bartholomew, was fixed for the awful deed.

The Guises were well pleased, only they wished that the Bourbons and the Montmorencies might be slain as well as the Huguenot chiefs and their followers. This Catherine sternly forbade.

As for the king, he went to the Louvre, where he had had a forge set up, and worked with all his strength that he might tire himself, and so forget what in his mad fit of anger he had recklessly allowed to be done in his name.

On the morning of Saturday, August 23rd, the streets of Paris were crowded as was usual, but as the evening crept on apace a strange feeling of danger seemed to haunt every corner and doorway. Strange shadows flitted stealthily hither and thither. People moved and spoke as though under a sense of some great impending horror, they knew not why.

The admiral, serene in his unconsciousness of the influence that had made the king break faith with him, went early to bed on Saturday night, ill and restless, but untouched by ominous forebodings.

Suddenly, between one and two o'clock on Sunday morning, a bell rang out upon the stillness of the summer night. It was the signal agreed upon by Catherine and her followers for the assassination of all the Huguenots in Paris.

No sooner had the single bell sounded than, at once, from every belfry in the city an answering bell was heard.

Clang, clang, loud and insistent the noise fell upon startled ears, until at length the city awoke, wide-eyed, to see everywhere armed men with torches, bearing in their hats or on their sleeves a white cross, the badge of the Cardinal Guise.

Then followed horrors of which I cannot tell, save that every Huguenot, and many as well who knew nothing of the new faith, men, women, little children, all whom the queen-mother's soldiers or the Paris mob could find, were cruelly put to death.

Admiral Coligny was one of the first to perish. He had been sleepless, and when the bells rang out he did not take long to guess what they foretold. He quickly rose, put on his dressing-gown, and said to the Huguenot minister who had been sitting by his bed, 'Pray for me. I commend my soul to my Saviour. I have long been prepared for death.'

Then, unselfish to the last, he bade his terrified servants go try to save themselves. And they obeyed, running upstairs, and so on to the roof of the house.

Almost at once the door of the bedroom was burst open, and a young man belonging to the Guises entered, saying, 'Art thou not the admiral?'

'Young man,' answered Coligny, 'thou comest against a wounded and aged man. Thou 'lt not shorten my life by much.'

Almost before his brave words were uttered, the admiral was stabbed to death and his body flung out of the window into the street below, where the Duke of Guise waited with impatience to make sure that his enemy had perished.

By dawn the terrible work was well-nigh done. Paris was as a city of the dead. In the provinces the Huguenots had also been slain.

The palace itself had been the scene of many a painful death. Even there no Huguenot was spared, save the surgeon of the king and Charles's old nurse. To his surgeon, Charles, whose remorse had already begun, said, 'I wish the helpless and the innocent had not been included.'

In the church of St. Peter, at Rome, a thanksgiving service was held because so many heretics had been slain.

But when a little later the Pope heard how the Huguenots had been entrapped and sent unaware to their death, he wept.

'When certain of my lords, the cardinals who were beside him, asked wherefore he wept, and was sad at so goodly a despatch of those wretched folk, enemies of God and his Holiness,' he answered, 'I weep at the means the king used, exceeding unlawful and forbidden of God, for to inflict such punishment. I fear that amongst so many dead folk there died as many innocent as guilty.'

All Europe was aghast at the terrible massacre of St. Bartholomew's Day, and from none save Philip II did Charles receive any sign of approval. He in his zeal offered to send soldiers, should the French king need them, to complete the destruction of the Huguenots.

After that never-to-be-forgotten Sunday in August, Charles IX had no peace of mind.

To escape from the memory that haunted him, he would hunt for twelve or fourteen hours, stopping only to eat and snatch a few moments to sleep, or he would work for long hours at his forge.

Two unhappy years passed slowly away, and then, in the spring of 1574, Charles fell ill.

His Huguenot nurse watched over him and slept in his room during his illness.

One night, when she had lain down upon a chest and was just beginning to doze, hearing the king moaning, weeping, sighing, she went full gently up to the bed.

' "Ah, nurse, nurse," said Charles, "what bloodshed, what murders! Ah, what evil counsel have I followed! O my God, forgive me them, and have mercy upon me, if it may please Thee." '

Then the kind old nurse comforted her young master, telling him the guilt lay upon the heads of those who made him do the deed. 'Of yourself, sire, you never would,' she said, begging the poor king to cease weeping.

'And thereupon she fetched him a pocket-handkerchief, because his own was soaked with tears.'

In May 1574 Charles IX died, having made Catherine de Medici once again regent over the kingdom of France.