

The Massacre of St. Bartholomew

The most famous incident in the French wars of religion is the Massacre of St. Bartholomew, which happened in Paris on St. Bartholomew's day, August 24, 1572. The whole thing may have begun because the Queen Mother, Catherine de Medici, was jealous of the influence of the Protestant (called Huguenot) leader Admiral Coligny over her idiot son, King Charles IX. She first attempted to have Coligny bumped off, but when the attack failed it somehow seemed a good idea (!) to use the opportunity to execute all of the Protestants in Paris. There were indeed a lot of them there to celebrate the marriage of Catherine's daughter Margaret to the Huguenot leader Henry of Navarre (who would survive and eventually become France's most popular king, Henry IV). Once the massacre began (at signal from the church bells of Paris) some 3,000 men, women, and children were butchered. Throughout France, the number may have risen to 70,000. We have a colorful account of the story from Princess Margaret herself, whom the French later came to call "Queen Margot."

For my part, I was told nothing about all this. But I saw everybody agitated—the Huguenots in despair because of the attempt on Coligny, the Guises fearing they would have justice done, and all on the alert. The Huguenots suspected me as a Catholic, and the Catholics as the wife of the King of Navarre, who was a Huguenot: nobody told me anything.

[Now we come to the night of the massacre.] One evening, at my mother the Queen's evening reception, I was sitting on a chest near my sister of Lorraine, who was looking very depressed. The Queen, who was talking to some people, saw me, and told me to go to bed. When I had made my curtsey, my sister took me by the arm, and stopped me, bursting into tears, and said, "For God's sake, sister, don't go." This terrified me. The Queen noticed what had happened, and called my sister, and abused her, and told her she was not to say anything to me. My sister told her it was not right to send me off to sacrifice myself like that, and that, if "they" discovered anything, they would certainly avenge themselves on me.

The Queen answered that "Please God, I should come to no harm: but that in any case I must go, for fear of rousing any suspicion that would spoil the plan"; I could see they were disputing, though I did not understand what they said. At last my mother told me again, roughly, to go to bed. My sister, in tears, said goodnight to me, but dared not add another word. For my part, I seemed to see everything changed and lost, without being able to imagine what there was to fear.

Directly I reached my room I prayed God to take me under His protection, and to keep me safe, without knowing from what or from whom. Just then my husband the King, who had already gone to bed, sent for me to come to bed too. So I did, and found his bed surrounded by thirty or forty Huguenots whom I didn't yet know, having been married only a few days. All night they did

nothing but talk of the attempt which had been made on the Admiral's life : they resolved that, as soon as it was day, they would ask justice from the King against M. de Guise, and that if he refused it they would execute it themselves. For my part, I couldn't forget my sister's tears, and couldn't sleep for fear of the warning she had given me, though I didn't know what it meant

So the night passed, without a wink of sleep. At day-break the King [i.e. of Navarre, her husband] said he was going to play tennis till King Charles was awake, when he would at once demand justice of him. He left my room, and all his gentlemen with him. Seeing that it was daylight, and thinking that the danger of which my sister had spoken was now past, and overcome with sleep, I told my nurse to shut the door, so that I could sleep quietly.

An hour later, when I was fast asleep, there came a man beating on the door with his hands and feet, crying "Navarre! Navarre!" My nurse, thinking it was my husband the King, ran quickly to the door and opened it. It was a gentleman named M. de L eran, with a sword-wound on his elbow and another from a halberd on his arm; and he was still being pursued by four archers, who all came after him into my room. To save his life, he threw himself on my bed. Feeling him clutching me, I dragged myself into the space behind the bed, and him after me, holding me all the time in front of his body. I didn't know the man at all, and had no idea whether he had come to insult me, or whether the archers were attacking him or me. We both shrieked, and each was as frightened as the other.

At last, thank God, M. le Nancay, the captain of the Guard, came up, and finding me in such a position, though he was sorry enough, couldn't help laughing. He abused the archers for their indiscretion, and got rid of them, and granted me the life of the poor man who was holding on to me. So I put him to bed, and nursed his wounds in my room, till he was completely recovered. I changed my nightgown, too, because the man had covered it with his blood : and M. de Nancay told me what had happened, and assured me that my husband was in the King's room, and would come to no harm. So I threw on a dressing gown, and he took me to my sister's room, where I arrived more dead than alive; for just as I reached the lobby, all the doors of which were open, a gentleman named Bourse, trying to escape from some archers who were pursuing him, was run through by a halberd-stroke three paces from me; I fell the opposite way, half fainting, into the arms of M. de Nancay, and thought that the blow had pierced us both.

When I felt a little better, I went to my sister's bedroom. Whilst I was there, M. de Miossans, my husband's first gentleman, and Armagnac, his first footman, came to look for me, to beg me to save their lives. I went and threw myself on my knees before the King, and my mother the Queen, to ask this favour, which at last they granted.