

Chicot the Jester

By

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Chapter 1

THE WEDDING OF ST. LUC.

On the evening of a Sunday, in the year 1578, a splendid fête was given in the magnificent hotel just built opposite the Louvre, on the other side of the water, by the family of Montmorency, who, allied to the royalty of France, held themselves equal to princes. This fête was to celebrate the wedding of François d'Épinay de St. Luc, a great friend and favorite of the king, Henri III., with Jeanne de Crossé-Brissac, daughter of the marshal of that name.

The banquet had taken place at the Louvre, and the king, who had been with much difficulty induced to consent to the marriage, had appeared at it with a severe and grave countenance. His costume was in harmony with his face; he wore that suit of deep chestnut, in which Clouet described him at the wedding of Joyeuse; and this kind of royal specter, solemn and majestic, had chilled all the spectators, but above all the young bride, at whom he cast many angry glances. The reason of all this was known to everyone, but was one of those court secrets of which no one likes to speak.

Scarcely was the repast finished, when the king had risen abruptly, thereby forcing everyone to do the same. Then St. Luc approached him, and said: "Sire, will your majesty do me the honor to accept the fête, which I wish to give to you this evening at the Hôtel Montmorency?" This was said in an imploring tone, but Henri, with a voice betraying both vexation and anger, had replied:

"Yes, monsieur, we will go, although you certainly do not merit this proof of friendship on our part."

Then Madame de St. Luc had humbly thanked the king, but he turned his back without replying.

"Is the king angry with you?" asked the young wife of her husband.

"I will explain it to you after, mon amie, when this anger shall have passed away."

"And will it pass away?"

"It must."

Mademoiselle de Brissac was not yet sufficiently Madame de St. Luc to insist further; therefore she repressed her curiosity, promising herself to satisfy it at a more favorable time.

They were, therefore, expecting St. Luc at the Hôtel Montmorency, at the moment in which our story commences. St. Luc had invited all the king's friends and all his own; the princes and their favorites, particularly those of the Duc d'Anjou. He was always in opposition to the king, but in a hidden manner, pushing forward those of his friends whom the example of La Mole and Coconnas had not cured. Of course, his favorites and those of the king lived in a state of antagonism, which brought on rencontres two or three times a month, in which it was rare that some one was not killed or badly wounded.

As for Catherine, she was at the height of her wishes; her favorite son was on the throne, and she reigned through him, while she pretended to care no more for the things of this world. St. Luc, very uneasy at the absence of all the royal family, tried to reassure his father-in-law, who was much distressed at this menacing absence. Convinced, like all the world, of the friendship of Henri for St. Luc, he had believed he was assuring the royal favor, and now this looked like a disgrace. St. Luc tried hard to inspire in them a security which he did not feel himself; and his friends, Maugiron, Schomberg, and Quelus, clothed in their most magnificent dresses, stiff in

their splendid doublets, with enormous frills, added to his annoyance by their ironical lamentations.

"Eh! mon Dieu! my poor friend," said Jacques de Levis, Comte de Quelus, "I believe now that you are done for. The king is angry that you would not take his advice, and M. d'Anjou because you laughed at his nose."

"No, Quelus, the king does not come, because he has made a pilgrimage to the monks of the Bois de Vincennes; and the Duc d'Anjou is absent, because he is in love with some woman whom I have forgotten to invite."

"But," said Maugiron, "did you see the king's face at dinner? And as for the duke, if he could not come, his gentlemen might. There is not one here, not even Bussy."

"Oh! gentlemen," said the Duc de Brissac, in a despairing tone, "it looks like a complete disgrace. Mon Dieu! how can our house, always so devoted to his majesty, have displeased him?"

The young men received this speech with bursts of laughter, which did not tend to soothe the marquis. The young bride was also wondering how St. Luc could have displeased the king. All at once one of the doors opened and the king was announced.

"Ah!" cried the marshal, "now I fear nothing; if the Duc d'Anjou would but come, my satisfaction would be complete."

"And I," murmured St. Luc; "I have more fear of the king present than absent, for I fear he comes to play me some spiteful tricks."

But, nevertheless, he ran to meet the king, who had quitted at last his somber costume, and advanced resplendent in satin, feathers, and jewels.

But at the instant he entered another door opened just opposite, and a second Henri III., clothed exactly like the first, appeared, so that the courtiers, who had run to meet the first, turned round at once to look at the second.

Henri III. saw the movement, and exclaimed:

"What is the matter, gentlemen?"

A burst of laughter was the reply. The king, not naturally patient, and less so that day than usual, frowned; but St. Luc approached, and said:

"Sire, it is Chicot, your jester, who is dressed exactly like your majesty, and is giving his hand to the ladies to kiss."

Henri laughed. Chicot enjoyed at his court a liberty similar to that enjoyed thirty years before by Triboulet at the court of François I., and forty years after by Longely at the court of Louis XIII. Chicot was not an ordinary jester. Before being Chicot he had been "De Chicot." He was a Gascon gentleman, who, ill-treated by M. de Mayenne on account of a rivalry in a love affair, in which Chicot had been victorious, had taken refuge at court, and prayed the king for his protection by telling him the truth.

"Eh, M. Chicot," said Henri, "two kings at a time are too much."

"Then," replied he, "let me continue to be one, and you play Duc d'Anjou; perhaps you will be taken for him, and learn something of his doings."

"So," said Henri, looking round him, "Anjou is not here."

"The more reason for you to replace him. It is settled, I am Henri, and you are François. I will play the king, while you dance and amuse yourself a little, poor king."

"You are right, Chicot, I will dance."

"Decidedly," thought De Brissac, "I was wrong to think the king angry; he is in an excellent humor."

Meanwhile St. Luc had approached his wife. She was not a beauty, but she had fine black eyes, white teeth, and a dazzling complexion.

"Monsieur," said she to her husband, "why did they say that the king was angry with me; he has done nothing but smile on me ever since he came?"

"You did not say so after dinner, dear Jeanne, for his look then frightened you."

"His majesty was, doubtless, out of humor then, but now--"

"Now, it is far worse; he smiles with closed lips. I would rather he showed me his teeth. Jeanne, my poor child, he is preparing for us some disagreeable surprise. Oh I do not look at me so tenderly, I beg; turn your back to me. Here is Maugiron coming; converse with him, and be amiable to him."

"That is a strange recommendation, monsieur."

But St. Luc left his wife full of astonishment, and went to pay his court to Chicot, who was playing his part with a most laughable majesty.

The king danced, but seemed never to lose sight of St. Luc. Sometimes he called him to repeat to him some pleasantries, which, whether droll or not, made St. Luc laugh heartily. Sometimes he offered him out of his comfit box sweetmeats and candied fruits, which St. Luc found excellent. If he disappeared for an instant, the king sent for him, and seemed not happy if he was out of his sight. All at once a voice rose above all the tumult.

"Oh!" said Henri, "I think I hear the voice of Chicot; do you hear, St. Luc?-- the king is angry."

"Yes, sire, it sounds as though he were quarreling with some one."

"Go and see what it is, and come back and tell me."

As St. Luc approached he heard Chicot crying:

"I have made sumptuary laws, but if they are not enough I will make more; at least they shall be numerous, if they are not good. By the horn of Beelzebub, six pages, M. de Bussy, are too much."

And Chicot, swelling out his cheeks, and putting his hand to his side, imitated the king to the life.

"What does he say about Bussy?" asked the king, when St. Luc returned. St. Luc was about to reply, when the crowd opening, showed to him six pages, dressed in cloth of gold, covered with chains, and bearing on their breasts the arms of their masters, sparkling in jewels. Behind them came a young man, handsome and proud; who walked with his head raised and a haughty look, and whose simple dress of black velvet contrasted with the splendor of his pages. This was Bussy d'Amboise. Maugiron, Schomberg, and Quelus had drawn near to the king.

"See," said Maugiron, "here is the servant, but where is the master? Are you also in disgrace with him, St. Luc?"

"Why should he follow Bussy?" said Quelus.

"Do you not remember that when his majesty did M. de Bussy the honor to ask him if he wished to belong to him, he replied that, being of the House of Clermont, he followed no one, and belonged to himself."

The king frowned.

"Yes," said Maugiron, "whatever you say, he serves the Duc d'Anjou."

"Then it is because the duke is greater than the king."

No observation could have been more annoying to the king than this, for he detested the Duc d'Anjou. Thus, although he did not answer, he grew pale.

"Come, come, gentlemen," said St. Luc, trembling, "a little charity for my guests, if you please; do not spoil my wedding day."

"Yes," said the king, in a mocking tone; "do not spoil St. Luc's wedding-day."

"Oh!" said Schomberg, "is Bussy allied to the Brissacs?--since St. Luc defends him."

"He is neither my friend nor relation, but he is my guest," said St. Luc. The king gave an angry look. "Besides," he hastened to add, "I do not defend him the least in the world."

Bussy approached gravely behind his pages to salute the king, when Chicot cried:

"Oh, la! Bussy d'Amboise, Louis de Clermont, Comte de Bussy, do you not see the true Henri, do you not know the true king from the false? He to whom you are going is Chicot, my jester, at whom I so often laugh."

Bussy continued his way, and was about to bow before the king, when he said:

"Do you not hear, M. de Bussy, you are called?" and, amidst shouts of laughter from his minions, he turned his back to the young captain. Bussy reddened with anger, but he affected to take the king's remark seriously, and turning round towards Chicot:

"Ah! pardon, sire," said he, "there are kings who resemble jesters so much, that you will excuse me, I hope, for having taken a jester for a king."

"Hein," murmured Henri, "what does he say?"

"Nothing, sire," said St. Luc.

"Nevertheless, M. Bussy," said Chicot; "it was unpardonable."

"Sire, I was preoccupied."

"With your pages, monsieur," said Chicot; "you ruin yourself in pages, and, par la mordieu, it is infringing our prerogatives."

"How so? I beg your majesty to explain."

"Cloth of gold for them, while you a gentleman, a colonel, a Clermont, almost a prince, wear simple black velvet."

"Sire," said Bussy, turning towards the kings' minions, "as we live in a time when lackeys dress like princes, I think it good taste for princes to dress like lackeys."

And he returned to the young men in their splendid dress the impertinent smiles which they had bestowed on him a little before. They grew pale with fury, and seemed only to wait the king's permission to fall upon Bussy.

"Is it for me and mine that you say that?" asked Chicot, speaking like the king.

Three friends of Bussy's now drew near to him. These were Charles d'Antragues, François, Vicomte de Ribeirac, and Livarot. Seeing all this, St. Luc guessed that Bussy was sent by Monsieur to provoke a quarrel. He trembled more than ever, for he feared the combatants were about to take his house for a battle-field. He ran to Quelus, who already had his hand on his sword, and said, "In Heaven's name be moderate."

"Parbleu, he attacks you as well as us."

"Quelus, think of the Duc d'Anjou, who supports Bussy; you do not suppose I fear Bussy himself?"

"Eh! Mordieu, what need we fear; we belong to the king. If we get into peril for him he will help us."

"You, yes; but me," said St. Luc, piteously.

"Ah dame, why do you marry, knowing how jealous the king is in his friendships?"

"Good," thought St. Luc, "everyone for himself; and as I wish to live tranquil during the first fortnight of my marriage, I will make friends with M. Bussy." And he advanced towards him. After his impertinent speech, Bussy had looked round the room to see if any one would take notice of it. Seeing St. Luc approach, he thought he had found what he sought.

"Monsieur," said he, "is it to what I said just now, that I owe the honor of the conversation you appear to desire?"

"Of what you have just said, I heard nothing. No, I saw you, and wished to salute you, and thank you for the honor you have done me by your presence here."

Bussy, who knew the courage of St. Luc, understood at once that he considered the duties of a host paramount, and answered him politely.

Henri, who had seen the movement said, "Oh, oh! I fear there is mischief there; I cannot have St. Luc killed. Go and see, Quelus; no, you are too rash--you, Maugiron."

But St. Luc did not let him approach Bussy, but came to meet him and returned with him to the king.

"What have you been saying to that coxcomb?" asked the king.

"I, sire?"

"Yes, you."

"I said, good evening."

"Oh! was that all?"

St. Luc saw he was wrong. "I said, good evening; adding, that I would have the honor of saying good morning to-morrow."

"Ah! I suspected it."

"Will your majesty keep my secret?" said St. Luc.

"Oh! parbleu, if you could get rid of him without injury to yourself----"

The minions exchanged a rapid glance, which Henri III. seemed not to notice.

"For," continued he, "his insolence is too much."

"Yes, yes," said St. Luc, "but some day he will find his master."

"Oh!" said the king, "he manages the sword well. Why does he not get bit by some dog?" And he threw a spiteful glance on Bussy, who was walking about, laughing at all the king's friends.

"Corbleu!" cried Chicot, "do not be so rude to my friends, M. Bussy, for I draw the sword, though I am a king, as well as if I was a common man."

"If he continue such pleasantries, I will chastise Chicot, sire," said Maugiron.

"No, no, Maugiron, Chicot is a gentleman. Besides, it is not he who most deserves punishment, for it is not he who is most insolent."

This time there was no mistaking, and Quelus made signs to D'O and D'Epernon, who had been in a different part of the room, and had not heard what was going on. "Gentlemen," said Quelus, "come to the council; you, St. Luc, go and finish making your peace with the king."

St. Luc approached the king, while the others drew back into a window.

"Well," said D'Epernon, "what do you want? I was making love, and I warn you, if your recital be not interesting I shall be very angry."

"I wish to tell you that after the ball I set off for the chase."

"For what chase?"

"That of the wild boar."

"What possesses you to go, in this cold, to be killed in some thicket?"

"Never mind, I am going."

"Alone?"

"No, with Maugiron and Schomberg. We hunt for the king."

"Ah! yes, I understand," said Maugiron and Schomberg.

"The king wishes a boar's head for breakfast to-morrow."

"With the neck dressed à l'Italienne," said Maugiron, alluding to the turn-down collar which Bussy wore in opposition to their ruffs.

"Ah, ah," said D'Epernon, "I understand."

"What is it?" asked D'O, "for I do not."

"Ah! look round you."

"Well!"

"Did any one laugh at us here?"

"Yes, Bussy."

"Well, that is the wild boar the king wants."

"You think the king----"

"He asks for it."

"Well, then, so be it. But how do we hunt?"

"In ambush; it is the surest."

Bussy remarked the conference, and, not doubting that they were talking of him, approached, with his friends.

"Look, Antragues, look, Ribeirac," said he, "how they are grouped; it is quite touching; it might be Euryale and Nisus, Damon and Pythias, Castor and----. But where is Pollux?"

"Pollux is married, so that Castor is left alone."

"What can they be doing?"

"I bet they are inventing some new starch."

"No, gentlemen," said Quelus, "we are talking of the chase."

"Really, Signor Cupid," said Bussy; "it is very cold for that. It will chap your skin."

"Monsieur," replied Maugiron, politely, "we have warm gloves, and doublets lined with fur."

"Ah! that reassures me," said Bussy; "do you go soon?"

"To-night, perhaps."

"In that case I must warn the king; what will he say to-morrow, if he finds his friends have caught cold?"

"Do not give yourself that trouble, monsieur," said Quelus, "his majesty knows it."

"Do you hunt larks?" asked Bussy, with an impertinent air.

"No, monsieur, we hunt the boar. We want a head. Will you hunt with us, M. Bussy?"

"No, really, I cannot. To-morrow I must go to the Duc d'Anjou for the reception of M. de Monsoreau, to whom monseigneur has just given the place of chief huntsman."

"But, to-night?"

"Ah! To-night, I have a rendezvous in a mysterious house of the Faubourg St. Antoine."

"Ah! ah!" said D'Epernon, "is the Queen Margot here, incognito, M. de Bussy?"

"No, it is some one else."

"Who expects you in the Faubourg St. Antoine?"

"Just so, indeed I will ask your advice, M. de Quelus."

"Do so, although I am not a lawyer, I give very good advice."

"They say the streets of Paris are unsafe, and that is a lonely place. Which way do you counsel me to take?"

"Why, I advise you to take the ferry-boat at the Pré-aux-Clercs, get out at the corner, and follow the quay until you arrive at the great Châtelet, and then go through the Rue de la Tixanderie, until you reach the faubourg. Once at the corner of the Rue St. Antoine, if you pass the Hôtel des Tournelles without accident, it is probable you will arrive safe and sound at your mysterious house."

"Thanks for your route, M. de Quelus, I shall be sure to follow it." And saluting the five friends, he went away.

As Bussy was crossing the last saloon where Madame de St. Luc was, her husband made a sign to her. She understood at once, and going up, stopped him.

"Oh! M. de Bussy," said she, "everyone is talking of a sonnet you have made."

"Against the king, madame?"

"No, in honor of the queen; do tell it to me."

"Willingly, madame," and, offering his arm to her, he went off, repeating it.

During this time, St. Luc drew softly near his friends, and heard Quelus say:

"The animal will not be difficult to follow; thus then, at the corner of the Hôtel des Tournelles, opposite the Hôtel St. Pol."

"With each a lackey?" asked D'Epernon.

"No, no, Nogaret, let us be alone, and keep our own secret, and do our own work. I hate him, but he is too much a gentleman for a lackey to touch."

"Shall we go out all six together?"

"All five if you please," said St. Luc.

"Ah! it is true, we forgot your wife."

They heard the king's voice calling St. Luc.

"Gentlemen," said he, "the king calls me. Good sport, au revoir."

And he left them, but instead of going straight to the king, he ran to where Bussy stood with his wife.

"Ah! monsieur, how hurried you seem," said Bussy. "Are you going also to join the chase; it would be a proof of your courage, but not of your gallantry."

"Monsieur, I was seeking you."

"Really."

"And I was afraid you were gone. Dear Jeanne, tell your father to try and stop the king, whilst I say a few words tête-à-tête to M. Bussy." Jeanne went.

"I wish to say to you, monsieur," continued St. Luc, "that if you have any rendezvous to-night, you would do well to put it off, for the streets are not safe, and, above all, to avoid the Hôtel des Tournelles, where there is a place where several men could hide. This is what I wished to say; I know you fear nothing, but reflect."

At this moment they heard Chicot's voice crying, "St. Luc, St. Luc, do not hide yourself, I am waiting for you to return to the Louvre."

"Here I am, sire," cried St. Luc, rushing forward. Near Chicot stood the king, to whom one page was giving his ermine mantle, and another a velvet mask lined with satin.

"Sire," said St. Luc, "I will have the honor of lighting your majesties to your litters."

"No," said Henri, "Chicot goes one way, and I another. My friends are good-for-nothings, who have run away and left me to return alone to the Louvre. I had counted on them, and you cannot let me go alone. You are a grave married man, and must take me back to the queen. Come, my friend, my litter is large enough for two."

Madame de St. Luc, who had heard this, tried to speak, and to tell her father that the king was carrying away her husband, but he, placing his fingers on his month, motioned her to be silent.

"I am ready, sire," said he, "to follow you."

When the king took leave, the others followed, and Jeanne was left alone. She entered her room, and knelt down before the image of a saint to pray, then sat down to wait for her husband's return. M. de Brissac sent six men to the Louvre to attend him back. But two hours after one of them returned, saying, that the Louvre was closed and that before closing, the captain of the watch had said, "It is useless to wait longer, no one will leave the Louvre to-night; his majesty is in bed."

The marshal carried this news to his daughter.