

Chapter 43

HOW CHICOT BLESSED KING LOUIS II. FOR HAVING INVENTED POSTING, AND RESOLVED TO PROFIT BY IT.

Chicot, to whom our readers will now permit us to return, after his last adventure, went on as rapidly as possible. Between the duke and him would now exist a mortal struggle, which would end only with life. Mayenne, wounded in his body, and still more grievously in his self-love, would never forgive him. Skillful in all mimicry, Chicot now pretended to be a great lord, as he had before imitated a good bourgeois, and thus never prince was served with more zeal than M. Chicot, when he had sold Ernanton's horse and had talked for a quarter of an hour with the postmaster. Chicot, once in the saddle, was determined not to stop until he reached a place of safety, and he went as quickly as constant fresh relays of horses could manage. He himself seemed made of iron, and, at the end of sixty leagues, accomplished in twenty hours, to feel no fatigue. When, thanks to this rapidity, in three days he reached Bordeaux, he thought he might take breath. A man can think while he gallops, and Chicot thought much. What kind of prince was he about to find in that strange Henri, whom some thought a fool, others a coward, and all a renegade without firmness. But Chicot's opinion was rather different to that of the rest of the world; and he was clever at divining what lay below the surface. Henri of Navarre was to him an enigma, although an unsolved one. But to know that he was an

enigma was to have found out much. Chicot knew more than others, by knowing, like the old Grecian sage, that he knew nothing. Therefore, where most people would have gone to speak freely, and with their hearts on their lips, Chicot felt that he must proceed cautiously and with carefully-guarded words. All this was impressed on his mind by his natural penetration, and also by the aspect of the country through which he was passing. Once within the limits of the little principality of Navarre, a country whose poverty was proverbial in France, Chicot, to his great astonishment, ceased to see the impress of that misery which showed itself in every house and on every face in the finest provinces of that fertile France which he had just left. The woodcutter who passed along, with his arm leaning on the yoke of his favorite ox, the girl with short petticoats and quiet steps, carrying water on her head, the old man humming a song of his youthful days, the tame bird who warbled in his cage, or pecked at his plentiful supply of food, the brown, thin, but healthy children playing about the roads, all said in a language clear and intelligible to Chicot, "See, we are happy here."

Often he heard the sound of heavy wheels, and then saw coming along the wagon of the vintages, full of casks and of children with red faces. Sometimes an arquebuse from behind a hedge, or vines, or fig-trees, made him tremble for fear of an ambush, but it always turned out to be a hunter, followed by his great dogs, traversing the plain, plentiful in hares, to reach the mountain, equally full of partridges and heathcocks. Although the season was advanced, and Chicot had left Paris full of fog and hoar-frost, it was here warm and fine. The great trees, which had not yet entirely lost their leaves, which, indeed, in the south they

never lose entirely, threw deep shadows from their reddening tops.

The Béarnais peasants, their caps over one ear, rode about on the little cheap horses of the country, which seem indefatigable, go twenty leagues at a stretch, and, never combed, never covered, give themselves a shake at the end of their journey, and go to graze on the first tuft of heath, their only and sufficing repast.

"Ventre de biche!" said Chicot; "I have never seen Gascony so rich. I confess the letter weighs on my mind, although I have translated it into Latin. However, I have never heard that Henriot, as Charles IX. called him, knew Latin; so I will give him a free French translation."

Chicot inquired, and was told that the king was at Nerac. He turned to the left to reach this place, and found the road full of people returning from the market at Condom. He learned, for Chicot, careful in answering the questions of others, was a great questioner himself, that the king of Navarre led a very joyous life, and was always changing from one love to another.

He formed the acquaintance of a young Catholic priest, a sheep-owner, and an officer, who had joined company on the road, and were traveling together. This chance association seemed to him to represent Navarre, learned, commercial, and military.

The officer recounted to him several sonnets which had been made on the loves of the king and the beautiful La Fosseuse, daughter of Rene de

Montmorency, baron de Fosseux.

"Oh!" said Chicot; "in Paris, we believe that the king is mad about Mlle. de Rebours."

"Oh! that is at Pau."

"What! has the king a mistress in every town?"

"Very likely; I know that he was the lover of Mlle. de Dayelle, while I was in garrison at Castelnaudry."

"Oh! Mlle. Dayelle, a Greek, was she not?"

"Yes," said the priest; "a Cyprian."

"I am from Agen," said the merchant; "and I know that when the king was there he made love to Mlle. de Tignonville."

"Ventre de biche!" said Chicot; "he is a universal lover. But to return to Mlle. Dayelle; I knew her family."

"She was jealous and was always threatening; she had a pretty little poniard, which she used to keep on her work-table, and one day, the king went away and carried the poniard with him, saying that he did not wish any misfortune to happen to his successor."

"And Mlle. de Rebours?"

"Oh! they quarreled."

"Then La Fosseuse is the last?"

"Oh! mon Dieu! yes; the king is mad about her."

"But what does the queen say?"

"She carries her griefs to the foot of the crucifix," said the priest.

"Besides," said the officer, "she is ignorant of all these things."

"That is not possible," said Chicot.

"Why so?"

"Because Nerac is not so large that it is easy to hide things there."

"As for that, there is a park there containing avenues more than 3,000 feet long of cypresses, plane trees, and magnificent sycamores, and the shade is so thick it is almost dark in broad daylight. Think what it must be at night."

"And then the queen is much occupied."

"Occupied?"

"Yes."

"With whom, pray?"

"With God, monsieur," said the priest.

"With God?"

"Yes, the queen is religious."

"Religious! But there is no mass at the palace, is there?"

"No mass; do you take us for heathens? Learn, monsieur, that the king goes to church with his gentlemen, and the queen hears mass in her private chapel."

"The queen?"

"Yes."

"Queen Marguerite?"

"Yes; and I, unworthy as I am, received two crowns for officiating there; I even preached a very good sermon on the text, 'God has separated the wheat from the chaff.' It is in the Bible, 'God will

separate,' but as it is a long time since that was written, I supposed that the thing was done."

"And the king?"

"He heard it, and applauded."

"I must add," said the officer, "that they do something else than hear mass at the palace; they give good dinners--and the promenades! I do not believe in any place in France there are more mustaches shown than in the promenades at Nerac."

Chicot knew Queen Marguerite well, and he knew that if she was blind to these love affairs, it was when she had some motive for placing a bandage over her eyes.

"Ventre de biche!" said he, "these alleys of cypresses, and 3,000 feet of shade, make me feel uncomfortable. I am coming from Paris to tell the truth at Nerac, where they have such deep shade, that women do not see their husbands walking with other women. Corbiou! they will be ready to kill me for troubling so many charming promenades. Happily I know the king is a philosopher, and I trust in that. Besides, I am an ambassador, and sacred."

Chicot entered Nerac in the evening, just at the time of the promenades which occupied the king so much. Chicot could see the simplicity of the royal manners by the ease with which he obtained an audience. A valet

opened the door of a rustic-looking apartment bordered with flowers, above which was the king's antechamber and sitting-room. An officer or page ran to find the king, wherever he might be when any one wished for an audience, and he always came at the first invitation. Chicot was pleased with this; he judged the king to be open and candid, and he thought so still more when he saw the king coming up a winding walk bordered with laurels and roses, an old hat on his head, and dressed in a dark green doublet and gray boots, and with a cup and ball in his hand. He looked gay and happy, as though care never came near him.

"Who wants me?" said he to the page.

"A man who looks to me half courtier, half soldier."

Chicot heard these words, and advanced.

"It is I, sire."

"What! M. Chicot in Navarre! Ventre St. Gris! welcome, dear M. Chicot!"

"A thousand thanks, sire."

"Quite well? Ah, parbleu! we will drink together, I am quite delighted.

Chicot, sit down there." And he pointed to a grass bank.

"Oh no, sire!"

"Have you come 200 leagues for me to leave you standing? No, no; sit down; one cannot talk standing."

"But, sire, respect--"

"Respect! here in Navarre! You are mad, my poor Chicot."

"No, sire, I am not mad, but I am an ambassador."

A slight frown contracted Henri's brow, but disappeared at once.

"Ambassador, from whom?"

"From Henri III. I come from Paris and the Louvre, sire."

"Oh! that is different. Come with me," said the king, rising, with a sigh.

"Page, take wine up to my room. Come, Chicot, I will conduct you."

Chicot followed the king, thinking, "How disagreeable! to come and trouble this honest man in his peace and his ignorance. Bah! he will be philosophical."