

## Chapter 51

### CHICOT'S ASTONISHMENT AT FINDING HIMSELF SO POPULAR IN NERAC.

Chicot, having taken his resolution, began to prepare his little packet. "How much time will it take me," thought he, as he did so, "to carry to the king the news of what I have seen and fear? Two days to arrive at a city whence the governor can send couriers; Cahors, for example, of which Henri of Navarre thinks so much. Once there, I can rest, for after all a man must rest some time. Come, then, Chicot, speed and sang froid. You thought you had accomplished your mission, and you are but half-way through it."

Chicot now extinguished the light, opened his door softly, and began to creep downstairs on tip-toe.

He went into an antechamber, but he had hardly gone four steps before he kicked against something. This something was D'Aubiac lying on a mat.

"Ah! good-evening, M. d'Aubiac," said Chicot, "but get out of the way a little, I beg; I want to go for a walk."

"Ah! but it is forbidden to walk by night near this castle."

"Why so?"

"Because the king fears robbers, and the queen lovers."

"Diable!"

"None but robbers or lovers want to walk at night, when they ought to be sleeping."

"However, dear M. d'Aubiac," said Chicot, with his most charming smile, "I am neither the one nor the other, but an ambassador, very tired from having talked Latin with the queen and supped with the king; let me go out then, my friend, for I want a walk."

"In the city, M. Chicot?"

"Oh no! in the gardens."

"Peste! that is still more forbidden than in the city."

"My little friend, you are very vigilant for your age. Have you nothing to occupy yourself with?"

"No."

"You neither gamble nor fall in love."

"To gamble one must have money, M. Chicot, and to be in love, one must find a lady."

"Assuredly," said Chicot, and feeling in his pocket he drew out ten pistoles and slipped them into the page's hand, saying, "Seek well in your memory, and I bet you will find some charming woman, to whom I beg you to make some presents with this."

"Oh, M. Chicot!" said the page, "it is easy to see that you come from the court of France; you have manners to which one can refuse nothing: go then, but make no noise."

Chicot went on; glided like a shadow into the corridor, and down the staircase, but at the bottom he found an officer sleeping on a chair, placed right against the door, so that it was impossible to pass.

"Ah! little wretch of a page," murmured Chicot, "you knew this."

Chicot looked round him to see if he could find no other way by which he could escape with the assistance of his long legs. At last he saw what he wanted: it was an arched window, of which the glass was broken. Chicot climbed up the wall with his accustomed skill, and without making more noise than a dry leaf in the autumn wind; but unluckily, the opening was not big enough, so when he had got his head and one shoulder through, and had taken away his foot from its resting place on the wall, he found himself hanging between heaven and earth, without being able either to advance or retreat.

He began then a series of efforts, of which the first result was to tear

his doublet and scratch his skin. What rendered his position more difficult was his sword, of which the handle would not pass, making a hook by which Chicot hung on to the sash. He exerted all his strength, patience and industry, to unfasten the clasp of his shoulder-belt; but it was just on this clasp that his body leaned, therefore he was obliged to change his maneuver, and at last he succeeded in drawing his sword from its sheath and pushing it through one of the interstices; the sword therefore fell first on the flagstones, and Chicot now managed to get through after it. All this, however, was not done without noise, therefore Chicot, on rising, found himself face to face with a soldier.

[Illustration: CHICOT, ON RISING, FOUND HIMSELF FACE TO FACE WITH A SOLDIER.]

"Ah! mon Dieu! have you hurt yourself, M. Chicot?" said he.

Chicot was surprised, but said, "No, my friend, not at all."

"That is very lucky; there are not many people who could do such a thing."

"But how the devil did you know my name?"

"I saw you to-day at the palace, and asked who was the gentleman that was talking with the king."

"Well! I am in a hurry; allow me to pass."

"But no one goes out of the palace by night; those are my orders."

"But you see they do come out, since I am here."

"Yes, but--"

"But what?"

"You must go back, M. Chicot."

"Oh! no."--"How! no?"

"Not by that way, at all events; it is too troublesome."

"If I were an officer instead of a soldier, I would ask you why you come out so; but that is not my business, which is only that you should go back again. Go in, therefore, M. Chicot, I beg you."

And the soldier said this in such a persuasive tone, that Chicot was touched. Consequently he put his hand in his pocket and drew out another ten pistoles.

"You must understand, my friend," said he, "that as I have torn my clothes in passing through once, I should make them still worse by going back again, and should have to go naked, which would be very indecent in

a court where there are so many young and pretty women; let me go then to my tailor." And he put the money in his hand.

"Go quickly then, M. Chicot," said the man.

Chicot was in the street at last. The night was not favorable for flight, being bright and cloudless, and he regretted the foggy nights of Paris, where people might pass close to each other unseen. The unfortunate fugitive had no sooner turned the corner of the street than he met a patrol. He stopped of himself, thinking it would look suspicious to try and pass unseen.

"Oh, good-evening, M. Chicot!" said the chief; "shall we reconduct you to the palace? You seem as though you had lost your way."

"It is very strange," murmured Chicot, "every one knows me here." Then aloud, and as carelessly as he could, "No, cornet, I am not going to the palace."

"You are wrong, M. Chicot," replied the officer, gravely.

"Why so, monsieur?"

"Because a very severe edict forbids the inhabitants of Nerac to go out at night without permission and without a lantern."

"Excuse me, monsieur, but this edict cannot apply to me, who do not

belong to Nerac."

"But you are at Nerac. Inhabitant means living at; now you cannot deny that you live at Nerac, since I see you here."

"You are logical, monsieur. Unluckily, I am in a hurry; make an exception to your rule, and let me pass, I beg."

"You will lose yourself, M. Chicot; Nerac is a strange town. Allow three of my men to conduct you to the palace."

"But I am not going there, I tell you."

"Where are you going, then?"

"I cannot sleep well at night, and then I always walk. Nerac is a charming city, and I wish to see it."

"My men shall conduct you where you please."

"Oh, monsieur, I would rather go alone."

"You will be assassinated."

"I have my sword."

"Ah, true; then you will be arrested for bearing arms."

Chicot, driven to despair, drew the officer aside, and said:

"Come, monsieur, you are young; you know what love is--an imperious tyrant."

"Doubtless, M. Chicot."

"Well, cornet, I have a certain lady to visit."

"Where?"

"In a certain place."

"Young?"

"Twenty-three years old."

"Beautiful?"

"As the graces."

"I felicitate you, M. Chicot."

"Then you will let me pass?"

"It seems I must."



"And alone; I cannot compromise--"

"Of course not; pass on, M. Chicot."

"You are a gallant man, cornet. But how did you know me?"

"I saw you at the palace with the king. Apropos, which way are you going?"

"Toward the Porte of Agen. Am I not in the right road?"

"Yes, go straight on; I wish you success."

"Thank you;" and Chicot went on. But before he had taken a hundred steps he met the watch.

"Peste! this town is well guarded," thought Chicot.

"You cannot pass!" cried the provost, in a voice of thunder.

"But, monsieur, I want--"

"Ah, M. Chicot, is it you? In the streets in this cold?" asked the officer.

"Ah, decidedly! It must be a bet," thought Chicot; and, bowing, he

tried to pass on.

"M. Chicot, take care!" said the provost.

"Take care of what?"

"You are going wrong; you are going toward the gates."

"Just so."

"Then I arrest you!"

"Not so, monsieur; you would be very wrong."

"However--"

"Approach, monsieur, that your soldiers may not hear."

The man approached.

"The king has given me a commission for the lieutenant of the Porte of Agen."

"Ah!"

"That astonishes you?"

"Yes."

"It ought not, since you know me."

"I know you from having seen you at the palace with the king."

Chicot stamped his foot impatiently. "That should prove to you that I possess the king's confidence."

"Doubtless; go on, M. Chicot, and execute your commission."

"Come," thought Chicot, "I advance slowly, but I do advance. *Ventre de biche!* here is a gate; it must be that of Agen; in five minutes I shall be out."

He arrived at the gate, which was guarded by a sentinel walking up and down, his musket on his shoulder.

"My friend, will you open the gate for me?" said Chicot.

"I cannot, M. Chicot," replied the man, "being only a private soldier."

"You also know me?" cried Chicot in a rage.

"I have that honor; I was on guard at the palace this morning, and saw you talking with the king."

"Well! my friend, the king has given me a very urgent message to convey to Agen; open the postern for me."

"I would with pleasure, but I have not the keys."

"And who has them?"

"The officer for the night."

Chicot sighed.

"And where is he?"

The soldier rang a bell to wake his officer.

"What is it?" said he, passing his head through a window.

"Lieutenant, it is a gentleman who wants the gate opened."

"Ah! M. Chicot," cried the officer, "I will be down in a moment."

"What! does every one know me?" cried Chicot. "Nerac seems a lantern, and I the candle."

"Excuse me, monsieur," said the officer, approaching, "but I was asleep."

"Oh! monsieur, that is what night is made for; will you be good enough to open the door. Unluckily, I cannot sleep, for the king, whom you doubtless also saw me talking to--"

"Yes, I did, monsieur."

"Of course!" growled Chicot. "Well! the king has sent me on a commission to Agen; this is the right gate, is it not?"

"Yes, M. Chicot."

"Will you please to have it opened?"

"Of course. Anthenas, open the gate quickly for M. Chicot."

Chicot began to breathe; the door creaked on its hinges, and opened, and Chicot saw liberty through it.

"Adieu! monsieur," said he, advancing.

"Adieu! M. Chicot, a pleasant journey.--But stay, one moment; I have forgotten to ask for your pass," cried he, seizing Chicot by the sleeve to stop him.

"How! my pass?"

"Certainly, M. Chicot; you know what a pass is? You understand that no

one can leave a town like Nerac without a pass, particularly when the king is in it."

"And who must sign this pass?"

"The king himself; so if he sent you he cannot have forgotten to give you a pass."

"Ah! you doubt that the king sent me?" cried Chicot, with flashing eyes, for he saw himself on the point of failing, and had a great mind to kill the officer and sentinel, and rush through the gate.

"I doubt nothing you tell me, but reflect that if the king gave you this commission--"

"In person, monsieur."

"All the more reason, then: if he knows you are going out, I shall have to give up your pass to-morrow morning to the governor."--"And who is he?"

"M. de Mornay, who does not jest with disobedience, M. Chicot."

Chicot put his hand to his sword, but another look showed him that the outside of the gate was defended by a guard who would have prevented his passing if he had killed the officer and sentinel.

"Well!" said Chicot to himself, with a sigh; "I have lost my game," and he turned back.

"Shall I give you an escort, M. Chicot?" said the officer.

"No, thank you."

Chicot retraced his steps, but he was not at the end of his griefs. He met the chief of the watch, who said, "What! have you finished your commission already, M. Chicot? Peste! how quick you are!"

A little further on the cornet cried to him, "Well, M. Chicot, what of the lady; are you content with Nerac?"

Finally, the soldier in the courtyard said, "Cordieu! M. Chicot, the tailor has not done his work well; you seem more torn than when you went out."

Chicot did not feel inclined to climb back through the window: but by chance, or rather by charity, the door was opened, and he returned into the palace. Here he saw the page, who said, "Dear M. Chicot, shall I give you the key to all this?"

"Yes, serpent," murmured Chicot.

"Well! the king loves you so much, he did not wish to lose you."

"And you knew, and never told me?"

"Oh! M. Chicot, impossible! It was a state secret."

"But I paid you, knave."

"Oh! dear M. Chicot, the secret was worth more than ten pistoles."

Chicot returned to his room in a rage.