

Chapter 80

THE CORNE D'ABONDANCE.

The way along which Borromée led Chicot, never suspecting that he knew it as well as himself, recalled to our Gascon the happy days of his youth. How many times had he in those days, under the rays of the winter sun, or in the cool shade in summer, sought out this house, toward which a stranger was now conducting him. Then a few pieces of gold, or even of silver, jingling in his purse, made him happier than a king; and he gave himself up to the delightful pleasures of laziness, having no wife nor children starving, or scolding and suspicious, at home. Then Chicot used to sit down carelessly on the wooden bench, waiting for Gorenflo, who, however, was always exact to the time fixed for dinner; and then he used to study, with intelligent curiosity, Gorenflo in all his different shades of drunkenness.

Soon the great street of St. Jacques appeared to his eyes, the cloister of St. Benoit, and nearly in front of that the hotel of the Corne d'Abondance, rather dirty, and rather dilapidated, but still shaded by its planes and chestnuts, and embellished inside by its pots of shining copper, and brilliant saucepans, looking like imitations of gold and silver, and bringing real gold and silver into the pockets of the innkeeper. Chicot bent his back until he seemed to lose five or six inches of his height, and making a most hideous grimace, prepared to meet his old friend Bonhomet. However, as Borromée walked first, it was

to him that Bonhomet spoke, and he scarcely looked at Chicot, who stood behind. Time had left its traces on the face of Bonhomet, as well as on his house. Besides the wrinkles which seem to correspond on the human face to the cracks made by time on the front of buildings, M. Bonhomet had assumed airs of great importance since Chicot had seen him last. These, however, he never showed much to men of a warlike appearance, for whom he had always a great respect.

It seemed to Chicot that nothing was changed excepting the tint of the ceiling, which from gray had turned to black.

"Come, friend," said Borromée, "I know a little nook where two men may talk at their ease while they drink. Is it empty?" continued he, turning to Bonhomet.

Bonhomet answered that it was, and Borromée then led Chicot to the little room already so well known to all readers of "Chicot, the Jester."

"Now," said Borromée, "wait here for me while I avail myself of a privilege granted to the habitués of this house."

"What is that?"

"To go to the cellar and fetch one's own wine."

"Ah! a jolly privilege. Go, then."

Borromée went out. Chicot watched him disappear, and then went to the wall and raised a picture, representing Credit killed by bad paymasters, behind which was a hole, through which you could see into the public room. Chicot knew this hole well, for it was his own making.

On looking through, he perceived Borromée, after placing his finger on his lips, as a sign of caution, say something to Bonhomet, who seemed to acquiesce by a nod of the head, after which Borromée took a light, which was always kept burning in readiness, and descended to the cellar. Then Chicot knocked on the wall in a peculiar manner. On hearing this knock, which seemed to recall to him some souvenir deeply rooted in his heart, Bonhomet started, and looked round him. Chicot knocked again impatiently, like a man angry at his first call not being answered. Bonhomet ran to the little room, and found Chicot standing there upright. At this sight Bonhomet, who, like the rest of the world, had believed Chicot dead, uttered a cry, for he believed he saw a ghost.

"Since when," said Chicot, "has a person like me been obliged to call twice?"

"Oh! dear M. Chicot, is it you or your shade?" cried Bonhomet.

"Whichever it be, since you recognize me, I hope you will obey me."

"Oh! certainly, dear M. Chicot."

"Then whatever noise you hear in this room, and whatever takes place here, do not come until I call you."

"Your directions will be the easier to obey, since they are exactly the same as your companion has just given to me."

"Yes, but if he calls, do not come--wait until I call."--"I will, M. Chicot."

"Good! now send away every one else from your inn, and in ten minutes let us be as free and as solitary here as if we came to fast on Good Friday."

"In ten minutes, M. Chicot, there shall not be a soul in the hotel excepting your humble servant."

"Go, Bonhomet; you are not changed, I see."

"Oh! mon Dieu! mon Dieu!" said Bonhomet, as he retired, "what is about to take place in my poor house?"

As he went, he met Borromée returning from the cellar with his bottles.

We do not know how Bonhomet managed, but when the ten minutes had expired, the last customer was crossing the threshold of the door, muttering:

"Oh! oh! the weather is stormy here to-day; we must avoid the storm."