Chapter 81

WHAT HAPPENED IN THE LITTLE ROOM.

When the captain re-entered the room with a basket in his hand containing a dozen bottles, he was received by Chicot with smiles. Borromée was in haste to uncork his bottles, but his haste was nothing to Chicot's; thus the preparations did not take long, and the two companions began to drink. At first, as though their occupation was too important to be interrupted, they drank in silence. Chicot uttered only these words:

"Par ma foi! this is good Burgundy."

They drank two bottles in this way; at the third, Chicot raised his eyes to heaven, and said:

"Really, we are drinking as though we wished to intoxicate ourselves."

"It is so good," replied Borromée.

"Ah! it pleases you. Go on, friend; I have a strong head."

And each of them swallowed another bottle. The wine produced on each of them an opposite effect--it unloosened Chicot's tongue, and tied that of Borromée.

"Ah!" murmured Chicot, "you are silent; then you doubt yourself."

"Ah!" said Borromée to himself, "you chatter; then you are getting tipsy." Then he asked Chicot, "How many bottles does it take you?"

"For what?"

"To get lively."

"About four."

"And to get tipsy?"

"About six."

"And dead drunk?"

"Double."

"Boaster!" thought Borromée, "he stammers already, and has only drunk four. Come, then, we can go on," said he, and he drew out a fifth for Chicot and one for himself.

But Chicot remarked that of the five bottles ranged beside Borromée some were half full, and others two-thirds; none were empty. This confirmed him in his suspicions that the captain had bad intentions with regard to

him. He rose as if to fetch his fifth bottle, and staggered as he did so.

"Oh!" said he, "did you feel?"

"What?"

"The earth trembling."

"Bah!"

"Yes, ventre de biche! Luckily the hotel of the Corne d'Abondance is solid, although it is built on a pivot."

"What! built on a pivot?"

"Doubtless, since it turns."

"True," said Borromée, "I felt the effects, but did not guess the cause."

"Because you are not a Latin scholar, and have not read the 'De Natura Rerum.' If you had, you would know that there is no effect without a cause."

"Well, my dear captain, for you are a captain like me, are you not?"

"Yes, from the points of my toes to the roots of my hair."

"Well, then, my dear captain, tell me, since there is no effect without a cause, as you say, what was the cause of your disguise?"

"What disguise?"

"That which you wore when you came to visit Dom Modeste."

"How was I disguised?"

"As a bourgeois."

"Ah! true."

"Will you tell me?"

"Willingly, if you will tell me why you were disguised as a monk. Confidence for confidence."

"Agreed," said Borromée.

"You wish to know, then, why I was disguised," said Chicot, with an utterance which seemed to grow thicker and thicker.

"Yes, it puzzles me."

"And then you will tell me?"

"Yes, that was agreed."

"Ah! true; I forgot. Well, the thing is very simple; I was a spy for the king."

"A spy?"

"Yes."

"Is that, then, your profession?"

"No, I am an amateur."

"What were you spying there?"

"Every one. Dom Modeste himself, then Brother Borromée, little Jacques, and the whole convent."

"And what did you discover, my friend?"

"First, that Dom Modeste is a great fool."

"It does not need to be very clever to find that out."

"Pardon me; his majesty Henri the Third, who is no fool, regards him as

one of the lights of the Church, and is about to make a bishop of him."

"So be it; I have nothing to say against that promotion; on the contrary, it will give me a good laugh. But what else did you discover?"

"I discovered that Brother Borromée was not a monk but a captain."

"Ah! you discovered that?"

"At once."

"Anything else?"

"I discovered that Jacques was practicing with the foils before he began with the sword."

"Ah! you discovered that also. Anything else."

"Give me more to drink, or I shall remember nothing."

"Remember that you are beginning your sixth bottle," said Borromée laughing.

"Did we not come here to drink?"

"Certainly we did."

"Let us drink then."

"Well," said Borromée, "now do you remember?"

"What?"

"What else you saw in the convent."

"Well, I saw that the monks were really soldiers, and instead of obeying Dom Modeste, obeyed you."

"Ah, truly: but doubtless that was not all?"

"No; but more to drink, or my memory will fail me."

And as his bottle was empty, he held out his glass for more.

"Well, now do you remember?"

"Oh, yes, I should think so."

"Well, what else?"

"I saw that there was a plot."

"A plot!" cried Borromée, turning pale.

"Yes, a plot."

"Against whom?"

"Against the king."

"Of what nature?"

"To try and carry him off."

"When?"

"When he was returning from Vincennes."

"Sacre!"

"What did you say?"

"Nothing. And you found out that?"

"Yes."

"And warned the king?"

"Parbleu! that was what I came for."

"Then you were the cause of the attempt failing?"

"Yes, I."

"Hang him!" murmured Borromée.

"What did you say?"

"I said that you have good eyes, my friend."

"Bah! I have seen more than that; pass me one of your bottles, and I will tell you what I have seen."

Borromée hastened to comply with Chicot's desire.

"Let me hear," said he.

"Firstly, I have seen M. de Mayenne wounded."

"Bah!"

"No wonder, he was on my route. And then I have seen the taking of Cahors."

"How? the taking of Cahors?"

"Certainly. Ah! captain, it was a grand thing to see, and a brave man like you would have been delighted."

"I do not doubt it. You were, then, near the king of Navarre?"

"Side by side, my friend, as we are now."

"And you left him?"

"To announce this news to the king of France."

"Then you have been at the Louvre?"

"Yes, just before you."

"Then, as we have not quitted each other since, I need not ask you what you have done."

"On the contrary, ask; for that is the most curious of all."

"Tell me, then."

"Tell! oh, it is very easy to say tell."

"Try."

"One more glass of wine, then, to loosen my tongue. Quite full; that will do. Well, I saw, comrade, that when you gave the king the Duc de Guise's letter, you let another fall."

"Another!" cried Borromée, starting up. "Yes, it is there."

And having tried two or three times, with an unsteady hand, he put his finger on the buff doublet of Borromée, just where the letter was. Borromée started, as though Chicot's finger had been a hot iron, and had touched his skin instead of his doublet.

"Oh, oh!" said he, "there is but one thing wanting."

"What is that?"

"That you should know to whom the letter is addressed."

"Oh, I know quite well; it is addressed to the Duchesse de Montpensier."

"Good heavens! I hope you have not told that to the king."

"No; but I will tell him."

"When?"

"When I have had a nap." And he let his arms fall on the table, and his head on them.

"Then as soon as you can walk you will go to the Louvre?"

"I will."

"You will denounce me."

"I will denounce you."

"Is it not a joke?"

"What?"

"That you will tell the king after your nap."

"Not at all. You see, my dear friend," said Chicot, half raising his head, "you are a conspirator, and I am a spy; you have a plot, and I denounce you; we each follow our business."

And Chicot laid his head down again, so that his face was completely hidden by his hands, while the back of his head was protected by his helmet.

"Ah!" cried Borromée, "you will denounce me when you wake!" and, rising, he made a furious blow with his dagger on the back of his companion, thinking to pierce him through and nail him to the table. But he had not reckoned on the shirt of mail which Chicot had carried away from the priory. The dagger broke upon it like glass, and for the second time Chicot owed his life to it.

Before Borromée had time to recover from his astonishment, Chicot's right fist struck him a heavy blow in the face, and sent him bleeding and stunned against the wall.

In a minute, however, he was up, and sword in hand; but this minute had sufficed for Chicot to draw his sword also, and prepare himself. He seemed to shake off, as if by enchantment, all the fumes of the wine, and stood with a steady hand to receive his adversary. The table, like a field of battle, covered with empty bottles, lay between them, but the blood flowing down his face infuriated Borromée, who lunged at his adversary as fiercely as the intervening table permitted.

"Dolt!" cried Chicot, "you see that it is decidedly you who are drunk, for you cannot reach me across the table, while my arm is six inches longer than yours, and my sword as much longer than your sword; and here is the proof."

As he spoke, he stretched out his arm and wounded Borromée in the forehead. Borromée uttered a cry, still more of rage than of pain, and as he was brave enough, attacked with double fury.

Chicot, however, still on the other side of the table, took a chair and sat down, saying, "Mon Dieu! how stupid these soldiers are; they pretend to know how to manage their swords, and any bourgeois, if he liked, could kill them like flies. Ah! now you want to put out my eye. And now you mount on the table; but, ventre de biche! take care, donkey." And he pricked him with his sword in the stomach, as he had already done in the

forehead.

Borromée roared with anger and leaped from the table to the floor.

"That is as it should, be," said Chicot; "now we are on the same level, and we can talk while we are fencing. Ah! captain, captain, and so we sometimes try our hand a little at assassination in our spare moments, do we?"

"I do for my cause what you do for yours," said Borromée, now brought back to the seriousness of his position, and terrified, in spite of himself, at the smothered fire which seemed gleaming in Chicot's eyes.

"So much for talking," said Chicot; "and yet, my friend, it is with no little pleasure I find that I am a better hand than you are. Ah! that was not bad."

Borromée had just made a lunge at Chicot, which had slightly touched his breast.

"Not bad, but I know the thrust--it is the very same you showed little Jacques. I was just saying, then, that I have the advantage of you, for I did not begin this quarrel, however anxiously disposed I might have been to do so. More than that, even, I have allowed you to carry out your project by giving you every latitude you required, and yet at this very moment even, I have only been acting on the defensive, and this, because I have something to propose to you."

"Nothing," cried Borromée, exasperated at Chicot's imperturbability, "nothing."

And he gave a thrust which would have run the Gascon completely through the body, if the latter had not, with his long legs, sprung back a step, which placed him out of his adversary's reach.

"I am going to tell you what this arrangement is, all the same, so that I shall have nothing left to reproach myself for."

"Hold your tongue," said Borromée; "hold your tongue; it will be useless."

"Listen," said Chicot; "it is to satisfy my own conscience. I have no wish to shed your blood, you understand, and I don't want to kill you until I am driven to extremes."

"Kill me, kill me, I say, if you can!" exclaimed Borromée, exasperated.

"No, no; I have already once in my life killed another such swordsman as you are; I will even say a better swordsman than you. Pardieu! you know him; he, too, was one of De Guise's retainers--a lawyer, too."

"Ah! Nicolas David!" said Borromée, terrified at the incident, and again placing himself on the defensive.

"Exactly so."

"It was you who killed him?"

"Oh! yes, with a pretty little thrust which I will presently show you, if you decline the arrangement I propose."

"Well, let me hear what the arrangement is."

"You will pass from the Duc de Guise's service to that of the king, without, however, quitting that of the duc."

"In other words, that I should become a spy like yourself?"

"No, for there will be a difference; I am not paid, but you will be. You will begin by showing me the Duc de Guise's letter to Madame la Duchesse de Montpensier; you will let me take a copy of it, and I will leave you quiet until another occasion. Well, am I not considerate?"--"Here," said Borromée, "is my answer."

Borromée's reply was "un coupé sur les armes," so rapidly dealt that the point of his sword slightly touched Chicot's shoulder.

"Well, well," said Chicot, "I see I must positively show you Nicolas David's thrust. It is very simple and pretty."

And Chicot, who had up to that moment been acting on the defensive, made

one step forward and attacked in his turn.

"This is the thrust," said Chicot; "I make a feint in quartrebasse."

And he did so; Borromée parried by giving way; but, after this first step backward he was obliged to stop, as he found that he was close to the partition.

"Good! precisely so; you parry in a circle; that's wrong, for my wrist is stronger than yours. I catch your sword in mine, thus. I return to the attack by a tierce haute, I fall upon you, so, and you are hit, or, rather, you are a dead man!"

In fact, the thrust had followed, or rather had accompanied, the demonstration, and the slender rapier, penetrating Borromée's chest, had glided like a needle completely through him, penetrating deeply, and with a dull, heavy sound, the wooden partition behind him.

Borromée flung out his arms, letting his sword fall to the ground; his eyes became fixed and injected with blood, his mouth opened wide, his lips were stained with a red-colored foam, his head fell on his shoulder with a sigh, which sounded like a death-rattle; then his limbs refused their support, and his body as it sunk forward enlarged the aperture of the wound, but could not free itself from the partition, supported as it was by Chicot's terrible wrist, so that the miserable wretch, like a gigantic insect, remained fastened to the wall, which his feet kicked convulsively.

Chicot, cold and impassible as he always was in positions of great difficulty, especially when he had a conviction at the bottom of his heart that he had done everything his conscience could require of him--Chicot, we say, took his hand from his sword, which remained in a horizontal position, unfastened the captain's belt, searched his doublet, took the letter, and read the address:

"Duchesse de Montpensier."

All this time the blood was welling copiously from the wound, and the agony of death was depicted on the features of the wounded man.

"I am dying, I am dying!" he murmured. "O Heaven! have pity on me."

This last appeal to the divine mercy, made by a man who had most probably rarely thought of it until this moment of his direst need, touched Chicot's feeling.

"Let us be charitable," he said; "and since this man must die, let him at least die as quietly as possible."

He then advanced toward the partition, and by an effort withdrew his sword from the wall, and supporting Borromée's body, he prevented it from falling heavily to the ground.

This last precaution, however, was useless; the approach of death had

been rapid and certain, and had already paralyzed the dying man's limbs. His legs gave way beneath him, he fell into Chicot's arms, and then rolled heavily on the floor.

The shock of his fall made a stream of blood flow from his wound, with which the last remains of life ebbed away.

Chicot then went and opened the door of communication, and called Bonhomet.

He had no occasion to call twice, for the innkeeper had been listening at the door, and had successively heard the noise of tables and stools, the clashing of swords, and the fall of a heavy body; besides, the worthy M. Bonhomet had particularly, after the confidence which had been reposed in him, too extensive an experience of the character of gentlemen of the sword in general, and of that of Chicot in particular, not to have guessed, step by step, what had taken place.

The only thing of which he was ignorant was, which of the two adversaries had fallen.

It must, however, be said in praise of Maître Bonhomet that his face assumed an expression of real satisfaction when he heard Chicot's voice, and when he saw that it was the Gascon who, safe and sound, opened the door.

Chicot, whom nothing escaped, remarked the expression of his

countenance, and was inwardly pleased at it.

Bonhomet, tremblingly, entered the apartment.

"Good heavens!" he exclaimed, as he saw the captain's body bathed in blood.

"Yes, my poor Bonhomet," said Chicot; "this is what we have come to; our dear captain here is very ill, as you see."

"Oh! my good Monsieur Chicot, my good Monsieur Chicot!" exclaimed Bonhomet, ready to faint.

"Well, what?" inquired Chicot.

"It is very unkind of you to have chosen my inn for this execution; such a handsome captain, too!"

"Would you sooner have seen Chicot lying there, and Borromée alive?"

"No, oh no!" cried the host, from the very bottom of his heart.

"Well, that would have happened, however, had it not been for a miracle of Providence."--"Really?"

"Upon the word of Chicot, just look at my back, for it pains me a good deal, my dear friend."

And he stooped down before the innkeeper, so that both his shoulders might be on a level with the host's eye.

Between the two shoulders the doublet was pierced through, and a spot of blood as large and round as a silver crown piece reddened the edges of the hole.

"Blood!" cried Bonhomet, "blood! Ah, you are wounded!"

"Wait, wait."

And Chicot unfastened his doublet and his shirt. "Now look!" he said.

"Oh! you wore a cuirass! What a fortunate thing, dear Monsieur Chicot; and you were saying that the ruffian wished to assassinate you."

"Diable! it hardly seems likely I should have taken any pleasure in giving myself a dagger thrust between my own shoulders. Now, what do you see?"

"A link broken."

"That dear captain was in good earnest then; is there much blood?"

"Yes, a good deal under the links."

"I must take off the cuirass, then," said Chicot.

Chicot took off his cuirass, and bared the upper part of his body, which seemed to be composed of nothing else but bones, of muscles spread over the bones, and of skin merely covering the muscles.

"Ah! Monsieur Chicot," exclaimed Bonhomet, "you have a wound as large as a plate."

"Yes, I suppose the blood has spread; there is what doctors call ecchymosis; give me some clean linen, pour into a glass equal parts of good olive oil and wine dregs, and wash that stain for me."

"But, dear M. Chicot, what am I to do with this body?"

"That is not your affair."

"What! not my affair?"

"No. Give me some ink, a pen, and a sheet of paper."

"Immediately, dear Monsieur Chicot," said Bonhomet, as he darted out of the room.

Meanwhile Chicot, who probably had no time to lose, heated at the lamp the point of a small dagger, and cut in the middle of the wax the seal of the letter. This being done, and as there was nothing else to retain

the dispatch, Chicot drew it from its envelope, and read it with the liveliest marks of satisfaction.

Just as he had finished reading it, Maître Bonhomet returned with the oil, the wine, the paper, and the pen.

Chicot arranged the pen, ink, and paper before him, sat himself down at the table, and turned his back with stoical indifference toward Bonhomet for him to operate upon. The latter understood the pantomime, and began to rub it.

However, as if, instead of irritating a painful wound, some one had been tickling him in the most delightful manner, Chicot, during the operation, copied the letter from the Duc de Guise to his sister, and made his comments thereon at every word.

"DEAR SISTER--The expedition from Anvers has succeeded for everybody, but has failed as far as we are concerned. You will be told that the Duc d'Anjou is dead; do not believe it--he is alive.

"_He lives_, you understand, and that is the whole question.

"There is a complete dynasty in those words; those two words separate the house of Lorraine from the throne of France better than the deepest abyss could do.

"Do not, however, make yourself too uneasy about that. I have

discovered that two persons whom I thought were dead are still living, and there is a great chance of death for the prince while those two persons are alive.

"Think then only of Paris; it will be time enough for the League to act six weeks hence. Let our Leaguers know that the moment is approaching, and let them hold themselves in readiness.

"The army is on foot; we number twelve thousand sure men, all well equipped; I shall enter France with it, under the pretext of engaging the German Huguenots, who are going to assist Henri de Navarre. I shall defeat the Huguenots, and having entered France as a friend, I shall act as a master."

"Oh, oh!" cried Chicot.

"Did I hurt you, dear Monsieur Chicot?" said Bonhomet, discontinuing his frictions.

"Yes, my good fellow."

"I will rub more softly; don't be afraid."

Chicot continued:

"P.S.--I entirely approve of your plan with regard to the Forty-five; only allow me to say, dear sister, that you will be

conferring a greater honor on those fellows than they deserve."

"Ah! diable!" murmured Chicot, "this is getting obscure."

And he read it again.

"I entirely approve of your plan with regard to the Forty-five."

"What plan?" Chicot asked himself.

"Only allow me to say, dear sister, that you will be conferring a greater honor on those fellows than they deserve."

"What honor?"

Chicot resumed:--

"Than they deserve.

"Your affectionate brother.

"H. DE LORRAINE."

"At all events," said Chicot, "everything is clear, except the postscript. Very good, We will look after the postscript, then."

"Dear Monsieur Chicot," Bonhomet ventured to observe, seeing that Chicot

had finished writing, if not thinking, "Dear Monsieur Chicot, you have not told me what I am to do with this corpse."--"That is a very simple affair."

"For you, who are full of imagination, it may be, but for me?"

"Well! suppose, for instance, that that unfortunate captain had been quarreling with the Swiss guards or the Reiters, and he had been brought to your house wounded, would you have refused to receive him?"

"No, certainly, unless indeed you had forbidden me, dear M. Chicot."

"Suppose that, having been placed in that corner, he had, notwithstanding the care and attention you had bestowed upon him, departed this life while in your charge, it would have been a great misfortune, and nothing more, I suppose?"

"Certainly."

"And, instead of incurring any blame, you would deserve to be commended for your humanity. Suppose, again, that while he was dying this poor captain had mentioned the name, which you know very well, of the prior of Les Jacobins Saint Antoine?"

"Of Dom Modeste Gorenflot?" exclaimed Bonhomet, in astonishment.

"Yes, of Dom Modeste Gorenflot. Very good! You will go and inform Dom

Modeste of it; Dom Modeste will hasten here with all speed, and, as the dead man's purse is found in one of his pockets--you understand it is important that the purse should be found; I mention this merely by way of advice--and as the dead man's purse is found in one of his pockets, and this letter in the other, no suspicion whatever can be entertained."

"I understand, dear Monsieur Chicot."

"In addition to which you will receive a reward, instead of being punished."

"You are a great man, dear Monsieur Chicot; I will run at once to the Priory of St. Antoine."

"Wait a minute! did I not say there was the purse and the letter?"

"Oh! yes, and you have the letter in your hand."--"Precisely."

"I must not say that it has been read and copied?"

"Pardieu! it is precisely on account of this letter reaching its destination intact that you will receive a recompense."

"The letter contains a secret, then?"

"In such times as the present there are secrets in everything, my dear Bonhomet."

And Chicot, with this sententious reply, again fastened the silk under the wax of the seal by making use of the same means as he had done before; he then fastened the wax so artistically that the most experienced eye would not have been able to have detected the slightest crack.

He then replaced the letter in the pocket of the dead man, had the linen, which had been steeped in the oil and wine, applied to his wound by way of a cataplasm, put on again the safety coat of mail next to his skin, his shirt over his coat of mail, picked up his sword, wiped it, thrust it into the scabbard, and withdrew.

He returned again, however, saying:

"If, after all, the story which I have invented does not seem satisfactory to you, you can accuse the captain of having thrust his own sword through his body."

"A suicide?"

"Well, that don't compromise any one, you understand."

"But they won't bury this ill-starred fellow in holy ground."

"Pooh," said Chicot, "will that be giving him much pleasure?"

"Why, yes, I should think so."

"In that case, do as you like, my dear Bonhomet; adieu."

Then, returning a second time, he said:

"By-the-by, I pay, since he is no more." And Chicot threw three golden crowns on the table, and then, placing his fore-finger on his lips, in token of silence, he departed.