

Chapter 83

SHOWING HOW CHICOT BEGAN TO UNDERSTAND THE PURPORT OF MONSIEUR DE GUISE'S LETTER.

Chicot fancied that he had already certainly seen, somewhere or another, the figure of this courteous cavalier; but his memory, having become a little confused during his journey from Navarre, where he had met with so many different figures, did not, with its usual facility, furnish him with the cavalier's name on the present occasion.

While, concealed in the shade, he was interrogating himself, with his eyes fixed upon the lighted window, as to the object of this lady and gentleman's *tete-à-tete* at the "Brave Chevalier," our worthy Gascon, forgetting Ernanton in the mysterious house, observed the door of the hostelry open, and in the stream of light which escaped through the opening, he perceived something resembling the dark outline of a monk's figure.

The outline in question paused for a moment to look up at the same window at which Chicot had been gazing.

"Oh! oh!" he murmured; "if I am not mistaken, that is the frock of a Jacobin friar. Is Maitre Gorenflot so lax, then, in his discipline as to allow his sheep to go strolling about at such an hour of the night as

this, and at such a distance from the priory?"

Chicot kept his eye upon the Jacobin, who was making his way along the Rue des Augustins, and something seemed instinctively to assure him that he should, through this monk, discover the solution of the problem which he had up to that moment been vainly endeavoring to ascertain.

Moreover, in the same way that Chicot had fancied he had recognized the figure of the cavalier, he now fancied he could recognize in the monk a certain movement of the shoulder, and a peculiar military movement of the hips, which only belong to persons in the habit of frequenting fencing-rooms and gymnastic establishments.

"May the devil seize me," he murmured, "if that frock yonder does not cover the body of that little miscreant whom I wished them to give me for a traveling companion, and who handles his arquebuse and sword so cleverly."

Hardly had the idea occurred to Chicot, when, to convince himself of its value, he stretched out his long legs, and in a dozen strides rejoined the little fellow, who was walking along holding up his frock above his thin and sinewy legs in order to be able to get along all the faster.

This was not very difficult, however, inasmuch as the monk paused every now and then to glance behind him, as if he was going away with great difficulty and with feelings of profound regret.

His glance was invariably directed toward the brilliantly-lighted windows of the hostelry.

Chicot had not gone many steps before he felt sure that he had not been mistaken in his conjectures.

"Hallo! my little master," he said; "hallo! my little Jacquot; hallo! my little Clement. Halt!"

And he pronounced this last word in so thoroughly military a tone, that the monk started at it.

"Who calls me?" inquired the young man rudely, with something rather antagonistic than cordial in his tone of voice.

"I!" replied Chicot, drawing himself up in front of the monk; "I! don't you recognize me?"

"Oh! Monsieur Robert Briquet!" exclaimed the monk.

"Myself, my little man. And where are you going like that, so late, darling child?"

"To the priory, Monsieur Briquet."

"Very good; but where do you come from?"

"I?"

"Of course, little libertine."

The young man started.

"I don't know what you are saying, Monsieur Briquet," he replied; "on the contrary, I have been sent with a very important commission by Dom Modeste, who will himself assure you that such is the case, if there be any occasion for it."

"Gently, gently, my little Saint Jerome; we take fire like a match, it seems."

"And not without reason, too, when one hears such things said as you were saying just now."

"Diable! when one sees a frock like yours leaving a tavern at such an hour--"

"A tavern, I!"

"Oh! of course not; the house you left just now was not the 'Brave Chevalier,' I suppose? Ah! you see I have caught you!"

"You were right in saying that I left that house, but it was not a tavern I was leaving."

"What!" said Chicot; "is not the hostelry of the sign of the 'Brave Chevalier' a tavern?"

"A tavern is a house where people drink, and as I have not been drinking in that house, that house is not a tavern for me."

"Diable! that is a subtle distinction, and I am very much mistaken if you will not some day become a very forcible theologian; but, at all events, if you did not go into that house to drink there, what did you go there for?"

Clement made no reply, and Chicot could read in his face, notwithstanding the darkness of the night, a resolute determination not to say another word.

This resolution annoyed our friend extremely, for it had almost grown a habit with him to become acquainted with everything.

It must not be supposed that Clement showed any ill-feeling in his silence; for, on the contrary, he had appeared delighted to meet, in so unexpected a manner, his learned fencing-master, Maitre Robert Briquet, and had given him the warmest reception that could be expected from the close and rugged character of the youth.

The conversation had completely ceased. Chicot, for the purpose of starting it again, was on the point of pronouncing the name of Frere

Borromée; but, although Chicot did not feel any remorse, or fancied he did not feel any, he could not summon up courage to pronounce that name.

His young companion, still preserving the same unbroken silence, seemed as if he were awaiting something; it seemed, too, as if he considered it a happiness to remain as long as possible in the neighborhood of the hostelry of the "Brave Chevalier."

Robert Briquet tried to speak to him about the journey which the boy had for a moment entertained the hope of making with him.

Jacques Clement's eyes glistened at the words space and liberty.

Robert Briquet told him that in the countries through which he had just been traveling, the art of fencing was held greatly in honor; he added, with an appearance of indifference, that he had even brought away with him several wonderful passes and thrusts.

This was placing Jacques upon slippery ground. He wished to know what these passes were; and Chicot, with his long arm, indicated a few of them upon the little monk's arm.

But all these delicacies and refinements on Chicot's part in no way affected little Clement's obstinate determination; and while he endeavored to parry these unknown passes, which his friend Maitre Robert Briquet was showing him, he preserved an obstinate silence with respect to what had brought him into that quarter.

Thoroughly annoyed, but keeping a strong control over himself, Chicot resolved to try the effect of injustice; injustice is one of the most powerful provocatives ever invented to make women, children, and inferiors speak, whatever their nature or disposition may be.

"It does not matter," he said, as if he returned to his original idea; "it does not matter, you are a delightful little monk; but that you visit hostelries is certain, and what hostelries too! Those where beautiful ladies are to be found, and you stop outside in a state of ecstasy before the window, where you can see their shadow. Oh! little one, little one, I shall tell Dom Modeste all about it."

The bolt hit its mark, more truly so even than Chicot had supposed; for when he began, he did not suspect that the wound had been so deep.

Jacques turned round like a serpent that had been trodden on.

"That is not true," he cried, crimson with shame and anger, "I don't look at women."

"Yes, yes," pursued Chicot; "on the contrary, there was an exceedingly pretty woman at the 'Brave Chevalier' when you left it, and you turned round to look at her again; and I know that you were waiting for her in the turret, and I know, too, that you spoke to her."

Chicot proceeded by the inductive process.

Jacques could not contain himself any longer.

"I certainly have spoken to her!" he exclaimed; "is it a sin to speak to women?"

"No, when one does not speak to them of one's own accord, and yielding to the temptation of Satan."

"Satan has nothing whatever to do with the matter; it was absolutely necessary that I should speak to that lady, since I was desired to hand her a letter."

"Desired by Dom Modeste!" cried Chicot.

"Yes, go and complain to him now, if you like."

Chicot, bewildered, and feeling his way as it were in the dark, perceived, at these words, a gleam of light traversing the obscurity of his brain.

"Ah!" he said, "I knew it perfectly well."

"What did you know?"

"What you did not wish to tell me."

"I do not tell my own secrets, and, for a greater reason, the secrets of others."

"Yes, but to me."

"Why should I to you?"

"You should tell them to me because I am a friend of Dom Modeste, and, for another reason, you should tell them to me because--"

"Well?"

"Because I know beforehand all you could possibly have to tell me."

Jacques looked at Chicot and shook his head with an incredulous smile.

"Very good!" said Chicot, "would you like me to tell you what you do not wish to tell me?"

"I should indeed."

Chicot made an effort.

"In the first place," he said, "that poor Borromée--"

A dark expression passed across Jacques' face.

"Oh!" said the boy, "if I had been there--"

"Well! if you had been there?"

"The affair would not have turned out as it did."

"Would you have defended him against the Swiss with whom he got into a quarrel?"

"I would have defended him against every one."

"So that he would not have been killed?"

"Either that, or I should have got myself killed along with him."

"At all events, you were not there, so that the poor devil breathed his last in an obscure tavern, and in doing so pronounced Dom Modeste's name; is not that so?"

"Yes."

"Whereupon the people there informed Dom Modeste of it?"

"A man, seemingly scared out of his wits, who threw the whole convent into consternation."

"And Dom Modeste sent for his litter, and hastened to 'La Corne

d'Abondance."

"How do you know that?"

"Oh! you don't know me yet, my boy; I am somewhat of a sorcerer, I can tell you."

Jacques drew back a couple of steps.

"That is not all," continued Chicot, who, as he spoke, began to see clearer by the light of his own words; "a letter was found in the dead man's pocket."

"A letter--yes, precisely so."

"And Dom Modeste charged his little Jacques to carry that letter to its address."

"Yes."

"And the little Jacques ran immediately to the Hotel de Guise."

"Oh!"

"Where he found no one."

"Bon Dieu!"

"But Monsieur de Mayneville."

"Good gracious!"

"And which same Monsieur de Mayneville conducted Jacques to the hostelry of the 'Brave Chevalier.'"

"Monsieur Briquet! Monsieur Briquet!" cried Jacques, "if you know that--"

"Eh! ventre de biche! you see very well that I do know it," exclaimed Chicot, feeling triumphant at having disentangled this secret, which was of such importance for him to learn, from the provoking intricacies in which it had been at first involved.

"In that case," returned Jacques, "you see very well, Monsieur Briquet, that I am not guilty."

"No," said Chicot, "you are not guilty in act, nor in omission, but you are guilty in thought."

"I!"

"I suppose there is no doubt you think the duchesse very beautiful?"

"I!!"

"And you turned round to look at her again through the window."

"I!!!"

The young monk colored and stammered out: "Well, it is true, she is exactly like a Virgin Mary which was placed over the head of my mother's bed."

"Oh!" muttered Chicot, "how much those people lose who are not curious!"

And thereupon he made little Clement, whom from this moment he held in his power, tell him all he had himself just told him, but this time with the details, which he could not possibly otherwise have known.

"You see," said Chicot, when he had finished, "what a poor fencing-master you had in Frere Borromée."

"Monsieur Briquet," said little Jacques, "one ought not to speak ill of the dead."

"No; but confess one thing."

"What?"

"That Borromée did not make such good use of his sword as the man who killed him."--"True."

"And now that is all I had to say to you. Good-night, Jacques; we shall meet again soon, and if you like--"

"What, Monsieur Briquet?"

"Why, I will give you lessons in fencing for the future."

"Oh! I shall be most thankful."

"And now off with you, my boy, for they are waiting for you impatiently at the priory."

"True, true. Thank you, Monsieur Briquet, for having reminded me of it."

And the little monk disappeared, running as fast as he could.

Chicot had a reason for dismissing his companion. He had extracted from him all he wished to know, and, on the other hand, there still remained something further for him to learn. He returned, therefore, as fast as he could to his own house. The litter, the bearers, and the horse were still at the door of the "Brave Chevalier."

He regained his gutter without making a noise.

The house opposite to his own was still lighted up, and from that moment all his attention was directed toward it.

In the first place, he observed, by a rent in the curtain, Ernanton walking up and down, apparently waiting with great impatience.

He then saw the litter return, saw Mayneville leave, and, lastly, he saw the duchess enter the room in which Ernanton, palpitating, and throbbing rather than breathing, impatiently awaited her return.

Ernanton kneeled before the duchess, who gave him her white hand to kiss. She then raised the young man from the ground, and made him sit down before her at a table which was most elegantly served.

"This is very singular," said Chicot; "It began like a conspiracy, and finishes by a rendezvous.

"Yes," continued Chicot, "but who appointed this rendezvous?"

"Madame de Montpensier."

And then, as a fresh light flashed through his brain, he murmured, "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."

"Ventre de biche!" exclaimed Chicot, "I return to my original idea,--it is not a love affair, but a conspiracy.

"Madame la Duchesse de Montpensier is in love with Monsieur Ernanton de Carmainges; let us watch over this love affair of Madame la Duchesse."

And Chicot watched until midnight had long passed, when Ernanton hastened away, his cloak concealing his face, while Madame la Duchesse de Montpensier returned to her litter.

"Now," murmured Chicot, as he descended his own staircase, "what is that chance of death which is to deliver the Duc de Guise from the presumptive heir of the crown? who are those defunct persons who were thought to be dead, but are still living?"

"Mordioux! I shall trace them before long."