

Chapter 22

THE LESSON.

Fencing was not at that time the science that it is now. The swords, sharp on each side, made them strike as often with the edge as with the point; besides, the left hand, armed with a dagger, was at the same time offensive and defensive, and hence resulted a number of slight wounds, which, in a real combat, kept up a continual excitement. Fencing, then in its infancy, consisted in a crowd of evolutions, in which the actor moved continually, and which, on a ground chosen by chance, might be continually impeded by its nature.

It was common to see the fencer throw himself forward, draw back again, or jump to the right or left, so that agility, not only of the hand, but of the whole body, was necessary. Chicot did not appear to have learned in this school, but seemed to have forestalled the modern style, of which the superiority and grace is in the agility of the hands and immovability of the body. He stood erect and firm, with a wrist at once strong and supple, and with a sword which seemed a flexible reed from the point to the middle of the blade, and an inflexible steel from thence to the guard.

At the very first commencement, Jacques, seeing before him this man of bronze, whose wrist alone seemed alive, gave some impatient passes, which merely made Chicot extend his arm, and at every opening left by

the young man, strike him full on the chest. Jacques, red with anger and emulation as this was repeated, bounded back, and for ten minutes displayed all the resources of his wonderful agility--he flew like a tiger, twisted like a serpent, and bounded from right to left; but Chicot, with his calm air and his long arm, seized his time, and putting aside his adversary's sword, still sent his own to the same place, while Borromée grew pale with anger. At last, Jacques rushed a last time on Chicot, who, parrying his thrust with force, threw the poor fellow off his equilibrium, and he fell, while Chicot himself remained firm as a rock.

"You did not tell us you were a pillar," said Borromée, biting his nails with vexation.

"I, a poor bourgeois!" said Chicot.

"But, monsieur, to manage a sword as you do, you must have practiced enormously."

"Oh! mon Dieu! yes, monsieur, I have often held the sword, and have always found one thing."--"What is that?"

"That for him who holds it, pride is a bad counselor and anger a bad assistant. Now, listen, Jacques," added he: "you have a good wrist, but neither legs nor head; you are quick, but you do not reason. There are three essential things in arms--first the head, then the hands and legs: with the one you can defend yourself, with the others you may conquer,

but with all three you can always conquer."

"Ah! monsieur," said Jacques, "try Brother Borromée; I should like to see it."

"No," said the treasurer, "I should be beaten, and I would rather confess it than prove it."

"How modest and amiable he is!" said Gorenflot.

"On the contrary," whispered Chicot, "he is stupid with vanity. At his age I would have given anything for such a lesson," and he sat down again.

Jacques approached him, and admiration triumphing over the shame of defeat:

"Will you give me some lessons, M. Briquet?" said he; "the prior will permit it, will you not, your reverence?"

"With pleasure, my child."

"I do not wish to interfere with your master," said Chicot, bowing to Borromée.

"Oh! I am not his only master," said he. "Neither all the honor nor the defeat are wholly due to me."

"Who is the other, then?"

"Oh! no one!" cried Borromée, fearing he had committed an imprudence.

"Who is he, Jacques?" asked Chicot.

"I remember," said Gorenflot; "he is a little fat man who comes here sometimes and drinks well."

"I forget his name," said Borromée.

"I know it," said a monk who was standing by. "It is Bussy Leclerc."

"Ah! a good sword," said Chicot.

Jacques reiterated his request.

"I cannot teach you," said Chicot. "I taught myself by reflection and practice; and I advise you to do the same."

Gorenflot and Chicot now returned to the house.

"I hope," said Gorenflot, with pride, "that this is a house worth something, and well managed."

"Wonderful! my friend; and when I return from my mission--"

"Ah! true, dear M. Chicot; let us speak of your mission."

"So much the more willingly, that I have a message to send to the king before I go."

"To the king, my dear friend! You correspond with the king?"

"Directly."

"And you want a messenger?"

"Yes."

"Will you have one of our monks? It would be an honor to the priory."

"Willingly."

"Then you are restored to favor?"

"More than ever."

"Then," said Gorenflot, "you can tell the king all that we are doing here in his favor."

"I shall not fail to do so."

"Ah! my dear Chicot," cried Gorenflot, who already believed himself a bishop.

"But first I have two requests to make."

"Speak."

"First, money, which the king will restore to you."

"Money! I have my coffers full."

"Ma foi! you are lucky."

"Will you have 1,000 crowns?"

"No, that is far too much; I am modest in my tastes, humble in my desires, and my title of ambassador does not make me proud; therefore 100 crowns will suffice."

"Here they are; and the second thing?"

"An attendant!"

"An attendant?"

"Yes, to accompany me; I love society."

"Ah! my friend, if I were but free, as formerly."

"But you are not."

"Greatness enslaves me," murmured Gorenflot.

"Alas!" said Chicot, "one cannot do everything at once. But not being able to have your honorable company, my dear prior, I will content myself with that of the little Jacques; he pleases me."

"You are right, Chicot, he is a rare lad."

"I am going to take him 250 leagues, if you will permit it."

"He is yours, my friend."

The prior struck a bell, and when the servant appeared said, "Let Brother Jacques come here, and also our messenger."

Ten minutes after both appeared at the door.

"Jacques," said Gorenflot, "I give you a special mission."

"Me!" cried the young man, astonished.

"Yes, you are to accompany M. Robert Briquet on a long journey."

"Oh!" cried he, enthusiastically, "that will be delightful. We shall fight every day--shall we not, monsieur?"

"Yes, my child."

"And I may take my arquebuse?"

"Certainly."

Jacques bounded joyfully from the room.

"As to the message, I beg you to give your orders. Advance, Brother Panurge."