

Chapter 35

HOW CHICOT CONTINUED HIS JOURNEY, AND WHAT HAPPENED TO HIM.

Chicot passed his morning in congratulating himself on the sang-froid and patience he had displayed through his night of trials.

"But," thought he, "they never take an old wolf twice in the same snare; therefore, it is nearly certain that they will invent some new devilry to practice on me to-day, so I must be on my guard."

The result of this reasoning was, that Chicot made a march that day worthy of being immortalized by Xenophon. Every tree, rising ground, or wall, served him for a point of observation. He also concluded on the road alliances, if not offensive, at least defensive. Four grocers from Paris, who were going to Orleans to order preserves, and to Limoges for dried fruits, allowed Chicot, who called himself a hosier from Bordeaux, returning home, to join their company, which was rendered more formidable by four clerks, who were following their masters. It was quite a little army, and scarcely less formidable in mind than in number, so warlike a spirit had the League introduced among the Parisian shopkeepers. At all events, three cowards together have less fear than one brave man alone. At last they reached Etampes, the town fixed on for supper and sleeping. They supped, and then each went to his room.

Chicot, who had not been sparing during the repast, either of his fun, which amused his companions, or of the Muscat and Burgundy, went to bed,

after having settled to travel again with the grocers on the morrow.

Chicot, therefore, thought himself guarded like a prince by the four travelers, whose rooms were in the same corridor and close to his own.

Indeed, at this epoch, the roads being far from safe, travelers were in the habit of promising each other mutual aid in case of need. Chicot then, after bolting his door and striking the walls, which returned everywhere a satisfactory sound, went to bed and to sleep.

But there arrived, during his first sleep, an event which the Sphynx himself, the diviner par excellence, could not have foreseen; but the devil was mixing himself up with Chicot's affairs, and he is more cunning than all the Sphynxes in the world.

About half-past nine a blow was struck on the door of the room where the clerks all slept. One of them opened in a very bad humor, and found himself face to face with the host.

"Gentlemen," said he, "I see with pleasure that you are sleeping all ready dressed, for I wish to render you a great service. Your masters grew very warm over politics at supper-time, and it seems that a sheriff of the town heard them and reported it. Now, as we are very loyal here, the mayor sent down the watch, and they have arrested your masters and carried them off. The prison is near the Hotel de Ville; go, my lads, your mules are ready for you, your masters will join you on the road."

The four clerks shook like hares, ran downstairs, jumped on their mules, and took the road back to Paris, telling the host to let their masters know, if they should return to the hotel.

Having seen them disappear, the host went to knock very gently at one of the doors in the corridor.

One of the merchants cried out in a loud voice, "Who is there?"

"Silence!" replied the host, "and come quietly to the door."

The merchant obeyed, but before opening, he said again--"Who are you?"

"Your host; do you not recognize my voice?"

"Mon Dieu! what is the matter?"

"Why, it seems you talked rather too freely at table, and the mayor has been informed by some spy, and has sent to arrest you. Luckily, I thought of showing them your clerks' room instead of yours, so that they are busy upstairs arresting them."

"Can this be true?"

"Pure and simple truth. Make haste, and escape while you can."

"But my companions?"

"Oh! I will tell them."

And while the merchant dressed, the host awakened the others, and very soon they all disappeared, walking on the points of their toes, that they might not be heard.

"That poor hosier!" said they; "it will all fall on him; but it is true he said the most."

Of course Chicot had received no warning. While the merchants were flying, he was sleeping peacefully.

The host now descended into the hall, where stood six armed men, one of whom seemed to command the others.

"Well?" said this one.

"I have obeyed your orders, monsieur."

"Your inn is deserted?"

"Absolutely."

"The person is not awakened?"

"No."

"You know in whose name we act, and what cause we serve: for you serve the same."

"Yes, certainly; therefore, I have sacrificed, to keep my oath, the money that these men would have spent at my house; for it is said in the oath, 'I will sacrifice my goods to the defense of the Catholic religion.'"

"And my life,' you forget that," replied the officer.

"Oh! I have a wife and children."

"You must obey blindly what is ordered you."

"Oh! I will obey."

"Then go to bed, shut the doors, and whatever you see or hear, do not come out, even if your house is burning."

"Oh! I am ruined!"

"I am instructed to indemnify you; here are thirty crowns."

"My house estimated at thirty crowns!" cried the inn-keeper, piteously.

"We shall not break even a window; complainer that you are."

"Oh! what a champion of the Holy League."

The host went away and did as he was told. Then the officer ordered two men to place themselves under Chicot's window, while he himself, with the three others, mounted to his room.

"You know the order," said the officer. "If he opens and lets us search, and we find what we seek, we will not do him the least harm; but if the contrary happens, a good blow with a dagger; no pistol, you understand--besides, it is useless, being four against one."

The officer knocked.

"Who is there?" cried Chicot.

"Your friends the grocers, who have something important to tell you."

"Oh!" cried Chicot; "how last night's wine has strengthened your voice."

The officer lowered his voice, and said in an insinuating tone, "Open quickly, dear companion."

"Ventre de biche! I do not smell the grocery."

"Ah! you will not open?" cried the officer, impatiently. "Break open the

door."

Chicot ran to the window, but saw below two naked swords shining.

"I am caught," said he.

"Ah! ah!" cried the officer, who had heard the noise of the window opening; "you fear the perilous leap, and you are right. Come, open!"

"Ma foi! no; the door is solid, and I shall get help when you make a noise." And he began to call for the merchants.

The officer laughed. "Fool!" cried he. "Do you think we have left you their help? Undeceive yourself; you are alone, so make up your mind to it. Go on, soldiers."

Chicot heard three blows struck on the door.

"They have three muskets," said he; "and below there are only two swords, and only fifteen feet to jump; I prefer the swords to the muskets."

And tying his bag to his belt, he got on the window-sill with his drawn sword. The two men below stood ready with their drawn swords, but, as Chicot guessed, on seeing him jump sword in hand, they drew back, intending to strike him as he came to the ground. Chicot alighted on his feet, and one of the men gave him a thrust immediately. Thanks,

however, to Gorenflot's coat of mail, the blade broke like glass.

"He has armor!" cried the soldier.

"Pardieu!" said Chicot, cutting open his head with a blow of his sword.

The other began to cry out, thinking now only of defending himself, but, at the second pass, Chicot laid him by his comrade; so that when the door was burst open, the officer saw through the window his two sentinels lying in their blood, and Chicot running quietly away.

"He is a demon; he is steel proof!" cried he.

"Yes; but not ball-proof!" cried the soldiers.

"No firing; no noise; you will wake the city. We shall catch him to-morrow."