

Chapter 36

THE THIRD DAY OF THE JOURNEY.

Chicot knew he was safe in the city of Etampes, where he was under the protection of magistrates who would have arrested the officer immediately on his complaint. It was the knowledge of this which had induced the officer to stop his men from firing, and to abstain from pursuit. Therefore he retired with his soldiers, leaving the two dead men on the ground after laying their swords by them, that it might seem as though they had killed each other.

Chicot vainly searched for his former companions, and then determined to stay for a time in the city; and even, after watching the officer and his men leave the town, had the audacity to return to the inn. There he found the host, who had not recovered from his terror, and who watched him saddling his horse as though he had been a phantom, and never even asked him for his money.

Then he went and finished his night in the public room at another inn, among all the drinkers, who were far from thinking that this tall unknown, who looked so smiling and gracious, had just killed two men.

At break of day he started again, but a prey to anxiety, for although two attempts had failed, the third might be successful. He determined when he reached Orleans to send to the king to ask for an escort.

But as the road to Orleans was passed without accident, Chicot began to think again that it was needless, and that the king would lose his good opinion of him, and also that an escort would be a great trouble. He went on, therefore, but his fears began to return as evening advanced. All at once he heard behind him the galloping of horses, and turning round he counted seven cavaliers, of whom four had muskets on their shoulders. They gained rapidly on Chicot, who, seeing flight was hopeless, contented himself with making his horse move in zig-zags, so as to escape the balls which he expected every moment. He was right, for when they came about fifty feet from him, they fired, but thanks to his maneuver, all the balls missed him. He immediately abandoned the reins and let himself slip to the ground, taking the precaution to have his sword in one hand and a dagger in the other.

He came to the ground in such a position that his head was protected by the breast of his horse.

A cry of joy came from the troop, who, seeing him fall, believed him dead.

"I told you so," said a man, riding up, with a mask on his face; "you failed because you did not follow my orders. This time, here he is; search him, and if he moves, finish him."

Chicot was not a pious man, but at such a moment he remembered his God and murmured a fervent prayer.

Two men approached him sword in hand, and as he did not stir, came fearlessly forward; but instantly Chicot's dagger was in the throat of one, and his sword half buried in the side of the other.

"Ah! treason!" cried the chief, "he is not dead; charge your muskets."

"No, I am not dead," cried Chicot, attacking the speaker.

But two soldiers came to the rescue; Chicot turned and wounded one in the thigh.

"The muskets!" cried the chief.

"Before they are ready, you will be pierced through the heart," cried Chicot.

"Be firm, and I will aid you," cried a voice, which seemed to Chicot to come from heaven.

It was that of a fine young man, on a black horse. He had a pistol in each hand, and cried again to Chicot, "Stoop! morbleu, stoop!"

Chicot obeyed.

One pistol was fired, and a man rolled at Chicot's feet; then the second, and another man fell.

"Now we are two to two," cried Chicot; "generous young man, you take one, here is mine," and he rushed on the masked man, who defended himself as if used to arms.

The young man seized his opponent by the body, threw him down, and bound

him with his belt. Chicot soon wounded his adversary, who was very corpulent, between the ribs; he fell, and Chicot, putting his foot on his sword to prevent him from using it, cut the strings of his mask.

"M. de Mayenne! ventre de biche, I thought so," said he.

The duke did not reply; he had fainted from the loss of blood and the weight of his fall. Chicot drew his dagger, and was about coolly to cut off his head, when his arm was seized by a grasp of iron, and a voice said:

"Stay! monsieur; one does not kill a fallen enemy."

"Young man," replied Chicot, "you have saved my life, and I thank you with all my heart; but accept a little lesson very useful in the time of moral degradation in which we live. When a man has been attacked three times in three days--when he has been each time in danger of death--when his enemies have, without provocation, fired four musket balls at him from behind--as they might have done to a mad dog--then, young man, he may do what I am about to do." And Chicot returned to his work.

But the young man stopped him again.

"You shall not do it, while I am here. You shall not shed more of that blood which is now issuing from the wound you have already inflicted."

"Bah! do you know this wretch?"

"That wretch is M. le Duc de Mayenne, a prince equal in rank to many kings."

"All the more reason. And who are you?"

"He who has saved your life, monsieur."

"And who, if I do not deceive myself, brought me a letter from the king three days ago."

"Precisely."

"Then you are in the king's service?"

"I have that honor."

"And yet you save M. de Mayenne? Permit me to tell you, monsieur, that that is not being a good servant."

"I think differently."

"Well, perhaps you are right. What is your name?"

"Ernanton de Carmainges."

"Well, M. Ernanton, what are we to do with this great carcass?"

"I will watch over M. de Mayenne, monsieur."

"And his follower, who is listening there?"

"The poor devil hears nothing; I have bound him too tightly, and he has fainted."

"M. de Carmainges, you have saved my life to-day, but you endanger it furiously for the future."

"I do my duty to-day; God will provide for the future."

"As you please, then, and I confess I dislike killing a defenseless man. Adieu, monsieur. But first, I will choose one of these horses."

"Take mine; I know what it can do."

"Oh! that is too generous."

"I have not so much need as you have to go quickly."

Chicot made no more compliments, but got on Ernanton's horse and disappeared.