

Chapter 52

HOW THEY HUNTED THE WOLF IN NAVARRE.

When Marguerite left the king, she went at once to the apartments of the maids of honor, and performed her promise with regard to Fosseuse. When she returned, the king thanked her warmly, and then went up to Chicot's room, where he found him still asleep. Henri shook him to wake him.

"Come, compere," said he, "get up, it is two in the morning."

"Ah! you make me a prisoner," cried Chicot; "I, an ambassador. Sire, you violate the rights of nations."

Henri began to laugh, and Chicot could not help joining him.

"You are mad," said Henri. "Why the devil did you want to go away from here, have you not been well treated?"

"Too well, ventre de biche! too well. It seems to me as if I were like a goose being fattened. Every one says to me, 'Pretty little Chicot, how gentle he is!' but they clip my wings, and shut the doors on me."

"Oh! reassure yourself, Chicot; you are not fat enough for my table."

"Sire, you seem very gay this morning; what is it?"

"I am always gay when I am setting off for the chase. Come, out of bed, compere."

"You want me, sire?"

"Yes; you shall be my historian."

"To count the shots?"

"Just so."

Chicot dressed murmuringly, while the king remained in the antechamber.

"My horse," cried Henri; "and tell M. de Mornay that I am ready."

"What! is M. de Mornay chief huntsman?" asked Chicot.

"M. de Mornay is everything here," replied Henri. "I am so poor, than I can afford but one man."

"Yes; but he is a good one."

Chicot found the preparations much less sumptuous than those of Henri III. A dozen or fifteen gentlemen only, among whom he recognized the Vicomte de Turenne, formed the whole suite. And as they were none of them rich, they all wore, instead of the usual hunting dress, their helmets and cuirasses, which made Chicot ask if the wolves in Gascony

used muskets and artillery.

"No," said Henri; "but they are fierce beasts, who have claws and teeth, and draw hunters into places where they are likely to tear their clothes on the thorns, if they wear silk and velvet, or even cloth and buff, but not if they wear cuirasses."

"That is a reason, but not a good one, sire."

"What would you have? I have no other."

"Then I must be content with this."

"You had better."

"So be it."

"You are angry at being disturbed for this chase."

"Ma foi! yes."

"So you find fault?"

"Is it forbidden?"

"Oh no."

"You understand, sire, I am no hunter, and have nothing to do, so I must amuse myself, while you are thinking of all the wolves that a dozen men are going to kill."

"Ah, yes, laugh away, Chicot; first it was the clothes, now the number of wolves."

"Oh, sire!"

"But I must say you are not indulgent, for Béarn is not as large as France; so the king goes there with two hundred huntsmen, I with a dozen, as you see."

"Yes, sire."

"But," said Henri, "sometimes the country gentlemen, hearing I am going, quit their chateaux and join me, which sometimes makes up a good escort for me."

When they had ridden about half an hour--

"Look," said Henri to Chicot, "are not those cavaliers that I see there?"

Chicot looked and said, "Yes, sire, cavaliers, but not huntsmen."

"Why not?"

"Because they are armed like Amadis or Rolando," replied Chicot.

"Ah! what matters the dress, my dear Chicot? you see we are not particular as to that."

"But I see at least two hundred men there."

"Ah! that is a good number."

Chicot began to feel very curious. He had really named too low a number, for the group before them consisted of two hundred men, who came silently and joined their party; each man was well armed and mounted, and they were led by a gentleman who came and kissed Henri's hand with much devotion.

They passed the river Gers, and then came on a second troop of one hundred men; the chief approached, and seemed to be making excuses for not bringing more men. Henri gave him his hand. They went on till they came to the Garonne; this they also passed, and about half a league on the other side, three hundred cavaliers, hidden in a pine forest, suddenly came in sight.

"Oh! monseigneur," said Chicot, "are not these enemies who have heard of your chase, and wish to oppose it?"

"No, my son, you are wrong; they are friends from Puzmirol."

"Mordieu! sire, you will have more men in your escort than trees in your forest."

"Chicot, I really believe the news of your arrival must have spread through the country, and all these people have come to welcome the ambassador from France."

Chicot saw he was being laughed at, and felt rather offended.

The day finished at Muroy, where the gentlemen of the country gave a grand supper to the king, of which Chicot took his part enthusiastically, as it had not been deemed necessary to stop on the road for anything so unimportant as dinner, and he had eaten nothing since he had left Nerac.

Henri had the best house in the town, half the troop slept within doors, the other half in the street where the king was.

"When are we to begin the hunt?" asked Chicot of Henri, as he was undressing.

"We are not yet in the territory of the wolves, my dear Chicot."

"And when shall we be?"

"Curious!"

"Not so, sire; but you understand, one likes to know where one is going."

"You will know to-morrow; meanwhile, lie down there on those cushions on my left; here is Mornay snoring already at my right."

"Peste!" said Chicot, "he makes more noise asleep than awake."

"It is true he is not very talkative; but see him at the chase."

Day had partly appeared, when a great noise of horses awoke Chicot. They dressed, drank some spiced wine, and took other refreshment, and then Henri cried:

"To horse! gentlemen, we have a long day's work before us."

Chicot saw with astonishment that five hundred cavaliers had swelled the train during the night.

"Sire!" cried he, "you have an army."

"Wait!" replied Henri.

At Lauzerte, six hundred more men came and ranged themselves behind the cavaliers.

"Foot soldiers!" cried Chicot.

"Nothing but beaters," said the king.

Chicot frowned and spoke no more.

Twenty times his eyes turned toward the country, and the idea of flight presented itself to him. But Chicot had his guard of honor, doubtless as ambassador of the king of France, and so well was he recommended to this guard, that he could not make a movement that was not repeated by ten men.

This annoyed him, and he said so to the king.

"Diable!" said Henri, "it is your own fault; you tried to run away from Nerac, and I am afraid you will try it again."

"Sire, if I give my word as a gentleman not to do so?"

"That will do."

"Besides, I should be wrong to do so."

"How so?"

"Yes; for if I stay, I believe I shall see curious things."

"I am of your opinion, my dear Chicot."

At this moment they were going through the town of Montcuq, and four field-pieces took their place in the army.

"I return to my first idea," said Chicot, "that the wolves in this country are different from others, and are differently treated; with artillery, for instance."

"Ah!" said Henri, "it is a mania of the people of Montcuq. Since I gave them these four pieces they take them about everywhere."

"Well, sire, shall we arrive to-day?"

"No, to-morrow."

"To-morrow morning or evening?"

"Morning."

"Then," said Chicot, "it is at Cahors we are to hunt, is it not, sire?"

"On that side," replied Henri.

"But, sire, you who have infantry, cavalry, and artillery to hunt wolves with, should also have taken the royal standard, and then the honor to the wolves would have been complete."

"We have not forgotten it, Chicot, ventre St. Gris! only it is left in the case for fear of dirtying it. But if you wish to see it, and know under whose banner you march, you shall see it."

"No, no, it is useless; leave it where it is."

"Well, be easy, you will see it before long."

They passed the second night at Catus. Troops kept arriving all night.

"It is lucky we are not going on to Paris," said Chicot, "we should arrive with 100,000 men."

The next morning, by eight o'clock, they were before Cahors, with 1,000 foot soldiers and 2,000 horse.

They found the city in a state of defense, M. de Vezin having heard rumors of the advance.

"Ah!" said the king, "he is warned; that is very annoying."

"We must lay siege in due form, sire," said Mornay; "we expect still about 2,000 men, and that is enough."

"Let us assemble the council and begin the trenches."

Chicot listened to all this in amazement. The pensive air of Henri alone reassured him, for it confirmed his suspicions that he was no warrior. He let every one speak, and said nothing. All at once he raised his head, and said in a commanding tone:

"Gentlemen, this is what we must do. We have 3,000 men, and you say you expect 2,000 more, Mornay?"

"Yes, sire."

"That will make 5,000. In a regular siege we should lose 1,000 or 1,500 men in two months, their death would discourage the others, and we should lose 1,000 more in retreating. Let us sacrifice 500 men at once, and take Cahors by assault."

"What do you mean, sire?" asked Mornay.

"My dear friend, we will go straight to the nearest gate. We shall find a fosse in our way, which we will cover with fascines; we may leave two hundred men on the road, but we shall reach the gate."

"After, sire?"

"Then we will break it down with petards and go in. It will not be difficult."

Chicot looked at Henri, astonished.

"Oh!" growled he, "perhaps he is a coward and a boaster."

"Let us not lose time, gentlemen," cried Henri. "Forward, and let all who love me follow."

Chicot approached Mornay.

"Well! M. le Comte," said he, "do you all want to be cut to pieces?"

"Oh! we take our chance."

"But the king will get killed."

"Bah! he has a good cuirass."

"But he will not be foolish enough to fight himself, I suppose?"

Mornay shrugged his shoulders and turned on his heel.

"After all, I like him better asleep than awake; he is more polite snoring than speaking," said Chicot.