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## LA CULOTTE DU BRIGADIER

par

**Florian Pharaon**

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Saint-Maximin est une jolie et coquette petite ville de Province, pleine de soleil et d'ombrages, célèbre par son église aux allures de cathédrale et par le souvenir du brigadier Camaréon.

L'épopée de ce brave vétéran des guerres d'Afrique est décrite à la fresque par quatre grandes pages qui forment la paroi de la salle de la "Pomme-de-Pin", cabaret qui, il y a trente ans était le grand café de la bourgeoisie de l'endroit.

Le premier tableau représente un chien en arrêt et dans la pénombre ombreuse d'un sentier, la silhouette de deux gendarmes; dans le second, les deux gardiens de la paix publique sont au galop, poursuivis plutôt que suivis par le chien; le troisième fait assister les spectateurs à un repas que partage le chien; le quatrième, enfin, une sorte d'apothéose, nous montre le brigadier son chapeau brossé et carré sur la tête, encore tout botté, mais, en chemise, et l'arrière-train d'un chien fuyant par un carreau de papier résolument traversé.

Ces fresques sont signées Lucoli, un peintre qui battait misérablement la campagne en 1846, et qui possède aujourd'hui un palais à Florence, sa patrie.

Or, voici l'aventure qu'elles racontent, aventure restée légendaire à Saint-Maximin, à Puy Loubien, à Trets, et dans toute la vallée de l'Arc, célèbre par la victoire de Marius et la défaite des Cimbres.

M. Frédéric de Trets était un grand chasseur devant le Seigneur, aussi fier de la sûreté de son oeil que de son vieux compagnon Faro, magnifique chien d'arrêt qu'il se faisait gloire d'avoir dressé.

Un soir, il revenait, le carnier plein, de battre la plaine, lorsque au détour du chemin, il rencontra son voisin Sixte Choua. Sixte Choua était aussi un chasseur, mais chasseur d'oiseaux de passage, qu'il guettait nonchalamment de son poste; il avait, en outre pour la plus profonde aversion les chiens, qui ne sont bons, disait-il, qu'à effaroucher le gibier et à le mettre en fuite.

M. Frédéric et Sixte Choua se serrèrent la main et firent route vers Trets. Faro, en chien bien dressé, marchait le nez sur les talons de son maître.

La conversation ne tarda pas à rouler sur la chasse, et Sixte Choua reprit sa thèse sur l'inutilité du chien.

M. Frédéric chercha à convaincre son compagnon en lui citant les prouesses de Faro; mais Sixte Choua avait son opinion faite et n'en voulait pas démordre. A chaque fait que lui citait M. Frédéric, Sixte Choua répondait:

--C'est un pur hasard.

M. Frédéric était exaspéré.

--Qu'entends-tu par un pur hasard? s'écria-t-il.

--Oh! rien.

--Mais encore?

--Eh bien, suppose une supposition: tu as la bouche ouverte, je te jette une cerise entre le nez et le menton; si elle ne tombe pas dans ta bouche, c'est par un pur hasard.

--Tu es plus entêté que le bedeau de Peynier.

M. Frédéric s'arrêta, fit mine de charger son fusil; Faro, les yeux fixés sur lui, raidit son fouet.

--Cherche! lui cria-t-il en lui désignant un champ de trèfle qui bordait la route.

Puis se tournant vers Sixte Choua:

--Tiens, lui dit-il, nous sommes seuls; Faro ne nous voit ni ne nous entend, n'est-ce pas? Eh bien, regarde: je mets cette pièce de cinq francs sous cette pierre; nous allons rentrer à Trets, et j'enverrai Faro la chercher. Tu ne diras pas que c'est un pur hasard, ça?

--Oh! pour ça non; ce ne sera pas un pur hasard.

--Eh bien, partons, dit M. Frédéric.

Il siffla Faro, et ils se dirigèrent vers Trets, où ils arrivèrent à la nuit tombante.

En attendant le souper que préparait la ménagère, les deux amis s'assirent sur un banc qu'ombrageait un magnifique figuier et s'apprêtèrent à pétuner, comme disait M. Frédéric, qui avait la prétention d'être un beau parleur. Lorsque sa pipe fut bien allumée, il appela Faro, qui vint se placer entre ses jambes, et il le caressa.

--Tu vois, Faro, dit-il en montrant au chien une pièce de cinq francs, tu vois! J'en ai perdu une sur le chemin, va la chercher!

Faro donna quelques éclats de voix en bondissant pour indiquer qu'il avait compris; puis, prenant piste, le nez au ras du sol, il partit en courant.

--Eh bien, qu'en dis-tu? dit M. Frédéric.

--S'il rapporte la pièce, je dirai que ce n'est pas un pur hasard.

Faro quêta tout le long du chemin et s'arrêta net devant la pierre sous laquelle était placée la pièce de cinq francs. Il essaya vainement de la soulever avec son museau; il flairait bruyamment, cherchant une issue pour atteindre la pièce. Après de vains efforts, il se décida à gratter le sol pour faire une excavation qui lui permit d'atteindre l'objet qu'il recherchait.

Il se livrait ardemment à cette besogne sur le bord du sentier, lorsque deux gendarmes apparurent. Faro était un trop honnête chien pour fuir devant l'autorité; il considéra même l'arrivée des représentants de la force publique comme un secours providentiel. Tout frétilant, il s'élança vers eux, revint vers la pierre, se mit à regratter, retourna, semblant solliciter leur assistance.

Le brigadier était un homme d'expérience, et, trouvant ce manège insolite, il mit pied à terre. Le chien ne le quittait pas de vue. Camaréon--tel était le nom du brigadier--souleva la pierre et vit une belle pièce blanche qui, malgré la nuit qui était arrivée, se détachait brillante sur la terre sombre. Le chien se précipita sur elle, mais le brigadier l'avait déjà saisie.

--Diable! diable! dit-il, qu'est-ce que cela signifie? Quel est ce mystère?

Après un moment de réflexion, il mit soigneusement la pièce de cinq francs dans la poche de son pantalon et remonta à cheval.

Puis, comme la nuit était venue, il partit au trot, suivi de son subordonné.

Faro, un instant hésitant, étonné peut-être de l'acte d'indélicatesse du brigadier, prit son parti et se mit à la poursuite des gendarmes.

Tout en chevauchant, son inférieur se hasarda à l'interroger:

--Pour lors, brigadier, que vous pensez que cette pièce...

--Est une pièce à conviction... que c'est à cet endroit même que fut dévalisé le boucher du Beausset, dont auquel j'ai perdu la piste des coupables... et qu'avec cette pièce je fais faire un rapport au capitaine, avec mes idées.

Faro suivait toujours.

--Le chien nous suit, dit le gendarme.

--Tant mieux, que ce sera une pièce à conviction de plus à mettre dans mon rapport au capitaine.

En arrivant à Saint-Maximin, ils mirent les chevaux à l'écurie et montèrent souper dans le réfectoire de la caserne.

Faro n'avait pas quitté la botte du gendarme.

On se mit à table, et Faro fut admirablement traité. Camaréon n'avait jamais vu de chien plus caressant; la tête appuyée sur les genoux du brigadier, il ne perdait pas un seul de ses mouvements et poussait la familiarité jusqu'à fourrer son museau dans la poche de sa culotte.

Le repas fini, chacun se retira dans sa chambre, et Camaréon emmena avec lui Faro.

Je ne vous ferai pas assister à la toilette de nuit d'un brigadier de gendarmerie; sachez seulement que, à peine Camaréon venant de déposer négligemment sa culotte sur le dossier d'une chaise, Faro se précipita dessus, la happa et bondit avec à travers un carreau de papier qui remplaçait une vitre absente de la fenêtre.

Je ne chercherai pas à vous décrire la stupéfaction de Camaréon. Il cria: "Au voleur!" Ses hommes accoururent, et, dans le costume semi-officiel bien représenté par Lucoli, il raconta à ses subordonnés sa mésaventure.

On battit les rues sombres de Saint-Maximin, au grand émoi des habitants, mais on ne découvrit pas Faro.

--Couchons-nous, dit philosophiquement le brigadier; ce chien est un fricoteur et demain tout le monde à cheval, à la recherche de son propriétaire, qui doit être un fricoteur.

Sur cet ordre, tous les gendarmes allèrent se coucher.

Pendant ce temps-là, Faro brûlait les quatre lieues qui séparent Saint-Maximin de Trets.

Sixte Choua, attardé quittait M. Frédéric fort inquiet de la longue et inexplicable absence de Faro, lorsque celui-ci arriva à toute vitesse et déposa une loque noire aux pieds de son maître.

--*Qu'es aquo?* s'exclama Sixte Choua.

--*Va sabi djé!* répondit M. Frédéric.

On transporta la guenille poussiéreuse dans la maison. Faro, tout haletant, vint se coucher auprès et, la secouant, fit tinter sur le parquet le contenu de la culotte, toute déchiquetée. M. Frédéric la fouilla et en retira la pièce de cinq francs.

--Eh bien, qu'est-ce que tu en dis?

--J'en dis... j'en dis... fit en goguenardant Sixte Choua, que c'est un pur hasard de trouver dans une vieille culotte cinq francs placés sous une pierre au bord du chemin; voilà un pur hasard. Eh bien! bonsoir.

Sixte Choua allait se retirer, lorsque soudain M. Frédéric se frappa le front en poussant un grand cri:

--Ah! mon Dieu! quel malheur!

--Quoi donc?

--Tu ne comprends pas? J'ai fait voir à Faro une pièce de cinq francs; il a mal compris, je lui ai mal expliqué. Il a cru qu'il m'en fallait une quelconque, et alors...

--Alors?

--Oh! c'est affreux! alors il a rencontré quelqu'un, il l'a attaqué, il l'a peut-être dévoré pour m'apporter ma pièce, qui n'est pas ma pièce. Sainte Vierge Marie, quel malheur!

--Allons, du calme, Frédéric, sois un homme, dit Sixte Choua. Voyons d'abord ce que c'est que cette loque.

Les deux amis ne tardèrent pas à reconnaître le restant d'une culotte de gendarme.

--Assassiner un gendarme! Quel gueux que ce Faro! s'exclama M. Frédéric, désespéré.

Sixte Choua ne voulut pas abandonner son voisin, et les deux amis passèrent une nuit horrible à se consulter. Faro ne comprenait rien aux gourmandises qu'il recevait, et, en philosophe, il alla se coucher dans la grange pour les éviter.

A l'aube, les deux amis, qui avaient résolu d'aller droit au danger, se dirigèrent vers la gendarmerie.

A moitié route, à l'endroit même où, la veille, il avait voulu faire sa malencontreuse expérience, il aperçut un groupe de gendarmes. En les apercevant, Faro s'était précipité à leur rencontre, et Camaréon l'avait reconnu. En deux temps de galop, il fut auprès de M. Frédéric.

--Il est à vous, ce chien? fit-il

--Oui, brigadier.

--Et ma culotte?

--La voici, répondit piteusement M. Frédéric en tirant de sa veste un lambeau de drap.

--Ah! Ah! je vous tiens donc, assassins du boucher du Beausset! dit Camaréon.

Et mettant pied à terre, il commença l'interrogatoire.

Il ne fut pas difficile de s'expliquer, et gendarmes et inculpés allèrent dîner chez M. Frédéric.

La culotte fut généreusement payée.

--C'est égal, vous avez là un fameux chien, dit Camaréon.

--Qu'est-ce que je te disais, hein, Sixte?

--Que veux-tu? voilà ce qu'on peut appeler un pur hasard!

FLORIAN PHARAON.

\*\*\* END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK LA CULOTTE DU BRIGADIER \*\*\*

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