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'Come along now, Jacques! This is no way to get to Marqueyssac!'

The master's voice was gruff. He turned his horse away from the river. A narrow stretch of road wound between the right bank of the Dordogne and the golden cliffs that soared upwards. The hanging gardens of Marqueyssac spread in a green layer across the top. Sections of the walls could be seen from below. It was a veritable oasis.

Before he pressed his heels to his horse's flank, the master threw me a sharp look and said,

'Well, friend, is it possible that you could grace us with your company for a little longer? There's safety in numbers. You look as if you know how to handle that sword and the firearm across your shoulders has a presence at a distance. I would even welcome the likes of Reynard. He fights like a terrier when there's a scrap. What do you think Jacques? This is a notorious stretch of road for an ambush.'

Jacques nodded in agreement and I expressed my gratitude at the invitation. The pen might be mightier than the sword but not when it comes to ruffians.

To my surprise, Reynard appeared by my side. Had he been listening in the hedgerow? The master was heading down the road with Jacques beside him. We followed on foot. I wondered if the bandits had regrouped after their fright with the wild boar.

We walked on. What should I say? There was no way of knowing what this enigmatic little man was thinking. This had the effect of plunging the pair of us into darkness and silence. I think I preferred him when he was garrulous. Then again he was notorious for his skill at speechifying. He was famously unstoppable. I wondered if he had known Monsieur Diderot who was himself a famous raconteur (second only to the Englishman Mr Sterne, so I'm told). There was a difference however. Sterne and Diderot were wined and dined for their company, whereas poor Reynard was shunned. He was no man of letters. However, for a poor man he was admired for his wit and cunning when it came to a difficult situation or a matter of survival. Both he and Jacques were extraordinarily sharp of hearing. It was Reynard who had the edge, because his ears stood out from his head in a way that not only captured the slightest sound but startled strangers in the villages. Some people said that he had eyes in the back of his head but the truth is his sense of smell was so finely tuned that he could catch the scent of trouble before it appeared around any corner.

Monsieur Reynard must have some fine stories to tell, I thought. It's a pity he has gone quiet and secretive. I was aware that he glanced at me several times with the characteristic squint in his black eyes. I pretended not to notice as I prepared in my mind a way of coercing a conversation from him. My appetite had been whetted and I was almost overwhelmed by curiosity about his

opinions, his feelings about everyday matters. Perhaps I would have to be satisfied with a nonverbal exchange as we strode on in silence.

After we had walked a kilometre or so, I felt that we were somehow in communication. My eyes met his for a brief moment. Then, to my surprise he began to sing in a dialect that I was able to understand. Could Reynard know this? His song went thus,

By the toes of my boots
To the seat of my pants,
There's naught to beware
There's naught to despair!

By the hair on my chin
To the dirt in my ears,
We ought to beware
We ought to take care!

His pace had quickened and before long we had almost caught up to Jacques and his master. I sensed trouble. Reynard had sent me a warning. My hand settled on the handle of my sword. I wondered if we were being followed. Reynard had dropped back a few paces. When I looked back at him I could see the sun shining red through his great ears. Beyond that I thought I saw a dark figure slip into the hedgerow. My gaze swung back to the two horsemen in front. Should I warn them? Reynard seemed to sense what I was thinking. He placed a finger over his lips and shook his head. In the time it takes to blink an eye, he disappeared in silence into the bushes at the side of the road.

After some moments, I heard a high-pitched whistle like the scream of a distressed rabbit when it is lifted in the claws of an eagle. It was quite unnerving. Jacques turned his head. He saw that I stood stock still in the middle of the road, my hand grasping the hilt of my sword. My feet were pointed forwards but my torso was turned towards the hedgerow. Jacques and his master stopped on the road. They seemed not to know what to do. I did not know what they would do. I did not know what I would do. I did not know what Reynard was doing. I longed for Monsieur Diderot to come and advise me, to change the direction of this narrative. I craved a cup of coffee. In my fear, time seemed to stop still. I could almost smell the coffee. I could smell the coffee. If there were bandits about, it may well be that they had stopped to brew some in the protection of the overhang of the cliff. I felt a wave of excitement course up through my body and then back down to my feet. I cried out loud like a call to arms,

'Give me coffee and no one gets hurt!'

I was amazed at my bravado. I dashed through a gap in the hedgerow. There was Reynard with the bandits, seated near their fire, sipping coffee.

Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Nola Farman.