

THIRD DAY

Here begins the Third Day, wherein, under the rule of Neifile, the discussion turns upon people who by dint of their own efforts have achieved an object they greatly desired, or recovered a thing previously lost.

On the following Sunday, when already the dawn was beginning to change from vermilion to orange with the approach of the sun, the queen arose and summoned all her companions. Some time earlier, the steward had dispatched most of the things they required to their new quarters, together with servants to make all necessary preparations for their arrival. And once the queen herself had set out, he promptly saw that everything else was loaded on to the baggage train, as though he were striking camp, and then departed with the rest of the servants who had remained behind with the ladies and gentlemen.

Meanwhile the queen, accompanied and followed by her ladies and the three young men, and guided by the song of perhaps a score of nightingales and other birds, struck out westward at a leisurely pace along a little-used path carpeted with grass and flowers, whose petals were gradually opening to greet the morning sun. After walking no more than two miles, she brought them, long before tierce was half spent,¹ to a most beautiful and ornate palace,² which was situated on a slight eminence above the plain. Entering the palace, they explored it from end to end, and were filled with admiration for

its spacious halls and well-kept, elegant rooms, which were equipped with everything they could possibly need, and they came to the conclusion that only a gentleman of the highest rank could have owned it. And when they descended to inspect the huge, sunlit courtyard, the cellars stocked with excellent wines, and the well containing abundant supplies of fresh, ice-cold water, they praised it even more. The whole place was decked with seasonable flowers and cuttings, and by way of repose they seated themselves on a loggia overlooking the central court. Here they were met by the steward, who had thoughtfully laid on a supply of delectable sweetmeats and precious wines for their refreshment.

After this, they were shown into a walled garden alongside the palace, and since it seemed at first glance to be a thing of wondrous beauty, they began to explore it in detail. The garden was surrounded and criss-crossed by paths of unusual width, all as straight as arrows and overhung by pergolas of vines, which showed every sign of yielding an abundant crop of grapes later in the year. The vines were all in flower, drenching the garden with their aroma, which, mingled with that of many other fragrant plants and herbs, gave them the feeling that they were in the midst of all the spices ever grown in the East. The paths along the edges of the garden were almost entirely hemmed in by white and red roses and jasmine, so that not only in the morning but even when the sun was at its apex one could walk in pleasant, sweet-smelling shade, without ever being touched by the sun's rays. It would take a long time to describe how numerous and varied were the shrubs growing there, or how neatly they were set

out: but all the ones that have aught to commend them and flourish in our climate were represented in full measure. In the central part of the garden (not the least, but by far the most admirable of its features), there was a lawn of exceedingly fine grass, of so deep a green as to almost seem black, dotted all over with possibly a thousand different kinds of gaily-coloured flowers, and surrounded by a line of flourishing, bright green orange- and lemon-trees, which, with their mature and unripe fruit and lingering shreds of blossom, offered agreeable shade to the eyes and a delightful aroma to the nostrils. In the middle of this lawn there stood a fountain of pure white marble, covered with marvellous bas-reliefs. From a figure standing on a column in the centre of the fountain, a jet of water, whether natural or artificial I know not, but sufficiently powerful to drive a mill with ease, gushed high into the sky before cascading downwards and falling with a delectable splash into the crystal-clear pool below. And from this pool, which was lapping the rim of the fountain, the water passed through a hidden culvert and then emerged into finely constructed artificial channels surrounding the lawn on all sides. Thence it flowed along similar channels through almost the whole of the beautiful garden, eventually gathering at a single place from which it issued forth from the garden and descended towards the plain as a pure clear stream, furnishing ample power to two separate mills on its downward course, to the no small advantage of the owner of the palace.

The sight of this garden, and the perfection of its arrangement, with its shrubs, its streamlets, and the fountain from which they

originated, gave so much pleasure to each of the ladies and the three young men that they all began to maintain that if Paradise were constructed on earth, it was inconceivable that it could take any other form, nor could they imagine any way in which the garden's beauty could possibly be enhanced. And as they wandered contentedly through it, making magnificent garlands for themselves from the leaves of the various trees, their ears constantly filled with the sound of some twenty different kinds of birds, all singing as though they were vying with one another, they became aware of yet another delightful feature, which, being so overwhelmed by the others, they had so far failed to notice. For they found that the garden was liberally stocked with as many as a hundred different varieties of perfectly charming animals, to which they all started drawing each other's attention. Here were some rabbits emerging from a warren, over there hares were running, elsewhere they could observe some deer lying on the ground, whilst in yet another place young fawns were grazing. And apart from these, they saw numerous harmless creatures of many other kinds, roaming about at leisure as though they were quite tame, all of which added greatly to their already considerable delight.

When, however, they had wandered about the garden for some little time, sampling its various attractions, they instructed the servants to arrange the tables round the fountain, and then they sang half-a-dozen canzonets and danced several dances, after which, at the queen's command, they all sat down to breakfast. Choice and dainty dishes, exquisitely prepared, were set before them in unhurried

succession, and when they rose from table, merrier than when they had started, they turned once more to music, songs and dancing. Eventually, however, as the hottest part of the day was approaching, the queen decided that those who felt so inclined should take their siesta. Some of them accordingly retired, but the rest were so overwhelmed by the beauty of their surroundings that they remained where they were and whiled away their time in reading romances or playing chess or throwing dice whilst the others slept.

But a little after nones, they all went and refreshed their faces in cool water before assembling, at the queen's request, on the lawn near the fountain, where, having seated themselves in the customary manner, they began to await their turn to tell a story on the topic the queen had proposed. The first of their number to whom she entrusted this office was Filostrato, who began as follows:

FIRST STORY

Masetto of Lamporecchio pretends to be dumb, and becomes a gardener at a convent, where all the nuns combine forces to take him off to bed with them.

Fairest ladies, there are a great many men and women who are so dense as to be firmly convinced that when a girl takes the white veil and dons the black cowl, she ceases to be a woman or to experience feminine longings, as though the very act of making her a nun had caused her to turn into stone. And if they should happen to hear of anything to suggest that their conviction is ill-founded, they become

quite distressed, as though some enormous and diabolical evil had been perpetrated against Nature. It never enters their heads for a moment, possibly because they have no wish to face facts, that they themselves are continually dissatisfied even though they enjoy full liberty to do as they please, or that idleness and solitude are such powerful stimulants. Again, there are likewise many people who are firmly convinced that digging and hoeing and coarse food and hardy living remove all lustful desires from those who work on the land, and greatly impair their intelligence and powers of perception. But, since the queen has bidden me to speak, I would like to tell you a little tale, relevant to the topic she has prescribed, which will show you quite clearly that all these people are sadly mistaken in their convictions.

In this rural region of ours, there was and still is a nunnery, greatly renowned for its holiness, which I shall refrain from naming for fear of doing the slightest harm to its reputation. At this convent, not long ago, at a time when it housed no more than eight nuns and an abbess, all of them young, there was a worthy little man whose job it was to look after a very beautiful garden of theirs. And one day, being dissatisfied with his remuneration, he settled up with the nuns' steward and returned to his native village of Lamporecchio.

On his return, he was warmly welcomed by several of the villagers, among them a young labourer, a big, strong fellow called Masetto, who, considering that he was of peasant stock, possessed a remarkably handsome physique and agreeable features. Since the

good man, whose name was Nuto, had been away from the village for some little time, Masetto wanted to know where he had been, and when he learned that Nuto had been living at a convent, he questioned him about his duties there.

‘I tended a fine, big garden of theirs,’ Nuto replied, ‘in addition to which, I sometimes used to go and collect firewood, or I would fetch water and do various other little jobs of that sort. But the nuns gave me such a paltry wage that it was barely sufficient to pay for my shoe-leather. Besides, they are all young and they seem to me to have the devil in them, because whatever you do, it is impossible to please them. Sometimes, in fact, I would be working in the garden when one of them would order me to do one thing, another would tell me to do something else, and yet another would snatch the very hoe from my hands, and tell me I was doing things the wrong way. They used to pester me to such an extent that occasionally I would down tools and march straight out of the garden. So that eventually, what with one thing and another, I decided I’d had enough of the place and came away altogether. Just as I was leaving, their steward asked me whether I knew of anyone who could take the job on, and I promised to send somebody along, provided I could find the right man, but you won’t catch me sending him anybody, not unless God has provided the fellow with the strength and patience of an ox.’

As he listened, Masetto experienced such a longing to go and stay with these nuns that his whole body tingled with excitement, for it was clear from what he had heard that he should be able to achieve

what he had in mind. Realizing, however, that he would get nowhere by revealing his intentions to Nuto, he replied:

‘How right you were to come away from the place! What sort of a life can any man lead when he’s surrounded by a lot of women? He might as well be living with a pack of devils. Why, six times out of seven they don’t even know their own minds.’

But when they had finished talking, Masetto began to consider what steps he ought to take so that he could go and stay with them. Knowing himself to be perfectly capable of carrying out the duties mentioned by Nuto, he had no worries about losing the job on that particular score, but he was afraid lest he should be turned down because of his youth and his unusually attractive appearance. And so, having rejected a number of other possible expedients, he eventually thought to himself: ‘The convent is a long way off, and there’s nobody there who knows me. If I can pretend to be dumb, they’ll take me on for sure.’ Clinging firmly to this conjecture, he therefore dressed himself in pauper’s rags and slung an axe over his shoulder,¹ and without telling anyone where he was going, he set out for the convent. On his arrival, he wandered into the courtyard, where as luck would have it he came across the steward, and with the aid of gestures such as dumb people use, he conveyed the impression that he was begging for something to eat, in return for which he would attend to any wood-chopping that needed to be done.

The steward gladly provided him with something to eat, after which he presented him with a pile of logs that Nuto had been unable

to chop. Being very powerful, Masetto made short work of the whole consignment, and then the steward, who was on his way to the wood, took Masetto with him and got him to fell some timber. He then provided Masetto with an ass, and gave him to understand by the use of sign-language that he was to take the timber back to the convent.

The fellow carried out his instructions so efficiently that the steward retained his services for a few more days, getting him to tackle various jobs that needed to be done about the place. One day, the Abbess herself happened to catch sight of him, and she asked the steward who he was.

‘The man is a poor deaf-mute, ma’am, who came here one day begging for alms,’ said the steward. ‘I saw to it that he was well fed, and set him to work on various tasks that needed to be done. If he turns out to be good at gardening, and wants to stay, I reckon we would do well out of it, because we certainly need a gardener, and this is a strong fellow who will always do as he’s told. Besides, you wouldn’t need to worry about his giving any cheek to these young ladies of yours.’

‘I do believe you’re right,’ said the Abbess. ‘Find out whether he knows what to do, and make every effort to hold on to him. Provide him with a pair of shoes and an old hood, wheedle him, pay him a few compliments, and give him plenty to eat.’

The steward agreed to carry out her instructions, but Masetto was not far away, pretending to sweep the courtyard, and he had overheard their whole conversation. ‘Once you put me inside that

garden of yours,' he said to himself, gleefully, 'I'll tend it better than it's ever been tended before.'

Now, when the steward had discovered what an excellent gardener he was, he gestured to Masetto, asking him whether he would like to stay there, and the latter made signs to indicate that he was willing to do whatever the steward wanted. The steward therefore took him on to the staff, ordered him to look after the garden, and showed him what he was to do, after which he went away in order to attend to the other affairs of the convent, leaving him there by himself. Gradually, as the days passed and Masetto worked steadily away, the nuns started teasing and annoying him, which is the way people frequently behave with deaf-mutes, and they came out with the foulest language imaginable, thinking that he was unable to hear them. Moreover, the Abbess, who was possibly under the impression that he had lost his tail as well as his tongue, took little or no notice of all this.

Now one day, when Masetto happened to be taking a rest after a spell of strenuous work, he was approached by two very young nuns who were out walking in the garden. Since he gave them the impression that he was asleep, they began to stare at him, and the bolder of the two said to her companion:

'If I could be sure that you would keep it a secret, I would tell you about an idea that has often crossed my mind, and one that might well work out to our mutual benefit.'

'Do tell me,' replied the other. 'You can be quite certain that I

shan't talk about it to anyone.'

The bold one began to speak more plainly.

'I wonder,' she said, 'whether you have ever considered what a strict life we have to lead, and how the only men who ever dare set foot in this place are the steward, who is elderly, and this dumb gardener of ours. Yet I have often heard it said, by several of the ladies who have come to visit us, that all other pleasures in the world are mere trifles by comparison with the one experienced by a woman when she goes with a man. I have thus been thinking, since I have nobody else to hand, that I would like to discover with the aid of this dumb fellow whether they are telling the truth. As it happens, there couldn't be a better man for the purpose, because even if he wanted to let the cat out of the bag, he wouldn't be able to. He wouldn't even know how to explain, for you can see for yourself what a mentally retarded, dim-witted hulk of a youth the fellow is. I would be glad to know what you think of the idea.'

'Dear me!' said the other. 'Don't you realize that we have promised God to preserve our virginity?'

'Pah!' she said. 'We are constantly making Him promises that we never keep! What does it matter if we fail to keep this one? He can always find other girls to preserve their virginity for Him.'

'But what if we become pregnant?' said her companion. 'What's going to happen then?'

'You're beginning to worry about things before they've even happened. We can cross that bridge if and when we come to it.'

There'll be scores of different ways to keep it a secret, provided we control our own tongues.'

'Very well, then,' said the other, who was already more eager than the first to discover what sort of stuff a man was made of. 'How do we set about it?'

'As you see,' she replied, 'it is getting on for nones, and I expect all our companions are asleep. Let's make sure there's nobody else in the garden. And then, if the coast is clear, all we have to do is to take him by the hand and steer him across to that hut over there, where he shelters from the rain. Then one of us can go inside with him while the other keeps watch. He's such a born idiot that he'll do whatever we suggest.'

Masetto heard the whole of this conversation, and since he was quite willing to obey, the only thing he was waiting for now was for one of them to come and fetch him. The two nuns had a good look round, and having made certain that they could not be observed, the one who had done all the talking went over to Masetto and woke him up, whereupon he sprang instantly to his feet. She then took him by the hand, making alluring gestures to which he responded with big broad, imbecilic grins, and led him into the hut, where Masetto needed very little coaxing to do her bidding. Having got what she wanted, she loyally made way for her companion, and Masetto, continuing to act the simpleton, did as he was asked. Before the time came for them to leave, they had each made repeated trials of the dumb fellow's riding ability, and later on, when they were busily

swapping tales about it all, they agreed that it was every bit as pleasant an experience as they had been led to believe, indeed more so. And from then on, whenever the opportunity arose, they whiled away many a pleasant hour in the dumb fellow's arms.

One day, however, a companion of theirs happened to look out from the window of her cell, saw the goings-on, and drew the attention of two others to what was afoot. Having talked the matter over between themselves, they at first decided to report the pair to the Abbess. But then they changed their minds, and by common agreement with the other two, they took up shares in Masetto's holding. And because of various indiscretions, these five were subsequently joined by the remaining three, one after the other.

Finally, the Abbess, who was still unaware of all this, was taking a stroll one very hot day in the garden, all by herself, when she came across Masetto stretched out fast asleep in the shade of an almond-tree. Too much riding by night had left him with very little strength for the day's labours, and so there he lay, with his clothes ruffled up in front by the wind, leaving him all exposed. Finding herself alone, the lady stood with her eyes riveted to this spectacle, and she was seized by the same craving to which her young charges had already succumbed. So, having roused Masetto, she led him away to her room, where she kept him for several days, thus provoking bitter complaints from the nuns over the fact that the handyman had suspended work in the garden. Before sending him back to his own quarters, she repeatedly savoured the one pleasure for which she had

always reserved her most fierce disapproval, and from then on she demanded regular supplementary allocations, amounting to considerably more than her fair share.

Eventually, Masetto, being unable to cope with all their demands, decided that by continuing to be dumb any longer he might do himself some serious injury. And so one night, when he was with the Abbess, he untied his tongue and began to talk.

‘I have always been given to understand, ma’am,’ he said, ‘that whereas a single cock is quite sufficient for ten hens, ten men are hard put to satisfy one woman, and yet here am I with nine of them on my plate. I can’t endure it any longer, not at any price, and as a matter of fact I’ve been on the go so much that I’m no longer capable of delivering the goods. So you’ll either have to bid me farewell or come to some sort of an arrangement.’

When she heard him speak, the lady was utterly amazed, for she had always believed him to be dumb.

‘What is all this?’ she said. ‘I thought you were supposed to be dumb.’

‘That’s right, ma’am, I was,’ said Masetto, ‘but I wasn’t born dumb. It was owing to an illness that I lost the power of speech, and, praise be to God, I’ve recovered it this very night.’

The lady believed him implicitly, and asked him what he had meant when he had talked about having nine on his plate. Masetto explained how things stood, and when the Abbess heard, she realized that every single one of the nuns possessed sharper wits than her

own. Being of a tactful disposition, she decided there and then that rather than allow Masetto to go away and spread tales concerning the convent, she would come to some arrangement with her nuns in regard to the matter.

Their old steward had died a few days previously. And so, with Masetto's consent, they unanimously decided, now that they all knew what the others had been doing, to persuade the people living in the neighbourhood that after a prolonged period of speechlessness, his ability to talk had been miraculously restored by the nuns' prayers and the virtues of the saint after whom the convent was named, and they appointed him their new steward. They divided up his various functions among themselves in such a way that he was able to do them all justice. And although he fathered quite a number of nunlets and monklets, it was all arranged so discreetly that nothing leaked out until after the death of the Abbess, by which time Masetto was getting on in years and simply wanted to retire to his village on a fat pension. Once his wishes became known, they were readily granted.

Thus it was that Masetto, now an elderly and prosperous father who was spared the bother of feeding his children and the expense of their upbringing, returned to the place from which he had set out with an axe on his shoulder, having had the sense to employ his youth to good advantage. And this, he maintained, was the way that Christ treated anyone who set a pair of horns on His crown.

SECOND STORY

A groom makes love to King Agilulf's wife. Agilulf finds out, keeps quiet about it, tracks down the culprit, and shears his hair. The shorn man shears all the others, thus avoiding an unpleasant fate.

There were some parts of Filostrato's tale that caused the ladies to blush, others that provoked their laughter, and as soon as it had come to an end, the queen requested Pampinea to take up the storytelling. She accordingly began as follows, laughing all over her face:

Some people, having discovered or heard a thing of which they were better left in ignorance, are so foolishly anxious to publish the fact that sometimes, in censuring the inadvertent failings of others with the object of lessening their own dishonour, they increase it out of all proportion. And I now propose, fair ladies, to illustrate the truth of this assertion by describing a contrary state of affairs, wherein the wisdom of a mighty monarch was matched by the guile¹ of a man whose social standing was possibly inferior to that of Masetto.

When Agilulf² became King of the Lombards, he followed the example set by his predecessors and chose the city of Pavia, in Lombardy, as the seat of his kingdom. He had meanwhile married Theodelinda, who was the beautiful widow of the former Lombard king, Authari, and although she was a very intelligent and virtuous woman, she once had a most unfortunate experience with a suitor of hers. For during a period when the affairs of Lombardy, owing to the wise and resolute rule of this King Agilulf, were relatively calm and prosperous,

one of the Queen's grooms, a man of exceedingly low birth, gifted out of all proportion to his very humble calling, who was as tall and handsome as the King himself, happened to fall hopelessly in love with his royal mistress.

Since his low station in life had not blinded him to the fact that this passion of his was thoroughly improper, he had the good sense not to breathe a word about it to anyone, nor did he even dare to cast tell-tale glances in the lady's direction. But although he was quite resigned to the fact that he would never win her favour, he could at least claim that his thoughts were directed towards a lofty goal. And being scorched all over by the flames of love, he outshone every one of his companions by the zealous manner in which he performed any trifling service that might conceivably bring pleasure to the Queen. Thus it came about that whenever the Queen was obliged to go out on horseback, she preferred to ride the palfrey that was under his care, rather than any of the others. On these occasions, the fellow considered himself to be in his seventh heaven, and he would remain close beside her stirrup, almost swooning with joy whenever he was able simply to brush against the lady's clothes.

However, one frequently finds in affairs of this sort that the weakening of expectation goes hand in hand with a strengthening of the initial passion, and that is exactly what happened in the case of this poor groom. So much so, in fact, that having no glimmer of hope to sustain him, he found it increasingly difficult to keep his secret yearnings under control, and since he was unable to rid himself of his

passion, he kept telling himself that he would have to die. In reflecting on the ways and the means, he was determined to die in such a manner that his motive, in other words his love for the Queen, would be inferred from the circumstances leading up to his death. And at the same time, he resolved that these circumstances should offer him an opportunity of trying his luck and seeing whether he could bring his desires either wholly or partially to fruition. Knowing that it would be quite futile to start either confiding in the Queen or writing letters to acquaint her with his love, he thought he would explore the possibility of entering her bed by means of a stratagem. He had already discovered that the King was not in the habit of invariably sleeping with her, and hence the one and only stratagem that might conceivably succeed was for him to find some way of impersonating the King so that he could approach her quarters and gain admittance to her bedchamber.

Accordingly, with the aim of discovering how the King was dressed and what procedure he followed when paying the Queen a visit, the groom concealed himself for several nights running in the King's palace, in a spacious hall situated between the respective royal bedchambers. And during one of these nocturnal vigils, he saw the King emerge from his room in an enormous cloak, with a flaming torch in one hand and a stick in the other.³ Walking over to the Queen's room, the King knocked once or twice on the door with his stick, whereupon he was instantly admitted and the torch was removed from his hand. Some time later, the King retired in like fashion to his own quarters, and the groom, who had been keeping a

careful watch, decided that he too would have to adopt this same ritual. He therefore procured a torch and a stick, and a cloak similar to the one he had seen the King wearing, and having soaked himself thoroughly in a hot bath so that there should be no possibility of his giving offence to the Queen or arousing her suspicions by smelling of the stable, he transported these articles to the great hall and concealed himself in his usual place.

When he sensed that everyone was asleep, and that the time had finally come for him to gratify his longing or perish nobly in the attempt, he kindled a small flame with the aid of a flint and steel that he had brought along for the purpose, lit his torch, and, wrapping himself carefully up in the folds of the cloak, walked over to the door of the bedchamber and knocked twice with his stick. The door was opened by a chambermaid, still half asleep, who took the light and put it aside, whereupon without uttering a sound he stepped inside the curtain, divested himself of his cloak, and clambered into the bed where the Queen was sleeping. Knowing that the King, whenever he was angry about anything, was in the habit of refusing all discourse, he drew the Queen lustfully into his arms with a show of gruff impatience, and without a single word passing between them, he repeatedly made her carnal acquaintance. He was most reluctant to depart, but nevertheless he eventually arose, fearing lest by overstaying his welcome the delight he had experienced should be turned into sorrow, and having donned his cloak and retrieved his torch, he stole wordlessly away and returned as swiftly as possible to his own bed.

He could hardly have reached his destination when, to the Queen's utter amazement, the King himself turned up in her room, climbed into bed, and offered her a cheerful greeting.

'Heavens!' she said, emboldened to speak by his affable manner. 'Whatever has come over you tonight, my lord? You no sooner leave me, after enjoying me more passionately than usual, than you come back and start all over again! Do take care of your health!'

On hearing these words, the King immediately came to the conclusion that the Queen had been taken in by an outward resemblance to his own physique and manner. But he was a wise man, and since neither the Queen nor anybody else appeared to have noticed the deception, he had no hesitation in deciding to keep his own counsel. Many a stupid man would have reacted differently, and exclaimed: 'It was not I. Who was the man who was here? What happened? Who was it who came?' But this would only have led to complications, upsetting the lady when she was blameless and sowing the seeds of a desire, on her part, to repeat the experience. And besides, by holding his tongue his honour remained unimpaired, whereas if he were to talk he would make himself look ridiculous.

And so, showing little sign of his turbulent inner feelings either in his speech or in his facial expression, the King answered her as follows:

'Do you think, my dear, that I am incapable of returning to you a second time after being here once already?'

'Oh no, my lord,' the lady replied. 'But all the same, I beg you not

to overdo it.’

‘Your advice is sound, and I intend to follow it,’ said the King. ‘I shall go away again, and bother you no further tonight.’

And so, boiling with anger and indignation because of the trick that had clearly been played upon him, he put on his cloak again and departed, bent upon tracking the culprit quietly down, for the King supposed that he must be a member of the household, in which case, no matter who the fellow was, he would still be within the palace walls.

Accordingly, having equipped himself with a small lantern shedding very little light, he made his way to a dormitory above the palace-stables containing a long row of beds, where nearly all of his servants slept. And since he calculated that the author of the deed to which the lady had referred would not yet have had time to recover a normal pulse and heartbeat after his exertions, the King began at one end of the dormitory and went silently along the row, placing his hand on each man’s chest in order to discover whether his heart was still pounding.

Although all the others were sleeping soundly, the one who had been with the Queen was still awake. And when he saw the King approaching, he realized what he was looking for and grew very frightened, with the result that the pounding of his heart, already considerable because of his recent labours, was magnified by his fear. He was convinced that the King would have him instantly put to death if he were to notice the way his heart was racing, and reflected

on various possible courses of action. Eventually, however, on observing that the King was unarmed, he decided he would pretend to be asleep and wait for the King to make the first move.

Having examined a large number of the sleepers without finding the man he was looking for, the King came eventually to the groom, and on discovering that his heart was beating strongly, he said to himself: 'This is the one.' Since, however, he had no wish to broadcast his intentions, all he did was to shear away a portion of the hair on one side of the man's head, using a pair of scissors that he had brought along for the purpose. In those days, men wore their hair very long, and the King left this mark so that he could identify him by it next morning. He then departed from the scene, and returned to his own room.

The groom had witnessed the whole episode, and being of a sharp disposition, he realized all too clearly why he had been marked in this particular fashion. He therefore leapt out of bed without a moment's delay, and having laid his hands on one of several pairs of shears that happened to be kept in the stable for grooming the horses, he silently made the rounds of all the sleeping forms in the dormitory and cut everybody's hair in precisely the same way as his own, just above the ear. Having completed his mission without being detected, he crept back to bed and went to sleep.

When he arose the next morning, the King gave orders for the palace gates to remain closed until his whole household had appeared before him, and they duly assembled in his presence, all of them bare-

headed. The King then began to inspect them with the intention of picking out the man whose hair he had shorn, only to discover, to his amazement, that the hair on most of their heads had been cut in exactly similar fashion.

‘This fellow I’m looking for may be low-born,’ he said to himself, ‘but he clearly has all his wits about him.’

Then, realizing that he could not achieve his aim without raising a clamour, and not wishing to bring enormous shame upon himself for the sake of a trifling act of revenge, he decided to deal with the culprit by issuing a stern word of warning and showing him that his deed had not passed undetected.

‘Whoever it was who did it,’ he said, addressing himself to the whole assembly, ‘he’d better not do it again. And now, be off with you.’

Many another man would have wanted to have all of them strung up, tortured, examined and interrogated. But in so doing, he would have brought into the open a thing that people should always try their utmost to conceal. And even if, by displaying his hand, he had secured the fullest possible revenge, he would not have lessened his shame but greatly increased it, as well as besmirching the fame of his lady.

Not unnaturally, the King’s little speech caused quite a stir amongst his listeners, and a long time subsequently elapsed before they grew tired of discussing between themselves what it could have meant. But nobody divined its import except the one man for whom it

was intended, and he was far too shrewd ever to throw any light on the subject while the King was still alive, nor did he ever risk his life again in performing any deed of a similar nature.