

N EIGHBOR COSIMO, the litter-driver* had dressed down his mules, lengthened the halters a bit for the night, spread a handful of bedding under the feet of the bay mare, who had slipped twice on the wet cobblestones of the narrow street of Gramnichele, after the heavy rain there had been, and then he'd gone to stand in the stable doorway with his hands in his pockets, to yawn in the face of all the people who had come to see the king, for there was such a thronging that day in the streets of Caltagirone that you'd have thought it was the festival of San Giacomo; at the same time he kept his ears open and his eye on his cattle, which were steadily munching their barley, so that nobody should come and steal them from him.

*A litter was like a large sedan chair carried by two mules, one behind and one in front, and used in all the inland roads of Sicily in the nineteenth century.

Just at that moment they came to tell him that the king wanted to speak to him. Or rather it wasn't the king who wanted to speak to him, because the king never speaks to anybody, but one of those through whose mouth the king speaks, when he has something to say; and they told him that His Majesty wanted his litter, next day at dawn, to go to Catania, because he didn't want to be obliged neither to the bishop, nor to the lieutenant, but preferred to pay out of his own pocket, like anybody else.

Neighbor Cosimo ought to have been pleased, because it was his business to drive people in his litter, and at that very time he was waiting for somebody to come and hire his conveyance, and the king isn't one to stand and haggle for a dime more or less, like so many folks. But he would rather have gone back to Grammichele with his litter empty, it bothered him so much to have to carry the king in his litter, that the holiday all turned to poison for him at the mere thought of it, and he couldn't enjoy the illuminations anymore, nor the band that was playing in the marketplace, nor the triumphal-car that was going round the streets, with the picture of the king and queen, nor the church of San Giacomo all lit up, so that it was spitting out flames, and the Host was exposed inside, and the bells ringing for the king.

The grander the festival, the more frightened did he become of having to take the actual king in his litter, and all those squibs, that crowd, those illuminations and that clash of bells simply went to his stomach, so that he couldn't close his eyes all night, but he spent it in examining the shoes of the bay mare, currycombing his mules, and stuffing them up to their throats with barley, to get their strength up, as if the king weighed twice as much as anybody else. The stables were full of cavalry soldiers, with huge spurs on their heels, which they didn't take off even when they threw themselves down to sleep

on the planks, and on all the nails of the stable posts were hung sabers and pistols so that it seemed to poor Uncle Cosimo that they were there to cut off his head, if by bad luck one of the mules should go and slip on the wet stones of the narrow street while he was carrying the king; and really there had poured such quantities of water out of the sky just on those particular days that the people must have been crazy mad to see the king, to come all the way to Caltagirone in such weather. For himself, sure as God's above, he'd rather have been in his own poor little house, where the mules were pinched for room in the stable, but where you could hear them munching their barley not far from the bed-head, and he'd willingly have paid the gold coin that the king was due to fork out, to find himself in his own bed, with the door shut, and lying with his nose under the blankets, his wife busying herself around with the lamp in her hand, to settle up the house for the night.

At dawn the bugle of the soldiers blaring like a cock that knows the time made him start from his doze, and put the stables into a turmoil. The wagoners raised their heads from the pole they had laid down for a pillow, the dogs barked, and the hostess put in an appearance from the hayloft, heavy with sleep, scratching her head. It was still dark as midnight, but people were going up and down the street as if it were Christmas night, and the hucksters near the fire, with their little paper lanterns in front of them, banged their knives on their benches to sell their almond-rock. Ah, how all the people who were buying toffee must be enjoying themselves at their festival, trailing round the streets tired and sleepy, waiting for the king, and as they saw the litter go by with its collar-bells jingling and its woolen tassels, they opened their eyes and envied Neighbor Cosimo who had seen the king face to face, while nobody else had had so much luck up till then, not in all the

forty-eight hours that the crowd had been waiting day and night in the streets, with the rain coming down as God sent it. The church of San Giacomo was still spitting fire and flame, at the top of the steps that there was no end to, waiting for the king to wish him Godspeed, and all its bells were ringing to tell him it was time for him to be going. Were they never going to put out those lights; and had the sexton an arm of iron, to keep on ringing day and night? Meanwhile in the flatlands of San Giacomo the ashen dawn had hardly come, and the valley was a sea of mist; and yet the crowd was thick as flies, with their noses in their cloaks, and the moment they saw the litter coming they wanted to suffocate Neighbor Cosimo and his mules, thinking the king was inside.

But the king kept them waiting a good bit still; perhaps at that moment he was pulling on his breeches, or drinking his little glass of brandy, to clear his throat, a thing that Neighbor Cosimo hadn't even thought of that morning, for all his throat felt so tight. An hour later arrived the cavalry with unsheathed sabers, and made way. Behind the cavalry rolled another wave of people, and then the band, and then again some gentlemen, and ladies in little hats, their noses red with cold; and even the hucksters came running up, with their little benches on their heads, to set up shop again; to try to sell a bit more almond toffee; so that in the big square you couldn't have got a pin in, and the mules wouldn't even have been able to shake the flies off, if the cavalry hadn't been there to make space; and so if you please the cavalry brought along with them a cloud of horseflies, those flies that send the mules in a litter right off their heads, so that Neighbor Cosimo commended himself to God and to the souls in purgatory every one he caught under the belly of his animals.

At last the ringing was heard twice as loud, as if the bells had gone mad, and then the loud banging of crackers let off

for the king, another flood of people came running up, and the carriage of the king appeared in sight, seeming to swim on the heads of the people in the midst of all that crowd. Then resounded the trumpets and drums, and the crackers began to explode again, till the mules, God save us, threatened to break harness and everything, lashing out kicks; the soldiers drew their sabers, having sheathed them again, and the crowd shouted: "The queen, the queen! That little body there, beside her husband, you'd never believe it!"

But the king was a fine-built man, large and stout, with red trousers and a saber hanging at his stomach; and he drew behind him the bishop, the mayor, the lieutenant, and another bunch of gentlemen in gloves and white handkerchiefs folded around their necks, and dressed in black so that they must have felt spiders running in their bones, in that bit of a north wind that was sweeping the mist from the plain of San Giacomo. Now the king, before he mounted his horse, and while his wife was getting into the litter, was talking first to one then to another, as if it were no matter to him, and coming up to Neighbor Cosimo he clapped him on the shoulder, and told him just like this, in his Neapolitan way of talking, "Remember you are carrying your queen!" — so that Neighbor Cosimo felt his legs sinking back into his belly, the more so that at that moment a frenzied cry was heard, the crowd swayed like a sea of ripe corn, and a young girl, still dressed like a nun and very pale, was seen to throw herself at the feet of the king and cry, "Pardon!" She was asking pardon for her father, who had been one of those who had had a hand in trying to pull the king down from the throne, and had been condemned to have his head cut off. The king spoke a word to one of those near him, and that was enough for them not to cut off the head of the girl's father. And so she rose quite happy, and then they had to carry her away in a faint, she was so glad.

Which was as good as saying that the king with one word could have anybody's head he liked cut off, even Neighbor Cosimo's, if a mule in the litter should chance to stumble and throw out his wife, bit of a thing that she was.

Poor Neighbor Cosimo had all this before his eyes as he walked beside his bay mule with his hand on the shaft, and a bit of Madonna's dress between his lips, recommending himself to God as if he was at death's door, while all the caravan, with king, queen, and soldiers had started off on the journey amid the shouting and bell-ringing, and the banging of the cannon-crackers that you could still hear away down on the plain; and when they had come right down in the valley, on the top of the hill they could still see the black crowd teeming in the sun as if it was the cattle fair in the plain of San Giacomo.

But what good did Neighbor Cosimo get from the sun and the fine day? If his heart was blacker than a thundercloud, and he didn't dare raise his eyes from the cobblestones on which the mules put down their feet as if they were walking on eggs; nor could he look around to see how the corn was coming on, nor enjoy seeing the clusters of olives hanging along the hedges, nor think of what a lot of good all the last week's rain had done, while his heart was beating like a hammer at the mere thought that the torrent might be swollen, and they had got to cross the ford! He didn't dare to seat himself straddle-legs on the shafts, as he always did when he wasn't carrying his queen, and snatch forty winks under that fine sun and on that level road that the mules could have followed with their eyes shut; whilst the mules, who had no understanding, and didn't know what they were carrying, were enjoying the dry level road, the mild sun, and the green country, wagging their hind-quarters and shaking the collar bells cheerfully, and for two pins they would have started trotting, so that Neighbor Cosimo had his heart in his mouth with fright merely seeing his crea-

tures growing lively, without a thought in the world neither for the queen nor anything.

The queen, for her part, kept up a chatter with another lady, whom they'd put in the litter to while away the time with her, in a language of which nobody understood a single damn; she looked around at the country with her eyes blue as flax flowers, and she rested a little hand on the window frame, so little that it seemed made on purpose to have nothing to do; and it certainly wasn't worth while having stuffed the mules with barley to carry that scrap of a thing, queen though she was! But she could have people's heads cut off with a single word, small though she might be, and the mules, who had no sense in them, what with that light load, and all that barley in their bellies, felt strongly tempted to start dancing and jumping along the road, and so get Neighbor Cosimo's head taken off for him.

So that the poor devil did nothing all the way but recite paternosters and avemarias between his teeth, and beseech the souls of his own dead, those whom he knew and those whom he didn't know, until they got to Zia Lisa, where a great crowd had gathered to see the king, and in front of every hole of a tavern there was their own side of pork skinned and hung up for the feast. When he got home at last, after having delivered the queen safe and sound, he couldn't believe it was true, and he kissed the edge of the manger as he tied up his mules, then he went to bed without eating or drinking, and didn't even want to see the queen's money, but would have left it in his jacket pocket for who knows how long, if it hadn't been for his wife who went and put it at the bottom of the stocking under the straw mattress.

His friends and acquaintances, curious to know how the king and queen were made, came to ask him about the journey, pretending they had come to enquire if he had