

NOVEL V

Three young men pull down the breeches of a judge from the Marches, while he is administering justice on the bench.

So ended Emilia her story; and when all had commended the widow lady:

"'Tis now thy turn to speak," quoth the queen, fixing her gaze upon Filostrato, who answered that he was ready, and forthwith thus began:

Sweet my ladies, by what I remember of that young man, to wit, Maso del Saggio, whom Elisa named a while ago, I am prompted to lay aside a story that I had meant to tell you, and to tell you another, touching him and some of his comrades, which, notwithstanding there are in it certain words (albeit 'tis not unseemly) which your modesty forbears to use, is yet so laughable that I shall relate it.

As you all may well have heard, there come not seldom to our city magistrates from the Marches, who for the most part are men of a mean spirit, and in circumstances so reduced and beggarly, that their whole life seems to be but a petty-foggery; and by reason of this their inbred sordidness and avarice they bring with them judges and notaries that have rather the air of men taken from the plough or the last than trained in the schools of law.⁽¹⁾ Now one of these Marchers, being come hither as Podesta, brought with him judges not a few, and among them one that called himself Messer Niccola da San Lepidio, and looked liker to a locksmith than aught else. However, this fellow was assigned with the rest of the judges to hear criminal causes. And as folk will often go to the court, though they have no concern whatever there, it so befell that Maso del Saggio went thither one morning in quest of one of his friends, and there chancing to set eyes on this Messer Niccola, where he sate, deemed him a fowl of no common feather, and surveyed him from head to foot, observing that the vair which he wore on his head was all begrimed, that he carried an ink-horn at his girdle, that his gown was longer than his robe, and many another detail quite foreign to the appearance of a man of birth and breeding, of which that which he deemed most notable was a pair of breeches, which, as he saw (for the judge's outer garments being none too ample were open in front, as he sate), reached half-way down his legs. By which sight his mind was presently diverted from the friend whom he came there to seek; and forth he hied him in quest of other two of his comrades, the one Ribbi, the other Matteuzzo by name, fellows both of them not a whit less jolly than Maso himself; and having found them, he said to them:

"An you love me, come with me to the court, and I will shew you the queerest scarecrow that ever you saw." So the two men hied them with him to the court; and there he pointed out to them the judge and his breeches. What they saw from a distance served to set them laughing: then drawing nearer to the dais on which Master Judge was seated, they observed that 'twas easy enough to get

under the dais, and moreover that the plank, on which the judge's feet rested, was broken, so that there was plenty of room for the passage of a hand and arm. Whereupon quoth Maso to his comrades:

"'Twere a very easy matter to pull these breeches right down: wherefore I propose that we do so." Each of the men had marked how it might be done; and so, having concerted both what they should do and what they should say, they came to the court again next morning; and, the court being crowded, Matteuzzo, observed by never a soul, slipped beneath the dais, and posted himself right under the spot where the judge's feet rested, while the other two men took their stand on either side of the judge, each laying hold of the hem of his robe. Then:

"Sir, sir, I pray you for God's sake," began Maso, "that, before the pilfering rascal that is there beside you can make off, you constrain him to give me back a pair of jack boots that he has stolen from me, which theft he still denies, though 'tis not a month since I saw him getting them resoled." Meanwhile Ribbi, at the top of his voice, shouted:

"Believe him not, Sir, the scurvy knave! 'tis but that he knows that I am come to demand restitution of a valise that he has stolen from me that he now for the first time trumps up this story about a pair of jack boots that I have had in my house down to the last day or two; and if you doubt what I say, I can bring as witness Trecca, my neighbour, and Grassa, the tripe-woman, and one that goes about gathering the sweepings of Santa Maria a Verzaia, who saw him when he was on his way back from the farm." But shout as he might, Maso was still even with him, nor for all that did Ribbi bate a jot of his clamour. And while the judge stood, bending now towards the one, now towards the other, the better to hear them, Matteuzzo seized his opportunity, and thrusting his hand through the hole in the plank caught hold of the judge's breeches, and tugged at them amain. Whereby down they came straightway, for the judge was a lean man, and shrunk in the buttocks. The judge, being aware of the accident, but knowing not how it had come about, would have gathered his outer garments together in front, so as to cover the defect, but Maso on the one side, and Ribbi on the other, held him fast, shouting amain and in chorus:

"You do me a grievous wrong, Sir, thus to deny me justice, nay, even a hearing, and to think of quitting the court: there needs no writ in this city for such a trifling matter as this." And thus they

held him by the clothes and in parley, until all that were in the court perceived that he had lost his breeches. However, after a while, Matteuzzo dropped the breeches, and slipped off, and out of the court, without being observed, and Ribi, deeming that the joke had gone far enough, exclaimed:

"By God, I vow, I will appeal to the Syndics;" while Maso, on the other side, let go the robe, saying:

"Nay, but for my part, I will come here again and again and again, until I find you less embarrassed than you seem to be to-day." And so the one this way, the other that way, they made off with all speed. Whereupon Master Judge, disbreeched before all the world, was as one that awakens from sleep, albeit he was ware of his forlorn condition, and asked whither the parties in

the case touching the jack boots and the valise were gone. However, as they were not to be found, he fell a swearing by the bowels of God, that 'twas meet and proper that he should know and wit, whether 'twas the custom at Florence to disbreech judges sitting in the seat of justice.

When the affair reached the ears of the Podesta, he made no little stir about it; but, being informed by some of his friends, that 'twould not have happened, but that the Florentines were minded to shew him, that, in place of the judges he should have brought with him, he had brought but gowks, to save expense, he deemed it best to say no more about it, and so for that while the matter went no further.

1 It was owing to their internal dissensions that the Florentines were from time to time fain to introduce these stranger Podestas.