

Story for performance #50
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Source: [Rory Carroll, 'Storm hits Baghdad', Guardian online, 09/08/05.](#)
Tags: [private place](#), [fire](#), [countryside](#), [literature](#), [animals](#)
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The argument began modestly and gradually built momentum. The stout gentleman sat astride a horse that twitched its ears forward and back in a way that at first seemed random until I realised that the smart little red roan was listening. Each time the rider threw a cutting remark at his companion the horse swung about so that the fat fellow had to cast his vitriol over one or the other of his shoulders and roughly turn the animal back again. His companion lent on his stick, a sturdy branch cut from a tree. The expression on his face was calm. He was more plainly clad in a leather jacket with leather hosiery all covered in dust from a long day's walk. Added to a rising sense of mayhem was the nearby wailing and hollering of dogs and their masters as they sought out the lost scent of a fox.

'Master! Master! What can we do about it? After all is said and done the best we can make of it is to rest a while in the shade. The mad fellow will be miles away by now. Don't you think it's time to rest? If I hadn't driven him off with my stick he may have stuck us with another of his stories, so let's go and rest in the shadow of that haystack. Let's just rest a while and take stock! It's the end of a long day and my shank's ponies need some water and I need to be watering the ponies, if you catch my drift!'

The Master let out a deep sigh of resignation and cast a mellow glance at his companion.

'Ah well, Jacques! Once more you persuade me.'

He turned his horse's head toward the field and the rest of the animal followed in a quiet manner. The hounds were sounding very faintly in the distance and a calm had fallen on the little group. They couldn't see me and I dared not come down from my hiding place in the top of the haystack. I dared not move a whisker in case I should fall. I was fearful that they would catch my scent. But they sat down heavily and leaned back on the hay with the horse munching rhythmically and fingering at the most delectable straws with its thick but delicate lips.

'Jacques, what in the name of Creation makes that man talk so? From what is that thick skull of his made that he does not see the pallor of complete and catatonic boredom spread across the faces of his companions? And that pronounced cast in his eyes all the more complicates it.'

The servant was tossing small stones into the hay stubble in the field. At the same time he was trying out the squint

while raising and lowering his jaw to fine-tune the angle of his head.

'Heaven knows, master! But he is famous for it.'

'Yes, that's true. Even Jean-Jacques who is not short of a word himself does not have the breath for it. Do you remember that outrageous story he told at the Inn in Haute-Provence last summer?...the one about two men with whom he had cast his lot in order to purchase those atrocious paintings. You know the very ones! He claims that they were masterpieces, the pick of the bunch but I know that they were all bought for their size, their dimensions. It was necessary that they be small enough to fit into his coach.'

'Ah yes!', exclaimed Jacques. 'They were destined for the court in Russia! And then Denis rejected most of them. Especially the ones by that painter Bou...Bou...'

'Boucher! Yes, yes, I remember. And that expression of his that he throws into the conversation at every turn. The way he squints and says, "Hélas! As a fig tree casteth her untimely figs." And then "Hélas!" again!'

And so the two bumbled on. By now I was quite comfortable in the height of the haystack. I had been lulled into a sense of security by the ambling nature of their gossip. The servant had calmed his master as well as the horse. There was a quiet and yet fatalistic atmosphere about them as the conversation ebbed and flowed in the summer heat. After a while they stopped talking and I could hear their gentle snoring and the horse clinking at his bit as he chewed at the dry grass. I too fell asleep thinking that I would have to wait for nightfall in order to make my escape. As I dozed I became vaguely aware that it was a little cooler and that the sun was casting a red glow over the hills and fields. My companions were still snoring in a delicate contrapuntal sort of way. But was it the sun? I lifted my head and caught a whiff of smoke! I could now hear a crackling sound. I leapt up and out and into the air.

'Wake up! Wake up!' I cried, 'Reynard to the rescue after all!'

With that, I bounded off and left my friends shambling and scrambling both onto the horse and galloping after me with fire licking at their heels.

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