

All's Well That
Ends Well

William Shakespeare



A Classic Shakespeare Story

by

Edith Nesbit

In the year thirteen hundred and something, the Countess of Rousillon was unhappy in her palace near the Pyrenees. She had lost her husband, and the King of France had summoned her son Bertram to Paris, hundreds of miles away.



Bertram was a pretty youth with curling hair, finely arched eyebrows, and eyes as keen as a hawk's. He was as proud as ignorance could make him, and would lie with a face like truth itself to gain a selfish end. But a pretty youth is a pretty youth, and Helena was in love with him.



Helena was the daughter of a great doctor who had died in the service of the Count of Rousillon. Her sole fortune consisted in a few of her father's prescriptions.



When Bertram had gone, Helena's forlorn look was noticed by the Countess, who told her that she was exactly the same to her as her own child.

Tears then gathered in Helena's eyes, for she felt that the Countess made Bertram seem like a brother whom she could never marry.

The Countess guessed her secret forthwith, and Helena confessed that Bertram was to her as the sun is to the day.



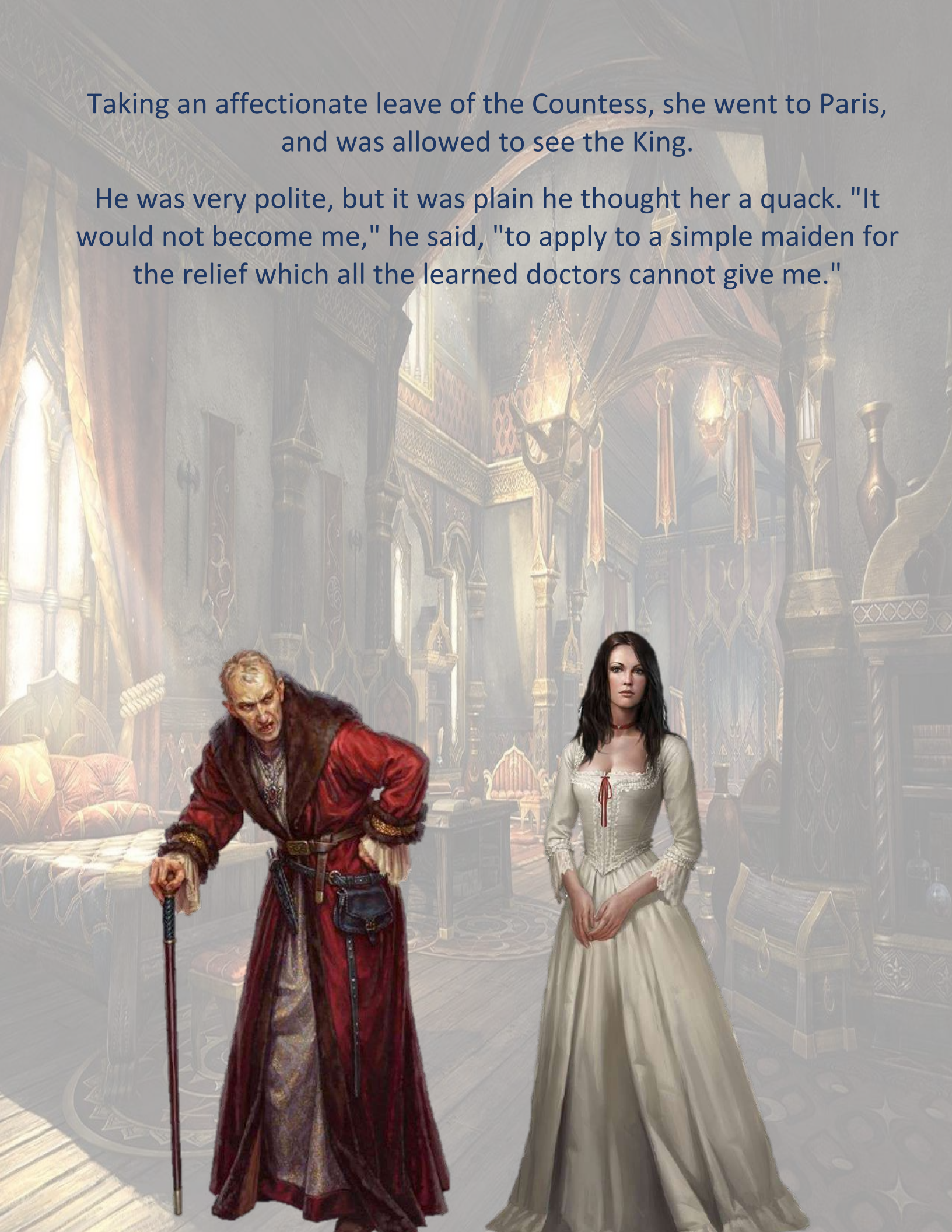
She hoped, however, to win this sun by earning the gratitude of the King of France, who suffered from a lingering illness, which made him lame.

The great doctors attached to the Court despaired of curing him, but Helena had confidence in a prescription which her father had used with success.



Taking an affectionate leave of the Countess, she went to Paris,
and was allowed to see the King.

He was very polite, but it was plain he thought her a quack. "It
would not become me," he said, "to apply to a simple maiden for
the relief which all the learned doctors cannot give me."

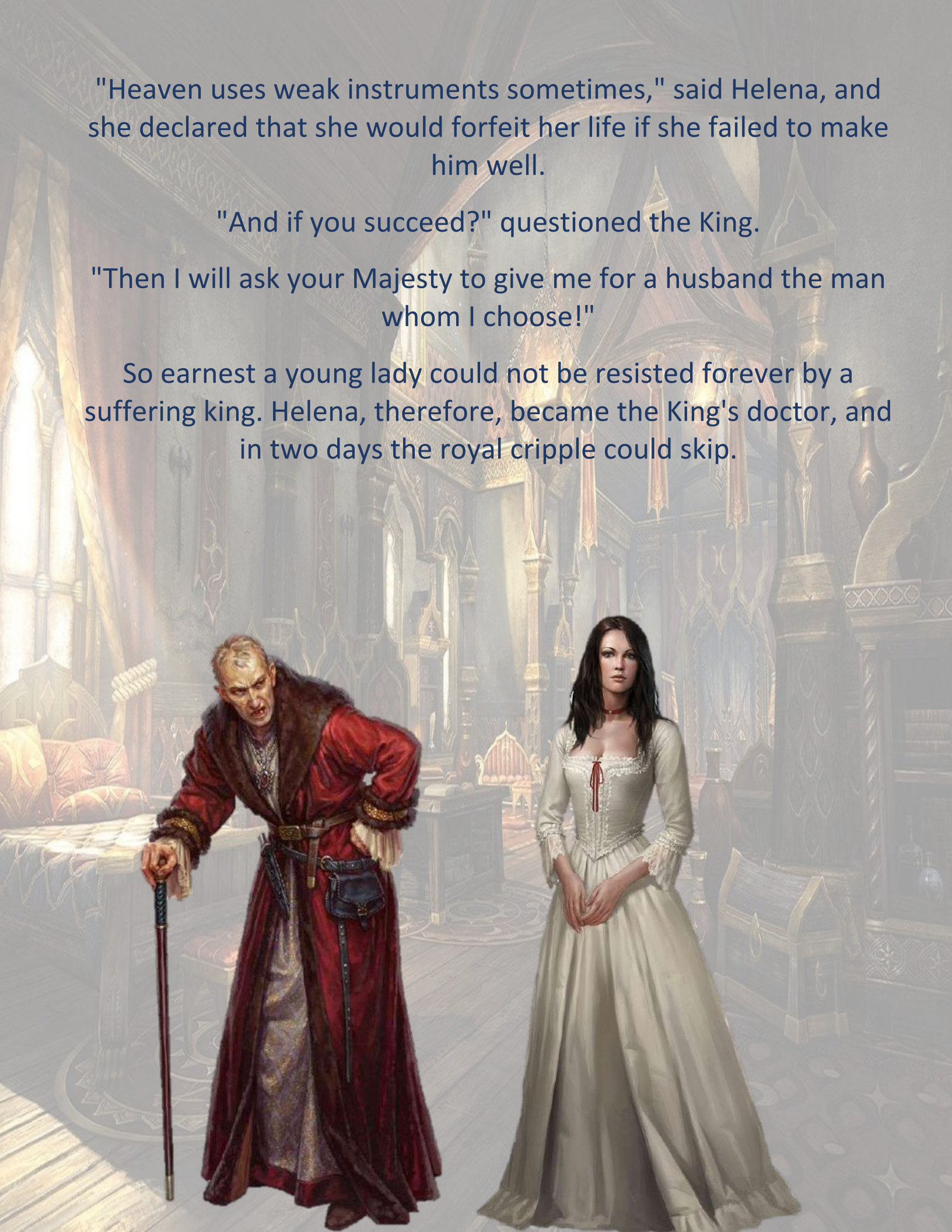


"Heaven uses weak instruments sometimes," said Helena, and she declared that she would forfeit her life if she failed to make him well.

"And if you succeed?" questioned the King.

"Then I will ask your Majesty to give me for a husband the man whom I choose!"

So earnest a young lady could not be resisted forever by a suffering king. Helena, therefore, became the King's doctor, and in two days the royal cripple could skip.



He summoned his courtiers, and they made a glittering throng in the throne room of his palace. Well might the country girl have been dazzled, and seen a dozen husbands worth dreaming of among the handsome young noblemen before her.

But her eyes only wandered till they found Bertram. Then she went up to him, and said, "I dare not say I take you, but I am yours!" Raising her voice that the King might hear, she added, "This is the Man!"



"Bertram," said the King, "take her; she's your wife!"

"My wife, my liege?" said Bertram. "I beg your Majesty to permit me to choose a wife."

"Do you know, Bertram, what she has done for your King?" asked the monarch, who had treated Bertram like a son.

"Yes, your Majesty," replied Bertram; "but why should I marry a girl who owes her breeding to my father's charity?"



"You disdain her for lacking a title, but I can give her a title," said the King; and as he looked at the sulky youth a thought came to him, and he added, "Strange that you think so much of blood when you could not distinguish your own from a beggar's if you saw them mixed together in a bowl."

"I cannot love her," asserted Bertram; and Helena said gently, "Urge him not, your Majesty. I am glad to have cured my King for my country's sake."



"My honour requires that scornful boy's obedience," said the King. "Bertram, make up your mind to this. You marry this lady, of whom you are so unworthy, or you learn how a king can hate. Your answer?"

Bertram bowed low and said, "Your Majesty has ennobled the lady by your interest in her. I submit."

"Take her by the hand," said the King, "and tell her she is yours."

Bertram obeyed, and with little delay he was married to Helena.



Fear of the King, however, could not make him a lover. Ridicule helped to sour him. A base soldier named Parolles told him to his face that now he had a "kicky-wicky" his business was not to fight but to stay at home.

"Kicky-wicky" was only a silly epithet for a wife, but it made Bertram feel he could not bear having a wife, and that he must go to the war in Italy, though the King had forbidden him.



Helena he ordered to take leave of the King and return to Rousillon, giving her letters for his mother and herself. He then rode off, bidding her a cold good-bye.

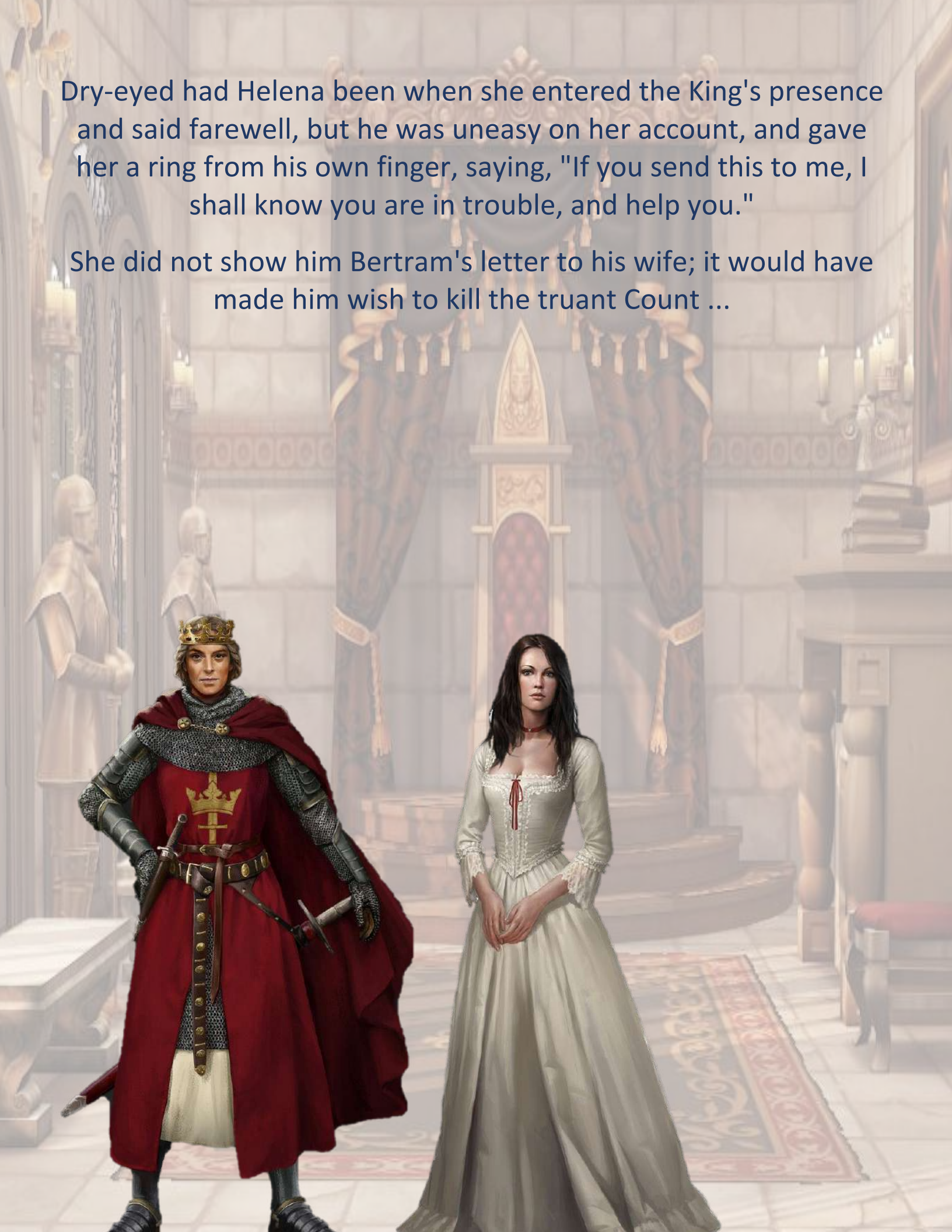


She opened the letter addressed to herself, and read, "When you can get the ring from my finger you can call me husband, but against that 'when' I write 'never.'"



Dry-eyed had Helena been when she entered the King's presence and said farewell, but he was uneasy on her account, and gave her a ring from his own finger, saying, "If you send this to me, I shall know you are in trouble, and help you."

She did not show him Bertram's letter to his wife; it would have made him wish to kill the truant Count ...



... but she went back to Rousillon and handed her mother-in-law the second letter. It was short and bitter. "I have run away," it said. "If the world be broad enough, I will be always far away from her."

"Cheer up," said the noble widow to the deserted wife. "I wash his name out of my blood, and you alone are my child."

The Dowager Countess, however, was still mother enough to Bertram to lay the blame of his conduct on Parolles, whom she called "a very tainted fellow."



Helena did not stay long at Rousillon. She clad herself as a pilgrim, and, leaving a letter for her mother-in-law, secretly set out for Florence.



On entering that city she inquired of a woman the way to the Pilgrims' House of Rest, but the woman begged "the holy pilgrim" to lodge with her.



Helena found that her hostess was a widow, who had a beautiful daughter named Diana.

When Diana heard that Helena came from France, she said, "A countryman of yours, Count Rousillon, has done worthy service for Florence."



But after a time, Diana had something to tell which was not at all worthy of Helena's husband. Bertram was making love to Diana. He did not hide the fact that he was married, but Diana heard from Parolles that his wife was not worth caring for.



The widow was anxious for Diana's sake, and Helena decided to inform her that she was the Countess Rousillon.

"He keeps asking Diana for a lock of her hair," said the widow.



Helena smiled mournfully, for her hair was as fine as Diana's and of the same colour. Then an idea struck her, and she said, "Take this purse of gold for yourself. I will give Diana three thousand crowns if she will help me to carry out this plan.



Let her promise to give a lock of her hair to my husband if he will give her the ring which he wears on his finger. It is an ancestral ring. Five Counts of Rousillon have worn it, yet he will yield it up for a lock of your daughter's hair.

Let your daughter insist that he shall cut the lock of hair from her in a dark room, and agree in advance that she shall not speak a single word."

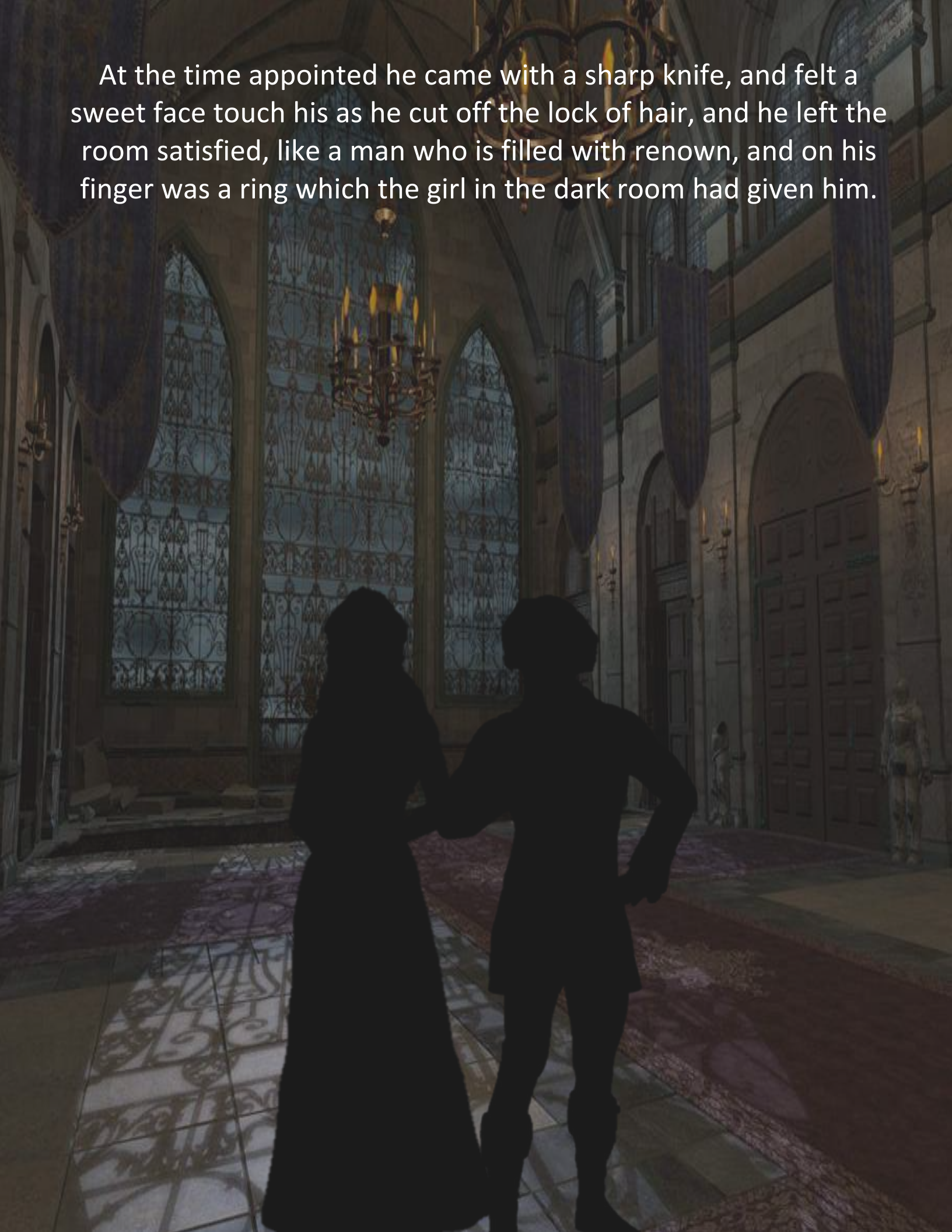
The widow listened attentively, with the purse of gold in her lap. She said at last, "I consent, if Diana is willing."



Diana was willing, and, strange to say, the prospect of cutting off a lock of hair from a silent girl in a dark room was so pleasing to Bertram that he handed Diana his ring, and was told when to follow her into the dark room.



At the time appointed he came with a sharp knife, and felt a sweet face touch his as he cut off the lock of hair, and he left the room satisfied, like a man who is filled with renown, and on his finger was a ring which the girl in the dark room had given him.



The war was nearly over, but one of its concluding chapters taught Bertram that the soldier who had been impudent enough to call Helena his "kicky-wicky" was far less courageous than a wife.

Parolles was such a boaster, and so fond of trimmings to his clothes, that the French officers played him a trick to discover what he was made of.

He had lost his drum, and had said that he would regain it unless he was killed in the attempt.



His attempt was a very poor one, and he was inventing the story of a heroic failure, when he was surrounded and disarmed.

"Portotartarossa," said a French lord.

"What horrible lingo is this?" thought Parolles, who had been blindfolded.

"He's calling for the tortures," said a French man, affecting to act as interpreter. "What will you say without 'em?"

"As much," replied Parolles, "as I could possibly say if you pinched me like a pasty."



He was as good as his word. He told them how many there were in each regiment of the Florentine army, and he refreshed them with spicy anecdotes of the officers commanding it.



Bertram was present, and heard a letter read, in which
Parolles told Diana that he was a fool.

"This is your devoted friend," said a French lord.

"He is a cat to me now," said Bertram, who detested our
hearthrug pets.

Parolles was finally let go, but henceforth he felt like a sneak,
and was not addicted to boasting.



We now return to France with Helena, who had spread a report of her death, which was conveyed to the Dowager Countess at Rousillon by Lafeu, a lord who wished to marry his daughter Magdalen to Bertram.



The King mourned for Helena, but he approved of the marriage proposed for Bertram, and paid a visit to Rousillon in order to see it accomplished.



"His great offense is dead," he said. "Let Bertram approach me."

Then Bertram, scarred in the cheek, knelt before his Sovereign, and said that if he had not loved Lafeu's daughter before he married Helena, he would have prized his wife, whom he now loved when it was too late.



"Love that is late offends the Great Sender," said the King.

"Forget sweet Helena, and give a ring to Magdalen."

Bertram immediately gave a ring to Lafeu, who said indignantly,
"It's Helena's!"

"It's not!" said Bertram.



Hereupon the King asked to look at the ring, and said, "This is the ring I gave to Helena, and bade her send to me if ever she needed help. So you had the cunning to get from her what could help her most."



Bertram denied again that the ring was Helena's, but even his mother said it was.



"You lie!" exclaimed the King. "Seize him, guards!" but even while they were seizing him, Bertram wondered how the ring, which he thought Diana had given him, came to be so like Helena's.



A gentleman now entered, craving permission to deliver a petition to the King. It was a petition signed Diana Capilet, and it begged that the King would order Bertram to marry her whom he had deserted after winning her love.

"I'd sooner buy a son-in-law at a fair than take Bertram now,"
said Lafeu.



Bertram found himself confronted by Diana and her mother. He denied that Diana had any claim on him, and spoke of her as though her life was spent in the gutter.

But she asked him what sort of gentlewoman it was to whom he gave, as to her he gave, the ring of his ancestors now missing from his finger?



Bertram was ready to sink into the earth, but fate had one crowning generosity reserved for him. Helena entered.

"Do I see reality?" asked the King.

"O pardon! pardon!" cried Bertram.

She held up his ancestral ring. "Now that I have this," said she, "will you love me, Bertram?"

"To the end of my life," cried he.

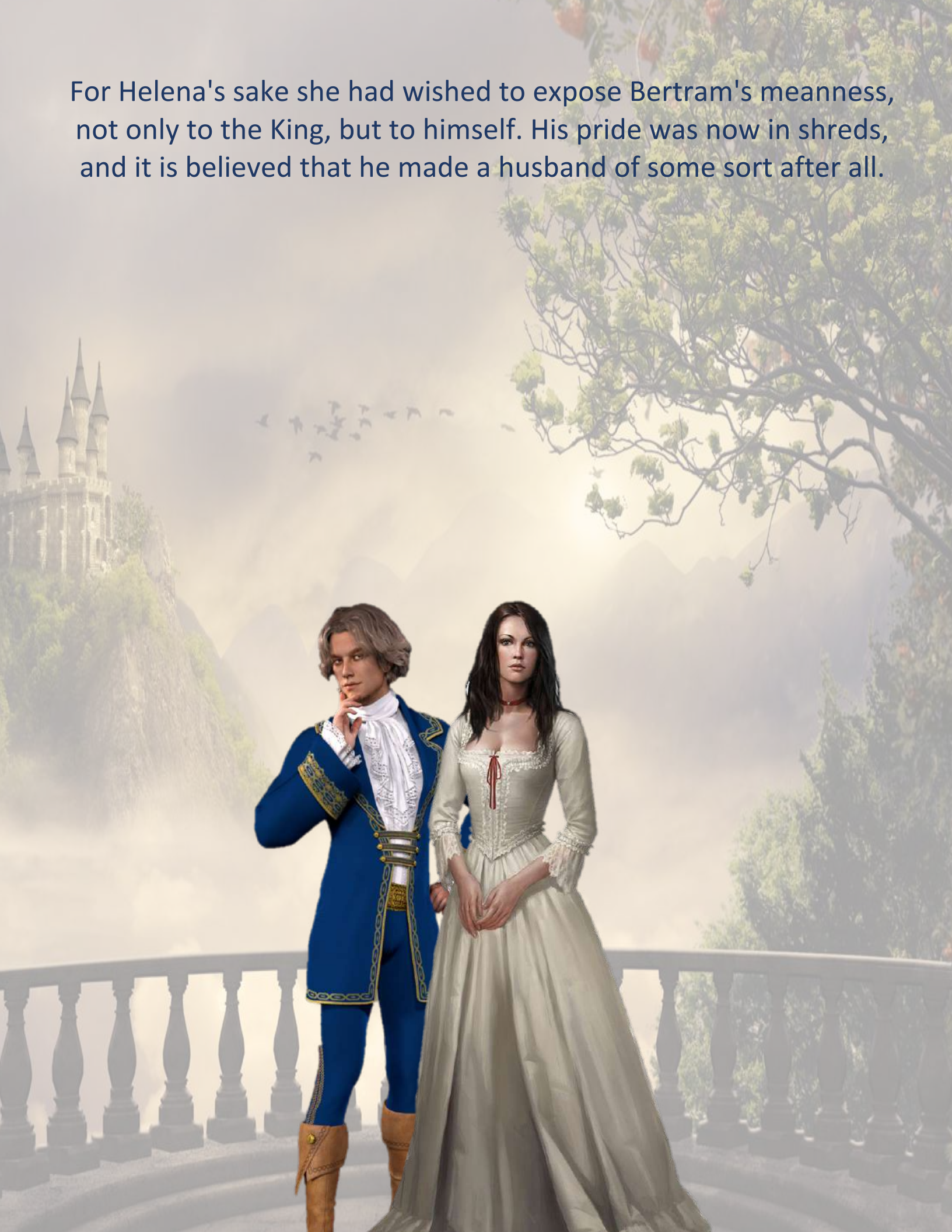


"My eyes smell onions," said Lafeu. Tears for Helena were twinkling in them.

The King praised Diana when he was fully informed by that not very shy young lady of the meaning of her conduct.



For Helena's sake she had wished to expose Bertram's meanness, not only to the King, but to himself. His pride was now in shreds, and it is believed that he made a husband of some sort after all.





THINK

DIGITAL ACADEMY