

*How it was that Maestro Ciliegia, Master Cherry, carpenter, found a piece of wood that wept and laughed like a child.*

Once upon a time there lived...

1 "A king!" my little readers will say at once.

No, my little ones, you are mistaken. Once upon a time there was a piece of wood.

2 It wasn't an expensive wood, but a piece good for the stack, of those that in winter are placed in stoves and fireplaces to get a fire going and make cold rooms warm.

3 I know not how it was, but the fact is that one fine day this piece of wood ended up in the shop of an old carpenter, whose name was Mastro Antonio, except that everyone called him Maestro Ciliegia, *Master Cherry*, on account of the tip of his nose, which was always shiny and purple, like a ripe cherry.

4 As soon as he had seen that piece of wood, Maestro Ciliegia was filled with joy; and, rubbing his hands together for the happiness, he mumbled in a half voice:

"This wood has come at precisely the right time; I shall use it to make the leg of a table."

5 No sooner said than done, he presently took the sharp hatchet to start shaving the bark off of it and rough-hew it; but as he was about to let go the first blow, he remained with his arm suspended in the air, for he heard a wee, little voice say in a beseeching tone:

"Don't hit me so hard!"

6 Imagine how that good old Maestro Ciliegia must have remained!

He turned his bewildered eyes about the room to see where ever that little voice could have come from, and he saw no one! He looked under the bench, and no one; he looked into a closet that was always shut, and no one; he looked into the shavings and sawdust cask, and no one; he opened the door of the shop to throw an eye into the street, and no one! How then?...

"Why, I see;" he then said laughing and scratching his wig.

"I must have thought I heard that little voice. Let us set to work again."

And having taken up the hatchet again, he struck a most solemn blow upon the piece of wood.

"Ouch! You hurt me!" cried dolefully the same little voice.

This time Maestro Ciliegia stood dumbfounded, his eyes popping out of his head for the fear, his mouth wide-open and his tongue hanging down to his chin, like a big fountain mask.

As soon as he had regained the use of his speech, he began to say, trembling and stuttering from fright:

"Whither did that little voice that said ouch come from?... Yet there isn't a living soul around here. Might it be that this piece of wood has learned to weep and whine like a child? I can not believe it. This wood here it is; it's a piece of wood good for the hearth, like all the others, and to throw it on the fire one could boil a pail of beans with it... How then? Might someone be hiding in it? If someone is hiding in it, so much the worse for him. I will settle him at once!"

And so saying, he grabbed with both hands that poor piece of wood, and started banging it mercilessly against the walls of the room.

Then he listened for any little moaning voice. He waited two minutes, and nothing; five minutes, and nothing; ten minutes, and nothing!

"I understand," he then said, forcing himself to laugh and ruffling up his wig, "that tiny voice that said ouch must have been in my mind! Let us set to work again."

And because a big scare had taken hold of him, he tried to sing to give himself a little courage.

Meanwhile, having set aside the hatchet, he picked up the plane, to plane and polish the piece of wood; but as he was planing it up and down, he heard the same little voice that said to him, laughing:

"Stop it! You're tickling me all over."

This time poor Maestro Ciliegia fell down as if stricken by lightning. When he reopened his eyes, he found himself seated on the floor.

His face appeared transfigured, and even the tip of his nose, from purple as it nearly always was, had turned blue from the great scare.