

Tales and Novels of J. de La Fontaine — Volume 24 eBook

Tales and Novels of J. de La Fontaine — Volume 24 by Jean de La Fontaine

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THE CONTRACT

The husband's dire mishap, and silly maid,
In ev'ry age, have proved the fable's aid;
The fertile subject never will be dry:
'Tis inexhaustible, you may rely.
No man's exempt from evils such as these:—
Who thinks himself secure, but little sees.
One laughs at sly intrigues who, ere 'tis long,
May, in his turn, be sneered at by the throng:
With such vicissitudes, to be cast down,
Appears rank nonsense worthy Folly's crown.
He, whose adventures I'm about to write,
In his mischances,—found what gave delight.

A certain Citizen, with fortune large,
When settled with a handsome wife in charge,
Not long attended for the marriage fruit:
The lady soon put matters 'yond dispute;
Produced a girl at first, and then a boy,
To fill th' expecting parent's breast with joy.

Theson, when grown of size, a tutor had,
No pedant rude, with Greek and Latin mad,
But young and smart, a master too of arts,
Particularly learned in what imparts,
The gentle flame, the pleasing poignant pang,
That Ovid formerly so sweetly sang.
Some knowledge of good company he'd got;
A charming voice and manner were his lot;
And if we may disclose the mystick truth,
'Twas Cupid who preceptor made the youth.
He with the brother solely took a place,
That better he the sister's charms might trace;
And under this disguise he fully gained
What he desired, so well his part he feigned:
An able master, or a lover true,
To teach or sigh, whichever was in view,
So thoroughly he could attention get,
Success alike in ev'ry thing he met.

In little time the boy could construe well
The odes of Horace:—Virgil's fable tell;



And she whose beauty caught the tutor's eyes,
A perfect mistress got of heaving sighs.
So oft she practised what the master taught,
Her stomach feeble grew, whate'er was sought;
And strange suspicions of the cause arose,
Which Time at length was driven to disclose.

Mostterribly the father raged and swore;
Our learned master, frightened, left the door,
The lady wished to take the youth for life;
The spark desired to make the girl his wife;
Both had the Hymeneal knot in view,
And mutual soft affection fondly knew.
At present love is little more than name:
In matrimony, gold's the only aim.
The belle was rich, while he had nothing got;
For him 'twas great:—for her a narrow lot.



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O dire corruption, age of wretched ways!
What strange caprice such management displays!
Shall we permit this fatal pow'r to reign?
Base int'rest's impulse: hideous modern stain;
The curse of ev'ry tender soft delight,
That charms the soul and fascinates the sight.

Buttruce to moral; let's our tale resume;
The daughter scared; the father in a fume;
What could be done the evil to repair,
And hide the sad misfortune of the fair?
What method seek?—They married her in haste;
But not to him who had the belle debased,
For reasons I've sufficiently detailed;
To gain her hand a certain wight prevailed,
Who store of riches relished far above
The charms of beauty, warmed with fondest love.
Save this the man might well enough be thought:
In family and wealth just what was sought;
But whether fool or not, I cannot trace,
Since he was unacquainted with the case;
And if he'd known it, was the bargain bad?
Full twenty thousand pounds he with her had
A sprightly youthful wife to ease his care,
And with him ev'ry luxury to share.

Howmany tempted by the golden ore,
Have taken wives whose slips they know before;
And this good man the lady chaste believed,
So truly well she managed and deceived.
But when four months had passed, the fair-one showed.
How very much she to her lessons owed;
A little girl arrived: the husband stared
Cried he, what father of a child declared!
The time's too short: four months! I'm taken in!
A family should not so soon begin.

Awayhe to the lady's father flew,
And of his shame a horrid picture drew;
Proposed to be divorced: much rage disclosed;
The parent smiled and said, pray be composed;
Speak not so loud: we may be overheard,
And privacy is much to be preferred.
A son-in-law, like you, I once appeared,



And similar misfortune justly feared;
Complaint I made, and mentioned a divorce;
Of heat and rage the ordinary course.

The father of my wife, who's now no more,
(Heav'n guard his soul, the loss I oft deplore,)
A prudent honest man as any round,
To calm my mind, a nice specifick found;
The pill was rather bitter, I admit;
But gilding made it for the stomach fit,
Which he knew how to manage very well:
No doctor in it him could e'er excel;
To satisfy my scruples he displayed



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A contract (duly stamped and ably made),
Four thousand to secure, which he had got,
On similar occasion for a blot;
His lady's father gave it to efface
Domestick diff'rences and like disgrace:
With this my spouse's fortune he increased;
And instantly my dire complaining ceased.
From family to family the deed
Should pass, 'twill often prove a useful meed;
I kept it for the purpose:—do the same
Your daughter, married, may have equal blame.
On this the son-in-law the bond received,
And, with a bow, departed much relieved.

May Heav'n preserve from trouble those who find,
At cheaper rate, to be consoled inclined.

The quid pro quo;
or
the mistakes

Dame fortune often loves a laugh to raise,
And, playing off her tricks and roguish ways,
Instead of giving us what we desire,
Mere quid pro quo permits us to acquire.
I've found her gambols such from first to last,
And judge the future by experience past.
Fair Cloris and myself felt mutual flame;
And, when a year had run, the sprightly dame
Prepared to grant me, if I may be plain,
Some slight concessions that would ease my pain.
This was her aim; but whatsoe'er in view,
'Tis opportunity we should pursue;
The lover, who's discreet, will moments seize;
And ev'ry effort then will tend to please.

Oneeve I went this charming fair to see;
The husband happened (luckily for me)
To be abroad; but just as it was night
The master came, not doubting all was right;



No Cloris howsoe'er was in the way;
A servant girl, of disposition gay,
Well known to me, with pretty smiling face,
'Tis said, was led to take her lady's place.
The mistress' loss for once was thus repaid;
The barter mutual:—wife against the maid.

With many tales like this the books abound;
But able hands are necessary found,
To place the incidents, arrange the whole,
That nothing may be forced nor feel control.
The urchin blind, who sees enough to lay
His num'rous snares, such tricks will often play.
The *Cradle* in Boccace excels the most,
As to myself I do not mean to boast,
But fear, a thousand places, spite of toil,
By him made excellent, my labours spoil.
'Tis time howe'er with preface to have done,
And show, by some new turn, or piece of fun,
(While easy numbers from my pencil flow,)
Of Fortune and of Love the quid pro quo.
In proof, we'll state what happened at Marseilles:
The story is so true, no doubt prevails.



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There Clidamant, whose proper name my verse,
From high respect, refuses to rehearse,
Lived much at ease: not one a wife had got,
Throughout the realm, who was so nice a lot,
Her virtues, temper, and seraphick charms,
Should have secured the husband to her arms;
But he was not to constancy inclined;
The devil's crafty; snares has often twined
Around and round, with ev'ry subtle art,
When love of novelty he would impart.

The lady had a maid, whose form and size,
Height, easy manners, action, lips, and eyes,
Were thought to be so very like her own,
That one from t'other scarcely could be known;
The mistress was the prettiest of the two;
But, in a mask where much escapes the view,
'Twas very difficult a choice to make,
And feel no doubts which better 'twere to take.

The Marseillesian husband, rather gay,
With mistress Alice was disposed to play;
(For such was called the maid we just have named;)
To show coquettish airs the latter aimed,
And met his wishes with reproof severe;
But to his plan the lover would adhere,
And promised her at length a pretty sum:
A hundred crowns, if to his room she'd come.
To pay the girl with kindness such as this,
In my opinion, was not much amiss.
At that rate what should be the mistress' price?
Perhaps still less: she might not be so nice.
But I mistake; the lady was so coy,
No spark, whatever art he could employ,
How cleverly soe'er he laid the snare,
Would have succeeded, spite of ev'ry care.
Nor presents nor attentions would have swayed;
Should I have mentioned presents as an aid?
Alas! no longer these are days of old!
By Love both nymph and shepherdess are sold;
He sets the price of many beauties rare;
This was a god;—now nothing but a mayor.



O altered times! O customs how depraved!
At first fair Alice frowardly behaved;
But in the sequel 'gan to change her way,
And said, her mistress, as the foll'wing day,
A certain remedy to take designed;
That, in the morning then, if so inclined,
They could at leisure in the cavern meet;—
The plan was pleasing: all appeared discreet.

The servant, having to her mistress said,
What projects were in view: what nets were spread;
The females, 'tween themselves, a plot contrived,
Of Quid pro quo, against the hour arrived.
The husband of the trick was ne'er aware,
So much the mistress had her servant's air;
But if he had, what then? no harm of course;
She might have lectured him with double force.



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Nextday but one, gay Clidamant, whose joy
Appeared so great, 'twas free from all alloy,
By hazard met a friend, to whom he told
(Most indiscreetly) what to him was sold;
How Cupid favoured what he most required,
And freely granted all he had desired.
Though large the blessing, yet he grudged the cost;
The sum gave pain: a hundred crowns were lost!
The friend proposed they should at once decide,
The charge and pleasure 'tween them to divide.
Our husband thought his purse not over strong,
That saving fifty crowns would not be wrong.
But then, on t'other hand, to lend the fair,
In ev'ry view had got an awkward air;
Would she, as was proposed, consent to two?
To keep things secret would their lips be true?
Or was it fair to sacrifice her charms,
And lay her open thus to dire alarms?

The friend this difficulty soon removed,
And represented that the cavern proved
So very dark, the girl would be deceived;
With one more shrewd the trick might be achieved.
Sufficient howsoever it would be,
If they by turns, and silent, could agree
To meet the belle, and leave to Love the rest,
From whom they hoped assistance if distressed.
Such silence to observe no hurt could do,
And Alice would suppose, a prudent view
Retained the tongue, since walls have often ears,
And, being mum, expressive was of fears.

Whenthus the two gallants their plan had laid,
And ev'ry promised pleasure fully weighed,
They to the husband's mansion made their way,
Where yet the wife between the bed-clothes lay.
The servant girl was near her mistress found;
Her dress was plain: no finery around;
In short, 'twas such that, when the moment came;
To fail the meeting could not be her aim.

The friends disputed which the lead should take,
And strong pretensions both appeared to make;
The husband, honours home would not allow:



Such compliments were out of fashion now.
To settle this, at length three dice they took;
The friend was highest placed in Fortune's book.
The both together to the cavern flew,
And for the servant soon impatient grew;
But Alice never came, and in her room
The mistress, softly treading 'mid the gloom,
The necessary signal gently gave,
On which she entered presently the cave,
And this so suddenly, no time was found
To make remarks on change or errors round,

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Or any diff'rence 'tween the friend and spouse;
In short, before suspicions 'gan to rouse,
Or alteration lent the senses aid:—
To *love*, a sacrifice was fully made.
The lucky wight more pleasure would have felt,
If sensible he'd been with whom he dealt:
The mistress rather more of beauty had,
And *Quality* of course must something add.

This scene just ended, t'other actor came,
Whose prompt arrival much surprised the dame,
For, as a husband, Clidamant had ne'er
Such ardour shown, he seemed beyond his sphere.
The lady to the girl imputed this,
And thought, to hint it, would not be amiss.

The entertainment o'er, away they went
To quit the dark abode they were intent.
The partner in amour repaired above;
But when the husband saw his wedded love
Ascend the stairs, and she the friend perceived,
We well may judge how bosoms beat and heaved.

The master of the house conceived it best
To keep the whole a secret in his breast.
But to discover *all*, his lovely rib
Appeared disposed, though wives can often fib;
The silliest of the throng (or high or low),
Most perfectly the science seem to know.

Some will pretend that Alice, in her heart
Was sorry she had acted such a part,
And not a better method sought to gain
The money which had caused her master's pain;
Lamented much the case, and tried to please
By ev'ry means that might his trouble ease.
But this is merely with design to make
The tale a more impressive feature take.



Two questions may agitate around;
The one, if 'mong the brotherhood renowned,
The husband, who thus felt disgraced,
Should (with the usual ornaments) be placed?
But I no grounds for such conclusion see:
Both friend and wife were from suspicion free;
Of one another they had never thought,
Though in the mystick scene together brought.
The other is:—Should she, who was misused,
Have sought revenge for being so abused?
Though this sufficiently I have maintained,
The lady inconsolable remained.

Heav'nguard the *fair*, who meet with ills like these,
And nothing can their wounded minds appease:
I many know howe'er, who would but laugh,
And treat such accidents as light as chaff.
But I have done: no more of that or this;
May ev'ry belle receive her lot of bliss!