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Tales and Novels of J. de La Fontaine -- Volume 09

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Author: Jean de La Fontaine

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The tales and novels

of

J. De La Fontaine

Volume 9.

Contains:

Belphegor

The Little Bell

The Glutton]

Belphegor

addressed to Miss de CHAMMELAY

*Your name with ev'ry pleasure here I place,
The last effusions of my muse to grace.
O charming Phillis! may the same extend
Through time's dark night: our praise together blend;
To this we surely may pretend to aim
Your acting and my rhymes attention claim.
Long, long in mem'ry's page your fame shall live;
You, who such ecstasy so often give;
O'er minds, o'er hearts triumphantly you reign:
In Berenice, in Phaedra, and Chimene,
Your tears and plaintive accents all engage:*

Beyond compare in proud Camilla's rage;
Your voice and manner auditors delight;
Who strong emotions can so well excite?
No fine eulogium from my pen expect:
With you each air and grace appear correct
My first of Phillis's you ought to be;
My sole affection had been placed on thee;
Long since, had I presumed the truth to tell;
But he who loves would fain be loved as well.

No hope of gaining such a charming fair,
Too soon, perhaps, I ceded to despair;
Your friend, was all I ventured to be thought,
Though in your net I more than half was caught.
Most willingly your lover I'd have been;
But time it is our story should be seen.

One, day, old Satan, sov'reign dread of hell;
Reviewed his subjects, as our hist'ries tell;
The different ranks, confounded as they stood,
Kings, nobles, females, and plebeian blood,
Such grief expressed, and made such horrid cries,
As almost stunned, and filled him with surprise.
The monarch, as he passed, desired to know
The cause that sent each shade to realms below.
Some said---my *husband*; others *wife* replied;
The same was echoed loud from ev'ry side.

His majesty on this was heard to say:
If truth these shadows to my ears convey,
With ease our glory we may now augment:
I'm fully bent to try th' experiment.
With this design we must some demon send,
Who wily art with prudence well can blend;
And, not content with watching Hymen's flock,
Must add his own experience to the stock.

The senate instantly approved
The proposition that the monarch moved;
Belphegor was to execute the work;
The proper talent in him seemed to lurk:
All ears and eyes, a prying knave in grain
In short, the very thing they wished to gain.

That he might all expense and cost defray,
They gave him num'rous bills without delay,
And credit too, in ev'ry place of note,
With various things that might their plan promote.

He was, besides, the human lot to fill,
Of pleasure and of pain:---of good and ill;
In fact, whate'er for mortals was designed,
With his legation was to be combined.
He might by industry and wily art,
His own afflictions dissipate in part;
But die he could not, nor his country see,
Till he ten years complete on earth should be.

*Behold*him trav'ling o'er th' extensive space;
Between the realms of darkness and our race.
To pass it, scarcely he a moment took;
On Florence instantly he cast a look;---
Delighted with the beauty of the spot,
He there resolved to fix his earthly lot,
Regarding it as proper for his wiles,
A city famed for wanton freaks and guiles.
Belphegor soon a noble mansion hired,
And furnished it with ev'ry thing desired;
As signor Roderick he designed to pass;
His equipage was large of ev'ry class;
Expense anticipating day by day,
What, in ten years, he had to throw away.

*His*noble entertainments raised surprise;
Magnificence alone would not suffice;
Delightful pleasures he dispensed around,
And flattery abundantly was found,
An art in which a demon should excel:
No devil surely e'er was liked so well.
His heart was soon the object of the *fair*;
To please Belphegor was their constant care.

Wholib'rally with presents smoothes the road,
Will meet no obstacles to *love's* abode.
In ev'ry situation they are sweet,
I've often said, and now the same repeat:
The primum mobile of human kind,
Are gold and silver, through the world we find.

Ourenvoy kept two books, in which he wrote
The names of all the married pairs of note;
But that assigned to couples satisfied,
He scarcely for it could a name provide,
Which made the demon almost blush to see,
How few, alas! in wedlock's chains agree;
While presently the other, which contained
Th' unhappy---not a leaf in blank remained.

No other choice Belphegor now had got,
 Than---try himself the hymeneal knot.
 In Florence he beheld a certain fair,
 With charming face and smart engaging air;
 Of noble birth, but puffed with empty pride;
 Some marks of virtue, though not much beside.
 For Roderick was asked this lofty dame;
 The father said Honesta* (such her name)
 Had many eligible offers found;
 But, 'mong the num'rous band that hovered round,
 Perhaps his daughter, Rod'rick's suit might take,
 Though he should wish for time the choice to make.
 This approbation met, and Rod'rick 'gan
 To use his arts and execute his plan.

The entertainments, balls, and serenades,
 Plays, concerts, presents, feasts, and masquerades,
 Much lessened what the demon with him brought;
 He nothing grudged:---whate'er was wished he bought.
 The dame believed high honour she bestowed,
 When she attention to his offer showed;
 And, after prayers, entreaties, and the rest,
 To be his wife she full assent expressed.

But first a pettifogger to him came, Of whom (aside) Belphegor made a game; What! said the demon, is
 a lady gained just like a house?---these scoundrels have obtained Such pow'r and sway, without them
 nothing's done; But hell will get them when their course is run. He reasoned properly; when faith's no
 more, True honesty is forced to leave the door; When men with confidence no longer view Their
 fellow-mortals,---happiness adieu! The very means we use 't escape the snare, Oft deeper plunge us in
 the gulph of care; Avoid attorneys, if you comfort crave Who knows a *pettifogger*, knows a *knave*;
 Their contracts, filled with IFS and *Fors*, appear The gate through which *Strife* found admittance here.
 In vain we hope again the earth 'twill leave Still *Strife* remains, and we ourselves deceive: In spite of
 solemn forms and laws we see, That *love* and *Hymen* often disagree. The heart alone can tranquilize
 the mind; In mutual passion ev'ry bliss we find.

How diff'rent things in other states appear!
 With friends---'tis who can be the most sincere;
 With lovers---all is sweetness, balm of life;
 While all is *irksomeness* with man and wife.
 We daily see from *Duty* springs disgust,
 And *pleasure* likes true *Liberty* to trust.

Are happy marriages for ever flown?
 On full consideration I will own,
 That when each other's follies couples bear;
 They then deserve the name of *happy Pair*.

Enough of this:---no sooner had our wight
The belle possessed, and passed the month's delight;
But he perceived what marriage must be here,
With such a demon in our nether sphere.
For ever jars and discords rang around;
Of follies, ev'ry class our couple found;
Honest a often times such noise would make,
Her screams and cries the neighbours kept awake,
Who, running thither, by the wife were told:---
Some paltry tradesman's daughter, coarse and bold,
He should have had:---not one of rank like me;
To treat me thus, what villain he must be!
A wife so virtuous, could he e'er deserve!
My scruples are too great, or I should swerve;
Indeed, without dispute, 'twould serve him right:---
We are not sure she nothing did in spite;
These prudes can make us credit what they please:
Few ponder long when they can dupe with ease.

This wife and husband, as our hist'ries say,
Each moment squabbled through the passing day;
Their disagreements often would arise
About a petticoat, cards, tables, pies,
Gowns, chairs, dice, summer-houses, in a word,
Things most ridiculous and quite absurd.

Well might this spouse regret his Hell profound,
When he considered what he'd met on ground.
To make our demon's wretchedness complete,
Honest a's relatives, from ev'ry street,
He seemed to marry, since he daily fed
The father, mother, sister (fit to wed,)
And little brother, whom he sent to school;
While *Miss* he portioned to a wealthy fool.

His utter ruin, howsoe'er, arose
From his attorney-steward that he chose.
What's that? you ask---a wily sneaking knave,
Who, while his master spends, contrives to save;
Till, in the end, grown rich, the lands he buys,
Which his good lord is forced to sacrifice.

If, in the course of time, the master take
The place of steward, and his fortune make,
'Twould only to their proper rank restore,
Those who become just what they were before.

Poor Rod'rick now no other hope had got,
Than what the chance of traffick might allot;
Illusion vain, or doubtful at the best:---
Though some grow rich, yet all are not so blessed.
'Twas said our husband never would succeed;
And truly, such it seemed to be decreed.
His agents (similar to those we see
In modern days) were with his treasure free;
His ships were wrecked; his commerce came to naught;
Deceived by knaves, of whom he well had thought;
Obliged to borrow money, which to pay,
He was unable at th' appointed day,
He fled, and with a farmer shelter took,
Where he might hope the bailiffs would not look.

He told to Matthew, (such the farmer's name,)
His situation, character, and fame:
By duns assailed, and harassed by a wife,
Who proved the very torment of his life,
He knew no place of safety to obtain,
Like ent'ring other bodies, where 'twas plain,
He might escape the catchpole's prowling eye,
Honesta's wrath, and all her rage defy.
From these he promised he would thrice retire;
Whenever Matthew should the same desire:
Thrice, but no more, t'oblige this worthy man,
Who shelter gave when from the fiends he ran.

The ambassador commenced his form to change:---
From human frame to frame he 'gan to range;
But what became his own fantastick state,
Our books are silent, nor the facts relate.

A only daughter was the first he seized,
Whose charms corporeal much our demon pleased;
But Matthew, for a handsome sum of gold,
Obliged him, at a word, to quit his hold.
This passed at Naples---next to Rome he came,
Where, with another fair, he did the same;
But still the farmer banished him again,
So well he could the devil's will restrain;
Another weighty purse to him was paid
Thrice Matthew drove him out from belle and maid.

The king of Naples had a daughter fair,
Admired, adored:---her parents' darling care;
In wedlock oft by many princes sought;
Within her form, the wily demon thought

He might be sheltered from Honesta's rage;
And none to drive him thence would dare engage.

Naught else was talked of, in or out of town,
But devils driven by the cunning clown;
Large sums were offered, if, by any art,
He'd make the demon from the fair depart.

Afflicted much was Matthew, now to lose
The gold thus tendered, but he could not choose,
For since Belphegor had obliged him thrice,
He durst not hope the demon to entice;
Poor man was he, a sinner, who, by chance,
(He knew not how, it surely was romance,)
Had some few devils, truly, driven out:
Most worthy of contempt without a doubt.
But all in vain:---the man they took by force;
Proceed he must, or hanged he'd be of course.

The demon was before our farmer placed;
The sight was by the prince in person graced;
The wond'rous contest numbers ran to see,
And all the world spectators fain would be.

If vanquished by the devil:---he must swing;
If vanquisher:---'twould thousands to him bring:
The gallows was, no doubt, a horrid view;
Yet, at the purse, his glances often flew;
The evil spirit laughed within his sleeve,
To see the farmer tremble, fret, and grieve.
He pleaded that the wight he'd thrice obeyed;
The demon was by Matthew often prayed;
But all in vain,---the more he terror showed,
The more Belphegor ridicule bestowed.

At length the clown was driven to declare,
The fiend he was unable to ensnare;
Away they Matthew to the gallows led;
But as he went, it entered in his head,
And, in a sort of whisper he averred
(As was in fact the case) a drum he heard.

The demon, with surprise, to Matthew cried;
What noise is that? Honesta, he replied,
Who you demands, and every where pursues,
The spouse who treats her with such vile abuse.

*These words were thunder to Belphegor's ears,
 Who instantly took flight, so great his fears;
 To hell's abyss he fled without delay,
 To tell adventures through the realms of day.
 Sire, said the demon, it is clearly true,
 Damnation does the marriage knot pursue.
 Your highness often hither sees arrive,
 Not squads, but regiments, who, when alive,
 By Hymen were indissolubly tied:---
 In person I the fact have fully tried.
 Th' institution, perhaps, most just could be:
 Past ages far more happiness might see;
 But ev'ry thing, with time, corruption shows;
 No jewel in your crown more lustre throws.*

*Belphegor's tale by Satan was believed;
 Reward he got: the term, which sorely grieved,
 Was now reduced; indeed, what had he done,
 That should prevent it?---If away he'd run,
 Who would not do the same who weds a shrew?
 Sure worse below the devil never knew!
 A brawling woman's tongue, what saint can bear?
 E'en Job, Honesta would have taught despair.*

*What is the inference? you ask:---I'll tell:---
 Live single, if you know you are well;
 But if old Hymen o'er your senses reign,
 Beware Honestas, or you'll rue the chain.*

* By this character La Fontaine is supposed to have meant his own wife.

The little bell

*How weak is man! how changeable his mind!
 His promises are naught, too oft we find;
 I vowed (I hope in tolerable verse,)
 Again no idle story to rehearse.
 And whence this promise?---Not two days ago;
 I'm quite confounded; better I should know:
 A rhymer hear then, who himself can boast,
 Quite steady for---a minute at the most.
 The pow'rs above could *prudence* ne'er design;
 For those who fondly court the *Sisters Nine*.
 Some means to please they've got, you will confess;
 But none with certainty the charm possess.
 If, howsoever, I were doomed to find
 Such lines as fully would content the mind:*

Though I should fail in matter, still in art;
I might contrive some pleasure to impart.

Let's see what we are able to obtain:---
A bachelor resided in Touraine.
A sprightly youth, who oft the maids beset,
And liked to prattle to the girls he met,
With sparkling eyes, white teeth, and easy air,
Plain russet petticoat and flowing hair,
Beside a rivulet, while Io round,
With little bell that gave a tinkling sound,
On herbs her palate gratified at will,
And gazed and played, and fondly took her fill.

Among the rustic nymphs our spark perceived
A charming girl, for whom his bosom heaved;
Too young, however, to feel the poignant smart,
By Cupid oft inflicted on the heart.
I will not say thirteen's an age unfit
The contrary most fully I admit;
The *law* supposes (such its prudent fears)
Maturity at still more early years;
But this apparently refers to towns,
While *love* was born for groves, and lawns, and downs.

The youth exerted ev'ry art to please;
But all in vain: he only seemed to tease:
Whate'er he said, however nicely graced,
Ill-humour, inexperience, or distaste,
Induced the belle, unlearned in Cupid's book;
To treat his passion with a froward look.

Believing ev'ry artifice in love
Was tolerated by the pow'rs above,
One eve he turned a heifer from the rest;
Conducted by the girl his thoughts possessed;
The others left, not counted by the fair,
(Youth seldom shows the necessary care,)
With easy, loit'ring steps the cottage sought,
Where ev'ry night they usually were brought.

Her mother, more experienced than the maid,
Observed, that from the cattle one had strayed;
The girl was scolded much, and sent to find
The heifer indiscreetly left behind.
Fair Isabella gave a vent to tears;
Invoked sweet echo to disperse her fears:
Solicited with fervent, piercing cry,

To tell her where lorn lo she might spy,
Whose little bell the spark deprived of sound;
When he withdrew her from the herd around.

*The*lover now the tinkling metal shook;
The path that t'wards it led the charmer took.
The well known note was pleasing to her ear;
Without suspecting treachery was near,
She followed to a wood, both deep and large,
In hopes at least she might regain her charge.

*Guess*her surprise, good reader, when she heard,
A lover's voice, who would not be deterred.
Said he, fair maid whene'er the heart's on fire,
'Tis all permitted that can quench desire.
On this, with piercing cries she rent the air;
But no one came:---she sunk to dire despair.

*Ye*beauteous dames avoid the Sylvan shade;
Dread dangers solitary woods pervade.

The glutton

A Sturgeon, once, a glutton famed was led
To have for supper---all, except the head.
With wond'rous glee he feasted on the fish;
And quickly swallowed down the royal dish.
O'ercharged, howe'er, his stomach soon gave way;
And doctors were required without delay.

*The*danger imminent, his friends desired
He'd settle ev'ry thing affairs required.
Said he, in that respect I'm quite prepared;
And, since my time so little is declared,
With diligence, I earnestly request,
The sturgeon's head you'll get me nicely dressed.

ETEXT EDITOR'S BOOKMARKS:

Avoid attorneys, if you comfort crave
Few ponder long when they can dupe with ease
He who loves would fain be loved as well

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