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Tales and Novels of J. de La Fontaine -- Volume 15 by Jean de La Fontaine

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Tales and Novels of J. de La Fontaine -- Volume 15

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The tales and novels

of

J. De La Fontaine

Volume 15.

Contains:

The Mandrake

The Rhemese

The mandrake

Florentine we now design to show;---
A greater blockhead ne'er appeared below;
It seems a prudent woman he had wed,
With beauty that might grace a monarch's bed;
Young, brisk, good-humoured, with engaging mien;
None in the town, or round, the like was seen:
Her praises every voice inclined to sing,
And judged her worthy of a mighty king;
At least a better husband she deserved:
An arrant fool he looked, and quite unnerved.
This Nicia Calfucci (for such his name)
Was fully bent to have a father's fame,
And thought his country honour he could do,

Could he contrive his lineage to pursue.
No holy saint in Paradise was blessed,
But what this husband fervently addressed;
From day to day, so oft he teased for grace,
They scarcely knew his off'rings where to place.
No matron, quack, nor conjurer around,
But what he tried their qualities profound;
Yet all in vain: in spite of charm or book,
No father he, whatever pains he took.

To Florence then returned a youth from France;
Where he had studied,---more than complaisance:
Well trained as any from that polished court;
To Fortune's favours anxious to resort;
Gallant and seeking ev'ry *fair* to please;
Each house, road, alley, soon he knew at ease;
The husbands, good or bad, their whims and years,
With ev'ry thing that moved their hopes or fears;
What sort of fuel best their females charmed;
What spies were kept by those who felt alarmed;
The if's, for's, to's, and ev'ry artful wile,
That might in love a confidant beguile,
Or nurse, or father-confessor, or dog;
When passion prompts, few obstacles can clog.

The snares were spread, each stratagem was laid;
And every thing arranged to furnish aid,
When our gay spark determined to invest
Old Nicia with the cuckold's branching crest.
The plan no doubt was well conceived and bold;
The lady to her friends appeared not cold;
Within her husband's house she seemed polite;
But ne'er familiarly was seen invite,
No further could a lover dare proceed;
Not one had hope the belle his flame would heed.

Our youth, Calimachus, no sooner came,
But he howe'er appeared to please the dame;
His camp he pitched and entered on the siege
Of fair Lucretia, faithful to her liege,
Who presently the haughty tigress played,
And sent him, like the rest, away dismayed.

He, scarcely knew what saint he could invoke;
When Nicia's folly served him for a cloak;
However strange, no stratagem nor snare,
But what the fool would willingly prepare
With all his heart, and nothing fancy wrong;

That might to others possibly belong.
The lover and himself, as learned men,
Had conversations ev'ry now and then;
For Nicia was a doctor in the law:
Degree, to him, not worth a single straw;
Far better had he common prudence traced;
And not his confidence so badly placed.

*O*ne day he to Calimachus complained,
Of want of heirs, and wished they could be gained:
Where lay the fault? He was a gay gallant;
Lucretia young with features to enchant.
When I at Paris was, replied our wight,
There passed a clever man, a curious sight,
His company with anxious care I sought,
And was at length a hundred secrets taught;
'Mong others how, at will, to get an heir:---
A certain thing, he often would declare;
The great Mogul had tried it on his queen,
just two years since, the heir might then be seen;
And many other princesses of fame,
Had added by it to their husband's name.
'Twas very true; I've seen it fully proved:
The remedy all obstacles removed;
'Tis from the root of certain tree expressed;
A juice most potent ev'ry where confessed,
And Mandrake called, which taken by a wife;
More pow'r evinces o'er organick life,
Than from conventual grace was e'er derived,
Though in the cloister youthful friars hived.

*T*en months from hence I'll you a father make;
No longer time than that I ask to take;
This period o'er, the child to church we'll bring,---
If true, said Nicia, what a glorious thing!
You'll do me services I can't express.---
Don't doubt it, cried the spark of smart address:
Must I the fact so oft to you repeat?
I've seen it with my eyes; 'tis most complete;
You mean to jest, assuredly my friend;
Would you by doubts the great Mogul offend?
So handsomely this traveller he paid,
No sign of discontent he e'er betrayed.

'*T*is excellent, the Florentine replied;
Lucretia must be pleased to have it tried;
What satisfaction! in her arms to view
An infant that my lineage will renew.

Now, worthy friend, you god-father shall stand;
This very day pray take the thing in hand.

*Not*quite so fast, rejoined our smart gallant,
First know the plan, before consent you grant;
There is an ill attends the whole affair;
But what below, alas! is free from care;
This juice, possessing virtues so divine,
Has also pow'rs that prove the most malign:
Whoe'er receives the patient's first embrace;
Too fatally the dire effects will trace;
Death oft succeeds the momentary joy;
We scarcely good can find without alloy.

*Your*servant; sir, said Nicia with surprise;
No more of this: the name will me suffice;
Lucretia we will let remain at ease:
What you propose can never truly please;
If I must die by getting of a son,
'Tis better far the benefit to shun;
Go find some other for your wondrous art;
In fact I'm not inclined with life to part.

*How*strange your conduct, cried the sprightly youth:
Extremes you seek, and overleap the truth;
Just now the fond desire to have a boy
Chased ev'ry care and filled your heart with joy;
At present quite the contrary appears
A moment changed your fondest hopes to fears;
Come, hear the rest; no longer waste your breath:
Kind Nature all can cure, excepting death.
What's necessary pray, that things succeed?
Some youthful clod for once should take the lead,
And clear the way of ev'ry venom round
Then you with safety may commence to sound;
No time you'll lose, but instantly begin
And you'll most certainly your object win.
This step is necessary to the end;
Some lad of little worth I recommend;
But not ill made, nor savagely robust,
To give your lady terror nor disgust.
We know that, used to Nicia's soft caress,
Lucretia would disrelish rude address;
Indeed 'tis possible in such event,
Her tender heart would never give consent;
This led me to propose a man that's young;
Besides, the more he proves for action strong,
The less of venom will behind remain,

And I'll engage that ev'ry drop he'll drain.

At first the husband disapproved the plan,
The infamy, and danger which they ran
Perhaps the magistrate might have him sought,
And he, of murder, guilty might be thought;
The sudden death would mightily perplex;
A fellow's creature's loss would sorely vex;
Lucretia, who'd withstood each tempter's charms,
Was now to be disgraced in rustick arms!

Calimachus, with eagerness replied;
I would a man of consequence provide,
Or one, at all events, whose anxious aim
Would be, aloud the myst'ry, to proclaim!
But fear and folly would contain the clown,
Or money at the worst would stop renown,
Your better half apparently resigned;
The clod without intention of the kind;
In short whate'er arrived, 'tis clear your case
Could not with Cuckoldom be well in place.
Besides 'tis no way certain but our blade,
By strength of nerves the poison may evade;
And that's a double reason for the choice,
Since with more certainty we shall rejoice:
The venom may evaporate in fume,
And Mandrake pleasing pow'rs at once assume;
For when I spoke of death, I did not mean,
That nothing from it would the person screen;
To-morrow we the rustick lad must name;
To-night the potion given your charming dame;
I've some already with me, all prepared;
Let nothing of your project be declared:
You should not seem to know what we've designed;
Ligurio you'll permit this clod to find;
You can most thoroughly in him confide:
Discretion, secrecy, with him reside.
One thing, however, nearly I'd forgot;
A bandage for the eyes we should allot;
And when well bound he nothing e'er can trace
Of whom, or what, the lady, or the place.

The whole arrangement Nicia much approved;
But now 'twas time the lady should be moved.
At first she thought it jest, then angry grew,
And vowed the plan she never would pursue;
Her life she'd rather forfeit than her name:
Once known, for ever lost would be her fame

Besides the heinous sin and vile offence,
God knew she rather would with all dispense;
Mere complaisance had led her to comply;
Would she admit a wretch with blearing eye,
To incommode, and banish tranquil ease?
Who could conceive her formed a clod to please?
Can I, said she, the paths of honour quit,
And in my bed a loathsome brute permit?
Or e'er regard the plan but with disdain?
No, by saint John, I ever will maintain,
Nor beau, nor clown, nor king, nor lord, nor 'squire,
Save Nicia, with me freely shall retire.

The fair Lucretia seemed so firmly bent,
To father Timothy at length they went,
Who preached the lady such a fine discourse,
She ceded more through penitence than force.

Moreover she was promised that the lad
Should be nor clownish, nor in person bad;
Nor such as any way might give disgust,
But one to whom she perfectly might trust.

The wondrous draught was taken by the fair;
Next day our Wight prepared his wily snare:
Himself bepowdered like a miller's man,
With beard and whiskers to complete his plan;
A better metamorphose ne'er was seen;
Ligurio, who had in the secret been,
So thoroughly disguised the lover thought,
At midnight him to Nicia freely brought,
With bandage o'er the eyes and hair disdained,
Not once the husband of deceit complained.

Beside the dame in silence slid our spark;
In silence she attended in the dark,
Perfumed and nicely ev'ry way bedecked;
For what? you ask, or whom did she expect;
Were all these pains a miller to receive?--
Too much they cannot take, the sex believe;
And whether kings or millers be their aim,
The wish to please is ever found the same.
'Tis double honour in a woman thought,
When by her charms a torpid heart is caught;
She, who in icy bosoms flame can raise,
Deserving doubtless is of treble praise.

Thespark disguised, his place no sooner took,
But awkwardness he presently forsook;
No more the miller, but the smart gallant:
The lady found him kind and complaisant;
Such moments we'll suppose were well employed;
Though trembling fears not perfectly destroyed.

She, to herself, remarked, 'tis very strange,
This lad's demeanour should so quickly change;
He's quite another character, 'tis clear;
What pity that his end should be so near;
Alas! he merits not so hard a fate;
I feel regret the lot should him await;
And while soft pleasure seems his heart's delight;
His soul is doomed from hence to take its flight.

The husband who so fully gave consent,
Was led his partner's sufferings to lament
The spirit of a queen in truth she showed,
When cuckoldom was on her spouse bestowed;
In decoration, forced to acquiesce,
She would not condescend to join caress.

Lucretia howsoe'er the lad approved;
His winning manners much her favour moved.

When he the subtle venom had subdued,
He took her hand, and having fondly sued,
Said he, your pardon lady now I ask;
Be not displeas'd when I remove the mask;
Your rage restrain; a trick on you's been played;
Calimachus am I; be not dismay'd;
Approve my sacrifice; the secret's known;
Your rigour would be useless now if shown;
Should I be doom'd howe'er to breathe my last,
I die content, rememb'ring what has pass'd;
You have the means my life at will to take;
More havock with me soft delight could make,
Than any poison that the draught possess'd;
Mere folly, imposition, all the rest.

Till then Lucretia had resistance made;
To seem submissive she was still afraid;
The lover was not hated by the belle,
But bashfulness she could not well dispel,
Which, join'd to simple manners mixed with fear,
Ungrateful made her, spite of self, appear.

*Insilence wrapt, and scarcely drawing breath,
By passion moved, and yet ashamed to death,
Not knowing how to act, so great her grief,
From tears, her throbbing bosom sought relief.
Look, could she e'er her lover in the face?
Will he not think me covered with disgrace?
Said she, within herself;---what else believe?
My wits were lost to let him thus deceive.
O'ercome by sorrow, then she turned her head,
And tried to hide herself within the bed,
At furthest end, but vain alas her aim,
The lover thither in a moment came:
Her only ground, remaining unsubdued,
Surrendered when the vanquisher pursued,
Who every thing submitted to his will,
And tears no more her eyes were found to fill;
Shame took to flight, and scruples spread the wing;
How happy those whom duping *gain* can bring!*

*Toosoon Aurora for our spark appeared;
Too soon for her so thoroughly revered;
Said he, the poison, that can life devour,
Requires repeated acts to crush its pow'r.
The foll'wing days our youthful am'rous pair
Found opportunities for pleasing fare.
The husband scarcely could himself contain,
So anxiously he wished his aim to gain.*

*The lover from the belle at length arose,
And hastened to his house to seek repose;
But scarcely had he placed himself in bed,
When our good husband's footsteps thither led;
He, to the spark, related with delight,
How mandrake-juice succeeded in the night.
Said he, at first beside the bed I crept,
And listened if the miller near her kept,
Or whether he to converse was inclined,
And ev'ry way to act as was designed.
I then my wife was anxious to address,
And whispered that she should the youth caress;
Nor dread too much the spoiling of her charms:
Indeed 'twas all embarrassing alarms.
Don't think, said I, that either can deceive;
I ev'ry thing shall hear, you may believe;
Know, Nicia is a man, who well may say,
He's trusted without measure ev'ry day.*

*Pray*recollect my very life 's at stake,
 And do not many difficulties make.
 Convince thereby how much your spouse you love;
 'Twill pleasure doubtless give the pow'rs above.
 But should the blockhead any how prove shy
 Send instantly to me; I shall be nigh;
 I'm going now to rest; by no means fail;
 We'll soon contrive and ev'ry way prevail.
 But there was no necessity for this;
 'Tis pretty clear that nothing went amiss.
 In fact the rustick liked the business well,
 And seemed unwilling to resign the belle,
 I pity him, and much lament his lot;
 But---he must die and soon will be forgot:
 A fig for those who used to crack their jest;
 In nine months' time a child will be the test.

The Rhemese

Nocity I to Rheims would e'er prefer:
 Of France the pride and honour I aver;
 The Holy Ampoule * and delicious wine,
 Which ev'ry one regards as most divine,
 We'll set apart, and other objects take:
 The beauties round a paradise might make!
 I mean not tow'rs nor churches, gates, nor streets;
 But charming belles with soft enchanting sweets:
 Such oft among the fair Rhemese we view:
 Kings might be proud those graces to pursue.

*One'*mong these belles had to the altar led,
 A painter, much esteemed, and who had bread.
 What more was requisite!--he lived at ease,
 And by his occupation sought to please.
 A happy woman all believed his wife;
 The husband's talents pleased her to the life:
 For gallantry howe'er he was renowned,
 And many am'rous dames, who dwelled around,
 Would seek the artist with a double aim:
 So all our chronicles record his fame.
 But since much penetration 's not my boast,
 I just believe---what's requisite at most.

WHENE'ER the painter had in hand a fair,
 He'd jest his wife, and laugh with easy air;
 But Hymen's rights proceeding as they ought,
 With jealous fears her breast was never fraught.
 She might indeed repay his tricks in kind,

And gratify, in soft amours, her mind,
Except that she less confidence had shown,
And was not led to him the truth to own.

Among the men attracted by her smiles,
Two neighbours, much delighted with her wiles;
Were often tempted, by her sprightly wit,
To listen to her chat, and with her sit;
For she had far the most engaging mien,
Of any charmer that around was seen.
Superior understanding she possessed;
Though fond of laughter, frolick, fun, and jest.
She to her husband presently disclosed
The love these cit-gallants to her proposed;
Both known for arrant blockheads through the town,
And ever boasting of their own renown.
To him she gave their various speeches, tones,
Each silly air: their tears, and sighs, and groans;
They'd read, or rather heard, we may believe,
That, when in love, with sighs fond bosoms heave.
Their utmost to succeed these coxcombs tried,
And seemed convinced they should not be denied;
A common cause they would the business hold,
And what one knew the other must be told.
Whichever first a favour might obtain,
Should tell his happiness to t'other swain.

Ye fair 'tis thus they oft your kindness treat:
The pleasure that he wished alone is sweet.
Love, is no more; of t'other, laid in earth,
We've here no traces scarcely from the birth.
You serve for sport and prey, to giddy youth,
Devoid of talents, principles, and truth.
'Tis right they should suppose, still two are found;
Who take their course continually round.
The first that in your pleasure grounds appears;
I'd have you, on his wings, to use the shears.

Our lady then, her lovers to deceive,
One day observed---you shall, my friends, this eve;
Drink wine with me:---my husband will away,
And, what's delightful, till to-morrow stay;
We shall ourselves be able to amuse,
And laugh, and sing, and talk as we may choose.
'Tis excellent, cried they: things well you frame;
And at the promised hour, the heroes came.

When introduced, and all supposing clear,
A sudden knocking turned their joy to fear;
The door was barred; she to the window flew;
I think, said she, that's to the master due;
And should it prove to be as I suspect:---
'Tis he, I vow:---fly, hide, he'll you detect;
Some accident, suspicion, or design,
Has brought him back to sleep, I now divine:

Our two gallants, when dangers round them pressed,
A closet entered, mightily distressed;
To get away 'twere folly to have tried;
The husband came, the roast he quickly spied;
With pigeons too, in different fashions cooked;
Why, hey! said he, as round about he looked:
What guests have you that supper you prepare?
The wife replied: two neighbours taste our fare:
Sweet Alice, and good Simonetta, mean
To-night, at table with us to be seen;
I'm quite rejoiced to think that you are here:
The company will more complete appear;
These dames will, by your presence, nothing lose;
I'll run and hasten them: 'twill you amuse;
The whole is ready; I'll at once away,
And beg, in coming, they'll no more delay.

The ladies named were wives of our gallants,
So fond of contraband, and smuggled grants,
Who, vexed to be confined, still praised the dame,
For skewing such address to 'scape from blame.
She soon returned, and with her brought the *fair*,
Who, gaily singing, entered free from care.
The painter them received with bow and kiss;
To praise their beauty he was not remiss;
Their dress was charming; all he much admired;
Their presence frolick, fun, and jest inspired,
Which no way pleased the husbands in the cage,
Who saw the freaks with marks of bursting rage:
The door half open gave a view complete,
How freely he their wives was led to treat.

Things thus commenced, the supper next was served;
From playful tricks the painter never swerved,
But placed himself at table 'twixt the two,
And jest and frolicking would still pursue.
To women, wine, and fun, said he, I drink;
Put round the toast; none from it e'er must shrink;
The order was obeyed; the glass oft filled

The party soon had all the liquor swilled:

*The*wife just then, it seems, no servant kept;
More wine to get, she to the cellar stept.
But dreading ghosts, she Simonetta prayed;
To light her down, she was so much afraid.

*The*painter was alone with Alice left,
A country belle, of beauty not bereft:
Slight, nicely made, with rather pretty face,
She thought herself possessed of ev'ry grace,
And, in a country town, she well might get
The appellation of a gay coquette.

*The*wily spark, perceiving no one near;
Soon ran from compliment to sweet and dear;
Her lips assailed;---the tucker drew aside,
And stole a kiss that hurt her husband's pride,
Who all beheld; but spouses, that are sage,
No trifles heed, nor peccadillos page;
Though, doubtless, when such meetings are possessed,
The simple kiss gives room to dread the rest;
For when the devil whispers in the ear
Of one that sleeps, he wakes at once to fear.

The husband, howsoe'er, at length perceived Still more concessions, which his bosom grieved; While
on the neck a hand appeared to please, The other wandered equally at ease; Be not offended, love! was
often said; To frantick rage the sight her sposo led, Who, beating in his hat, was on the move To sally
forth, his wrath to let them prove, To thrash his wife, and force her spark to feel his nervous arm could
quickly make him reel.

*Be*not so silly, whispered t'other Wight;
To stir up noise could ne'er be reckoned right;
Be quiet now: consider where we are;
Keep close, or else you'll all our pleasures mar;
Remember, written 'tis, By others do
The same as you would like they should by you;
'Tis proper in this place we should remain
Till all is hushed in sleep: then freedom gain;
That's my opinion how we ought to act
Are you not half a cuckold now, in fact?
Fair Alice has consented:-that's enough;
The rest is mere compliance, nonsense, stuff!

*The*husband seemed the reasons to approve;
Some slight attempts the lady made to move;
No time for more. What then? you ask:---Why, then---
The lady put her cap to rights agen;

No mark appeared suspicion to awake,
Except her cheek a scarlet hue might take.
Mere trifle that; from talking it might spring;
And other causes, doubtless, we could bring.

One of the belles, howe'er, who went for wine,
Smiled, on returning, at the blushing sign:
The painter's wife; but soon they filled each glass,
And briskly round the bottle seemed to pass;
They drank the host, the hostess, and the *fair*,
Who, 'mong the three, should first her wishes share.

At length, a second time the bottle failed;
The hostess' fear of ghosts again prevailed,
And mistress Alice now for escort went,
Though much she wished the other to have sent;
With Simonetta she was forced to change,
And leave the painter at his ease to range.

This dame at first appeared to be severe
Would leave the room, and feigned to be sincere;
But when the painter seized her by the gown,
She prudence showed, and feared he'd pull her down;
Her clothes might tear, which led her to remain:
On this the husband scarcely could contain;
He seemed resolved his hiding place to leave;
But instantly the other pulled his sleeve;
Be easy friend, said he, it is but right,
That equal favours we should have to-night,
And cuckoldom should take you to his care,
That we alike in ev'ry thing may fare.

Are we not brothers in adventure, pray?
And such our solemn promises, to-day.
Since one the painter clearly has disgraced,
The other equally should be embraced.
In spite of ev'ry thing you now advance,
Your wife as well as mine shall have a dance;
A hand I'll lend, if wanting it be found;
Say what you will, I'll see she has her round.
She had it then:---our painter tried to please;
The lady equally appeared at ease;
Full time the others gave, and when they came,
More wine was not required by spark nor dame;
'Twas late, and for the day enough he'd done;
Good night was said: their course the belles had run;
The painter, satisfied, retired to rest;
The gay gallants, who lay so long distressed,

The wily hostess from the closet drew,
Abashed, disconsolate, and cuckolds too;
Still worse to think, with all their care and pain;
That neither of them could his wish obtain,
Or e'en return the dame what she procured
Their wives, whom she so cleverly allured.

Hereends our tale; the business is complete;
In soft amours success alone is sweet.

* The Saint Ampoule, or Holy Ampulla, a vial said to have descended from heaven, in which was oil for anointing the kings of France at the coronation, and formerly kept at Rheims.

ETEXT EDITOR'S BOOKMARKS:

By others do The same as you would like they should by you
The wish to please is ever found the same
We scarcely good can find without alloy
When passion prompts, few obstacles can clog

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