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Tales and Novels of J. de La Fontaine -- Volume 18

THE DEVIL OF POPE-FIG ISLAND

By master Francis clearly 'tis expressed:
The folks of Papimania are blessed;
True sleep for them alone it seems was made
With *us* the copy only has been laid;
And by Saint John, if Heav'n my life will spare,
I'll see this place where sleeping 's free from care.
E'en better still I find, for naught they do:
'Tis that employment always I pursue.
Just add thereto a little honest love,
And I shall be as easy as a glove.

Ont'other hand an island may be seen,
Where all are hated, cursed, and full of spleen.
We know them by the thinness of their face
Long sleep is quite excluded from their race.

Shouldyou, good reader, any person meet,
With rosy, smiling looks, and cheeks replete,
The form not clumsy, you may safely say,
A Papimanian doubtless I survey.
But if, on t'other side, you chance to view,
A meagre figure, void of blooming hue,
With stupid, heavy eye, and gloomy mien
Conclude at once a Pope-figer, you've seen.

Pope-fig 'S the name upon an isle bestowed,
Where once a fig the silly people showed,
As like the pope, and due devotion paid:---
By folly, blocks have often gods been made!
These islanders were punished for their crime;
Naught prospers, Francis tells us, in their clime;
To Lucifer was giv'n the hateful spot,
And there his country house he now has got.
His underlings appear throughout the isle,
Rude, wretched, poor, mean, sordid, base, and vile;
With tales, and horns, and claws, if we believe,
What many say who ought not to deceive.

Oneday it happened that a cunning clown
Was by an imp observed, without the town,
To turn the earth, which seemed to be accurst,
Since ev'ry trench was painful as the first.
This youthful devil was a titled lord;

In manners simple:---naught to be abhorred;
He might, so ignorant, be duped at ease;
As yet he'd scarcely ventured to displease:
Said he, I'd have thee know, I was not born,
Like clods to labour, dig nor sow the corn;
A devil thou in me beholdest here,
Of noble race: to toil I ne'er appear.

Thou know'st full well, these fields to us belong:
The islanders, it seems, had acted wrong;
And, for their crimes, the pope withdrew his cares;
Our subjects now you live, the law declares;
And therefore, fellow, I've undoubted right,
To take the produce of this field, at sight;
But I am kind, and clearly will decide
The year concluded, we'll the fruits divided.
What crop, pray tell me, dost thou mean to sow?
The clod replied, my lord, what best will grow
I think is Tousell; grain of hardy fame;
The imp rejoined, I never heard its name;
What is it. Tousell, say'st thou?---I agree,
If good return, 'twill be the same to me;
Work fellow, work; make haste, the ground prepare;
To dig and delve should be the rabble's care;
Don't think that I will ever lend a hand,
Or give the slightest aid to till the land;
I've told thee I'm a gentleman by birth,
Designed for ease: not doomed to turn the earth.
Howe'er I'll now the diff'rent parts allot,
And thus divide the produce of the plot:---
What shall above the heritage arise,
I'll leave to thee; 'twill very well suffice;
But what is in the soil shall be my share;
To this attend, see ev'ry thing is fair.

This beardless corn when ripe, with joy was reaped,
And then the stubble by the roots was heaped,
To satisfy the lordly devil's claim,
Who thought the seed and root were just the same,
And that the ear and stalk were useless parts,
Which nothing made if carried to the marts:
The labourer his produce housed with care;
The other to the market brought his ware,
Where ridicule and laughter he received;
'Twas nothing worth, which much his bosom grieved.

Quit mortified, the devil quickly went;
To seek our clod, and mark his discontent:

The fellow had discreetly sold the corn,
In straw, unthrashed, and off the money borne,
Which he, with ev'ry wily care, concealed;
The imp was duped, and nothing was revealed.
Said he, thou rascal?---pretty tricks thou'st played;
It seems that cheating is thy daily trade;
But I'm a noble devil of the court,
Who tricking never knew, save by report.
What grain dost mean to sow th' ensuing year?
The labourer replied, I think it clear,
Instead of grain, 'twill better be to chop,
And take a carrot, or a turnip crop;
You then, my lord, will surely plenty find;
And radishes, if you are so inclined.

Thesecarrots, radishes, and turnips too,
Said t'other, I am led to think will do;
My part shall be what 'bove the soil is found:
Thine, fellow, what remains within the ground;
No war with thee I'll have, unless constrained,
And thou hast never yet of me complained.
I now shall go and try to tempt a nun,
For I'm disposed to have a little fun.

The time arrived again to house the store;
The labourer collected as before;
Leaves solely to his lordship were assigned,
Who sought for those a ready sale to find,
But through the market ridicule was heard,
And ev'ry one around his jest preferred:---
Pray, Mister Devil, where d'ye grow these greens?
How treasure up returns from your demesnes?

Enraged at what was said, he hurried back,
And, on the clown, proposed to make attack,
Who, full of joy, was laughing with his wife,
And tasting pleasantly the sweets of life.
By all the pow'rs of Hell, the demon cried,
He shall the forfeit pay, I now decide;
A pretty rascal truly, master Phil:
Here, pleasures you expect at will,
Well, well, proceed; gallant it while allowed;
For present I'll remit what I had vowed;
A charming lady I'm engaged to meet;
She's sometimes willing: then again discreet;
But soon as I, in cuckold's row, have placed
Her ninny husband, I'll return in haste,
And then so thoroughly I'll trim you o'er,

Such wily tricks you'll never practise more;
We'll see who best can use his claws and nails,
And from the fields obtain the richest sales.
Corn, carrots, radishes, or what you will:---
Crop as you like, and show your utmost skill
No stratagems howe'er with culture blend;
I'll take my portion from the better end;
Within a week, remember, I'll be here,
And recollect:---you've every thing to fear.

Amazed at what the lordly devil said,
The clod could naught reply, so great his dread;
But at the gasconade Perretta smiled,
Who kept his house and weary hours beguiled,
A sprightly clever lass, with prying eye,
Who, when a shepherdess, could more descry,
Than sheep or lambs she watched upon the plain,
If other views or points she sought to gain.
Said she, weep not, I'll undertake at ease,
To gull this novice-devil as I please;
He's young and ignorant; has nothing seen;
Thee; from his rage, I thoroughly will skreen;
My little finger, if I like can show
More malice than his head and body know.

The day arrived, our labourer, not brave,
Concealed himself, but not in vault nor cave;
He plunged within a vase extremely large,
Where holy-water always was in charge;
No demon would have thought to find him there,
So well the clod had chosen his repair;
In sacred stoles he muffled up his skin,
And, 'bove the water, only kept his chin;
There we will leave him, while the priests profound
Repeated Vade retro round and round.

Perretta at the house remained to greet
The lordly devil whom she hoped to cheat.
He soon appeared; when with dishevelled hair,
And flowing tears, as if o'erwhelmed with care,
She sallied forth, and bitterly complained,
How oft by Phil she had been scratched and caned;
Said she, the wretch has used me very ill;
Of cruelty he has obtained his fill;
For God's sake try, my lord, to get away:
Just now I heard the savage fellow say,
He'd with his claws your lordship tear and slash:
See, only see, my lord, he made this gash;

On which she showed:---what you will guess, no doubt,
And put the demon presently to rout,
Who crossed himself and trembled with affright:
He'd never seen nor heard of such a sight,
Where scratch from claws or nails had so appeared;
His fears prevailed, and off he quickly steered;
Perretta left, who, by her friends around,
Was complimented on her sense profound,
That could so well the demon's snares defeat;
The clergy too pronounced her plan discrete.

FERONDE

In Eastern climes, by means considered new;
The Mount's old-man, with terrors would pursue;
His large domains howe'er were not the cause,
Nor heaps of gold, that gave him such applause,
But manners strange his subjects to persuade;
In ev'ry wish, to serve him they were made.
Among his people boldest hearts he chose,
And to their view would Paradise disclose
Its blissful pleasures:---ev'ry soft delight,
Designed to gratify the sense and sight.
So plausible this prophet's tale appeared,
Each word he dropt was thoroughly revered.
Whence this delusion?---*Drink* deranged the mind;
And, reason drowned, to madness they resigned.
Thus void of knowing clearly what they did,
They soon were brought to act as they were bid;
Conveyed to places, charming to the eye,
Enchanting gardens 'neath an azure sky,
With twining shrubs, meandring walks, and flow'rs,
And num'rous grottos, porticoes and bow'rs.
When they chanced to pass where all was gay,
From wine's inebriating pow'rful sway,
They wondered at the frolicking around,
And fancied they were got on fairy ground,
Which Mahomet pretended was assigned,
For those to his doctrine were inclined.
To tempt the men and girls to seek the scene,
And skip and play and dance upon the green,
To murm'ring streams, meandering along,
And lutes' soft notes and nightingales' sweet song:
No earthly pleasure but might there be viewed,
The best of wines and choicest fruits accrued,
To render sense bewildered at the sight,
And sink inebriated with delight.

Then back they bore them motionless to sleep,
And wake with wishes further joys to reap.
From these enjoyments many fully thought,
To such enchanting scenes they should be brought,
In future times, eternal bliss to taste,
If death and danger valiantly they faced,
And tried the prophet Mahomet to please,
And ev'ry point to serve their prince would seize.

The Mount's old man, by means like these, could say;
He'd men devoted to support his sway;
Upon the globe no empire more was feared,
Or king or potentate like him revered.
These circumstances I've minutely told,
To show, our tale was known in days of old.

Feronde, a rich, but awkward, vulgar clown,
A ninny was believed throughout the town;
He had the charge of revenues not slight,
Which he collected for a friar white.
Of these I've known as good as any black,
When husbands some assistance seemed to lack,
And had so much to do, they monks might need;
Or other friends, their work at home to speed.
This friar for to-morrow never thought,
But squandered ev'ry thing as soon as brought;
No saint-apostle less of wealth retained;
Good cheer o'er ev'ry wish triumphant reigned,
Save now and then to have a little fun,
(Unknown to others) with a pretty nun.

Feronde had got a spouse of pleasing sight,
Related nearly to our friar white,
Whose predecessor, uncle, sponsor kind,
Now gone to realms of night, had her consigned,
To be this silly blockhead's lawful wife,
Who thought her hand the honour of his life.
'Tis said that bastard-daughters oft retain
A disposition to the parent-train;
And this, the saying, truly ne'er bellied,
Nor was her spouse so weak but he descried,
Things clearer than was requisite believed,
And doubted much if he were not deceived.

The wife would often to the prelate go,
Pretending business, proper he should know;
A thousand circumstances she could find;
'Twas then accounts: now sev'ral things combined;

In short no day nor hour within the week,
But something at the friar's she would seek.
The holy father then was always prone,
To send the servants off and be alone.
Howe'er the husband, doubting tricks were played;
Got troublesome; his wife would much upbraid
When she returned, and often beat her too;
In short,---he unaccommodating grew.

*The*rural mind by nature jealous proves;
Suspicion shows of ev'ry thing that moves;
Unused to city ways, perverse appears,
And, undismayed, to principle adheres:

*The*friar found his situation hard;
He loved his ease?---all trouble would discard;
As priests in gen'ral anxiously desire;
Their plan howe'er I never can admire,
And should not choose at once to take the town,
But by the escalade obtain the crown;
In *love* I mean; to *war* I don't allude:
No silly bragging I would here intrude,
Nor be enrolled among the martial train:
'Tis Venus' court that I should like to gain.
Let t'other custom be the better way:
It matters not; no longer I'll delay,
But to my tale return, and fully state,
How our receiver, who misused his mate;
Was put in purgatory to be cured,
And, for a time, most thoroughly immured.

*By*means of opiate powders, much renowned,
The friar plunged him in a sleep profound.
Thought dead; the fun'ral obsequies achieved,
He was surprised, and doubtless sorely grieved,
When he awoke and saw where he was placed,
With folks around, not much to suit his taste;
For in the coffin he at large was left,
And of the pow'r to move was not bereft,
But might arise and walk about the tomb,
Which opened to another vaulted room,
The gloomy, hollow mansion of the dead:
Fear quickly o'er his drooping spirits spread.
What's here? cried he: is't sleep, or is it death;
Some charm or spell perhaps withdraws their breath.
Our wight then asked their names and business there;
And why he was retained in such a snare?
In what had he offended God or man?---

Said one, console thyself:---past moments scan;
When thou hast rested here a thousand years,
Thou'lt then ascend amid the Heav'nly spheres;
But first in holy purgatory learn,
To cleanse thyself from sins that we discern;
One day thy soul shall leave this loathsome place,
And, pure as ice, repair to realms of grace.
Then this consoling Angel gave a thwack,
And ten or dozen stripes laid on his back:---
'Tis thy unruly, jealous mind, said he,
Displeases God, and dooms thee here to be.

A *mournful* sigh the lorn receiver heaved,
His aching shoulders rubbed, and sobbed and grieved;
A thousand years, cried he, 'tis long indeed!
My very soul with horror seems to bleed.

We should observe, this Angel was a wag,
A novice-friar and a convent fag;
Like him the others round had parts to act,
And were disguised in dresses quite exact.
Our penitent most humbly pardon sought;
Said he, if e'er to life again I'm brought,
No jealousy, suspicion's hateful bane,
Shall ever enter my distracted brain.
May I not have this grace, this wished for boon?
Some hopes they gave, but it could not be soon;
In short a year he lay upon the floor:
Just food for life received, and nothing more,
Each day on bread and water he was fed,
And o'er his back the cat-o-nine-tails spread:
Full twenty lashes were the number set,
Unless the friar should from Heav'n first get
Permission to remit at times a part,
For charity was glowing in his heart.

We, must not doubt, he often offered prayers,
To ease the culprit's sufferings and cares.
The Angel likewise made a long discourse;
Said he, those vile suspicions were the source,
Of all thy sorrow, wretchedness, and pain:
Think'st thou such thoughts the clergy entertain?
A friar white!--too bad in ev'ry sense:
Ten strokes to one, if black, for such offence.
Repent, I say:---the other this desired,
Though scarcely he could tell what was required.

Meanwhile the prelate with the fav'rite dame,
No time to lose, made ev'ry hour the same.
The husband, with a sigh, was heard to say:
I wonder what my wife's about to-day?
About?---whate'er it be 'tis doubtless right;
Our friar, to console her, takes delight;
Thy business too is managed as before,
And anxious care bestowed upon thy store.

Has she as usual matters that demand
Attendance at the cloister to be scanned?---
No doubt was the reply, for having now
The whole affair upon her feeble brow,
Poor woman! be her wishes what they will,
She more assistance wants thy loss to fill.

Discourse like this no pleasure gave the soul:
To call him so seems best upon the whole,
Since he'd not pow'r like others here to feed:---
Mere earthly shadow for a time decreed.

A *month* was passed in fasting, pains, and prayer;
Some charity the friar made him share,
And now and then remission would direct;
The widow too he never would neglect,
But, all the consolation in his pow'r,
Bestowed upon her ev'ry leisure hour,
His tender cares unfruitful were not long;
Beyond his hopes the soil proved good and strong;
In short our Pater Abbas justly feared,
To make him father many signs appeared.

Since 'twere improper such a fact were known;
When proofs perhaps too clearly might be shown,
So many prayers were said and vigils kept,
At length the soul from purgatory crept,
So much reduced, and ev'ry way so thin
But little more he seemed than bones and skin.

A *thing* so strange filled numbers with surprise,
Who scarcely would believe their ears and eyes.
The friar passed for saint:---Feronde his fruit;
None durst presume to doubt nor to dispute;
A double miracle at once appeared
The dead's return: the lady's state revered.
With treble force Te Deum round was sung;
Sterility in marriage oft was rung,
And near the convent many offered prayers,

In hopes their fervent vows would gain them heirs.

The humble spouse and wife we now shall leave
Let none, howe'er, suppose that we conceive,
Each husband merits, as our soul, the same,
To cure the jealous fears his breast inflame.

ETEXT EDITOR'S BOOKMARKS:

Perhaps one half our bliss to chance we owe
The more of this I think, the less I know
Though expectations oft away have flown
When husbands some assistance seemed to lack

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