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Tales and Novels of J. de La Fontaine -- Volume 22

THE PACK-SADDLE

A Famous painter, jealous of his wife;
Whose charms he valued more than fame or life,
When going on a journey used his art,
To paint an *ass* upon a certain part,
(Umbilical, 'tis said) and like a seal:
Impressive token, nothing thence to steal.

A brother brush, enamoured of the dame;
Now took advantage, and declared his flame:
The Ass effaced, but God knows how 'twas done;
Another soon howe'er he had begun,
And finished well, upon the very spot;
In painting, few more praises ever got;
But want of recollection made him place
A saddle, where before he none could trace.

The husband, when returned, desired to look
At what he drew, when leave he lately took.
Yes, see my dear, the wily wife replied,
The Ass is witness, faithful I abide.
Zounds! said the painter, when he got a sight,---
What!---you'd persuade me ev'ry thing is right?
I wish the witness you display so well,
And him who saddled it, were both in Hell.

The ear-maker and the mould-Mender

When William went from home (a trader styled):
Six months his better half he left with child,
A simple, comely, modest, youthful dame,
Whose name was Alice; from Champaign she came.
Her neighbour Andrew visits now would pay;
With what intention, needless 'tis to say:
A master who but rarely spread his net,
But, first or last, with full success he met;
And cunning was the bird that 'scaped his snare;
Without surrendering a feather there.

Quiteraw was Alice; for his purpose fit;
Not overburdened with a store of wit;
Of this indeed she could not be accused,
And Cupid's wiles by her were never used;
Poor lady, all with her was honest part,

And naught she knew of stratagem or art.

Her husband then away, and she alone,
This neighbour came, and in a whining tone,
To her observed, when compliments were o'er:---
I'm all astonishment, and you deplore,
To find that neighbour William's gone from hence,
And left your child's completing in suspense,
Which now you bear within, and much I fear,
That when 'tis born you'll find it wants an ear.
Your looks sufficiently the fact proclaim,
For many instances I've known the same.
Good heav'ns! replied the lady in a fright;
What say you, pray?--the infant won't be right!
Shall I be mother to a one-eared child?
And know you no relief that's certain styled?
Oh yes, there is, rejoined the crafty knave,
From such mishap I can the baby save;
Yet solemnly I vow, for none but you
I'd undertake the toilsome job to do.
The ills of others, if I may be plain,
Except your husband's, never give me pain;
But him I'd serve for ever, while I've breath;
To do him good I'd e'en encounter death.
Now let us see, without more talk or fears,
If I know how to forge the bantling ears.
Remember, cried the wife, to make them like.
Leave that to me, said he, I'll justly strike.
Then he prepared for work; the dame gave way;
Not difficult she proved:---well pleased she lay;
Philosophy was never less required,
And Andrew's process much the fair admired,
Who, to his work extreme attention paid;
'Twas now a tendon; then a fold he made,
Or cartilage, of which he formed enough,
And all without complaining of the stuff.
To-morrow we will polish it, said he:
Then in perfection soon the whole will be;
And from repeating this so oft, you'll get
As perfect issue as was ever met.
I'm much obliged to you, the wife replied,
A friend is good in whom we may confide.

Nextday, when tardy Time had marked the hour;
That Andrew hoped again to use his pow'r,
He was not plunged in sleep, but briskly flew,
His purpose with the charmer to pursue.
Said he, all other things aside I've laid,

This ear to finish, and to lend you aid.
And I, the dame replied, was on the eve,
To send and beg you not the job to leave;
Above stairs let us go:---away they ran,
And quickly recommenced as they began.
The work so oft was smoothed, that Alice showed
Some scruples lest the ear he had bestowed
Should do too much, and to the wily wight,
She said, so little you the labour slight,
'Twere well if ears no more than two appear;
Of that, rejoined the other, never fear;
I've guarded thoroughly against defects,
Mistake like that shall ne'er your senses vex.

The ear howe'er was still in hand the same,
When from his journey home the husband came.
Saluted Alice, who with anxious look,
Exclaimed,---your work how finely you forsook,
And, but for neighbour Andrew's kindness here,
Our child would incomplete have been---an ear,
I could not let a thing remain like this,
And Andrew would not be to friends remiss,
But, worthy man, he left his thriving trade,
And for the babe a proper ear has made.

The husband, not conceiving how his wife,
Could be so weak and ignorant of life,
The circumstances made her fully tell,
Repeat them o'er and on each action dwell.
Enraged at length, a pistol by the bed
He seized and swore at once he'd shoot her dead.
The belle with tears replied, howe'er she'd swerved,
Such cruel treatment never she deserved.
Her innocence, and simple, gentle way,
At length appeared his frantick rage to lay.
What injury, continued she, is done?
The strictest scrutiny I would not shun;
Your goods and money, ev'ry thing is right;
And Andrew told me, nothing he would slight;
That you would find much more than you could want;
And this I hope to me you'll freely grant;
If falsehood I advance, my life I'll lose;
Your equity, I trust, will me excuse.

A little cooled, then William thus replied,
We'll say no more; you have been drawn aside;
What passed you fancied acting for the best,
And I'll consent to put the thing at rest;

To nothing good such altercations tend;
I've but a word: to that attention lend;
Contrive to-morrow that I here entrap
This fellow who has caused your sad mishap;
You'll utter not a word of what I've said;
Be secret or at once I'll strike you dead.
Adroitly you must act: for instance say;
I'm on a second journey gone away;
A message or a letter to him send,
Soliciting that he'll on you attend,
That something you have got to let him know;---
To come, no doubt, the rascal won't be slow;
Amuse him then with converse most absurd,
But of the *ear* remember,---not a word;
That's finished now, and nothing can require;
You'll carefully perform what I desire.
Poor innocent! the point she nicely hit;
Fear oft gives simpletons a sort of wit.

Thearch gallant arrived; the husband came
Ascended to the room where sat his dame;
Much noise he made, his coming to announce;
The lover, terrified, began to bounce;
Now here, now there, no shelter could he meet;
Between the bed and wall he put his feet,
And lay concealed, while William loudly knocked;
Fair Alice readily the door unlocked,
And, pointing with her hand, informed the spouse,
Where he might easily his rival rouse.

Thehusband ev'ry way was armed so well,
He four such men as Andrew could repel;
In quest of succour howsoe'er he went:
To kill him surely William never meant,
But only take an ear, or what the Turks,
Those savage beasts, cut off from Nature's works;
Which doubtless must be infinitely worse
Infernal practice and continual curse.
'Twas this he whispered should be Andrew's doom,
When with his easy wife he left the room;
She nothing durst reply: the door he shut,
And our gallant 'gan presently to strut,
Around and round, believing all was right,
And William unacquainted with his plight.

The latter having well the project weighed,
Now changed his plan, and other schemes surveyed;
Proposed within himself revenge to take,

With less parade:---less noise it then would make,
And better fruit the action would produce,
Than if he were apparently profuse.
Said he to Alice, go and seek his wife;
To her relate the whole that caused our strife;
Minutely all from first to last detail;
And then the better on her to prevail,
To hasten here, you'll hint that you have fears,
That Andrew risks the loss of---more than ears,
For I have punishment severe in view,
Which greatly she must wish I should not do;
But if an ear-maker, like this, is caught,
The worst of chastisement is always sought;
Such horrid things as scarcely can be said:
They make the hair to stand upon the head;
That he's upon the point of suff'ring straight,
And only for her presence things await;
That though she cannot all proceedings stay,
Perhaps she may some portion take away.
Go, bring her instantly, haste quickly, run;
And, if she comes, I'll pardon what's been done.

Withjoy to Andrew's house fair Alice went;
The wife to follow her appeared content;
Quite out of breath, alone she ran up stairs,
And, not perceiving him who shared her cares;
Believed he was imprisoned in a room;
And while with fear she trembled for his doom;
The master (having laid aside his arms)
Now came to compliment the lady's charms;
He gave the belle a chair, who looked most nice:---
Said he, ingratitude's the worst of vice;
To me your husband has been wondrous kind;
So many services has done I find,
That, ere you leave this house, I'd wish to make
A little return, and this you will partake.
When I was absent from my loving dear,
Obligingly he made her babe an ear.
The compliment of course I must admire;
Retaliation is what I desire,
And I've a thought:---your children all have got
The nose a little short, which is a blot;
A fault within the mould no doubt's the cause,
Which I can mend, and any other flaws.
The business now let's execute I pray,
On which the dame he took without delay,
And placed her near where Andrew hid his head,
Then 'gan to operate as he was led.

The, lady patiently his process bore,
And blessed her stars that Andrew's risk was o'er
That she had thus the dire return received,
And saved the man for whom her bosom grieved.
So much emotion William seemed to feel,
No grace he gave, but all performed with zeal;
Retaliated ev'ry way so well,
He measure gave for measure:---ell for ell.
How true the adage, that revenge is sweet!
The plan he followed clearly was discrete;
For since he wished his honour to repair:---
Of any better way I'm not aware.

The whole without a murmur Andrew viewed,
And thanked kind Heav'n that nothing worse ensued;
One ear most readily he would have lost,
Could he be certain that would pay the cost.
He thought 'twould lucky be, could he get out,
For all considered, better 'twere no doubt,
Howe'er ridiculous the thing appears,
To have a pair of horns than lose his ears.

ETEXT EDITOR'S BOOKMARKS:

Not overburdened with a store of wit

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