

St. Julian's Prayer

Jean de La Fontaine

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ST. JULIAN'S PRAYER

TO charms and philters, secret spells and prayers,
How many round attribute all their cares!
In these howe'er I never can believe,
And laugh at follies that so much deceive.
Yet with the beauteous FAIR, 'tis very true,
These WORDS, as SACRED VIRTUES, oft they view;
The spell and philter wonders work in love
Hearts melt with charms supposed from pow'rs above!

MY aim is now to have recourse to these,
And give a story that I trust will please,
In which Saint Julian's prayer, to Reynold D'Ast,
Produced a benefit, good fortune classed.
Had he neglected to repeat the charm,
Believed so thoroughly to guard from harm,
He would have found his cash accounts not right,
And passed assuredly a wretched night.

ONE day, to William's castle as he moved.
Three men, whose looks he very much approved,
And thought such honest fellows he had round,
Their like could nowhere be discovered round;
Without suspecting any thing was wrong,
The three, with complaisance and fluent tongue,
Saluted him in humble servile style,
And asked, (the minutes better to beguile.)
If they might bear him company the way;
The honour would be great, and no delay;
Besides, in travelling 'tis safer found,
And far more pleasant, when the party's round;
So many robbers through the province range,
(Continued they) 'tis wonderfully strange,
The prince should not these villains more restrain;
But there:—bad MEN will somewhere still remain.

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TO their proposal Reynold soon agreed,
And they resolved together to proceed.
When 'bout a league the travellers had moved,
Discussing freely, as they all approved,
The conversation turned on spells and prayer,
Their pow'r o'er worms of earth, or birds of air;
To charm the wolf, or guard from thunder's roar,
And many wonderful achievements more;
Besides the cures a prayer would oft produce;
To man and beast it proves of sov'reign use,
Far greater than from doctors e'er you'll view,
Who, with their Latin, make so much ado.

IN turn, the three pretended knowledge great,
And mystick facts affected to relate,
While Reynold silently attention paid
To all the words the honest fellows said:—
Possess you not, said one, some secret prayer
To bring you aid, when dangers round you stare?
To this our Reynold seriously replied,
Myself, on secret spells, I do not pride;
But still some WORDS I have that I repeat,
Each morn I travel, that I may not meet
A horrid lodging where I stop at night;
'Tis called SAINT JULIAN'S PRAYER that I recite,
And truly I have found, that when I fail
To say this prayer, I've reason to bewail.
But rarely I neglect so good a thing,
That ills averts, and may such blessings bring.
And have you clearly said it, sir, to day?
Cried one of those he met upon his way.
Yes, Reynold answered. Well, replied the Wight;
I'll wage, I'm better lodged than you to-night.

'T WAS very cold, and darkness 'gan to peep;
The place was distant yet, where they might sleep.
Perhaps, said Reynold, 'tis your usual care,
In travelling, to say, like me, this prayer.
Not so, the other cried, to you I vow,
Invoking saints is not my practice now;
But should I lose, thenceforth I'll them address.—
Said Reynold, readily I acquiesce;
My life I'd venture, should you to an inn,
For, in the town, I've neither friend nor kin,
And, if you like, we'll this exception make.
The other answered: Well, the bet I'll take;
Your horse and coat against my purse you wage,
And, sure of gaining, readily engage.
Our Wight might then have thoroughly perceived,
His horse was lost—no chance to be relieved.

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BESIDE a wood, as on the party moved,
The one, who betting had so much approved,
Now changed his tone, and in a surly way,
Exclaimed:—Alight—you'll find it time to pray;
Let me apprize you, distant is the place,
And much you'll need Saint Julian's special grace.
Come off, I tell you:—instantly they took
His purse, horse, clothes, and all their hands could hook
E'en seized his boots, and said with subtle sneer,
Your feet, by walking, won't the worse appear;
Then sought a different road by rapid flight,
And, presently the knaves were out of sight;
While Reynold still with stockings, drawers, and shirt,
But wet to skin, and covered o'er with dirt:
(The wind north-east in front—as cold as clay;)
In doleful dumps proceeded on his way,
And justly feared, that spite of faith and prayer,
He now should meet, at night, with wretched fare.

HOWEVER, some pleasing hopes he still had yet,
That, from his cloak-bag, he some clothes might get;
For, we should note, a servant he had brought,
Who in the neighbourhood a farrier sought.
To set a shoe upon his horse, and then
Should join his master on the road agen;
But that, as we shall find, was not the case,
And Reynold's dire misfortune thence we trace.
In fact, the fellow, worthless we'll suppose,
Had viewed from far what accidents arose,
Then turned aside, his safety to secure,
And left his master dangers to endure;
So steadily he kept upon the trot,
To Castle-William, ere 'twas night, he got,
And took the inn which had the most renown;
For fare and furniture within the town,
There waited Reynold's coming at his ease,
With fire and cheer that could not fail to please.
His master, up to neck in dirt and wet,
Had num'rous difficulties o'er to get;
And when the snow, in flakes obscured the air,
With piercing cold and winds, he felt despair;
Such ills he bore, that hanging might be thought
A bed of roses rather to be sought.

CHANCE so arranges ev'ry thing around
ALL good, or ALL that's bad is solely found;
When favours flow the numbers are so great,
That ev'ry wish upon us seems to wait;
But, if disposed, misfortunes to bestow;
No ills forgot: each poignant pang we know.
In proof, attend my friends, this very night,
The sad adventures that befell our wight,

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Who, Castle–William did not reach till late,
When they, an hour or more, had shut the gate.

AT length our traveller approached the wall,
And, somehow to the foot contrived to crawl;
A roofed projection fortune led him near,
That joined a house, and 'gan his heart to cheer.
Delighted with the change he now had got,
He placed himself upon the sheltered spot;
A lucky hit but seldom comes alone;
Some straw, by chance, was near the mansion thrown,
Which Reynold 'neath the jutting penthouse placed
There, God be praised, cried he, a bed I've traced.

MEANWHILE, the storm from ev'ry quarter pressed;
Our traveller was soon to death distressed;
With cold benumbed; by fell despair o'erspread;
He trembled, groaned:—teeth chattered in his head;
So loud his plaints, at length they reached the ear
Of one who dwelled within the mansion near:
A servant girl; her mistress brisk and gay:
A youthful widow, charming as the day;
The governor she privately received:
A noble marquis, who her cares relieved.
Oft interrupted when he sought the fair,
And wished at ease her company to share;
Desirous too of passing quite unknown,
A private door he presently was shown,
That opened to the fields, and gave access:
Through this he visited with such address,
That none within the town his commerce viewed,
Nor e'en a servant's eye his course pursued.
Surprise I feel, since pleasures of the mind,
Apparently were not for lords designed;
More pleased they seem when made the talk around
And soft amours divulged, delights are found.

IT happened that the night our Job arrived,
And, stretched on straw, misfortune just survived,
The lady thought her fond gallant to see,
And ev'ry moment hoped with him to be.
The supper ready, and the room prepared,
Each rarity was served: no trouble spared;
Baths, perfumes, wines, most exquisite, in place,
And ev'ry thing around displaying grace,
With Cupid's whole artillery in view,
Not his, who would with sighs alone pursue,
But that kind god who always favour shows,
The source of happiness, whence pleasure flows.

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MEANWHILE, however, while thus the lady sought.
By ev'ry charm to please, a note was brought;
A page conveyed it, by the marquis sent,
To say his coming business would prevent.
The disappointment doubtless was severe,
But consolation certainly was near;
It proved to Reynold wonderfully kind,
For scarcely had our traveller resigned,
And groaned aloud, but, tender as her dame,
In haste the confidential servant came,
And to the widow said:—I hear below
Some poor unfortunate o'ercome with woe;
'Tis piercing cold, and he perhaps will die
Some place, pray grant, where he to-night may lie.

MOST readily, replied the courteous fair,
We never use the garret:—lodge him there;
Some straw upon a couch will make a bed,
On which the wand'rer may repose his head;
Shut well the door, but first provide some meat,
And then permit him thither to retreat.

WITHOUT this timely help 'twas clear our wight
Had ne'er survived the horrors of the night;
The door was ope'd, and Reynold blessed the hand
That gave relief, and stopt life's ebbing sand.
His tale he told; got spirits, strength, and ease;
In person tall, well made, and formed to please,
He looked not like a novice in amour,
Though young, and seeking shelter at a door.
His want of dress and miserable state
Raised shame indeed, and showed distress was great.
Though LOVE be seen in Nature's pure array,
No dirt appears, however you survey.

THIS servant girl now hastened to the fair,
And ev'ry circumstance detailed with care.
See, said the lady, if within the press
There be not clothes to furnish him a dress;
My husband, now no more, must some have left;
Yes, said the girl, you're not of them bereft,
I recollect his wardrobe did abound;
And presently a handsome suit she found.

MEANWHILE the lady having learned the name
Of Reynold D'Ast, his quality and fame,
(Himself it seems particulars detailed,
While all around his suff'rings keen bewailed,)
Her orders gave, the bath for her prepared
Should now receive the man her care had spared.
Unasked, the stranger this attention got,

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And well perfumed ere clothes they would allot.
When dressed, he waited on the widow fair,
And paid his compliments with graceful air.

THE supper (for the marquis first designed)
At length was served with taste the most refined.
Our trav'ler glad, an appetite displayed;
The lady carefully her guest surveyed,
And anxious seemed to gratify his wish,
By helping what appeared his favourite dish.
Already, perhaps, she felt a Cupid's dart,
And in her throbbing bosom knew the smart;
Or sympathy, or pity for his woes,
Might touch the spring whence softest passion flows.
On ev'ry side assailed the youthful dame
Herself surrendered unto Cupid's flame.
Should I give way, said she, who'll tell the tale?
No risk is run if secrecy prevail.
The marquis merits to be played the trick;
He no excuse can have, unless he's sick.
One sin against another I may weigh,
And man for man will equally repay.

SO inexperienced Reynold was not found,
But that he saw how things were going round,
And, that Saint Julian's Prayer would yet succeed,
To give him all the lodging he might need.

THE supper o'er, our couple left alone,
What fairer field could truly have been shown?
The belle now wore a smart becoming dress,
Designed, in ev'ry view, to prepossess.
'Twas NEGLIGENCE, so requisite to please
And fascinate, with airy, careless ease,
According to the taste which I pursue,
That made her charms so exquisite to view.
No gaudy tinsel: all was flowing light;
Though not superb, yet pleasing to the sight;
A neckerchief, where much should be concealed,
Was made so narrow,—beauties half revealed;
Beneath is shade—what words can ne'er express;
And Reynold saw enough the rest to guess.
No more I say; the belle indeed was fair,
Possessed of youth and all engaging air;
Tall, nicely formed; each grace, that hearts could win;
Not much of fat, nor yet appeared too thin.
Emotion, at the view, who would not feel?
To soft delight what bosom proves of steel?
No marble bust, philosopher, nor stone,
But similar sensation would have shown.

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THE silence first was broken by the dame;
Who spoke so freely, Reynold bolder came.
He knew not well, howe'er, discourse to find;
To help him out the widow was inclined;
Said she, you much remind me of a friend,
Whose ev'ry wish I sought with mine to blend
My husband (rest his soul!) had just those eyes,
That look, air, mouth:--the very height and size:
You greatly honour me, the spark replied:
Your charms howe'er might well have been his pride;
I ne'er beheld such soft engaging mien:
On earth, like beauty never yet was seen.
But, in extremes to be, appears my lot;
Just now I felt quite chilled:--at present hot;
Pray tell me which is best? The fair looked down,
And humbly seemed to wave the proffered crown,
That she might still more flattery receive
Address not small, if we'll our eyes believe.
The swain now praised each charm within his view,
And whatsoe'er his wishes could pursue;
Where hope was strong, and expectation high,
She would not long be cruel and deny.
To give the praise, your due, the lover cried,
And note the beauties that my heart divide,
'Twould take an age, and I've a single night,
Which surely might be passed with more delight.
The widow smiled; enough it seems was said;
And Reynold shortened--what to nothing led.
In war or love, time equally is dear;
More happy than our spark none could appear;
No point but what he gained; the smiling dame
Resistance only showed to raise the flame;
Nor more nor less; each belle like art has got,
And practises at will, or maid or not.

BUT truly, it was never my intent
To count each favour she to Reynold lent;
Particulars exact of ev'ry kiss,
And all the preludes incident to bliss;
Both, doubtless, knew more ways than one to please;
And sought, with anxious care, love's charms to seize.
On recollection of the wretched state
In which our traveller had moved of late,
Some favour was bestowed:--there, cried the dame,
Is something to repay the road you came;
This for the cold; that fear; there thieves disgraced;
So, one by one, the whole was soon effaced.
In this way to be paid for ills we meet,
Who'd not be satisfied with boons so sweet?
And we conclude, that Reynold on the spot,
Love's am'rous recompense of pleasures got.

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Now easy conversation was renewed;
Then mutual kisses; ev'ry sweet pursued.
'Twas time for bed; howe'er, the widow fair
Determined that her own the spark should share;
'Twas prudent, doubtless; like a lady wise;
Gallantly done: one room would well suffice.

WHAT further passed betwixt the pair that night;
I cannot say, though we'll believe 'twas right;
Between the clothes when laid, and unrestrained,
Most clearly, Reynold all his wishes gained.
There he was recompensed for ev'ry grief;
The lady too, received so much relief,
That she desired his company again,
But still these visits secrets should remain;
'Twas requisite the governor to see;
Howe'er the dame delighted seemed to be,
And not content with what she had bestowed,
A purse well stored with gold to Reynold showed:
He took no more, indeed, than what would pay
The bare expenses on his homeward way;
Then sought the street that to the tavern led,
Where still his lazy servant was in bed;
The fellow mauled; then changed throughout his dress;
Since to the cloak-bag now he had access.
His fortune to complete, that day they took
The very wretches that he wished to hook.
He to the judge repaired with ev'ry haste;
In such a case you never time should waste;
For, once the things are into court received,
'Tis like the lion's den: naught e'er 's retrieved;
Their hands are closed, not 'gainst what may be brought
But to secure what from their grasp is sought.
Who seeks redress by law, facts oft have shown,
May bless his stars if he but keep his own.

THE trial o'er, a gallows treble-faced,
Was, for their swinging, in the market placed,
ONE of the three harangued the mob around,
(His speech was for the others also found)
Then, 'bout their necks the halters being tied,
Repentant and confessed the culprits died.

WHO, after this, will doubt the pow'r of prayers?
These silly knaves had banished all their cares;
And when at ease they thought to skip and prance,
Were seized and quickly taught another dance.
On t'other hand, where dire distress prevailed,
And death, in various ways, our spark assailed,
A beauty suddenly his senses charmed,
Who might a prelate's bosom have alarmed.

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So truly fortunate, indeed, his lot,
Again his money, baggage, horse he got;
And, thank Saint Julian, howsoever tossed,
He passed a, blissful night that nothing cost.