

The Amorous Courtesan and Nicaise

Jean de La Fontaine

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THE AMOROUS COURTESAN

DAN CUPID, though the god of soft amour,
In ev'ry age works miracles a store;
Can Catos change to male coquets at ease;
And fools make oracles whene'er he please;
Turn wolves to sheep, and ev'ry thing so well,
That naught remains the former shape to tell:
Remember, Hercules, with wond'rous pow'r,
And Polyphemus, who would men devour:
The one upon a rock himself would fling,
And to the winds his am'rous ditties sing;
To cut his beard a nymph could him inspire;
And, in the water, he'd his face admire.
His club the other to a spindle changed,
To please the belle with whom he often ranged.

A hundred instances the fact attest,
But sage Boccace has one, it is confessed,
Which seems to me, howe'er we search around,
To be a sample, rarely to be found.
'Tis Chimon that I mean, a savage youth,
Well formed in person, but the rest uncouth,
A bear in mind, but Cupid much can do,
LOVE licked the cub, and decent soon he grew.
A fine gallant at length the lad appeared;
From whence the change? Fine eyes his bosom cheered
The piercing rays no sooner reached his sight,
But all the savage took at once to flight;
He felt the tender flame; polite became;
You'll find howe'er, our tale is not the same.

I MEAN to state how once an easy fair,
Who oft amused the youth devoid of care,

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A tender flame within her heart retained,
Though haughty, singular, and unrestrained.
Not easy 'twas her favours to procure;
Rome was the place where dwelled this belle impure;
The mitre and the cross with her were naught;
Though at her feet, she'd give them not a thought;
And those who were not of the highest class,
No moments were allowed with her to pass.
A member of the conclave, first in rank,
To be her slave, she'd scarcely deign to thank;
Unless a cardinal's gay nephew came,
And then, perhaps, she'd listen to his flame;
The pope himself, had he perceived her charms,
Would not have been too good to grace her arms.
Her pride appeared in clothes as well as air,
And on her sparkled gold and jewels rare;
In all the elegance of dress arrayed,
Embroidery and lace, her taste displayed.

THE god of soft amour beheld her aim;
And sought at once her haughty soul to tame;
A Roman gentleman, of finest form,
Soon in her bosom raised a furious storm;
Camillus was the name this youth had got;
The nymph's was Constance, that LOVE'S arrow shot:
Though he was mild, good humoured, and serene,
No sooner Constance had his person seen,
And in her breast received the urchin's dart,
Than throbs, and trembling fears o'erwhelmed her heart.
The flame she durst declare no other way,
Than by those sighs, which feelings oft betray.
Till then, nor shame nor aught could her retain;
Now all was changed: her bashfulness was plain.
As none, howe'er, could think the subtle flame
Would lie concealed with such a haughty dame,
Camillus nothing of the kind supposed.
Though she incessantly by looks disclosed,
That something unrevealed disturbed the soul,
And o'er her mind had absolute control.
Whatever presents Constance might receive,
Still pensive sighs her breast appeared to heave:
Her tints of beauty too, began to fail,
And o'er the rose, the lily to prevail.

ONE night Camillus had a party met,
Of youthful beaux and belles, a charming set,
And, 'mong the rest, fair Constance was a guest;
The evening passed in jollity and jest;
For few to holy converse seemed inclined,
And none for Methodists appeared designed:
Not one, but Constance, deaf to wit was found,

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And, on her, raillery went briskly round.

THE supper o'er the company withdrew,
But Constance suddenly was lost to view;
Beside a certain bed she took her seat,
Where no one ever dreamed she would retreat,
And all supposed, that ill, or spirits weak,
She home had run, or something wished to seek.

THE company retired, Camillus said,
He meant to write before he went to bed,
And told his valet he might go to rest
A lucky circumstance, it is confessed.
Thus left alone, and as the belle desired;
Who, from her soul, the spark so much admired;
Yet knew not how the subject to disclose,
Or, in what way her wishes to propose;
At length, with trembling accents, she revealed;
The flame she longer could not keep concealed.

EXCEEDINGLY surprised Camillus seemed,
And scarcely could believe but what he dreamed;
Why, hey! said he, good lady, is it thus,
With favoured friends, you doubtful points discuss?
He made her sit, and then his seat regained
Who would have thought, cried he, you here remained;
Now who this hiding place to you could tell?
'Twas LOVE, fond LOVE! replied the beauteous belle;
And straight a blush her lovely cheek suffused,
So rare with those to Cyprian revels used;
For Venus's vot'ries, to pranks resigned,
Another way, to get a colour, find.

CAMILLUS, truly, some suspicions had,
That he was loved, though neither fool nor mad;
Nor such a novice in the Paphian scene,
But what he could at once some notions glean:
More certain tokens, howsoe'er, to get,
And set the lady's feelings on the fret,
By trying if the gloom that o'er her reigned
Was only sly pretence, he coldness feigned.

SHE often sighed as if her heart would break;
At length love's piercing anguish made her speak:
What you will say, cried she, I cannot guess,
To see me thus a fervent flame confess.
The very thought my face with crimson dyes;
My way of life no shield for this supplies;
The moment pure affection 's in the soul,
No longer wanton freaks the mind control.

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MY conduct to excuse, what can I say?
O could my former life be done away,
And in your recollection naught remain,
But what might virtuous constancy maintain
At all event, my frankness overlook,
Too well I see, the fatal path I took
Has such displeasure to your breast conveyed,
My zeal will rather hurt than give me aid;
But hurt or not, I'll idolize you still:
Beat, drive away, condemn me as you will;
Or worse, if you the torment can contrive
I'm your's alone, Camillus, while alive.

TO this harangue the wary youth replied
In truth, fair lady, I could ne'er decide,
To criticise what others round may do.—
'Tis not the line I'd willingly pursue;
And I will freely say, that your discourse
Has much surprised me, though 'tis void of force.
To you it surely never can belong,
To say variety in love is wrong;
Besides, your sex, and decency, 'tis clear,
To ev'ry disadvantage you appear.
What use this eloquence, and what your aim?
Such charms alone as your's could me inflame;
Their pow'r is great, but fully I declare,
I do not like advances from the FAIR.

To Constance this a thunder-clap appeared;
Howe'er, she in her purpose persevered.
Said she, this treatment doubtless I deserve;
But still, from truth my tongue can never swerve,
And if I may presume my thoughts to speak,
The plan which I've pursued your love to seek,
Had never proved injurious to my cause,
If still my beauty merited applause.
From what you've said, and what your looks express
To please your sight, no charms I now possess.
Whence comes this change? to you I will refer;
Till now I was admired, you must aver;
And ev'ry one my person highly praised;
These precious gifts, that admiration raised,
Alas! are fled, and since I felt LOVE'S flame,
Experience whispers, I'm no more the same;
No longer have charms that please your eyes:
How happy I should feel if they'd suffice!

THE suppliant belle now hoped to be allowed
One half his bed to whom her sighs were vowed;
But terror closed her lips; she nothing said,
Though oft her eyes were to his pillow led.

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To be confused the wily stripling feigned,
And like a statue for a time remained.

AT length he said: I know not what to do;
Undressing, by myself, I can't pursue.
Shall I your valet call? rejoined the fair;
On no account, said he, with looks of care;
I would not have you in my chamber seen,
Nor thought that here, by night, a girl had been,
Your caution is enough, the belle replied:
Myself between the wall and bed I'll hide,
'Twill what you fear prevent, and ills avoid;
But bolt the door: you'll then be not annoyed;
Let no one come; for once I'll do my best,
And as your valet act till you're undressed;
To am'rous Constance this permission grant
The honour would her throbbing breast enchant.

THE youth to her proposal gave consent,
And Constance instantly to business went;
The means she used to take his clothes were such,
That scarcely once his person felt her touch;
She stopt not there, but even freely chose
To take from off his feet, both shoes and hose
What, say you: With her hands did Constance this?
Pray tell me what you see therein amiss?
I wish sincerely I could do the same,
With one for whom I feel a tender flame.

BETWEEN the clothes in haste Camillus flew,
Without inviting Constance to pursue.
She thought at first he meant to try her love;
But raillery, this conduct was above.
His aim, howe'er more fully to unfold,
She presently observed: 'Tis very cold;
Where shall I sleep? said she:

CAMILLUS

Just where you please;

CONSTANCE

What, on this chair?

CAMILLUS

No, no, be more at ease;
Come into bed.

CONSTANCE

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Unlace me then, I pray.

CAMILLUS

I cannot: I'm undressed, and cold as clay:
Unlace yourself.

Just then the belle perceived
A poinard, which anxiety relieved;
She drew it from the scabbard, cut her lace,
And many parts of dress designed for grace,
The works of months, embroidery and flow'r
Now perished in the sixtieth of an hour,
Without regret, or seeming to lament,
What more than life will of the sex content.

YE dames of Britain, Germany, or France,
Would you have done as much, through complaisance?
You would not, I'm convinced: the thing is clear;
But doubtless this, at Rome, must fine appear.

POOR Constance softly to the bed approached,
No longer now supposing she encroached,
And trusting that, no stratagem again
Would be contrived to give her bosom pain.
Camillus said: my sentiments I'll speak;
Dissimulation I will never seek;
She who can proffer what should be denied,
Shall never be admitted by my side;
But if the place your approbation meet,
I won't refuse your lying at my feet.

FAIR Constance such reproof could not withstand,
'Twas well the poinard was not in her hand;
Her bosom so severely felt the smart,
She would have plunged the dagger through her heart:
But Hope, sweet Hope! still fluttered to her view;
And young Camillus pretty well she knew;
Howe'er with such severity he spoke,
That e'en the mildest saint it would provoke;
Yet, in a swain so easy, gentle, kind,
'Twas strange so little lenity to find.

SHE placed herself, as order'd, cross the bed,
And at his feet at length reclined her head;
A kiss on them she ventured to impress,
But not too roughly, lest she should transgress:
We may conjecture if he were at ease;
What victory! to see her stoop to please;
A beauty so renowned for charms and pride,
'Twould take a week, to note each trait described;

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No other fault than paleness he could trace,
Which gave her (causes known) still higher grace.

CAMILLUS stretched his legs, and on her breast
Familiarly allowed his feet to rest;
A cushion made of what so fair appeared,
That envy might from ivory be feared;
Then seemed as if to Morpheus he inclined,
And on the pillow sullenly resigned.

At last the sighs with which her bosom heaved,
Gave vent to floods of tears that much relieved;
This was the end: Camillus silence broke,
And to tell the belle with pleasing accents spoke
I'm satisfied, said he, your love is pure;
Come hither charming girl and be secure.
She t'wards him moved; Camillus near her slid;
Could you, cried he, believe that what I did,
Was seriously the dictates of my soul,
To act the brute and ev'ry way control?
No, no, sweet fair, you know me not 'tis plain:
I truly wish your fondest love to gain;
Your heart I've probed, 'tis all that I desire;
Mid joys I swim; my bosom feels the fire.
Your rigour now in turn you may display;
It is but fair: be bountiful I pray;
Myself from hence your lover I declare;
No woman merits more my bed to share,
Whatever rank, or beauty, sense or life,
You equally deserve to be my wife;
Your husband I'll become; forget the past;
Unpleasant recollections should not last.
Yet there's one thing which much I wish to speak
The marriage must be secret that we seek;
There's no occasion reasons to disclose;
What I have said I trust will you dispose,
To act as I desire: you'll find it best:
A wedding 's like amours while unconfessed;
One THEN both husband and gallant appears,
And ev'ry wily act the bosom cheers.
Till we, continued he, a priest can find,
Are you, to trust my promises inclined?
You safely may; he'll to his word adhere:
His heart is honest, and his tongue sincere.

TO this fair Constance answered not a word,
Which showed, with him, her sentiments concurred.
The spark, no novice in the dumb assent,
Received her silence fully as 'twas meant;
The rest involved in myst'ry deep remains;
Thus Constance was requitted for her pains.

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YE Cyprian nymphs to profit turn my tale;
The god of LOVE, within his vot'ries pale,
Has many, if their sentiments were known,
That I'd prefer for Hymen's joys alone.
My wife, not always to the spindle true,
Will many things in life, not seem to view;
By Constance and her conduct you may see
How, with this theory, her acts agree;
She proved the truth of what I here advance,
And reaped the fruits produced by complaisance,
A horde of nuns I know who, ev'ry night,
Would such adventures wage with fond delight.

PERHAPS it will not be with ease believed,
That Constance from Camillus now received,
A proof of LOVE'S enchanting balmy sweet,
A proof perhaps you'll think her used to meet;
But ne'er till then she tasted pleasures pure;
Her former life no blisses could secure.
You ask the cause, and signs of doubt betray:
Who TRULY loves, the same will ever say.

NICAISE

TO serve the shop as 'prentice was the lot;
Of one who had the name of Nicaise got;
A lad quite ignorant beyond his trade,
And what arithmetick might lend him aid;
A perfect novice in the wily art,
That in amours is used to win the heart.
Good tradesmen formerly were late to learn
The tricks that soon in friars we discern;
They ne'er were known those lessons to begin,
Till more than down appeared upon the chin.
But now—a—days, in practice, 'tis confessed,
These shopkeepers are knowing as the best.

OUR lad of ancient date was less advanced;
At scenes of love his eyes had never glanced;
Be that as 'twill, he now was in the way,
And naught but want of wit produced delay:
A belle indeed had on him set her heart
His master's daughter felt LOVE'S poignant smart;
A girl of most engaging mind and mien,
And always steady in her conduct seen.
Sincerity of soul or humour free,
Or whether with her taste it might agree,
A fool 'twas clear presided o'er her soul,
And all her thoughts and actions felt control.
Some bold gallant would p'erhaps inform her plain,

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She ever kept wild Folly in her train,
And nothing say to me who tales relate;
But oft on reason such proceedings wait.
If you a goddess love, advance she'll make;
Our belle the same advantages would take.
Her fortune, wit, and charm, attention drew,
And many sparks would anxiously pursue;
How happy he who should her heart obtain,
And Hymen prove he had not sighed in vain!
But she had promised, to the modest youth,
Who first was named, her confidence and truth;
The little god of pleasing soft desire
With full compliance with his whims require.

The belle was pleased the 'prentice to prefer:
A handsome lad with truth we may aver,
Quite young, well made, with fascinating eye:
Such charms are ne'er despised we may rely,
But treasures thought, no FAIR will e'er neglect;
Whate'er her senses say, she'll these respect.
For one that LOVE lays hold of by the soul,
A thousand by the eyes receive control.

THIS sprightly girl with soft endearing ease,
Exerted ev'ry care the lad to please,
To his regards she never shy appeared;
Now pinched his arm, then smiled and often leered;
Her hand across his eyes would sometimes put;
At others try to step upon his foot.
To this he nothing offered in reply,
Though oft his throbbing bosom heaved a sigh.

So many tender scenes, at length we find,
Produced the explanation LOVE designed;
The youthful couple, we may well believe,
Would from each other mutual vows receive;
They neither promises nor kisses spared,
Incalculable were the numbers shared;
If he had tried to keep exact account,
He soon had been bewildered with th' amount;
To such infinity it clearly ran,
Mistakes would rise if he pursued the plan;
A ceremony solely was required,
Which prudent girls have always much admired,
Yet this to wait gave pain and made her grieve;
From you, said she, the boon I would receive;
Or while I live the rapture never know,
That Hymen at his altar can bestow;
To you I promise, by the pow'rs divine,
My hand and heart I truly will resign.
Howe'er I'll freely say, should Hymen fail

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To make me your's and wishes not prevail,
You must not fancy I'll become a nun,
Though much I hope to act as I've begun;
To marry you would please me to the soul;
But how can WE the ruling pow'rs control?
Too much I'm confident you love my fame,
To aim at what might bring me soon to shame:
In wedlock I've been asked by that and this;
My father thinks these offers not amiss;
But, Nicaise, I'll allow you still to hope,
That if with others I'm obliged to cope,
No matter whether counsellor or judge.
Since clearly ev'ry thing to such I grudge,
The marriage eve, or morn, or day, or hour,
To you I'll give the first enchanting flow'r.

THE lad most gratefully his thanks returned;
His breast with ev'ry soft emotion burned.
Within a week, to this sweet charmer came,
A rich young squire, who soon declared his flame;
On which she said to Nicaise: he will do;
This spark will easily let matters through;
And as the belle was confident of that,
She gave consent and listened to his chat.
Soon all was settled and arranged the day,
When marriage they no longer would delay,
You'll fully notice this: I think I view
The thoughts which move around and you pursue;
'Twas doubtless clear, whatever bliss in store,
The lady was betrothed, and nothing more.

THOUGH all was fixed a week before the day,
Yet fearing accidents might things delay,
Or even break the treaty ere complete,
She would not our apprentice fully greet,
Till on the very morn she gave her hand,
Lest chance defeated what was nicely planned.

HOWE'ER the belle was to the altar led,
A virgin still, and doomed the squire to wed,
Who, quite impatient, consummation sought,
As soon as he the charmer back had brought;
But she solicited the day apart,
And this obtained, alone by prayers and art.
'Twas early morn, and 'stead of bed she dressed,
In ev'ry thing a queen had thought the best;
With diamonds, pearls, and various jewels rare;
Her husband riches had, she was aware,
Which raised her into rank that dress required,
And all her neighbours envied and admired.
Her lover, to secure the promised bliss,

The Amorous Courtesan and Nicaise

An hour's indulgence gained to take a kiss.
A bow'r within a garden was the spot,
Which, for their private meeting, they had got.
A confidant had been employed around,
To watch if any one were lurking found.

THE lady was the first who thither came;
To get a nosegay was, she said, her aim;
And Nicaise presently her steps pursued,
Who, when the turf within the bow'r he viewed,
Exclaimed, oh la! how wet it is my dear!
Your handsome clothes will be spoiled I fear!
A carpet let me instantly provide?
Deuce take the clothes! the fair with anger cried;
Ne'er think of that: I'll say I had a fall;
Such accident a loss I would not call,
When Time so clearly on the wing appears,
'Tis right to banish scruples, cares, and fears;
Nor think of clothes nor dress, however fine,
But those to dirt or flames at once resign;
Far better this than precious time to waste,
Since frequently in minutes bliss we taste;
A quarter of an hour we now should prize,
The place no doubt will very well suffice;
With you it rests such moments to employ,
And mutually our bosoms fill with joy.
I scarcely ought to say what now I speak,
But anxiously your happiness I seek.

INDEED, the anxious, tender youth replied,
To save such costly clothes we should decide;
I'll run at once, and presently be here;
Two minutes will suffice I'm very clear.
AWAY the silly lad with ardour flew,
And left no time objections to renew.
His wondrous folly cured the charming dame;
Whose soul so much disdained her recent flame;
That instantly her heart resumed its place,
Which had too long been loaded with disgrace:
Go, prince of fools, she to herself exclaimed,
For ever, of thy conduct, be ashamed;
To lose thee surely I can ne'er regret,
Impossible a worse I could have met.
I've now considered, and 'tis very plain,
Thou merit'st not such favours to obtain;
From hence I swear, by ev'ry thing above;
My husband shall alone possess my love;
And least I might be tempted to betray,
To him I'll instantly the boon convey,
Which Nicaise might have easily received;
Thank Heav'n my breast from folly is relieved.

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This said, by disappointment rendered sour,
The beauteous bride in anger left the bow'r.
Soon with the carpet simple Nicaise came,
And found that things no longer were the same.

THE lucky hour, ye suitors learn I pray,
Is not each time the clock strikes through the day,
In Cupid's alphabet I think I've read,
Old Time, by lovers, likes not to be led;
And since so closely he pursues his plan,
'Tis right to seize him, often as you can.
Delays are dangerous, in love or war,
And Nicaise is a proof they fortune mar.

QUITE out of breath with having quickly run;
Delighted too that he so soon had done,
The youth returned most anxious to employ,
The carpet for his mistress to enjoy,
But she alas! with rage upon her brow,
Had left the spot, he knew not why nor how;
And to her company returned in haste
The flame extinguished that her mind disgraced.
Perhaps she went the jewel to bestow,
Upon her spouse, whose breast with joy would glow:
What jewel pray? The one that ev'ry maid
Pretends to have, whatever tricks she's played.
This I believe; but I'll no dangers run;
To burn my fingers I've not yet begun;
Yet I allow, howe'er, in such a case,
The girl, who fibs, therein no sin can trace.

OUR belle who, thanks to Nicaise, yet retained;
In spite of self, the flow'r he might have gained,
Was grumbling still, when he the lady met
Why, how is this, cried he, did you forget,
That for this carpet I had gone away?
When spread, how nicely on it we might play!
You'd soon to woman change the silly maid;
Come, let's return, and not the bliss evade;
No fear of dirt nor spoiling of your dress;
And then my love I fully will express.

NOT so, replied the disappointed dame,
We'll put it off: perhaps 'twould hurt your frame
Your health I value, and I would advise,
To be at ease, take breath, and prudence prize;
Apprentice in a shop you now are bound
Next 'prentice go to some gallant around;
You'll not so soon his pleasing art require,
Nor to your tutorage can I now aspire.
Friend Nicaise take some neighb'ring servant maid,

The Amorous Courtesan and Nicaise

You're quite a master in the shopping trade;
Stuffs you can sell, and ask the highest price;
And to advantage turn things in a trice.
But opportunity you can't discern;
To know its value, prithee go and learn.