

The Progress of Wit and Other

Jean de La Fontaine

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THE PROGRESS OF WIT

DIVERTING in extreme there is a play,
Which oft resumes its fascinating sway;
Delights the sex, or ugly, fair, or sour;
By night or day: 'tis sweet at any hour.
The frolick, ev'ry where is known to fame;
Conjecture if you can, and tells its name.

THIS play's chief charm to husbands is unknown;
'Tis with the lover it excels alone;
No lookers-on, as umpires, are required;
No quarrels rise, though each appears inspired;
All seem delighted with the pleasing game:
Conjecture if you can, and tell its name.

BE this as 'twill, and called whate'er it may;
No longer trifling with it I shall stay,
But now disclose a method to transmit
(As oft we find) to ninnies sense and wit.
Till Alice got instruction in this school,
She was regarded as a silly fool,
Her exercise appeared to spin and sew:
Not hers indeed, the hands alone would go;
For sense or wit had in it no concern;
Whate'er the foolish girl had got to learn,
No part therein could ever take the mind;
Her doll, for thought, was just as well designed.
The mother would, a hundred times a day,
Abuse the stupid maid, and to her say
Go wretched lump and try some wit to gain.

THE girl, quite overcome with shame and pain;
Her neighbours asked to point her out the spot,

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Where useful wit by purchase might be got.
The simple question laughter raised around;
At length they told her, that it might be found
With father Bonadventure, who'd a stock,
Which he at times disposed of to his flock.

AWAY in haste she to the cloister went,
To see the friar she was quite intent,
Though trembling lest she might disturb his ease;
And one of his high character displease.
The girl exclaimed, as on she moved, Will he
Such presents willingly bestow on me,
Whose age, as yet, has scarcely reached fifteen?
With such can I be worthy to be seen?
Her innocence much added to her charms,
The gentle wily god of soft alarms
Had not a youthful maiden in his book,
That carried more temptation in her look.

MOST rev'rend sir, said she, by friends I'm told,
That in this convent wit is often sold,
Will you allow me some on trust to take?
My treasure won't afford that much I stake;
I can return if more I should require;
Howe'er, you'll take this pledge I much desire;
On which she tried to give the monk a ring,
That to her finger firmly seemed to cling.

BUT when the friar saw the girl's design,
He cried, good maid, the pledge we will decline,
And what is wished, provide for you the same;
'Tis merchandize, and whatsoe'er its fame,
To some 'tis freely giv'n: to others taught
If not too dear, oft better when 'tis bought.
Come in and boldly follow where I lead;
None round can see: you've nothing here to heed;
They're all at prayers; the porter's at my will;
The very walls, of prudence have their fill.

SHE entered as the holy monk desired,
And they together to his cell retired.
The friar on the bed this maiden threw;
A kiss would take: she from him rather drew;
And said. To give one wit is this the way?
Yes, answered he, and round her 'gan to play:
Upon her bosom then he put his hand
What now, said she, am I to understand?
Is this the way? Said he, 'tis so decreed;
Then patiently she let the monk proceed,
Who followed up, from point to point, his aim;
And wit, by easy steps, advancing came,

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Till its progression with her was complete;
Then Alice laughed, success appeared so sweet.

A SECOND dose the friar soon bestowed,
And e'en a third, so fast his bounty flowed.
Well, said the monk, pray how d'ye find the play?
The girl replied: wit will not long delay;
'Twill soon arrive; but then I fear its flight:
I'm half afraid 'twill leave me ere 'tis night.
We'll see, rejoined the priest, that naught you lose;
But other secrets oftentimes we use.
Seek not those the smiling girl replied
With this most perfectly I'm satisfied;
Then be it so, said he, we'll recommence,
Nor longer keep the business in suspense,
But to the utmost length at once advance;
For this fair Alice showed much complaisance:
The secret by the friar was renewed;
Much pleasure in it Bonadventure viewed;
The belle a courtesy dropt, and then retired,
Reflecting on the wit she had acquired;
Reflecting, do you say? To think inclined?
Yes, even more: she sought excuse to find,
Not doubting that she should be forced to say,
Some cause for keeping her so long away.

TWO days had passed, when came a youthful friend;
Fair Nancy with her often would unbend;
Howe'er, so very thoughtful Alice seemed,
That Nancy (who was penetrating deemed)
Was well convinced whatever Alice sought,
So very absent she was not for naught.
In questioning she managed with such art,
That soon she learned what Alice could impart
To listen she was thoroughly disposed,
While t'other ev'ry circumstance disclosed,
From first to last, each point and mystick hit,
And e'en the largeness of the friar's wit,
The repetitions, and the wondrous skill
With which he managed ev'ry thing at will.

BUT now, cried Alice, favour me I pray,
And tell at once, without reserve, the way
That you obtained such wit as you possess,
And all particulars to me confess.

IF I, said Nancy, must avow the truth,
Your brother Alan was the bounteous youth,
Who me obliged therewith, and freely taught,
What from the holy friar you'd have bought.
My brother Alan! Alan! Alice cried;

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He ne'er with any was himself supplied;
I'm all surprise; he's thought a heavy clot,
How could he give what he had never got?

FOOL! said the other, little thou can'st know;
For once, to me some information owe;
In such a case much skill is not required,
And Alan freely gave what I desired.
If me thou disbeliev'st, thy mother ask;
She thoroughly can undertake the task.

ON such a point we readily should say,
Long live the fools who wit so well display!

THE SICK ABBESS

EXAMPLE often proves of sov'reign use;
At other times it cherishes abuse;
'Tis not my purpose, howsoe'er, to tell
Which of the two I fancy to excel.
Some will conceive the Abbess acted right,
While others think her conduct very light
Be that as 'twill, her actions right or wrong,
I'll freely give a license to my tongue,
Or pen, at all events, and clearly show,
By what some nuns were led to undergo,
That flocks are equally of flesh and blood,
And, if one passes, hundreds stem the flood,
To follow up the course the first has run,
And imitate what t'other has begun.
When Agnes passed, another sister came,
And ev'ry nun desired to do the same;
At length the guardian of the flock appeared,
And likewise passed, though much at first she feared.
The tale is this, we purpose to relate;
And full particulars we now will state.

AN Abbess once a certain illness had,
Chlorosis named, which oft proves very bad,
Destroys the rose that decorates the cheek,
And renders females languid, pale, and weak.
Our lady's face was like a saint's in Lent:
Quite wan, though otherwise it marked content.
The faculty, consulted on her case,
And who the dire disorder's source would trace,
At length pronounced slow fever must succeed,
And death inevitably be decreed,
Unless; but this unless is very strange
Unless indeed she some way could arrange;
To gratify her wish, which seemed to vex,

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And converse be allowed with t'other sex:
Hippocrates, howe'er, more plainly speaks,
No circumlocutory phrase he seeks.

O JESUS! quite abashed the Abbess cried;
What is it? fy! a man would you provide?
Yes, they rejoined, 'tis clearly what you want,
And you will die without a brisk gallant;
One truly able will alone suffice;
And, if not such, take two we would advise.
This still was worse, though, if we rightly guess,
'Twas by her wished, durst she the truth confess.
But how the sisterhood would see her take
Such remedies and no objection make?
Shame often causes injury and pain;
And ills concealed bring others in their train.

SAID sister Agnes, Madam, take their word;
A remedy like this would be absurd,
If, like old death, it had a haggard look,
And you designed to get by hook or crook.
A hundred secrets you retain at ease;
Can one so greatly shock and you displease?
You talk at random, Agnes, she replied;
Now, would you for the remedy decide,
Upon your word, if you were in my place?
Yes, madam, said the nun, and think it grace;
Still more I'd do, if necessary thought;
Your health, by me, would ev'ry way be sought,
And, if required by you to suffer this,
Not one around would less appear remiss;
Sincere affection for you I have shown,
And my regard I'll ever proudly own.

A THOUSAND thanks the Abbess gave her friend;
The doctors said: no use for them to send;
Throughout the convent sad distress appeared;
When Agnes, who to sage advice adhered,
And was not thought the weakest head around,
A kinder soul perhaps could not be found,
Said to the sisterhood, What now retains
Our worthy Abbess, and her will enchains,
Is nothing but the shame of pow'rs divine,
Or else, to what's prescribed she would resign.
Through charity will no one take the lead,
And, by example, get her to proceed?

THE counsel was by ev'ry one approved,
And commendation through the circle moved.

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IN this design not one, nor grave, nor old,
Nor young, nor prioress, at all seemed cold;
Notes flew around, and friends of worth and taste,
The black, the fair, the brown, appeared in haste;
The number was not small, our records say,
Not (what might be) appearance of delay,
But all most anxious seemed the road to show,
And what the Abbess feared, at once to know;
None more sincerely 'mong the nuns desired,
That shame should not prevent what was required.
Nor that the Abbess should, within her soul,
Retain what might injuriously control.

NO sooner one among the flock had made
The step, of which the Abbess was afraid,
But other sisters followed in the train:
Not one behind consented to remain;
Each forward pressed, in dread to be the last;
At length, from prejudice the Abbess passed;
To such examples she at last gave way,
And, to a youth, no longer offered nay.

THE operation o'er, her lily face
Resumed the rose, and ev'ry other grace.
O remedy divine, prescription blessed!
Thy friendly aid to numbers stands confessed;
The friends of thousands, friend of nature too;
The friend of all, except where honour 's due.
This point of honour is another ill,
In which the faculty confess no skill.

WHAT ills in life! what mis'ries dire around,
While remedies so easy may be found!

THE TRUCKERS

THE change of food enjoyment is to man;
In this, t'include the woman is my plan.
I cannot guess why Rome will not allow
Exchange in wedlock, and its leave avow;
Not ev'ry time such wishes might arise,
But, once in life at least, 'twere not unwise;
Perhaps one day we may the boon obtain;
Amen, I say: my sentiments are plain;
The privilege in France may yet arrive
There trucking pleases, and exchanges thrive;
The people love variety, we find;
And such by heav'n was ere for them designed.

ONCE there dwelled, near Rouen, (sapiant clime)

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Two villagers, whose wives were in their prime,
And rather pleasing in their shape and mien,
For those in whom refinement 's scarcely seen.
Each looker-on conceives, LOVE needs not greet
Such humble wights, as he would prelates treat.

IT happened, howsoe'er, both weary grown,
Of halves that they so long had called their own;
One holyday, with them there chanced to drink
The village lawyer (bred in Satan's sink);
To him, said one of these, with jeering air,
Good mister Oudinet, a strange affair
Is in my head: you've doubtless often made
Variety of contracts; 'tis your trade:
Now, cannot you contrive, by one of these,
That men should barter wives, like goods, at ease?
Our pastor oft his benefice has changed;
Is trucking wives less easily arranged?
It cannot be, for well I recollect,
That Parson Gregory (whom none suspect)
Would always say, or much my mem'ry fails,
My flock 's my wife: love equally prevails;
He changed; let us, good neighbour do the same;
With all my heart, said t'other, that's my aim;
But well thou know'st that mine's the fairest face,
And, Mister Oudinet, since that's the case,
Should he not add, at least, his mule to boot?
My mule? rejoined the first, that will not suit;
In this world ev'ry thing has got its price:
Mine I will change for thine and that 's concise.
Wives are not viewed so near; naught will I add;
Why, neighbour Stephen, dost thou think me mad,
To give my mule to boot? of mules the king;
Not e'en an ass I'd to the bargain bring;
Change wife for wife, the barter will be fair;
Then each will act with t'other on the square.

THE village lawyer now the friends addressed:
Said he, Antoinetta is confessed
To have superior charms to those of Jane;
But still, if I may venture to be plain,
Not always is the best what meets the eye,
For many beauties in concealment lie,
Which I prefer; and these are hid with care;
Deceptions, too, are practised by the FAIR;
Howe'er, we wish the whole to be disclosed,
Too much, 'tis said, they must not be exposed.

NOW, neighbours, let us fair arrangement make:
A pig in poke you'd neither give nor take;
Confront these halves in nature's birth-day suit;

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To neither, then, will you deceit impute.
The project was most thoroughly approved;
Like inclination both the husbands moved.

ANTOINETTA, said the second spouse,
Has neither ill nor scratch her fears to rouse.
Jane, cried the first, is ev'ry way complete;
No freckles on the skin: as balm she's sweet:
Antoinetta is, her spouse replied,
Ambrosia ev'ry way: no fault to hide.

SAID t'other: Don't so confident appear;
Thou know'st not Jane: her ways would marble cheer;
And there's a play: thou understand'st no doubt?
To this rejoined the second village lout,
One difference only have my wife and I:
Which plays the prettiest wiles is what we try;
Thou'lt very soon of these know how to think;
Here's to thee, neighbour; Mister Oud'net, drink;
Come, toast Antoinetta; likewise Jane;
The mule was granted, and the bargain plain:
Our village lawyer promised to prepare,
At once, the writings, which would all declare.
This Oudinet a good apostle proved
Well paid for parchment, or he never moved:
By whom was payment made? by both the dames;
On neither husband showed he any claims.

THE village clowns some little time supposed
That all was secret: not a hint disclosed;
The parson of it, howsoe'er, obtained
Some intimation, and his off'rings gained.
I was not present, fully I admit;
But rarely clergymen their dues will quit.
The very clerk would not remit his fee:
All those who serve the church in this agree.

THE permutation could not well be made,
But scandal would such practices upbraid;
In country villages each step is seen;
Thus, round the whisper went of what had been,
And placed at length the thorn where all was ease;
The pow'rs divine alone it could displease.
'Twas pleasant them together to behold;
The wives, in emulation, were not cold;
In easy talk they'd to each other say:
How pleasing to exchange from day to day!
What think you, neighbour, if, to try our luck,
For once we've something new, and valets truck?
This last, if made, the secret had respect;
The other had at first a good effect.

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FOR one good month the whole proceeded well;
But, at the end, disgust dispersed the spell;
And neighbour Stephen, as we might suppose,
Began dissatisfaction to disclose;
Lamented much Antoinetta's stop;
No doubt he was a loser by the swop;
Yet neighbour Giles expressed extreme regret,
That t'other from him ought to boot should get:
Howe'er, he would retrucking not consent,
So much he otherwise appeared content.

IT happened on a day, as Stephen strayed
Within a wood, he saw, beneath a shade,
And near the stream, asleep, and quite alone,
Antoinetta, whom he wished his own.
He near her drew, and waked her with surprise;
The change ne'er struck her when she ope'd her eyes;
The gay gallant advantage quickly took,
And, what he wished, soon placed within his hook.
'Tis said, he found her better than at first;
Why so? you ask: was she then at the worst?
A curious question, truly, you've designed;
In Cupid's am'rous code of laws you'll find
Bread got by stealth, and eat where none can spy,
Is better far than what you bake or buy;
For proof of this, ask those most learn'd in love
Truth we prefer, all other things above;
Yet Hymen, and the god of soft desire,
How much soe'er their union we admire,
Are not designed together bread to bake;
In proof, the sleeping scene for instance take.
Good cheer was there: each dish was served with taste;
The god of love, who often cooks in haste,
Most nicely seasoned things to relish well;
In this he's thought old Hymen to excel.

ANTOINETTA, to his clasp restored,
Our neighbour Stephen, who his wife adored,
Quite raw, howe'er, in this, exclaimed apart
Friend Giles has surely got some secret art,
For now my rib displays superior charms,
To what she had, before she left my arms.
Let's take her back, and play the Norman trick
Deny the whole, and by our priv'lege stick.

IMMEDIATELY he ev'ry effort tried,
To get the bargain fully set aside.
Giles, much distressed, exerted all his might,
To keep his prize, and prove his conduct right.
The cause was carried to the bishop's court;
Much noise it made, according to report.

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At length the parliament would hear the claim,
And judge a case of such peculiar fame.

THE village lawyer, Oudinet, was brought;
From him, who drew the contract, truth was sought;
There rests the cause, for 'tis of recent date;
While undecided, more we cannot state.

HOW silly neighbour Stephen must appear!
He went against his int'rest now 'tis clear;
For, when superior pleasure he was shown,
The fascinating fair was not his own.
Good sense would whisper then, 'twere full as well,
To let remain with Giles the beauteous belle;
Save now and then, within the leafy shade,
Where oft Antoinetta visits made,
And warbled to the shrubs and trees around;
There he might easily the nymph have found,
But, if with ease it could not be obtained,
Still greater pleasure he would then have gained.

GO preach me this to silly country louts;
These, howsoe'er, had managed well their bouts,
It must not be denied, and all was nice;
To do the like perhaps 'twill some entice.
I much regret my lot was not the same,
Though doubtless many will my wishes blame.