

King Candaules and Other

Jean de La Fontaine

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- THE PSALTER
- KING CANDAULES AND THE DOCTOR OF LAWS

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THE PSALTER

ONCE more permit me, nuns, and this the last;
I can't resist, whatever may have passed,
But must relate, what often I've been told;
Your tales of convent pranks are seldom cold;
They have a grace that no where else we find,
And, somehow, better seem to please designed.
Another then we'll have, which three will make:
Three did I say?-'tis four, or I mistake;
Let's count them well:—The GARD'NER first, we'll name;
Then comes the ABBESS, whose declining frame
Required a youth, her malady to cure
A story thought, perhaps, not over pure;
And, as to SISTER JANE, who'd got a brat,
I cannot fancy we should alter that.
These are the whole, and four's a number round;
You'll probably remark, 'tis strange I've found
Such pleasure in detailing convent scenes:
'Tis not my whim, but TASTE, that thither leans:
And, if you'd kept your breviary in view,
'Tis clear, you'd nothing had with this to do;
We know, howe'er, 'tis not your fondest care;
So, quickly to our hist'ry let's repair.

A CHARMING youth would frequent visits pay,
To nuns, whose convent near his dwelling lay;
And, 'mong the sisters, one his person saw,
Who, by her eyes, would fain attention draw;
Smiles she bestowed, and other complaisance,
But not a single step would he advance;
By old and young he greatly was admired;
Sighs burst around, but none his bosom fired.

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Fair Isabella solely got his love,
A beauteous nun, and gentle as a dove,
Till then a novice in the flow'ry chain,
And envied doubly: for her charms and swain.
Their soft amours were watched with eagle-eye:
No pleasure's free from care you may rely;
In life each comfort coupled is with ill,
And this to alter baffles all our skill.

THE sister nuns so vigilant had been,
One night when darkness overspread the scene;
And all was proper mysteries to hide,
Some words escaped her cell that doubts supplied,
And other matters too were heard around,
That in her breviary could not be found.
'Tis her gallant! said they: he's clearly caught;
Alarm pervaded; swarms were quickly brought;
Rage seemed to triumph; sentinels were placed;
The abbess too must know they were disgraced.
Away they hastened to convey surprise,
And, thund'ring at her door, cried, madam rise,
For sister Isabella, in her cell,
Has got a man, which surely can't be well.

YOU will observe, the dame was not at prayer,
Nor yet absorbed in sleep, devoid of care,
But with her then, this abbess had in bed
Good parson John, by kindness thither led,
A neighb'ring rector, confessor, and friend;
She rose in haste the sisters to attend,
And, seeking for her veil, with sense confused,
The parson's breeches took for what she used,
Which, in the dark, resembled what was worn
By nuns for veils, and called (perhaps in scorn),
Among themselves, their PSALTER, to express
Familiarly, a common, awkward dress.

WITH this new ornament, by way of veil,
She sallied forth and heard the woeful tale.
Then, irritated, she exclaimed with ire
To see this wretched creature I desire,
The devil's daughter, from her bold career,
Who'll bring our convent to disgrace, I fear;
But God forbid, I say, and with his leave,
We'll all restore: rebuke she shall receive.
A chapter we will call: the sisters came,
And stood around to hear their pious dame.

FAIR Isabella now the abbess sent,
Who straight obeyed, and to her tears gave vent,
Which overspread those lily cheeks and eyes,

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A roguish youth so lately held his prize.
What! said the abbess: pretty scandal here,
When in the house of God such things appear;
Ashamed to death you ought to be, no doubt,
Who brought you thither? such we always scout.

NOW Isabella, (sister you must lose,
Henceforth, that name to you we cannot use;
The honour is too great,) in such a case,
Pray are you sensible of your disgrace,
And what's the punishment you'll undergo?
Before to-morrow, this you'll fully know;
Our institution chastisement decrees;
Come speak, I say, we'll hear you if you please.

POOR Isabella, with her sight on ground,
Confused, till then had scarcely looked around,
Now raised her eyes, and luckily perceived
The breeches, which her fears in part relieved,
And that the sisters, by surprise unnerved,
As oft's the case, had never once observed.
She courage took, and to the abbess said,
There's something from the Psalter, on your head,
That awkwardly hangs down; pray, madam, try
To put it right, or 'twill be in your eye.

'T WAS knee-strings, worn, at times, by priests and beaux,
For, more or less, all follow fashion's laws.
This veil, no doubt, had very much the air
Of those unmentionables parsons wear;
And this the nun, to frolicking inclined,
It seems had well impressed upon her mind.
What, cried the abbess, dares she still to sneer?
How great her insolence to laugh and jeer,
When sins so heavily upon her rest,
And ev'ry thing remains quite unconfessed.
Upon my word, she'd be a saint decreed;
My veil, young imp, your notice cannot need;
'Tis better think, you little hellish crow,
What pains your soul must undergo below.

THE mother abbess sermonized and fired,
And seemed as if her tongue would ne'er be tired.
Again the culprit said, your Psalter, pray,
Good madam, haste to set the proper way;
On which the sisters looked, both young and old
THOSE 'gan to laugh, while THESE were heard to scold.

OUR preacher, quite ashamed of what she'd done,
Now lost her voice, and noticed not the nun;
The murmur buzzed around, too well expressed,

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What thoughts the holy sisterhood possessed.
At length the abbess said: we've now not time
To take the chapter's votes upon her crime;
'Twould make it late; let each to bed return,
And, till to-morrow, we'll the case adjourn.
No chapter met, howe'er, when morrow came;
Another day arrived, and still the same;
The sages of the convent thought it best,
In fact, to let the mystick business rest.
Much noise, perhaps, would hurt religion's cause,
And, that considered, prudent 'twere to pause.
Base envy made them Isabella hate,
And dark suspicions to the abbess state.
In short, unable by their schemes to get
The morsel she'd so fortunately met,
Each nun exerted all her art to find,
What equally might satisfy the mind.
Old friends were willingly received again;
Her gallant our belle was suffered to retain;
The rector and the abbess had their will;
And, such their union, precepts to fulfill,
That if a nun had none to give her bliss,
To lend a friend was nothing thought amiss.

KING CANDAULES AND THE DOCTOR OF LAWS

IN life oft ills from self-imprudence spring;
As proof, Candaules' story we will bring;
In folly's scenes the king was truly great:
His vassal, Gyges, had from him a bait,
The like in gallantry was rarely known,
And want of prudence never more was shown.

MY friend, said he, you frequently have seen
The beauteous face and features of the queen;
But these are naught, believe me, to the rest,
Which solely can be viewed when quite undressed.
Some day I'll let you gratify your eyes;
Without her knowledge I'll means devise;
But on condition: you'll remember well
What you behold, to no one you will tell,
In ev'ry step most cautiously proceed,
And not your mind with silly wishes feed;
No sort of pleasure surely I could take,
To see vain passion you her lover make.
You must propose, this charming form to view,
As if mere marble, though to nature true;
And I'm convinced you'll readily declare,
Beyond nor art can reach, nor thought prepare;
Just now I left her in the bath at ease:

King Candaules and Other

A judge you are, and shall the moment seize;
Come, witness my felicity supreme;
You know her beauties are my constant theme.

AWAY they went, and Gyges much admired;
Still more than that: in truth his breast was fired;
For when she moved astonishment was great,
And ev'ry grace upon her seemed to wait.
Emotion to suppress howe'er he tried,
Since he had promised what he felt to hide;
To hold his tongue he wished, but that might raise
Suspicious of designs and mystick ways.
Exaggeration was the better part,
And from the subject he would never start,
But fully praised each beauty in detail,
Without appearing any thing to veil.
Gods! Gyges cried, how truly, king, you're blessed;
The skin how fair how charming all the rest!

THIS am'rous conversation by the queen
Was never heard, or she'd enraged have been;
In ancient days of ignorance, we find,
The sex, to show resentment, much inclined;
In different light at present this appears,
And fulsome praises ne'er offend their ears.

OUR arch observer struggled with his sighs
Those feelings much increased, so fair the prize:
The prince, in doubt, conducted him away;
But in his heart a hundred arrows lay;
Each magick charm directed pointed darts;
To flee were useless: LOVE such pain imparts,
That nothing can at times obstruct its course;
So quick the flight: so truly great the force.

WHILE near the king, much caution Gyges showed;
But soon the belle perceived his bosom glowed;
She learned the cause: her spouse the tale disclosed,
And laughed and jeered, as he the facts exposed:
A silly blockhead! not to know a queen
Could raillery not bear on such a scene.
But had it pleased her wishes, still 'twere right
(Such honour's dictates) to discover spite;
And this she truly did, while in her mind,
To be revenged she fully was inclined.

FOR once, good reader, I should wish thee wife;
Or otherwise, thou never can'st in life,
Conceive the lengths a woman oft will go,
Whose breast is filled with wrath and secret woe.
A mortal was allowed these charms to view,

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Which others' eyes could never dare pursue.
Such treasures were for gods, or rather kings
The privilege of both are beautiful things.

THESE thoughts induced the queen revenge to seek;
Rage moved her breast, and shame possessed her cheek.
E'en Cupid, we are told, assistance gave;
What from his aim effectually can save?
Fair in person was Gyges to behold;
Excuses for her easy 'twere to mould;
To show her charms, what baseness could excel?
And on th' exposor all her hatred fell.
Besides, he was a husband, which is worse
With these each sin receives a double curse.
What more shall I detail? the facts are plain:
Detested was the king: beloved the swain;
All was accomplished, and the monarch placed
Among the heroes who with horns are graced;
No doubt a dignity not much desired,
Though in repute, and easily acquired.

SUCH merit had the prince's folly got,
'In petto', Vulcan's brother was his lot;
The distance thence is little to the HAT:
The honour much the same of this or that.

SO far 'twas passing well, but, in the intrigue;
The cruel Parcae now appeared to league;
And soon the lovers, on possession bent,
To black Cocytus' shores the monarch sent;
Too much of certain potions forced to drink,
He quickly viewed the dreary, horrid brink;
While pleasing the objects Gyges' eyes beheld;
And in the palace presently he dwelled,
For, whether love or rage the widow fired,
Her throne and hand she gave, as was required.

T' EXTEND this tale was never my design;
Though known full well, I do not now repine;
The case so thoroughly my purpose served.
Ne'er from the narrative the object swerved;
And scarcely can I fancy, better light
The DOCTOR will afford to what I write.
The scenes that follow I from Rome have drawn;
Not Rome of old, ere manners had their dawn,
When customs were unpleasant and severe
The females, silly, and gallants in fear;
But Rome of modern days, delightful spot!
Where better tastes have into fashion got,
And pleasure solely occupies the mind
To rapture ev'ry bosom seems resigned.

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A tempting journey truly it appears,
For youths from twenty on to thirty years.

NOT long ago, then, in the city dwelled,
A master, who in teaching law excelled;
In other matters he, howe'er, was thought
A man that jollity and laughter sought.
He criticised whatever passed around,
And oft, at others' cost, diversion found.

IT happened that our learned doctor had,
Among his many pupils (good and bad)
A Frenchman, less designed to study laws,
Than, in amours, perhaps, to gain applause.
One day, observing him with clouded mien,
My friend, said he, you surely have the spleen,
And, out of college, nothing seem to do;
No law books read: some object I'd pursue;
A handsome Frenchman should his hours improve;
Seek soft intrigues, or as a lover move;
Talents you have, and gay coquettes are here
Not one, thank heav'n, but numbers oft appear.

THE, student answered, I am new at Rome,
And, save the belles who sell their beauteous bloom,
I can't perceive, gallants much business find,
Each house, like monasteries, is designed,
With double doors, and bolts, and matrons sour,
And husbands Argus-eyed, who'd you devour.
Where can I go to follow up your plan,
And hope, in spots like these, a flame to fan?
'Twere not less difficult to reach the moon,
And with my teeth I'd bite it just as soon.

HA! HA! replied the doctor with delight,
The honour which you do us is not slight;
I pity men quite fresh and raw like you;
Our town, I see, you've hardly travelled through,
You fancy then, such wily snares are set,
'Tis difficult intrigues in Rome to get.
I'd have you know, we've creatures who devise,
To horn their husbands under Argus' eyes.
'Tis very common; only try around,
And soon you'll find, that sly amours abound.
Within the neighb'ring church go take your place,
And, to the dames who pass in search of grace,
Present your fingers dipt in water blessed:
A sign for those who wish to be caressed.
In case the suppliant's air some lady please,
Who knows her trade, and how to act at ease,
She'll send a message, something to desire:

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You'll soon be found, wherever you retire,
Though lodged so secretly, that God alone,
Till then, your place of residence had known.
An aged female will on you attend,
Who, used to this, will full assistance lend,
Arrange an interview with wily art;
No trouble take, you'll have an easy part;
No trouble did I say? why, that's too much;
Some things I would except, their pow'r is such;
And proper 'tis, my friend, that I should hint,
Attentions you at Rome should well imprint,
And be discrete; in France you favours boast:
Of ev'ry moment here you make the most;
The Romans to the greatest lengths proceed.

So best, the spark replied, I like the deed;
And, though no Gascon, I may boldly say;
Superior prowess always I display.
Perhaps 'twas otherwise, for ev'ry wight;
In this, to play the Gascon, thinks it right.

To all the doctor's words our youth adhered,
And presently within a church appeared,
Where daily came the choicest belles around,
And loves and graces in their train were found,
Or, if 'tis wished in modern phrase to speak,
Attention num'rous angels there would seek.
Beneath their veils were beauteous sparkling eyes;
The holy-water scarcely would suffice.

IN lucky spot the spark his station took,
And gave to each that passed a plaintive look;
To some he bowed; to others seemed to pray,
And holy water offered on their way.
One angel 'mong the rest the boon received,
With easy pleasing air, that much relieved;
On which the student to himself expressed,
A fond belief, with her he might be blessed.

WHEN home, an aged female to him came,
And soon a meeting place he heard her name.
To count particulars howe'er were vain
Their pranks were many, and their folly plain;
The belle was handsome; ev'ry bliss was sought,
And all their moments most delightful thought.

HE, to the doctor, ev'ry matter told
Discretion in a Frenchman would be cold;
'Tis out of nature, and bespeaks the cit;
Smells strong of shop, and would not fashion fit.

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THE learned teacher satisfaction showed,
That such success from his instructions flowed,
Laughed heartily at husbands, silly wights,
Who had not wit to guard connubial rights,
And from their lamb the wily wolf to keep:
A shepherd will o'erlook a hundred sheep,
While foolish man's unable to protect,
E'en one where most he'd wish to be correct.
Howe'er, this care he thought was somewhat hard,
But not a thing impossible to guard;
And if he had not got a hundred eyes,
Thank heav'n, his wife, though cunning to devise,
He could defy: her thoughts so well he knew,
That these intrigues she never would pursue.

YOU'LL, ne'er believe, good reader, without shame,
The doctor's wife was she our annals name;
And what's still worse, so many things he asked,
Her look, air, form, and secret charms unmasked,
That ev'ry answer fully seemed to say,
'Twas clearly she, who thus had gone astray.
One circumstance the lawyer led to doubt:
Some talents had the student pointed out,
Which she had never to her husband shown,
And this relief administered alone.
Thought he, those manners not to her belong,
But all the rest are indications strong,
And prove the case; yet she at home is dull;
While this appears to be a prattling trull,
And pleasing in her conversation too;
In other matters 'tis my wife we view,
Form, face, complexion, features, eyes, and hair,
The whole combined pronounces her the fair.

AT length, when to himself the sage had said
'Tis she; and then, 'tis not; his senses led
To make him in the first opinion rest,
You well may guess what rage was in his breast.
A second meeting you have fixed? cried he;
Yes, said the Frenchman, that was made with glee;
We found the first so pleasing to our mind,
That to another both were well inclined,
And thoroughly resolved more fun to seek.
That's right, replied the doctor, have your freak;
The lady howsoe'er I now could name.
The scholar answered, that to me's the same;
I care not what she's called, Nor who she be:
'Tis quite enough that we so well agree.
By this time I'm convinced her loving spouse.
Possesses what an anchorite might rouse;
And if a failure any where be met,

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At such a place to-morrow one may get,
What I shall hope, exactly at the hour,
To find resigned and fully in my pow'r:

IN bed I shall be instantly received,
And from anxiety be soon relieved.
The place of meeting is a room below,
Most nicely furnished, rich, but void of show.
At first I through a passage dark was led,
Where Sol's bright rays are ne'er allowed to spread;
But soon, by my conductress, I was brought,
'Mid LOVE'S delights, where all with charms was fraught.

ON this you may suppose the doctor's pain;
But presently he thought a point to gain,
And take the student's place by wily art,
Where, acting in disguise the lover's part,
His rib he might entangle in a net,
And vassalage bestow she'd ne'er forget.
Our learned man was clearly in the wrong;
'Twere better far to sleep and hold his tongue;
Unless, with God's assistance, he could raise
A remedy that merited full praise.
Whenever wives have got a candidate,
To be admitted to the Cuckold's state,
If thence he get scot free 'tis luck indeed;
But once received, and ornaments decreed,
A blot the more will surely nothing add,
To one already in the garment clad.
The doctor otherwise however thought;
Yet still his reason no advantage brought;
Indeed he fancied, if he could forestall
The youth who now he might his master call;
The trick would to his wisdom credit do,
And show, superior wiles he could pursue.

AWAY the husband hastened to the place;
In full belief, that, hiding well his face,
And favoured by the darkness of the spot,
The silence marked, and myst'ry of the plot,
He, undiscovered, safely might be led,
Where such delicious fruits were ready spread.

MISFORTUNE, howsoe'er, would so direct
The aged female nothing to neglect,
Had with her got a lantern to conduct,
The light from which at will she could obstruct,
And, far more cunning than our learned sage,
Perceived at once with whom she had t'engage;
But, marking no surprise, she bade him wait,
While she, his coming, to her dame should state.

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Said she, unless I tell her first you're here,
I dare not let you in her room appear.
Besides, you have not got the right attire;
Undressed, in truth, is what she would desire.
My lady, you must know, is gone to bed:
Then, thrusting in a dressing room his head,
He there beheld the necessary fare,
Of night-cap, slippers, shirt, and combs for hair,
With perfumes too, in Rome the nicest known,
And fit for highest cardinals to own.
His clothes the learned doctor laid aside;
The aged female came his steps to guide;
Through passages she led him by the hand,
Where all was dark, and many turnings planned;
At once bewildered, and deprived of sight,
The lawyer tottered much for want of light.
At length she ope'd a door, and pushed the sage,
Where most unpleasantly he must engage,
Though doubtless ev'ry way his proper place:
The school where he was used the LAWS to trace!
O'ercome with shame, confusion, and surprise,
He nearly fainted, vain 'twere to disguise.

THE circumstances ran throughout the town;
Each student then was waiting in his gown;
Enough, no doubt, his fortunes to destroy;
The laugh went round, and all was jest and joy.
What, is he mad? said they, or would he seek
Some lass, and with her wish to have a freak?
Still worse arrived: his beauteous spouse complained;
A trial followed, and distractions reigned;
Her relatives supported well the cause,
And represented, that the MAN of LAWS,
Occasioned jars and matrimonial strife;
That he was mad, and she, a prudent wife,
The marriage was annulled, and she withdrew:
Retirement now the lady would pursue,
In Vavoureuse a prelate blessed the dame,
And, at Saint Croissant, she a nun became.