

Neighbor Peter's Mare and Other

Jean de La Fontaine

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- NEIGHBOUR PETER'S MARE

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THE DEVIL IN HELL

HE surely must be wrong who loving fears;
And does not flee when beauty first appears.
Ye FAIR, with charms divine, I know your fame;
No more I'll burn my fingers in the flame.
From you a soft sensation seems to rise,
And, to the heart, advances through the eyes;
What there it causes I've no need to tell:
Some die of love, or languish in the spell.
Far better surely mortals here might do;
There's no occasion dangers to pursue.
By way of proof a charmer I will bring,
Whose beauty to a hermit gave the sting:
Thence, save the sin, which fully I except;
A very pleasant intercourse was kept;
Except the sin, again I must repeat,
My sentiments on this will never meet
The taste of him at Rome, who wine had swilled,
Till, to the throat, he thoroughly was filled,
And then exclaimed, is't not a sin to drink?
Such conduct horrid ever I shall think;
I wish to prove, e'en saints in fear should live;
The truth is clear: our faults may Heav'n forgive;
If dread of punishment, from pow'rs divine,
Had led this friar in the proper line,
He never had the charming girl retained,
Who, young and artless, would your heart have gained.

HER name was Alibech, if I recollect;
Too innocent, deceptions to detect.
One day this lovely maiden having read,
How certain pious, holy saints were led,

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The better to observe religious care,
To seek retirement in some lorn repair,
Where they, like Heav'nly Angels, moved around,
Some here, some there, were in concealment found,
Was quite delighted, strange as it may seem,
And presently she formed the frantick scheme,
Of imitating those her mind revered,
And to her plan most rigidly adhered.

WITH silent steps the innocent withdrew;
To mothers, sisters, none she bade adieu.
Long time she walked through fields, and plain, and dale;
At length she gained a wood within a vale;
There met an aged man, who once might be,
Gay, airy, pleasing, blithe, gallant, and free,
But now a meagre skeleton was seen
The shadow only of what late he'd been:
Said she, good father, I have much desire
To be a saint: thither my hopes aspire;
I fain would merit reverence and prayer,
A festival have kept with anxious care;
What pleasure, ev'ry year, the palm in hand,
And, beaming round the head, a holy band,
Nice presents, flow'rs, and off'rings to receive
Your practice difficult must I believe?
Already I can fast for many days,
And soon should learn to follow all your ways.
Go, said the aged man, your plan resign;
I'd have you, as a friend, the state decline;
'Tis not so easy sanctity to meet,
That fasting should suffice the boon to greet.
Heav'n guards from ill the maids and wives who fast,
Or holiness would very seldom last.
'Tis requisite to practise other things;
These secrets are, which move by hidden springs;
A hermit, whom you'll find beneath yon' beech,

Can, better far than I, their virtues teach;
Go, seek him, pray, make haste if you are sage;
I ne'er retain such birds within my cage.
This having said, at once he left the belle,
And wisely shut the door, and barred his cell:
Not trusting hair-cloth, fasting, age, nor gout;
With beauty, anchorites themselves should doubt.

OUR pensive fair soon found the person meant,
A man whose soul was on religion bent;
His name was Rustick, young and warm in prayer;
Such youthful hermits of deception share.
Her holy wish, the girl to him expressed,
A wish most fervent doubtless to be blessed,

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And felt so strongly, Alibech had fear,
Some day the mark might on her fruit appear.

A SMILE her innocence from Rustick drew;
Said he, in me you little learning view;
But what I've got, I'll readily divide,
And nothing from your senses try to hide.

THE hermit surely would have acted right;
Such pupil to have sent away at sight.
He managed otherwise, as we shall state;
The consequences, let us now relate.

SINCE much he wished perfection to pursue;
He, to himself, exclaimed: what can'st thou do?
Watch, fast, and pray; wear hair-cloth too; but this
Is surely little that will lead to bliss;
All do as much, but with a FAIR to dwell,
And, never touch her, would be to excel;
'Twere triumph 'mong the Heav'nly Angels thought;
Let's merit it, and keep what here is brought;
If I resist a thing so sweet and kind,
I gain the end that pow'rs divine designed.

HE with him let the charming belle remain;
And confident he could at will abstain,
Both Satan and the flesh at once defied:
Two foes on mischief ready to decide.

BEHOLD our saints together in a hut;
Young Rustick, where a corner seemed to jut;
A bed of rushes for the novice placed,
Since sleeping on the floor had her debased,
Who, yet unused to hardships, much must feel:
'Twas best that these should on her senses steal.
A little fruit, and bread not over fine,
She had for supper: water too for wine.
The hermit fasted; but the lady fed,
And ate with appetite her fruit and bread.

APART their place of rest, the maiden slept,
But something quite awake the other kept:
The Devil could by no means quiet rest,
Till he should get admitted as a guest.
He was received within the humble cell;
The friar's thoughts were on his smiling belle,
Her simple manners, fascinating grace,
Complexion, age; each feature he would trace;
The heaving bosom, and the beauteous charms;
That made him wish to clasp her in his arms.

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BY passion moved, he bade at once adieu,
To hair—cloth, discipline, and fasting too;
Cried he, my saints are these; to them I'll pray;
From Alibech no longer he would stay,
But to her flew, and roused the girl from sleep:
Said he, so soon you should not silence keep,
It is not right: there's something to be done,
Ere we suspend the converse we've begun:
'Tis proper that, to please the pow'rs divine;
We Satan instantly in Hell confine;
He was created for no other end;
To block him up let's ev'ry effort lend.

IMMEDIATELY within the bed he slid,
When, scarcely knowing what young Rustick did;
And, unaccustomed to the mystick scene,
She knew not what the anchorite could mean,
Nor this nor that but, partly by consent,
And partly force, yet wishing to prevent,
Though not presuming to resist his sway
To him 'mid pain and pleasure, she gave way,
Believing ev'ry thing was most exact,
And, what the saint performed, a gracious act,
By thus the Devil shutting up in Hell,
Where he was destined with his imps to dwell.

HENCEFORTH 'twas requisite, if saint she'd be;
From martyrdom she must not think to flee,
For friar Rustick little sought to please:
The lesson was not given quite at ease,
Which made the girl (not much improved in wit)
Exclaim, this Devil mischief will commit;
'Tis very plain, though strange it may appear
To hurt his prison e'en he'll persevere;
The injury now you clearly may perceive;
But, for the evil done, I shall not grieve:
Yet richly he deserves to be again
Shut up effectually in his domain.

IT shall be so, the anchorite replied;
Once more the mystick art was fully tried;
Such care he took, such charity was shown,
That Hell, by use, free with the Devil grown,
His presence pleasant always would have found;
Could Rustick equally have kept his ground.

CRIED Alibech, 'tis very truly said,
No prison has so nice and soft a bed,
But presently the host will weary grow;
And here our pair soon discord seemed to show:
Hell, for the prisoner, in vain inquired;

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Deaf was the fiend, and quietly retired;
Repeated calls of course must irksome prove:
The fair grew weary, when he would not move;
Her strong desire to be a saint declined;
And Rustick to get rid of her designed;
In this with him the belle agreed so well,
That secretly she left the hermit's cell,
And home returned in haste the shortest way;
But what the fair could to her parents say,
Is what I fain would know, though truly yet;
The full particulars I ne'er could get.
'Tis probable she made them understand,
Her heart was prompted by divine command;
To try to be a saint; that they believed,
Or seemingly for truth the tale received.
Perhaps the parents were not quite exact,
In narrowly examining the fact;
Though some suspicions doubtless might arise
About her Hell, they could not well disguise;
But 'tis so formed that little can be seen,
And many jailors in it duped have been.

FOR Alibech great feasting was prepared,
When, through simplicity, the girl declared,
To those around, without the least restraint,
How she had acted to be made a saint.
You'd surely no occasion, they replied,
To go so far instruction to provide,
When at your house you might have had, with ease,
Like secret lectures, just as you should please.
Said one, my brother could the thing have done;
Another cried, my cousin would have run
To do the same; or Neherbal, who's near,
No novice in the business would appear;
He seeks your hand, which you'll be wise to take
Before he learns what might a difference make.
She took the hint, and he the fair received;
A handsome fortune many fears relieved;
This joined to num'rous charms that had the belle;
He fancied pure a most suspicious Hell,
And freely used the blessings Hymen sends;
May Heav'n like joys bestow on all our friends!

NEIGHBOUR PETER'S MARE

A CERTAIN pious rector (John his name),
But little preached, except when vintage came;
And then no preparation he required
On this he triumphed and was much admired.
Another point he handled very well,
Though oft'ner he'd thereon have liked to dwell,
And this the children of the present day,
So fully know, there's naught for me to say:
John to the senses things so clearly brought,
That much by wives and husbands he was sought,
Who held his knowledge of superior price,
And paid attention to his sage advice.
Around, whatever conscience he might find,
To soft delights and easy ways inclined,
In person he would rigidly attend,
And seek to act the confessor and friend;
Not e'en his curate would he trust with these;
But zealously he tried to give them ease,
And ev'ry where would due attention show,
Observing that divines should always know
Their flocks most thoroughly and visit round;
To give instruction and the truth expound.

AMONG the folks, to whom he visits paid,
Was neighbour Peter, one who used the spade;
A villager that God, in lieu of lands,
Had furnished only with a pair of hands,
To dig and delve, and by the mattock gain
Enough his wife and children to maintain.
Still youthful charms you in his spouse might trace;
The weather injured solely had her face,
But not the features which were perfect yet:
Some wish perhaps more blooming belles to get;
The rustick truly me would ne'er have pleased;
But such are oft by country parsons seized,
Who low amours and dishes coarse admire,
That palates more refined would not desire.

THE pastor John would often on her leer,
just as a cur, when store of bones are near,
That would good pickings for his teeth afford,
Attentively behold the precious hoard,
And seem uneasy; move his feet and tail;
Now prick his ears; then fear he can't prevail,
The eyes still fixed upon the bite in sight,

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Which twenty times to these affords delight,
Ere to his longing jaws the boon arrives,
However anxiously the suitor strives.

SELF-TORMENTS solely parson John obtained;
By seeing her that o'er his senses reigned.
The village-wife was innocent of this,
And never dreamed of any thing amiss;
The pastor's mystick looks, nor flatt'ring ways;
Nor presents, aught in Magdalene could raise;
But nose-gays made of thyme, and marj'ram too,
Were dropt on ground, or never kept in view;
A hundred little cares appeared as naught
'Twas Welch to her, and ne'er conveyed a thought.
A pleasant stratagem he now contrived,
From which, he hoped, success might be derived.

MOST clearly Peter was a heavy lout,
Yet truly I could never have a doubt,
That rashly he would ne'er himself commit,
Though folly 'twere from him to look for wit,
Or aught expect by questioning to find
'Yond this to reason, he was not designed.

THE rector to him said, thou'rt poor, my friend,
And hast not half enough for food to spend,
With other things that necessary prove,
If we below with comfort wish to move.
Some day I'll show thee how thou may'st procure
The means that will thy happiness insure,
And make thee feel contented as a king.
To me what present for it wilt thou bring?

ZOOKS! Peter answered, parson, I desire,
You'll me direct to do as you require;
My labour pray command; 'tis all I've got;
Our pig howe'er to you we can allot,
We want it not; and truly it has eat
More bran than thrice this vessel would complete;
The cow you'll take besides, from which my wife
A calf expects, to raise the means of life.
No, no, the pastor with a smile replied,
A recompense for this thou'lt not provide;
My neighbour to oblige is all I heed;
And now I'll tell thee how thou must proceed;
Thy spouse, by magick, I'll transform each day,
And turn her to a mare for cart or dray,
And then again restore her ev'ry night,
To human form to give thy heart delight.
From this to thee great profit will arise;
Thy ass, so slow is found, that when supplies,

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It carries to the market, 'tis so late,
The hour is almost past ere at the gate,
And then thy cabbages, and herbs, and roots,
Provisions, provender, and wares and fruits,
Remain unsold, and home to spoil are brought,
Since rarely far from thence such things are sought.
But when thy wife's a mare, she'll faster go:
Strong, active, ev'ry way her worth she'll show,
And home will come without expense in meat:
No soup nor bread, but solely herbs she'll eat:

SAID Peter, parson, clearly you are wise;
From learning, what advantages arise!
Is this pray sold? If I'd much money got,
To make the purchase I'd the cash allot.

CONTINUED John: now I will thee instruct,
The proper manner, matters to conduct,
For thee to have a clever mare by day,
And still at night a charming wife survey;
Face, legs, and ev'ry thing shall reappear;
Come, see it done, and I'll perform it here;
Thou'lt then the method fully comprehend;
But hold thy tongue, or all will quickly end:
A single word the magick would dispel,
And, during life, no more with us 'twould dwell.
Keep close thy mouth and merely ope' thy eyes:
A glimpse alone to learn it will suffice;
This o'er, thyself shall practise it the same,
And all will follow as when first it came.

THE husband promised he would hold his tongue;
And John disliked deferring matters long.
Come, Magdalene, said he, you will undress;
To quit those Sunday-clothes, you'll acquiesce,
And put yourself in Nature's pure array
Well, well, proceed; with stays and sleeves away;
That's better still; now petticoats lay by;
How nicely with my orders you comply.

WHEN Magdalene was to the linen come,
Some marks of shame around her senses swum;
A wife to live and die was her desire,
Much rather than be seen in Eve's attire;
She vowed that, spite of what the priest disclosed;
She never would consent to be exposed.

SAID Peter, pretty work, upon my truth:
Not let us see how you are made forsooth!
What silly scruples! Are they in your creed?
You were not always led such scenes to heed:

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Pray how d'ye manage when for fleas you seek?
'Tis strange, good sir, that she should be so weak;
What can you fear? 'tis folly time to waste;
He will not eat you: come, I say, make haste:
Have done with haggling; had you acted right,
Ere now the parson all had finished quite.

ON saying this, her garment off he took;
Put on his spectacles to overlook;
And parson John, without delay, began;
Said he (as o'er her person now he ran),
This part umbilical will make the mare
A noble breast, and strength at once declare:
Then further on the pastor placed his hand,
While, with the other, (as a magick wand,)
He set about transforming mounts of snow;
That in our climes a genial warmth bestow,
And semi-globes are called, while those that rise
In t'other hemisphere, of larger size,
Are seldom mentioned, through respect no doubt,
But these howe'er the parson, quite devout,
Would not neglect, and whatsoe'er he felt,
He always named, and on its beauties dwelt;
The ceremony this, it seems, required,
And fully ev'ry movement John admired.

PROCEEDINGS so minute gave Peter pain,
And as he could not see the rector gain
The slightest change, he prayed the pow'rs divine,
To give assistance to the priest's design;
But this was vain, since all the magick spell,
In metamorphosing the lady well,
Depended on the fixing of the tail;
Without this ornament the whole would fail.

To set it on the parson hastened now,
When Neighbour Peter 'gan to knit his brow,
And bawled so loud, you might have heard him far:
No tail, said he, I'll have: there'll be a scar;
You put it on too low; but vain his cries,
The husband's diligence would not suffice,
For, spite of ev'ry effort, much was done,
And John completely his career had run,
If Peter had not pulled the rector's gown,
Who hastily replied, thou ninny, clown;
Did I not tell thee silence to observe,
And not a footstep from thy station swerve?
The whole is spoiled, insufferable elf!
And for it thou hast got to thank thyself.

THE husband, while the holy pastor spoke,

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Appeared to grumble and his stars invoke.
The wife was in a rage, and 'gan to scold:
Said she to Peter, wretch that I behold!
Thou'lt be through life a prey to pain and grief,
Come not to me and bray and hope relief,
The worthy pastor would have us procured
The means that might much comfort have ensured.
Can he deserve such treatment to receive?
Good Mister John this goose I now would leave,
And ev'ry morning, while he gathers fruits,
Or plants, herbs, cabbages, and various roots,
Without averting him, pray, here repair,
You'll soon transform me to a charming mare.

No mare, replied the husband, I desire;
An ass for me is all that I require.